

The Background of a “Background Place”

“It’s just a tunnel”, he says, shaking his head, “was this really worth seeing?”¹ He stands in the mouth of the Santiago Creek bike trail’s Bond Avenue tunnel, which cuts under the busy roadway above to connect two shards of pathway. His first impression of the tunnel is fair, if not a little reductionist. The tunnel isn’t particularly captivating, it’s not notably grand in length or height, it’s not critically important infrastructure, it’s not a famous landmark or a particularly relevant hotspot for the community. It’s a ‘background place’, a place many experience but few *see*. The Santiago Creek Bike Trail, while not renown as one of Southern California’s greatest trails, is yet often smattered with a biker or stroller (both definitions). Many people pass through this tunnel on a daily basis, yet few stop to appreciate the detail in its simplicity. This tunnel is not a bastion of Orange’s reputation as a city, it’s not something that people travel to see; if you didn’t live near it, you may not even know it exists. That being said, places, like people, have something to say regardless of status. The tunnel is not a gleaming statue or a historic building or an ancient grove of orange trees, but that does not mean that it has any less to say. Perhaps what it has to say is less obvious, or less demonstrable, but there are messages hidden among the walls (literally) and shrub-patched dirt – we just have to go looking.

The tunnel is not a location with a particularly rich history, and the existing literature on it is virtually nonexistent. The entirety of the Santiago Creek bike trail is between 7.5 and 8.5 miles, depending on which hiking website you ask^{2,3}, and it was mostly constructed in 2011. It snakes around the Santiago Creek recharge basins, a creek recharge project completed in 1991 with upgrades made in 2003 and 2012 – the two large reservoirs form the scenic centerpiece of the trail. You can not see the reservoirs from the tunnel. The tunnel instead resides alongside a concrete channel that connects the reservoirs and the creek, a dam system with tunnels that run parallel to the human tunnel with a similar purpose. Some hikers may be sad; a bridge would surely offer a much better view and would be amazingly placed to take in sunsets over the basins, but alas the tunnel stands as our throughfare.

The tunnel, despite its lack of prestige, stands as a trove of little details we can piece together to form a cohesive picture of the tunnel’s message. From the war of graffiti and cover-ups adorning its walls to the sounds of the birds as they chirp from nearby trees, every element of the tunnel’s empire is critical to understanding its meaning, and thus, understanding ourselves.

¹ Dylan Johnson in discussion with the author, March 3, 2023

² Villa Park, “Santiago Creek Bike Trail”

³ TrailLink, “Santiago Creek Trail”

It's Just a Tunnel...

Table of Contents



Maps & Drawings – 3
On Graffiti – 6
On Liminality – 7
The Travelers – 8
The Sounds – 9
Scars of Humanity – 9
On Texture & Color – 10
Conclusion – 11
Interview Notes – 12
Bibliography – 16

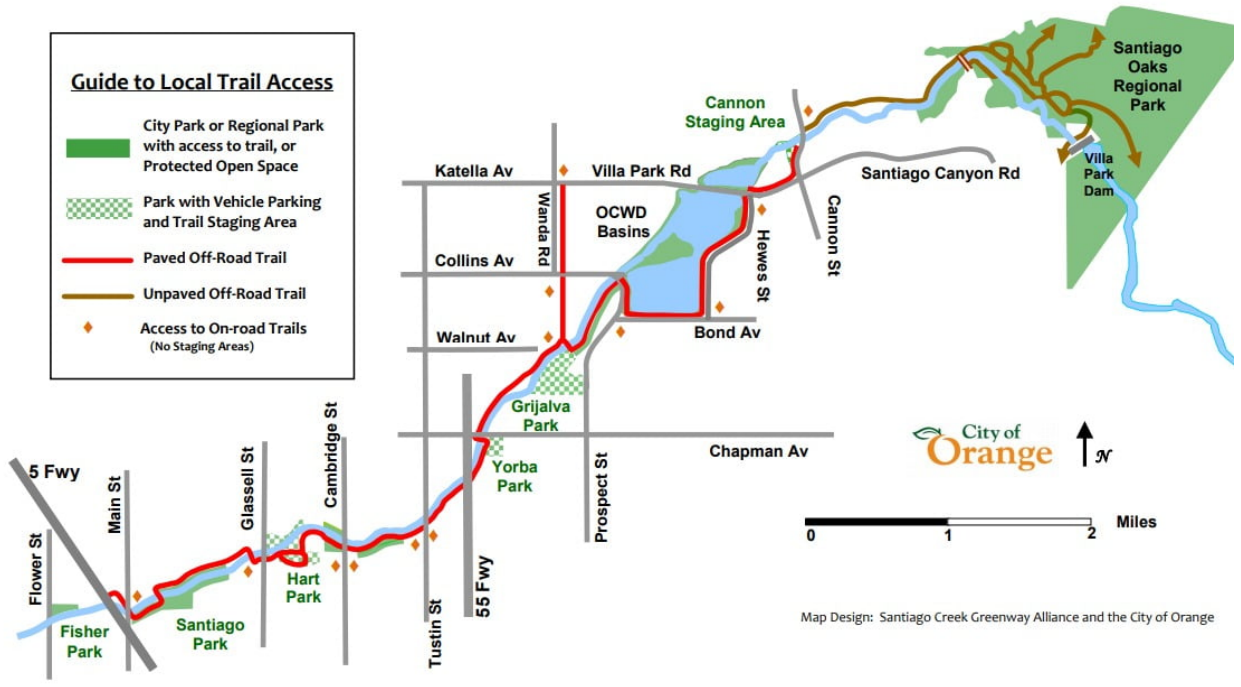
Notebook Map of the Tunnel's Empire



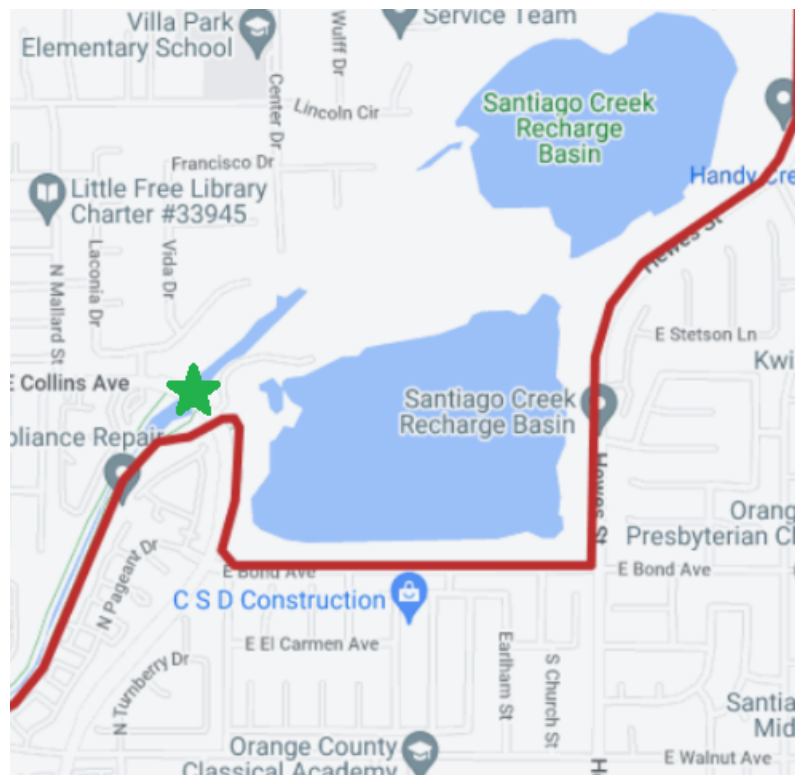
Drawing of the Tunnel Maw (From the Creek Side)



Villa Park map of the trail



TrailLink map of tunnel area (tunnel marked with green star)



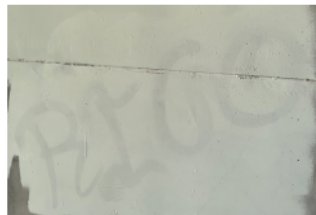
On Graffiti

The tunnel's sunken home below the road lends itself to privacy under the sparse illumination of most moonlights, its weakly-lit orange bulbs doing little to truly repel the darkness. Its concrete walls present the perfect canvas for any wandering vandal, and the tunnel has thus become a battlefield where the wars of graffiti are waged. The endless layers of spray paint and gray paint scar its interior, a testament to years of artistic war fought here. Its patchwork of cover-ups have turned its once concrete-gray walls into a monochrome quilt of mismatched grays; deep purples and blues and blacks doing their best to seep through their hastily painted veneers. You never know when a vandal may strike, though the keepers of the tunnel are quick to repair.

Much of the graffiti is vandalism in the purest sense, spray paint scrawls of names and symbols with little cohesion or design. I'm sure these walls have seen symbols and words of hate, though I suspect the keepers of the tunnel approach restoration more thoroughly in such cases. The keepers also cover the names and symbols – the remnants of Rico's signature and what was something blue are easily visible among many others. The war is waged continuously, as I've seen multiple pieces of graffiti and their accompanying cover-ups throughout the last ~2 years. When asked, a man in a blue shirt who "lives nearby" muses that the graffiti would be better – then at least the tunnel would be interesting⁴.

The battle between graffiti and cover-up is inherent to the medium of a vandal, and the concrete canvas may always suffer from this problem. The aesthetics of the multicolored gray squares are not particularly riveting, but would a smattering of random graffiti be better? Perhaps graffiti is only better en masse, when disjointed pieces can form a collage of spray painted color. To get there, then, we would need to allow the natural growth of disjointed graffiti before it can achieve unity. I do not propose that I know the best way to outfit our tunnel's interior, nor can we ask the tunnel itself. I do, however, believe an eternal state of patchwork grays is not the optimal solution, yet I suspect the tunnel may remain as such for a long while.

~ *From Notebook* ~



⁴ Blue shirt guy in discussion with the author, March 3, 2023

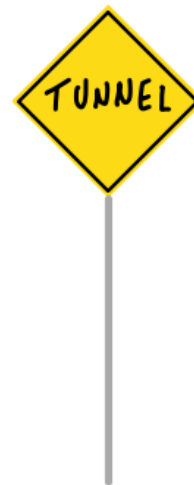
On Liminality

Tunnels, by nature, are inherently permeated by an aura of transition; the juxtaposition of being both inside and outside, of being unabashedly exposed yet thoroughly hidden, thus catapults tunnels into the realm of the liminal. It is no surprise that the tunnel has been a prominent feature of many a story, as its entrancing allure can both entice and petrify depending on the context. For such a simple piece of infrastructure constructed--and found naturally--in such innumerable numbers throughout the world, each tunnel can manage to feel unique. They force us to acknowledge their existence as we enter their maw, and they often wrest us into the present as we leave the outside world or our daydreams and enter the stomach of the beast.

The nature of the tunnel tends to make it feel isolated from the rest of the world despite the fact that you've sunken into it. Their encompassing grasp both protects and imprisons as the sights, sounds, and smells of the world fade away, even when you can see outside on either end. Our tunnel is further furnished, with faded orange lighting and weathered steel grates as decor. Its walls are pockmarked with the scars of hidden graffiti, but they will still protect from the oft-blowing wind or rarely-falling rain. The tunnel's empire is adorned with bushy green plants, golden cattails and the occasional wiry tree; a lone yellow sign stands amongst the eco-chaos exclaiming "Tunnel", almost as if to mark the territory. The occasional rock or branch has meandered into the depths of the tunnel, settling peacefully along the walls enjoying respite from the wind.

Stepping foot into the world of the tunnel is an undeniably liminal experience for those who stop to experience it; yet many pass through with no regard. Those who do give the tunnel their attention, however, are entreated to a world somehow separate from the road mere feet above and the sidewalks mere seconds away.

~ From Notebook ~



10 FT 0 IN

The Travelers

An important part of any empire is those that make up its population, and the empire of the tunnel is no exception. Due to its status as a reliable thoroughfare for an otherwise impassable section of road, we may often find travelers within its borders. Throughout my exploration of the tunnels empire, I had the opportunity to talk to a number of travelers as they passed through the tunnel. The trail – and hence the tunnel – are a choice for many who choose to get outside for exercise. Bikers, runners, joggers, and walkers abound, many in groups of two or more. The rare skateboard or scooter appears, though other than walking the most common means of transport is bike. There are a surprising number of strollers, although I suppose I don't particularly know what a 'normal' amount of people with strollers to see on a path is. Many of the walkers are from the immediate area and have not traveled far; though a jogger I sidelined was embarking on a 3 mile jog⁵.

The views on the empire of the tunnel are varied yet there are elements of cohesion; many travelers appreciate the convenience of having a not-road near their house for them to walk upon. They can thank the tunnel, then, for them not having to walk a minute or two along a speed limit 35 (read: people traveling 45 to 50) roadway to the nearest sidewalk, not only ruining the immersion of the trail but also entreating any who walk by to the cacophony of sounds and scents that accompany fast moving cars. The travelers so often highlighted the atmosphere of the path in conversation, the 'nice day' or 'sounds of the birds'⁶ or 'sun on the stream'⁷. Many do not think much of the tunnel as few mention it; only once did it come up and solely because it was my active engagement with the tunnel that sparked the conversation⁸.

Those I didn't have the opportunity to converse with were, at times, equally engaging. A well-dressed man walking quickly along while pressing a phone to his ear, blurting out the occasional "yep", a family of bikers with the youngest kid pedaling fervently in first gear to the amusement of his older sister, a group of four or five student-aged kids on what looks to be an after-school cross-country run together. The travelers are various and varied, and they pass through often. Few, if any, stop to appreciate the finer details of the tunnel, the way the shadows slice across the walls, and they don't mourn the defeated graffiti or delve into the tunnel's hidden words. The tunnel doesn't mind, however, and it will continue to grant them safe passage under the road regardless.

~ Notebook pages of (my very messy) conversation notes at bottom ~

⁵ Jogger in discussion with the author, March 9, 2023

⁶ Pair of older women in discussion with the author, March 3, 2023

⁷ Jogger in discussion with the author, March 9, 2023

⁸ Blue shirt guy in discussion with the author, March 3, 2023

The Sounds

The whoosh of the bike, as it flies through the tunnel
 Like air getting fanned through the mouth of a funnel
 The chirp and the screech of the birds in the sky
 Hear them yap, hear them caw as they perch or they fly
 Scuffing of sneakers and huffing of speakers
 Skittering and rustling of lizardy creatures
 The rushing of water as it flows through the creek
 A father and daughter who haven't hung out all week

Yes the sounds of a tunnel are various indeed
 Like the different types of rustling from the cattails and the trees
 Like the water trickling softly or a branch tumbling in the breeze
 The cars rumbling and roaring as they tear around the bend
 Like the echo of the tunnel walls so sound can never end

Scars of Humanity

On my map you may have noticed a gray dotted line connecting two sections of path between plants on the creek side. This isn't a paved path, but rather a 'desire path', a human-made convenient shortcut that arose from the wear and tear of people using said shortcut. The line slashes directly through the encamped shrubbery so that we humans may save 10 seconds on our walk, dirt glaring angrily through the cracks in the green facade.

This pathway isn't the only marring present from humanity's actions; cigarette butts and various other forms of trash can be found amongst the rocks and greenery, though thankfully less than one may expect given the tunnel's circumstances. The striking scar, however, is the concrete walls of the creek bank that lack even a splotch of green. The natural bank of this creek would likely be hospitable as an ecosystem for a variety of animals, and would bring a high degree of lushness to the empire of the tunnel. Alas, the concrete bank and dam system stands tall, a striking monument to human ingenuity and destruction.

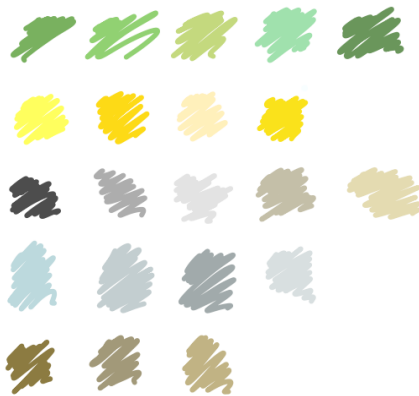
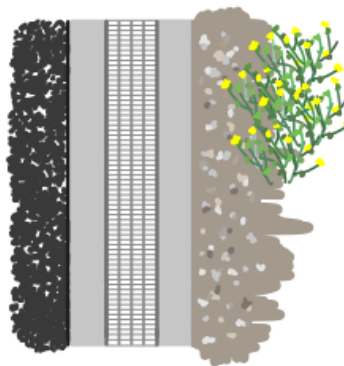
~ From Notebook ~ →



On Texture & Color

The tunnel is a man-made object that resides amongst a shell of nature. When I discuss ‘the empire of the tunnel’, I’m referencing the tunnel itself and some abstract amount of the nature around it. There is a definite contrast between these two elements, as the tunnel is asphalt and concrete and the nature is, well, nature. The tunnel is completely surrounded by green and gold, with rocky dirt the foundation, as if surrounding a concrete structure with plants might make it more ‘natural’. Alas, the tunnel is in stark contrast with its surroundings, a contrast seen most sharply through the lenses of texture and color.

The tunnel is firmly inorganic, its boxy shape and crisp concrete lines far removed from the chaos of nature. Its walls are sleek, smooth; their bleak gray patched with graffiti repair a stark contrast even to the brown dirt at its feet. The crisp blue sky, the radiant sun, the green stalks with their bright yellow flowers, the tunnel finds no kinship with those artifacts of nature. Yet, the tunnel seems at home amongst the differences. It welcomes the sun with open arms, though not fully into its depths. It carves a fair border between its paths and the reaches of nature, and it doesn’t complain when rocks and leaves find their way beyond the grate. The tunnel has even gone as far as to imitate the nature around it, the popcorn-stone not far removed from the rocky dirt base coat on the ground outside.



~ From Notebook ~



Conclusion

Though the tunnel speaks subtly, there is much to learn from its words. It doesn't stand as a monument to perfection, it isn't enriched with the context of historical architecture or cultural graffiti. It instead stands as microcosm; an empire of the little things with meaning waiting to be derived. In a way, the tunnel is but a mirror. It is as large or as small as we want it to be, it can be nothing more than a background or as deep as any world wonder. It is a reflection of our ideas, of the way we see the world. This tunnel is not a protagonist, it is a background character, a supporting actor in everyone's story of life.

This piece entitled the tunnel the moniker of 'background place', but I've aimed to show that 'background place' is but a state of being. See, the tunnel is only a background place because of the context with which we see it; the exploration I've embarked upon has hopefully shown you that to assume the tunnel depthless in meaning is woefully unfair. The story of the tunnel, then, should stand as a lesson for any 'background place' in your own life; it is only a background place because you choose to let it be one. The little things can often be explored just as deeply as the large ones, if you are willing to dedicate the effort. Sure, it does not come with glory and often runs awry of excitement, but it enriches daily life in a way little else can. What I once saw as nothing more than an irrelevant feature of a nearby trail has been illuminated in all its depth, and that illumination has allowed me to see the other little things in my world in a fresh light. I can only hope that through my conversations on the tunnel and trail with those who passed through, I may have helped them as I have helped myself.

Yes, dear reader, I hope I have helped you as well. You may well be in a background place right now, a room your brain has enough or too little familiarity with to perturb itself with all the details. Perhaps you should look around a little more carefully, investigate the texture of the wall, the ticking of the clock, the blowing of the wind. Perhaps you should try to draw the sun filtering through the blinds, or jot down a reflection on the relaxing aura of the light. Or perhaps you shouldn't. That's the beauty of a background place – it can be a background, or so much more.

Interview Notes

Blue Shirt guy

3/3

Lives on Metcalf
Speaks bad
glad it's more interesting
out for walk "hike day"



Stroller couple

3/3

Walk with little kid
kid asked
head on home
like the path, sidewalk

~ 30 min tally @ 4pm 3/3

BIKE	WALK	RUN
HHH	HHH	ll
ll		

joy
|

2x Old Woman, pink shirt 7/5

Like the path for walk + take
has cars, close to home, flat
descender, birds

Dylan 3/3 night

22. Boring - dylan
just turned

mil nature
cool echo

Jogger 3/9 morning

WFH, jog in morning to
wakeup 3 mi.

likes on chapel, but he
likes sun on stream

didn't ask age but maybe
N 35-40?

Woman w/ stroller 3/9 ~ 3:00

Walk w/ baby before sunset

Likes on la vita

Wishes here often

Wishes there were more trees

2 kids skateboard 3/9
~3:30

is going to in-h-out
like Crosby, no license

made noise going thru tunnel for
echo, lol

Bibliography

Orange County, CA, “Santiago Creek Bike Trail (SCBT) | Orange County, CA,” October 1, 2022, <https://villapark.co/santiago-creek-bike-trail/>.

→ This is where I got information regarding the bike trail that the tunnel is on as well as the Santiago Creek bike trail map.

Trail Link, “Santiago Creek Trail”, Accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.trailink.com/trail-maps/santiago-creek-trail/>.

→ I got the google map with the trail overlay from here, and I also got more information about the Santiago Creek trail.

Orange County, CA, “Santiago Creek Recharge Basin” October 1, 2022, <https://villapark.co/santiago-basin/>.

→ This is where I got information on this history of the recharge basin. It wasn’t much of a timeline but this is about all the context I could get on the area.

Blue shirt guy in discussion with the author, March 3, 2023

→ Blue shirt guy approached me while I was inspecting the graffiti cover ups on the walls of the tunnel and asked what I was up to after I gave him a “hello” when he entered the tunnel. We had a pretty short conversation about what he was up to and where he was from and I asked him what he thought of the graffiti. He gave me his thoughts saying the graffiti would be more interesting than the ugly gray splotches and we parted ways.

Stroller couple in discussion with the author, March 3, 2023

→ The stroller couple was a couple pushing a stroller that looked fairly young, and they were walking pretty slowly so I asked if I could ask them a question or two for a school project. They obliged, and said they were out for a walk just enjoying the nice day. They mentioned liking the path more than walking on a sidewalk and they were heading back with their snoozing kid in the stroller.

Pair of old women in discussion with the author, March 3, 2023

→ This pair of old women were out on a walk together and approached me as I was sitting on the path drawing and were happy to chat. They highlighted enjoying the sounds of the birds near the reservoir, and liking the path because they didn’t have to deal with the cars and because it was fairly flat – other than the entrance, which one of the women in a pink shirt pointed out (the entrance from the sidewalk is somewhat sloped).

Dylan in discussion with the author, March 3, 2023

→ My friend Dylan got in that Friday night to visit and I took him over to see the tunnel so I could gauge his reaction, and he wasn't very impressed. I had mentioned the project offhand to him, so I think he maybe was expecting a more impressive tunnel. Alas, he still liked the echo and was making funny noises to gauge it.

Jogger in discussion with the author, March 9, 2023

→ I managed to get a jogger who was out on a jog right before he started jogging again after a sip of water to answer a couple questions. He said he was out on a morning run and it was a perk of working from home, and he actually lives like a block from me. When I asked his favorite part of the path, he highlighted being happy about their being more water in the stream because he liked the sun on the water.

Woman with stroller in discussion with the author, March 9, 2023

→ I went back in the afternoon yesterday to take some pictures of the sun and catch another traveler, and I asked a woman who was walking with a stroller what she was up to. She was out for a walk with her baby and lives close by near a different section of the path.

Two kids on skateboard in discussion with the author, March 9, 2023

→ I was doing some drawing when two kids skated up from the creek side heading up to the road to skate to in-n-out, which is close by. I asked as they skated close by if I could ask them a question or two, and they stopped. They said they were heading to in-n-out and they skate this route often to get it because they don't have a license for a car. They skated on, and as they went through the tunnel, they made an 'Awooo!' noise and enjoyed the echo.