

## A Tale of Two Freeways

Aya de Leon, January 2026

my mother and I came to Berkeley on the 101 freeway  
Berkeley—the oasis of racial understanding we couldn't find down south  
Southern California, that is  
When I was three years old my mother wanted out of Los Angeles

my mother is Puerto Rican / güera / often mistaken for white  
my unmistakably Black father hails from the West Indies / South Carolina

after they divorced  
his memory was immortalized in my brown skin, my kinky hair  
in 1969 I was exhibit A  
the evidence left behind of his alleged miscegenation

in 1970 I was three  
a white man accosted my mom while playing in the park with me in LA  
*what'd you do? he asked. f\*\*\* a monkey? where did you get that? in the zoo?*  
I was the *that*  
the allegedly half-monkey  
the man followed us around ranting til my mother scooped me up and drove away  
later that week different park,  
a little white girl approached my mom as she pushed me on a swing asking  
*does she have a n\*\*\*\* daddy?*  
in the unaware face of this girl my mother could see my future peers in school  
thus began the first of my mother's sojourns up the 101 freeway to Northern California

she chose Berkeley in 1971 the first US school district to voluntarily desegregate  
with other cities exploding in violence over bussing  
Berkeley gritted its teeth mixed the kids together a bit went on about its business

I grew up in Berkeley in a charmed time—  
after segregation but before Reaganomics/drug wars/prison industrial complex would ravage  
the Black community  
early 70s Berkeley's UC campus was freshly anointed  
with Free Speech radicals  
Black Panthers organizing in Oakland next door  
anti-Vietnam war movement going strong  
farmworkers gaining momentum  
I imprinted with the political optimism of this time

over four decades later I was still living in Berkeley  
my own daughter on the verge of kindergarten  
I hear a rumor that—for the first time—Berkeley has kindergarten classes  
with no Black children  
my Black child might be in a class with no? Black? children?  
unacceptable

I opted instead for a Spanish immersion feminist homeschool cooperative in East Oakland  
all Black & Latinx children

thus began my ten-year odyssey of traveling east down highway 580  
shuttling my daughter to  
ICC / Amandla Co-op / Lodestar / Forest Freedom School / Northern Light  
I—a climate activist—burned barrel after barrel of fossil fuels  
chasing the disappearing shadow of Black people down the freeway into East Oakland  
she still goes to school in Oakland today

Berkeley, my beloved Black Berkeley, what happened?  
I line danced at my own BHS reunion  
our boots on a ground we can no longer afford to rent or own  
led by an BHS alumna who now lives in Oakland

what happened to the Berkeley that beckoned my mother up the 101  
the Berkeley of sanctuary for her and her Black daughter?

in the 70s and 80s private schools implicitly provided refuge  
to escape schools with too many Black students  
in the new millennium I choose private schools to *find* those too many Black students

today no white men accost us in the park no white girls offer slurs  
but every school day I shuttle my daughter to Oakland  
I drive past Berkeley High School four times  
twice in the morning  
twice in the afternoon  
longing/missing/yearning to see equity for Black Berkeley