

ALEX ESPINOZA

Through the Heart of California

Seeing the “other” California through a relief map

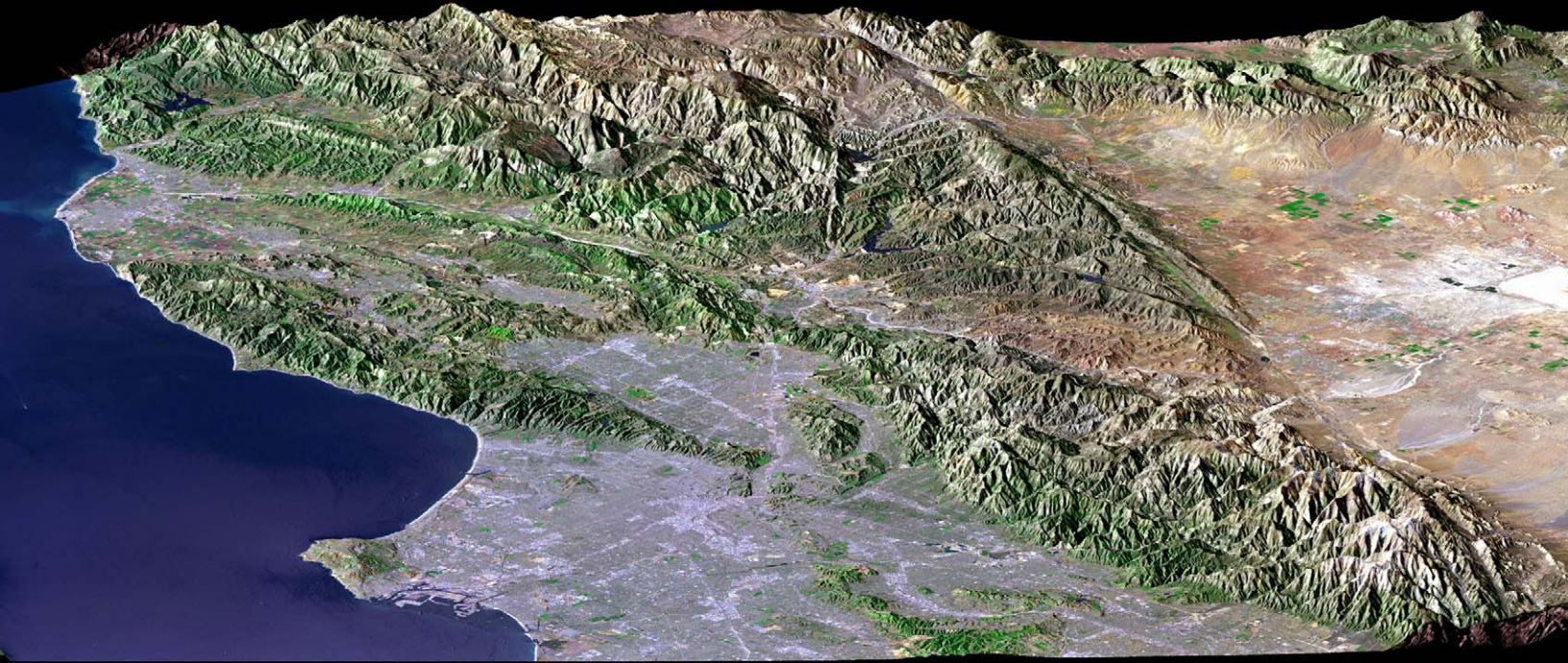
In 2014, *Aljazeera America* ran a story titled “Fresno Rated Highly Livable for Young People.”¹ The piece cited information gathered by the online news source *Vocativ*, which used everything from the cost of manicures to real estate prices as metrics for determining “all things that matter to younger people — especially in rough times.”² Fresno took the number 24 slot on a list of 100 best places for those under thirty-five.

Many say that California’s fifth largest city has always suffered from an identity crisis. Others say that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Equidistant from Los Angeles and the Bay Area, Fresno attracts citizens from its larger cousins who find themselves fed up with hour-long commutes and skyrocketing home prices. Here is one of the few places in California where you can find San Francisco Giants lawn banners jabbed into yellowing patches of grass while, across the street, a dusty Ford F-150 sports a decal proudly proclaiming that its driver “bleeds Dodger Blue.” Here you find a regional dialect that often fuses idioms and verbal ticks from both the Bay Area and metropolitan Los Angeles; sentences are sprinkled with liberal amounts of the adjective *hella* (from the North) while use of the definite article *the* when referencing local freeways (an LA staple) has become increasingly common.

Fresno, like its vernacular, like the fertile soil of the Great Basin—carved when an ancient ocean plate called the Farallon surrendered to the more aggressive North American Plate as Pangea broke apart during the Jurassic period—is constantly chafing against external forces determined to define it, to alter it.

Despite its strategic location, its deep agricultural roots, and its close ties with the farmworker movement of the sixties and seventies, in many ways Fresno remains stubbornly un-Californian, reveling in its misfit status. It is home to one of the largest Hmong populations in the United States. It is where in the sixties a man named

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The topography of Los Angeles and the Antelope Valley, courtesy of NASA/JPL/NIMA.

Boogaloo Sam created “popping,” described as “a dance that combines rigid robotic moves with loose flowing moves.”³ Cher attended Fresno High School briefly before quitting at sixteen to pursue her dreams. The name Fresno means “ash tree” in Spanish, and it’s where Chrissy Snow on *Three’s Company* was born and raised, and to where she was ultimately banished when Suzanne Sommers, the actress who played her, was enmeshed in contract disputes with the show’s producers.

Before relocating there, I thought of cities like Fresno as places people moved *from*, not places people moved *to*.

“Fresno is not small. The city has more than half a million residents and is larger than the state capital, Sacramento. But because it’s in the heart of farm country, it lacks big-city glamour. What it does offer is a more compact power structure that allows even the young to make a difference.”⁴

I remember a relief map of California I made in the fourth grade. I pressed my thumb into the mixture of paste and flour to form the Central Valley. Then, using brown food coloring and water, I painted in wide fields of alfalfa and rows of lettuce and cabbage. I imagined people, cars, small towns, a schoolyard with swings and a metal slide, its patina worn and dull not from neglect but from years of friction, the kind of use that tells you that things as innocuous as playground equipment could be loved.

In the documentary, *The City Addicted to Crystal Meth*, widely viewed by Brits, reporter Louis Theroux examines the

damaging affects the drug has had on Fresno. At the time of its airing on the BBC in August of 2009, the city had the highest number methamphetamine users in the nation.⁵ “It is quite charming—and this was an extraordinary film, a sad portrait of a very different California from the one you see in *Entourage*,”⁶ wrote Sam Wollastan for *The Guardian* about Theroux’s documentary.

I had always dreamed of owning my own home. When I was a kid there was no such thing as privacy. When you have ten older siblings, there isn’t much opportunity to cultivate this luxury. I used to dream of space, of empty rooms and a quiet kitchen, a big yard with a giant tree, its branches rocking in a soft breeze carrying the scent of blooming jasmine and freshly shorn grass. I’d lie in a hammock and read and sleep to the sound of birds chirping and the low, lonely bark of a neighbor’s dog.

In 2005, I was fresh out of graduate school and living with my husband, Kyle, in a cramped apartment in Riverside. I was a part-time instructor teaching composition and creative writing classes. I kept an eye on my aging mother who lived nearby in a large house all by herself. I would shuttle her from her doctor appointments to her dentist appointments, grading papers in the lobbies while I waited. At night, I would work on my first novel, sitting at a desk in a dark corner of the bedroom in our small, shabby place. I remember thinking, *If only I could get away from the stress of my family, be far enough away from the drama but close enough to drive if there were an emergency. If only we could afford a house.*

In 2007, after my first novel was published, I decided to go on the job market. When I came across the announcement for the teaching position at Fresno State, there was only one thing I knew about Fresno: raisins.

On 22 January 2016, the *Fresno Bee* reported that the county's unemployment rate for the previous year was the lowest it had been in nearly a decade. "In Fresno County and its neighboring Valley counties, annual unemployment has fallen in each of the past six years, dropping to levels not seen since the early part of the 2007–2009 recession."⁷

According to United States Census Bureau, in 2015 52.4 percent of the population of Fresno County was Hispanic or Latino.⁸

Despite its large Latino population, despite its long history of cultivating artists of color, I was the first Chicano writer ever hired to teach in the MFA program in creative writing at Fresno State.

Call it regional snobbery, but many of my LA friends could not comprehend why I decided to move to Fresno.

"Really?" they asked.

"I'd commute from here," another friend suggested. "You don't actually want to *live* there, do you? Stay in LA and drive up just to teach your classes, man."

The car was crammed full of boxes, and our dog sat on Kyle's lap. As we cleared the Tejon Pass, I saw before us a wide valley floor, stretched flat. I remembered the relief map I'd constructed back in elementary school. I imagined a giant thumb parting the sky, the rivulets and swirls of my fingerprint denting the land to form rivers and thin roads that looped around and around one another.

Fresno is located in the fertile San Joaquin Valley in the central part of California, about halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The terrain in Fresno is relatively flat, with a sharp rise to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains about 15 miles eastward. The weather is usually sunny, with over 200 clear days each year. Summers are typically hot and dry, while winters are mild and rainy. Spring and fall are the most pleasant seasons.

Area: 99.1 square miles (2000)

Elevation: 328 feet above sea level

Average Temperatures: January, 39.6° F; August, 94.1° F; annual average, 62.5° F

Average Annual Precipitation: 9.86 inches⁹

The heat was like a blast furnace that first June. Two weeks of triple digit temperatures. Thankfully, the house we were renting had a swimming pool. In between unpacking boxes of books, we swam for hours. I used to love watching the cypress trees lining the perimeter of the backyard bending and swaying in that hot, dry breeze.

Located on Shaw Avenue, just east of Highway 99, the Forestiere Underground Gardens is a series of subterranean tunnels, grottos, and patios that were designed and built by a Sicilian immigrant named Baldasare Forestiere. It took him over forty years to complete, and he used only hand tools throughout its construction. "Forestiere worked without blueprints or plans, following only his creative instincts and aesthetic impulses. He continued expanding and modifying the gardens throughout his life. Baldasare Forestiere died in 1946 at the age of sixty-seven. After his death, the Underground Gardens were opened to the public as a museum."¹⁰ He built it as a way to cool off during the brutal Central Valley summers. The Forestiere Underground Gardens is on the National Register of Historic Places and draws hundreds of visitors year after year.

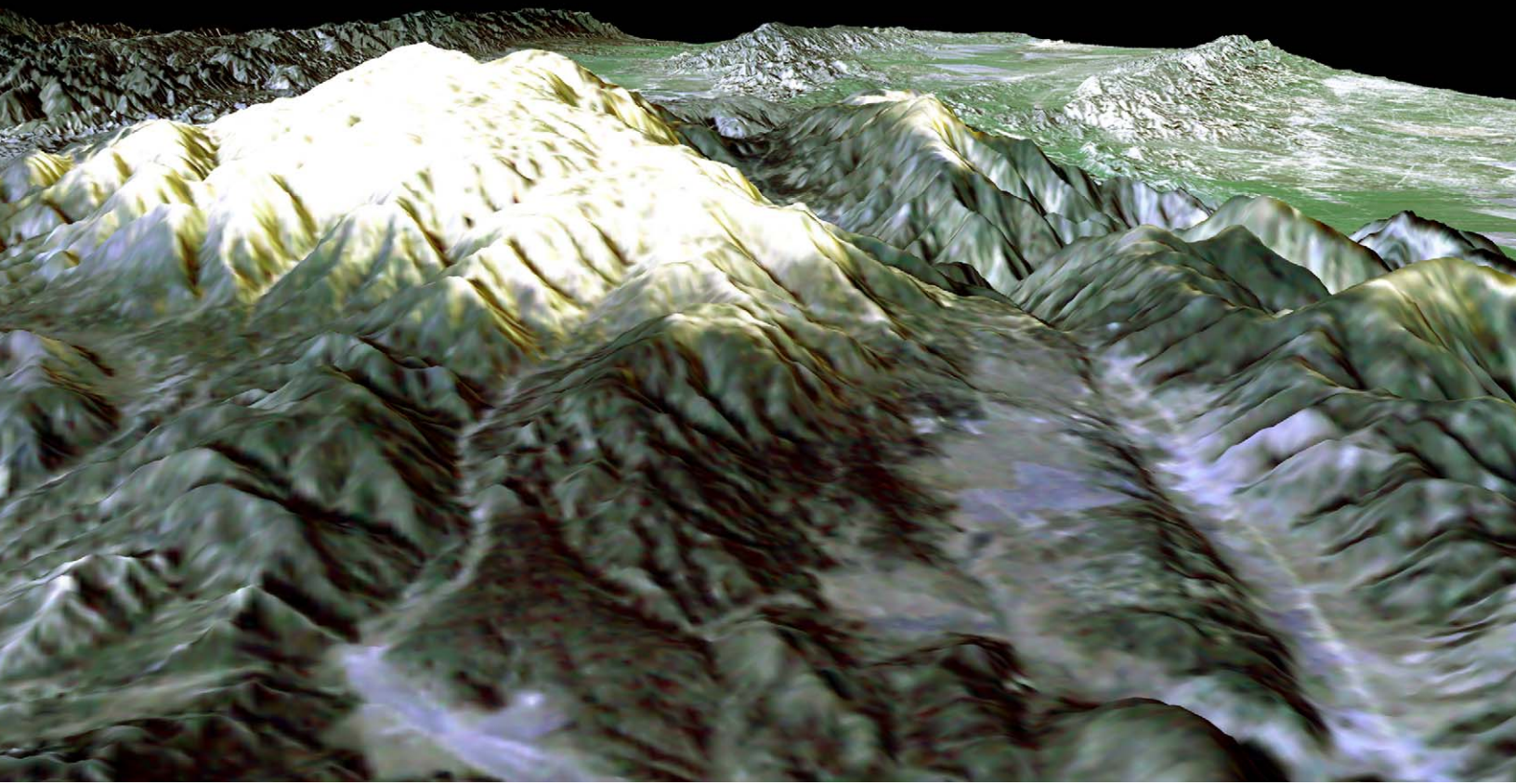
Coming from Los Angeles, there were some perks to relocating to Fresno:

1. Hardly any traffic
2. Lower cost of living
3. A slower pace of life

I didn't have time to miss Los Angeles that first semester. I was too busy getting a handle on my new job. Between teaching classes and committee meetings, there was hardly a moment to take in my surroundings. During that time, my mother grew increasingly ill. My sisters and I decided not to tell her that I had relocated. Me being the baby of the family, her favorite child, we thought it would devastate her to know I had packed up and headed north. Immediately after she passed away, I had dreams of her holding the relief map I had made as a kid. In the dream, she squeezed it hard. Dried tan and green-colored chunks broke apart and fell to the ground. She's scolded me, her face red, her forehead beaded with sweat. "Why did you leave?" she asked. "You weren't supposed to leave. What were you thinking?"

I should have told her. My mother never knew I left. She died thinking I was still near her.

In a story dated 9 March 2015, *Men's Health* ranked Fresno number 1 on its list of drunkest cities in America.



Mt. Pinos and the Carizo Plain in the distance, courtesy of NASA/JPL/NIMA/USGS.

“Our statistical sobriety checkpoint shows that the inebriated people there have one of the highest death rates from alcoholic liver disease (per data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention),” they wrote.¹¹

Men’s Health included the following details on measures used to determine Fresno’s “dangerous drinking” ranking:

- Deaths from Liver Disease:** 2nd
- Deaths in DUI Crashes:** 16th
- Binge Drinking:** 33rd
- DUI Arrests:** 4th
- Harsh DUI Laws:** 80th
- Grade:** F¹²

We’ve also been voted among the “dumbest cities” in the United States. On 26 July 2016, the *Fresno Bee* ran a story citing a national poll that ranked cities in the San Joaquin Valley on their list of least educated areas. *WalletHub*, which initiated the poll, “compared the top 150 metropolitan statistical areas based on the percentage of adults with a college education and other factors such as the quality of the area’s public schools and universities. Overall, Fresno ranked 145th, just ahead of Modesto at

146th, Bakersfield at 147th and Visalia/Porterville at 148th.

I am not out to dis a place like Fresno. That’s never been my style. Nor am I here to praise it, to paint an inauthentic picture of the city as an idyllic community untouched by problems plaguing it and similar inland cities of California. It’s true that we have a high number of drug abusers, that we drink a lot, and that lack of access and money has prevented some of our citizens from reaping the benefits of higher education. But I can also tell you about the friends I’ve made here, scholars from some of the most prestigious schools in the country. I can tell you how famed novelist Julia Alvarez once taught at the same university I did. I can tell you about the history and legacy of writers like William Saroyan and Gary Soto, and Mark Arax today. I can tell you about Diana Marcum, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter who covered the Central Valley and who, in 2015, won a Pulitzer Prize for her unflinching coverage of the devastating effects of the drought on farmers, field hands, communities, and families. I can tell you how I’ve picked apricots in the summer, washed them in my kitchen sink, and eaten to my heart’s content. I can tell you that I lived here for nearly ten

years, and I was never robbed. I can tell you that I bought my first house and that it was built in 1941, and there's a tall oak tree full of squirrels and woodpeckers and blue jays that live and raise families in the green canopy above my roof. I can tell you about the dogs I've rescued and the one that I lost here and cried over for days. I can tell you that this place, like any other place, is full of contrast and contradiction.

My husband and two dogs have remained there for the year while I ease my way back into a life in Los Angeles. Because I'm returning to the Eastside and the greater San Gabriel Valley, locations holding so many memories—both good and bad—my emotions have run the gamut, vacillating between moments of extreme fear and trepidation to hope and nostalgia. It's all wrapped up together, coming at me in waves, simultaneously hot and cold, up and down, dark and light. I laugh when I drive by the 7-11 where a high school friend of mine and I scored our first six-pack of beer when we were fifteen, then I cry when I turn left down another street and find myself at the exact spot on Valley Boulevard where my father took his last breath on a cold January evening in 1989.

The past few years, as I've commuted back and forth between Los Angeles and Fresno for work between two state universities and as I've served on the board of California Humanities, our statewide humanities council, I've learned about geographical variances, that we're not all the same, that we all have stories to tell, and that my notion of California stretches far beyond the factories and freeways of the San Gabriel Valley, far beyond the stucco houses and empty lots of the Inland Empire, where I spent my twenties and

thirties, and even beyond the strawberry fields, the orange groves, and the almond orchards and vineyards of the Central Valley.

It's appropriate for Californians, I think, this constant moving, just like the earth that occasionally rumbles and shifts and flows right beneath our collective feet. **B**

Notes

- ¹ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/3/fresno-ranks-highlylivableforyoungpeople.html>
- ² <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/3/fresno-ranks-highlylivableforyoungpeople.html>
- ³ <http://blogs.uoregon.edu/jerkrumpop/popping/>
- ⁴ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/3/fresno-ranks-highlylivableforyoungpeople.html>
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_City_Addicted_to_Crystal_Meth
- ⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/aug/10/louis-theroux-crystal-meth>
- ⁷ <http://www.fresnobee.com/news/business/article56100350.html#storylink=cp>
- ⁸ <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/0627000,06019#headnote-js-b>
- ⁹ <http://www.city-data.com/us-cities/The-West/Fresno-Geography-and-Climate.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://historicfresno.org/nrhp/forest.htm>
- ¹¹ <http://www.menshealth.com/health/drunk-cities>
- ¹² <http://www.menshealth.com/health/drunk-cities>