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Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA

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This other Eden, demi-Paradise, this precious stone
set in the silver sea, this earth, this realm, this Los Angeles.
Steve Martin (and Shakespeare), L.A. Story

The entire world seems to be rooting for Los Angeles to slide into
the Pacific or be swallowed by the San Andreas Fault.
Mike Davis, Ecology of Fear

Experience the beauty . . . of another culture
while learning more about wastewater treatment and reuse.
Brochure for the combination water reclamation plant and
Japanese garden in the San Fernando Valley

Prologue: From Walden to LA

There are many places in LA you can go to think about the city, and
my own favorite has become the Los Angeles River—a deeply para-
doxical river, most famous for being forgotten, that looks and func-
tions like an oversized concrete sewer. It flows fifty-one miles through the heart
of LA County, and is currently enjoying an explosion of efforts to revitalize it,
but commuters who have driven over it five days a week for ten years cannot
tell you where it is. Along the river, the rough midpoint lies at the confluence
with the Arroyo Seco, a couple miles north of downtown. LA was founded here
in 1781: the confluence offered the most reliable above-ground supply of fresh
water in the LA basin. It's a miserable spot now, an unmarked wasteland of
empty lots, railroad tracks, freeway-overpass pylons, fences, and trash: it looks
like a *Blade Runner* set that a crew disassembled and then put back together wrong. It's not the most scenic place to visit the river, but this may be the finest spot on the river to think about LA. Thinking about LA is a kind of national pastime. And thinking about LA in print is a rite of passage for an LA writer.¹

So many writers who move to this city—and I arrived in 1998—seem to succumb to an overwhelming urge to share their quirky adventures here with the reading public. You can love LA, or hate LA, or both. LA must be “the most mediated town in America,” in architect Michael Sorkin’s widely quoted words.² Few people feel ambivalent, and most writers seem to feel compelled eventually to weigh in on what it all means. The standard procedure has been to evaluate one’s own love-hate relationship with LA to make sweeping and incisive judgments about American dreams and American life. And whether you proclaim that LA is the American dream or nightmare, the tradition offers writers a combination of navel gazing and arm waving that is incredibly hard to resist.

However, I am a nature writer—a brand of writer that has felt no compulsion whatsoever to write about LA, much less to move here. You could toss an apple core into the bushes and hit a nature writer in Missoula, Montana (which has to host at least a dozen screenwriters), but approximately four nature writers live among the 10 million people in LA County, and one, my friend Bill Fox, fled to Portland, Oregon, for a couple years. But I have ended up here, and Bill has just returned, because LA is an unsurpassably fantastic place to think and write about nature. More urgently, LA is the ideal place in America to completely rethink what it means to write about nature. Nature writing, that venerable American literary genre, has been begging long and desperately for a thorough overhaul. Often beautifully crafted, it also suffers a popular reputation as ponderous, high-handed, redundant. It can be so, well, boring. A devotional literature that enjoys an unusually devoted readership—so I know my friends who cherish the genre will read this critique as heresy—it seems marginal and irrelevant to far too many people. Its central and most indicative failure, I’ll argue, has been its stubborn aversion to cities. Of course, the genre has become so marginal that you might not see its failures as a serious problem, but I wish to persuade you that this crisis of nature writing is a national cultural catastrophe. In the weighing in on big American stories, our nature stories should not be marginalized.³

Me, I love LA. I was not supposed to. I grew up in suburban St. Louis and dreamt of settling in the wilds of the southern Rockies. I was supposed to love Boulder, Colorado, where I moved in the early 1990s in the hope that it might be the perfect place, and which every day gazes approvingly in the mirror and tells itself that it is. I never did warm up to Boulder (however terrific the hiking and cross-country skiing). But from my first trip out from Colorado to visit my
brother David, I was attracted to LA—the last place I had expected I would live.

This is my LA manifesto, after six years on and off the freeways. I love LA in great part because it is the single most perfect place to grapple with American nature stories: I love LA because it should be one of our great national meccas for nature writing. Which is why the LA River—which hosted the chase scenes in Grease and Terminator 2 and the giant mutant ants that want to take over the world in Them!—so quickly became my favorite place in Los Angeles. Why “Experience the beauty of another culture while learning more about wastewater treatment and reuse” has become my working motto as a nature writer. Also why so many of LA’s most influential interpreters, from Nathanael West to Raymond Chandler to Joan Didion to Mike Davis, have written obsessively about nature. And why perhaps the most quoted lines in all of the fabled literature about LA are Raymond Chandler’s passage on LA’s fierce autumn winds: “It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas. . . . On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands’ necks. Anything can happen.”

One Way of Seeing Nature in LA: As Nonexistent

“Is there nature in LA?”

When I tell friends, family, or anyone else that I am writing about nature in LA, they invariably ask this question—and often without sarcasm. The topic, they are thinking, should occupy one person for about ten minutes. LA, after all, has long been decried as the Anti-Nature—the American city with brown air, fouled beaches, pavement to the horizon, and a concrete river. It is sort of the Death Star to American nature lovers—the place from where the destruction of nature emanates—which is why woody towns such as Boulder and Missoula position themselves as the anti-LA. And this is the reigning nature story we tell in LA: there is no nature here.

A Second Way: As the Wild Things

But this story heeds to a historically powerful definition of nature as only the wild things and as what and where the city is not. This way of defining nature—the great American nature story and the heart and soul of nature writing—is so firmly entrenched that it can be difficult to see nature as anything else. Still, even with this definition, is there nature in LA? Absolutely. The most iconic American city also tends logically to be the most misunderstood, since the iconic and real LAs do not always match. LA symbolizes the end of nature—to use nature writer Bill McKibben’s unfortunately catchy phrase—but on the ground, it actually boasts more wild corners than most cities, with
three trail-crossed mountain ranges, scores of rugged canyons, and miles of beaches, where you can see coyotes, curlews, and herons in abundance as well as the occasional mountain lion. The noncentralized development in Southern California has spewed forth an ungodly sprawl, but also has translated into a patchwork of wild and not-wild where you can share a rustic hillside with foxes, owls, and hawks fifteen minutes from the high-rises in downtown LA, Hollywood, or Century City.

The nature-writing anthologies often include an oddball piece—usually not two, and many have none—about wild nature in the city. And there is more than enough fodder for such stories here, if you want to write about the sunset on Broad Beach in Malibu or the soaring hawks in Griffith Park or the dolphins leaping offshore or how your heart soars like a hawk or leaps like a dolphin while you watch the sun setting.

But there are so many other nature stories to tell here that are equally or more compelling. I love LA’s wildness. I delight in sunsets, hawks, and dolphins as much as the next nature lover. I have a special soft spot for ducks. But the anthologies are missing about 98 percent of the possible nature stories in cities. In fact, they’re missing about 98 percent of our encounters with nature generally. And the major problem with nature writing, in a few words, is that Thoreau really, really needs to get on the bus.

We have been ignoring huge, entire categories of stories. And the kinds of stories the genre tells often come with standard morals that don’t seem to me very useful. To get on the bus means to tell new kinds of stories and to reinterpret the familiar ones. In LA, writers will probably opt, like most Angelenos, to get in the car instead, but however we travel around, we should be drawing up maps for a more urban and everyday landscape of nature writing. I delight that LA is a magically effective place to do this as much as I delight in the sea ducks off Broad Beach. To travel through and describe all of LA, however, could take a few decades. So, I have been scouting for a handful of especially rich nature stories—from my own encounters in the city and some that I have read about—that can suggest a blueprint for such maps.

And my own favorite representative topics for a literature of nature in LA have to include, above all, mango body whips, the social geography of air, Zuzu the murdered Chihuahua, and Mapleton Drive in Bel Air. And, of course, the Los Angeles River, where all the possible kinds of nature stories in LA converge.

A Third Way: As the Resources We Use

The mango body whip story begins like this: Last April, a woman who ran into my car while it was parked at the University of Southern California left a note on the back of a receipt for a mango body whip, which she had purchased
at Skinmarket at the Beverly Center mall. What’s a mango body whip? I didn’t know. Skin product? More perverse? I made a trip to the Beverly Center and found that it is a mango-infused thick buttery skin cream.

Nature stories abound in such an encounter. Begin with the mangoes. Follow them, and you can tell an intricate set of stories as people harvest mangoes in rural Mexico and then transport them into the LA area and into the Skinmarket factory in Simi Valley—just over the LA County line—where people use customized industrial technologies to infuse them into skin butter and then transport them out to upscale malls like the Beverly Center and then cart them away to bathrooms in nearby Beverly Hills and other cities throughout the country.

Mango body whip stories, in other words, look for and follow the nature we use and watch it move in and out of the city, to track very specifically how we transform nature into the mountains of stuff with which we literally lead and sustain our lives. It could be soap. It could be cars. It could be refrigerators, sushi, dog food, TVs, digital cameras, baseball caps, closet organizers, bracelets, concert halls, 747s, bicycles. If you tell stories that follow nature through our material lives, you will see a lot of LA—the city’s warehouses, factories, commercial strips, cultural centers, and residential neighborhoods, some of which have a great deal more stuff than others.9

A Fourth Way: As Different to Different People

Which brings me to the social geography of air. The air in LA, if polluted, is not equally polluted everywhere. The coastal and mountain areas, which tend to be the wealthiest, enjoy the cleanest air, on average. On the inland flats, the poorest, most heavily nonwhite, and most industrial neighborhoods in LA suffer the worst air, along with alarming asthma and cancer rates. Another way to put it is that the Angelenos who work in and live near the factories that manufacture mango body whips breathe far more polluted air than the consumers who are the most likely to be the mango body whip devotees. I live on Venice Beach, on Ozone Avenue—named without irony in the clean-air early 1990s, but still one of the safest places to breathe in LA County. Twenty miles inland, Southeast LA—the most industrialized urban area in the United States, with many of LA’s lowest-income and most heavily Latino neighborhoods—occupies 1 percent of the county by area but generates 18 percent of the toxic air emissions.10

While mango body whip stories follow nature as resources through LA, geography of air tales narrate who encounters what nature where. These tales begin with who. They ask, as an important example, who benefits most and
who suffers the worst consequences as who uses and transforms nature. But they also ask who eats what and who does not and who plants what in their gardens and who lives nearest and farthest away from the city parks and who hunts and fishes and who watches birds and who chooses parrots or pit bulls or rabbits or goldfish as pets. They want to know how different people encounter nature differently.

Nature writing has ignored these two categories of stories. It has been a literary universe in which you retreat to nature from the city but never use it in the city. And the genre nearly always describes nature as a unitary thing that humans encounter and experience, that is and should mean the same to all people—but never something you encounter from a specific social position and point of view.

But such a way of seeing cannot really think about and understand—much less rethink and be responsible for—our actual place in nature and our myriad connections to it. It cannot begin to examine how our ties to nature are bound up with our connections to one another. The established nature story, which yearns for simplicity and universal meaning in this postmodern age, can explain exactly no twenty-first century encounter with nature. The modern ideal of the simple life in nature is just a refusal to see. Every encounter with nature—whether on a farm, in a wilderness area, or at the Beverly Center mall—is complex as hell. I love to go hiking in the Santa Monica Mountains. Sure, there’s a typical nature story in my hikes, about communing with LA’s wilds as antidote to the stress and pace and noise of a typical LA week. But to fully understand such an encounter—to place it within all the skeins of my connections to nature—I would also track and narrate the complex global travels of the petroleum, metals, and other natural resources in my Gore-Tex shell, my leather and Gore-Tex hiking boots, and the rest of my industrial high-tech gear that keeps me dry and warm and makes my closet look like an REI outlet. The hike also has to be a story about who does and does not live near the mountain parks in LA and how the particular work I do at a desk all week makes a strenuous weekend hike look attractive in the first place. And it’s about how the National Park Service chooses trail routes, and how it manages fire suppression, and how it implements hundreds of rules and policies to keep both the visitors and the parklands happy.

A Fifth Way: As Landscape and Ecology We Build In and Manage

This brings me to Zuzu the murdered Chihuahua. As the Los Angeles Times reported, Zuzu’s story begins, or ends, like this: Last fall, a coyote entered the yard of a casting director in the Silver Lake area west of downtown and ate her
Chihuahua, Zuzu. Coyotes, her husband warned bitterly, are "urban terrorists"; the bereft owner said, "I have no liberty in my front yard." Still, nature writing might typically lionize the coyote as the real victim, the noble indigenous animal encroached on by evil yippy Chihuahuas (if like me you tend to agree, then try substituting a Labrador retriever puppy for Zuzu).  

When you bring domestic dogs into a landscape of native animals, the resident carnivores are likely to see the pets as prey. When you use and change a landscape, the place will respond. Nature is never passive. Every place has an active, very particular ecology, climate, topography, geology, flora, fauna. Zuzu stories narrate how we change places and how they respond and how we respond back and so on and so on. They're about paving, building, bulldozing, planting, fires and fire suppression, pet keeping, earthquakes, polluting, cleaning up, water supply and management, flood control, and sewers and lawns and gardens and roads and trails and parks.

Nature writers have in fact told this kind of story—usually, however, with an evil invading Chihuahua moral, in which a destroying Man (with an absurdly small canine) enters a sacred Nature Primeval and defiles it. As a way to narrate this category of tale, evil Chihuahua ranks with urban terrorist on a scale of helpfulness: the first approach instructs us to leave nature as it is and the second to eradicate it. Neither helps us navigate how to keep pet animals in a landscape with native predators—or how to make a road or ensure a water supply or build a house. Ideally, Zuzu stories should help us think about how to create livable, sustainable cities. They should be deeply informed by knowledge of the ecology, geology, and natural history of the place. They should help us walk the essential line between doing nothing and doing whatever we want. Like mango body whip tales, they should seek to understand what our connections to nature actually are so that we can think about what our connections should look like.

These are a few topics the Los Angeles Times reported on in recent months: water deals in the West, discarded American computers shipped to China, dog parks, an LA landfill in the Mojave desert, the hybrid Toyota Priuses, diesel pollution in industrial south LA, battles against new developments in the outer suburbs, new parks on the Los Angeles River, high silicosis rates among Chinese trinket-factory workers, oil refineries in Venezuela, farmers’ markets, the best restaurants for peach dishes, sustainable practices in Santa Monica, toxic plastics residues in polar bears in the Arctic, neighborhood lawn regulations, the fight over removing the feral pheasants who scream every morning in Palos Verdes neighborhoods, pesticides buildup in frog populations, battles for public beach access in Malibu.

These are nature topics all, about how we live in and fight about nature and about how we use it more and less fairly and sustainably and about the enor-
mous consequences for our lives in LA and for places and people and wildlife everywhere. And nature writing has left so much of it without stories. Such topics beg for a literature—for an aesthetics, for a poetry, that can help us imagine and navigate and renavigate our connections to nature.

A Sixth Way: As a Premier Source of Human Meaning

Imagine the site of Los Angeles County four thousand years ago. The people who lived here—the Tongva, the Chumash, the Tataviam—turned birds and deer into food and clothes, and turned trees, water, rocks, and dirt into shelter, energy, tools, boats, medicine, religious objects, art. (And connections to nature back then were not easy and not simple either.) They used and changed their natural world to live. They told stories about nature to explain the world and to guide their actions within it.

What do we do in Los Angeles now? Essentially the same thing. We use nature and tell stories about it to live and understand our lives. To use nature is to be human: that’s a pretty fair working definition. To tell stories is to be a human figuring things out. The stories that any people tell about nature are the most basic stories they tell. Is there nature in LA? The fact that the most basic nature story we tell in LA, as in all cities, is that there is no nature here does not make this story any less telling, powerful, or basic.

What does nature mean to us? What it means stories are one last category of story I’ll suggest—and nature writing has shown great interest in this kind of story, in fact it has been the very soul of the genre. Of course, nature writers attach diverse meanings to a vast range of places, animals, and plants. Yosemite: Majesty. A sacred place. The desert: Peace. Harshness. Clarity. Songbirds: Beauty. Delicacy. Earthquakes: Fury and vengeance. Water: A metaphor for life. But nature: The overall meaning that frames all others, the un-meaning, is wildness. The not-modern. The not-us-ness. What’s out there. Refuge. Salvation. These meanings historically have reigned as exceptionally powerful American cultural assumptions. Nature writing has given them literary expression with undying tenacity, but hardly invented this way of seeing and of refusing to see. The vision of wild nature as counterpoint to a modern, corrupted civilization has always been central to American national myths and identity. (Think city on a hill, the mythic frontier, western films, and—how literal can we get?—Mount Rushmore.) To see nature as the wild things only is one of the great fantastic American stories.

It is also one of the great fantastic American denials. On Mapleton Drive in Holmby Hills (a sort of wealthy annex to the wealthy suburb Bel Air), in the Santa Monica Mountain foothills above UCLA, the TV producer Aaron Spelling built what has been publicized broadly as the starship of LA man-
sions—a 56,550-square-foot French limestone estate with 123 rooms, with 2
rooms for wrapping gifts, and a rose garden on top of one of four garages.12
Here are two, generally ignored, facts about Spelling’s famous homestead. First,
his manse is a house of nature: it is built out of and contains fantastic quanti-
ties of oil, limestone, metals, dirt, water, and wood (a likely forest’s worth of
wrapping paper, to begin with). And second, there are very few maple trees on
Mapleton Drive. Maybe maples grew here once, and maybe not. Either way,
the street enjoys the idea of maple trees, which conjure a bucolic refuge above
the smog and noise and stress of the city below. Call it maple mojo. Smaller
manses of nature line the rest of Mapleton Drive, and Parkwood, Greendale,
Brooklawn, Beverly Glen, and other neighboring streets. No parks, no woods,
no dales, no brooks, no glens. Just the mojo of wild nature.

Mapleton Drive showcases the denial so intrinsic to the great American
nature story. It’s a convenient way of seeing nature if you enjoy wild things and
aspire to a virtuous relationship to nature but don’t want to give up any of your
stuff. We embrace nature as an ideal of wilderness, while losing track of the real
nature around us. We say that nature is a haven from modern, high-tech,
industrial urban life, but refuse to see that we madly use nature to sustain the
exact life from which we seek retreat. We make sacred our encounters with wild
nature, but thereby desacralize all other encounters.

If I could persuade you of any one argument, it’s that our foundational
nature stories should sacralize our mundane, economic, utilitarian, daily
encounters with nature—so that what car you drive and how you get your
water and how you build a house should be acts as sacred as hiking to the top
of Red Rock Canyon in the Santa Monica Mountains and gazing out over the
Pacific Ocean to watch the dolphins leap, the sea ducks float, and the sun set.
True, there’s terrific yearning in this nature story—for simplicity, for a slower
life. There’s wonder and exhilaration, too, about the natural world. There’s
sheer bewilderment faced with the boggling complexity of modern connected-
ness (how could anyone possibly keep track?). There’s a large dose of real regret,
for the wanton destructiveness of toxic industrialism and excessive con-
sumerism. And there is powerful, overriding denial, in the service of powerful
self-indulgence and material desire, that pushes us to imagine nature out of
rather than into our lives.

Interlude: First River Trip

Just how powerful? Well, in LA, we’ve lost track of an entire river—not just
the nature in the stuff in our houses. We cannot find LA’s major waterway,
which runs under ten freeways through the heart of LA County. A fifty-one-mile river in plain sight: lost.

The LA River is one of LA’s central natural facts. LA inhabits a river basin, and the major river drains large portions of the three mountain ranges out to the Pacific. The LA basin, while large enough for a megalopolis, is small for such significant drainage, and the river consequently poses the greatest flood danger of any river in a major U.S. city. (Mark Twain wrote that he had fallen into a California river and “come out all dusty”—but apparently had not seen one of the Southland’s raging flash floods.) After a last-straw series of floods in the 1930s, which made half of LA canoeable, the city brought in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who proceeded heroically to dig a concrete straitjacket for the river—a twenty-year project that lined the river and its tributaries with 2 million cubic yards of concrete and remains the corps’ largest public works project west of the Mississippi. The engineers rechristened the river the flood control channel. They decreed it was no longer a river—and to the public, the concrete channel no longer looked wild enough to count as nature. And this is how LA lost its river—not lost as in no longer had one, because LA actually did, but lost as in could no longer see or find it.

If a city is built and sustained by using and managing nature, then however you use and manage your central natural facts should have massive citywide consequences. What happens when you deny that your river is a river?

The saga of the LA River in the concrete era plays out as every brand of nature tale. And every part of this story plays largely like a tragedy. First, a what-nature-means tale: Angelenos labeled the river an unriver and imagined it out of their collective understanding of place. Also, a tale of wild things: many birds and frogs continue to use the river—they seem not to have heard it’s a river no longer—but other bird and most fish species disappeared.

Also, a Zuzu story. As this city altered the landscape to control the river’s floods, we largely ignored the basic hydrological processes within the place we inhabit. The reengineered river could no longer flow out into its basin, so therefore no longer replenished the aquifer with water, the soils with nutrients, and the beaches with sand. At the same time, the county directed the storm sewers into the channel, thereby turning the river into LA’s grand sewer, which now gathered pesticides, motor oil, trash, dog feces, and hundreds more pollutants from driveways, lawns, roads, and parking lots across the 834-square-mile watershed and rushed them downstream and out into the Pacific Ocean. And though the channel has prevented any further flooding, the extra water from the storm sewers has dramatically increased the volume of floodwaters. In sum, the decisions that LA has made to manage its river have generated water
and soil depletion, coastal erosion, higher floodwaters, and severe river, beach, and ocean pollution.¹⁴

This city that inhabits a piece of earth with a semiarid Mediterranean climate also chose a strategy for how to move water through the city. Here is the river’s mango body whip story: LA rushed as much as possible of its free water, which it got from the sky, as fast as possible off driveways and roads into the storm sewers, which rushed the rainwater into the river and out into the Pacific—and then paid dearly to import water by aqueduct up to four hundred miles from watersheds across the West. Call it watering the ocean. And draining the West. And finally, a social geography of air story. LA may enjoy wild corners galore, but as the American city that has so consistently privileged private property over public spaces, it has also most consistently constructed the least park space per capita—a problem by far the worst in poorer neighborhoods, which not only suffer the most alarming shortages of community park space but also enjoy the least private green space and lie the farthest away from the large mountain parks. As the corps dug away, LA turned the basin’s most logical site for green space, and the city’s major connector, into an ugly barren scar that carved a no-man’s-land through many of the most industrial and park-starved areas.

Since the late 1930s, LA has chosen to manage a major natural feature in ways that encourage vast environmental degradation, social inequities, community fragmentation, erasure of civic memory, and water imperialism. These choices, in other words, have profoundly exacerbated most of LA’s notorious troubles. The good news, on the other hand, is that if managing your landscape and river poorly brings disaster and doom to the city, then managing them far more sustainably and fairly should make the city a healthier, more equitable, and all around lovelier place to live in. First, though, you have to see the river. You have to find it.

Is there nature in LA? Far more than our philosophies dream of and much more than in Portland or Boulder—more, possibly, on Mapleton Drive alone than in some small towns in Iowa. In the reinvention of nature writing, the question will seem silly, since it makes about as much sense as, is there air in the atmosphere? We’ll also shun as useless and flat-out uninteresting, where is nature? and even, what is nature? and especially that nonsense about the end of nature, a jeremiad that offers us about as much help as declaring an end to water or plants or animals—and which bespeaks the way of thinking by which LA lost its river. The literature’s power question will become, rather, what nature is it? And then—how do we use nature? how do we change nature? how does nature react? how do we react back? how do we imagine nature? who uses
and changes and imagines nature? and often the most important questions of all, how sustainably? how fairly? how well?

A Seventh Way: As Nearly Infinitely Abundant

Who was stupid enough to erect a city on the site of Los Angeles anyway? . . . The place is rapidly . . . sinking into a Blade Runner dystopian futurism. . . . The air is unbreathable, the water undrinkable, the transit system impenetrable.

_Time Out Los Angeles Guide_ (the guide I purchased upon moving here)

What is doubly true of America is quadruply true of Los Angeles.

Pico Iyer, _Harper's_, 1995

Is there a more nature-intensive city than LA? LA County stretches 4,084 square miles. It is the second largest metropolitan area (after New York) by size and population: the entire four-county area has more people than each of the least populous forty-two states. LA hosts the nation's busiest port, and ranks as the largest U.S. industrial center. It is a world Valhalla for wealth and consumerism. How nature moves through LA, and how we use and transform nature here, bear enormous consequences for places throughout the United States and the world.

In the literary tradition of nature writing, there has been Walden Pond, and there have been Yosemite and Tinker Creek. And there should be Los Angeles. Chicago, New York, Baltimore, Denver, Phoenix, Des Moines, and Fargo all urgently need nature writers too, and I hope people will swarm to these cities to serve. But come to LA, especially, and not only because there is just so much nature here or that this is a global center and way station for the use and movement of nature. If LA has a special relationship to nature, it also enjoys singular connections to storytelling. Above all, it enjoys a special relationship to stories about nature.

An Eighth Way: As Exceptionally Iconic

Since the start of the '90s . . . many of us [were left] with the distinct impression that we were living through the end of civilisation . . . and that maybe the Four Horsemen were using the LA basin to warm up before riding onto the actual Apocalypse.

_Time Out Los Angeles Guide_
Has any city engendered more enthusiastic storytelling? LA’s special, even unstoppable—even psychotic—relationship to representation has made the meanings of nature here, like the meanings of everything else, look especially dramatic and resonant. After all, who asks, is there nature in Chicago, or is there nature in New York (much less, where is the Hudson River)? Most of us have not envisioned Manhattan or Philadelphia as major centers for nature, but as the Anti-Nature, LA represents all other cities as places where nature is not.

How have nature writers, alone in the literary community, been able to resist LA—even if they hate it? It’s actually quite a lot of fun to write about LA. The rapture in the paens is as palpable as the glee in the excoriations. Since the mid-1800s, when marketers of LA as the American Eden willed the city to prominence, LA typically has stood in as some larger story about successes and failures of American dreams: New Eden, Paradise Lost, Utopia, Dystopia, City of Angels, City of Fallen Angels, Autopia, Surfurbia, American Daydream, City of the Second Chance, and the Great Wrong Place. 16

Whether waxing eloquent about suburban sprawl, ethnic diversity, racial violence, economic opportunity, excesses of capitalism, class warfare, sexual liberation, urban crime, self-reinvention, or moral decay, the city’s storytellers have interpreted what happens in LA to define what we hope for and fear, want and don’t want, and believe has gone fantasticaly right or wrong. “A plague has descended,” the New York Times, the sober national paper of record, reported on the first fall rains in 2002: “It is raining in Los Angeles. People are dying on the highways. Planes are falling out of the sky.” A film reviewer wrote in a recent Entertainment Weekly, “There’s a certain kind of white, piercing empty light to the Los Angeles sky that can make a person want to commit suicide.” 17 Can you imagine saying that about the rains in San Diego or investing that moral and narrative weight in the sky in Oakland? And in what other city would the informational tourist guidebooks—not just fiction, essays, op-eds, and scholarship, as well as the weather coverage—describe the place as if it were a staging ground for the apocalypse?

Rain . . . usually [causes] massive flooding and [leaves] people stranded atop their vehicles or entombed in sinking homes.

National Geographic Traveler Los Angeles

Near the [Santa Monica] pier, a vaguely menacing throng makes the potential for getting mugged almost as good as that for getting a tan.

Fodor’s Upclose Los Angeles
Even if you don’t get mugged, there are... thieves who specialize in peering over your shoulder when you enter your PIN number.

*Rough Guide Los Angeles*

The oft-cited refrains American dream and American nightmare can set eyes rolling in Los Angeles itself, especially among native residents versus immigrants like me. In reality, planes do not tumble from the sky and people do not climb on their cars when it rains, and you could spend years and a small fortune on sunscreen waiting to be mugged on the Santa Monica Pier. There are great walking neighborhoods here. The city is not inordinately dangerous to visit: it is not a Gotham in dire need of a bat signal. It can be frustrating to live in such a relentlessly iconic city. But proclaiming the meaning of LA will not likely fade any day soon as a national pastime. You could say—to borrow a coinage from the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss—that Americans have used LA to think.18

All of which makes LA an ideal place to reinvent one of the great American stories. If the Anti-Nature, the city that represents the city as a place without nature, is really a place of nature, then any city must be.

**A Ninth Way: As a Casualty of a Larger Refusal to See Connections**

Imagination is all that finally defines LA.


It is? Really?

Of course, if the real LA has not always matched up to the tales about the City of Angels, these descriptions of LA have tended to exaggerate more than to make things up. As the city with more ethnic diversity, pollution, sprawl, and inequality than most others, LA has always tended to push all things American—our trends, our narratives, our ideas—to the outer edge, and has pushed few things farther or more obsessively than an ideal of personal freedom. I read an LA is about freedom refrain nearly every week: in the month in which I am writing this, the architectural historian Robert Winter told a *Los Angeles Times* interviewer, “You have a sense of freedom here that you don’t have anywhere else in the United States”; an *Entertainment Weekly* review of a new TV show set in LA declared, “Los Angeles [is] the land of reinventing yourself, of discovering new possibilities, new realities, new fantasies.” LA has
been the fabled city where you're supposed to be able to start over, cut loose from social constraints, and escape your past. You should generally be able to pursue the American dream of being whatever you want to be. As the astute LA writer David Ulin wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* (that same month) about a commemoration of the 1994 earthquake, "[It is] expected to be the kind of event that doesn't usually happen in Los Angeles, a conscious effort to link the present to the past." In the city so often used to articulate American stories, you can most clearly watch the association of the American Dream with private desire, and with a willful blindness to connections.¹⁹

You have an inalienable right to make your real life
conform to your dream life.

*CityTripping: Los Angeles*

Ultimately, L.A. is the city in me, the city
I weave together for myself.


LA has the least park space per capita and many poorer areas with almost no public park space at all. It is a notoriously fragmented city geographically and notoriously short on public spaces of all kinds that nourish public life. My adopted town is the city of the gated neighborhood. It ranks first among U.S. cities for the number of millionaires and forty-first in philanthropy. Forty-first.²⁰ Here, you can see how wealth and power bankroll the pursuit of private desire. You clearly view a tendency—magnified here, but hardly unique to LA—to confuse ideals of individual liberty with ideals of being free to accumulate capital and use it to do whatever you want. You can watch the failure to ballast the quest for personal freedom with other American ideals of equality and community. Here, you can watch all this translate into the willful failure to see the basic connections to people and nature that sustain life within the city.

This is the land of Proposition 13 and Proposition 187, where we want lower taxes but all the same public services. It is where affluent Angelenos want the cheapest labor but no social services for illegal immigrants, and all the economic as well as cultural benefits of ethnic diversity but gated neighborhoods to keep the diversity away from where you live, and secluded canyon homes but no responsibility for the damage after the inevitable fires and mudslides in this climate, and the freedom of car travel and the remote residential areas and pristine wilds to hike and vacation in and all the material goods you desire, but no traffic or smog or pollution and of course no industrial activity or toxic
dumps near your neighborhood. Here, you can watch the great American nature story play out as part of the larger desire to benefit from all your connections to people and places and nature but refuse to make good on them.

This is a city whose best feature is... [that] it does not oppress its citizens with a civic identity. Los Angeles lets you alone, and... forces you to consider who you... want to be.


Contents may have shifted during flight... And remember, life is a work of art, designed by the one who lives it.

TWA flight attendant, approach to LAX on my return trip from a visit to St. Louis

It's hard not to embrace the love affair with freedom here, for reasons ignoble but also admirable. I live on Venice Beach, after all, and I love that LA is a place where you can rollerblade in a thong at the beach (whether male or female) while strumming a guitar. Do you know you can buy a hot dog topped with pastrami, chili, and American cheese and wrapped in a tortilla? And I love living in a place where a friend's recent story began, "I went to Terry's house, and there was Terry, and Terry's baby, and the baby's doula, and the doula's chimp in a dress." I appreciate the greater ethnic integration, the flourishing of experimental arts, the diversity of lifestyles, and the relative porosity of social and career circles.

But individual freedom, like all such sweeping ideals, is inherently malleable and can serve a wide range of agendas, and the conviction that it means doing whatever the hell you want has to have found its most dramatic expression in the refrain that LA is, in point of fact, whatever you want it to be. It is all imagination, your dream life, yours to define. Even well-respected critics and writers repeat this shibboleth with astonishing frequency. LA, you hear, is not just a place where we tell stories. It is a story. Literally—and yours, no less, your own personal home movie. And this is the ideal of freedom gone seriously over the edge. It is the American dream on a shooting rampage. If ever a way of understanding a city and carving one's place within it were designed to lose track of connections, here it is: to say LA is whatever you want it to be authorizes you to ignore all your connections to other people, community, the past, and nature. It palps with that same potent amalgam of material desire, overall yearning, self-indulgence, and extreme denial.

In LA, you can most clearly watch the American nature story plug into a family of sins committed in the name of the American dream.
A Tenth Way: As Especially Dangerous to Lose Track Of

On the other hand, you can see the consequences, too. In LA, it is so inarguably evident that whether you acknowledge your connections or not, they of course remain operable. Go ahead and ignore your topography, your climate, your hydrology. The air will darken, the mountains will slide into houses, and the lost river will gather toxics and trash. LA is not all imagination or your dream life. It has never been the city in me or your story to create, so watch out for the blowback—for smog, racial violence, poverty, homelessness, freeway gridlock, beach erosion, mudslides, soil depletion, sewage spills, water pollution, and the ongoing crisis in water supply. Of course, the more affluent Angelenos, who benefit most from ignoring vital connections, can evade the consequences most readily. Most of these problems will wreak far more havoc in the lives of the city’s poorer residents.

This city’s infamous problems can fuel an argument, as large as Los Angeles itself, for ways of seeing nature and of telling nature stories that refuse to lose track.

An Eleventh Way: As a Terrific Boon to Boulder and Missoula

None of which is to let Boulder off the hook—actually, very much the opposite. We may wish away connections in LA, but we can hardly wish away culpability for the ensuing troubles (and even affluent Angelenos encounter serious daily havoc). Boulder tends to hail itself as the anti-LA: it’s the green place, the socially just place, the great good place. But you can keep your air clean more easily when the factories that manufacture your SUVs and Gore-Tex jackets lie in distant cities. You can minimize racial and class confrontations when most of you are white and affluent and most of the poor and nonwhite labor force that sustains the material life of the city actually resides far away. Nature writers have documented how cities mine the hinterlands ruthlessly for resources. But they have told us almost nothing about how urban regions, and especially the poorer areas within them, disproportionately shoulder the industrial burden of converting natural resources into our lovely wondrous stuff.

Boulder couldn’t begin to be the Boulder that Boulder loves without LA (and a lot of other places like LA), just as Bel Air and Malibu couldn’t be the Bel Air and Malibu people know and love minus the essential connections to nature and labor throughout LA County. Think of a defining difference between Boulder and LA as the difference between Malibu and Southeast LA writ nationally. Boulderites benefit far more, and suffer far less, from how they
use nature—which I suspect is one reason why Boulder never claimed my head or heart. LA may be a land of troubles, but it is also unfairly maligned, because it is too easy to call your town the Great Right Place when you live with far fewer of the problems you create.

In other words, I don’t embrace LA as the mecca for a reinvention of nature writing only because, alas, you can see the horror and fallout of the established stories so clearly here. You also can see a far larger picture of our connections to nature, and you have to live with their consequences—which is oddly heartening and makes LA feel like an honest place to think and write about nature, as well as a terrifyingly obvious place to forge fairer and more sustainable connections to nature.

A Twelfth Way: As a Focus of Great Good Work

And so many people are doing exactly that. The exorbitant costs of losing track of nature have so consistently confronted this megalopolis with the exigent need to pay attention. And when you change things in LA—where what happens has national and global ramifications, as well as metaphoric resonance—you inevitably enact change in other places too.

Angelenos ranging from elected public officials to civil engineers to urban planners to social and environmental activists have been establishing this city of troubles as a leading think tank for strategies generally to make cities more livable and more equitable, but also for recognizing the central importance of nature to such goals. And as a St. Louis friend who runs an environmental law clinic remarked to me, California is “light years ahead of the curve on environmental regulation”—in no small part due to wrestling with LA’s problems. The city with the nation’s worst air pollution enforces the strictest air quality regulations and maintains pioneering emissions standards for vehicles, outdoor appliances, and household products. A recent Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) report calls the LA area—with one out of every three beach closures in the United States—the “national epicenter” of coastal pollution. In 2000, NRDC and two local environmental groups won a landmark lawsuit against the EPA that, for the first time, requires a metropolitan area to not only prepare but adhere to the cleanup schedules mandated by the Clean Water Act—and that ideally will force other cities, too, to address their significant runoff problems.21

Because LA is the American city with the least park space per capita, the public agencies and nonprofits working for more parks have been pioneering methods to reclaim and green up phased-out industrial lands. In the city that suffers both extreme environmental ruin and extreme social and economic
inequities, environmental justice activists have won key battles in the poorer areas of East and South LA to shut down polluters—battles that have built and strengthened the movement nationally—and have fought successfully to make the Southland’s regulatory agencies the first to rewrite policies to recognize that problems such as air pollution and park-space shortages bedevil poorer and nonwhite neighborhoods disproportionately. And there can be no more cutting-edge place to work for urban transformation than on the banks of the country’s most degraded urban river.²²

LA may not be the greenest, cleanest place to be a nature writer, but it is exciting. As L.A. Weekly writer Judith Lewis has put it: “Los Angeles has...[given] me a world to battle as much as I revel in it. It has given me a life in interesting times.”²³

Interlude: Second River Trip

You almost need special glasses to see the LA River as the green and healthy river that the hundreds of people who are revitalizing it are aiming for. The project should take at least several decades—you also need great reserves of faith and patience—but it will happen if (in the early-twenty-first-century economy, admittedly a big if) the money and the political will continue to flow at the current rate.

In the mid-1980s, the first calls to revitalize the river, by the fledgling Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), seemed to push beyond what quixotic could describe. At that time, proposals to paint the concrete blue and to use the channel as a dry-season freeway for trucks met with far more serious consideration. In fact, FoLAR’s proposal, after a decade of persuasion, would prove to be superb common sense before its time. By 2000, the river’s restoration emerged as a major policy priority, as every imaginably relevant public and private interest—from environmentalists and social activists to neighborhood associations to urban planners and architects to the LA City Council, LA County Board of Supervisors, and LA County Department of Public Works (our quondam sun gods of flood control)—have concluded that restoring one of LA’s major natural facts to health can help ameliorate the city’s worst troubles.

How do you resurrect the LA River? You have to green the riverbanks. You have to clean the water. And you have to dynamite out some of the concrete. Each of these goals, it turns out, quickly becomes an act of thinking big.

To green the banks, this loose coalition of actors has set out to turn the cement scar through the heart of this park-poor, public space-starved, fragmented metropolis into a fifty-one-mile greenway and bikeway, which can
become the backbone for a countywide greenway network. The LA River Greenway itself will green and connect many of the poorer neighborhoods that most desperately need new parks. FoLAR, Latino activist groups, and others also propose to turn the downtown stretch of the river in this history-averse city into a historic route with stops that commemorate key sites and events in the city's past.24

To clean the river—which by law the EPA must now ensure happens by 2013—you have to remove pollutants from the river itself. Even better, you want to identify where they're coming from: weed-killers, insecticides, fertilizers, paints, detergents, car waxes, gasoline, motor oil, asbestos brake linings, and the thousands more sources for your basic toxic urban street stew that washes into our soil, water, and of course our bodies. It is an overwhelming task—and some cities along the river have chosen to fight the legal decision in court instead. But to clean the river, LA will have to encourage cleaner industrial processes to manufacture products that are less toxic, more recyclable, more biodegradable.

You have to blow up some, though not every single ton, of the concrete: the Seine, after all, runs through Paris in a concrete channel. Do it today, however, and the next heavy winter rains will bring devastating floods. So the fans of concrete removal have been thinking hard about how to keep more storm water out of the river—which would require two major steps. First, you capture as much rain as possible where it falls: you can use the water right away (say, to irrigate a lawn or park), or let it sink into the aquifer (which will naturally clean the water as minerals in the soil bind toxic chemicals). Second, you divert water out of the river during floods. To capture rainfall, the county is looking to site parks, restored wetlands, and more green space wherever possible, and LA County Public Works, along with FoLAR, the River Project, TreePeople, North East Trees, and other nonprofits, has launched pilot projects for porous paving and underground cisterns and for newly designed gutters, freeway medians, and parking lots that pitch water into the ground instead of the sewers. To divert floodwaters, the county has sited the first in a projected series of diversion basins, which will double as wetlands and parks. In sum, the initial vow to remove concrete has become a springboard to rethinking more broadly how to move water through LA. It has pushed LA to consider far more carefully that the city occupies a river basin, which itself is part of a larger watershed.

Altogether, greening, cleaning, and deconcreting the river would maximize local water supplies and quality. It should prevent flooding and restore wildlife habitat. Neighborhoods throughout the LA basin will acquire much-needed park and green space, and the greenery will help clean the air. The movement
to revive the river has pushed LA to the national forefront of urban watershed management. And one of LA’s defining natural features has quickly become a key meeting ground within LA for the diverse efforts to enhance the equity and environmental quality of life for Angelenos.

The saga of the river now, like the tale of turning the river into a concrete sewer, is at once every category of nature story. And the river’s mango body whip, Zuzu, geography of air, and wild-things tales are all now changing for the better. This story of revitalizing the river is about using essential natural resources well. It emphasizes the rewards of wild spaces in an urban setting. It’s about recognizing that using nature unsustainably inevitably brings by far the most grief to poorer neighborhoods. It’s about understanding the particular environment of the place you inhabit—the basic hydrology, climate, topography, ecology—and using that knowledge to guide how you change and manage that place.

A Thirteenth Way: As the Foundation of LA Stories

This is a happy land for children and all young animals. They are uniformly large, active, and healthy. They live in the pure air and sunshine.

*Guide to the . . . Pacific Coast*, 1884

I began by searching for the story in the streets . . . where . . .
the palm trees were high with scrawny fronds like broken pinwheels . . .
and droopy ice plant could never quite hold the earth . . . in place . . .
and an oil derrick [looked] like a rusty praying mantis, trying to suck
the last few barrels out of the dying crab grass.

Robert Towne, preface and postscript to *Chinatown* (released in 1974)

And waiting in the wings are the plague squirrels and killer bees.


And it should be about reimagining the place of nature in the city. But Angelenos still cannot seem to find the river and generally still doubt that the river is a real river at all. The what it means story remains uniquely stubborn.
The river has not been destroyed: it is nature degraded but nature nevertheless.
But amidst the epic efforts to revitalize the river, Angelenos have not yet redefined the river as natural. Despite all the great good work generally, people in
and out of LA still question whether LA has any nature at all. While scientists, social scientists, historians, urban planners, landscape designers, and environmentalists have written shelves and shelves of books that describe the centrality of nature to cities, most nature writers continue to shun cities as gomorrah of iniquitous conspiracies against nature (to overstate the case, but only a bit).

And as writers in every other literary genre have tried every wild experiment imaginable, this single genre has not changed philosophically in 150 years.

In the end, this opposition of nature and cities may prove more resistant to change than the concrete in the LA River. And nowhere has this insistence flourished more powerfully than in Los Angeles—more iconically and more consequentially, but also so consistently in descriptions of the city. And here is the last, and perhaps the ultimate, reason that nature writers should flock to the City of Angels as a logical headquarters. LA, like no other metropolis, has woven the established nature story comprehensively into its stories of itself. Here, Americans have used a nature tale to think about the city they have used to think.

"To watch the front-page news out of Los Angeles during a Santa Ana is to get very close to what it is about the place," Joan Didion wrote in 1968, in a famous passage that echoes Raymond Chandler's often quoted lines about LA's winds. From the nineteenth-century marketeers to prominent LA promoter and Land of Sunshine editor Charles Lummis in the early twentieth century to William Faulkner and Nathanael West and the noir writers in the 1930s and 1940s to Joan Didion to Mike Davis to the current coverage in the New York Times and Los Angeles Times, describers of LA have been obsessed with sun, sea, light, sky, wind, rains, and greenery, as well as rats, cougars, killer bees, fires, cascading mud, and earthquakes. And even in the work of Davis—from whom I have learned so much about how to think about Los Angeles—the nature is fundamentally anti-urban.

Consider how nature—and this vision of it in particular—has starred in the dominant stories about LA's larger meanings. To simplify egregiously, you can parse the American dream stories into roughly three phases—dream, nightmare, and apocalypse—which, while they have coexisted almost from the start, have shifted in dominance. In the beginning, LA was the American Eden. The early descriptions emphasize the sunshine, the sea, the clean air, the diaphanous light. Nature, the dream stories promise, will make LA the uncanny city, where you can escape the crowded, industrialized cities to the east, which are marked by pollution, ethnic and racial conflicts, and financial disappointments. But then, the nightmare gains on the dream. By the 1960s, LA has defaulted (inevitably) on every promise and has become paradise lost. Nightmare stories showcase the decimation of the city's natural gifts—the black sky,
the fouled sea, the stolen water, the endless pavement, the dying palm trees, the concrete river—as the premier symbols of everything gone wrong. LA has become the Anti-Nature—a place with no nature at all.

And then, apocalypse: “Is the City of Angels Going to Hell” as a 1993 cover of Time reads. In the early 1990s, as LA reeled from the Northridge earthquake, race riots, Malibu fires, mudslides, El Niño, and the O. J. Simpson trial, the reigning description of LA shifts from a place where nature no longer exists to one besieged by a nature that is quite literally anti-urban—as the city that destroyed nature becomes the city where nature comes back for revenge. The history of LA storytelling, if more complicated, basically boils down to a triology: Nature blesses LA. Nature flees LA. Nature returns armed.

No wonder I love LA. This city has hosted a spirited conversation about nature for 150 years. You can almost smell the obsession when you land at the LA airport. Nature stories have been far more than important stories here. They’re the stories that frame the other stories. How ironic, really, that nature writers have ostracized LA so religiously. You could say that LA already has long flourished as a mecca for writing about nature—as central an American place as Yosemite, the Alaskan outback, or Walden Pond—and especially for telling the story that nature writing itself has so dedicatedly perpetuated.

This makes perfect sense, if you think about it. As in any human society, the stories we tell about nature are the most basic stories we can tell. LA has long been a place where we articulate grand American narratives. So it should not surprise us either that the foundational LA story is a nature story, or that the city with a zeitgeist of denial has used an evasive story to imagine itself. In the dream tales, nature makes LA a city where you can escape the basic social and environmental challenges of any city. The nightmare visions write LA off as a ruined city; if you utterly destroy nature, how can you possibly ever fix it? And how much farther beyond redemption could a city be that awaits imminent millenial annihilation? The apocalypse stories, too, lament the city’s troubles while conveniently denying that anything can be done. Here is a city where we’ve dreamt brilliantly of virtue while doing spectacularly unvirtuous things. The city practically vibrates with brilliant denial in the service of spectacular yearning, self-interest, and material indulgence. And the city’s foundational story is a way of seeing and defining nature that encourages and allows for all these same evasions.

To see LA—and to understand any city and how we navigate our lives within—it—we need a foundational literature of nature not as the antithesis of the city but as the stuff of everyday life. Less apocalypse and avenging earthquakes and more mango body whips. Less mojo and more actual nature. We could use less “It’s raining in Los Angeles. Planes are falling out of the sky,” and a lot
more tales that track our daily, intertwined connections to nature and to each other—such as “Experience the beauty of another culture while learning more about wastewater treatment and reuse.”

I love that LA has been such an extraordinarily powerful place to tell American nature stories. But as long as LA has been a mecca for American stories, people have been calling for new ways to see the city. And nature stories have to be the logical place to start.

Postscript: The Confluence

After I found the LA River, which took me a year, I went searching for the confluence with the Arroyo Seco—the river’s geographic, historic, and ecological center. Unsurprisingly, this spot can prove almost impossibly difficult to find. In the Thomas Guide map book, the bible for finding one’s way around Los Angeles, the blue line of the Arroyo inexplicably peters out about a mile before the tributary in fact meets the river.

The day I found the river remains one of my finest days here. I started far upstream, on the sole half mile free of concrete, near the combination water reclamation plant and Japanese garden in the San Fernando Valley. I continued down to a stretch, across from Griffith Park, that boasts an inspired string of new pocket parks with native vegetation and outdoor public art. Both stretches teemed with ducks and other birds. I ended up far downstream in Southeast LA, where the channel widens out to the girth of a freeway. Black-necked stilts by the hundreds yapped and fed on algae around upturned shopping carts. A mallard shot down the swift current. The sun set spectacularly on the southwest horizon through the power lines, billboards, and smokestacks of the LA harbor. A man on a horse rode by, wearing a cowboy hat, a Mexican blanket, and a cell phone. This is LA, I thought. I was steeped so contentedly in the complex life. All day I had been marveling, there is a river in LA, a real river, what do you know, and it seemed, after a year of loving LA but not knowing why and of wanting to write about LA but not knowing how, that I was now looking at the place (duck filled, no less) that held the key to both.

With my friend Alan Loomis, an urban designer and river aficionado, I lead informal tours of the river—for friends and friends of their friends, who like to think about LA and who have heard LA has a river and want to see it. We stop at the new park sites, but also insist on a visit to the wasteland of the confluence, which I located finally on my own third try. We wander through the trash and skirt the homeless tents and lean on the massive pylons of the freeway overpasses. Here, we say, is the most hopeless as well as the most hopeful spot on the LA River. The confluence is perhaps the most extreme testament to LA's
erasure of nature, community, and the past. This spot is at once the logical nexus for the proposed fifty-one-mile LA River Greenway. And the city is about to break ground on the first half acre of what should, eventually, be a great central-city park. Here, we say, is one of the best places to think about the river, which is one of the best places to think about LA—and LA historically has been one of the best places to tell stories about America. You are standing, we allow, at an American narrative vortex. This spot ideally should be swarming with Angelenos, with writers, with nature writers. And to our delight, the people on the tours say, “What a cool place.” They take a great many photographs—more, usually, than at any other spot—and then we continue downstream to imagine the future of LA and the LA River Greenway, where you can drive into the river downtown.