The Contested Foodscape of Affluence and Exclusion in Eagle Rock and Highland Park

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines how the local foodscape of York Boulevard in the Northeast Los Angeles (NELA) neighborhoods of Eagle Rock and Highland Park has been structurally reshaped over the last two decades. Analyzing York Boulevard as a commercial corridor offers a critical lens into how and why the foodscape has transformed, and the impact it has on the economic viability, cultural meaning, and necessity of long-standing community-serving food establishments in Eagle Rock and Highland Park.

York Boulevard has undergone redevelopment over the last two decades, shaped by rising commercial rents, the influx of higher-income residents, and the abundance of cafes, upscale dining establishments, and specialty food retailers. Meanwhile, the cultural value of immigrant-run and legacy food businesses, which historically provided affordable, culturally appropriate foods and served as community hubs, has increasingly been overshadowed by the symbolic capital attached to the label of "authenticity," a phenomenon amplified by social media and food-blog culture (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2020, 2023). As a result, long-standing food vendors face mounting pressures to modernize or rebrand in ways that align with the tastes of new affluent consumers, even as these changes threaten the viability of their business.

Throughout the interviews conducted with three legacy food establishments: Troy's Burgers #8, Delia's Restaurant, and Jugos Azteca, some common themes emerged. A key finding was that the simultaneous endurance and vulnerability of these long-standing establishments, including the increased impact of rising insurance premiums, ingredient costs, and diminishing profit margins, became increasingly evident. Moreover, these businesses continue to operate on York Boulevard; yet they are increasingly at risk of being evicted or driven out of business. Long-standing establishments, once valued for their functionality, affordability, and cultural

rootedness, become reinvented as “hidden gems,” even though, as one vendor noted, they were never hidden to the communities that upheld them for many decades. The concept of “authenticity” becomes commodified through online food blogs and social media, along with influences from newer residents about decor or the perceived “healthiness” of traditional foods, further demonstrating the shifting cultural expectations shaped by affluent consumption norms and media (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2023; Zukin, 2009). At the same time, buyout offers from corporate chains like Pete’s Coffee reveal how rising commercial land values in Eagle Rock and Highland Park make long-standing businesses targets for acquisition and redevelopment. Because legacy businesses are essential components of the neighborhood social infrastructure, the closure of long-standing vendors creates “root shock” for long-standing residents and has an impact beyond food security (Lin, 2019).

Overall, this research reveals that the transformation of the York Boulevard foodscape is unfolding through a layered combination of rising economic pressures, changing clientele, symbolic revaluation of ethnic foods, and speculative real estate interest. While the physical displacement of the interviewed businesses has not occurred, the pressures they face mirror the broader structural forces documented in NELA’s gentrification over the past two decades (Lin, 2019). Importantly, these businesses continue to serve as anchors of community identity, cultural continuity, and everyday survival for long-standing residents. Yet their viability is increasingly threatened by processes that privilege affluent newcomers and reconfigure food establishments into aesthetic commodities rather than community institutions. This study details the urgent need for the preservation of long-standing ethnic food businesses to uphold the cultural identity, social infrastructure, and food security in areas undergoing rapid socio-spatial transformation, such as Eagle Rock and Highland Park.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper investigates how the remaining long-standing food businesses on York Boulevard navigate neighborhood change, as well as how the local foodscape has been reshaped in the last twenty years. Over the last three decades, urban food planning has expanded significantly and has increasingly been recognized for its role in the urban planning field. This field is situated within the scholarly discourse of environmental justice, which acknowledges that low-income and minority communities disproportionately bear environmental burdens, including unequal access to healthy food options and greater exposure to fast-food outlets and convenience stores (Hilmers et al., 2012). Within this research, the concepts of "foodscape" and "foodways" are central as they provide a more integrative, qualitative approach. "Foodways" are defined as the cultural and social practices that affect food consumption, while the "foodscape" concept emphasizes the spatiality of food systems, together being key tools for this research to think through food-place relations in terms of geographies and politics of urban poverty and survival (Miewald & McCann, 2014).

Within rapidly transitioning urban areas, the transformation of the foodscape can serve as an early identifier of neighborhood change, reflecting rising commercial rents, shifting consumer preferences, and the strategic redevelopment of the commercial corridor. This process is marked by the rapid development of new retail venues like cafes and health food stores, which act as identifiers that the area is available for development, and can be identified as aesthetic gentrification (Alkon & Cadji, 2020). Further, "foodie culture", with the growth of social media and online blogs, has further had an impact on the viability of many long-standing businesses, taking away their cultural, social, and economic value in the neighborhood, and commodifying the businesses for their perceived "authenticity" (Miewald & McCann, 2014). As a result, "zones

of exclusion" and "food mirages" become overly present, as long-standing residents and vendors are priced out of their neighborhoods, and while there may be an abundance of food establishments, they are targeted towards the new, affluent residents of the area, and price out long-standing residents (Short et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to better understand how these processes are manifesting on York Boulevard and the forces behind the redevelopment of its foodscape over the last two decades. This research employs a qualitative case study design by gathering primary qualitative data through several short, semi-structured, in-person interviews with owners and employees of long-standing food businesses on York Boulevard. The subjects prioritized in the interviews were vendors that first began operating in 2005, and they were identified using archival data on Google Maps. Complementing this, the secondary analysis incorporates academic peer-reviewed literature and the discourse of online digital food media, analyzing its impact on the transformation of the local foodscape. This research further examines how these changes are reflected across Eagle Rock and Highland Park, as well as gaining insight into how long-standing vendors have navigated the ongoing foodscapes transformation, contextualizing this issue within the local community, and providing recommendations for preserving long-standing, ethnic food businesses.

Delia's Restaraunt

Troy's Burgers

Jugos Azteca

PRIOR RESEARCH AND BACKGROUND

The socioeconomic trends of both Eagle Rock and Highland Park demonstrate a widening gap between residents in household income, as well as rent and housing costs, affecting long-standing low-income and minority residents at higher rates. Further, the demographic shift across Eagle Rock and Highland Park signals that the neighborhood is changing, with the largest demographic shifts happening around York Boulevard. These trends serve to help identify how structural changes of the local foodscape are being manifested both physically and spatially. A commercial corridor of an area, in this instance, York Boulevard, is where neighborhood change becomes evident, as more affluent residents frequent the commercial corridor and move into the neighborhood (Lin, 2019). This actively impacts the commercial corridor's composition of food vendors, the economic prosperity of long-standing businesses, essential to the community, and their ability to maintain cultural heritage. As a result, immigrant-run and established local food businesses are threatened by rising operating and rent prices, demographic turnover altering the clientele base, and capital investment in high-end dining and food establishments.

The Eagle Rock neighborhood had a median annual household income of $111,834 according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2020). It is important to note that in Eagle Rock, more than a third of households, around 35.96% earn less than $75,000 annually, but 35.82% of households earn more than $150,000, demonstrating the wealth gap between residents of the same area. Simultaneously, Eagle Rock has a highly diverse demographic complexity, with approximately 29.82% of its population being foreign-born, 32.92% identifying as Hispanic, 26.22% identifying as Asian, 2.15% African American, 39.6% identifying as White, and 16.33% of the population identifying as some other race (US Census, 2020). There are approximately 4,570 renters in Eagle Rock, making up 46.68% of residents between 2019 and 2023. However,

according to the U.S. Census' American Community Survey (ACS), 2,059 renters in this area were cost-burdened (paying more than 30% of their income towards rent) between 2019-2023. Of the renters who were cost-burdened, 22.78% were over the age of 65, and 31.91% earned less than $20,000 between 2019-2023 (US Census, 2020).

The adjacent Highland Park neighborhood has a slightly lower median annual income of $94,401; however, 38.65% of the population earned less than $75,000 annually, while 28.22% of households earned more than $150,000. Across the area, an estimated 53.54% or 11,505 households rented their homes between 2019-2023 (US Census, 2020). According to the ACS, 5,452 renters in this area were cost-burdened between 2019-2023, and of those renters, 17.24% were over the age of 65. Further, 19.26% of cost-burdened renters earned less than $20,000. Highland Park maintains a similar rate of concentration of foreign-born individuals to Eagle Rock, with approximately 35.87% of individuals being foreign-born; however, Highland Park has a higher majority of Hispanic residents, around 60.42% of the population, 29.79% of residents identifying as White, 2.22% identifying as African American, 12.88% as Asian and 35.19% of the population identifying as some other race, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020).

The maps in the appendices provide a visual understanding of the predominant racial or ethnic groups in both the Eagle Rock (Maps 1a-1b) and Highland Park (Maps 2a-2b) neighborhoods along York Boulevard, depicting the demographic trends between 2009-2013, and 2019-2023.

The urgency of this project stems from its connection to environmental justice and the critical need to address structural food inequities perpetuated by urban development (Hilmers et al., 2012). Early environmental justice research, primarily focused on environmental hazards and

toxic exposures, failed to adequately examine disparities in access to food environments and the foundational downfalls in the expansion of the food system. More broadly, urban planning and development have historically ignored the food system entirely, treating it as solely a zoning issue. As a result, a widening gap emerged in the field, where food's vital connections to health, the environment, and the economy were systematically ignored.

I. Food Systems as an Ethical Planning Imperative

The food system historically was widely perceived as a "stranger to the planning field," a systemic failure that delayed foundational academic inquiries until the late 1990s (Brinkley & Vitiello, 2014; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). Research had already shown that low-income and minority neighborhoods consistently experienced significant disparities in food access, frequently characterized by a greater prevalence of low-quality food stores and fewer healthy options (Hilmers et al., 2012; Raja et al., 2008). Even when issues of food accessibility were addressed, research findings produced general findings, relying on the metaphor of the "food desert", failing to conceptualize the relational nature of urban foodscapes and the roles of key actors such as long-standing food vendors in the local food system (Miewald & McCann, 2014). Key urban planners, notably Jerry Kaufman, a pioneer of the urban food studies field, stressed that planning must embrace ethics and justice to address these structural issues, positioning the planner as an interventionist in public policy (Hilmers et al., 2012). This ethical commitment led to the American Planning Association (APA) releasing its first policy guide in 2007, a document oriented around community and regional food planning. The APA, representing urban and rural planning practitioners, addresses the need for what the APA defined as an “efficient food system with the goals of economic vitality, public health, ecological sustainability, social equity, and cultural diversity” (Karetny et al., 2022).

The document urged urban planners to abide by the restorative planning ethic, tasking planners to move beyond simply identifying disparities in access, a past mishap that often lead to the implementation of inadequate approaches and short-term solutions (Brinkley & Vitiello, 2014; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). Rather, the restorative planning ethic encourages planners toward dismantling the underlying structural racism in urban planning and acknowledging past harms that have already dictated the development and infrastructure of our cities. As a conceptual framework, restorative planning is simultaneously future-oriented and historically informed, and requires the rejection of traditional notions such as labeling low-income neighborhoods without supermarkets as "food deserts" (Miewald & McCann, 2014). These existing categories often ignore the root causes of inequities and fail to acknowledge the complexity of food access, and further perpetuate the idea that current conditions are the consequence of residents' individual actions rather than systemic failures. This ethic directs planners in public institutions toward more collaborative efforts with community stakeholders and prioritizing the success and role of local food businesses in achieving an equitable food system.

II. "Taking Back the Boulevard"

The work of Jan Lin (2019) provides a foundational socio-spatial context for understanding contemporary neighborhood change and traces the history of gentrification in the Northeast Los Angeles area, including Highland Park and Eagle Rock. Lin's interview with John Urquiza, a member of the NELA Alliance of Neighborhood Activists and Artists, conducted in 2009, depicts the structural displacement of single-family units and multi-family units all along the transportation corridor of York Boulevard as a result of entrepreneurs attracted to the area who looked to develop new cafes and a more vibrant restaurant scene (Lin, 2019). Lin references

the term “root shock”, defined as “the traumatic stress reaction to the loss of a community’s multifamily and intergenerational social networks previously built up as emotional and social ecosystems to help low-income minority and immigrant communities survive when confronted by economic challenges and social marginalization”. Long-standing food vendors are essential to community networks and neighborhood cohesion, often serving as community hubs, beyond just a food source, aiding in upholding and maintaining a sense of cultural heritage (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2020). In turn, the eviction and displacement of these food vendors directly creates a sense of “root shock”, not just for the vendors but for the long-standing residents of the neighborhood, who continually rely on these businesses (Khojasteh, 2020).

Lin’s analysis identifies the mechanisms of gentrification in NELA to be aesthetic redevelopment, creative-class retailing, and shifting cultural narratives, which have been transforming Eagle Rock and Highland Park over the last two decades (2019). As previously discussed, Lin’s discussion of the transforming commercial corridors and the displacement of long-standing small businesses and residents along York Boulevard demonstrates that neighborhood change is not only physical, it is intertwined with the social and cultural dynamics of an area. This project builds directly on these insights by focusing specifically on the foodscape of York Boulevard, contextualizing the experiences of long-standing food vendors, and how neighborhood change manifests itself through the commodification of ethnic cuisines and the eviction of long-standing food vendors.

III. Aesthetic Gentrification and the Symbolic Economy of Food

Food gentrification is a transition propelled by two major mechanisms: aesthetic gentrification and the subsequent commodification of cultural foodways, through which symbolic value and visual cues of “authenticity” are strategically leveraged to attract outside

capital investment and consumers (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2020). This transition can often be seen through the introduction of new food retail venues such as cafes and upscale restaurants, and health food specialty stores, which serve as aesthetic markers that appeal to new residents and further signal to developers that a neighborhood is "ripe for redevelopment" (Alkon & Cadji, 2020; Richmond et al., 2025). This phenomenon is often associated with the consumption preferences of the affluent newcomers, often identified as the “creative class" (Lin, 2019). This term refers to a group of affluent, predominantly white new residents whose cultural proclivities and desires for specific tastes and modes of consumption drive gentrification, seeking the "authentic" urban food experience, including walkable streets, historic buildings, "ethnic" and alternative food, and coffee shops (Alkon & Cadji, 2020). Furthermore, the proliferation of these amenities, even those promoting sustainability or local food, can contribute to displacement risk by unintentionally raising land values, a concept termed "unintentional food zoning" (Cohen, 2018).

The subsequent commodification of cultural foodways fundamentally converts ethnic food institutions from providing high-use value and essential support for community food security, by providing affordable and culturally appropriate foods, into a resource valued mainly for its symbolic function. This commodification often involves “improving,” “revamping,” and “glamorizing” ethnic food establishments, ultimately excluding long-term, low-income residents and business owners who cannot afford the new prices or the maintenance costs to continue operating successfully (Alkon & Cadji, 2020; Richmond et al., 2025). Investors and policymakers explicitly prioritize the symbolic value of authenticity and the commodification of ethnic food establishments over the foodscape's original function. Zukin explains that this structure "encourages a dynamic of urban redevelopment that displaces working-class and ethnic

minority consumers" (2009). This economic displacement is compounded by structural regulation targeting the informal food economy, where immigrant and working-class vendors are often criminalized.

IV. Legal Violence and the Exclusionary "Food Mirage"

The critical transformation of the neighborhood food environment culminates in two interconnected processes: the regulatory elimination of marginalized food providers and the economic exclusion of long-term residents (Sullivan, 2014; Short et al., 2007). This process involves the discriminatory deployment of regulatory mechanisms against immigrant food vendors, a practice defined as “legal violence”, defined by Hidalgo as “formal structures of power that legitimized ‘legally sanctioned social suffering’ by merging criminal and immigration law to enact legal practices that harm Black and Brown street vendors” (2022).

These regulations, often nominally justified by concerns over "public safety", serve as displacement mechanisms aimed at eliminating the visible landscapes of working-class and immigrant enterprises to privilege urban transitions known as gastrodevelopment (Joassart-Marcelli, 2024; Martin, 2014). The term gastrodevelopment refers to a concept used in urban studies to describe the strategies employed by local governments and other stakeholders to leverage food and the food scene to promote economic growth, investment, and urban restructuring (Joassart-Marcelli, 2024). This concept often encourages a system in which gourmet ventures are celebrated, while the essential informal labor of immigrant vendors, who frequently earn under $15,000 annually, is subjected to harassment and criminalization (Hidalgo, 2022).

The cumulative result of these economic and regulatory pressures is the creation of what Sullivan (2014) categorizes as an exclusionary "food mirage", a recognized scholarly concept

where healthy, high-quality food options are visibly present but remain priced out of reach for long-standing low-income residents, thereby maintaining food insecurity despite apparent neighborhood amenities (Richmond et al., 2025). This outcome highlights how the physical, symbolic, and cultural changes of a foodscape serve as tools for displacement that reinforce racial "symbolic boundaries" and socioeconomic barriers, necessitating the adoption of a restorative planning ethic that actively confronts structural racism and advocates for the self-determination of historically marginalized communities (Raja, 2024).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research employs a qualitative case study design to critically analyze neighborhood change through the foodscape lens, facilitating a deeper understanding of the forces that dictate the food environments around us. The study utilizes the subjective experiences of food vendors on York Boulevard to contextualize these findings within the local foodscapes of Eagle Rock and Highland Park. The study blends primary qualitative data, used for assessing how urban trends inform lived experiences, combined with secondary academic analysis and frameworks. The primary data was gathered through several short, semi-structured, in-person interviews with key actors and stakeholders in the local foodscape, including owners and employees of long-standing, culturally significant food businesses, and informal street vendors operating on York Boulevard since 2005, identified using the archival data on Google Maps.

Cafe De Leche, located on York Boulevard, first opened in 2009 and is regarded as one of the first establishments that indicated that gentrification was unfolding in Eagle Rock and Highland Park (Lin, 2019). By interviewing businesses that have operated before 2009, this study only includes businesses that are long-standing and have cultural value to the neighborhood, beyond providing their services. The three long-standing food vendors operating on York Boulevard included in this study are: Andy Papavasicion, the owner of Troy's Burgers #8 (4738 York Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90042); Mark Flores, an employee at Delia's Restaurant (4501 York Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90041); and Guadalupe Guzman, an employee at Jugos Azteca (5213 York Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90042). Map 3a in the appendices shows the locations of the interviewed vendors mapped out on York Boulevard.

Complementing this, the secondary analysis incorporates academic peer-reviewed literature, as well as the discourse of online digital food media. Digital platforms, such as

TimeOut, Infatuation, and *Eater*, as well as social media apps, showcase cities like Los Angeles, including the Highland Park neighborhood, as having an "ever-evolving" and "vibrant" food scene built on a glorious mix of diverse cultures, incredible food trucks, and “hidden gems” (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2023). This media hype relies on a strategy of "distinctive casualization," where seemingly simple foods are reinvented and elevated to appeal to white and affluent palates (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2023). The inclusion of this type of media allows the study to explore how the conversion of ethnic foods from a vital community function to a commodified symbolic value is realized through being "discovered" and appropriated over time, structurally altering the economic viability and cultural value of the business. The study looks to situate how the popularization of local food businesses through online media channels contributes to the reframing of long-standing establishments as “trendy” destinations for newer, more affluent consumers, rather than preserving them to continue supporting long-standing residents and vendors. Below are the categorized questions that were presented to the interviewees:

Business Type and Longevity

1. Can you please tell me about yourself and your business?
2. How many years has your business operated at this location on York Boulevard?
3. What type of food business do you primarily operate?

Affordability and Use Value

4. What types of food does your business serve?
5. How often do you change the price of the available items?
6. If yes, what are the items that change in price? Why are these items selected for the price change?

7. Do you accept SNAP/EBT benefits?

Economic and Regulatory Vulnerability

8. Can you tell me about whether and how the rent has increased for your business? Are you able to afford these changes? What about your business neighbors?
9. With changes in the neighborhood, have you experienced increased scrutiny or difficulty with city permitting, licensing, or health code inspections in the last two years?

Clientele Shift and Competition

10. Can you please speak about your relationship with your customers? Do you have a long-standing clientele, or have you seen a shift in your customer base?
11. Can you tell me about the new businesses on York Blvd and how they may or may not impact your business?

Aesthetic and Cultural Pressure

12. Do you feel pressure (from customers or competitors) to "revamp," "glamorize," or change your food or décor to appeal to a newer, trendier clientele?
13. If you primarily sell ethnic foods or products, have newer residents or others ever stereotyped your offerings as "unhealthy," "low-quality," or "junk food"?

LIMITATIONS

One key limitation of this study is the lack of perspective from informal food vendors on York Boulevard. These vendors were actively encouraged to participate in the study through in-person recruitment on York Boulevard; however, no vendors agreed to participate and were not interested in the case study. While there were minor language differences, the primary barrier seemed to be the reluctance to provide personal information about oneself or the business. Even though the interviewees had the opportunity to be interviewed anonymously, the vendors were still hesitant, and all ended up declining. This hesitancy is understandable given the heightened legal precarity vendors face, particularly in the wake of the recent ICE raids in Los Angeles during the summer months, which disproportionately target Hispanic and Latino individuals. As a result, the study's findings only reflect the experiences of long-standing, brick-and-mortar food establishments on York Boulevard, leaving out perspectives from some of the most vulnerable members of the local foodscape. While this limits the scope of the analysis, it also underscores the need for future research using alternative methodologies to better document the lived realities of informal street vendors and the structural barriers they continue to navigate in commercial corridors such as York Boulevard.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The insights provided by these key interviewees constitute the necessary empirical data required to expand upon the foundational scholarly analysis of gentrification in Northeast Los Angeles. This includes the research of Jan Lin, whose work traces the historical mechanisms of neighborhood transformation in the Highland Park and Eagle Rock areas, and this project subsequently delves deeper into food systems on York Boulevard. The established socio-spatial context of NELA's urban transition, characterized by aesthetic reinvestment and the influx of new residents, masks the uneven impacts of revitalization on working-class residents and disproportionately disrupts the viability of legacy businesses (Alkon & Cadji, 2020; Park, 2017).

By centering the subjective experiences of these long-standing and ethnic food businesses, the data detail precisely how these economic and systemic forces translate into daily struggles over business viability, equitable access, and cultural authority. This reveals the mechanisms by which gentrification reinforces existing structural food inequities and impacts broader food accessibility for long-term residents (Gripper et al., 2022). The findings of the research are grouped into three categories below, revealing the foodscape transition of York Boulevard, in which cultural meaning, economic viability, and community-serving symbolic establishments are actively reconfigured.

I. Endurance and Vulnerability of Long-Standing Food Businesses

A central finding is the remarkable endurance of the three long-standing food establishments, each of which has operated through multiple cycles of neighborhood change over the last two decades. Troy's Burgers, established in 1982, remains an iconic fixture on York Boulevard. Delia's Restaurant has maintained a presence for over twenty-three years, first opening its doors in 2003, and Jugos Azteca has served the neighborhood since 2005 in the same

location. Their longevity places them among the few remaining cultural and economic anchors in a commercial corridor that has experienced substantial turnover, the three businesses acting as the “backbone” of local social infrastructure in NELA (Lin, 2019). The interviews reveal a profound contradiction common to long-standing food businesses: even when physical displacement is averted, economic viability remains precarious (Raja, 2024).

When prompted, all three vendors emphasized the escalating economic constraints associated with operating on York Boulevard. Rising costs, whether through rent increases, higher insurance premiums, or the cost of ingredients, were all influential factors mentioned by the vendors, which have placed pressure on their ability to maintain affordable prices for long-standing customers, as well as impacted how much financial profit they are able to produce. Both Troy’s Burgers and Jugos Azteca confirmed that they owned the property on which the business operated, while Delia’s Restaurant rents out the property. Both Papavasicion and Guzman confirmed that property ownership provides critical insulation for their businesses from eviction caused directly by soaring commercial rents (Richmond et al., 2025). Guzman explains:

“The operating costs have increased over the years… the insurance costs have also significantly risen… it directly impacts whether or not we have to change the prices, and how much the price change is. Even though we are lucky to own the property here, the costs of staying open have gone up.”

For Delia’s, because the owners of the business do not own the property, the rising rent costs have affected them more so than Troy’s and Jugos Azteca. Flores explained that the popularity of the business has gone up over time, especially since doors first opened, and the demand has remained consistent, even with the shifting clientele. Delia’s also realizes the demand from students from Occidental, and so, they tend to aim to keep prices down and provide

special initiatives, like student discounts, acknowledging that the business has profited from the built-in student clientele. However, Flores noted that Delia's has a large clientele of residents who have resided in Eagle Rock for a long time, which has helped them sustain their early presence in the neighborhood, but over time, has been reduced. Flores also reflected on the changing landscape of York Boulevard, highlighting several businesses that used to operate in the neighborhood and their lost impact on the greater community network:

"I just feel like there have been a lot of businesses that got pushed out… Luckily, we've been able to afford the changes and stay afloat; we haven't really had to let people go or anything like that to stay in business, but it has definitely gone up, and we've been fortunate enough to be able to afford everything… It's just it's really sad to see them go (other business in the area), but I just feel like it's one of those things where whatever you do, like it's gonna happen regardless, and it's kind of out of your hands."

Guzman had expressed a similar outlook on the transition of the neighborhood, acknowledging the impact of the loss of business partners and more diminished community cohesion:

"Many businesses have come and gone since our establishment opened, and while we have not been impacted as much, it is certainly sad to see people we have become friends with have to close their businesses and see them replaced with something else… We work hard; however, we are also lucky that we have been able to continue operating. I think that with new people moving into the neighborhood, the demand can change, and people seek what they think are 'exotic' foods."

Further, beyond expanding food access in Eagle Rock and Highland Park, the economic function of these businesses is tied directly to the community's social fabric, as Papavasicion

noted:

"Some of my employees, if they don't work, rent's not getting paid, there's no food on the table".

This statement highlights an important aspect of the multi-versed functionality of the long-standing food businesses in York, not just being a community hub and providing culturally appropriate foods, but also being part of a local labor system, which employs residents of the community. Papavasicion talked about the high retention rates for his employees, with most of Troy's employees working there for close to a decade, demonstrating the type of relationship that the business has with not just the customers, but also the employees who upkeep and maintain the quality, image, and success of the establishment. Similarly, Mark Flores from Delia's described how affordability is sustained through familial labor:

"My parents work here all the time… we don't need to hire as many people. That really does help keep prices down for everybody. It also creates a stronger relationship with our customers, and they know what they are getting when they come to our business."

This reliance on unpaid or underpaid family labor aligns with broader literature on immigrant-run enterprises, which often rely on internal forms of resilience to counter structural economic disadvantages. Further, while these businesses provided employment opportunities for the residents of the area, this is proving to be increasingly difficult, as many residents who shopped and worked at these establishments are forced out of the neighborhood. These accounts from the participants collectively demonstrate that long-standing food businesses perform critical social and cultural functions; yet, their ability to remain accessible to legacy residents is increasingly constrained, with rising prices and the eviction of long-standing businesses, essential to the community network, and the subsequent eviction of long-standing residents of

the area. This echoes Lin's argument that, under gentrification, working-class commercial providers experience significant strain even when they manage to survive reinvestment-driven turnover (2019).

II. Clientele Shifts and the Redefinition of Foodspaces

The interviews further depicted how shifting clientele demographics constitute a significant force reshaping the meaning, function, and social positioning of long-standing food establishments on York Boulevard. Each of the three vendors directly described a noticeable turnover in their customer base, with long-time patrons gradually supplemented, and in some cases, overshadowed by a new, more affluent customer base. This transition of the customer base at the food establishments on York Boulevard parallels broader demographic shifts in Eagle Rock and Highland Park, further reflecting the "repopulation" of NELA, coined by Jan Lin (2019), with higher-income residents whose consumption patterns fundamentally alter commercial corridors.

At Jugos Azteca, Guadalupe Guzman articulated this dual nature of clientele change, noting that while their long-standing patrons continue to frequent the restaurant, their customer base has gradually diversified in ways that reflect the broader neighborhood transition. Guzman and Flores mentioned that this clientele transition is out of their hands, and they have been fortunate to continue operating whilst maintaining a balance of new and old customers who frequent the business. While this clientele change can expose a food establishment to a greater consumer base, as well as bring an influx of profit, these clientele changes can serve as key identifiers in documenting how ethnic food establishments become reinterpreted through gentrification processes. This becomes evident as essential neighborhood resources for culturally rooted communities become sites of "authentic experience" for newcomers and become

reinterpreted to be thought of as “exotic food” (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2020). This shift is echoed in the experience of Delia’s Restaurant, where Mark Flores described a growing emphasis on visual branding and stylistic appeal among newer customers, along with the retention of the long-standing client base:

“I mean, I've got customers who know my mom since she was pregnant with me, so it's just nice to see that. As you can see, our customers here are pretty diverse, the older customers from the beginning, and all the people who just moved here, so it's kind of nice that both can enjoy our place… However, nowadays it’s definitely look first and then the product later.”

The gentrification of Eagle Rock can be traced back to 2001, documented by a Los Angeles Times Magazine article written by Dave Gardetta, who described Eagle Rock as a neighborhood transitioning from “Mayberry, R.F.D.” to “Hipster U.S.A.”, with Highland Park becoming “the new gentrification hot spot post Great Recession of 2007-2010” (Lin, 2019). Flores’ reflection resonates directly with Lin’s analysis of commercial change in NELA, where the influx of what Lin distinguishes as “cultural creatives” reorients retail environments toward lifestyle-oriented consumption practices, emphasizing aesthetics, novelty, and symbolic capital over long-standing relational forms of patronage (2019).

As a result, the authentic aesthetic of these long-standing food businesses, such as Delia’s, Troy’s Burgers, and Jugos Azteca, is monetized through what’s called "cool gentrification". Cool gentrification is a concept used to describe a specific manifestation of gentrification where neighborhood transformation is promoted and masked by seemingly "cool," alternative, ethical, and progressive tropes, with food playing a central role in this process (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2023). This has become much more evident with the increased

popularity of social media platforms and online food blogs, which are powerful corporate actors that guide largely white, affluent consumers to locations offering unique food experiences. This is further illustrated in an online article written by True Cross, an online blogger:

“Once you’ve had lunch at one of the many great restaurants, are fully caffeinated and have experienced all the shops, take your dog to Garvanza park, have a swim at the Highland Park Rec outdoor pool, or simply stroll along the rolling hills of your new new neighborhood” (2018).

This further puts a strong emphasis on the importance of the aesthetics of the newly opened businesses and, in turn, how the viability of the legacy establishments on York Boulevard is actively being threatened by outside forces, as confirmed by Papavasicion of Troy’s Burgers:

"We have received several buyout offers over the years. One was Pete's Coffee; they were looking for some more locations in the area, and scouted out Troy’s because we have the drive-through here, and they were looking for a location that had one of those. We’ve also had several advertising campaigns filmed here for some major companies.”

This is evidence that the cultural capital embedded in the local foodscape of York Boulevard is being monetized for external financial gain and is taking away the symbolic value of the establishments. This external interest is a direct consequence of the digitally-mediated discourse that promotes the neighborhood as a ripe destination for redevelopment, and promotes the "hidden gem" social media phenomenon. Through the process of “cool gentrification”, this term portrays long-standing ethnic food establishments as “trendy”, “vibrant,” or “undiscovered”, enticing affluent urban groups to visit previously ignored working-class, ethnic neighborhoods like Highland Park (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2023). This discourse allows online influencers and "foodies" to signal their distinction and cosmopolitanism by “uncovering”

the authenticity of older food establishments. However, this narrative actively ignores the history and local knowledge that built these establishments, supported by the interview with Mark Flores, who directly resisted this framing, arguing that his business is:

"Not really like a hidden gem. I mean, we are a gem, but we're not like hidden, you know what I mean, the people who have been here know about us".

This contrast of perspectives highlights a fundamental tension in foodscapes' transformation and “cool gentrification”, where digital food media created by bloggers and vloggers work to convert long-standing ethnic businesses into marketable aesthetic eateries for consumption, utilizing the wide reach of social media to propel one’s own platform, effectively disrupting the cultural and communal identity of these establishments. Mark Flores of Delia’s and Guadalupe Guzman of Jugos Azteca agreed that not succumbing to pressures to rebrand or revitalize their business to attract more customers is an active effort they have made, asserting local authority over their own cultural identity and the identity of their business.

III. Regulatory, Symbolic, and Structural Pressures Reshaping the Foodscape

A third major theme that emerged from the interviews is the growing influence of regulatory and structural pressures that affect how long-standing food businesses navigate the foodscape of York Boulevard. While the vendors did not always describe these pressures as overt, their accounts reveal a pattern consistent with the concept of gastrodevelopment, where food becomes a tool for urban revitalization and a marker of neighborhood desirability, seen by the increase of outside capital investment in the neighborhood. These pressures are also aligned with what Lin (2019) describes as “the symbolic reordering of commercial corridors” during the process of gentrification, in which certain aesthetics and food practices become implicitly valued over others, often dictated by the shifting clientele base and online media as discussed. As the

foodscape transforms, these pressures collectively redefine what kinds of food establishments are seen as legitimate or "fitting" for the new identity of the neighborhood, and break down the resilience of long-standing, immigrant-run, and ethnic food vendors (Corrales-Øverlid, 2023; High, 2015).

Beyond formal regulation, the interviews also highlighted subtle but key symbolic pressures that reshaped how these establishments are continually perceived in the neighborhood. These pressures often appear in comments from newer residents who suggest aesthetic or atmospheric changes that reflect their own expectations of what a certain restaurant "should" look like. These comments reflect a shift in cultural expectations, where these symbolic boundaries elevate businesses aligned with creative-class tastes while devaluing long-standing, working-class establishments (Zukin, 2009). Flores provided an insight into the changing symbolic perceptions of the food itself, noting that newer customers sometimes frame traditional dishes as unhealthy:

"It's just kind of like a nice comfort meal, you know what I mean, I guess some people would call it unhealthy, but it's really not. We literally make everything pretty much in-house. So it's just kind of like, maybe it's just your perspective on our food, you know?"

These observations from the vendors mirror broader critiques in food justice literature, where affluent consumers apply moralized judgments to ethnic foods, often associating "authentic" with aesthetics rather than cultural continuity (Khojasteh, 2020; Short et al., 2007). Guzman emphasized that these critiques typically come from newer residents rather than long-standing community members, underscoring how outsider expectations reshape the cultural narrative around these restaurants. A final structural pressure repeatedly noted by interviewees was the growing commercial interest in the properties in the neighborhood, particularly on the

Boulevard, acknowledging its function as a commercial corridor. As a result, as York Boulevard becomes further popularized as a destination, long-standing establishments increasingly receive offers from outside investors.

Buyout offers of long-standing establishments reveal the rising symbolic and real estate value of the corridor, where food businesses are not valued for their cultural and social significance but for their potential profitability once redeveloped. This dynamic aligns with the concept of unintentional food zoning, where market pressures, rather than policy, signal that certain types of food establishments no longer "fit" the future vision of a gentrifying neighborhood (Cohen, 2018).

These regulatory, symbolic, and structural pressures also contribute to the formation of a "food mirage", in which food abundance masks rising inequities in access and cultural continuity, affecting low-income and long-standing residents at disproportionate rates (Sullivan, 2014; Richmond et al., 2025). These factors collectively reshape York Boulevard's foodscape by prioritizing businesses that align with new cultural and aesthetic norms, popularized by online media discourse, while abandoning long-standing businesses vulnerable to displacement despite their historical and cultural importance. These changes in Eagle Rock and Highland Park unfold not only through direct physical displacement but through gradual transformations in the everyday expectations, values, and narratives that reshape the commercial corridor of York Boulevard (Lin, 2019). The experiences of Troy's Burgers, Delia's Restaurant, and Jugos Azteca illustrate these processes as clearly ongoing, demonstrating how foodscape transformation in Northeast Los Angeles is produced through both visible and invisible forms of structural change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Community Organizing and Community Cohesion

a. York Boulevard Food Business Coalition and Mutual Support Networks

Long-standing businesses should be encouraged and supported in forming a merchant association or coalition dedicated to advocating for shared interests, leveraging collective bargaining power, and ensuring representation in local planning processes. This model aligns with community self-determination practices and helps vendors address issues such as rent negotiations, operating costs, and installed protection from business eviction (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2023; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2007). This coalition will enhance the greater neighborhood cohesion between long-standing residents and vendors, where community-based organizations can collaborate with local food vendors on York Boulevard. This will serve to document and promote the cultural significance of long-standing establishments, as well as their impact and influence on the area, through an organized effort that will uphold the business while preserving the economic and cultural integrity.

A York Boulevard initiative could help the remaining long-standing businesses continue to operate and honor the food heritage of Eagle Rock and Highland Park, countering distortions created by the “cool gentrification” discourse. Further, through workshops, multilingual trainings, and resource networks of businesses operating in the neighborhood, vendors would be assisted in accessing grants, updating business practices, and navigating bureaucratic loopholes (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). These resources would help reduce reliance on self-exploitation and family labor, empowering vendors to remain stable without sacrificing time, wages, or cultural identity.

II. Policy and Planning Interventions for Anti-Displacement of Long-Standing Businesses

a. Implement Corrective Zoning and Establish a Legacy Business Registry

The city of Los Angeles should adopt neighborhood-serving commercial overlays along York Boulevard to prevent the displacement of immigrant-run establishments by limiting formula retail and upholding the historical commercial character (Horst et al., 2024; Richmond et al., 2025). This approach, which can be characterized as corrective zoning, directly counters the pressures of aesthetic redevelopment and "gastrodevelopment", which reshape the corridor toward consumption patterns favored by affluent newcomers (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2023). Additionally, regulatory reform must address disproportionate enforcement, particularly for vendors who do not have a brick-and-mortar location. Streamlining inspections, increasing transparency, and providing compliance assistance can reduce punitive burdens that historically undermine long-standing ethnic establishments.

A York Boulevard Legacy Business Program should formally identify and support businesses operating for more than a specified period of time, around 20 years or longer, in the same community, offering financial assistance and rent stabilization tools to buffer against rising operational costs. This program already exists in cities like Los Angeles; however, localizing the registry can help ensure that a majority of legacy businesses are participating. The interview data demonstrated that insurance premiums and ingredient costs directly impact changes in prices, as well as the profit margins, suggesting that targeted subsidies are essential for economic survival. These measures, if implemented, can help ensure that long-standing establishments remain accessible to the very communities whose patronage built them.

b. Promote Community Ownership Through a Commercial Land Trust

To permanently protect key storefronts, Los Angeles should support the creation of a York Boulevard Commercial Land Trust or public acquisition fund (Boston et al., 2023; Brinkley & Vitiello, 2014). Such a mechanism would remove long-standing businesses from speculative markets, preventing displacement caused by escalating land values and outside buyout offers, similar to what Papavasicion experienced with the buyout offer from Pete's Coffee. A commercial land trust reflects a restorative planning ethic by ensuring that commercial property supports community well-being rather than speculative profit.

A commercial land trust reflects a restorative planning ethic by ensuring that commercial property supports community well-being rather than speculative profit (Horst et al., 2024; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999; Raja, 2024). By placing land under long-term community control, the Commercial Land Trust secures cultural continuity in the foodscape and provides stable tenure for long-standing ethnic enterprises identified as the "backbone" of local social infrastructure (Lin, 2019). This safeguards against the ongoing reconfiguration of York Boulevard's foodscape and ensures these businesses remain operational and accessible to the long-term, low-income residents whose patronage built them (Alkon et al., 2020). Furthermore, this approach directly counters the pressures of aesthetic gentrification and increasing property values by creating long-term stability and upholding the resiliency of these long-standing businesses (Richmond et al., 2025; Cohen, 2018). Thus, the Commercial Land Trust provides a critical tool for local government and community-based organizations to actively participate in remedying structural inequities perpetuated by decades of racialized disinvestment and market pressures (Hilmers et al., 2012; Raja, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how long-standing food businesses on York Boulevard are navigating neighborhood change and how the local foodscape is continually transforming, evident through a lack of economic stability, shifting consumer bases, and structurally altering the cultural value of ethnic food establishments. This qualitative project, grounded in the experiences of long-standing food vendors, demonstrates that the local food systems in Eagle Rock and Highland Park are being manipulated by structural processes that disproportionately impact low-income, long-standing communities and legacy businesses.

Rising costs, including higher insurance premiums and ingredient expenses, strain the ability of these businesses to maintain the affordable prices necessary to serve long-standing customers and contribute to a shifting clientele in the area. For those businesses that owned the land they operated on, property ownership emerged as a critical tool of resistance, confirming that small business vulnerability often hinged on real estate dynamics rather than merely consumer demand (Richmond et al., 2025). Furthermore, these businesses function as integral parts of the local labor system, often relying on familial labor and high employee retention to sustain affordability and remain open, reflecting the internal forms of resilience typical of immigrant-run enterprises that face structural economic disadvantages (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2020).

The study further highlights that aesthetic gentrification is a key mechanism driving neighborhood change, converting culturally rooted establishments into commodities (Alkon et al., 2020). These processes are accelerated by online media discourse that actively promotes the Highland Park and Eagle Rock neighborhoods as a desired destination, utilizing the perceived "authenticity" of ethnic businesses as a component of "cool gentrification" (Joassart-Marcelli &

Bosco, 2023). The businesses that participated in the study discussed the symbolic pressure from affluent newcomers, including comments about traditional foods being "unhealthy" and suggestions for improved decor, revealing how the shifting demographics of the neighborhoods can influence the viability of long-standing food establishments (Short et al., 2007).

Ultimately, the combination of economic, symbolic, and regulatory pressures culminates in the creation of an exclusionary "food mirage," where the surface-level abundance of trendy, high-quality food options masks the reality that these amenities are priced out of reach for long-standing, low-income residents, thereby exacerbating structural food inequities (Sullivan, 2014; Richmond et al., 2025). The culmination of these changes reinforces racial and socioeconomic barriers, underscoring that changes in the foodscape reflect a complex, intersectional struggle over class, race, and directly dictate who can succeed in a transforming urban environment.

This study illuminates how the forces of redevelopment are reshaping the foodscape of York Boulevard, ultimately revealing the intricate and cumulative ways in which the transformations of local food systems reproduce structural food inequities. The project reinforces the need for a mandate for planners to adopt a restorative planning ethic, moving beyond simply documenting food access disparities to actively addressing the underlying structural racism and past harms that dictated unequal neighborhood development and infrastructure. The study calls for the implementation of anti-displacement strategies, such as forming a York Boulevard Food Business Coalition, utilizing Corrective Zoning, and establishing a Commercial Land Trust to ensure that long-standing businesses maintain stable tenure and that the community retains cultural continuity in the transforming foodscape.

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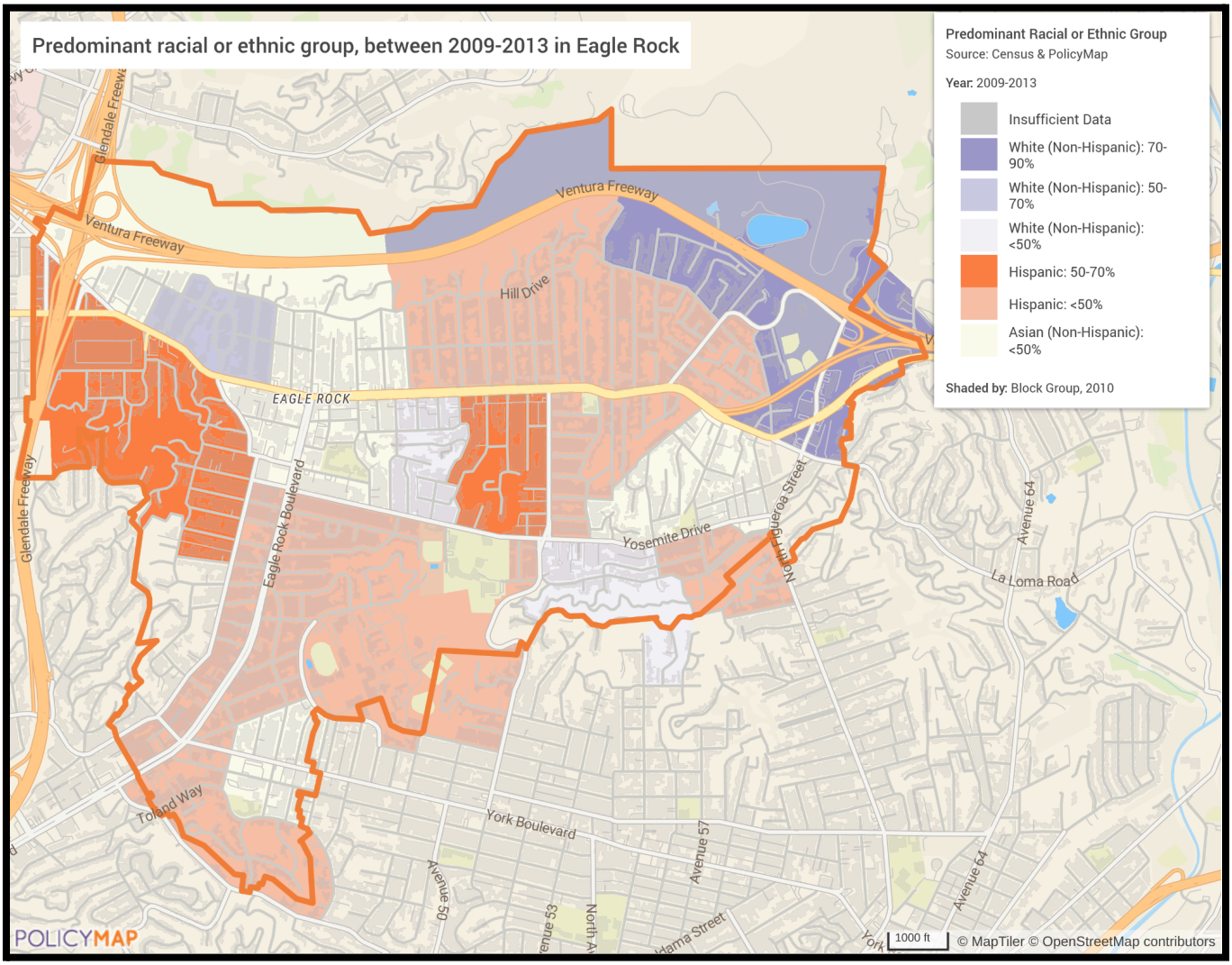
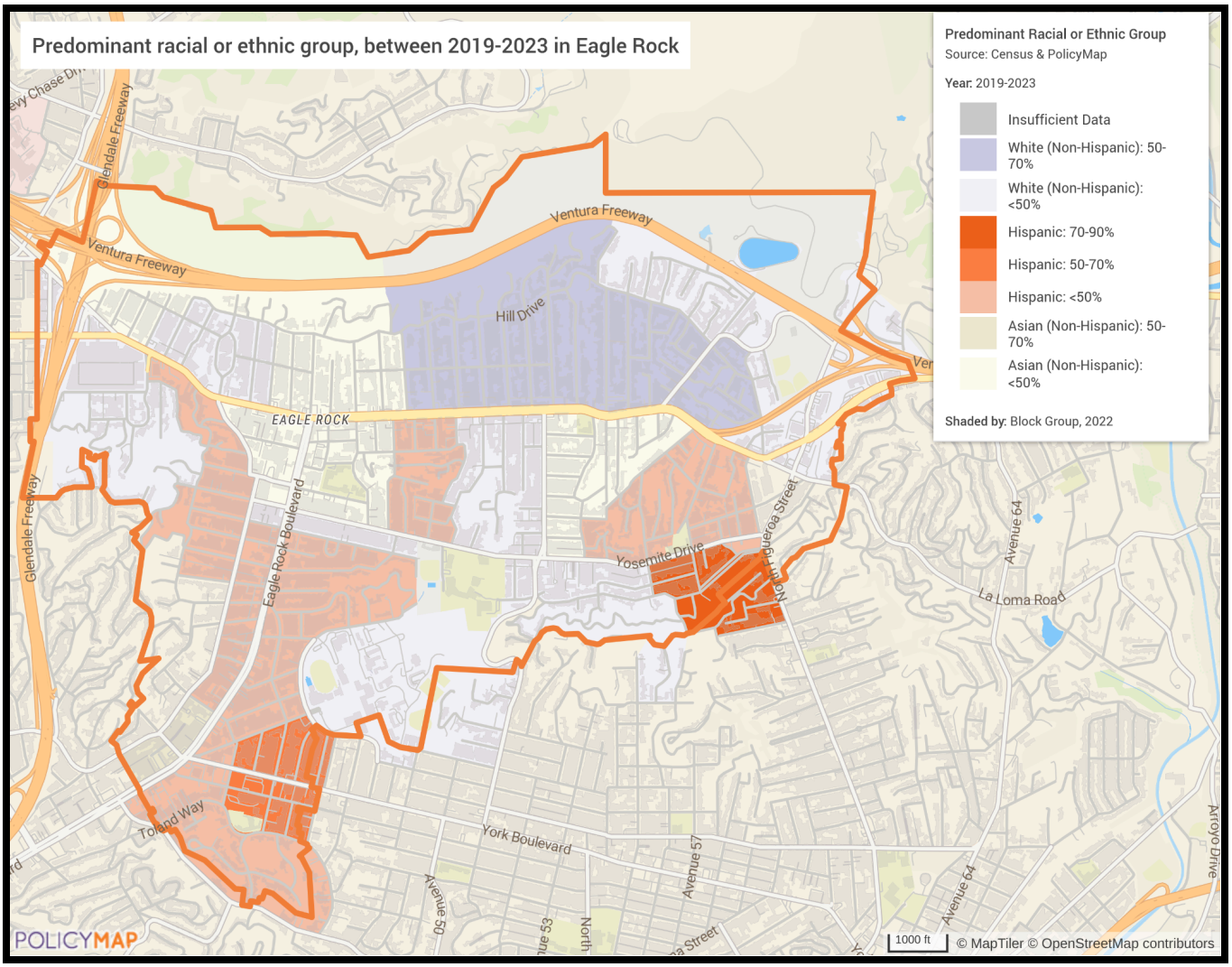
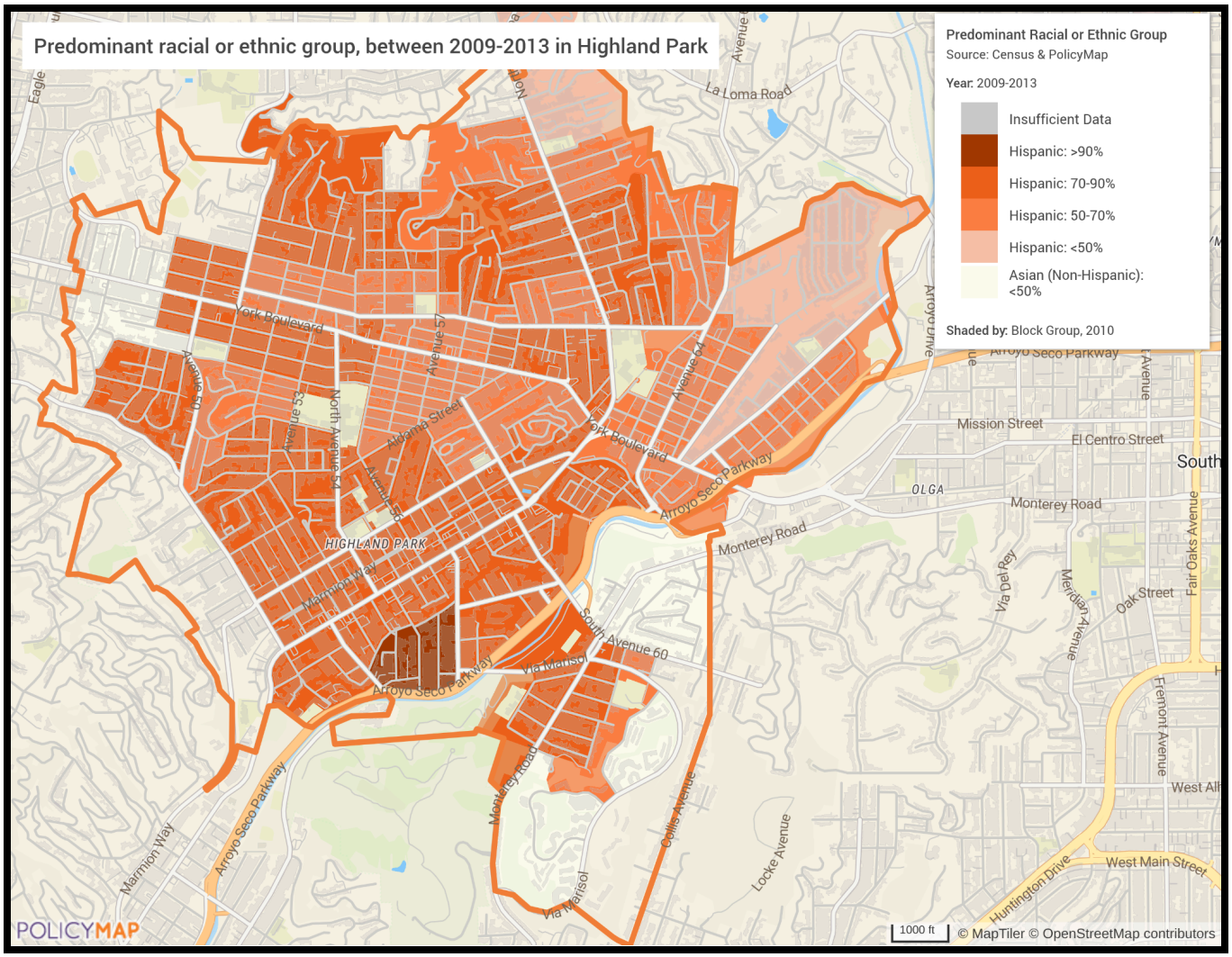
APPENDICES



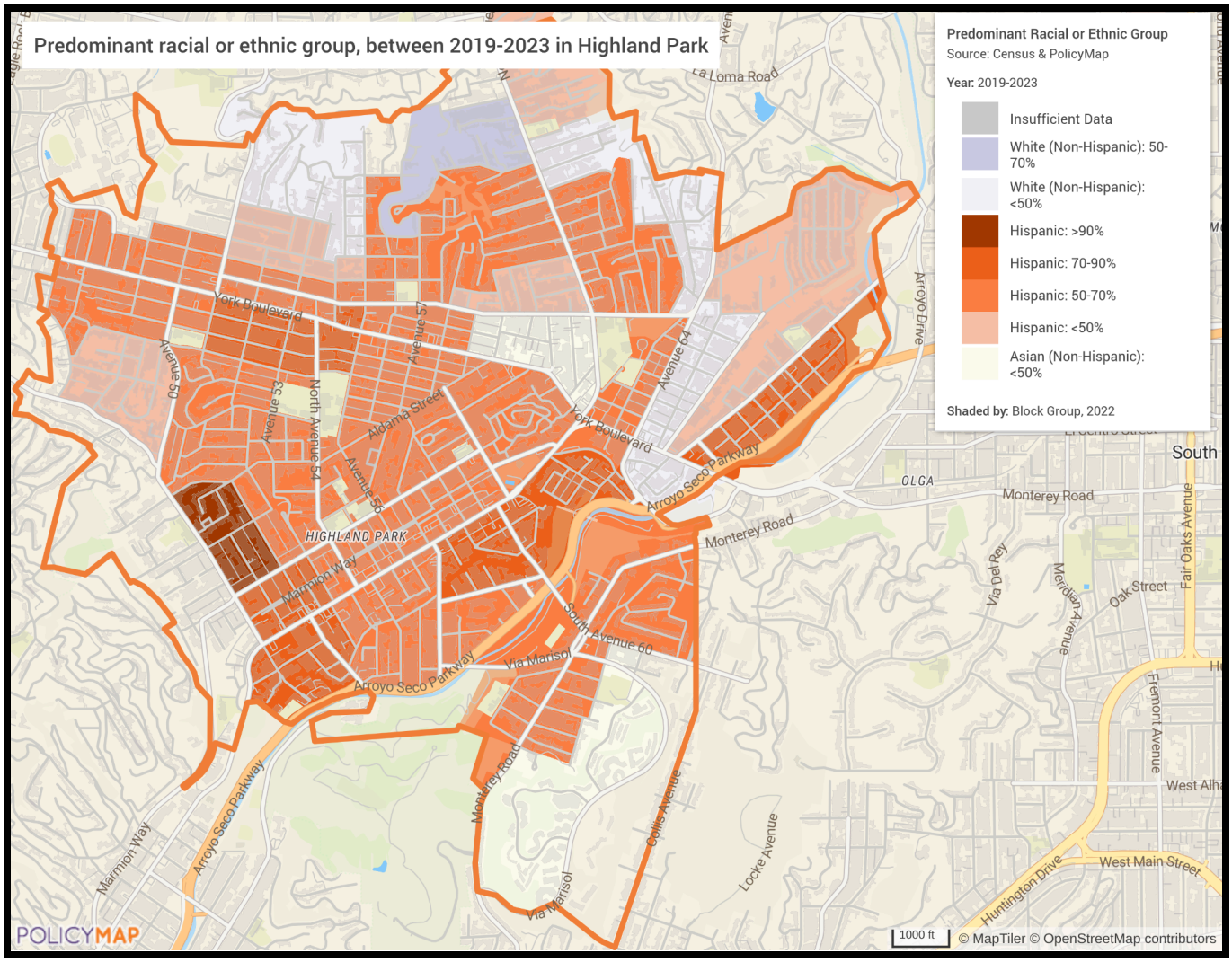
Map 1a: Predominant racial or ethnic group, between 2009-2013 in Eagle Rock



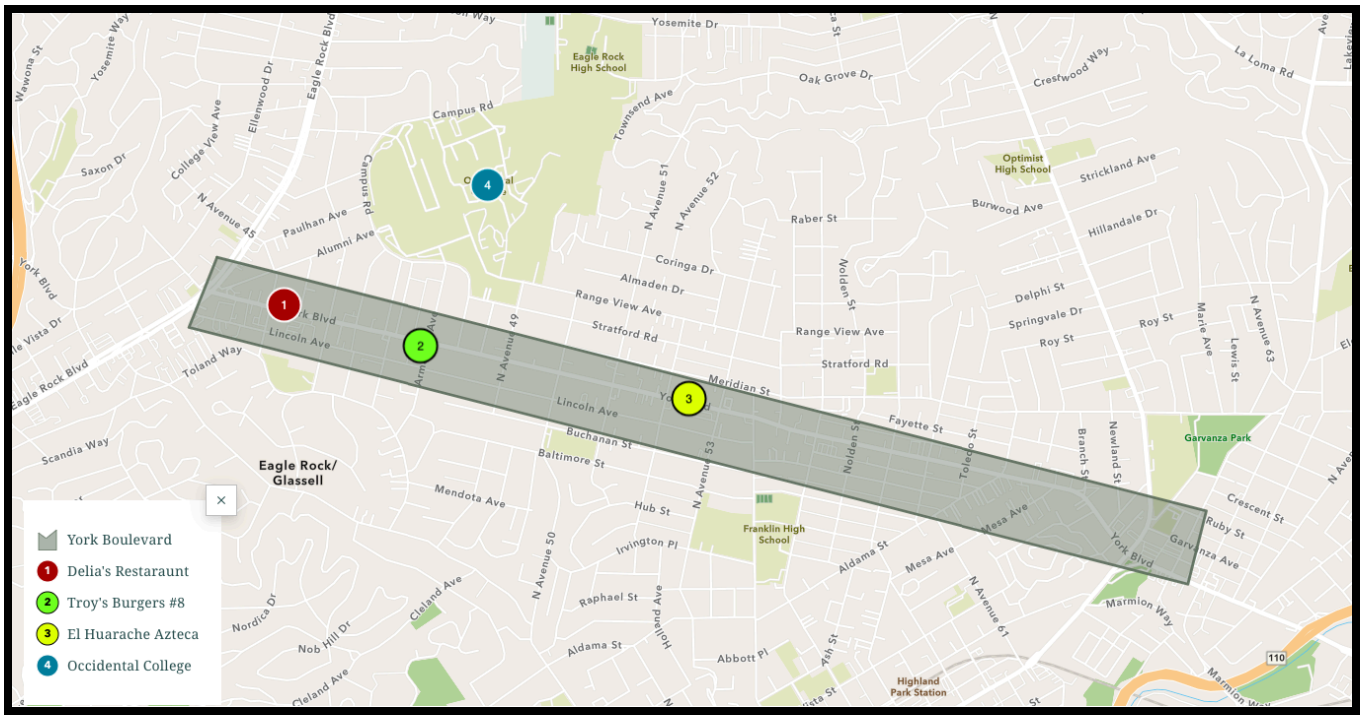
Map 1b: Predominant racial or ethnic group, between 2019-2023 in Eagle Rock (U.S. Census)



Map 2a: Predominant racial or ethnic group, between 2009-2013 in Highland Park (U.S. Census)



Map 2b: Predominant racial or ethnic group, between 2019-2023 in Highland Park (U.S. Census)



Map 3a: Locations of Businesses Interviewed, Occidental College and York Boulevard