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Black Housing Politics in

1940s South Los Angeles

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Masters of Art  
in Afro American Studies

by

Marques Augusta Vestal

2014



ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Black Housing Politics in  
1940s South Los Angeles

by

Marques Augusta Vestal

Master of Arts in Afro American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Brenda E. Stevenson, Chair

What if you made it to an urban “promised land” and had nowhere decent to live? For African Americans in 1940s Los Angeles, housing was a major problem and focus of political activity. WWII caused the African American population in Los Angeles to surge throughout the 1940s, placing severe stress on a restricted housing market. This study investigates black housing politics in the 1940s in South Los Angeles, along with the ideological formation of race restrictive covenants. It was observed that black women played a central role in the mobilization of community resources to combat segregation and poor housing conditions. Black activism around housing issues was shared between a cross-section of civic, religious, and labor groups, with particular focus on black news media. Furthermore, residential segregation was identified

not as an inherent pathology of racism, but as a deliberate practice to construct white ideals of residential space, and hence white identity itself.

The thesis of Marques Augusta Vestal is approved.

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Brenda E. Stevenson, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

## Table of Contents

The Development of Suburban and Racial Space in Los Angeles .....	8
Legal and Ideological Development of Race Restrictive Covenants in Los Angeles .....	15
Racialized Geographies and the Mounting Housing Crisis in 1940s Los Angeles .....	21
Black News Media and Coalition Housing Politics .....	35
Public Housing.....	46
Conclusion.....	57
Bibliography .....	59

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Map of Los Angeles and adjacent industrial suburbs (highlighted). Alameda Street and Long Beach Boulevard are highlighted in red. The darkened region is the approximate location of the Central Avenue area circa 1940.....	12
Figure 2. 1940 map of Los Angeles showing majority black and majority white areas. The highlighted section south of Downtown was the Central Avenue area. ....	23
Figure 3. View of the area where Pueblo Del Rio was built. Location is between East 53 <sup>rd</sup> and 55 <sup>th</sup> Streets near Fortuna Street.....	52
Figure 4. Aerial view of Pueblo Del Rio. ....	53
Figure 5. Children at play in Pueblo del Rio playground.....	55



## Introduction

On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1946 the *Los Angeles Sentinel* ran the front page headline, “Burning Cross Linked to L.A. Race Housing Fight.” The Sunday prior, a rag-wrapped cross was burned on the front lawn of Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Hickerson’s home on West 56<sup>th</sup> Street just north of Slauson Avenue and west of Main Street in South Los Angeles. The Hickerson family had been fighting a race restrictive covenant suit that threatened to force them from their home for nearly two years. The *Sentinel* reported that the act of racism was the first occurrence of a cross burning in “Los Angeles proper.”<sup>1</sup> The incident demonstrated the highly charged nature of racialized residential space in South Los Angeles in the 1940s. It was the racial conflict over residential space that encouraged local segregationists to use one of the most menacing symbols of racial terror and white supremacy in United States history. It was these contentions over residential space that lay at the foundations of modern black Los Angeles, a city that presently boasts the seventh largest black population in the nation.<sup>2</sup> How African Americans fought for equal access to residential space in an area that was then popularly considered “Negro” is an essential component of the city’s history and black Angeleno identity.

This study seeks to investigate instances of black housing politics that militated against white supremacist barriers to residential space in the 1940s. I define black housing politics broadly as the mobilization of community resources to change the material and legal circumstances of housing in the interest of the black community.<sup>3</sup> Within that definition I include

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<sup>1</sup> *Sentinel*, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1946.

<sup>2</sup> Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>3</sup> For a general analysis of African American politics during the post-WWII period see, Nikhil Pal Singh, "Internationalizing Freedom," in *Black Is a Country : Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge,

the articulation of political rhetoric to achieve that end. More specifically, I examine black resistance to race restrictive covenants and the ideological formations that came to justify them as first private, then legal, tools to create exclusively white residential spaces. This study is not meant to be a cohesive, chronological narrative of the “evolution” or expansion of the black community in Los Angeles. Instead, I offer here an exposition and analysis of the contention over residential space in South Los Angeles in the 1940s. By examining the war and postwar periods, this analysis differs from other black urban historiography in that it takes an approach away from a narrative of the construction of a ghetto to the fight for community.<sup>4</sup>

Studies on black housing in Los Angeles on the war and post war period are sparse. Excellent collections of essays such as the volume edited by Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter, *African American Urban History Since World War II*, lack or offer very little in the way of works targeted toward black Los Angeles. Works that take Los Angeles as its primary subject either focus on prewar black Los Angeles as a sort of “golden era,” examine the postwar period through the prism of ghetto development and the urban rebellions of 1965 and 1992, or analyze African American suburbanization from the 1960s to the present.<sup>5</sup> Josh Sides devotes an entire

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Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). For local political mobilization of African Americans in postwar Los Angeles see, João Helion Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels : Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Sides, L.A. *City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*; Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West : Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> For “ghetto development” perspectives see, Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid : Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Keith E. Collins, *Black Los Angeles : The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940-1950* (Saratoga, Calif.: Century Twenty One Pub., 1980); Patricia Rae Adler, "Watts : From Suburb to Black Ghetto" (s.n., 1981).

<sup>5</sup> For pre-WWII works on African American Los Angeles see, J. Max Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles" (University of Southern California, 1936); Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Lonnie G. III Bunch, ""The Greatest State for the Negro:' Jefferson L. Edmonds, Black Propagandist of the California Dream", in *Seeking El Dorado : African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence Brooks De Graaf, et al. (Los Angeles; Seattle: Autry Museum of Western Heritage ; University of Seattle Press, 2001); Bette Yarbrough Cox, *Central Avenue : Its Rise and Fall (1890-C.1995) : Including the Musical Renaissance of Black Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: BEEM Publications, 1996). Post WWII historiography see, Sides, L.A.

chapter to black housing in the postwar period in Los Angeles in the only book length work dedicated to black postwar Los Angeles. Sides predominately focuses on landmark cases through the prism of civil rights, whereby the current study seeks to supplement his analysis with more of the local, grassroots mobilization against race restrictive covenants. More recently, a few of the works in the collection of essays *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* offer excellent survey analyzes of the overall “evolution” and shift of black space in Los Angeles from the community’s inception to the present.<sup>6</sup>

This study grapples with a range of subjects and themes that revolve around the politics of race and residential space in Los Angeles in the 1940s. One of the early questions of this study

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*City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*; Josh Sides, U. S. C. Institute on California Huntington, and West the, *Post-Ghetto : Reimagining South Los Angeles* (Berkeley; San Marino, Calif.: Published for the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West by University of California Press ; Huntington Library, 2012); Josh Sides, "'You Understand My Condition': The Civil Rights Congress in the Los Angeles African-American," *Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 2 (1998); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race : Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); Widener, *Black Arts West : Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*. For “ghetto development” historiography see, Lawrence B. De Graaf, "The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890-1930," *pacihistrevi Pacific Historical Review* 39, no. 3 (1970); Collins, *Black Los Angeles : The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940-1950*; De Graaf, "The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890-1930; Sally Jane Sandoval, "Ghetto Growing Pains : The Impact of Negro Migration on the City of Los Angeles, 1940-1960" (1983); GregoryChristopher Brown, JamesDiego Vigil, and EricRobert Taylor, "The Ghettoization of Blacks in Los Angeles: The Emergence of Street Gangs," *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012); Adler, "Watts : From Suburb to Black Ghetto." For Watts and the King rebellions see, Spencer Crump, *Black Riot in Los Angeles; the Story of the Watts Tragedy* (Los Angeles: Trans-Anglo Books, 1966); Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time : The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Scott Saul, "Gridlock of Rage: The Watts and Rodney King Riots," in *A Companion to Los Angeles*, ed. Hise Greg William Deverell (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); David O. McConahay John B. Sears, *The Politics of Violence; the New Urban Blacks and the Watts Riot* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973); Paul Bullock, *Watts; the Aftermath; an inside View of the Ghetto* (New York: Grove Press, 1969); Jerry Murphy William S. Cohen, *Burn, Baby, Burn! The Los Angeles Race Riot, August, 1965* (New York: Dutton, 1966); Robert E. Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (Toronto; New York: Bantam Books, 1967); Darnell M. Hunt, *Screening the Los Angeles "Riots" : Race, Seeing, and Resistance* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Finally for black suburbanization in Los Angeles see, Lawrence B. De Gaaf, "African American Suburbanization in California, 1960 through 1990," in *Seeking El Dorado : African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence Brooks De Graaf, et al. (Los Angeles; Seattle: Autry Museum of Western Heritage ; University of Seattle Press, 2001); Francine F. Rabinovitz, *Minorities in Suburbs, the Los Angeles Experience* ([Cambridge, Mass.]: Joint Center for Urban Studies of M.I.T. and Harvard, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Darnell M. Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, *Black Los Angeles : American Dreams and Racial Realities* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

was: What were the material forces that shaped the overall residential configuration of Los Angeles that served as the spatial context for black housing politics? Mike Davis asserts that “Los Angeles’s emergence from the desert has been an artifact of giant public works, city-building has otherwise been left to the anarchy of market forces, with only rare interventions by the state, social movements or public leaders.”<sup>7</sup> So this study begins with one of Los Angeles’ most influential private city-builders, Henry Huntington, during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In conjunction with the development of alternative transportation infrastructure, geography, and zoning, the massive railroad and real estate development undertaken by Huntington from 1900 to 1920 (estimated at over half a billion dollars in investments when adjusted for contemporary inflation) shaped the general spatial layout of the city.<sup>8</sup>

Yet what acted as the enforcement mechanism coercing the racial organization of space in residential areas were race restrictive covenants. The current study analyzes the development of the ideologies justifying race restrictive covenants through the prism of competing and cooperating traditions of white privilege against African American demands for equality. This analysis conceptualizes white supremacy as a set of practices and beliefs that are “reconstituted” by state actors when challenged by black resistance.<sup>9</sup> Essentially, as blacks challenged the legal and ideological justifications for race restrictive covenants, private and state actors adjusted their practices to maintain prevailing modes of segregation. Resistance to restrictive covenants was

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<sup>7</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz : Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London; New York: Verso, 1990), 23.

<sup>8</sup> William B. Friedrichs, *Henry E. Huntington and the Creation of Southern California* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 9. For contemporary inflation calculation see <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.

<sup>9</sup> Jenny Irons, *Reconstituting Whiteness : The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010); Irons' concept of "reconstitution" is based on Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States : From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Lipsitz writes, "Political and cultural struggles over power have shaped the countours and dimensions of racism differently in different eras." George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness : How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 5.

not exclusively about obtaining access to desirable white residential space. For African Americans in Los Angeles in the 1940s, housing conditions in “Negro” areas also posed a serious threat to the welfare of the community. Black news media was pivotal in documenting and advocating for remedies to housing problems for African Americans in Los Angeles.

This media also was critical in articulating a brand of coalition politics centered on housing issues. The rhetoric used the social instability of World War II to articulate demands for housing equality through a liberal democratic frame that was popular during the war. Charlotta Bass, owner and editor of the *California Eagle*, was central in this activity. Through the pages of her newspaper, she rallied the community around housing injustices and encouraged interracial and interethnic unity. Bass represented the fierce determination of the petite bourgeoisie of black Los Angeles. Her most substantial contribution was evident in her work in the Laws family race restrictive covenant case in 1945. Lastly, the thesis presents a very brief exploration of public housing in South Los Angeles, particularly black resistance to racial quotas in housing projects and the construction of Pueblo del Rio. Oftentimes, examinations of housing either deal with suburban (read private homeownership) and public housing separately.<sup>10</sup> Yet both represent residential space that is equally, although not identically, racialized. Pueblo del Rio, much like South Los Angeles, held the promise of a good life with a good place to live. Today, there exists a general consensus among black folks in South Los Angeles that you do not go to the “Pueblos” without an “escort,” basically an individual that authorizes one’s presence in the area. Even the

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<sup>10</sup> For studies that focus on suburbanization see, Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven : Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). For public housing in Los Angeles see, Donald Craig Parson, *Making a Better World : Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

Los Angeles Police Department has a similar practice.<sup>11</sup> These cautionary practices, when compared to the initial vision of the project, serves as an indication of the massive failure on the part of the state to provide the human right of safe, dignified housing for its citizens.

This thesis offers a few observations about black housing politics in South Los Angeles in the 1940s. First, the leadership of black women was critical to black housing politics in South Los Angeles. Second, a cross section of community institutions was important in the effort to resist discrimination and advocate for equality in housing. The work of securing equal access to housing was not the sole responsibility or accomplishment of any one organization or charismatic leader. Various institutions, groups, and individual African Americans committed time, sometimes jail time, to fight for housing. Especially significant were the black homeowners who put their money and shelter on the line to resist race restrictive covenants. Some African Americans were aware that the property they purchased was covered by a race covenant, yet purchased the property in spite of restrictions.<sup>12</sup> Without this material commitment, overturning the legality and social acceptability of race restrictive covenants would not have been possible. Lastly, battles over residential space reveal that segregation is not an inherent pathology of racism. Conflicts over racialized space are, in part, about identity and status. Cultural historians such as Eric Avila and William Deverell demonstrate that the construction of public and residential spaces is intimately linked to the construction of whiteness.<sup>13</sup> Black presence in white neighborhoods was not repulsive, like matching magnetic charges. Instead, it was the presence of

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<sup>11</sup> Scott Gold. "At an impoverished housing complex, a reflection of South L.A.." Los Angeles Times, July 14, 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-southla-pueblos14-2009jul14,0,2422714.story> (accessed January 13, 2010)

<sup>12</sup> Charlotta A. Bass, *Forty Years : Memoirs from the Pages of a Newspaper* (Los Angeles: C.A. Bass, 1960), 98.

<sup>13</sup> William Francis Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe : The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight : Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

African Americans with apparently equal social and economic standing that incited white racial anxiety. Remember, race restrictive covenants often had an exemption for servants.

The black politics of housing and space in 1940s Los Angeles transcended class in some respects. African Americans across class strata had a stake in winning civil and economic rights. This is a far cry from claiming class was irrelevant. Yet it does mean that the fight for equality in housing in terms of access, mobility, equal protection under "just" laws, and quality - like other civil, economic, and human rights - are rights that indicated equal citizenship in urban modernity, and more generally, equal membership in humanity. In this light, African Americans who did not have a "real" material concern in the elimination of race restrictive covenants in aging "suburban" communities in South Los Angeles could find common ground in racial interests. To say it plainly, the African American demand for equality in housing was a matter of respectability at its most superficial (suburban) and dignity at its most human.

Using Birmingham, Alabama as an example, Robin D. G. Kelley demonstrated that class was an important axis of difference in the Civil Rights Movement (CRM). Working class folk had different material and experiential concerns that the mainstream CRM did not prioritize.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, class mediated the discriminatory effects of racist housing and spatial practices for African Americans in Los Angeles in the 1940s. There was a stark material difference between being middle class living in the segregated but nicest area of the black community versus living in overcrowded, illegally partitioned kitchenettes in unsafe dilapidated structures. Therefore, while there may have been a collective interest in resisting racist housing practices, the

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter Four "Birmingham's Untouchables: The Black Poor in the Age of Civil Rights," Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels : Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York; Toronto; New York: Free Press ; Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), 78.

discriminatory effects of those practices affected black Angelenos of varying class statuses differently.

## The Development of Suburban and Racial Space in Los Angeles

The urban, suburban, and racial configuration of space in Los Angeles that contextualized black housing politics in the 1940s developed with the meteoric rise of the city in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Los Angeles was envisioned and produced around the idealization of suburban design, militating against any semblance of the industrial centralization characteristic of older cities in the east.<sup>15</sup> Much has already been written about the cultural producers who created the controlling images, metaphors, and narratives that informed Angelenos' notions of the ideal Los Angeles, most notably Mike Davis.<sup>16</sup> What were the material processes that produced the general landscape of Los Angeles that would be the spatial context of black housing politics in the 1940s? The processes that influenced the overall configuration of the city were created by ambitious urban developers who created dispersed residential areas, the development of transportation infrastructure, geography, and zoning.

Urban entrepreneurs played a major role in producing the modern landscape of Los Angeles – the best example being Henry E. Huntington. Huntington wielded a trio of business ventures – trolley networks, electricity, and real estate development – that made him a one man private metropolitan planner, developer and major catalyst of urban expansion in Los Angeles

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<sup>15</sup> Becky M. Nicolaides, "The Quest for Independence: Workers in the Suburbs " in *Metropolis in the Making : Los Angeles in the 1920s*, ed. Tom Deverell William Sitton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 79.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, *City of Quartz : Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*; Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe : The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past*; Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream : California through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight : Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*.



from about 1900 to 1920. Huntington inherited an estimated \$15 million from his uncle and president of Southern Pacific. Coupled with a background in railway management, Huntington had the capital and skill to implement development on a massive scale in a time where the city held little regulatory power. Trolley lines were essential to urban development, and before Huntington came to Los Angeles, individual landowners were responsible for funding the construction of routes adjacent to their property. Yet Huntington's access to vast amounts of capital and little regulation meant he was free to choose the construction of routes.<sup>17</sup> The Pacific Electric network covered the Los Angeles basin from Glendale and Pasadena to San Pedro and Long Beach, from downtown Los Angeles to Covina, and southeast into Whittier and Artesia. A comparison of the Pacific Electric Railway lines map reveals a similar layout to Los Angeles' modern freeway system.<sup>18</sup> William Friedrichs captures Huntington's impact on the development of Los Angeles when he writes, "While it would be left to the automobile – which encouraged development between and beyond the trolley lines – to fill in and extend beyond this outline, the basic spatial design of downtown Los Angeles and the surrounding suburbs was created by Huntington's streetcars."<sup>19</sup>

Huntington also owned massive real estate holdings along his rail lines. Although Los Angeles had some of the most strict land-use regulations in the country, city planning authorities would not possess real enforcement capabilities until the 1920's. Therefore, in the absence of enforceable regulation, Huntington's massive community development served the function of private city planner. As a subdivider, Huntington created communities designated for certain socioeconomic groups, such as the community of Oak Knoll, an upscale neighborhood tucked

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<sup>17</sup> Friedrichs, *Henry E. Huntington and the Creation of Southern California*, 1-11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-57.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

between Pasadena and San Marino. Similar to other subdivision developers, Huntington used deed restriction to regulate physical structures, land-use, and the race of prospective residents.<sup>20</sup> The combination of Huntington's rail and real estate development efforts both guided and encouraged the dispersed spatial geography of Los Angeles. It allowed for residential development to stretch from downtown to the Pacific coast, into and beyond the Santa Monica Mountains, east into the diversity of mountains and desert of San Bernardino, and south toward San Pedro harbor. Black Los Angeles of the 1940s contended with this landscape, with the Central Avenue district just south of downtown wedged between the desirable "Westside" and white working class industrial suburbs to the southeast of Central Avenue, with both restricting "non-Caucasian" residency.

Whereas the overall spatial development of Los Angeles unfolded in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development of the southern industrial area and the white working class southern suburbs that housed its workers occurred in the 1920s. By the end of the 20s, industry had been established from the central business district of downtown, around the harbor in San Pedro and Long Beach, and the southern suburbs that filled the land between them. The southern suburbs became critical industrial junctions due to the development of transportation arteries, geography, and zoning. The development of major truck highways and a harbor rail system ensured that raw materials and manufactured products could be transported between manufacturers, transporters, and distributors, such as the establishment of Alameda Street and Long Beach Boulevard in the mid-1920s. Southern industry also developed with the geography of the basin. Natural oil reserves dot the southeast – Dominquez, Torrance, and Brea – with refineries in Whittier, Brea, Fullerton, and El Segundo. Lastly, zoning influenced the

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 88.

development of industry in Los Angeles and subsequently the development of southern working class suburbs. As part of Progressive Era reforms, Los Angeles implemented the nation's first city-wide zoning law in 1908, which organized the city into residential and industrial zones. The zoning plan created seven zoning districts along the Los Angeles River and railroad lines that wound through southern suburbs. With some exceptions and variations, the zoning plan produced a general schema of the Los Angeles residential and industrial landscape and all but reserved the Westside for middle and upper class residential development.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nicolaidis, "The Quest for Independence: Workers in the Suburbs " 80.

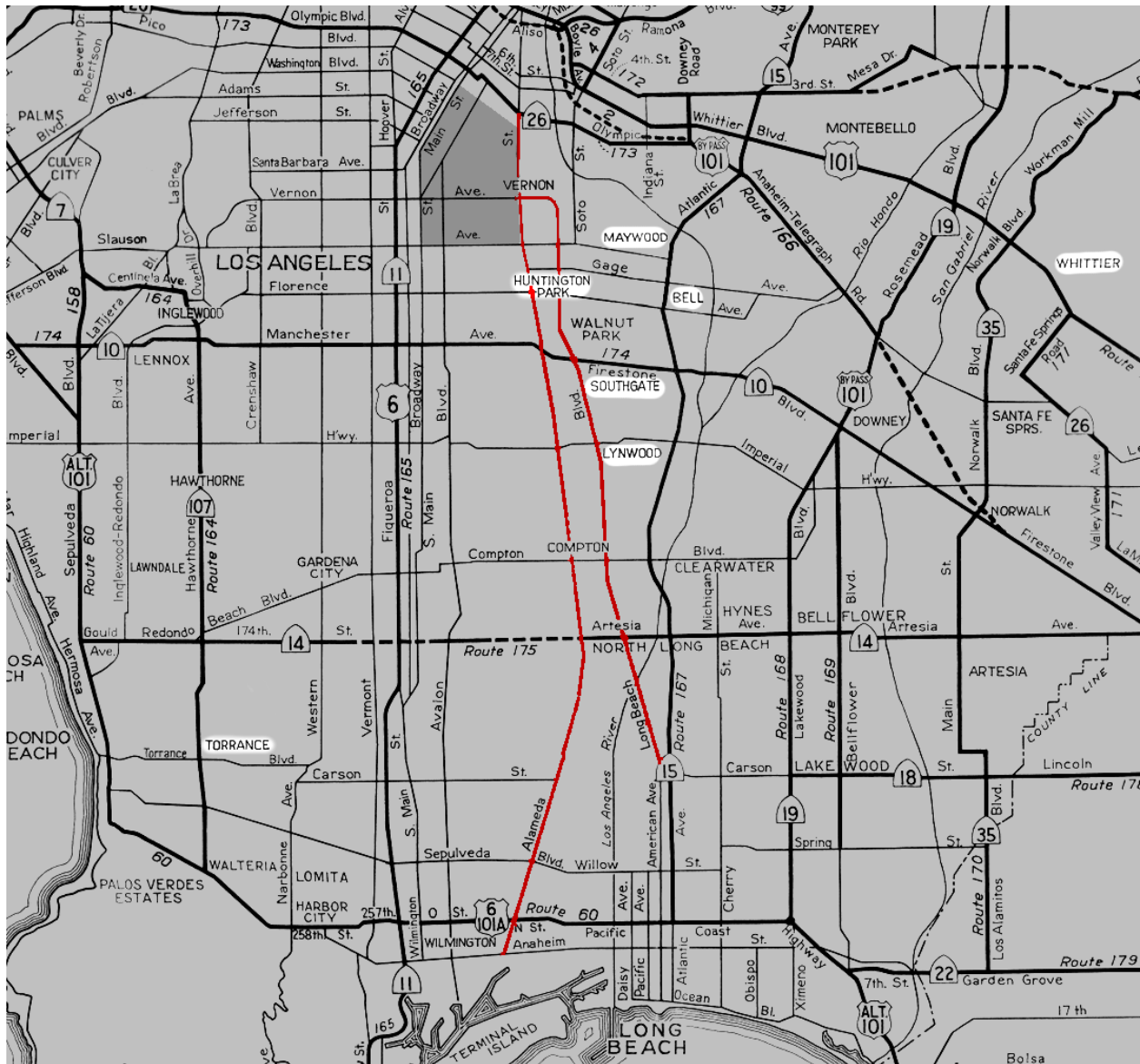


Figure 1. Map of Los Angeles and adjacent industrial suburbs (highlighted). Alameda Street and Long Beach Boulevard are highlighted in red. The darkened region is the approximate location of the Central Avenue area circa 1940.<sup>22</sup>

As industry gained a foothold encouraged by economics, geography, and city planning, working class suburbs were developed to house industrial workers, specifically white workers. Spaces such as South Gate possessed characteristics that made settlement by industrial workers sensible. Land was cheap and there were few restrictions and regulations on land-use and

<sup>22</sup> Darban, Nema, image editor. "Map highlighting industrial suburbs of Los Angeles in relation to Central Avenue area circa 1940." Digital image.

building construction. Many working class whites built their own homes and used their land to raise small livestock and grow food. The lack of city services and infrastructure meant taxes were low. Above all, South Gate and other southern suburbs were close to industry; and therefore, the area possessed the availability of semi-skilled and skilled work.<sup>23</sup> Yet southern suburbs were thoroughly race restricted. The presence of race restrictive covenants was marketed to attract white workers to burgeoning communities, appearing in advertisements and billboards boosting residential lots. In Home Gardens, for example, annexed to South Gate in 1927, promoters described it as “a town of, by and for workingmen – and we want hundreds more of them. The only restrictions are racial – the white race only may own property here.” Alameda Street became the de facto border dividing black Central Avenue and Watts on the west side and white industrial suburbs on the east side.<sup>24</sup>

Within this overall configuration of urban and suburban space in and around Los Angeles, African Americans somewhat thrived in the Central Avenue area southwest of Downtown prior to World War II. None other than the venerable W.E.B. Dubois praised Los Angeles in an often cited quote from the *Crisis* in 1913:

Los Angeles was wonderful. The air was scented with orange blossoms and the beautiful homes lay low crouching on the earth as though they loved its scents and flowers. Nowhere in the United States is the Negro so well and beautifully housed, nor the average efficiency and intelligence in the colored population so

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>24</sup> *My Blue Heaven : Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965*, 157-58; "The Quest for Independence: Workers in the Suburbs " 87.

high. Here is an aggressive, hopeful group - with some wealth, large industrial opportunity and a buoyant spirit.<sup>25</sup>

The “beautiful homes” lauded by Dubois were not an aberration – blacks in Los Angeles prior to the first World War experienced some of the highest proportions of home ownership in the country. Nearly 40 percent of blacks owned their homes in Los Angeles County compared to less than 3 percent in New York and less than ten percent in Chicago.<sup>26</sup> Writing in the black Los Angeles newspaper the *Liberator*, Jefferson L. Edmonds triumphantly claimed California to be the "greatest state" for African Americans.<sup>27</sup> Prewar Los Angeles also boasted a multiracial population, especially in the Central Avenue area where the majority of African Americans resided. The area was populated with African Americans, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Mexican Americans, and white ethnic Europeans.<sup>28</sup>

Yet African Americans were by no means legally, economically, or socially equal to whites, and some African Americans in the city may have scoffed at the overly optimistic assumptions and statements touted by black cultural producers such as Edmonds. African Americans were perennially hounded by blatant discrimination. The notorious 'Shenk Rule,' for example, allowed business owners to charge African Americans more than white patrons in order to signal the obvious message that their business was not welcomed. In some cases white businesses flatly denied black patronage.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, black children were only allowed to swim

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<sup>25</sup> W.E.B Dubois quoted in, Josh Sides, L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Sides, 16

<sup>27</sup> Bunch, ""The Greatest State for the Negro:' Jefferson L. Edmonds, Black Propagandist of the California Dream".

<sup>28</sup> Mark Wild, *Street Meeting : Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Bass, *Forty Years : Memoirs from the Pages of a Newspaper*, 61.

in public pools the night before they were cleaned.<sup>30</sup> Despite the varied forms of discrimination experienced by African Americans in Los Angeles, residential segregation was arguably the most insidious.

## Legal and Ideological Development of Race Restrictive Covenants in Los Angeles

Comprehensive networks of race restrictive covenants were the primary method of creating and maintaining residential segregation in Los Angeles. Similar to Huntington, private developers used these covenants to control the racial composition of residential space. Restrictive covenants first appeared in California in the 1890s and became a commonplace fixture of urban spaces nationwide by 1920.<sup>31</sup> In Los Angeles, the use of race restrictive covenants became popular after 1910, and they continued to receive support by the California Real Estate Association as an effective practice to exclude minorities from white communities until the late 1960s.<sup>32</sup> Restrictive covenants are legal contracts either written directly into property deeds or articulated in standalone agreements that regulate how the property can be used. Covenants “run with the land,” which mean that the original signatory of the covenant establishes a set of rights that become “intrinsic” to the property. Any future proprietor of the property has the responsibility to uphold these rights for the duration of the covenant. While race was a pivotal focus of covenants, the agreements commonly regulated, in addition to the racial

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<sup>30</sup> Sides, 13

<sup>31</sup> Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Regina Freer, "L.A. Race Woman: Charlotta Bass and the Complexities of Black Political Development in Los Angeles," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 616; Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 17.

identity of potential proprietors and occupants, new construction, modifications of existing structures, and the commercial or residential use of the land.<sup>33</sup>

By the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Los Angeles, race restrictive covenants had been implemented as private agreements with no state support in the form judicial enforcement. One of the earliest challenges to race restrictive covenants came in 1915, when Homer Garrott, an African American police officer, purchased a home in the Angeles Park tract just west of Main Street. The developers of the subdivision, Title Guarantee and Trust Company, had established race restrictive covenants on the property purchased by Garrott. The covenant prohibited the sale of property in the subdivision to people of African, Chinese, or Japanese decent, and the company sued Garrott in an attempt to repossess the property. Garrott resisted and in the subsequent case *Title Guarantee and Trust Co. v Garrott*, Superior Court Judge John W. Sherk ruled in favor of Garrott in 1916 declaring race restrictive covenants unenforceable. The case wound through appeals courts until it made it to the California Supreme Court in 1919. This court also ruled in favor of Garrott, deciding that race restrictive covenants are illegal because such agreements place unwarranted restraints on the alienation of land.<sup>34</sup>

The decision marked a peculiar conflict in American legal tradition at the intersection of the protection of “unencumbered alienation of land” and what Cheryl Harris coined “whiteness as property.” Alienation of land is an essential foundation of property law which holds that property owners have the right to sell or dispose of land as they see fit, rights encompassed by the legal term “alienation,” and the decision in *Garrott* conformed to general legal opinion on

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<sup>33</sup> David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property : State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*, Kindle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 93.Ebook

<sup>34</sup> Flaming, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 152-53.



alienation in the 1910s.<sup>35</sup> Since alienation concerns the rights of property owners, the *Garrott* decision could be viewed as the courts' desire to protect the alienation rights of the white homeowner who sold the property to Garrott and not any intrinsic rights of Garrott as an African American citizen and consumer. Yet whatever the courts' desires may have been, Garrott benefited indirectly from the protection of white alienation of land because it simultaneously undermined private efforts to enforce residential segregation. The indirect subversion of white aims to construct segregated residential communities through the protection of the white right of alienation conflicted sharply with the legal tradition of whiteness as property, or specifically, the property rights inherent in white identity. Harris argues that whiteness and property share a "conceptual nucleus," the right to exclude, which are rooted in histories of African American and Native American domination by whites.<sup>36</sup> The inherent attribute to exclude in whiteness as property is the unmarked basis for the legal and popular justification of public and private segregation in the United States. In the legal scum, Garrott found metaphorical shelter between conflicting traditions of white privilege.

The opportunity for African American home seekers found in the *Garrott* decision was short lived. In the same year as *Garrott*, the California Supreme Court ruled on the case of Alfred Gary, an African American Angeleno who purchased a home in a tract owned by the Los Angeles Investment Company. The property was covered by a race restrictive covenant similar to the one that covered Homer Garrott's property. Both restricted sale of property to non-whites, yet the covenant covering the contested property Gary purchased also included an occupancy clause that excluded non-whites from living on the property. The owners of the tract sought to

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 152; "Real Property. Fee Simple. Restraint of Alienation," *Virginia Law Review* 3, no. 6 (1916).

<sup>36</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1714.

have the property reverted to the company in adherence to the restrictive covenant binding the land. In *Los Angeles Investment Company v. Gary*, the California Supreme Court made four rulings – three of which held great implications for potential black homeowners in Los Angeles. The first ruling aligned with the *Garrott* case that race restrictive covenants that denied the sale of property to non-whites was a restraint on alienation and therefore against the California Civil Code which made such restraints null and void. The second and third rulings concerned the occupancy clause. The court held that occupancy restrictions placed restraints on the *use* of land and not the alienation of it; therefore, race restrictive covenants could not legally prohibit the sale of property to non-whites, but they could legally prevent prospective non-white buyers from occupying the property. Lastly, the court held that occupancy restrictions were not a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment since covenants were private agreements and not public prohibitions.<sup>37</sup> In this series of rulings, segregationists, from developers to homeowners, found state sanction for race restrictive covenants that would remain enforced for the nearly three decades. Although covenants would continue to include language restricting the sale of property after *Garrott* and *Gary*, state support of occupancy restriction ensured that African Americans could purchase homes freely but not live in them.

With clear state legitimization, race restrictive covenants became a critical element for developers in marketing their suburban developments to prospective white buyers. In one of the first comprehensively designed communities in Southern California, Leimert Park served as a model for future developments in Los Angeles. Anchored around the park at Forty-Third Place and Degnan Boulevard, the area attracted prospective white buyers by advertising the area as

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<sup>37</sup> Flammig, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 155-56.Eboo; Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 18.

highly controlled, emphasizing the design and construction of “safety streets and walks” so that children walking to and from school would encounter minimal traffic. Utility wires were buried or hidden in alleys which provided unhindered space for the planting of trees on the neighborhood’s main streets.<sup>38</sup> Walter Leimert prized the use of restrictive covenants as part of the designed allure of the community, whose plan of restriction was “the only one whereby beauty, distinction and order [could] be maintained permanently.”<sup>39</sup> Race restrictive covenants were employed in an attempt to control the racial composition of the community as part of a larger conception of the modern, ordered, and white residential space. Similarly to other forms of restriction on the size or commercial use of property, racial and ethnic minorities, except as servants, were deemed a danger to neighborhood beauty and order, and for all intents and purposes, the state supported that ideology.

State justification of the private use of race restrictive covenants intersected with the public justification of zoning restriction of private land. David Freund, in his case study on the development of suburban housing politics in Detroit, argues that nationally race restrictive covenants and restrictive zoning shared legal and ideological justifications for the regulation of private property. Although race restrictive covenants and zoning restrictions operate in two separate realms, private and public respectively, the two forms of restriction found overlapping ideological support at the juncture of land-use restriction.<sup>40</sup> While race covenants were the brain child of market forces, the rationale that led to the development of zoning in Los Angeles was rooted in the rise of Progressivism after 1900. The primary goal of the movement was political

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<sup>38</sup> Reginald Chapple, "From Central Avenue to Leimert Park: The Shifting Center of Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles : American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. Darnell M. Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 72.

<sup>39</sup> Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race : Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles*, 20.Ebook

<sup>40</sup> Freund, *Colored Property : State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*.

reform through the dismantling of partisan organizations, curtailing special interests influence, and giving more power to average citizens, but the movement also cultivated an activist form of government to combat mounting problems of urban development.<sup>41</sup> Los Angeles Progressives worried that, although the city's development was due to relatively unrestrained market forces, the same unchecked development could lead to an unsightly and unorganized city bereft of recreational spaces, well-developed streets, and functional infrastructure.<sup>42</sup> In that spirit, Los Angeles passed the United States' first city-wide land-use zoning ordinance in 1908, which demarcated separate industrial and residential zones.<sup>43</sup> Although Los Angeles lacked explicit racial zoning, the ideological justification of land-use restriction later buttressed private justification for the exclusion of non-white occupancy in designated white communities. Furthermore, the state passively allowed developers' and residents' discretion to determine what was considered a nuisance or threat to community welfare.

The Progressive Era's government-as-activist ethos also had an impact on the spatial experiences of Mexican American, Japanese American, and ethnic European residents in Los Angeles. George Sanchez contends that Progressivism in Los Angeles created the municipal structure imbued with racialized notions of urban space responsible for the forced expatriation of Mexican Americans during the Depression, the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII, and the removal of multiracial populations for "urban renewal" and progress.<sup>44</sup> Local officials were extremely critical in identifying and targeting racialized spaces as "slums" and

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis : Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 247; K. Putnam Jackson, "The Persistence of Progressivism in the 1920's: The Case of California," *Pacific Historical Review* 35, no. 4 (1966): 247.

<sup>42</sup> Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis : Los Angeles, 1850-1930*.

<sup>43</sup> Freund, *Colored Property : State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*, 49.

<sup>44</sup> George J. Sanchez, "Disposable People, Expendable Neighborhoods ", ed. Hise Greg William Deverell, *A Companion to Los Angeles* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). 2.

administering local and federal programs as solutions to achieve modern urban improvement. In the midst of the Depression, Sanchez argues that city officials shared “a collective sense of racial urban geography”<sup>45</sup> that informed their targeting of Mexican Americans in the Flats of Boyle Heights for expatriation in the 1930s and slum clearance in the 1930s and 1940s. After the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese naval forces in December of 1941, the ideology and respective processes of forced removal of racialized populations for the “public good” were brought to bear on Japanese Americans in communities east and southeast of Downtown Los Angeles.<sup>46</sup> The experiences of multiracial populations demonstrate the impact of the Progressive Era on ideologies and structures that influence the configuration of the racial geography of the city. Yet for the most part, African American experiences of residential space in Los Angeles were most directly affected by private processes buttressed by public legitimization.

### **Racialized Geographies and the Mounting Housing Crisis in 1940s Los Angeles**

For racial and ethnic minorities in Los Angeles in the 1940s, the city had a racial map socially ascribed on the landscape designating “colored” residential space from white residential space. As the black community expanded and challenged the legal and extralegal barriers to black residential mobility the landscape shifted. Even with this flux, the most prominent spatial references were the “Westside” and the “Eastside.” The Westside was the residential area west of Main Street and was seen as the most desirable portion of the city for upwardly mobile African Americans.<sup>47</sup> The Eastside was located east of Main until Alameda Street, which marked the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Celes King et al., "Black Leadership in Los Angeles Celes King Iii," ([Los Angeles]: Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988); Paul Robinson, "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles " in *Black Los*

border between the black Central Avenue area and the heavily race restricted white working class industrial suburbs of South Los Angeles. The Central Avenue area was bracketed north and south by East 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Slauson Avenue respectively. The area with the dual ethnic and racial names of Little Tokyo and Bronzeville, representing the shifting presence of Japanese Americans and African Americans respectively, was bounded by Aliso Street to the north, East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street to the south, Alameda Street to the east, and San Pedro Avenue to the west. The African American section of Watts was further south bordered by East 93<sup>rd</sup> Street to the north, East 116<sup>th</sup> Street to the south, Compton Avenue to the east, and Central Avenue to the west.<sup>48</sup> It was in these restricted black spaces, pressed by the contingencies of World War II, where housing problems became most acute.

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*Angeles : American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. Darnell M. Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 38-39.

<sup>48</sup> Gallagher Charles J. Katz for Katz, Margolis, and John T. Mcternan "In the Supreme Court of the State of California: In the Matter of the Application of Henry Laws, Anna Laws, and Pauletta Laws Fears, for Writ of Habeas Corpus, Petitioners Opening Brief," in *Charlotta A. Bass Papers* (Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, 1945).

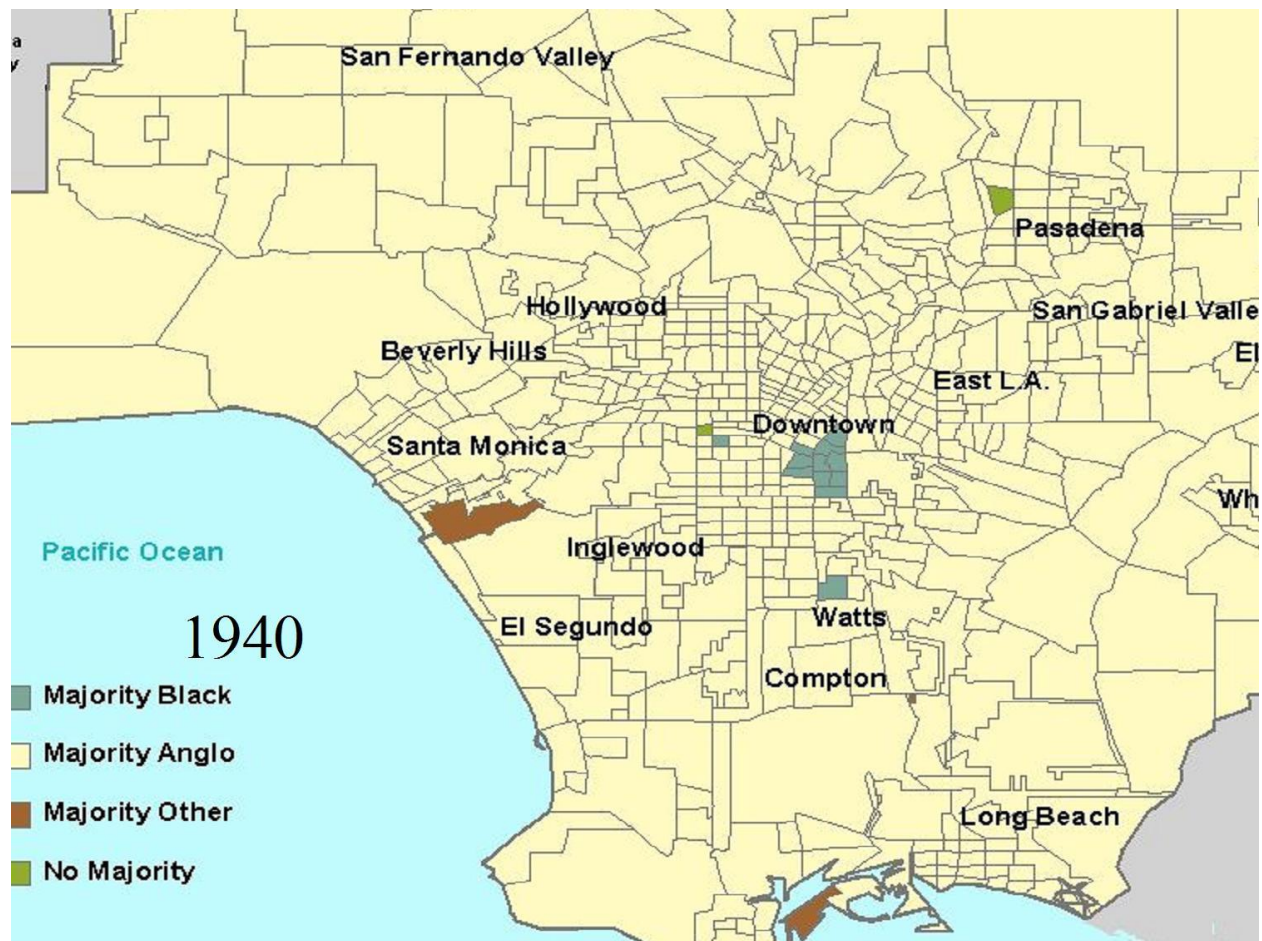


Figure 2. 1940 map of Los Angeles showing majority black and majority white areas. The highlighted section south of Downtown was the Central Avenue area.<sup>49</sup>

By the mid-1940's, the housing problems in the Central Avenue area could no longer be ignored due to the dramatic effects wrought on the community by the war. World War II caused an unprecedented labor shortage as young men went to war, while it also boosted the need for labor to produce war machines. The labor shortage and national pressure by African Americans forced manufacturing industries that had historically discriminated against African Americans to reconsider their racist stance. The material and social pressure led to the establishment of the Fair Employment Practice Committee in 1941 which opened up limited, yet gainful, employment

<sup>49</sup> “[Los Angeles County Racial/Ethnic Breakdown 1940.]” Digital image. <http://uselectionatlas.org/FORUM/index.php?topic=169073.0>.

opportunities for African Americans in manufacturing. The effect on Los Angeles was extraordinary, for while many urban centers benefited economically from the infusion of federal funds in manufacturing, Los Angeles received more than \$11 billion dollars in war contracts, second only to Detroit.<sup>50</sup> Employment opportunities were abundant; near the closing months of 1942 there were 20,000 available jobs in aircraft manufacturing. Within the first three years of the 1940s, 550,000 jobs were created by the demands of the war effort. The effect on the black population of Los Angeles was explosive – a black community that was nearly invisible prior to the war became impossible not to notice within a few years. By mid-1943, blacks were arriving in Los Angeles at rates between six thousand and ten thousand per month, and from 1940 through 1944 the black population mushroomed from 55,114 to 118,888, with more than two hundred thousand African Americans arriving in the 1940s.<sup>51</sup>

Massive black migration into Los Angeles placed severe stress on already dilapidated housing in the Central Avenue area, which made housing an important issue for black Angelenos.<sup>52</sup> In April and May of 1940, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) released a housing survey report in three volumes. The overall survey inspected 250,107 dwellings in the city, approximately 53 percent of the city's housing. The survey operated on two substandard definitions. A dwelling was defined as physically substandard if it had one or more of the following deficiencies: it needed major structural repairs, it had no private bath, no private flush toilet, no running water, or was not equipped with gas or electricity. A dwelling was defined as occupancy substandard if there were more than 1.5 persons per room or if the dwelling housed more than one family. According to the survey, the multiethnic eastside and the predominately

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<sup>50</sup> Sides, 36-37

<sup>51</sup> David J. Leonard, "'The Little Fuehrer Invades Los Angeles,': The Emergence of a Black-Jewish Coalition after World War II," *American Jewish History* 92 (2005): 82; Sides, 43

<sup>52</sup> Robinson, "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles " 40.



African American Central Avenue were the worst areas. Citywide, 23.5 percent of dwellings were found to be physically or occupancy substandard or both. Although Los Angeles had a relatively low population density, some areas - the eastside and Central Avenue - were highly congested and labeled as “slums.” The WPA survey proved conclusively that not only New York and other eastern cities contained “slums,” but Los Angeles was also plagued by substandard housing in the mostly single family homes that dominated the city.<sup>53</sup>

The housing crisis in Los Angeles in the 1940s was exacerbated by not only increased population pressure on aging housing during the war but also the Great Depression. By 1933, 12 to 17 million people were unemployed. National income and production were cut in half since 1929. Unable to afford housing, people began to double and triple-up in smaller apartments and homes to lower housing cost. Apartments and homes nationwide became vacant. Many buildings were abandoned by the owners for mounting delinquent taxes. As the vacant buildings sat unused and unmaintained, they became dilapidated and occupied by squatters. Housing construction all but ceased during the Depression. Sources for credit for apartment building were unavailable, and public support to take responsibility for the slack in construction within the private market was nonexistent. In 1930, total housing production fell to 60 percent below the 1922-28 average; by 1931, it fell to 69 percent; and by 1932, it fell to 84 percent below the 1922-28 percent average. Foreclosures skyrocketed and reached a drastic 250,000 homes in 1932.<sup>54</sup> Coupled with the drastic population increase beginning with WWII, the Depression halted housing construction and maintenance for nearly a decade prior to the war.

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<sup>53</sup> United States, *Housing survey covering portions of the city of Los Angeles*, California, 1940, 93-98 for substandard definitions, 12-13 for summary of findings; Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, California. 1940. *Annual report - Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles*. Los Angeles: Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, California; Parson, Donald Craig. *Making a Better World : Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* [in English]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005., 25.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence M. Friedman, *Public Housing and the Poor : An Overview* (Berkeley: [s.n.], 1966), 99-100.

A particularly acute crisis developed in Little Tokyo. As the name implies, the area was formally home to a sizable Japanese population, who were involuntarily relocated into internment camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>55</sup> The area would later be renamed as “Bronzeville.” The area came to be a gate of entry for black migrants entering the city.<sup>56</sup> Black migrants and prospective entrepreneurs ambivalently benefited from Japanese removal as the growing African American community expanded into Little Tokyo, acting as a population valve for the overcrowded Central Avenue area. Blacks assumed control of Japanese businesses and cultural institutions, shifting their operations to cater to new residents while sometimes attempting to maintain continuity with previous practices. Gail Thompson, for example, assumed control of Taiki Café and kept the Chinese food menu of its Issei operators. The African American congregation of Trinity Baptist Church took control of Centenary Methodist Church recognizing a “moral obligation [to] safeguard Japanese interests.” The black acquisition of Little Tokyo signaled an ambivalent opportunity through the oppression of its former Japanese residents. Yet soon overcrowding and opportunistic landlords would make Bronzeville “the neighborhood of last resort.”<sup>57</sup>

Ambitious and opportunistic building owners subdivided apartments into “kitchenettes.” A popular practice in other urban centers, landlords used thin partitions to divide a single family unit into multiple units that commonly had substandard plumbing, gas, and sewer services. The area soon became congested with some seventy thousand black migrants, packed into an area estimated to accommodate only thirty thousand people. Due to overcrowded conditions, the area

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<sup>55</sup> Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy : Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 93.

<sup>56</sup> Sides, 44-45

<sup>57</sup> Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race : Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles*, 146-47.Ebook

was susceptible to communicable diseases and pest such as typhus, tuberculosis, and head lice. More well-to-do migrants had the means to avoid settlement in Bronzeville, but for many working class blacks, they had no other option. Migrants that had relatives living in Los Angeles prior to their arrival settled with them, usually in the Central Avenue area, which also experienced congestion due to the continuing influx of African Americans into the area.<sup>58</sup> As housing problems grew more severe by the month, black news media became critical in documenting the problems, articulating rhetoric that framed the issues, and advocating for action to resolve community housing problems.

Leon Washington, through his newspaper the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, became an important voice in uncovering and informing the black public of Los Angeles on community housing problems. Leon Washington migrated to Los Angeles sometime around 1930. Upon arrival Washington was hired as a reporter for the *California Eagle* in 1932, owned and edited by the influential Charlotta Bass. Washington's ambitions outgrew his role as a reporter and with a loan from his cousin, NAACP attorney Loren Miller who helped lead the legal attack against racially restrictive covenants, Washington began the *Los Angeles Sentinel* in 1933.<sup>59</sup> Although Washington was the owner and acting editor of the paper, his reporter spirit led him to personally investigate and report on the effects of housing discrimination in the Central Avenue area, the major thoroughfare of the black community until Crenshaw Boulevard in Leimert Park took its place during the late 50's and early 60's.<sup>60</sup> Washington was most well known in the community for his "Don't Spend Where You Can't Work" Depression Era campaign which he promoted in

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<sup>58</sup> King et al., "Black Leadership in Los Angeles Celes King lli; Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 44-45.

<sup>59</sup> *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 30; "About," The Los Angeles Sentinel [http://www.lasentinel.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9268&Itemid=210](http://www.lasentinel.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9268&Itemid=210).

<sup>60</sup> Chapple, "From Central Avenue to Leimert Park: The Shifting Center of Black Los Angeles."

the *Sentinel*. The campaign leveraged black purchasing power through boycotting local businesses that engaged in discriminatory hiring practices,<sup>61</sup> and it demonstrated the character of the paper through Washington's politics.

Like many well-known black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Sentinel* mirrored the character and the politics of its editor,<sup>62</sup> and this was most apparent with Washington's "Don't Spend Where You Can't Work" campaign. Beginning sometime around May, 1934, the *Sentinel* reported that the campaign would target five and ten cent stores in the community that refused to hire African Americans. Citing a survey conducted by the *Sentinel* the previous fall, 55 to 75 percent of these stores' consumers were African American, which made them a prime target for the campaign. Washington spread word of the boycott, not only through the pages of the paper, but he also planned to have speakers disseminate the details of the campaign to local churches, clubs, and lodges, including workers to execute "home-to-home" visits. Washington harangued critics and complacent leaders for accepting the discriminatory treatment by local merchants. Washington militantly called some of the complacent leaders "handkerchief heads," and he pledged that "this is an age when courage is needed, where there must not and cannot be a compromise with prejudice and bias especially where the very livelihood of our people are concerned; and that our campaign will go on until it has accomplished what it set out to accomplish."<sup>63</sup> Washington named Woolworth's, Soboles', Kirby's, Coast Drug Co., and Karl's Shoe Store as some of the targeted merchants of the campaign. Washington exhorted his readers to observe the staff of whatever retail establishment they shopped in, if the staff lacked African Americans in a predominately black neighborhood,

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<sup>61</sup> Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 30.

<sup>62</sup> Bunch, ""The Greatest State for the Negro:' Jefferson L. Edmonds, Black Propagandist of the California Dream", 134.

<sup>63</sup> *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 6 September 1934.

then ask the reason for the lack of black employees and spend money at an establishment that employed black people.<sup>64</sup>

In fact, the campaign led Woolworth's to hire an all-African American sales staff at its 43<sup>rd</sup> and Central Avenue location in 1939. The language used by a Woolworth's supervisor for the area echoed the discourse of the campaign, boasting that a large percentage of the store's patrons are "Negroes," and they want to show their appreciation by "inaugurating" an all "Negro" sales staff.<sup>65</sup> Spanning over five years to this point, the pressure placed on the store by the boycott probably had more to do with their decision than their "appreciation." Later in the year, Washington targeted the campaign on a lunch diner across the street from the *Sentinel* office on Vernon Avenue. Washington reported that the owner was Chinese, and he had plans to expand the business. After making those plans a reality, the owner hired all Chinese and Filipino workers and one black dishwasher. Washington urged readers to take their business elsewhere unless the owner hired Negroes in more desirable positions. From its inception, the *Sentinel* took an activist role in politics of the community.<sup>66</sup>

When documenting the housing crisis in the Central Avenue area, the *Sentinel* placed blame squarely on race restrictive covenants. An article titled "Congestion Mounts; Families Double Up" gave a detailed picture of the crisis. The article explained that Los Angeles had experienced massive migration, more than a quarter million people, yet a quarter of these migrants were limited to where they could reside by racial covenants. Under the subtitle "Where Did They Go?," the piece explained that some of these migrants moved into city or privately built war housing, but most were forced to move into illegally partitioned "kitchenettes" and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> *Sentinel*, 3 October 1935.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

other structures not meant for human habitation. Citing a nurse's observations in a public health report, the article detailed several "cases" of deplorable housing conditions. In one case, seven people, including an infant, occupied two rooms with no running water, no windows, with one unscreened door through which water ran when it rained. Other cases involved eleven people living in a garage with no running water; a soldier's wife and their six kids living in a hotel room with no cooking or washing facilities; and a family of eight living in a one room condemned house with one bed shared by all residents. The article also noted that the report documented people living in sheds, garages, and even chicken coups. All of these issues - unvaccinated families, overcrowding, poor ventilation, poor sewage, and lack of cooking and cleaning facilities – were attributed to stymied residential mobility due to racially restrictive covenants.<sup>67</sup>

The *Sentinel* soon turned its critical gaze on racialized zoning practices in residential sections of Central Avenue after an explosion at the O'Conner Electroplating Plant left fifteen people dead and destroyed adjacent African American homes in February of 1947. The title "Explosion Spotlights Ghetto Housing, Evils of Zoning Methods" introduced the main article reporting on the incident. The article framed the industrial accident as a cause of the discriminatory effects of unfair zoning practices *and* restrictive covenants. Racial and class motivated zoning practices by the city allowed dangerous industrial businesses to encroach on the residential communities of African Americans and the poor. The article described blacks as "hemmed in" by covenants, preventing families from moving away from industrial areas.<sup>68</sup>

The *Sentinel* reported that a survey of the Central Avenue area revealed several "danger spots" where large gasoline tanks, junk yards prone to repeated fires, and factories where

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<sup>67</sup> *Sentinel*, 3 January 1946.

<sup>68</sup> *Sentinel*, February 27 1947

explosives were used were located within close proximity to residential units. The *Sentinel* attributed primary blame on the city planning commission, particularly on Councilman Rasmussen, claiming he had protected the Westside of the Seventh District while the Eastside had seen the encroachment of dangerous industrial businesses. Black civic and religious institutions also suffered from the zoning issues. The *Sentinel* reported that the city decided to rezone for industrial use East 28th street where a local YMCA and church were located. In the face of protest by the church's pastor, Rasmussen passively remarked, "Why don't you people buy a church somewhere else?" Washington retorted that "there is hardly a six block square area in the so-called Central Avenue district where industrial use is not permitted,"<sup>69</sup> and due to restrictive covenants, African Americans were limited to areas plagued by industrial encroachment and subject to the life-threatening dangers of industrial accidents and waste.

In October of 1947, Washington began a series of investigative reports aimed at heightening awareness of community conditions in the Central Avenue area. In the first article of the series titled "Eastside -- Los Angeles' Stepchild: Sanitation, Noise, Zoning Evils Described by Sentinel Publisher," Washington documented zoning violations, loud factories, and dirty lots that posed public hazards in the community. Describing the Central Avenue area as a "forgotten city within a city," Washington observed that although the population of the area had grown tremendously, there had scarcely been any improvements to recreational, sanitation, police, or firefighting facilities. The primary grievance in the article was rampant zoning violations. According to Washington, African Americans could purchase a beautiful home next to an empty lot and soon have an industrial facility built in its place. The article reported that neighboring residents were plagued by noise from welding machines and hammering; endangered by constant

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

traffic of heavy trucks that damaged sidewalks; and troubled by runoff water which collected at curbs in the street and became “offensive.” According to Washington, some of these manufacturing plants operated illegally. For example, an iron tank plant was located on land zoned M1, which did not allow welding and metal fabrication. Residents’ health and safety were also endangered by corner dumps, which were “a breeding place of disease germs, rats and dangerous insects.” Washington contended that these dangerous facilities would never be allowed to exist in “Lamert Park”<sup>70</sup> or other residential areas. African Americans were involuntarily saddled with these environmental problems because, as Washington claimed, “Negro citizens are prohibited from living in these areas because of race restrictive covenants.”<sup>71</sup> These conditions and the race restrictive covenants that trapped Negroes in these areas, argues Washington, “handicaps the progress of the community.”<sup>72</sup>

In the second installment of Washington's investigative series, Washington focused on the discriminatory practices of the Los Angeles Fire Department. Washington cited several complaints. He highlighted all white firehouses serving majority black neighborhoods; "Negro" stations not adequately supported in relation to their service load; and population increases that, in conjunction with restrictive covenants, created ghettos that allowed landlords to spend little on improvements and safety measures, which made structures prone to fires. Similar to the previous article in the series, safety issues were exacerbated by the racially influenced "spot-zoning" that sprinkled black residential districts with dangerous industrial factories that created conditions ripe for fires. Yet this installment highlighted that the ghettoization of African

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<sup>70</sup> The author was most likely referring to Leimert Park

<sup>71</sup> *Sentinel*, 2 October 1947.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*



Americans through the use of covenants also facilitated conditions for fires.<sup>73</sup> In this series, race restrictive covenants were framed as an underlying cause of several public safety and health concerns. Not only did covenants restrict residential mobility, preventing African Americans from moving away from dangerous conditions, but the covenants also forced the entire African American community into restricted sections of the city. The effect, argued Washington, caused overcrowding and the dangerous mingling of residential and industrial sectors. The *Sentinel* was critical in highlighting how race restrictive covenants not only prevented black residential mobility, but they also indirectly contributed to worsening conditions in the Central Avenue area.

The racial covenants vilified by Washington were supported by white segregationist using economic and nuisance justifications. In March 1946 a wealthy African American caterer, Thomas Gordon, from Bakersfield, purchased a home on West 25<sup>th</sup> and Arlington Avenue. Two white residents in the neighborhood sought to have Gordon evicted on the basis that the property was covered by a race restrictive covenant. The plaintiffs argued that the presence of a Negro in the community would harm their property values and interfere with their “quiet and peaceable enjoyment of the property and surrounding neighborhood.” The case was dismissed on a technicality.<sup>74</sup> In a different suit brought against a Mr. and Mrs. Bolden B. Roberts of 2200 West 39<sup>th</sup> Street, on the eastern boarder of Leimert Park, Superior Court Judge Myron Westover issued an injunction that ordered the Bolden family to vacate their home. The judge was reported to have opined that the presence of a black family in the neighborhood caused “great and irreparable injury” to the white covenanters and caused their property to be “less desirable to them for residential purposes.”<sup>75</sup> Similar to the legal logic of public land use restriction through

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<sup>73</sup> *Sentinel*, October 9, 1947.

<sup>74</sup> *Sentinel*, March 28 1946; *Sentinel*, May 9 1946.

<sup>75</sup> *Sentinel*, May 30 1946.

zoning, white residents “legitimately” claimed that the presence of racial and ethnic minorities were neighborhood nuisances, which justified the exclusion of racial minorities under an indirect form of the “police power” used by cities in land use restrictions on private property.<sup>76</sup>

White resistance to black occupancy in what they designated as exclusive white residential space was also a tactic akin to reinforcing a small crack in a dam. The covenants acted as the concrete wall and upwardly mobile black families as the menacing waters. A common argument used to undermine restrictive covenants was that the shifting racial composition of a contested neighborhood rendered covenants binding the community void. Such was the case in a 1946 covenant suit brought against Dr. Welles E. Forde, an African American surgeon who purchased a home on West 31<sup>st</sup> Street just west of Arlington and north of West Jefferson. The plaintiffs in the case requested the enforcement of two race restrictive covenants signed in 1925 and 1940 that restricted the area around Arlington and Jefferson from “use of occupancy by persons of non-Caucasian descent.” The judge presiding on the case ruled that non-Caucasians, possibly Japanese Americans and other African Americans, already occupied the area covered by the covenants, which rendered the agreements void.<sup>77</sup> As the logic went, if the purpose of race restrictive covenants was to prevent non-white occupancy in a neighborhood, but some non-white occupancy had already occurred, then the intent of the covenants could no longer be realized with their subsequent, selective enforcement on a single family of color. Therefore any breach in the racial homogeneity of white neighborhoods may have been feared as the crack in the edifice of segregation before it gave way to the flood of “inharmonious” racial groups.

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<sup>76</sup> For more insight into the public use of the "police power" as an ideological justification for restrictive covenants see, Freund, *Colored Property : State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*.

<sup>77</sup> *Los Angeles Times*. Jan 18, 1946.

In another example a few months after the Forde case, and just a few blocks east of where he purchased his home, a group of concerned white homeowners held what the *Sentinel* described as a “secret meeting” to raise money to continue the legal attack against minority homeowners. The meeting’s spatial focus was the Victor Hall Tract, demarcated by Adams and Jefferson on the north and south and Western and Normandie on the west and east. The meeting concluded unproductively when Roy Eberhard, who was the attorney the group solicited, informed the residents that he would not accept the planned cases. Eberhard was reported to have said that there were at least thirty-seven non-Caucasian families living in the tract along with an unknown number of non-Caucasian owners that did not occupy their homes. Due to this, the “character” of the neighborhood had changed significantly enough to potentially render the racial covenants in the community unenforceable.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the divestment of prohibitive powers from covenants due the presence of minority residents facilitated racial turnover. For example, a resident at the meeting was reported to have caused quite an incident when she informed other white residents present that white buyers were not interested in buying her home, and she planned to sell to minority buyers.<sup>79</sup> The potential loss of legal enforceability of racial covenants incited panic in white homeowners and served as a justification for racial and ethnic exclusion, racial turnover, and later, white flight.

## Black News Media and Coalition Housing Politics

Black newspapers were also central to building a coalition politics around the desire for improved housing in South Los Angeles. Charlotta Bass and her paper, *California Eagle*, proved

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<sup>78</sup> *Sentinel*, March 21, 1946.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

to be a critical component in coalition politics through addressing housing concerns. According to Regina Freer, not much is known about Charlotta Bass' early life. She was born Charlotta Spears in 1879 or 1880. She began working in the news industry in Rhode Island before moving west to Los Angeles in 1910. Bass started her career in Los Angeles selling subscriptions for the black newspaper, the *Advocate*. The owner of the paper, John J. Neimore, passed ownership of it to Bass before 1912 – the year Neimore died. Bass changed the name to the *California Eagle* a year later. She eventually hired Joseph Bass as editor and he soon became her husband.<sup>80</sup>

The Bass' used the pages of the *California Eagle* as a forum to promote social justice issues affecting African Americans. Freer writes that “[l]ike most black newspapers of that period, the *California Eagle* served as a source of both information and inspiration for the black community...”<sup>81</sup> After the death of Joseph Bass in 1934, Bass intensified her social justice focus through the *Eagle*. The paper reached its zenith in the 1940s, reaching a subscription base of 17,600, approximately a quarter of the black population of Los Angeles<sup>82</sup>, not to mention the secondary readings of the paper through non-subscribers. Therefore the *Eagle*, in the 40s, was a significant source of information and crucial instrument in mobilizing African Americans in Los Angeles.

The *Eagle's* coalition rhetoric was most prominent during Bass' campaign run for a seat on the 7<sup>th</sup> District Council in 1945. During the campaign, the front page of the *California Eagle* encouraged readers and potential voters that for "better housing" and for "all-out unity" to vote for Charlotta Bass for 7th District Councilwoman. Bass informed readers that the “race baiting” tactics employed by her opponent Carl Rasmussen would not be replicated in her campaign. She

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<sup>80</sup> Freer, "L.A. Race Woman: Charlotta Bass and the Complexities of Black Political Development in Los Angeles."

<sup>81</sup> Freer, 609

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

reported that Rasmussen appeared before a meeting of the Southwest Realty Board, an organization that Bass reported encouraged racially restrictive covenants, and warned the gathering that the election of a black woman to the 7<sup>th</sup> District council would endanger white property rights.<sup>83</sup> Bass assured readers that “a canvass churches, civic and social clubs, and other organizations before which I have spoken will reveal the fact that I have offered myself as a representative of all people of the 7<sup>th</sup> District regardless race, creed, or religion.”<sup>84</sup> Housing and inter-ethnic unity were the pillars of Bass' campaign, highlighting the importance of housing in the 1940s in Los Angeles. It demonstrated that African American political activism not only agitated for greater group rights and resources, but fought to expand the purview of humanity within the larger national consciousness. The advocacy of unity and equal representation regardless of race was encapsulated within the issue of housing. Bass linked the issues together, implicating the black struggle for equality in housing to a larger fight to expand equality to all excluded minorities.

Bass' coalition rhetoric centered on housing equality was also evidenced in her campaign pamphlet that described her platform. The headline quote on the pamphlet was, “Don't Fence Me In,”<sup>85</sup> which referenced the limited residential mobility of African Americans and other excluded minorities due, in major part, to racially restrictive covenants. Bass, who ran without party affiliation, called herself the “People's Unity Candidate for Councilman for the Seventh District.”<sup>86</sup> One of the tenets in her platform called for a large scale public or private housing program to accommodate the “working population of Los Angeles without regard to race, creed,

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<sup>83</sup> *California Eagle*, April 12, 1945.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> “Don't Fence Me In” Campaign pamphlet, Charlotta A. Bass Papers, MSS 002, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

or national origin.”<sup>87</sup> The following page of the pamphlet enumerated Bass’ accomplishments in the community. The flyer touted that Bass was “leading the fight against segregated and restricted housing accommodations in the interest of people of all minority groups.”<sup>88</sup> Bass’ rhetorical mobilization around housing problems that affected minority residents in Los Angeles’ Seventh District highlighted the importance of housing in the city in the 1940s. It also indicated the dynamics of black political life described by Nikhil Pal Singh that “represent the counter-statements of political subjects who have struggled to widen the circle of common humanity.”<sup>89</sup>

The articulation of unity among different ethnic and racial groups centered on housing issues was critical to black housing politics. Yet Bass was also involved in mobilizing community groups to fight housing injustices. Bass collaborated with the Housing Committee of the Council for Civic Unity, which held a meeting petitioning the mayor to sponsor a “Housing Week” to help publicize the housing problems experienced by residents in the city. Bass reported that “100,000 families” lacked decent housing, with minorities being disproportionately represented among them.<sup>90</sup> The committee sought a broad base of support from religious, housing, and legal groups, including Bass’ own Home Owners Protective Association and the NAACP. The collaboration indicated that organizations in the community were organizing around housing issues as an approach to mobilize across racial, ethnic, and class lines. The substandard housing conditions and the restrictions based solely on race and ethnicity became more than the source of political agitation for greater material comfort. Decent housing and

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country : Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 44.

<sup>90</sup> *Eagle*, April 12, 1945

residential mobility became markers of inclusion within a new wave of urban modernity; a goal struggled to be achieved for all racial and ethnic minorities.

The Laws family restrictive covenant case serves as one of the best examples of Bass' community mobilization around housing discrimination. By the time the Laws family went to the office of the *California Eagle* seeking help in their restrictive covenant suit, the NAACP had already informed them to comply with the court injunction to vacate their home after losing their appeals case in 1943.<sup>91</sup> Sometime in the early 1930s the Laws family – Henry and Anna Laws and their two sons and daughters – purchased an undeveloped plot of land at 1235 East 92<sup>nd</sup> Street in an area known as Central Avenue Gardens. The family saved money in order to build their five bedroom home on the empty lot which they completed in 1941. According to Charlotta Bass, two real estate agents dredged up an old racial restrictive covenant and filed a suit against the family to have them evicted from their home.<sup>92</sup> It is unclear if the NAACP provided legal counsel between 1943 and 1945 or simply informed the family to comply with the injunction. In any case, the family attempted to comply with the order, but due to the housing shortage in *de facto* African American areas in the city, the family could not find another place to live. They were forced to live in their car for a short period of time. When the Laws contacted Charlotta Bass, she encouraged them to reoccupy the home and resist the covenant; and consequently, they were served with an order to appear in court and show cause for disobeying the order.

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<sup>91</sup> Bass, *Forty Years : Memoirs from the Pages of a Newspaper*.

<sup>92</sup> *Eagle*, Nov 29, 1945. *Eagle*, Dec 20, 1945.

Anticipating the legal fight ahead, Bass and community supporters organized the Home Protective Association (HPA) in 1945 with Bass serving as chairwoman.<sup>93</sup>

The goal of the organization, Bass wrote, was to not only “protect African Americans from covenant restrictions, but also to campaign for better housing.”<sup>94</sup> The HPA held bi-monthly meetings at the California Eagle office where a cross section of civic, labor, and religious group leaders discussed plans to combat housing problems, and specifically, defending the Laws family. They urged concerned residents to attend the Laws’ court proceedings in order to apply public pressure on the courts to influence a favorable ruling. The HPA helped raise money to pay for the Laws’ legal expenses by holding bourgeois socialite events such as balls and piano recitals. Furthermore, they sought both organizational and financial support from community institutions.<sup>95</sup>

The Laws were found in contempt of court on November 30, 1945. The family was ordered to be imprisoned for five days and fined fifty dollars for disobeying the injunction and living in their own home. The California Supreme Court denied a hearing for their appeals case the following month, so the contempt ruling and jail sentence were still in effect. In response, the HPA organized a mass rally at the office of the *California Eagle*, where they signed up volunteers to form a planned picket line at the Laws’ home the day of their eventual arrest.<sup>96</sup> Henry, Anna, and Pauletta Laws Fears were jailed on a Saturday morning on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Bass reported in the *California Eagle* that “thousands” of demonstrators marched in front

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<sup>93</sup> Bass, *Forty Years : Memoirs from the Pages of a Newspaper*; Charles J. Katz for Katz, "In the Supreme Court of the State of California: In the Matter of the Application of Henry Laws, Anna Laws, and Pauletta Laws Fears, for Writ of Habeas Corpus, Petitioners Opening Brief."

<sup>94</sup> *Eagle*, Oct 25, 1945.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid. Sentinel*, May 23, 1946.

<sup>96</sup> Charles J. Katz for Katz, "In the Supreme Court of the State of California: In the Matter of the Application of Henry Laws, Anna Laws, and Pauletta Laws Fears, for Writ of Habeas Corpus, Petitioners Opening Brief."; *Eagle*, Dec 13, 1945.



of the Laws' home and around the police vehicle in protest of the arrest. Rev. Clayton Russell of the People's Independent Church and the Negro Victory Committee called the picket "a prayer line."<sup>97</sup> The HPA continued to hold meetings to organize local groups to pool resources for the Laws. The following Friday the *Eagle* reported that the local Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were staging a "mammoth parade."<sup>98</sup> They planned to gather at the CIO office at Avalon and Slauson then march to the Laws' home; the offices of the two real estate agents that initiated the suit; and then the chambers of Judge Allen Ashburn at City Hall to protest the jailing of the Laws family. A number of leaders of community groups joined in the collective outcry for the immediate release of the Laws, among them were William Binder of the Mobilization of Democracy, Rev. J. Raymond Henderson of the Second Baptist Church, James Burford of the CIO Council, Rev. M.H. Duvall of the Macedonia Baptist Church, and Rev. Clayton Russell of the People's Independent Church.<sup>99</sup>

For nearly three years the Laws family, and many other African Americans, resisted in limbo as the California Supreme Court refused to hear the stream of appeals from covenant cases. Finally in 1948, as a national strategy of the NAACP, the United States Supreme Court ruled race restrictive covenants unconstitutional in *Shelley v Kraemer*. The justices ruled unanimously that race restrictive covenants violated the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.<sup>100</sup> Celebration erupted in Los Angeles. The *Sentinel* reported that their phones rang continuously with calls from African American residents verifying the decision was true. The Los Angeles branch of the NAACP held a Victory Mass Meeting at Second Baptist Church the Sunday after the decision. Henry, Anna, and Pauletta Laws were local heroes in the fight against

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<sup>97</sup> *Eagle*, Dec 20, 1945; Bass, *Forty Years : Memoirs from the Pages of a Newspaper*, 109-10.

<sup>98</sup> *Eagle*, Dec. 20, 1945.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 18.

race restrictive covenants for their efforts. In fact, they were specially invited as featured guest to the NAACP victory rally.<sup>101</sup> As with most legal victories wrought from power, the progress achieved was substantial but limited as the strategies of segregationist reacted and reconstituted in new forms to ensure the continuity of residential segregation.

The HPA continued to advocate for racial equality in housing into the next decade as whites used extralegal pressure in the wake of *Shelley v. Kraemer* to force black homeowners from “white” neighborhoods. The *Eagle* demanded a “Call to Arms” and encouraged readers to attend a meeting to protest the harassment of Bessie Woods.<sup>102</sup> The paper announced that “we didn’t let this happen in the Laws’ case, and we will not let this happen in the Woods’ case.”<sup>103</sup> Bessie Woods moved into her new home at 1116 West 66<sup>th</sup> Street February 2, 1950. The same evening, a group of three white neighbors visited the Woods’ home and informed them that other neighbors objected to blacks living in the area and advised her to move. Woods reported to the *Eagle* that since moving in she had not “had a moment’s peace,” due to the constant harassment from white neighbors.<sup>104</sup> Unable to stanch the constant harassment Woods moved out of her home and released the property to a Ted Rokos, possibly a white neighbor. Rokos informed the *Eagle* that the house was awaiting a buyer. In response, white neighbors called a meeting at Legion Hall to ensure the Woods family’s departure. They attempted to organize a plan to prevent another black family from purchasing the home. Meeting participants committed to “protect” the area of Vermont to the east, Florence to the south, and Western to the west.<sup>105</sup> The *Eagle* informed readers that the Home Protective Association would enter this fight as they did

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<sup>101</sup> Sentinel, “Cal. Negroes Can Now Love Anywhere Says High Court,” May 6, 1948.

<sup>102</sup> *Eagle*, March 16, 1950

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

in the Laws case. Bass once again employed unity; she implored “all people” to join the resistance to unfair housing practices.<sup>106</sup>

The *Sentinel* also encouraged coalition politics centered on housing issues. The paper reported on not only instances of housing discrimination against African Americans, but also reported on housing discrimination experienced by other racial and ethnic minorities. A 1947 article titled “American Indians Feel Ax of Race Ban” reported that a mother and her three children were ordered to vacate their West Hollywood home after lower courts enforced a restrictive race covenant. The father of the children was allowed to remain in the home because he was considered Caucasian of French-Canadian descent, while the mother and children were considered Native American. The *Sentinel* reported that “the entire Indian colony has mobilized to fight the eviction.” It also reported that the ACLU took the case at no expense to Mr. or Mrs. Crocker. In addition, a meeting was held by Los Angeles chapter of the Congress of American Indians on the Crocker’s eviction. At the meeting, other Native Americans shared their experiences of discrimination when they attempted to purchase property. A Mrs. Gray shared that their family was prevented from purchasing a home because her husband “looked like an Indian.”<sup>107</sup> Gray was quoted to have said that her husband or her sons’ service in the military did not mitigate the treatment they received because “we have Indian blood.”<sup>108</sup>

In the next issue of the *Sentinel* in an article titled “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” the article incited readers’ indignation that citizens of the United States were ousted from their homes “on the heels of a war fought against racism.”<sup>109</sup> The article reported a national outcry over the case,

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Sentinel*, February 14 1947.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Sentinel*, 20 February 1947.

but suggested that the same indignation was lacking in the case of the Negro, who had been discriminated against through the very same covenants for a quarter century. The article used the event to mark an inevitable result - discrimination against African Americans would lead to discrimination against other groups. In this instance it was Native Americans. The *Sentinel* wished for the incident to be a "rallying point" for the fight against race restrictive covenants.<sup>110</sup> The article concluded, "No American is secure in any of his constitutional rights as long as any other American is denied the full measure of his democratic rights and privileges."<sup>111</sup> The rhetoric of racial and ethnic unity focused on housing discrimination became a major theme in black political representations that sought to fight housing discrimination. It used the social upheaval of WWII and America's purported position as a global defender of democracy to infuse black demands for equal access to and quality of housing in Los Angeles.

Racial and ethnic minorities were not alone in challenging the legitimacy of racial covenants. Some whites in Los Angeles condemned race restrictive covenants on moral, religious, or possibly pragmatic grounds. Certain religious communities refused to condone the use of racial covenants and even chastised church leadership involved in covenant lawsuits. For example, controversy broke out in October and November of 1947 when Rev. W. Clarence Wright, who was a well-known white pastor of the "fashionable" Wilshire Presbyterian Church, was publicly involved in a race restrictive covenant case. Wright and his co-plaintiffs sought an injunction for the immediate removal of three African American families from the Arlington community just south of Olympic Boulevard.<sup>112</sup> Wright was a type of celebrity pastor. A *Los Angeles Times* article titled "Pastor So Busy He Has to Use Helicopter," described that Wright

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Los Angeles Sentinel*. "Presbyterians Plan to Rebuke Pastor." October 30, 1947.

used a helicopter to be ferried between appointments in the city.<sup>113</sup> Rev. H. B. Hawes of Westminster Presbyterian Church claimed that when he heard a minister of his faith attempted to enforce residential segregation, he contacted Rev. Wright to “intercede” before the case went to court. Hawes informed Wright that enforcing segregation was “ungodly” and would have negative implications for the church as a whole.<sup>114</sup> According to Hawes, Wright rebutted that it was African Americans that were ungodly for moving into white communities.<sup>115</sup>

After Superior Court Judge Stanley Mosk ruled the racial covenant Wright and others attempted to enforce was unconstitutional, the governing body of the Presbyterian Church planned disciplinary action against Wright. They condemned his participation in the suit and characterized his actions as contrary to the principles of the Presbyterian Church.<sup>116</sup> In the beginning of November, “church heads” issued a resolution that directed ministers to refrain from any involvement in the enforcement of race covenants. Wilbur LaRue, the moderator of the General Assembly that drafted and passed the resolution, said he was “upset... that one of our ministers has joined as a property owner in a suit to prevent a fine colored family occupying a house in a white area.”<sup>117</sup>

Although many California judges upheld the legality of race restrictive covenants, there were white judges who refused to enforce them on legal grounds, such as Judge Mosk in the Rev. Wright case. In 1947 four white residents sought an injunction to evict Dr. Wilkins and his family from the home they purchased in the West Adams area. Superior Court Judge Walter L. Gates, who the residents initially sought to sign their injunction, refused. He was reported to

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<sup>113</sup> *Los Angeles Times*. June 15, 1947.

<sup>114</sup> *Los Angeles Sentinel*. October 9, 1947

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>116</sup> *Los Angeles Sentinel*. “Presbyterians Plan to Rebuke Pastor.” October 30, 1947.

<sup>117</sup> *Los Angeles Sentinel*. November 13, 1947.

have informed the covenanters that such an act was unconstitutional.<sup>118</sup> In the conflict over residential space in Los Angeles, the favorable views of a few judges, or pastors, was not enough to substantially weaken the legal or social barriers to equal access to single family homes for African Americans. In the case of Wilkins, covenanters simply found a judge that would sign their injunction. Yet white antiracist discourse in housing had the effect, while difficult to quantify, of slowly changing the unchallenged “common sense” of the acceptability of residential segregation.

## Public Housing

Public housing became an increasingly popular solution, if only temporarily, to the housing crisis in Los Angeles. Despite the rise in popularity, white communities resisted the placement of housing projects in their neighborhoods for fear that racial minorities would compromise the homogeneity of white neighborhoods. When a potential project approached the white community of Willowbrook - an area just south of Watts - white residents threatened to burn the structures and attack any black residents who moved into the planned projects. A resident was quoted saying Willowbrook would “either stay lily white or run red with blood.”<sup>119</sup> In October of 1943, the National Housing Administration (NHA) planned to construct public war housing in Venice. White property owners complained loudly to the city council that their property values would plummet; that the presence of blacks would ruin the future of white recreation; or that they simply did not want to live next to African Americans. In addition, the Culver City for Caucasians Committee sought to strengthen race restrictions in the areas adjacent

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<sup>118</sup> *Los Angeles Sentinel*. Jun 5, 1947

<sup>119</sup> Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven : Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965*, 210.

to the planned site for the housing project. One month later the plan was dropped by the NHA.<sup>120</sup> Spatial ideologies that designated certain areas as “white” influenced the construction of racialized public housing in multiracial areas, which reinforced extant racial geographies in the city that would later manifest in the vilification of housing projects as ghettos.

Although hardly adequate for the stream of migrants entering Los Angeles during the war, the city responded to the growing housing shortage and erected housing units for defense workers.<sup>121</sup> The default policy of the city housing authority duplicated the segregated racial geography of 1940s Los Angeles. The racial composition of war housing projects was filled to match the racial configuration of the neighborhood where the particular project was located. Yet black Angelenos knew that such a policy would perpetuate existing lines of segregation. Furthermore, the policy would limit African American access to war housing proportionate to their relatively small population in the city, as opposed to their disproportionate need caused by restricted residential mobility and migration. In response to the employment and housing issues that affected African Americans in the city, activist pastor of the People’s Independent Church, Clayton Russell, organized the Negro Victory Committee. The committee was composed of both old and new members of his congregation with Charlotta Bass as chairwoman.<sup>122</sup>

The Negro Victory Committee drafted a statement which they sent via telegram to the City Housing Authority and the Board of Supervisors. The rhetoric of the statement took full advantage of the negative association of white supremacy - represented in segregationist housing policies - in Los Angeles and the master race ideology of Nazi Germany. It criticized housing

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<sup>120</sup> Parson, *Making a Better World : Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*. Location 778. Kindle Edition

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> California Eagle. Jul 22, 1943; Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 52.

restrictions as “Hitlerite” and charged that the housing restrictions forced black defense workers into “subnormal housing in the Little Tokyo slum area.”<sup>123</sup> The statement also positioned inadequate housing as a detriment to the war effort. It claimed that housing affected defense workers’ health, which directly affected their capacity to produce planes and ships for the war. The committee demanded immediate action on a four point plan of action to address the dire shortage of housing in the city. First, they called for emergency construction of additional federal housing projects on the Eastside. Second, the statement demanded conversion of all large buildings in the Eastside into small apartment units or dormitories. Third, the committee wanted immediate occupancy of vacant houses on the Westside for African Americans. And lastly, they demanded the removal of racial quotas for public housing and the elimination of property race covenants from all Los Angeles property.<sup>124</sup>

In response to the protest of Los Angeles’ black community and the Negro Victory Committee, the Los Angeles Housing Authority’s chairman Nicola Giulil issued this statement the following day:

The policy of the Housing Authority has been, until now, to keep within each development the approximate ratio of minorities that existed in the surrounding neighborhoods. We cannot, however, ignore the deplorable housing conditions under which hundreds of racial minority members are living because of the war time shortage of homes in Los Angeles. Therefore, we are removing all restrictions of William Mead homes and Aliso Village. The move will not solve

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<sup>123</sup> California Eagle. Jul 22, 1943.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.



the problem, but we believe it will be some contribution to the wellbeing of these people.<sup>125</sup>

The concession by the housing authority was a victory for the community, but an ambiguous one at best. The Aliso Village and the William Mead Homes were some of the largest projects in terms of units out of the ten established from the 1939 cooperation agreement passed by the City Council.<sup>126</sup> They contained 802 and 449 units respectively, yet the projects were already located in areas that were predominately populated by racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, the victory ensured a greater proportion of black tenancy in the projects, but could not challenge the residential organization of the city into “white” and “colored” areas. Of the ten housing projects constructed from the 1939 agreement, several were located in “Negro” areas; Pueblo del Rio was one of the earliest constructed.

Pueblo del Rio was the housing project built in the “Negro” area of Los Angeles constructed under the same cooperation agreement as Aliso Village and the William Mean Homes. The project is located between Long Beach Avenue and Alameda Street to the west and east and 51<sup>st</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Street to the north and south. The site was designed by African American architect Paul Williams and modernist architect Richard Neutra. Pueblo del Rio covers an area approximately 17.5 acres comprised initially of 57 two story buildings containing 400 units, not including a single-story administrative and communal facilities building. The buildings are horizontally oriented and low-rise, giving them a more humane “modern” aesthetic that never dominates the flat topography of the area. Richard Neutra’s initial sketches contained notes

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Parson, *Making a Better World : Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*. Location 519,50 Kindle Edition.

<sup>127</sup> Wild, *Street Meeting : Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*.

excluding the larger building types that can house ten families, noting “too many families.”<sup>128</sup>

The consideration of the optimal number of families was a decision balanced between the need for efficiency and practicality on one hand, and the desire for comfort and humanity on the other.

Pueblo del Rio was possible, in part, due to controversial “slum clearance,” which leveled what used to be home to a thriving, largely African American community. The area was established by an Irish farmer named James Furlong, who owned land between 50th and 55th Streets to the north and south, and Long Beach Avenue and Alameda to the west and east. He was concerned with the plight of African Americans and established what came to be known as the Furlong Tract for the benefit of black folk. He subdivided the land into plots and sold them to blacks for \$750. Working-class African Americans began to settle the area. According to Beverly M. Taylor of the Southern California Genealogical Society and Family Research Library, residents of the area worked in the facilities of the Cottonseed Oil Mill, the Hercules Foundry, and the Pioneer Paper Co. The tract had relatively functional transportation and “soon became a cohesive neighborhood of small, neat homes, served by small business, three churches, and a school.”<sup>129</sup> The Holmes school was built in 1910 and was the first all-black school in Los Angeles, with the school’s first black teacher as its principal in 1919.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> "Site Maps of Pueblo del Rio" Richard Joseph Neutra, *Richard J. Neutra Papers. Collection Number 1179. Box 609* (Los Angeles, California: Dept. of Special Collections, UCLA Research Library, 1986); Karen E. Williams Paul R. Hudson, *Paul R. Williams, Architect : A Legacy of Style* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 25; Teresa Grimes, "Historic Resources Associated with African Americans in Los Angeles ", ed. National Park Service United States Department of the Interior (Washington D.C. : United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service 2009), 8; Parson, *Making a Better World : Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*. 7.

<sup>129</sup> Leonard Pitt Dale Pitt, *Los Angeles a to Z : An Encyclopedia of the City and County* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 163.; Taylor, Beverly Mateer Taylor, "Southern California Genealogical Society: Research Assistance and Resources." Southern California Genealogical Society. <http://www.scgsgenealogy.corsch-Black.htm> (accessed February 20, 2010).

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately in 1933, the Long Beach Earthquake interrupted life for Southern Californians in general and residents of the Furlong Tract in particular. According to the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, the quake was a violent magnitude of 6.4Ms and caused catastrophic failures in buildings with unreinforced brick masonry. Engineered or reinforced concrete buildings suffered little damage. The small community of predominately African Americans in modest but poorly built homes suffered major damage. After the earthquake, residents began to move to other areas. Although certain portions of Los Angeles were racially restricted, African Americans had relatively fluid residential mobility before WWII due to their small population. In the absence of city support, the area never fully recovered and continued to decline. Photographs of the area before it was demolished attest to its condition. The area was pervaded by poorly built wooden structures appended to homes that were only in slightly better condition. The rear areas of the homes were lined with unpaved, poorly drained dirt alleys. Vast portions of the area were cluttered with the debris of collapsed structures or were sparsely dotted with what appeared to be self-made wooden structures. By the 1940's, the area was considered a "slum." According to the City Housing Authority's annual report in June of 1939, 75 percent of the project's site was acquired through slum clearance, while the other 25 percent of the site was vacant land within the area.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Teresa Grimes, 8; Leonard Pitt and Dale Pitt, 163; Susan Fatemi and Charles James, "The Long Beach Earthquake of 1933," National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, [http://nisee.berkeley.edu/long\\_beach/long\\_beach.html](http://nisee.berkeley.edu/long_beach/long_beach.html).



Figure 3. View of the area where Pueblo Del Rio was built. Location is between East 53<sup>rd</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Streets near Fortuna Street.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Luckhaus Studio, photographer. “[Pueblo del Rio Housing Project.]” Photograph. Los Angeles: Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, c1941. From Los Angeles Public Library: Housing Authority Collection. <http://jpg3.lapl.org/pics25/00062467.jpg> (accessed May 31, 2014).



Figure 4. Aerial view of Pueblo Del Rio.<sup>133</sup>

The construction of Pueblo del Rio centered on ideas of collectivity and recreation. The overall gridiron layout was influenced by the existing main thoroughways. Within this layout, the architects designed the project with families well in mind. The buildings are clustered in four groups creating a rectangle and repeat continuously. The spaces between are filled with concrete walkways and grass-filled lawns. Each apartment has its own small garden plot for families to plant flowers. The ample spacing of the buildings allows for light and air circulation for each

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<sup>133</sup> Fairchild Aerial Surveys, Inc, photographer. “[Pueblo del Rio Housing Project.]” Photograph. Los Angeles: Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, n.d. From Los Angeles Public Library: Housing Authority Collection. <http://jpg3.lapl.org/pics25/00062479.jpg> (accessed May 31, 2014).

building, honoring the luxurious – or wasteful (?) – use of space in Los Angeles. Social and child play areas were consciously insulated by the surrounding buildings, protecting children and pedestrians from the street, parking lots, and general traffic. The naturally built environment provided more streamline and subliminal boundaries as opposed to unsightly and visually abrasive chain-linked gates. Parking lots were built on the periphery of the site, further protecting the children at play and relegating automotive noises to the outskirts of the site. Seemingly innocuous design elements actually indicate a socially consciousness design plan. The architects respected the dignity and well-being of the prospective low-income residents within the restraints of pragmatic concerns, such as budgets and the natural environment. Modern desires for conscious order, invigorating cleanliness, and structurally encouraged sociability were technically wrung from meager resources to produce democratic, safe public housing.<sup>134</sup>

The administration building and the surrounding outdoor facilities further indicate the architects' commitment to a collective and edifying environment. The administration building was not simply a space for project officials to complete mundane administrative work; it also housed a public meeting room, a crafts room, and a nursery. The building is juxtaposed with a small play area surrounded by a curved stucco wall that contrasts starkly with the straight, almost harsh form of the building. The play area had a sandbox and a small steel climbing structure. According to Neutra's site plans, the opposite side of the building had a larger play area for children, but whether it was actually implemented is unknown. The crafts room provided a space for youth and adults to participate in communal crafts projects, such as wood working and ceramics. The nursery was a communal facility with its own small play area adjoining the larger

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<sup>134</sup> [Site Map, Box 691], Richard and Dion Neutra Papers (Collection Number 1179). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.



play area for older children.<sup>135</sup> The project's design intersects at the juncture of several material and social concerns that manifest in a civilly-minded modernist way: human need and dignity; pragmatic material constraints; the relationship between the former and the later; and the utilization of modern technology to transform these concerns into a socially conscious housing area of solution in an the city that was struggling to fight for decent housing in the 1940s.



Figure 5. Children at play in Pueblo del Rio playground.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Stoumen, Louis Clyde, photographer. “[Children at play in housing project playground.]” Photograph. Los Angeles: Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, n.d. From Los Angeles Public Library: Housing Authority Collection. <http://jpg3.lapl.org/pics25/00042811.jpg> (accessed May 31, 2014).

Similar to many city housing projects nationwide, the program was practically abandoned in the wake of McCarthyism. Somewhat ironically, the beginning of the 1950's showed promise for an enduring public housing program in Los Angeles according to Don Parson. By late 1950, the City Council approved sites for the construction of 10,000 units. By early 1951, the City Housing Authority was making preparations to fulfill the contract. In 1952 and 1953, the CHA was subject to right-wing McCarthy inspired attacks that transformed the idea of public housing from a democratic, socially conscious solution for low income housing to a vilified un-American communist plot. Anti-public housing advocates composed of members on the City Council, homeowners, and real estate groups crafted a political movement that equated public housing with communism. As the Red Scare took hold among the voting public, public housing became increasingly unpopular. City officials of the City Housing Authority (CHA) who supported public housing became targets of the House Un-American Activities Committee and were subsequently marginalized. After the election of anti-public housing advocate Norris Poulson for mayor in 1953, Poulson and a contingent of like-minded city officials negotiated the cancellation of the city's federal public housing agreement.<sup>137</sup>

The modern Pueblo del Rio is now the site of recurring homicides, assaults, and drug transactions. The play area adjacent to the administrative building was paved over. Security bars now cover all the windows, and those "unsightly and visually abrasive" chain-linked gates dominate the area. From city neglect beginning in the 1950s, Pueblo del Rio has become the exact opposite of its creators' intended vision. Journalist Scott Gold aptly proclaimed that Pueblo

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<sup>137</sup> For a detailed account of the end of public housing in Los Angeles see chapter 4 of Parson, *Making a Better World : Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*. Kindle Edition.



del Rio represents “the promise and peril of South L.A.”<sup>138</sup> The public housing program possessed the promise of a modern, dignified low income housing solution. Pueblo del Rio was an example of that promise, and its fate mirrors the political and social shift away from publicly funded housing solutions. Los Angeles would reap the bitter consequences of neglecting the housing issues in South Los Angeles in the 50s as the area burned in 1965.<sup>139</sup>

## Conclusion

Although race restrictive covenants have been outlawed for over half a century, the existence of residential segregation in urban centers in the United States remains one of the most pressing problems facing the country. Problems stemming from racialized residential space are both legacies and contemporary reality. In fact, it was a contemporary incident I experienced that led me to investigate the legacy of race and space in South Los Angeles. On a summer day before I entered UCLA as an undergraduate student, I witnessed the aftermath of the homicide of a sixty-three year old black man just steps away from my door. I vividly remember kneeling next to his lifeless body and peering out at all the black faces gathering to survey the loss of yet another drive-by shooting. I wondered why South Los Angeles housed most of the city’s black population. About a year later, I took preliminary steps to understand the historical processes that led to setting the social and economic context that framed that day. Although the current study is but a narrow aspect of the history of change in South Los Angeles, it serves as one of many points of departure in the mammoth task of investigating the history of black Los Angeles.

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<sup>138</sup> Scott Gold. "At an impoverished housing complex, a reflection of South L.A.." Los Angeles Times, July 14, 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-southla-pueblos14-2009jul14,0,2422714.story> (accessed January 13, 2010)

<sup>139</sup> Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots California, *McCone Commission Report! : Complete and Unabridged Report by the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riot ; Plus, One Hundred Four Shocking Photos of the Most Terrifying Riot in History* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Kintex Corp., 1965).

The investigation cannot end here. There were a dizzying amount of people, institutions, and general themes that I could not explore. I intentionally avoided the inclusion of the NAACP, not because they did not deserve inclusion, but because they have already received a massive amount of scholarly attention in civil right historiography. Although, the involvement of the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP in housing politics in the city remains to be research that is sorely needed. Additionally, working class voices, experiences, and mobilizations in regards to housing in the period studied are missing from the historical record. What were the housing concerns for working class Angelenos? Did black petite bourgeoisie organization against race covenants elbow out working class concerns over other issues such as rent control, public housing, building regulations, or the availability of multifamily housing? What was the role of labor organizations and the Communist Party in black housing politics? Further research is also needed on the impact of the Los Angeles Citizens Housing Council and its Executive Director Shirley Adelson Siegel.

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