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Lessons on Freedom: Jefferson High School and Black Los Angeles, 1920-1950

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in History

by

Michael Anthony Slaughter

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Lessons on Freedom: Jefferson High School and Black Los Angeles, 1920 – 1950

by

Michael Anthony Slaughter

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Stephen Aron, Chair

Lessons on Freedom: Jefferson High School and Black Los Angeles, 1920 – 1950 uses Jefferson High School as a lens to explore the African American experience in Los Angeles in the second quarter of the twentieth century. My approach rests on the notion that Jeff was one of the most dynamic institutions in the city’s “South Central” section and thus offers a unique vantage point to view the interplay between forces shaping black Los Angeles. I argue that Los Angeles educators were pioneers in the use of color-blindness and notions of racial tolerance to mask racial inequalities. I suggest that city school’s official policy of non-discrimination not only effectively blunted charges of racism, but also worked to absolve the schoolhouse of its role in racialized outcomes. By maintaining racial neutrality, school officials erased the connections between education and other structures, allowing them to establish a position of racial innocence.

In spite of these claims of innocence, black activists saw educational, housing and employment policies and practices as intimately bound up and co-constitutive. As their multi-pronged strategies reveal, they understood the salience of these interactions but struggled to pin racism down as school officials “passed the buck.” Attesting to the conundrum that “race neutrality” posed to African American equality, blacks responded to discrimination in various ways that were often at odds. Ultimately, I propose that these uses of color-blindness and these assertions of racial innocence in the midst of racial disparities were foundational to arguments rooted in majority victimhood in post-affirmative action era California.

The dissertation of Michael Anthony Slaughter is approved.

Brenda Stevenson

Tyrone Howard

Stephen Aron, Committee Chair

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2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vi
VITA	viii
Introduction	1
Section 1: Culture and Politics in Central Avenue	
1. Concerns About Decorum on Central Avenue: Pre-1930s Black Los Angeles	16
2. “Cleaning Up Jazz”: Samuel Browne and the Rise of Assertive Black Folks in New Deal Los Angeles	48
Section 2: The Conundrum of Color-blindness	
3. The Progressive School in an Era of Integration	120
4. A Tale of Two Schools: Segregating the Progressive Schoolhouse in Interwar Los Angeles	167
5. Suspicious Partners: Imperfect Interest Convergences at Jefferson High in World War II Los Angeles	221
Conclusion	259
Appendix	266
Bibliography	269

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VITA

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Introduction

In 1939, twelve-year-old Alvan Burton and his family pulled up stakes in Ruston, Louisiana and headed for Los Angeles. Just months prior to their departure, Alvan's aunt sent the family a letter singing the praises of Southern California. Seventy years later, Alvan vividly remembered the central theme of his aunt's correspondence—Come West, “there [are] ... more opportunities for blacks in Los Angeles.”¹ In true booster form, part of his aunt's pitch centered on the favorable economic conditions ostensibly found in the City of Angels. She assured the family that decent jobs were plentiful and housing was affordable.

To seal the deal, however, Alvan's aunt played another card. In the same envelope that held her letter, she included a picture of Los Angeles's Thomas Jefferson High School. Accustomed to the “separate and unequal” schools in the Jim Crow South, Alvan recalled his family marveling at the modern school buildings. Indeed, Alvan was so impressed that he “knew right then and there that [he] wanted to move to California.”²

For black Americans migrating out of the apartheid South, freedom was understood as a composite of different elements. Among other things, it meant freedom to participate equally in the economy. It meant freedom to exercise their political rights. It meant freedom from racial violence. But as the Burton's history reveals, freedom also meant equal access to quality educational opportunities. Alvan's aunt fully understood this nexus between freedom and education. By including the photograph of Jefferson High School, she suggested that the benefits of full citizenship could be found in the West. Like countless Americans before them, the Burtons

¹ Alvan Burton, interview by author, January 22, 2008.

² Ibid.

could not resist the promises of the California Dream; they decided to move to the neighborhood of Central Avenue in Los Angeles.

Upon arrival, the family immediately tied in to personal and institutional support networks. In short order, Alvan's uncle landed his father a job as a bricklayer, his mother quickly found employment as a seamstress and his two sisters got work as domestics. For young Alvan, his new neighborhood was "wonderful." It had "everything" one could need or want. Churches, several grocery stores, clothing and furniture shops, theatres, restaurants, and nightclubs were all within walking distance of the family home. Reflecting on the insularity of the community, Alvan noted, "We lived in a bubble." "I was happy in my neighborhood," he later recalled.³

Although the neighborhood of Central Avenue developed just a few decades before the Burton's arrived, it had already witnessed tremendous change. Bounded by 8th Street to the north, Slauson Boulevard to the south, Avalon Boulevard to west and Alameda Street to the east, the neighborhood's northern boundary lay just one mile south of downtown Los Angeles. Its southern boundary ran approximately 8 miles from the city's center. While the neighborhood was long, it was not very wide. Taking on a semi-triangular shape, it was approximately 1.6 miles at its base. The neighborhood was home to mostly small single-family bungalows on small lots. In some parts, such as that area several blocks north of Vernon between Central Avenue and Avalon, larger craftsman homes stood on bigger lots. Many of these residences were home to the community's professionals and business owners.⁴ Generally, however, Central Avenue was and remained a working-class neighborhood.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Roughly 58% of the homes in the community were built before 1919. 29% of the homes were built between 1920 and 1929. -- U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of Population, 1950, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

Between 1920 and 1950 the community experienced the encroachment of industry and a demographic shift. Los Angeles's industrial core grew during the 1920s and began to crowd out some residential areas in the district. By 1950, residences in the community's northern boundary gave way to warehouses and factories. During the same period, industry began to spring up along Alameda Street. Factories, then, loomed over much of Central Avenue's eastern boundary as well.

Demographics shifts were just as dramatic. In the first couple of decades in the twentieth century, the neighborhood was home to an eclectic mix of people. In it resided native born, working-class Anglo Americans. So, too, the area served as a starting point for many immigrants, including Germans, Italians, Jews and Japanese. In these early years, the number of black residents was negligible. However, by the late 1920s, African Americans began to move south down Central Avenue and into the neighborhood from points north of 8th Street. By the mid-1930s, blacks constituted over 35% of the community's total population. The trend toward a black Central Avenue accelerated in coming decades. By 1950, the community was over 90% black. The perception of Central Avenue as black space preceded the social reality, however. By the time the Burtons arrived in Los Angeles, many Angelenos considered Central Avenue a black community, despite its multiracial/multiethnic character. Jefferson High was located close to the center of this triangular community, just two blocks off Central.

Jefferson High, or "Jeff" as community members nicknamed it, also experienced tremendous change in its relatively short existence before the Burtons arrived. On September 5, 1916, the school opened its doors to the residents of the community. Initially, the campus comprised of a single academic building and a gymnasium, both built in neo-classical style. An auditorium, shop building, girl's gymnasium, library and administration building were added by 1921 from funds raised by city bonds. During its first years of operation the school population

remained relatively small. In the 1916-1917 school year, the student body consisted of 246 girls and 252 boys, over 95% of whom were white.⁵

Under Jeff's first principal, Theodore Fulton, the school worked to establish an identity and create a vibrant student life. In the first year, the students selected "The Democrats" as the school's call name and green and gold as the institution's colors. By 1920, Jefferson offered several extracurricular activities, such as a debate team, girl's glee club, Hi-Y club, drama club, various foreign language clubs, student newspaper, yearbook club, student council and numerous athletic teams.

By the mid-1920s, Jefferson's student population became increasingly more diverse. Surveying the 1930 yearbook, students with surnames such as Wong, Okamura, Sanchez, Marinaro, Cohen, and Klein were found alongside and Smith and Jones. Jeff's organizations reflected this diversity. Students could join a plethora of ethnic clubs including, the Chinese Club, the Jefferson Japanese Club, and the "El Club Cuauhtemoc."⁶ In the early 1930s, Jefferson High was one of the most diverse high schools in Los Angeles. By the time Alvan Burton arrived, however, the trend was clear. Blacks made up over sixty percent of the student population.⁷

Jefferson High's physical appearance also underwent dramatic change just before the Burtons arrived. On March 10, 1933, the 6.3 magnitude Long Beach earthquake shook the Los Angeles basin and damaged over two hundred and thirty schools throughout the area. Jefferson High was among them. For the next three years, Jefferson students studied in tents on the campus. Constructed under California's Field Act, which now required earthquake resistant structures for

⁵ *The Clipper*, Jefferson High School Yearbook (1917).

⁶ *The Monticellan* Jefferson High School Yearbook (1930).

⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of Population, 1950, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

schools receiving public funding, Jeff's new school buildings opened three years after the quake and just three years before the Burtons arrived.

The new Jeff High was a source of pride for residents of Central Avenue. Charlotta Bass, the editor of the *California Eagle*, one of Los Angeles's largest black newspapers, expressed the sentiments of many others when she declared, "Jeff once the most beautiful schools in the city is again without a peer."⁸ Built in art-deco style, the new structures, which comprised academic, administrative, shop and art buildings, a cafeteria and an auditorium, ringed a large courtyard. Jeff's modern design pulled at young Alvan Burton all the way in Louisiana. He recalled carefully studying the picture his aunt sent of the buildings "that had no corners."⁹

The buildings were not only state of the art in their design, but due to Field Act requirements, they were state of art in their construction. The structures possessed all steel frames with no wood in walls or partitions. The floors mostly consisted of poured cement, except for the main hallway in front of the administrative offices, which had a decorative terrazzo floor. "Modern to the last degree," boasted the *Jeffersonian*, "here a program of education organized to meet the everyday needs of the student of today is carried on under favorable conditions in an atmosphere conducive to the best in self-development and citizenship training."¹⁰ Alvan's aunt knew that these "favorable conditions" would appeal to her Louisiana relatives.

Alvan's aunt's decision to include the picture of Jeff High in her letter was not surprising, nor by happenstance. When the Burtons arrived in Los Angeles, Jefferson High had served the people of Central Avenue in Los Angeles for twenty-nine years. It had only been recently, though, that black Angelenos laid claim to it, numerically and consequently psychologically. If Alvan's

⁸ *California Eagle*, September 4, 1935.

⁹ Alvan Burton, interview by author, January 22, 2008. Built in art-deco style, Jeff's buildings possess rounded edges.

¹⁰ *The Jeffersonian*, October 16, 1936.

aunt's actions had not tipped them off, the Burtons surely discovered quickly after their arrival that Jefferson was one of the most important institutions in Los Angeles' black community.

Few, if any other, institutions defined the community and community life of Central Avenue more than Jefferson High School. To a remarkable extent, Jeff determined relations among residents, integrated migrants into the neighborhood, addressed community issues, and shaped the cultural life of the neighborhood. For decades, Jeff stood at the center of Los Angeles' black community and connected black Angelenos of various backgrounds. For a group in search of freedom, Jeff was arguably both one of the clearest links *to* and at times, the most promising symbol *of* American citizenship and the California dream. Given Jeff's significance to Central Avenue and black Los Angeles, it makes for an excellent point of departure to explore the hopes, aspirations, disappointments, the struggles, indeed, the history of twentieth-century black Angelenos.

In and of itself, the history of Jefferson High is an incredibly rich and important story. Jeff educated many African American notables such as Alvin Ailey, Ralph Bunche, Dorothy Dandridge, Dexter Gordon, Woody Strode and Horace Tapscott. It also produced some of Los Angeles' most prominent leaders in the struggle for equality, including Clayton Russell and Augustus Hawkins. In the second quarter of the twentieth century, numerous black luminaries who visited Los Angeles placed a stop at Jefferson High on their agenda. A veritable who's who of mid-twentieth century black America graced Jeff's campus. Ralph Bunche, Nat King Cole, W.E.B. Du Bois, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Jimmy Lunceford, Lionel Hampton, Langston Hughes, William Grant Still and Ethel Waters all spoke to students at Jeff.

And while the story of Jeff alone is fascinating and deserves special attention, *Lessons on Freedom* is not an institutional history. The central aim of this study is to illuminate both the

history of the community that surrounded the school and the lived experience of black Angelenos in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Because Jeff uniquely registered and actively responded to the forces transforming Los Angeles, the campus's windows provide an excellent view to witness the changes that shaped the lived experiences of African Americans. The themes that defined the black experience in twentieth century Los Angeles—such as, diversity, growth, discrimination, concentration, industrialization, and activism—were all palpable on Jeff's campus.

This study, then, will attempt to document and explain the experiences of people like Alvan Burton. It seeks to address questions that arise from the Burtons' story, such as: What kind of neighborhood did the Burtons enter? How did the community receive migrants like the Burtons? What kind of housing and employment opportunities did Los Angeles offer African Americans? What did education in Los Angeles mean to and for blacks? And more specifically, what did Jefferson High mean to and for black Angelenos? How did African Americans' expectations of California jibe with their lived experience? And finally, how did black Angelenos attempt to make their California dreams reality?

To explore these questions, I use Jefferson High School as a lens. My approach rests on the notion that Jeff was one of the most dynamic institutions in the "South Central" section of Los Angeles between 1920 and 1950 and thus offers a unique vantage point to view the interplay of forces shaping black Los Angeles. Peering out of Jeff's windows, I explore the intersections of housing, employment and education. *Lessons on Freedom* strives to be both a community study and a history of the African American educational experience in Los Angeles. It draws from numerous sources that emanate from both the African American community and from mainstream institutions. For the African American perspective, this study utilizes black newspapers, oral histories, organizational collections and the papers of prominent black Angelenos. To bring to

light institutional policies and practices, I use Board minutes, Board records, the district's monthly publication, *Los Angeles School Journal* and mainstream newspapers, such as the *Los Angeles Times*. I employ as well school yearbooks, student newspapers, school employee reports, and school subject files to reconstruct student life at Jeff. To grasp the employment and housing conditions of black Angelenos over the second quarter of the twentieth century, I turn to federal and state governmental reports.

No historical study is produced in isolation deep inside the archives, however. To be sure, many of the ideas advanced in *Lessons on Freedom* emerged after a long exploration and consideration of a rich body of scholarship. For insights into the African American experience in California and the American West, *Lessons on Freedom* consulted numerous studies, such as those produced by Albert Broussard, Marilyn Johnson, Shirley Ann Moore, Sherman Savage and Quintard Taylor.¹¹ In a historiography replete with conquest and oppression narratives, these kinds of studies served as a continuing reminder that black Westerners were not merely victims of racial injustice, but dreamers and shapers of historical developments. By locating African Americans' fight for full citizenship in the American West, *Lessons on Freedom* adds to a growing body of literature that not only recognizes a "long" Civil Rights Movement, but a "wide" one as well.¹²

¹¹ See Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West* (Lawrence: 1993); Marilyn Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: 1993); Shirley Ann Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California* (Berkeley, 2001); Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (New York, 1977); Quintard Taylor. *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West* (New York, 1998).

¹² See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" for a summary of the historiography of the "traditional" Civil Rights Movement narrative and a concise argument for an alternative "long" history. The "traditional" narrative of the Civil Rights Movement begins in the mid 1950s with Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott. After a hard-fought battle on the streets and lunch counters of the South, the spirit of the movement inspires more radical forms of resistance in Northern cities, culminating in the rise black separatist groups. By the late 1960s, the radicalism of black activism initiates a white

This study also found inspiration in recent scholarship on black Los Angeles. Prior to the late 1960s, few historians considered the lives of people like the Burtons. When scholars began to consider non-whites' role in the development of Los Angeles after the Civil Rights Movement, they were a mere footnote in the creation story of the "fragmented metropolis," notable only for adding a complex array of colors to the social landscape.¹³ Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth first century, there was a real dearth of scholarship on black Los Angeles.

Within the last decade, however, several historians produced excellent studies on black life in the City of Angels. Douglas Flamming, for example, meticulously explored black Angelenos' fight against Jim Crow from late nineteenth century to the Great Depression. Josh Sides and Scott Kurashige pursued black Angelenos' struggles into the post-World War II era.¹⁴ And while these studies offered a deft analysis of African Americans' political and labor activism, they gave short shrift to education. With the exception of Sides, who explored the desegregation controversy in Los Angeles schools in the third quarter of the twentieth century, education is treated as an afterthought. My study strives to round out the picture by spotlighting education *and* its

"backlash" and the struggle for black freedom is derailed. Hall and "long civil rights" historians, on the other hand, trace the roots of the Civil Rights Movement back even further to the formation of "civil rights unionism" during the late 1930s popular front era. Hall's interpretation is much more syncretic and dynamic. She offers a framework that unites black struggles in the South, North and West and challenges the implicit argument that late 1960s black radicals stymied black progress. For works that explore this "first phase" of the civil rights movement, see Richard Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution"; Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as National Issue* (New York, 1978); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, 1996). Mark Brilliant pushes for a consideration of a "wide" civil rights movement in *The Color Line Has Changed* (Oxford, 2010). Brilliant's "wide" civil rights movement is both a reference to the geographical and multiracial breadth of struggles for racial equality.

¹³ See, for example, Robert Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis* (Berkeley, 1993).

¹⁴ Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: 2005); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, 2008); Josh Sides, *LA City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to Present* (Berkeley, 2003).

interactions with other structures and by demonstrating its central place in black Angelenos' struggle for full citizenship. Moreover, by situating my study in a *specific* place, I hope to capture the contours of the community life, which are frequently lost in some of the other works in their efforts to recount the history of black Los Angeles. After all, much of the history of black Los Angeles, at least for the period explored in *Lessons on Freedom*, is a history of Central Avenue.

Lessons on Freedom is also in dialogue with an emergent body of scholarship focused on the multiracial character of California. Scholars such as Mark Brilliant, Allison Varzally and Mark Wild have all demonstrated the historical significance of California's diversity to Americans' understandings of race and citizenship. In their studies, they follow the various color lines in California and show how at different times these demarcations were crossed, maintained and redrawn.¹⁵ *Lessons on Freedom* builds on the proposition that the multiracial interactions in California mattered. These encounters worked to reconfigure race itself and produce a peculiar kind of discourse and race relations. While these scholars look for the confluence of *various* ethno-racial groups, *Lessons on Freedom* focuses specifically on how Los Angeles' diversity shaped the African American experience.

Lessons on Freedom benefited from numerous ethnic community studies and histories of African American education as well. Valerie Matusmoto's study of Japanese-American agricultural community, for example, proved instructive for its methodological approach. David Yoo's investigation of the function of educational institutions in California's Japanese-American communities was also insightful. Robert Orsi's study of Italian Harlem brought into sharp relief

¹⁵ Mark Brilliant, *The Color Line Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California* (New York, 2010); Allison Varzally, *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring Outside Ethnic Lines* (Berkeley, 2008); Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 2005).

the layered symbolism of community institutions.¹⁶ To compare and contrast the education of black Angelenos and African Americans in other parts of the country, I consulted localized and regional studies, such as those produced by James Anderson, Jack Dougherty, V.P. Franklin and Vanessa Siddle Walker.¹⁷ *Lessons on Freedom*, then, engages various historical dialogues and intersects with numerous subfields.

Lessons on Freedom is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the cultural and political life of Central Avenue before World War II. In chapter 1, I show how a black middle-class loomed large in pre-1935 black Los Angeles. I document their persistent efforts to both shape community norms and establish themselves as the sole arbiters for racial redress. In chapter 2, I follow a cultural transformation that took place in Central Avenue. Spurred by the inclusionary politics of the New Deal and a mass migration of southern African Americans to the area, I show how purveyors of black Los Angeles' middle-class orientation increasingly confronted stiffer challenges for sway from an ever-growing working-class population. Ultimately, I find that the struggles between competing orientations yielded to accommodations and, more important, an understanding of the efficacy of mass activism.

The second section explores the entanglements of education and other structures in Los Angeles. In chapter 3, I explore how Central Avenue's "extreme" diversity prior to World War II prompted educators to embrace a number of reforms associated with progressive education. On the

¹⁶ Valerie Matsumoto, *Farming the Home Place: A Japanese American Community in California* (Ithaca, 1993); Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem* (New Haven, 2002); David Yoo, *Race, Generation, and Culture Among Japanese Americans of California* (Urbana, 2000).

¹⁷ James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: 2004); Vincent P. Franklin, *The Education of Black Philadelphia: The Social and Education History of a Minority Community* (Philadelphia, 1979); Vanessa Siddle-Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in The Segregated South* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

surface, these reforms seemed to benefit marginalized groups, including African American students. However, I detail how the promises of progressive education floundered on the shoals of broader racial attitudes and larger discriminatory structures. In chapter 4, I backtrack from a mock lynching at Fremont High School in Los Angeles in 1941 to highlight how both protestors *and* black Angelenos came to see racial spaces in public places in the interwar years. Ironically, I find that some of the very same policies and practices that worked to exclude black Angelenos from the city-at-large offered an institutional foothold at Jeff from which to engage in group politics and community formation and from which to counter deleterious popular perceptions of blackness. And although claiming black space held out tremendous possibilities, it consistently proved to be a precarious strategy. In chapter 5, I expose how black activists, racial liberals, and progressive school officials used the exigencies of World War II to push for numerous changes at Jeff, including the implementation of defense industry training classes and cultural classes and the hiring of black administrators. In documenting activists' expansive demands, I examine how they saw various forms of educational discrimination as deeply rooted and intertwined with other structures.

This study finds its most important discoveries in between the gaps of language and action, practice and espoused ideals. By exploring these interstices, the study contributes to a history of color-blindness in America. Amending dominant explanations that attribute the development of color-blindness as tool for status quo to neo-conservatives in an era of ascendant conservatism, *Lessons on Freedom* argues that color-blindness as pretext for racial innocence was cultivated in interwar Northern and Western cities, such as Los Angeles. Indeed I find that Los Angeles educators were pioneers in the use of color-blindness and notions of racial tolerance to mask racial inequalities. I suggest that city school's official policy of non-discrimination not only effectively

blunted charges of racism, but also worked to absolve the schoolhouse of its role in racialized outcomes.

By maintaining racial neutrality, school officials erased the connections between education and other structures, allowing them to establish a position of racial innocence. The creation of a domestic service program at the expense of more rigorous academic offerings in Los Angeles' only black high school then became based on "realities" of the labor market and students' best interests, not educators' own notions of blacks' ability or "proper" place. That black students could not be found at Los Angeles' premier trade school was not the result of racial discrimination, but an assessment of applicants' potential to gain employment when finished. Growing black isolation at Jefferson High was solely due to housing practices and blacks' own preferences in neighbors, not decisions regarding attendance boundaries, school construction, optional school designations and transfer policies. In these formulations and many more, the color-blind schoolhouse was woefully at the mercy of other forces. However, when critics pointed to glaring inconsistencies inside the school system, officials maintained that they did not perceive any differences in the educational experience of whites and blacks because they did not see race.

Despite school officials' claims of innocence, black activists saw educational, housing and employment policies and practices as intimately bound up and co-constitutive. As their multi-pronged strategies reveal, they understood the salience of these interactions but struggled to pin racism down as school officials "passed the buck." Attesting to the conundrum that "race neutrality" posed to African American equality, blacks responded to discrimination in various ways that were often at odds. Ultimately, I conclude that these uses of color-blindness and these assertions of racial innocence in the midst of racial disparities were foundational to arguments rooted in majority victimhood in post-affirmative action era California.

Distilled to its essence, *Lessons on Freedom* is a simple narrative. It is a story about people like the Burtons. It is a historical accounting of their efforts to find freedom and create opportunity in the City of Angels in the second quarter of the twentieth century. It documents the paradox that was Los Angeles during the second quarter of the twentieth century. That is, for black Angelenos, Los Angeles was a place that held out new school buildings, but denied them equal educational opportunities. It was a city that offered them relatively decent housing, but vigilantly maintained residential segregation. It was a place where public officials denounced racial violence and intolerance, but downplayed mock lynchings. It was a city that extended African Americans broader job opportunities, yet a place that steadfastly upheld a racialized labor hierarchy. For southern migrants like the Burtons, there was something new and yet something very familiar in Los Angeles. As a writer for the *California Eagle* put it, black migrants to Los Angeles found upon their arrival a “progressive Jim Crow” awaiting them. It is the tension within this oxymoron that plagued black life in Los Angeles in the second quarter of the twentieth century and thus it is this friction that drives the narrative in *Lessons on Freedom*.

Section 1: Culture and Politics in Central Avenue

Chapter 1: Concerns About Decorum on Central Avenue Between 1900-1930.

If you talk to someone who lived in the Central Avenue district in the mid-twentieth century long enough about the community's past, invariably the name Samuel Browne will come up. Indeed, the activities of Los Angeles's first African American secondary teacher are now legendary and enshrined in local lore. For both his protégés and casual observers, Sam Browne is an integral part of the story of Central Avenue. The community's collective memory of Browne focuses on his contributions to the cultural life of the area, most notably in his role as music teacher at Jefferson High School. As these remembrances go, Browne was a central figure in a musical renaissance that flowered along the Avenue in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Through his mentorship of world-renowned Jazz artists, he brought jazz to Los Angeles and Los Angeles to jazz.¹⁸

Yet Browne's life can tell us more about the community's history than has been heretofore considered. If we follow Browne's life beyond the Jazz scene on Central Avenue, we can glimpse a much more complex and layered community past. At the most basic level, Browne's life decisions reflect the opportunities and barriers confronting men of his ilk during the twentieth century. Delving deeper, however, we can make out key developments that remade the social and physical landscape of Central Avenue. In this chapter and next, I will use Browne's experience to highlight an uneasy coexistence between a black middle class progressive ethos steeped in a talented tenth philosophy and an African American working-class orientation centered on grassroots, man-on-the street politics. Both challenging and reaffirming

¹⁸ By "LA to Jazz," I mean to say that some people credit Samuel Browne for creating a distinctive West Coast variant of Jazz.

narratives of black middle-class abandonment, the struggle for cultural sway in Central Avenue emerged prior to World War II and involved a process of both conflict *and* accommodation. Though *Shelley v. Kraemer* is popularly viewed as the case that split otherwise monochromatic pre-war urban African American communities, Browne's life shows that this is only a half-truth. The overwhelming attention paid by scholars and community historians to Central Avenue's musical legacy obscures, if not distorts the experiences of everyday life in the neighborhood. As a result, the history of Central Avenue has been rendered as thin as sheet music. Prying open Samuel Browne's life reminds us that black Angelenos struggled and negotiated as well as played and danced in Central Avenue.

Considering his musical progeny, the celebration of Samuel Browne's life is befitting. His veneration by the community of Central Avenue, however, is not without irony for at least a couple of reasons. First, Samuel Browne (initially) never wanted to teach jazz. Reflecting on his early years at Jefferson High, Browne told an interviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* that he wanted to instill an appreciation for classical music and avoid the "old devil music" in his curriculum.¹⁹ Second, and perhaps more intriguing, for at least the last ten years of his career at Jeff, Browne did not want to teach high school in Central Avenue. In fact, the last half of his career at the school he spent trying to leave for any other high school that would take him. But, due to the Los Angeles school district's discriminatory assignment practices, Browne's transfer requests were repeatedly denied. So here we have a community hero, who did not want to do the very thing for which he became beloved and who wanted to escape the community that ultimately ensconced him in their collective past.

¹⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1979.

I point this out, not to diminish his legacy, but to begin to disentangle the complex forces that ran through community life. To grasp this paradox, we need to understand the cultural milieu in which Samuel Browne operated and from whence he came. In this chapter, I define the cultural terrain on which Samuel Browne navigated to make sense in chapter 2 of the decisions he made and to shed some light on the way the community chose to remember him. This chapter, then, is less about Samuel Browne the person, than it is about the world in which he lived. After establishing a contextual base, we shall return to Sam Browne's days at Jefferson High.

At the time of the 1910 census, just two years after Samuel Browne's birth, Los Angeles' black population stood at 7,599, constituting 2.4% of the total population.²⁰ Historians have waxed and waned over the significance of these numbers to the treatment of and opportunities for black Angelenos. Some scholars of Los Angeles' race relations in the early twentieth-century argue that black Angelenos' small presence in an ever-expanding city lowered their visibility and weakened white Americans' impulse to target them *exclusively* for discrimination.²¹ As evidence, they offer black Angelenos' residential spatial mobility. Yet, other scholars, point to so-called "nigger alley," the "Shenk Decision," discrimination on "jitney cars" and the rapid spread of racially restrictive housing covenants in the late teens and twenties as proof that Los

²⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of Population, 1910, Population and Housing for Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

²¹ See, for example, Charlotta Bass, *Forty Years. Memoirs From the Pages of a Newspaper* (Los Angeles: California Eagle Press, 1960).; Max Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles" (PhD dissertation, University of Southern California, 1936); Lawrence De Graff, "The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto" *Pacific Historical Review*, 39, no. 3 (1970): 323-52; Gerald Horne. *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1995).

Angeles was not the racial Shangri-La early black migrants hoped for.²² Of course, the most cautious (and typically the most nuanced) historians advance the notion that early twentieth-century black Angelenos experienced all things at once. They contend that African Americans felt the scorn of the larger white society, while socializing, attending school, working, eating and residing alongside Anglo Angelenos.²³

What has been less explored, however, is the extent to which these numbers had an impact on the internal development of the black community in Los Angeles. It seems as though the small size (in relative terms) and newness of Los Angeles' black community presented yet another inducement that has been overlooked by scholars; it held out the possibility (and it provided the incentive) for those men and women standing at the helm of community institutions to shape and control the community's image. Never shy to speak *to* and *for* the masses, L.A.'s early black bourgeoisie constantly worked to establish community values with the twin goals of instilling an outlook that would foster black success and that would establish positive associations with blackness. Drawing from an admixture of Victorian morality, Progressive Era values, W.E.B. Dubois' Talented Tenth doctrine, Booker T. Washington's "earn respect" philosophy and a tinge of Western exceptionalism, this ethos emphasized refinement in dress, respectability, independence, temperance (in the Victorian sense), entrepreneurship, education, wholesome/healthy recreation, patience, industriousness, stability, self-control, and decorum. Some of its cultural markers included homeownership, college education, society club and

²² See, for example, Keith Collins, *Black Los Angeles: The Maturing Ghetto, 1940-1950* (Saratoga: Century Twenty-One Publish, 1980).

²³ See, Douglass Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

country club membership and trips to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Community institutions, such as churches, schools, newspapers, society clubs, played an important role in transmitting and reinforcing these expected community norms. Operating on the presumption of rightful leadership, the black bourgeoisie believed that they should blaze the trail to “racial uplift.” Throughout Browne’s early life, this middle-class *orientation* (and these middle-class assumptions) overlay community life.

To say, however, that a middle-class ethos held sway in black Los Angeles is certainly not to suggest that turn of the century black Los Angeles was essentially middle-class. For one, in economic terms, the vast majority of African Americans fell into the category of working-class. Indeed, about seventy percent of wage-earning black women worked as domestics between 1900 and 1920. Around five percent more were employed by commercial laundries and another five percent were seamstresses.²⁴ In 1920, there were about one hundred professional women—mostly nurses, schoolteachers and private music teachers—compared to around two thousand servants.²⁵ For men, twenty percent worked as “general laborers.” Porters made up nearly fifteen percent of the black male wage-earning labor force. Janitors represented between five and ten percent. Waiters constituted about five percent of black male workers and male servants and chauffeurs added another fifteen to twenty percent.²⁶

Moreover, working-class culture, as historian Mark Wild demonstrated, was ubiquitous in Central Los Angeles neighborhoods, including Central Avenue. Beer halls, after-hour clubs, gambling spots and brothels shared the same landscape as churches, fraternal lodges and

²⁴ Flammig, *Bound For Freedom*, 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73 -75.

schools.²⁷ Thus, while this middle-class orientation set a dominant tone in black Los Angeles, it never completely stifled various forms of working-class or street expressions. Put differently, the image just as often had more to do with perception than actual condition. Nevertheless, this perception operated as a powerful force shaping the lived experience of early twentieth-century black Angelenos. It would not be until the inclusionary politics of the New Deal—with its labor and mass activism—that the seeds for an alternative orientation rooted in the common man and mass participation would be planted. The onset of World War II and the mass migration that accompanied it further nourished this outlook, before finding traction in Central Avenue in the post-war years when it came to predominate.

As alluded to above, the vision for black Los Angeles as a thoroughgoing middle-class community was by and large a construction crafted by a diverse group of actors. From the earliest black Angeleno voices, we hear a clear preference for middle-class values and a penchant for the middle-class lifestyle. Jefferson Edmonds, owner of one of Los Angeles's first black newspapers, for example, frequently spoke of the need to lure “honest” and “industrious” black men and women “who were unafraid of hard work” to the area. According to Edmonds, an “education unsurpassed by any city in the country,” and “the best hous[ing]” found anywhere in the nation awaited these “self-supporting and independent” migrants. Reflecting progressive era middle-class concerns for privacy, cleanliness and orderly spaces, Edmonds, in the same article, went on to write, “colored people [in Los Angeles are] so admirably situated.” “Tenement houses and alley life, such as exists in New York, Chicago and Philadelphia is practically unknown

²⁷ Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

here.”²⁸ For Edmonds, then, the high quality of housing for black Angelenos signified “stability, character, better citizenship, foresight, thrift, development and pride, and the sum of these ...Progress.”²⁹

Edmonds was not alone in envisioning a middle-class black Los Angeles. Seventeen years after Edmonds’ remarks, amid the 1920s population boom, Joseph Bass, the editor of the *California Eagle*—another one of Los Angeles’ first black newspapers—offered his readership advice on proper boosterism. When doing their part in “residence development,” black Angelenos must “seek newcomers with due consideration given to [their] prestige, good will, civic and social condition.”³⁰ Ensuring that the “right-kind” of migrants made their way to Los Angeles also preoccupied the thoughts of journalist Noah Thompson. Writing to a national readership, Thompson declared that “Production” “Progress” and “Active Life” are the mottos of “every brother in California.”³¹ Thompson continued: “As I write this final word, an aviator away up in the air is writing, in letters each a mile long, so all may read, the word ‘Welcome.’” “But for the Brother or anyone else who is merely a loafer or dreamer of the slouching, half-apologetic type,” Thompson warned, “that word will quickly fade away into the gem-colored sky against which it was written.”³² Sidney Dones, pioneering black real estate man, echoed

²⁸ Lonnie G. Bunch III, “The Greatest State for the Negro” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence De Graff and Quintard Taylor (Seattle: University of Washington, 2001), 139. A focus on housing became the most commonly used cultural marker. The California bungalow especially became a symbol of a middle-class black Los Angeles. In the early twentieth-century, the bungalow earned a reputation as the first “egalitarian” architectural style for its “do-it-yourself” possibilities which appealed to the middle-class virtue of thrift. The enclosed plan—typically marked by the style’s low slung roof, deep porch and surrounding garden which functioned to the bring the outdoors in and keep the outside out—satisfied middle-class sensibilities of healthful living, privacy and respectability.

²⁹ *California Eagle*, February 17, 1923.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, August 21, 1928.

³¹ *Messenger*, “These Colored United States,” 221.

³² *Ibid.*

Thompson's concern, advising prospective migrants to come to "the City of Great Opportunities," with "as much money as you can so as not to lower the standard of the Colored People of this State."³³

Like Thompson and Dones, a writer for the *Eagle* also saw the connections between "production," "progress," affluence and black Los Angeles exceptionalism. "It is out Central Avenue way," the writer contended, "that the ambitious man catches inspiration to do business." "Out Central Avenue way," the writer continued, "one sees prosperous and handsomely appointed [black-owned] stores and shops, huge garages teeming with activity, busy tire and accessory establishments, [and] eating houses de luxe." Here, then, enterprise, ambition, affluence, sophistication and consumption constituted the "evidence of economic progress and [middle-class] success in endless variety." Drawing together notions of class and industriousness, the author concluded: "On Central Avenue, the people are attending to business, and its citizenship stands without a peer."³⁴

National figures, too, seemed to have stock in a middle-class black Los Angeles. After W.E.B. Du Bois' now well-documented 1912 visit, he wrote "nowhere in the United States... is the average efficiency and intelligence in the colored population so high."³⁵ Black Los Angeles is full of "pushing" and "energetic" people.³⁶ It was the pictures accompanying Du Bois' reflections, however, which best conveyed to his readers his thoughts of (or hopes for) black Los Angeles. Five out of eight photos were pictures of neat California bungalows owned by black Angelenos. The cover picture featured a well-dressed black family sitting in front of their sharp

³³ Miriam Matthews Collection 1804, Box 10 Folder 11, Charles Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

³⁴ *California Eagle*, February 10, 1923.

³⁵ *Crisis*, "Editorial" (July 1913).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, (August 1913).

craftsman style home which had a spacious porch with an awning and a large manicured front lawn featuring a flowering palm tree. Confirming the exhortations of local black boosters, Du Bois concluded that black Angelenos “are without doubt the most beautifully housed group of colored people in the United States.”³⁷ Two other pages offered a panoramic view of Du Bois’ welcoming committee. Standing beside a seemingly endless line of staged parked cars, the reader saw nattily dressed black men and women in front of a thriving black-owned business block. The pictures, then, conveyed an unmistakable message using powerful symbols suggestive of class. Du Bois’ readers did not have to work too hard to decode the signs of middle-class respectability, industriousness and affluence embedded in the homes, clothes, cars and people. To be sure, the desired cumulative effect of the imagery was to convey the notion that black Angelenos enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle and possessed middle-class sensibilities.

Still, other writers from outside California struck a similar bourgeois tone. Chandler Owen, the editor of the national journal *The Messenger*, gushed over the many black Angeleno residences “enmeshed in vines,” “embowered in palmetto palm,” “surrounded by verdant lawns” and “bedecked with choice varieties of tropical flowers.” For Owen, the quality of homes seemed to reflect the quality of people. On his first speaking engagement at the Los Angeles Sunday Forum, he marveled at the “huge crowd jammed” with “ministers, club women, lawyers, physicians, businessman, editors [and] politicians.”³⁸ Similarly, a writer for the *Chicago Defender* described how black Angelenos “wrenched success from the land about them” through “thrift,” “enterprise” and “self-sacrifice.” To highlight black Angeleno’s achievement and integration into the city at large, the writer noted, black Angelenos “have two newspapers, 10 lawyers, 13 doctors and dentists and about 18 churches. They are members of the city’s chamber

³⁷ *Crisis* “Colored California” (August 1943).

³⁸ *The Messenger*, “From Coast to Coast” (May 1922), 409.

of commerce ... and patrons of most of the banks.” Identifying the character of black Los Angeles by way of relational opposition, the writer concluded, “There are few delinquents and few criminals among the estimated 20,000 Afro-Americans people of Los Angeles and vicinity.”³⁹

Of course, not everyone saw in black Los Angeles a “respectable” middle-class community. In fact, when large mainstream newspapers acknowledged the black community around Central Avenue, it was in connection to dysfunction and criminality and accompanied derogatory racial identifiers. Apparently, black Angelenos found this media bias such a problem that as early as 1915, the Afro-American Council of California, a group made up of black Angeleno leaders, incorporated in their “declaration of principles” the following: “That it is unfair for the press to publish articles parading the acts of the law breaker publishing his racial identity and that all such words as nigger, coon, dark cloud, smoke and dinge [sic], be discontinued by the daily papers of this state and made punishable by law.”⁴⁰ Eight years later, despite the council’s plea, “big dailies” continued to “cast slurs at the slightest excuse upon Central Avenue.” “Every dog fight, any sort of untoward happening that occur[ed] within a radius of twelve blocks of Central Avenue,” fumed a writer for the *Eagle*, “is played up to take place ON Central Avenue!”⁴¹ To counter these perceived aspersions, the writer offered, “Central Avenue is just as clean and orderly as any other district of our city.” The people of Central Avenue, “citizenship stands without a peer.” As these rejoinders reveal, early twentieth-century

³⁹ *Chicago Defender*, “California People Make Marvelous Record in Ten Years” (January 30, 1915). Like DuBois and Owen, this article also included a photograph of the “type of homes owned by progressive members of the race” as a signifier middle-class comfort.

⁴⁰ Don’t have the exact cite—*California Eagle*—have to find again.

⁴¹ *California Eagle*, February 10, 1923.

black Angelenos not only engaged in image construction, but they also participated in its necessary compliment—image protection.⁴²

However, when the mainstream papers dug beyond the superficial and sensational focus on black criminality and into black community life in the city, they frequently described a middle-class black Los Angeles. In 1909, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a series of articles in commemoration of the centennial of Abraham Lincoln’s birth that portrayed black Angelenos as cultured, industrious, educated, high-minded and entrepreneurial. Taking stock of multiple aspects of black life in the city, including religious activities, social “uplift” organizations, education, and black enterprise, one writer summarized, “if the negroes of Los Angeles and Southern California can be taken as examples of the race, it would seem from their own showing of indisputable facts that the ‘negro problem’ is a thing that has no existence.”⁴³

In 1933, a *Los Angeles Times* feature article once again turned its attention to “Darktown,” to “remind [readers] of the existence of the large local colored community to which [they] seldom g[a]ve a thought.” Here, too, the *Times* found a “respectable,” if not admirable, Negro “colony.” Even though the writer frequently used racial identifiers dating back to slavery and trotted out racial stereotypes that surely made many African Americans wince, he generally portrayed black Los Angeles in a favorable light.⁴⁴ The Central Avenue, then, of the writer’s construction was not one of smoke-filled clubs where saxophones blared and sporting types freely roved, but rather it was a community, home to a myriad of institutions and organizations

⁴² This was also touched on in chapter 1 when I explored what Jefferson High meant to black Angelenos.

⁴³ *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1909. Of course, this representation had just as much to do with celebrating white Angelenos’ benevolence than highlighting black achievement.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, June 18, 1933. For example, blacks were “picaninies” and “our duskies.” They were “always gay in darktown.” “There’s always sunshine in their hearts and quicksilver in their heels.” They love to dance and “sing too.”

that gave expression to a middle-class outlook. Implicitly challenging “the complete knowledge white folks [had] about the [class of the] Negro colony,” the writer revealed to readers that the “real colored society” hung out in “more exclusive places,” such as churches, the YMCA, “handsome” lodges, black-owned enterprises, business organizations, fraternity and sorority formals, cultural improvement clubs and the likes. Far from “a cluster of Uncle Tom’s cabins,” the writer concluded, the “negro colony” continued to “thrive and expand ... with a business and social structure all its own,” in spite of “the white man’s self-created burden,” manifest in the Great Depression.

Even within the notoriously swinging Central Avenue jazz clubs another *Times* writer discovered that African American club-goers held steadfastly to the middle-class virtues of decorum and self-control. And, while the writer identified blacks as servants and celebrated their raw innocence, the African American men were “nattily, but not bizarrely outfitted.”⁴⁵ Women dressed in “clothes of quality,” not exhibiting “the fleshiness which cartoonists and humorists insist[ed] that the Negro craves.” The writer concluded, “No better-dressed crowd can be found in any other section of town.” Blacks throughout the “modish” Central Avenue ostensibly also practiced moderation, if not outright temperance. “Negroes don’t need liquor to quicken their dancing feet,” observed the writer. “They do a lot of sweating and they fill up every other dance or so on soft drinks, sucked from the bottle through straws.” It’s doubtful,” he noted, “if a tour of all the beer parlors and night spots in the colored section will reveal a single drunk.” Even the street hustlers (or, as the writer—perhaps naively—referred to them, “dapper young negroes”)

⁴⁵ It should be noted that the writer’s characterization of African Americans as “carefree,” “happy-go-lucky,” “spontaneous,” and “leisurely,” could suggest that blacks still lived as if they were in a pre-modern era. Viewed this way, these characterizations could be associated with a maladjusted working-class who missed the leap to modern times. Though the writer exalts their quaintness, it is juxtaposed with progressive modernity and sophistication.

seemingly carried themselves with grace. There was “nothing objectionable in the manner” in which they offered “entertainment of a less public nature.” But, rather, their behavior conformed to “the natural hospitality of Little Harlem” in an effort to simply make one’s “visit to Central Avenue more memorable.”⁴⁶ The writer, then, attempted to pull off an inversion of sorts. He leaves the reader with the image of domestics, butlers, chauffeurs and street hustlers behaving with middle-class propriety in settings reputed to be immoral, dirty and disorderly.

No doubt, much of this lustrous talk about the superlative character and condition (in the middle-class sense) of black Angelenos is simply that—glowing talk. We should not lose sight of the fact that these comments emanated from people with specific agendas, including, black boosters, grateful visitors and self-congratulating white Angelenos. My concern here, however, is Los Angeles’ black bourgeoisie and the ways in which they saw utility in an imagined middle-class black Los Angeles and worked vigorously to shape and maintain it. Evidently, early twentieth-century black Angelenos understood better than anyone the mutability of race. As seen above in their efforts at image construction, they figured they could change the lived experience of African Americans by changing perceptions of blackness. Drawing from Booker T. Washington’s notions of progress and asserting Western exceptionalism, they tried to inscribe on Los Angeles’ social landscape a new set of racial assumptions. They did this by exalting progressive era middle-class values and (frequently) distancing black Los Angeles from the “the rest” of black America. The construction involved two mutually reinforcing steps. The first, we see above in the black bourgeoisie’s efforts to construct an image of middle-class respectability and protect it from outside “knockers,” who tried to obscure “the fact” that the people of Central

⁴⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, “Swing Street,” April 24, 1938.

Avenue “citizenship [stood] without a peer.”⁴⁷ The other step I will explore in greater depth later, but it involved making those within the black community conform to the image.

So to what extent were these pronouncements about the nature of black Los Angeles rooted in “reality”? Or, to what degree did the image reflect actual conditions and attitudes? It certainly held true that in general terms, black Angelenos through the first twenty years of the twentieth-century enjoyed better housing conditions than blacks in other American cities. Though comments about the “most beautifully housed” frequently slipped into hyperbole, a significant number of black Angelenos, in fact, resided in detached single family homes on modest-sized lots. Blacks, during this period, also had greater residential mobility, as racially restrictive covenants *just* started to take root. A typical “modern six room bungalow” in the Central Avenue district set the buyer back a modest \$2100 in 1920.⁴⁸ Additionally, Los Angeles’ proclivity for sprawl militated against the deleterious effects arising from high-density living arrangements. Thus, African Americans apparently found fewer obstacles in Los Angeles in attaining the ultimate symbol of middle-class respectability—homeownership. In 1910, 36.1% of black Angelenos owned their homes; a nation-wide high. Compared to New York’s black homeownership rate of 2.4% and Chicago’s 8%, this gave credence to booster’s claims of Los Angeles exceptionalism.⁴⁹

In addition to embracing homeownership, black Angelenos displayed their middle-class sensibilities in recreation and leisure as well. There were at least a couple of efforts—Parkridge Country Club and Eureka Villa (later renamed Val Verde)—in the first few decades of twentieth-

⁴⁷ *California Eagle*, February 10, 1923.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, September 9, 1919. The American average annual income was \$1,236 in 1920. – United States Census Bureau accessed September 29, 2013, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

⁴⁹ United States Census Bureau. "Negro Population in the United States 1790-1915" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918).

century to establish black country clubs. Similar to white middle-class reformers of the period, Los Angeles' black bourgeoisie apparently prized "healthful recreation" for its character building possibilities. Both Parkridge Country Club and Eureka Villa heavily advertised the sale of plots and cabins in the black newspapers. A typical advertisement conflated middle-class affluence and California exceptionality, such as the following:

Visit Black America's Million Dollar Playground with its most beautiful and elaborate club facilities. You may play golf-18 hold (sic) course; you may swim (bring your bathing suits); play Tennis; enjoy the sport of Moonlight Rabbit Shooting, then have our chef prepare a boneless rabbit fry for you. Dine and Dance as long as you wish. A most scenic drive through Santa Ana Canyon brings you out at Parkridge; our elevation gives you a most commanding view of our richest valley. These are Moonlight Nights, and so Romantic from our upper verandas.

The sketch accompanying the pitch showed a mission style building surrounded by oaks and rolling hills.⁵⁰

Advertisers for Val Verde Resort made a similar promotion. "Go West The Val Verde Way!" the title declared. "Eight hundred buyers point with pride to their charming rancheros in quaint and picturesque Val Verde," the ad continued, "where they get the most out of living the outdoor Western way!" "A recognized recreational center, Val Verde provides every facility for rest and recreation: its 53-acre park grounds include a \$150,000 swimming pool and bath house, just completed, tennis and badminton courts, acres of rolling lawn, hundreds of shade trees and trails that lead through scenes of magical beauty." "Val Verde," the ad concluded was a place where "kiddies rollick[ed] on the green" and "old folks stay[ed] to be active." It was a place one found a happy and healthy balance; a place where an "abundance of water," "graded streets," and "telephone service transform[ed] the inconveniences of the country into city-like

⁵⁰ *California Eagle*, June 29, 1928.

modernity.”⁵¹ Clearly, the advertisers attempted to tap into black Angelenos’ sense of themselves by conjuring up thoughts about Western leisure, a romanticized California past, and middle-class comfort.

Moreover, although staged, we should not summarily dismiss W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1912 reception as superficial. After all, those were *actual* homes, automobiles, businesses and finely dressed black men and women in the pictures. But to elide the question of representativeness, for a moment, Los Angeles’ black bourgeoisie still had to arrange a month long itinerary for Du Bois that included lectures, speeches, galas, dinners, regional day-trips and other forms of entertainment. This required a certain degree of control and influence over the social landscape. Put another way, the careful orchestration (or performance) of middle-class comfort/opulence and decorum reflected not necessarily what black Los Angeles *was*, but, what an influential group of black Angelenos expected it to be. As such, Du Bois’ visit says more about the values and strands of expectations that flowed through community life than actual conditions. Du Bois’ effusive praise of black Los Angeles middle-classness, then, in part, gestures toward the influence of the bourgeoisie as cultural arbiters.

To give life to this middle-class outlook, the black bourgeoisie enlisted community institutions. These organizations were both grounded in and disseminators of middle-class sensibilities and assumptions. Aside from black newspapers, a plethora of other institutions in early twentieth-century black Los Angeles exuded a middle-class orientation. The Los Angeles Forum was one of the most conspicuous.

Established in 1903 by Los Angeles’ black bourgeoisie, which included newspapermen Joseph Bass and Jefferson Edmonds and businessman Sidney Dones, the Los Angeles Forum

⁵¹ Ibid., November 5, 1935.

encouraged “united effort on the part of negroes for their advancement, and to strengthen them along lines of moral, social, intellectual financial and Christian ethics.”⁵² In short, the Forum served as the de facto governing body of the black community. While any man or woman “of good character” were eligible for membership, it was Los Angeles’ black elite who really ran the organization. A look at the Forum’s “elected” officers over the first four decades of its existence reads like a who’s who of early twentieth-century black Los Angeles’ business and professional elite. By no means were working-class people shut out. Indeed the “Forum” was just that—a forum for “respectable” men and women to freely exchange ideas and concerns. According to one member of the Forum, even the “humblest” members had “access” to meetings, where they could “state [their] grievances” and await a decision from “the body.” Yet, despite its openness, there should be no doubt that the organization was a vehicle for middle-class hegemony.

In its philosophy and function, the Forum reflected both the middle-class values and notions of racial uplift of its day. Like many “upright” middle-class people during the progressive era, its leaders repeatedly stressed “good character,” “morality,” “frugality,” property ownership and education as keys to advancement. Beyond determining the success of the individual, however, Los Angeles’ black bourgeoisie understood these characteristics to have greater import. That is, an individual’s actions, behavior and attitude were not so individual, but, superimposed on to the group. Because white society so thoroughly demonstrated their antipathy toward blackness in other places and times, Los Angeles’ black bourgeoisie maintained that “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”⁵³ They believed that *individual’s* actions largely determined whether black Los Angeles’ fortunes sank or rose. Subscribing to the Booker T. Washington philosophy of racial uplift, the Forum advised black Angelenos to “conduct

⁵² *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1909.

⁵³ *California Eagle*, December 24, 1936.

themselves in such a manner as to win the respect of the people of their communities and thereby create favorable race sentiment.”⁵⁴

Although historians like to juxtapose the philosophies of Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, the case of black Los Angeles shows that their ideas were not necessarily irreconcilable. Los Angeles black bourgeoisie also seemingly embraced Dubois’ “talented tenth” doctrine. Unabashedly, they (rhetorically) assumed the reigns of racial uplift. By way of example and exertion of social pressure, the black elite tried in earnest to get those they deemed not on the program to conform. In this vein, the Forum made it “a permanent issue” to “work along moral lines” in “the suppression of the vicious element.” To control the image of black Los Angeles, they “from time to time appointed committees on strangers, to keep newcomers to [the] city in the proper channel for its moral uplift.” “These strangers [were] introduced to the Forum,” a member remarked, “and a chance given them to meet the best class of our race and become useful members of society.” Those who were not ready “to take on the responsibilities of life” were “ask[ed]...not to be stumbling blocks.”⁵⁵ Thus, aside from simply modeling respectability, Los Angeles’ black bourgeoisie felt it important to shape and patrol the boundaries of acceptable social behavior.

Defining social behavior involved educating the masses. In this endeavor, the Forum established weekly seminars that revolved around “current topics clipped from the daily papers.” Here, local, state and national political issues were of special concern. The Forum discussed topics such as the credentials of political candidates, city-wide political reforms, platforms of political parties, and school bond measures. The idea behind this kind of education was not to produce independent, free-thinking voters, but rather, to forge consensus around a particular

⁵⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1909.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

issue so as to increase black political power. Looked at another way, it was a mechanism for the informed (read middle-class) to inform (or tell) the less-informed (read working-class) how to vote. When the Forum “endorsed” a candidate or measure, they expected the community to follow suit. Power brokers in the city recognized the Forum’s sway by frequently sending representatives from their respective offices—ie... board of education, city attorney’s office, office of the mayor, health department, etc...—to its meetings to disseminate information and/or to garner support on a particular issue. The Forum also sponsored lectures, speeches and paper readings on topics as wide-ranging as the soundness of an industrial education, the fairness of the Alien Land Act, the linkages between “Mississippi, Africa, Los Angeles,” the agrarian roots of African Americans, healthful child-rearing, tuberculosis prevention and tips to good health, the potential benefits of New Deal projects and consumer cooperatives. The Forum clearly saw these engagements as opportunities to shape opinions and bend attitudes, as their appeals for listeners reflect. A typical announcement would exert subtle pressure by challenging the reader’s intellect and character. So “all intelligent Race members should expect to hear” the lecture. Or only “progressive members of the Race” should attend the speech. Or, all “upstanding Christian Race members” would be remiss not to attend the paper reading. Thus, the announcement worked to remind the reader of his obligation to get him to the Forum, where his outlook would undergo further development.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ It should be noted that aside from working to “pull up” the masses, the Forum also provided for the education of the exceptional. In fact, providing financial assistance to promising students attending college was one of the major philanthropic aims of the organization. Two of most notable recipients of the Forum’s benevolence was Ralph Bunche and Ruth Temple, Los Angeles’ first African American female doctor and founder of an important community health center.

Outside of the male-dominated Forum, perhaps the most ardent purveyors of middle-class culture were African American women.⁵⁷ Clubwomen, in particular, displayed tremendous zeal for racial uplift. Black Los Angeles had no shortage of women's clubs in the first half of the twentieth-century. A perusal of any of the black newspapers revealed "society pages" or "social intelligence" pages crammed with the clubwomen's events and "comings and goings." In 1933, a *Times* article estimated that there were over one hundred and twenty clubs in black Los Angeles.⁵⁸ If this number is even close to accurate, this is quite astounding considering that the black population of Los Angeles stood at roughly 39,000 in 1930.⁵⁹

In this respect, black Angelenos were in step with women across the country. The nationwide movement to establish women's clubs sprung out of progressive era concerns about the harmful effects of industrialization and urbanization. Clubs served as vehicles for women, particularly from middle-class backgrounds, to address perceived social ills and flex their political muscles in a period when they lacked the franchise.⁶⁰ For African American women, club work also entailed countering the deleterious effects of turn of the century American racism. The African American club movement reached a high point when Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin called for the establishment of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Founded in Washington D.C. in 1896, as a way to unite theretofore isolated organizations (including more than a few in Los Angeles) doing like work, the association's stated objective more generally

⁵⁷ Women, also, were elected officers of the Forum and participated in meeting. However, the great majority of the officers (and particularly the top officers) over the course of the institution's existence were men.

⁵⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, "Our Gay Black Way," June 18, 1933.

⁵⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of Population, 1930, Population and Housing for Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

⁶⁰ Californian women won the complete franchise on October 10, 1911 after the passage of Proposition 4. California became the sixth state in the nation to expand the boundaries of political citizenship in this way.

captured the missions and outlook of most clubs of the period. Their motto “Lifting as We Climb” reflected a talented tenth understanding of black middle-class women’s role in racial uplift. While historians identify 1890 to 1920 as the golden period for women’s clubs nationwide, in black Los Angeles the club movement outlived the Progressive era, flourishing well into the early 1950’s. However, although the middle-class pretensions maintained and concerns about social uplift continued, by the mid 1950’s more clubs became explicitly social in nature.

Self-help organizations (which we can consider clubs) were nothing new to black communities during the progressive era. As scholars, such as Gary Nash pointed out, black mutual aid societies existed in Northern cities before the American Revolution.⁶¹ What is striking, however, about the first half of the twentieth-century is the great number and variety of clubs organized, at least in part, to assist individuals and institutions in the black community. In Los Angeles and presumably across the country, there were generally four types of clubs: clubs focusing on intellectual/educational development, clubs focused on cultural development, clubs focused on socializing and clubs geared toward civic engagement. While most clubs usually had a focus, their activities reflected concerns and interests beyond their niche. For example, although most social clubs were not *as* civically oriented as other clubs, philanthropy was a central component to most of their missions.

No matter the type of club, these organizations projected a middle-class orientation. Clubwomen, a former resident of Central Avenue and club president later recalled, were on “the bourgeoisie side.” They “weren’t smoking, they weren’t drinking—maybe lightly—and they didn’t use curse words,” chimed in her husband. “We were better women,” she added. And

⁶¹ Gary Nash, *The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community 1720-1890* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

despite her contention that her social club was not exclusive, she emphasized that “*all* of the women in [her] club were educated” and that “not anybody” could join. Attempting to explain away any inference of “snootiness,” the former club president, reasoned it was the “poor blacks” that “stayed in their own corner—they didn’t want to be bothered with us—*they* segregated themselves.”⁶²

To be sure, though, for black Angelenos, club membership was a way “to separate,” or shall we say, to convey social standing and give expression to a very specific set of values. Club membership was a cultural marker; it was a way to *know* a person and place them on a social map. Answers to questions, such as—is she in a club? what club is she in? what *kind* of club is she in?—were of great social import. On the attendance rolls of the most prestigious clubs, you could expect to find the last names of Los Angeles’ most prominent families, such as, Owens, Alexander, Garrott, Somerville, Williams, Burke, Beavers, Nickerson, Houston, Blodgett, and Johnson.⁶³ Many of these women were educated and approached their club work with the presumption of leadership in setting standards and addressing community issues. They believed that their skill set and outlook placed them at the vanguard of racial uplift.

Their activities reflected the concerns, proclivities and attitudes typical of middle-class women of their era. The “disorderly” city offered all kinds of opportunities for clubwomen to do “good work.” For example, because so “many women of the race [were] compelled to be away from their homes during the entire day,” the Woman’s Day Nursery Association, established a system whereby club women would “care for [their] children in a comfortable home” away from

⁶² Edythe Espree, interview by author, January 27, 2011.

⁶³ It should come as no surprise that these families not only shared the same social circles, but also intermarried. For example, the earliest black elites, the Masons and the Owens were related by marriage; the Matthews and the Blodgetts were related by marriage; Samuel Browne married the daughter of George P. Johnson of Lincoln Motion Picture Company fame.

“the evil influence of the street.”⁶⁴ Similarly, the Sojourner Truth Club also worked to “rescue” working-class African Americans from their own condition. They offered unattached young women a “modern, model home.” However, for “working girls” to receive the good grace of the organization, they had to prove that they possessed “good character” and “temperate habits.”⁶⁵ Looking to care for youth outside the confines of their own home, clubwomen sought to redefine their roles as “social mothers.”

Other clubs sought social uplift through education. There was a plethora of clubs that embraced some facet of intellectual and/or cultural development. Established in 1903, the Women’s Progressive Club brought together Western literature, race pride, law and politics, studying Victorian authors, African culture and “the code of California.” The Child Study Circle discussed issues related to the “individual child,” including “causes of sensitiveness, untruthfulness and effects of different foods.” The Young Ladies’ Dramatic Club strove “to cultivate a desire for pure thought-inspiring literature.” The crème-de-la-crème of black society in the first few decades came together in the Phys-Art-Lit-Mor Club. Vada Somerville, one of early twentieth-century black Los Angeles’ most prominent socialites, established the club in 1913 as a self-improvement organization, stressing moral philosophy, art, literature and physical culture. Outside of their intellectual spaces, however, they were known by the larger community for their fashion shows, sponsorship of civic activities and philanthropy to community institutions. Somewhat more narrowly focused, the Women’s Political Study Club considered issues ranging from city and state measures, the efficacy of New Deal programs to the consequences of the dissolution of the Reichstag. The Dunbar Society also evidently dealt with the sticky issues of race and national citizenship. It staged a debate revolving around the

⁶⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1909.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

question: “Should Phillipinos [sic] have their independence.” Ruth Temple, Los Angeles’ first black female doctor, organized the Health Study Club at the YWCA in 1928. Meetings gave members an opportunity to hear the latest information from different experts on good health and medicine and receive information about city and county services. At any given meeting, attendees could expect to get advice on anything from tuberculosis prevention, infant nutrition, and home hygiene to properly parenting an adolescent. Consisting of members of Los Angeles’ early black families, the Pioneer Club worked to preserve and celebrate black life in the West.

Still, other organizations took the philanthropy through socializing approach to racial uplift. The Nannette club counted black Los Angeles’ well heeled as its members. Mostly a social club, it annually hosted a charity affair which was one of black Los Angeles’ biggest fundraisers and “best dressed events of the year.” In sum, African American women used club activities to expand their sphere of influence beyond the home. While some activities were simply extensions of society’s prescribed role for “respectable” middle-class women, such as, work at the Women’s day nursery and Sojourner Truth Home for Girls, other activities, such as political debates, directly challenged the notion of “noble motherhood.” Clubwomen did not eschew the role as mother and wife; many just did not want this identity to be all-encompassing. Succinctly describing the frustration of many, one clubwoman vented, “[Women have] grown tired of the purview which man has given her—that of being the drudge in excessive reproduction and housework.” “The married women in the Negro INTELLIGENTSIA,” she insisted, “is of the opinion that her leisure time should be productively employed and that she has no more right to waste her moments unproductively than her husband.” Instead, the clubwomen concluded, “She [should] use her spare time in adjusting the social and economic needs of her

community.”⁶⁶ In other words, clubwomen wanted a voice in community affairs and an outlet for their education and talents. The few clubs mentioned here are merely a small representation of the great variety of these outlets, but not nearly indicative of the great number.⁶⁷

The events sponsored by these organizations presented club members both the opportunity to display and model middle-class decorum. The events themselves not so subtly hinted at middle-class refinement. As the sheer number of announcements for these events reveals, teas and fashion shows were exceedingly popular. Dinner parties in (frequently rented) homes in the affluent Sugar Hill neighborhood were also common. As the glowing detailed accounts of these events attest to, those within “society” highly prized careful coordination of attire and party displays. For example, one recap of a “formal reception,” relayed to black Angelenos:

Society’s eyes were opened last evening... In [the host’s] living room and dining room were a mask of pink carnations and Baby’s breath. In one corner of the dining room, Mrs. White and Mrs. Johnson presided over the coffee table. In the other Miss Littlejohn Mrs. Logan served punch.

⁶⁶ *California Eagle*, June 9, 1933.

⁶⁷ Looking through black newspapers between 1910 and 1940, you find announcements for *numerous* clubs on a single page. A snap shot of just two issues of the *California Eagle* reveals the vast number of women’s clubs in operation. Organizations adverted included: Antique Art Club, Wilfandel Club, Native Daughters Club, Breakfast Club, Civil Queens Social Club, Women of the Hour, Ques Este Que Club, Novelty Limited Club, Zodiac Art Club of Economical and Industrial Housewives, Recondites, Native Californian’s Club, P.A.L.M Club, Women’s Liberty Club, Fleur de Lis Club, Western University Club, Ne Plus Ultra Club, Silver Lining Club, Allegro Club, Poro Agents Club, Jolly Nine Club, Golden Eagle Social Club, Pyramid Social Club, L.A. Art and Charity Club, Dazzling Debutants, Style Art Club, Silver Leaf Club, Er Quilous Club, Rosebud Girls, Les Mariee’s Club, Five and Over Charity Club, Lend A Hand Charity Club, Red Clover Art Club, Woman’s Charity Club, Twentieth Century Club, Kensington Art Club, Married Ladies Art Guild, Thrifty Housewives Club. I have omitted in this discussion men’s professional and social clubs, fraternal orders and fraternities (ie...Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi) and women’s sororities (Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta). But, to be sure, these groups played a prominent role in the community and also projected a middle-class orientation. Also, not mentioned here because it falls outside of our timeframe is Links, which was founded in L.A. in 1950 and currently active. I will explore the activities of another influential club—Our Author’s Study Club founded by Vassie Wright—in another chapter.

Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Creuzot, served the salad, while Mrs. Brooks along with Mrs. Tinsley served the choice ice cream and cake. Mrs. White was beautifully attired in a sleeveless gown trimmed with silver and a corsage of pink sweet peas and furns [sic], which made her look like every woman. Mrs. Johnson was just too charming in a gray sleeveless gown of Parisian designed with accessories to match her headdress was an Oriental comb. Mrs. Allen was beautifully attired in a red and black garden crepe trimmed with little rose buds. Mrs. Allen wore a bird of paradise in her hair. The hostess, Mrs. Tinsley wore Melrose with a corsage of white rose buds. Everybody left smiling wondering if here [sic] will ever be another party like this one.⁶⁸

Typically, a club's largest event of the year was a formal dance, usually advertised as a "grand ball," "gala," "cotillion" or some other term used to signify elegance. These were occasions to dress up. At exclusive club dances, only the "right class" should expect to gain entry. Most clubs, however, to cover expenses, openly advertised and welcomed those with "proper manners" and proper attire to attend their "greater than ever" dances. Yet still, as one former Central Avenue resident recalled, "you were special if you got a ticket to a [prestigious] dance." Once the advertisement went out in the newspapers, "you couldn't even get a ticket—because people were buying them up."⁶⁹ Highlighting the trend toward a proliferation of social clubs, by the 1940s this former resident remembered "having something to do every Saturday night." Fulfilling obligations for social uplift, clubs donated a sizeable share of the proceeds from these events to community institutions that projected middle-class values and/or explicitly supported racial uplift, most notably, the YMCA, YWCA, Sojourner Truth Home, (later) the Pilgrim House, East Side Settlement House, the local chapter of NAACP and the Urban League.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *California Eagle*, March 1926.

⁶⁹ Edythe Espree, interview by author, January 27, 2011.

⁷⁰ The "Colored" YMCA and the YWCA were among the biggest recipients of money from clubs. The 28th Street YMCA, just off Central Avenue, was viewed as one of the most important institutions in the community. Now registered as a Los Angeles historical landmark, famed black Angeleno architect Paul Williams designed the building, in part, from funds coming from the

Charity, however, was not the only way these women saw themselves “lifting as [they] climbed.” They understood their events to function as “encouragement to Negro business.” In 1926, the *California Eagle* acknowledged just this point by “[bringing] to the public’s attention” the less talked about beneficiaries of the Phys-Art-Lit-Mo fashion show. “Many of the handsome gowns, hats and well tailored suits,” are the “handiwork of most of the Negro Tailors, dressmakers and milliners of the city,” noted the writer.⁷¹ Had the writer been assessing the impact of more than one club and more than one event on the community’s economy, he could have extended the reach even further. Indeed, a whole internal economy spun around club life. Aside from tailors and seamstresses, clubwomen called on the services of beauticians, barbers, hairstylists, florists, caterers, waiters, bartenders, printers, promoters to people who hung broadsides. They provided opportunities for black musicians to hone their craft. In fact, many famous local black musicians got their start playing club engagements. A former promoter for the social club Allegretto recollected securing the talents of jazz artists Erroll Garner, Dinah Washington, Elvira Redd, Wardell Grey and Dexter Gordon before their careers took off.⁷² Clubs also provided black scholars and professionals a venue to share their ideas through lectures and speeches. Clubs rented out halls, homes and night clubs. They also sent advertising dollars and subscribers to black newspapers.⁷³ To no small degree, then, club life not only transmitted a set of principles, but it also subsidized a community economy.

community. As many scholars have explored, late nineteenth century reformers embraced the British-conceived YMCA as a means to transform unwieldy working-class youth into respectable middle-class citizens through healthy recreation, “morals and manners” training and Christian, vocational and formal education.

⁷¹ *California Eagle*, March 19, 1926.

⁷² Alfred Moore, interview by author, October 6, 2011.

⁷³ Of course, this was not all internal. Clubwomen called on the services of the Shrine, Ciro’s, Trocadero and other venues outside of the black community that catered to a white clientele most days of the week.

As we can just glimpse in the influence exerted by such organizations as women's clubs and the Los Angeles Forum, a middle-class orientation steeped in a talented tenth understanding of racial uplift coursed through community life in Central Avenue during the first three decades of the twentieth-century. Even removed from the sites of convergence for club women and the Forum, black Angelenos ran up against bourgeoisie assumptions and ideals. Revealing of the paternalistic attitudes imbedded in notions of racial uplift, the bourgeoisie and their organizations, for example, promoted community-wide "better behavior weeks" to "shake off the things that tend to keep us a backward people culturally."⁷⁴ The "Community Builders," a federation of clubs, initiated a campaign to "improve conditions in Central Avenue," that focused in part on juvenile delinquency, vice and unsanitary conditions. Attempting to shield the group from charges of practicing paternalism and perhaps acknowledging that past "clean-up" efforts aggravated class sensitivities, the executive secretary announced that "*this* [campaign] is no attempt to dictate to the people of this community." The black bourgeoisie and its aspirants also had no shortage of advice for the "unsophisticated" and they had no inhibitions in sharing it. They chastised parents in the editorial sections of black newspapers for not taking "proper interest in the school attended by their children."⁷⁵ They stressed thriftiness by berating chauffeurs who "lavish[ed] champagne and expensive dinners on his friends until his salary [was] all gone."⁷⁶ They charged "young negro mothers" for "keep[ing] us back" by "feeding [their] babies watermelon at 18 months, pot licker at two months, sweetened rags at teething time," hence, not "keep[ing] pace with the modern movement to "Keep Fit!"⁷⁷ They even directed their ire toward the next generation of the black middle-class. "It is said that drinking by

⁷⁴ *California Eagle*, November 20, 1936.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, February 19, 1937.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, June 18, 1937.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, August 7, 1936.

college students is becoming quite common,” observed *California Eagle* owner, Joe Bass. “The habit of drinking should most certainly be discouraged on the ground that it has a tendency to discourage high ideals.” Furthermore, because “the average [African American] college woman comes from the middle class [or lower],” lamented the editor, “when she appears at college overdressed or over decorated as to paint powder and other facial attractions in many instances she appears ridiculous.”⁷⁸

Community members also encountered the talented tenth middle-class mindset in times of crisis. Assuming “rightful” leadership, the black bourgeoisie inserted itself in community controversies, especially when the issue related to the larger white society. In these instances, the black bourgeoisie demanded the black community’s patience *and* inaction while they worked with whites with a stake in the issue. For example, when Hamburger department store dismissed fourteen “colored operators,” black leaders discouraged “colored citizens of Los Angeles” from “loudly discuss[ing]” the incident. They reassured the community that they met with the store “superintendent” and that “he assured [them] to a degree satisfactory that the boys were dismissed for other causes than race prejudice.” Until they shared all of the information from their investigation with the community, the black leaders insisted that black Angelenos remain “cool-headed,” for “[they] certainly deprecate[d] the attitude often assumed by [their] people in such matters.”⁷⁹ In other words, let the level-headed leadership within black bourgeoisie come to the conclusions and decide how to move forward on community issues. While the leaders were not prepared to issue a final determination just yet, it did not stop them from insinuating who and what was at fault. “Too little care or attention is given the laboring class of our people, who seem

⁷⁸ Ibid., November 13, 1925.

⁷⁹ Ibid., February 27, 1922.

to have faint conception of their position as employe [sic] vs. employer,” a leader wrote.⁸⁰ Surely, what the leader meant to say was that many blacks within the working-class needed middle-class assistance in a values adjustment, so as to avoid future firings and smudges on the image of black Los Angeles.

Conclusion

In 1933, a writer captured the essence of the middle-class talented tenth ethos when he laid out the pathway to black progress: “It will be absolutely NECESSARY to take “Politics” (the science of good government; not a hat-in-the-hand Institution) out of the hands of the MANY, and place it into those of a FEW, who shall be RECOGNIZED LEADERS of its people and accountable to them for their action.” “A REAL LEADER must possess the pre-requisite of HONOR, and INTEGRITY, INTELLIGENCE (Education and Learning), INITIATIVE, EXECUTIVE ABILITY, and an INDOMITABLE WILL.”⁸¹ To secure a “guarantee of ‘Negro Patronage’,” he called for a “Joint Political Council” composed of “the HEADS” of black Los Angeles. But by this time, this kind of approach to racial uplift was under duress. In the same year that this writer called for top-down democracy, newspaperwoman Charlotta Bass, a soon-to-be widow and reluctant “bourgie” populist, blasted the city council for rejecting a request for a permit to stage a “We Do Our Part” Parade “against non-employment of Negroes by such corporations as the Southern California Telephone Company.”⁸² There had been a “No Milk for

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., October 13, 1933.

⁸² *California Eagle*, November 3, 1933. Charlotta Bass’ life gives us a good vantage point to view the crosscurrents of values, thoughts and strategies whirling around in Los Angeles’ black community over the first half of the twentieth-century. When she arrived in Los Angeles, she

our Babies Parade,” “Hunger Parade,” “parades to encourage public opinion in the interest of some industrial movements,” and even a “Mexican emancipation Parade,” but to her recollection, “this was the *first time* that *Negroes* asked to parade [for racial justice] and of course the noble city fathers said NO!”⁸³ “I do not doubt, but that some big Negro political boss,” Bass inveighed, “told the worthy City Council that it did not have to pay any attention to such a request.” Seemingly coming to an epiphany on the efficacy of mass movement, Bass recalled: “A few weeks ago a delegation of 17 dark people visited the *New York Daily News* and protested against its consistent policy of stirring racial antagonisms. I am asking a few hundred people to can on the Southern California Telephone Company.”⁸⁴ Two decades earlier, Bass likely would have considered such a comment unseemly had someone else made it. However, the Great Depression and the inclusionary politics of the New Deal both opened a window for the masses to get involved and resurrected a language and ethos oriented around the “common man,” or in its plural form, “the people.” As we shall explore in the next chapter, this new development would have deep and lasting consequences for Central Avenue. When Samuel Browne arrived to

was a staunch Lincoln Republican. While her paper always rhetorically aligned itself with the people, her early writings show she carried the same bourgeoisie assumptions and sensibilities as described above. In a span of fifty years, Bass moved from the Republican Party, to the Democratic Party, to the mid-twentieth century Progressive Party (where she became the first African American woman nominated by a party for the Vice President of the United States). Indeed she moved so far to the left by mid century that the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department’s Red Squad opened a file and interviewed her on suspicion she was a communist, if not, a fellow traveler. Above all else, Bass was a pragmatist. She did not hesitate to embrace any strategy that she felt would advance the cause of black Americans. Just to show how she made seemingly contradictory ideologies work together, Bass was an officer for the NAACP and the Universal Negro Improvement Association at the same time. That is, she worked for an organization whose central purpose was to integrate people of color *into* American life and an organization that revived the “Back to Africa” movement and promoted separation. Perhaps due to personal transformations, Bass seemed to have her foot in two camps in the 1930’s and early 1940’s—sometimes she called for a solution through mass action and at other times she called for community restraint and a solution by black elite.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

teach at Jefferson High in 1936, this is the heritage he carried as he jumped headlong into now whirling crosscurrents of ideology and culture in black Los Angeles.

Chapter 2: “Cleaning Up Jazz”: Samuel Browne and the Rise of Assertive Black Folks in New Deal Los Angeles

In a March 1923 editorial, Joe Bass, owner of the *California Eagle* and one of Los Angeles’ perennial torchbearers for a middle-class outlook ruefully remarked, “the world is going crazy with jazz, the modern historical [sic] music has given mankind the rickets. It cannot soothe or refresh by its figgety [sic] strains. Nobody is satisfied, but everybody is restless and discontent—Jazzy music makes them so.”⁸⁵ Our first inclination is to connect these comments to anxieties over generational change. Seen this way, Joe Bass, the “old fogey,” is uncomfortable with the changing musical tastes. This certainly could be the case here. However, beyond generational divisions, debates over popular culture can also reveal the contested meanings and boundaries of class. Thus, before we throw Bass into the dustbin of has-beens, it would do us well to consider that Samuel Browne, a Jazz Age adolescent, too, believed jazz improper and harmful to the human constitution. Speaking to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, the venerated music teacher acknowledged that he did not want to teach the “ole devil music” when he arrived at Jefferson High School. Instead, he intended “to challenge the kids and give them exposure” to the classical form. Chopin and Mozart was what he had in mind, not Duke Ellington and Count Basie. In the end, Browne reluctantly “put his arms around jazz” at his students’

⁸⁵ *California Eagle*, March 31, 1923.

behest. But to do so and feel comfortable, Browne later revealed he had to “salvage it” and “make it respectable.”⁸⁶

In Browne’s inner-conflict and use of cultural speak we can detect not only the discomfort of a single man but, the tension between two black Los Angeleses. Indeed, just as Browne entered Jefferson High to teach, Los Angeles’ black community was undergoing tremendous transformations. Spurred by the inclusionary politics of the New Deal and a mass migration of southern African Americans to the area during World War II, purveyors of black Los Angeles’ middle-class orientation increasingly confronted stiffer challenges for sway from an ever-growing working-class population. Never quite comfortable with the working class and their manner, yet enticed by the potential benefits for black advancement found in greater numbers, Los Angeles’ black middle class behaved in unpredictable ways between 1935 and 1950. In a schizophrenic attempt to make right the new social, cultural and political landscape, the arbiters of a middle-class orientation both rejected and embraced, resisted and accommodated, integrated and segregated, and supported and abandoned the working class and their culture. Arriving to teach at a hub of community life in 1936, Samuel Browne ran up against the tensions wrought by this change on a day-to-day basis with the arrival of each new enrollee to Jefferson High. Browne, a man raised in a period when a middle-class ethos held sway, now stood at the crossroads of culture and in a liminal space between two eras as a teacher at Jefferson High. Thus, Browne’s experience can tell us just as much about the social history of Central Avenue as it can about the musical history.

⁸⁶ Browne was twenty-eight years old when he entered Jefferson High—hardly out of the age range to enjoy “edgy” music.

To understand Samuel Browne's seemingly anachronistic views, we must delve into his early background. Surely, had black Los Angeles's bourgeoisie taken notice of young Samuel Browne, they would have been pleased with his life course. In many ways, his life very much conformed to the expectations embedded within the middle-class orientation. Born in 1908, Browne took an early liking to music. At the age of seven, Samuel Browne began his musical odyssey at the Congregational Church at Thirty-fourth and Central, under the tutelage of the Pastor's wife, Amelia Lightener. Realizing fairly quickly that Browne possessed extraordinary talent, Lightener and others in the church encouraged him to train under a teacher who was "more widely known," where he "might be able to accelerate a little more and gain a little more exposure."⁸⁷ For the next ten years, then, Browne studied under the flamboyant, if not eccentric, William Wilkins, whom many in the community considered one of the greatest pianists and music teachers in California. Describing the teacher's style, Browne later recalled that he wore long hair, a "nice big cowboy-like hat," a "big bow tie," gloves, and "cape now and then," accompanied by "a cane with a golden knob."⁸⁸ On Sundays, the teacher would drag "several pianos" out of his home on Fourteenth Street and Central Avenue and have Browne and his fellow students play classical music for the passing streetcars. Highlighting the tensions arising from the contest for cultural sway, Browne remembered that "conservatives [in the community] did not appreciate [Wilkins] as he was so

⁸⁷ Samuel Browne, Bette Cox, editor/interviewer, *Central Avenue: It's Rise and Fall, 1890-1955* (Los Angeles: BEEM Publications, 1993), 97

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 97, 99.

dramatic and wonderful...but he was all they had—the only community music teacher at the time.”⁸⁹

Exhibiting the drive for upward mobility that was central to the black bourgeoisie’s formula for racial uplift, Browne kept formal education at the center of his development. Ever the good student, Brown studied classical music and played in the orchestra as one of the few African Americans at Jefferson High School in the mid 1920s. Outside of school and Wilkins’ Piano Academy, Browne honed his soon-to-be-craft by carefully studying the performances at the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Upon graduation at Jeff, Browne enrolled at the University of Southern California in 1926 to train to become a music teacher in Los Angeles schools. Again, as one of a few black students, Browne worked his way through college with the financial assistance of his uncles and grandmother and by shining shoes and working in church choirs on weekends. Even though Browne earned a Bachelor’s and later a Master’s degree in music and education, graduated with honors and earned membership into Phi Kappa Laude honor society, his future in teaching, at least in Los Angeles was far from certain. Later, he recalled one of his professors assuring him that “there will never be a ‘Negra’ teaching [high school] in the school system of Los Angeles.”⁹⁰ This prediction, of course, turned out to be wrong. Nevertheless, racial prejudice did manage to keep Browne out of public schools for at least five years after the completion of his degrees.

His response to these kinds of slights corresponds with one of the major strands of the early black bourgeoisie’s strategy for racial uplift. According to Browne’s reconstruction of this period, this setback “didn’t bother [him].” He “just had to find other

⁸⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 103.

employment” and “wait for the opening of opportunity.”⁹¹ In fact, in Browne’s narration of his life story, each time he confronted racial prejudice, he responded coolly and with a confidence that his ability would *eventually* overcome bigotry. In another incident, for example, when officers for the honor society told Browne that they would nominally admit him if he did not expect to go to their banquets, he recalled replying, “No, I don’t need to attend. That’s not my prime interest at all.”⁹² To the extent that Browne subscribed to Booker T. Washington’s notion that “in all things that are purely social we [blacks and whites] can be as separate as the fingers” is unknowable. Yet, Browne’s response that he “didn’t care about the social aspects of belonging to [the honor society]” jibed with Washington’s contention that “the wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle.”⁹³ As pointed out in last chapter, this “push onward and earn respect from the larger society” approach, pejoratively known as an accommodationist position, held favor with many in the early twentieth-century black bourgeoisie, who did not want to upset the delicate social balance that ostensibly offered black Angelenos comparatively more advantages than their brethren in eastern cities. As we shall see again later in this chapter, Browne did not respond, at least in his reconstruction of the past, to racism in “radical” ways. Indeed, in his recounting of his reactions to racial prejudice, he remained “cool-headed” and patient—two central virtues of the early twentieth-century black middle-class ethos.

⁹¹ Ibid., 103.

⁹² Ibid., 102.

⁹³ Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Compromise,” Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 583–587.

Browne's comportment reflected his middle-class sensibilities in other ways as well. By all accounts, Browne modeled bourgeois respectability. Former students and community residents remember him as poised, soft-spoken, astute and impeccably dressed. Browne's neighbor, Marshal Royal, recalled "he was a very gentle, kind, orderly sort of fellow all his life." "He never raised his voice much above a whisper and was well thought of and respected."⁹⁴ Former student, Art Farmer described Browne as "reserved" (in a dignified manner) and "always in control." "Sam Browne was a very quiet person," he recollected. "He kept order by his personality."⁹⁵ Jack Kelson, one of Browne's first students, remembered Browne as "supremely self-confident" and temperate. He was "very low-key, soft-spoken and tall." He "looked like he never overate, because he remained quite slim and always quite impressive in his appearance." He was not "pretentious in any of his gestures," Kelson recalled.⁹⁶ Photos of Browne confirm his attention to attire. In the parlance of cultural speak, Browne is never found "dressing down." Without exception, Browne can be seen wearing a suit (typically a three piece) and tie in various settings. To Kelson's mind, Browne was representative of an era. The "relaxed thing," he posited, "happened after World War II." He "very" clearly

⁹⁴ Marshal Royal, "Central Avenue Sounds," interview by Steven Isoardi, oral history transcript, 1996, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁹⁵ Art Farmer, "Central Avenue Sounds," interview by Steven Isoardi, oral history transcript, 1996, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁹⁶ Jack Kelso, "Central Avenue Sounds," interview by Steven Isoardi, oral history transcript, 1993, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

remembered “black men [like Browne] having the appearance of almost automatically demanding respect, because they simply looked like cultured gentlemen.”⁹⁷

Browne’s choice in a lifelong partner also sheds some light on his cultural leanings. On March 19, 1937, the *California Eagle* announced on its front page Samuel Browne’s impending marriage to Virgel Johnson, who was a young woman “prominent in local social affairs.”⁹⁸ Just over two months later, an *Eagle* reporter gave a detailed account of the wedding, which was “the culmination of a romance that flowered since” their days as students at Jefferson High School.⁹⁹ The dynamic reverend, community organizer and Jeff alum Clayton Russell presided over the ceremony at People’s Independent Church of Christ, where Samuel not only worshipped, but, also, worked as music director. Virgel wore a “wedding gown of almost indescribable beauty... reminiscent of the gowns worn in the royal courts of the Middle Ages.” Her “tight fitting leg o’ mutton sleeves burst into fullness at her shoulders and the richness of the dress’ brocaded satin swept far behind her in a regal train.” As guests anxiously awaited the couples approach down an “aisle marked with tall waxen tapers” to “an altar of breathless, fragile beauty bedecked with evergreen, fern palms and pastel old-fashioned flowers,” they listened to “strains of ‘Kamenow-Ostrow’” by classical composer Anton Rubinstein. After Virgel “plighted her troth” to Samuel, friends and relatives reconvened at the Johnson home, where they crowded around the “wide veranda to await Virgel’s appearance to traditionally toss her bouquet.” Bidding farewell, as they adjourned for their honeymoon, the couple climbed into a “glistening café au lait Buick, a gift of the

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ *California Eagle*, March 19, 1937.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

groom to his bride,” and “shot up the tree lined street before finally disappearing around the bend.”¹⁰⁰ In short, the wedding was befitting a couple of Samuel’s and Virgel’s stature. The writer’s description of the people, decorations, music, clothes, home and car was an unmistakable nod to middle-class refinement and comfort.

Browne found someone who shared his middle-class orientation. Virgel’s father was born in Colorado and her mother in Alabama. Virgel was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1913. In the 1920 Census, the enumerator identified the family as “Mulatto.”¹⁰¹ Ten years later, the Johnsons were classified as “Negro,” likely due to the reductive logic within the new special instructions to enumerators that collapsed any percentage of African lineage into black.¹⁰² In any case, both of Virgel’s parents were of lighter complexion and her uncle on her father’s side, for whom she was named, passed as white.¹⁰³ In 1916, the family settled in the Central Avenue district and quickly became active in community affairs. By the mid-1920s, we find George as first vice-commander of the Ben Bowie Post (black) American Legion and Rose an officer in the women’s club, the Loyalettes.

Both of Virgel’s parents held highly visible jobs for African Americans during the period. Virgel’s father, George P. Johnson, established the “race film” company Lincoln

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., July 2, 1937.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of Population, 1920, Population and Housing for Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

¹⁰² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of Population, 1930, Population and Housing for Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

¹⁰³ George P. Johnson, “African American History,” interview by Adelaide Tusler and Elizabeth Dixon, oral history transcript, 197, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Motion Pictures in 1916 with his more famous brother, actor Nobel Johnson.¹⁰⁴ However, despite the success of Lincoln Pictures' production *Trooper K*, the rising cost of film-making sank the venture by 1923. Fortunately for the family, George retained his job as a mail clerk with the post office—a highly regarded position at the time and one that was most commonly extended to African Americans with lighter complexions—throughout his efforts at Lincoln. Although George fretted about the *kind* of education he received at Hampton Institute, the school apparently provided him with enough skills to simultaneously start the Pacific Coast News Bureau, which compiled and disseminated “Negro news of national importance” to black newspapers throughout the country.¹⁰⁵

Like her father, Virgel's mother, Rose Johnson, may also have benefited from her light complexion in securing a position as an elevator operator at a major department store. At a time when the vast majority of black women were locked in a rigidly segregated labor market as domestics, the job of elevator operator came with a degree of social prestige. But for Rose, this was not necessarily a step up. Prior to coming Los Angeles, she was a teacher in a government school in Muskogee, Oklahoma, which suggests she possessed at least a fair amount of formal education.¹⁰⁶ In any event, while Rose may have possessed the skills necessary to operate an elevator, it was most likely her light complexion that opened up the possibility in Los Angeles. It was common practice of downtown businesses in Los Angeles to employ *only* light skin African American women for this kind of work. Contemporary observers widely-discussed and

¹⁰⁴ Demonstrating his concern for education and uplift, George P. Johnson donated a large “Negro” film collection to UCLA before his death.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson interview. George contended that Hampton's emphasis on “the 3 Rs” in training black teachers to teach in Southern schools failed to meet the objectives of higher education.---clearly he is in the Du Bois camp here.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

roundly decried this doling out of opportunities along the color spectrum within the African American community. Though the chapter before us explores the difference that class made, it should be duly noted the difference that color made in black Los Angeles. The Johnsons' opportunities just hint at how color and class colluded in early twentieth-century urban black communities.

Reaping the benefits of employment stability and relatively high wages, the Johnsons bought a "nice five-room cottage" in the late 1920s on 35th Street (off Central Avenue) just as whites were moving out of the neighborhood.¹⁰⁷ Equating homeownership with social standing to evidence the family's upward climb, George later boasted, "we were in a very [good neighborhood] --all the doctors and lawyers and big shots all lived around me; we had the prettiest block over there on 35th Street." Although the "big shots" were mostly Jewish when the Johnsons moved in, the neighborhood's transition to an African American community apparently did not *immediately* threaten their status. According to George, prominent black Angelenos, including "all the Negro businessmen," and "three or four doctors and lawyers," took the place of Jews on their block.

The "prettiest block" did not retain its appeal for long, however. Capturing both the processes shaping mid twentieth century black Los Angeles and the attitudes of the black middle class, George lamented that the black professionals on his block started moving out one by one for points westward. "That left me pretty near alone over there," George recalled. Unlike the last neighborhood transition, "*New* people were coming in and they were a different type entirely." Rather than stay put, George later remembered

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

telling his family, “We’ve got to get out of here.”¹⁰⁸ They moved further south down Central to 55th Street.

George’s narration of his neighborhood’s transitions is filled with socially coded language. George seems to derive the greatest satisfaction from his 35th street neighborhood when “there were no Negroes going south beyond 12th Street.” Not that George objected to living with members of his own race. He appears equally as proud when black professionals move in. Still for George, being one of the first to move into a “very good [white] neighborhood” was a symbol of status. In other words, the racial makeup of the neighborhood stood in as an indicator of the family’s class. When African American newcomers made their way to the neighborhood, George remained pleased, making it a point to cite their professional backgrounds. But these newcomers, according to George, “soon left [him] pretty near alone.” Yet, the Johnsons, of course, were not *really* all alone on 35th Street. They were surrounded by “new people,” who were “a *different type entirely*.”¹⁰⁹ Who were these “new people” George spoke of? Looking at the 1940 Census tract, they were nearly all black and by the 1950 Census tract they were all black.¹¹⁰ So why did George view these people as *entirely* different and find commonality with the “big shot” Jews on his block? George’s experience with neighborhood transition highlight the fault lines within the burgeoning black community along Central Avenue and reveal the anxieties associated with cultural encounters. Put simply, George perceived these “entirely different people” coming from a foreign,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

¹¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of Population, 1950, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

inferior and degenerative class/culture. For George, it appears that class was of greater import than race when it came to neighbors. As we shall see later, George was indeed not alone. The misgivings of many other black middle-class Angelenos pushed them to move in search of not only better housing, but better neighbors. In attitude, values and actions, then, Samuel Browne's wife and in-laws bore the marks of the middle class. When Browne arrived at Jefferson High to teach in 1936, this was the cultural baggage he carried.

That Browne's choices and behavior conformed to a black middle class orientation does not mean that this was foreordained. Beneath the celebratory newspaper articles, tributes and his self-styled life story is a family background that raises more questions than those in the black bourgeoisie would be comfortable. Browne's neighbor, Marshall Royal, alluded to the dubiousness of Browne's past when he told an interviewer: "[Browne] actually lived with his grandmother. I never knew his mother."¹¹¹ Royal may never have crossed paths with Samuel's mother. The 1910 census locates two year old Samuel Browne in Louisville, Kentucky in a household consisting of his grandmother, Columbia Brown and his uncle Benjamin Brown.¹¹² Though Royal did not care to note the household dynamics beyond this curious observation, he could have told the interviewer he never knew Samuel's father either. The 1920 Census finds twelve year old Samuel in Los Angeles in a home on 33rd Street directly behind Jefferson High School living with his grandmother, who was head of household and his uncles Hayes

¹¹¹ Royal interview.

¹¹² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of Population, 1910, Population and Housing for Louisville, Kentucky Area*.

and Benjamin, all of whom were listed as “mulattos.”¹¹³ In 1930, twenty-two year old “David” (as the enumerator identified Samuel) lives in the same small bungalow on 33rd Street with his grandmother, his uncles Hayes, who worked as a pool hall operator and Benjamin, who worked as a porter and his aunt Alice, who was a housemaid.¹¹⁴ Similar to his future in-laws, the Browne family also made the transition from “mulatto” to “negro” in this ten-year span. For much of Browne’s young life, then, we find three to four adults, none of whom are Samuel’s parents and one of which held a dubious occupation [by middle class standards] living in a small home. This arrangement hardly conformed to the black bourgeoisie’s notions of respectability that prized privacy, “respectable” work and a “stable” nuclear family.

More intriguing (and maybe just as telling) are the silences, omissions, changes and frictions within the sources linked to Browne’s past. While we can only speculate what happened to Samuel’s mother and father, it is striking that Browne never mentions them in his oral history. Unlike all other interviewees in Bette Cox’s *Central Avenue—Its Rise and Fall*, Browne elides his family background all together when speaking about his youth. Instead, his testimony focuses solely on his musical development. The only exception is when he acknowledges his grandmother’s and *uncles*’ financial assistance during college.¹¹⁵ This acknowledgment, however, is made all the more confounding by the 1920 Census that identifies one of the men he refers to as his uncle (Benjamin) as his father. Certainly, this could have been a mistake by the enumerator. But the absence of

¹¹³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of Population, 1920, Population and Housing for Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of Population, 1930, Population and Housing for Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

¹¹⁵ Browne, interview by Cox, 101.

either a living or deceased mother and/or father in all his reconstructions of his life story, including oral histories, newspaper interviews and tribute biographies begs the questions: Who were Browne's parents? Where were Browne's parents? Why did Browne withhold sharing this past? Both the historical record *and* Samuel Browne remained silent on these queries.

Perhaps more perplexing is that Browne maintained until his death that he was born in Los Angeles. We find this city in his oral history, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* and even on his death certificate. However, as noted above, the 1910 census locates Browne in Louisville and lists his place of birth as "Kentucky." In fact, we find nearly his entire household in Louisville in every census going back to 1880. The only exception is Hayes, who was likely the family's trailblazer as a "servant" in Los Angeles in 1910. Given the cost of travel, it is unlikely that Samuel was born in Los Angeles in 1908, returned to Louisville before the 1910 census and came back to Los Angeles less than five years later. Moreover, enumerators for both the 1920 and 1930 censuses listed "Kentucky" as Samuel's birthplace. It was not until 1940, when Samuel became head of his own household that the census identifies his place of birth as "California." Here again, then, the historical record runs up against a self-constructed past, resulting in a muddled history.

Because what is known about Samuel Browne's personal life comes directly or indirectly from him, the frictions in his life story are not easily discoverable from the historical record. This, in part, is due to the fact that Samuel Brown is not Samuel Browne. At some point in the late 1930s, Samuel made a conscious choice to change his last name from Brown to Browne. Browne's letters from this period reflect this uneasy

transition, as he and his correspondents alternatively used Mr. Brown and/or Mr. Browne, sometimes in the same communiqué. By the early 1940s, Samuel had successfully made the switch; Samuel was Mr. Browne. Letters, newspapers articles, legal documents, yearbooks and commemoration programs henceforth referred to him only as Samuel Browne. So whereas W.E.B. Du Bois wrote to Mr. Brown in 1929, Arthur Spingarn penned Mr. Browne in 1942.¹¹⁶ This transition not only engendered a change in his identity, but a break from his past. The Samuel Brown from the 1910 Census, who was born in Louisville, Kentucky and raised in a household with no parents, was not the same Samuel Browne who, according to a death certificate, was born in California to a mother with a maiden name of Browne. And, yet, they were one and the same person.

Sometimes history gives way to memory, as is the case with the life of Samuel Browne. Few people in Central Avenue remember the Samuel Brown born parentless in Kentucky. The collective memory recalls an “orderly” and extraordinarily talented and giving native son. Speculation is uncomfortable for the historian. But when memory washes over history and the shards of the *lived* experience fail to glimmer enough to make out a picture, it is all we are left with. We can only surmise, then, why Samuel Browne changed his name. Maybe he was running from a background that did not conform to his orientation or possibly it was simply a stylistic change. We are also left to wonder why Browne changed his place of birth. Perhaps Browne wanted to firmly affix himself to the “pioneer” era in black Los Angeles and steer clear of any association with southern migrants of the post-World War II era.¹¹⁷ Or maybe he was always told he was

¹¹⁶ Samuel Browne Scrapbook, Mayme Clayton Museum.

¹¹⁷ Many people spoke (and still speak) of a pre-war/post-war split within black Los Angeles. People who had (or have) connections to the pre-war era maintain that pre-

born in Los Angeles. While the historical record may never satisfactorily answer these questions, we know that elements of Browne's background ran counter to the values associated with the black middle class ethos and thus, contrary to our memory of him. Yet still, Samuel Browne was middle-class. He was middle class to all who knew him because he "acted" middle class, even if that may have required dissemblance. Hence, Browne's life's path shows how outlook and performance and not necessarily condition defined middle-class. Put another way, Browne's early life reveals that the line between middle class and working class in early twentieth-century black Los Angeles was both thin and permeable.

Again, Browne did not *have* to adopt the middle-class sensibility. Aside from his own "inauspicious" background, Browne was most certainly exposed to other cultural currents. While much of chapter one explored the middle-class ethos that *overlay* black Los Angeles, strands of working-class culture *and* "street" culture also flowed through community life in the first three decades of the twentieth-century. Several scholars have traced the imprints of their influence. In Donald Bogle's book on black entertainment in Los Angeles, for example, he provides readers a view into the night clubs and after-hour spots on and around Central Avenue, where "sporting" types listened to jazz, the "modern hysterical music," while satisfying their baser desires.¹¹⁸ Max Bond spotlights vice along Central Avenue—most prominently prostitution—in his sociological study on

World War II black Angelenos possessed greater ability and character than those that followed. The word "pioneer" is most often employed to designate these individuals or families.

¹¹⁸ Donald Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams The story of Black Hollywood* (New York: One World Ballantine Books, 2005).

1930 black Los Angeles.¹¹⁹ Turning attention to the working class experience, Marne Campbell argued that the Apostolic Faith Mission’s highly emotionalized Azusa Street Revivals of the first and second decades of the twentieth-century “represented [a] form of working class insurgency.”¹²⁰ Mark Wild, also, finds working-class agency as he takes readers to early twentieth-century Central Los Angeles neighborhoods to hear “street speakers” give voice to working-class concerns. Though Wild’s working-class are a diverse group, they include African-Americans and operate in the area Browne traversed.¹²¹ So while the middle-class ethos struck a dominant tone, despite the black bourgeoisie’s best efforts, it never had a complete hold on black Los Angeles.

“We firmly believe that *the people of our district are intelligent enough to decide matters pertaining to their economic and social welfare.*” – Augustus Hawkins, 1934.

While these influences were ever-present, the *legitimacy* of a working-class/common man orientation in black Los Angeles really did not gain traction until the mid-1930s—just as Samuel Browne started at Jefferson High—with the inclusionary politics of the New Deal. The emergence of this new outlook and political orientation and the contestation over its legitimacy can be seen in the pages of black Los Angeles’ two largest newspapers. Both the *Sentinel* and the *Eagle* gave voice to this heretofore silenced struggle for cultural (and now political) sway in black Los Angeles. While scholars, such as Douglas Flamming, have explored the New Deal’s impact on black Angelenos’

¹¹⁹ Max Bond, “The Negro in Los Angeles” (PhD Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1936).

¹²⁰ Marne Campbell, “Heaven’s Ghetto?: African Americans and Race in Los Angeles 1850-1917 (PhD Dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, 2006).

¹²¹ Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

material and political life, fewer have considered the cultural transformations wrought by the New Deal's "people" politics. The coverage of the 1934 62nd Assembly Race gives us a good window into this development.

On April 7, 1932, soon-to-be President, Franklin D. Roosevelt declared to a Depression weary, radio-listening public:

These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power, for plans like those of 1917 that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

Less than two years later, Augustus Hawkins, a recent graduate of UCLA, ran for assemblyman of the 62nd District which encompassed the Central Avenue neighborhood and placed the essence of this ideological position at the core of his campaign. "Gus" entered the race as a self-proclaimed ardent supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal. As such, his campaign closely echoed the policies, philosophies and rhetoric of this political ethos. His main opposition, Frederick Roberts, was the Republican incumbent of sixteen years and California's first African American legislator. Given African American's traditional loyalty to the party of Lincoln and Roberts' name recognition within the community, Hawkins faced a daunting challenge.¹²² While the outcome of the election was far from inevitable, Hawkins held one distinct advantage—the Great Depression. That is, the economic crisis held out the opportunity for a Democrat to connect with a traditionally Republican electorate, who had become

¹²² Going into the election, the 62nd district had 20,917 registered Republicans and 17,712 Democrats.

disenchanted with a GOP associated with big business, laissez-faire capitalism and Herbert Hoover.

Attempting to wrench political gain from economic crisis, Hawkins did what many Democrats of this era did; he aligned himself with “the people” and cast his opponent as part of “the establishment.” From the outset of his campaign, he carefully honed his language for the “forgotten man.” In Hawkins’ initial announcement for candidacy, he promised “prosperity for the *masses*.” Pitting “the people” against the “interests” and challenging the “talented tenth” form of leadership, Hawkins proclaimed: “We firmly believe that *the people* of our district are intelligent enough to decide matters pertaining to *their* economic and social welfare; and prefer a consideration of these factors. Public office involves public service and not self-worship.”¹²³ His supporters, too, branded Hawkins as “a consistent fighter for the common man.” “He has always stressed the recognition of the needs of the masses rather than the present system of distribution of fat jobs to a chosen few,” they emphasized.¹²⁴ To further solidify his link to “the peoples” cause, Hawkins endorsed Upton Sinclair’s End Poverty In California [EPIC] plan, which promised jobs for the masses through a state takeover of idle factories.

In the run-off, Hawkins and his allies sharpened the contrast between himself and Assemblyman Roberts. In a press release two weeks before the election Hawkins declared: “My opponent does not represent the people.” Working the rhetorical question, Hawkins asked, Did he represent us when he voted AGAINST decreasing our gas, telephone and electric rates? Did he represent us when he voted against a reduction in the

¹²³ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 12, 1934.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1934.

7 cent street care fare? Did he represent us when he voted against the many measures compelling the Railroads to employ US? Has he represented the best interests of our district in protecting us on our jobs or helping us to secure any jobs?" Hawkins continued, "I repeat this is the people's fight. If they are in favor of sending to Sacramento someone to vote against their interests then my opponent should be returned. But if they are in favor of a change and ACTION, if they desire NEW LEADERSHIP, if they wish greater recognition, if they wish someone to fight FOR and not against" them, "I say vote for these principles by casting your vote for me." Hawkins concluded: "THIS IS NOT MY FIGHT; THIS IS OUR FIGHT."¹²⁵

Here, then, Hawkins tactically constructed an us ("the people") against them (the few elites) dichotomy. It is not by happenstance that Hawkins used the phrase "the people" five times in the short statement and juxtaposed "us" or "our" to "them" and "their" throughout. Moreover, Hawkins' "NEW LEADERSHIP" called forth the participation of the masses in "the people's fight." Jettisoning the paternalistic form of leadership embraced by the black bourgeoisie, Hawkins tapped into the New Deal political culture that (rhetorically) called for bottom up democracy. Reinforcing this framing of voters' choice, the Sentinel, "the only newspaper to support Hawkins," added that the Democratic candidate was the only "man who represent[ed] the changing and broader social outlook."¹²⁶ In contrast, Roberts failed at "reconciling the interests of his constituents with those of powerful groups whose desires ha[d] been diametrically

¹²⁵ Ibid., October 18, 1934.

¹²⁶ Ibid., September 20, 1934

opposed to those of the people.” The true choice, then, according to the *Sentinel*, was between “the progressive and the reactionary.”¹²⁷

The *California Eagle* saw the choice differently. Although grieving from the recent death of their longtime editor, Joe Bass, the *Eagle* staff found time to throw their full support behind Roberts just two weeks before the election, warning “Roberts or Ruin.” The *Eagle*, too, perceived a dichotomy; “it was not,” however, “merely a race between Republicans and Democrats.” The election was “a race between experience and lack of experience; a race between wisdom and lack of wisdom; between calm and proven judgment and hot-headed radicalism.” Voters should not bet the districts’ future on the “costly experimentation” of a “communist and a socialist.”¹²⁸ “Think twice before voting,” the *Eagle* implored. Hawkins’ populist rhetoric was merely an attempt to “exploit the common people’s cry for food in the promotion of [Roosevelt’s] political machine.”¹²⁹ Clearly, then, the *Eagle* discerned the changing political culture and recognized the seductive appeal of bottom up democracy to the masses. Charlotta Bass and the black bourgeoisie may have also sensed the *implications* of such a transformation to cultural relations within black Los Angeles. In short, for black Angelenos, this political

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, November 1, 1934.

¹²⁸ *California Eagle*, November 1934. Apparently, the *Eagle* writer could not decide how “extreme” Hawkins was.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, October 16, 1936. Though this quote came from Hawkins’ reelection campaign against Roberts two years later, it most certainly captures the editor’s earlier views. Charlotta Bass generally supported a Republican agenda until sometime in the early 1940s when she switched allegiance to the Democratic Party. In other words, she was a relatively late African American convert to the Democratic Party. In 1936, when over 70% of black Americans voted for Roosevelt (and the New Deal), Bass asserted “we conscientiously believe the mode of procedure [the New Deal] is wrong.”—*California Eagle*, November 6, 1936. She suggested that “prior to the New Deal, Black Americans were not listed as beggars.” The New Deal, however, was changing a “once thrifty and energetic [people],” to a group with “a dangerous ‘what difference does it make it’ attitude.”—*California Eagle*, February 21, 1936.

struggle was also a cultural struggle that ran deeper than questions related to government's role in society. The New Deal political orientation directly challenged a middle class ethos that prized patience, "cool-headedness," conservatism and top-down leadership and thus threatened the black bourgeoisie's ability to control community life. Ultimately, it turned out Hawkins was indeed a "man in step with the times."¹³⁰ He won with a plurality of 1,500 votes out of the nearly 20,000 cast.

Hawkins eventual victory not only presaged the nationwide trend of African Americans ditching the GOP for the Democratic Party, but it also signaled changes to the alignment of black Los Angeles' cultural relations and approach to racial uplift.¹³¹ For those who experienced it, this transformation must have been sudden and thorough. Whereas an exasperated Charlotta Bass could report in 1933 that a *request* to stage a mass demonstration "against non-employment of Negroes" was "the first time Negroes asked to parade," by 1943 she could cite several mass protests that black Angelenos *actually* staged, which were neither sanctioned by the city council *nor* leading members within the black bourgeoisie. What happened? Both the Great Depression and the political culture of the New Deal inspired mass participation by focusing a spotlight on the concerns of the "forgotten man" and thus opening up a space for working class agency. In Central Avenue, the clarion plea for the participation of common men in "the people's fight," as glimpsed in Hawkins' campaign, emboldened working-class men and women to assert their interests, particularly in connection to perceived economic rights, in ways previously impracticable. The local "Don't Spend Where You Can't Work"

¹³⁰ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 1, 1934.

¹³¹ It has been estimated that there was *over* a forty percent swing from African Americans voting for the Republican presidential candidate to overwhelmingly voting for the Democratic candidate between 1932 and 1936; a pattern that has maintained.

Campaign, which targeted discriminatory hiring practices in Central Avenue, was one the earliest and most conspicuous manifestations of this new spirit.

In late summer of 1934, the Los Angeles *Sentinel* in partnership with the “militant” organizations of the Young Men’s Progressive League and the Citizen’s Protective League initiated a campaign dubbed “Don’t Spend Where You Can’t Work.” Far from novel, Los Angeles’ iteration of the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign emerged relatively late in comparison to other Northern cities. Black Chicagoans led the way in challenging the non-employment or underemployment of African Americans by white-owned businesses in the black community, staging direct mass boycotts as early as 1929. Blacks in Toledo, Cleveland, Detroit, New York, Washington D.C. and Baltimore had also all organized direct action protests under the banner “Don’t Spend,” before Leon Washington, the *Sentinel*’s editor, advised black Angelenos that “if you don’t see a colored clerk in a store located in a predominantly colored neighborhood, make it your business to ask why none are employed. Then take your money to a place which does employ Negroes.”¹³² Angelenos’ efforts, then, were part of a broader, nationwide movement.

The new vigor surrounding these campaigns against employment discrimination and for economic justice was a direct product of the Great Depression and the New Deal. As a group, African Americans bore the heaviest burden during the economic crisis. Nationwide, throughout the Depression, African Americans experienced unemployment rates twice as high as whites. In Los Angeles, 33.1% of African Americans were

¹³² *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 6, 1934.

unemployed in 1931; by 1933, nearly half of black Angelenos were out of work.¹³³ Thus, given the paucity of overall employment opportunities and precariousness of blacks' position in the labor market, economic justice took on graver meaning. Indeed, as reflected in the statistics above, employment discrimination hurt more in times of severe recession. If employed by a business at all, blacks were usually "last hired and first fired." In an attempt to alleviate the psychological, if not material, hardship African Americans experienced, promoters of "Don't Spend" campaigns targeted those firms that did not employ African Americans yet derived significant business from black customers. Thus, while blacks never took employment discrimination lightly, the economic crisis gave this issue greater weight.

Moreover, aside from the sheer urgency precipitated by the calamity, the political culture that dawned in response to the depression also gave shape to the form of protest. The New Deal's focus on economic issues and emphasis on the participation of the "forgotten man" pushed African Americans (and others) towards mass forms of action. Evidencing the influence of the new outlook, it appears even Charlotta Bass, who maintained a talented-tenth middle-class orientation well into the 1940s, caught a tinge of the New Deal spirit. As an antecedent to Washington's campaign, recall from last chapter that Bass and the Industrial Council called on "a few hundred people to can on the Southern California Telephone Company" for refusing to hire blacks in 1933. "The people's crusade" Bass called for was markedly different than the later "Don't Spend" campaign, however. Bass called for a letter writing campaign and a city council approved "parade," not picketing. Written complaints and permitted marches, then, represented the

¹³³ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 229.

outer limits of Bass' comfort level with mass action. Nevertheless, Bass called on "the people" to take a stand.

In contrast, Washington's campaign not only sounded the siren for mass participation, but also called for more direct and bold action. Aside from asking black Angelenos to buy only from stores where they could work, the *Sentinel* encouraged all "action-loving, fearless" and "justice-loving citizens" to pick up a picket sign and march against those stores who were "absolutely contemptuous of the efforts of [blacks] to gain employment."¹³⁴ To identify those merchants in contempt, the *Sentinel* along with other "militant" organizations, canvassed the Central Avenue district to get an "accurate check on the percentage of Negro business enjoyed by the various stores" and to ascertain the number of blacks they employed.¹³⁵ Displaying the new assertiveness of the era, Washington warned all recalcitrant stores: "We have given unfair merchants their chance to play fair, to get right with those whose dollars make their profits possible, but that period is now ended and we are prepared ... to carry on relentlessly until our aims are accomplished."¹³⁶ Stores initially on notice included, Woolworth, Soboles' Dry Goods, Kirby's and Karl's Shoe Store. This list grew over three years to include eating establishments, such as a Chinese-owned Milton's Lunch Room, furniture stores, such as Kress' and drug stores, such as Mardsen's. Stopping short, though, of the demands of other "Don't Spend" campaigns, such as Baltimore's which demanded that all businesses in the black community employ *only* African Americans, activists in Los Angeles requested that "the working schedule be so arranged that the employment of *a* colored

¹³⁴ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 6, 1934.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, September 13, 1934.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

clerk could be made possible.”¹³⁷ But to be sure, for Los Angeles, a city with a relatively small black population and a black community heretofore largely guided by a talented tenth middle class ethos, it was a bold campaign. The ensuing controversy over the “appropriateness” of the campaign both speaks to the turbulence of the times and highlights the growing cultural tensions within black Los Angeles.

It was clear early on that the “Don’t Spend” campaign struck some within the community as foolhardy. Less than a couple of weeks into the campaign, the *Sentinel* found it “necessary for once and for all to make known the position of [the] newspaper.” In spite of coming under attack from “a group of officious ‘hand-kerchief-head’ brethren” who felt the campaign was a “dangerous experiment,” the *Sentinel* assured its readers that it would stand resolute in its efforts to win jobs for blacks. “To our flannel-mouthed friends who merely echo the sentiments of certain merchants,” Washington inveighed, “go back to those who instigated your cowardly warning and protests and tell them that this is an age when courage is needed, when there must not and cannot be a compromise with prejudice and bias.”¹³⁸ A week later, the *Sentinel* again tried to shape popular perception of the campaign. “The telephone of the [newspaper] has been kept busy for a full week by hundreds of our friends who called to offer congratulations,” a writer reported. As if offering a counter to continued criticism, the writer added: “On the street corners, in barber shops, in churches, the *Sentinel’s* campaign was discussed fully. Friends have reported with the general attitude being ‘Go to it!’”¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Ibid., July 18, 1935.

¹³⁸ Ibid., September 6, 1934.

¹³⁹ Ibid., September 13, 1934.

Although the *Sentinel* did not initially specifically identify their “flannel-mouthed friends,” surely all within the community ascertained that they were referring to the black bourgeoisie. For everyone understood the culturally coded identifier “hand-kerchief head” as a reference to the sycophant house slave and contemporarily as a stand-in for a black who would do anything to stay in good standing with whites. Terms such as “hankie head” and “Uncle Tom,” which had their origins in slave times, not only encapsulated the behavior of an individual, though. The references were also used in connection to class. The label most frequently was reserved for middle-class blacks, who, through their education, values, and/or conspicuous consumption “acted” white. Most people, then, probably recognized that the *Sentinel*’s “militant” tactics ran counter to a black bourgeoisie outlook that revered patience, “cool-headedness,” and a top-down approach to community problem solving and thus drew their ire.

In April of 1935, the grumblings that percolated just below the surface over the appropriateness of the “Don’t Spend” campaign boiled over after a gathering of the local NAACP. While there are conflicting stories about what happened in the meeting, there are enough consistencies to make out a course of events. Sometime in early spring, the *Sentinel* identified Marsden’s Drug Store on 54th and Central Avenue as a potential target for the campaign. When Washington went to the store to ask why Marsden did not hire black cashiers, Marsden called the police and Washington ended up in jail. Soon thereafter, the Young Men’s Progressive League voted to form a picket line around the store. The next Sunday, following the initiation of the protest, the NAACP—an organization run by middle-class leaders—was scheduled to meet. “Through secret sources,” the activists learned that an African American porter at Marsden’s planned to

attend the meeting to plead with the committee to “fix things up” for Mr. Marsden. To “present their side of the story,” Leon Washington and twenty-five members of the YMPL also decided to attend.¹⁴⁰

In the meeting, Marsden’s porter sat between Dr. Claude Hudson and L.G. Robinson—two of Los Angeles’ most prominent members of the black bourgeoisie. As the business session wrapped up, the porter had not been called on to state his case. Young attorney and the local NAACP president, Thomas L. Griffin stated before concluding that there was a matter the porter wanted to bring to the gathering, but he did not feel it was an issue for the association to consider. After protest from the YMPL, Marsden’s porter was permitted to make the case that Marsden was a “very good man” and that the picketing of his business was unfair. The YMPL, then, “demanded” that their spokesman “be allowed to tell the other side of the story.” Upon completion, Dr. Hudson asked that both groups agree to a thirty-day truce while the executive committee of the NAACP investigated the matter. No more than six days later the executive committee went on record as disapproving the picketing methods of the YMPL. They expressed that the YMPL’s policies were extremely shortsighted, as the protests would stir up racial animosities and “have a tendency to hurt Negro institutions.”¹⁴¹ The clash between two orientations now came into open view.

Charlotta Bass had had enough; it was time to restore proper order. “The Don’t Spend Your Money Where You Can’t Work Agitators” created “quite a stir of amazement” at the NAACP and Los Angeles Forum meetings with their demands that Marsden “remove his family and relatives from positions they now occupy at the store

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., July 18, 1935.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

and fill the vacancies with Colored help.” “We [read black bourgeoisie] have stood by and held our peace on this matter for a long time, for we endeavor at all times to avoid fights, but to be silent longer would cause us to feel culpably [sic] guilty of negligence to warn this people of the dangers that face this continued program,” Bass proclaimed. It is a “very, very poor idea” for “Negroes to organize or attempt to organize to fight and demand the *dismissal* of white employees to be replaced by Negroes.” Where a business opens up in the black community or is enlarged, Bass argued, “the Negro is absolutely entitled to consideration in employment.” But, to “endeavor to break up organized business borders on nothing short of [the *Sentinel*’s] racket” would, according to Bass, “eventually lead to serious and maybe disastrous trouble.” Highlighting both the class and the *perceived* generational dimension to the controversy, Bass asserted “It is a time for councils of sane, seasoned and [the] experienced” to lead the community, “not the wreck and ruin attitude of our YOUNG MEN.”¹⁴² Put another way, it was time for the talented tenth to wrest control of the issue from the irrational and boisterous masses.

In their retort to Bass’ charge, the *Sentinel* also framed the controversy in terms of a time divide. However, whereas Bass tried to attribute the controversy to “youngsters” run amuck, which was somewhat disingenuous given the age stratification on both sides of the issue, Washington saw the setting of a bourgeoisie-led era and the dawning of a people-led era.¹⁴³ The Marsden incident,” Washington suggested, “brought to light the main reason why Negroes of California have made such little progress.” “For the past 50 years,” Washington continued, “[the people] have followed the advice of a group of moth

¹⁴² *California Eagle*, April 19, 1935.

¹⁴³ I say “somewhat” disingenuous because many of the *leaders* appear to have been younger. Leon Washington was 27 years old at the start of the campaign.

eaten, antiquated, boot licking, back-slapping, jealous, envious, brow beaten, for sale, unprincipled, “That’s right, boss,” Uncle Toms and Aunt Dinah’s who have sold out the race.” But now, in the New Deal era, “the people are demanding results and not a lot of pointless braying from [the black bourgeoisie].” Turning the logic of the talented tenth doctrine on its head, Washington declared, the *Sentinel* was “willing to let the PEOPLE be the judges,” of their effort, not the NAACP, the Los Angeles Forum or any other middle-class led organization.¹⁴⁴

At issue really was not the basic principle of the campaign. Bass so much stated that some businesses “in communities where their sole or greater portion of support is the Negro” should be boycotted if they refused to hire blacks. The crux of the disagreement was, in Bass’ words, “method, not object.”¹⁴⁵ Drawing on a long-standing tradition in black Los Angeles, Bass and other members of the black bourgeoisie assumed it was their job to not only define the issues, but also lead the way in addressing them. Mass “intimidation” was an “unscrupulous method” to achieve equal opportunity that would ultimately “boomerang” back on the community. To “agitate” the masses into direct action was irresponsible, dangerous and would “eventually get [the] community a GREAT DEAL OF TROUBLE.”¹⁴⁶ In a revealing editorial, entitled ‘Who Killed the Bear’ Bass made the case for retaining black bourgeoisie stewardship. After citing a long list of the accomplishments under “negro pioneer” (as the black bourgeoisie was sometimes called) leadership to beat back “the bear” of discrimination, Bass pointed to the dangers of the new era. Bucking the steady hand of “pioneers” would leave the

¹⁴⁴ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 18, 1935.

¹⁴⁵ *California Eagle*, May 3, 1935.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, April 26, 1935.

community's fate to a "shiftless bunch of rowdies whose only ambition was to satisfy their new freedom in riotousness." Bass predicted that this new aggressive element would be "the excuse needed for those among the white settlers who believed in Jim Crow conditions for Negroes only" to segregate blacks in public places. Before ditching the talented tenth and their orientation, Bass urged her readers to think carefully about "who did kill that bear?"¹⁴⁷ Although Bass did not specifically identify the "Don't Spend" protesters as the "rowdies," readers almost certainly knew, given the timing of the editorial, to whom she referred. The message was clear: Let us not get swept away by the unbridled passions of the masses.

But Central Avenue was already awash in the New Deal spirit. Aside from the 1934 assemblyman election and the "Don't Spend" campaign, there were other signs that an orientation grounded in working-class concerns was taking root. Although black Los Angeles did not have significant ties to organized labor until World War II, local black newspapers took an increased interest in union activity during the Depression.¹⁴⁸ Clearly influenced by the national trend of the growing prominence of unions both the *Sentinel* and the *Eagle* decided to dedicate a permanent space in their weeklies to organized labor. Evincing how powerful the workingman identity had become, both papers took turns trading barbs, accusing each other of being an enemy of labor. Because being against labor increasingly meant being against "the common man" in a "people's era," writers for

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., April 30, 1935.

¹⁴⁸ Los Angeles Urban League Collection 203, Box 1 Folder 7, Charles Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles. Unionized Black Angelenos belonged to one of three unions—Black Musicians Union, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Dining Car Employees. In contrast to the powerful influence the black railroad unions exerted in Oakland, as described in Robert Self's *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), these unions were relatively weak in Los Angeles.

both papers regularly threw their support behind labor's cause and promoted the eventual amalgamation of blacks and unions. Although Charlotta Bass somewhat tepidly supported the cause of organized labor, citing the A.F.L.'s discriminatory practices as a reason for reservation, a columnist for her paper anticipated that "the Negro people and organized Labor [were] destined to become increasingly synonymous." "They are both fighting the same battle and both have the same aims and the same purposes--day after day the gap is being closed and a PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE is forming," he concluded.¹⁴⁹ Not to be outdone, the *Sentinel* routinely reminded its readers "whatever helps labor helps the vast majority of the Negro people."¹⁵⁰ Thus, while very few black Angelenos enjoyed union benefits, they became acquainted with a concept of "common man rights" and the mass methods to achieve those perceived entitlements.

And still, there were other indications that may have been lost on those who lived through the era, but nonetheless significant.¹⁵¹ Clubwomen and the Forum sponsored more and more events that spotlighted the "labor question" and spoke to the "needs of [the] laboring class." Elliott Johnson, a candidate for president of the staunchly bourgeois NAACP, issued a thinly-veiled attack on its middle class leadership in a campaign statement, promising a "New Deal" for black Angelenos and pledging to "give [the organization] back to the people."¹⁵² Just as Hawkins pitted the bourgeoisie against the

¹⁴⁹ *California Eagle*, June 25, 1937.

¹⁵⁰ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 15, 1937.

¹⁵¹ Highlighting how important shifts often elude the historical actors who experience them, the president of the local Urban League asserted in 1940, that "the masses [were] still very largely under the control and influence of conservative leaders," such as "the churches and unprogressive ministers."-- Urban League Collection 203, Box 2, Folder 7, Charles Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹⁵² *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 10, 1935.

people, Johnson saw the dichotomy a winning strategy in his bid. Several local businesses attempted to appeal to potential customers' "inner common-man," adopting such names as, "The People's Funeral Home" and the "New Deal Plumbing Company." An insurance company advertised "The New Deal" Health policy, promising to pay for the "entire family" health bill. Indeed, headlines with the phrase "The People" were ubiquitous in the black newspapers. Captions, referred to "the People's War," "The People's Fight," "The People's Cause," "The People's Grocer," "The People's Candidate," "The People's Champion" just to cite a few. The newly established Congress for Household Employees Federation sponsored a mass meeting for domestics to discuss the possibility of organizing and to map out "What the future [held] for the household service workers."¹⁵³ Recognizing that "this [was] a time for pressure groups," the *Sentinel* again turned to the masses in the late 1930s, calling on "a Volunteer Army" of "public spirited citizens," to march on the offices of politicians for the non-appointment of blacks to state and city positions.¹⁵⁴ Clearly, the political culture of the New Deal elevated "the people" to such an extent that they had become an indispensable part of the calculation to win favor, elections, customers and justice.

This coalescing of a "common man" ethos only accelerated with a mass influx of Southern black migrants to Los Angeles. Beginning in the late 1930s and accelerating during World War II, waves of black migrants mostly from Texas (24.2%), Louisiana (18.8%), Mississippi (7%), Arkansas (6.2%), Oklahoma (6.2%), Georgia (5.2%) Alabama (4.2%), Missouri (3.4%), Tennessee (3.2%) and Kansas (2.4%) made their way to Los Angeles, enticed by the idealized accounts of the region's weather and physical

¹⁵³ Ibid., May 13, 1937.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., August 10, 1939.

landscape, but even more, the employment opportunities directly or indirectly created by World War.¹⁵⁵ To appreciate the dramatic transformation black Los Angeles experienced, consider that in 1930, Los Angeles' black population stood at 38,894 out of a total population of 1,238,048.¹⁵⁶ By the end of the decade the black population increased by 61% to 63,774.¹⁵⁷ On the surface, these figures do not seem too extraordinary, given their relative insignificance vis-à-vis the overall population. But when we consider, what Douglas Flamming aptly points out, that San Francisco only had a black population of 5,000 blacks, Oakland only 8,500, Seattle less than 4,000, Denver 8,000 and Dallas, a major Southern city, only at 50,000, the migration firmly established Los Angeles as the largest and arguably the most important African American outpost on the "racial frontier."¹⁵⁸

A vast majority of the 26,000 new arrivals were confined by discriminatory housing practices to a four-mile by two-mile strip along Central Avenue, changing a once racially diverse neighborhood to a decidedly black and overcrowded community. At the height of the migration, in 1943, city officials estimated that nearly 4,000 black migrants streamed into the Los Angeles per month. By 1950, nearly 170,000 blacks called Los Angeles home.¹⁵⁹ The world the black bourgeoisie created had become unsettled; as had

¹⁵⁵ Calculations found in Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits*. The percentages are for the entire Second Great Migration period (1940-1970).

¹⁵⁶ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of Population, 1930, Population and Housing for Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

¹⁵⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

¹⁵⁸ Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). "Racial frontier" is a reference to Quintard Taylor's study, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*.

¹⁵⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

happened throughout the West during boom times, there were now far more newcomers than there were “sage pioneers.” For the black bourgeoisie, efforts to shape the image of black Los Angeles and police the behavior of black Angelenos in a community full of strangers became significantly more challenging.

Central Avenue not only became blacker and more crowded, it also became more self-consciously working class. If the war workers did not consider themselves “working class” before the war, their experiences with “labor” issues at defense factories fostered a working-class consciousness. As historians Josh Sides and Scott Kurashige have demonstrated, the exigencies of war not only opened up space on the factory floor for black war workers, but also offered a foray into the broader labor struggle.¹⁶⁰ Although the acceptance of African Americans in unions was uneven, blacks’ presence in factories along with the federal support found in Roosevelt’s Fair Employment Practices Commission, stirred many heretofore passive laborers into assertive workers. Black workers and their allies engaged in numerous “bold” campaigns to secure worker rights and economic justice. For example, in 1943, “two thousand Negro shipyard workers picketed Calship Consolidated, Western Pipe and Steel and the Boilermaker International for attempting “to shunt Negro workers into a hankey-head, non-participating, Jim Crow auxiliary” union and keeping them in “low-efficiency jobs.”¹⁶¹ When the Los Angeles branch of United States Employment Service apparently conceded to discriminatory employment requests by companies exclusively looking for white women, several

¹⁶⁰ Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits*; Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁶¹ *California Eagle*, July 8, 1943.

hundred African American women flooded the offices of USES, demanding fair treatment and crying “Double Victory.”

Concerns about fair employment and employability extended beyond factory walls. As we shall explore in greater depth in chapter 5, hundreds of black Angelenos affiliated with the Negro Victory Committee, under the leadership of Pastor Clayton Russell, marched at the Los Angeles Board of Education to demand defense industry training classes at Jefferson High School. Russell’s Victory Committee embodied the spirit of the era, asking the working class masses to be the backbone of “the fighting organization.” Russell also initiated the “Hold Your Jobs” campaign, culminating in a meeting of “fifteen hundred essential war workers” shouting its “demand for unity with trade unions, other minorities and white Americans generally in the struggle with [the] “Fifth Column Southernism threatening ... Los Angeles.” In addition to fair employment, they called for “prompt, unsegregated war housing for Negro people of the city.”¹⁶² Black Angelenos also boycotted the Los Angeles Railway Company for refusing to hire conductors and bus drivers as street cars set idle supposedly due to a “manpower shortage.” Ever connecting the war and its aims to racism in America, the *Eagle* underscored the apparent irony that “OUR boys may shoot down Messerschmidts [sic] [German fighter airplanes], but they are not quite up to driving trolley cars for the Los Angeles Railway company.”¹⁶³ To be sure, the war made these kinds of critiques and

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, September 16, 1943.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, July 8, 1943. African Americans also staged other mass protests not directly linked to issues of employment. For example, the Board of Education heard from the black masses when students at Fremont High School, Jefferson’s neighboring school, staged a mock lynching to intimidate recently enrolled black students. In response, black Angelenos staged several mass demonstrations at the school and at the Board of Education.

actions possible. But it was the Great Depression and the inclusionary politics of the era that provided the fertile ground on which an orientation rooted in the masses would develop. So in the wake of the New Deal and World War II, we find a new cultural force in Central Avenue that rejected deference and passivity, prized confrontation and bold action and elevated the common man; and, an outlook that unflinchingly challenged bourgeoisie control. This was the cultural milieu Samuel Browne found himself in as he started his teaching career at Thomas Jefferson High School.

Salvaging Jazz to make it “Respectable”

When placed in this context, it becomes a little easier to understand why Samuel Browne, a youth of the Jazz age, was not initially receptive to teaching jazz at Jefferson High School. In terms of outlook, Browne was a quintessential middle class black Angeleno in the pre-Depression mold. Browne’s preference to teach classical was not merely an aesthetic choice; it was a cultural statement. Put another way, his musical preference was an expression of class and culture. For the black bourgeoisie, classical music denoted refinement and sophistication. It was a form that implicitly celebrated hierarchy, education and organized structure. Because classical musicians were (and are) expected to carefully follow the notes as written, the form requires formal training and deference to hierarchal structure. The composer creates the song, the conductor tunes the sound and musicians carry out what the composer wrote and what the conductor directed. In this sense, there was a great degree of predictability and orderliness for the middle-class listener. For the black bourgeoisie, an appreciation of classical music was a mark of

the listener's education and a measure of his/her level of engagement with "high" [European] culture.¹⁶⁴

Jazz, on the other hand, agitated the class sensitivities of men such as, Joe Bass and Samuel Brown. Like the excitable masses, Jazz was "figgety," "hysterical," "restless," overly-emotionalized, "bold" and thus potentially harmful. While Jazz was a product of both West African and European influences, it originated in African American working class communities in the South. Jazz's distinguishable characteristics---blue notes, polyrhythms, call and response, improvisation and syncopation---led musicians who worked in the European tradition to label it as a "disorderly" music. To critics, the form seemed to have few rules. It emphasized "feel" at the expense of discipline. Distressingly, many jazz musicians did not even know how to read musical notes and indeed many were self-taught. The musician was too unconstrained. He or she appeared compelled to interpret and improvise; to "feel" rather than read the music. Thus, if classical music gave support to the logic of hierarchal forms, jazz seemingly worked to lower the walls between musician and artistic production, between musician and listener, between leader and follower and thus between order and disorder. For these reasons, admirers perceived Jazz as an egalitarian form---as a "people's music," if you will. But for many possessing a middle class outlook, it skirted the boundaries of respectability.

Jazz was not the only target of the black bourgeoisie. At different times throughout the twentieth-century (and into the twenty first), the black bourgeoisie questioned the substance of spirituals, blues, rhythm and blues and rap. For example,

¹⁶⁴ While I do not share E. Franklin Frazier's assessment that the black bourgeoisie were simply a self-interested group, I do find in *Black Los Angeles* a distancing phenomenon, where the black bourgeoisie reject various expressions of black folk culture...notably black musical forms---ie...spirituals, blues, jazz, etc...

numerous scholars have observed the black middle class's reservation with spirituals because of their direct connection to slavery and the meanings produced by the institution. Charlotta Bass best articulated a middle class view of blues when she lauded Ethel Waters for her performance at the Lincoln Theatre. "I have never gone in for what they call the 'Blues' singers," she stated, "because I don't care for the nasal tones and the 'wringing and twisting' it seems to require to be a success." Waters, however, "put dignity in place of vulgarity" and "lifted *this sort* of entertainment to a higher plane."¹⁶⁵ Young Edythe Espree learned an early lesson on the connection between music and class when her mother caught her singing "Confessin' the Blues," a song she picked up from a neighbor's house. Edythe recalled her mother sharply asking, "What song are you singing?" And, before Edythe could respond, her mother said "I never want to hear that song sung in this house again."¹⁶⁶ Her husband Elmo remembered blues as the music of "ghetto clubs." "You couldn't play blues in the house," he recalled. "Your mother and father would say don't bring that in here."¹⁶⁷ Thus, when placed alongside these examples and in this cultural matrix, it should come as no surprise that Browne, a man who embraced a middle class outlook, viewed Jazz "as the old devil music."

Increasingly, however, many of the students Browne encountered at Jeff came with a Southern folk, working-class background. A significant proportion of his students and their families were the recent arrivals from Los Angeles' Great Migration. Although they were not uniformly *from* the South, a survey of Browne's seventeen most famous protégés reveals that more than 50% of the students were either from the South or from

¹⁶⁵ *California Eagle*, February 12, 1937. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶⁶ Edythe Espree, interview by author, January 27, 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Elmo Espree, interview by author, January 10, 2011.

areas with strong ties to the black musical tradition, such as Chicago, Kansas City, and Detroit. Six of the seventeen students were born in Los Angeles. In sum, newcomers outnumbered natives at a ratio of 3 to 1. And, as they made their way to Central Avenue and Jefferson High, they brought with them an enthusiasm for musical forms rooted in the southern African American experience. Thus, when a group of students asked Browne early in his first year to break with Jeff’s curriculum, they requested he teach jazz—the most popular black musical expression of the period. In this way (and others), mass migration posed new challenges to the definitions of “legitimate” and “acceptable” culture in Central Avenue.

Samuel Browne was a man tugged by two worlds, then. Browne’s response to the changing cultural landscape was typical of men and women of his ilk during the era. His initial rejection of Jazz mirrored a general tendency by the black bourgeoisie to spurn black “folk,” and their expressions. Considerable scholarly attention has focused on the animus springing from newcomer/old resident encounters during the Great Migrations. These studies show how the “entirely different” newcomers provoked a great deal of anxiety among “pioneers.”¹⁶⁸ In Los Angeles, this was true as well. Pre-war residents southernized and ruralized migrants to underscore their ostensible immorality, crudeness, laziness and most generally, their cultural otherness. In a 1940 report for the Myrdal Study, for example, Floyd Covington, the head of the Los Angeles Urban League griped that “the larger percentage of Negroes coming to California [were] rural and agricultural

¹⁶⁸ See, Shirley Ann Moore’s *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, 1910-1963* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), Marilyn Johnson’s *Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), Josh Sides’ *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

... but they make little effort to engage in the same work here.”¹⁶⁹ They are a “rootless population,” who come to California “with the idea that [it] is the Promiseland and everything will work out.”¹⁷⁰ They needed to be “taught the basic rules of culture,” Charlotta Bass complained. “Unseemly loudness in public places by Negroes fresh from the lower strata of Southern life is understandable. At home they were not permitted to enter so-called ‘white’ theatres and restaurants; it is no wonder that they sometimes revel loudly in the non-segregated freedom of Los Angeles.”¹⁷¹ One former Central Avenue resident perhaps best captured the sentiments and experience of many long-time black Angelenos when he recalled: “The community [started] getting people from the South. They’re coming in.... the rural people coming ... for defense jobs. To me, they didn’t keep their yards, their house like I thought they should. I think they lived different than we did. Now, we’re talking about all black people. The rural people didn’t have much education. So, we [my wife and I] said we don’t need to be next to them, let’s go further [west].”¹⁷² Scholars tend to trivialize these assertions about difference by emphasizing mass migration’s “real” disruptions, such as the stresses on community resources. In doing so, they fail to take residents on their own terms. That is, they fail to acknowledge that these residents perceived “real” cultural differences.

This is not to suggest that the issue—as established residents saw it—was simply a matter of cultural incompatibility. Indeed, many viewed the “antics” of the “invading” migrants’ as a real threat. They explicitly and implicitly accused migrants of destroying

¹⁶⁹ Urban League Collection 203, Box 2, Folder 14, Charles Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Box 2, Folder 7.

¹⁷¹ *California Eagle*, September 14, 1942.

¹⁷² Elmo Espree interview.

“their” community. When in 1940, for example, the Council of Social Agencies of Los Angeles attempted to defend itself against charges that it was not satisfactorily meeting the needs of the community, it cited the “influx of rural people” as the chief problem.¹⁷³ A report by the “Deteriorating Committee”—a community group working under the direction of the Los Angeles County Probation Department—blamed the high delinquency rate on the “new rootless” population.¹⁷⁴ In correspondence with an inquisitive sociologist from Fisk University, Floyd Covington pointed to the “heavy immigration of blacks from Southern states” as a source of “new racial tensions.”¹⁷⁵ In his report to Myrdal, Covington charged migrants with “cutting down employment opportunities” for local residents.¹⁷⁶ Migrants were to blame for everything from the rise in tuberculosis to increases in crime.

Given contemporary observers’ preoccupation with the newcomers’ “rural” background, it would come as a surprise to many that most of the “country” migrants, in fact, came from Southern “metropolitan” areas. Historian Josh Sides’ estimated that 85% of the newcomers came from areas with “at least fifty thousand residents and where more than two-thirds of the workforce was engaged in nonagricultural occupations.”¹⁷⁷ This fact was not lost on a recent arrival from Texas. Astutely noting how southernization and ruralization of migrants worked to create “otherness,” he argued in a letter to the editor that “all I hear in cafes and on street cars and buses is that Negroes from the South have almost destroyed everything we have gained.” “One preacher,” he continued, “frankly

¹⁷³ Urban League Collection 203, Box 1, Folder 12 Charles Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 13.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 27.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Box 2 Folder 4.

¹⁷⁷ See, Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 38.

stated that Southern Colored people were ignorant and did not know how to conduct themselves.” “Don’t they know,” he asked, “that a Negro is a Negro and that only a small percentage of Southern Colored people are sharecroppers? That many of them are just as successful as those in Chicago and Los Angeles.” Recasting the migrant in a different light, he emphatically concluded, “The newcomers from Dixie are working people, trying to advance the race and the country.”¹⁷⁸ Clearly, the ire of longtime residents found its way to migrants.

While the “rejection/conflict” framework is crucial to an understanding of the mass migration experience, it only takes us so far. What have been largely missed in scholars’ rush to find discord are the efforts of integration and a process of accommodation. Eager to resolve the contestation between newcomers and long-time residents, scholars jump to the 1948 Supreme Court decision *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which, according to these narratives opened the door for middle-class flight by declaring racially restrictive covenants unconstitutional. In this leap, we lose a period of negotiation. Because the black middle class did not know at the height of the migration that it would become easier to part ways with those from “the lower strata of Southern life,” we witness attempts at accommodation. Samuel Browne’s eventual decision to embrace Jazz at his students’ insistence, offers a small window into this process.

When Browne gained employment at Jefferson, jazz had been around for over three decades and had been through several evolutions. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, big band swing predominated. Along Central Avenue from the late 1920s onward the sounds of jazz grew louder and louder with the advent of a rapidly developing

¹⁷⁸ *California Eagle*, August 12, 1943.

entertainment scene and continued black migration. By the time Browne entered Jeff, Angelenos had numerous choices of venues on Central to take in “the ole devil music.” Therefore, as Browne put it, “[he] didn’t bring jazz [to Jeff]; it was already there.”¹⁷⁹

Yet, while Count Basie may have played in the minds of students, it did not play in Jeff’s halls; jazz was not offered in the curriculum. When the students prevailed upon Browne at lunch to teach the genre, Browne was confronted with the kind of choice many middle class blacks faced during the war years. And, like many of his peers, Browne opted to accommodate rather reject; Browne decided “to meet [jazz] head on and put [his] arms around it” because he realized “it [like the migrants] was here to stay.”¹⁸⁰ Refusing to fully abandon his cultural sensibilities, though, Browne resigned himself to “salvage [jazz]” and “make it respectable.”¹⁸¹ At the same time, he vowed to “never neglect the classics.” “Cleaning up [jazz]” *and* maintaining a classical orchestra at Jeff, then, was Browne’s way of bridging the cultural gap that separated him and his students and reconciling the tensions between two orientations.¹⁸²

Browne’s embrace of the “ole devil music” would have a lasting impact on Central Avenue. Between 1936 and 1961, Browne mentored numerous musicians, who would help define a sound that not only filled clubs on Central, but all across the world. Among the many talented jazz artists that sat in Browne’s classroom were Dexter Gordon, Marshal Royal, Jackie Kelson, William Douglass, Art Farmer, Chico Hamilton, Sonny Criss, Horace Tapscott, Big Jay McNeely, Ginger Smock and Frank Morgan. Many of these former students remember Jefferson fondly and credit Browne for their

¹⁷⁹ Browne, interview by Cox, 107.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1979.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

success. Cecil “Big Jay” Mc Neeley remembered learning “lots from Browne.” Browne, he later said, taught him “about the different types of scales and how to play tonal.” “He was a tremendous teacher,” McNeely recollected.¹⁸³ Dexter Gordon also remembered “Count Browne” as a “very good” and “dedicated” teacher. The “Jeff Sound” that these students created on campus under Browne’s mentorship influenced the development of “Cool Jazz.”¹⁸⁴

Browne’s decision, however, to take on jazz may have been more complex than figuring out how far he would bend to satisfy students’ wishes. Many teachers on Jefferson’s all-white staff were not enthusiastic about his appointment. Browne later learned that nearly half of the faculty asked for a transfer prior to his arrival. At lunch on his first day, Browne later recounted how his colleagues got up as he sat down next to them in the faculty cafeteria. Shunned by his peers, Browne retreated to his classroom, a move he said that almost got him fired. Early into the year, the principal called Browne into his office to voice his concern that Browne was not collegial. Ostracized by the faculty and closely watched by the principal for any missteps, Browne knew he “needed to produce” and needed support to do it. Browne later remembered: “If the kids wanted me there, they knew they’d better help me. So we helped each other. Had we listened to the other things around us, as the walls began to tumble, we would have been lost. But we didn’t listen. We just worked hard to produce music.”¹⁸⁵ Browne’s recognition that he

¹⁸³ Cecil McNeely, “Central Avenue Sounds,” interview by Steven Isoardi, oral history transcript, 1993, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹⁸⁴ See, Clora Bryant, et al., eds. *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Bette Cox’s *Central Avenue, It’s Rise and Fall: 1890-c.1955* (Los Angeles: BEEM Publications, 1996).

¹⁸⁵ Browne, interview by Cox, 107.

needed the students to help blunt the discrimination he faced from Jeff's faculty may have made him more receptive to the students' music.

Here, Browne found himself in the same predicament as many middle class blacks under racial discrimination. Despite their paternalistic attitudes, in many ways, the black middle class needed the working class. First, as demonstrated in the last chapter, the black middle class believed the working class needed to "behave" for the entire race to advance. Second, the working class also served as a kind of psychological crutch for the middle class. The working class stood in as a counterpoint for the middle class to define themselves—that is, to give the middle class a sense of self-importance and self-worth in a society that cast *all* people of African heritage as inferior. And finally, as in the case of Samuel Browne, the middle class also increasingly understood that the sheer numbers represented in the masses provided leverage in negotiations with white society. In addition to providing him job security at the school, Browne could also credit the masses for his employment at Jeff. As will be explored in chapter four, one of the key points black leaders cited in their argument for the need of African American secondary teachers was Jeff's slight majority and rapidly growing black population. Thus, the more that "entirely different" black folk moved to the city, the more the black middle class could make the case for black teachers, police officers, firefighter, city appointments and fair housing. Though it would be unfair (and inaccurate) to doubt their sincerity for racial uplift, it should be noted that these were perks that mostly accrued to the middle class. Often, however, the different strategic roles the masses played for the black bourgeoisie were at odds with one another. For example, while a larger African American population may have strengthened the black bourgeoisie's bargaining hand with the white power

structure, this growth also made it more difficult for the black middle class to exert control over the masses' behavior. Due to these tensions within the masses' utility, we see the black bourgeoisie responding in seemingly erratic ways, ranging from outright rejection to, as we see here, accommodation.

Samuel Browne's decision, then, to "put his arms around" the folk and their culture *on his own terms* gestures toward a more general pattern of response by the black middle class during the interwar and war years. Because housing discrimination generally precluded the kind of geographic distancing we see among different classes of whites during the period, the African American middle class reluctantly attempted integration of the masses through persuasion and accommodation. Even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, a report by the Deteriorating Committee captured both middle class' anxieties and their sense of urgency to assimilate the newcomers, warning: "The slum character [which included physical deterioration as well as perceived moral decay] is rapidly increasing in [Central Avenue]." To abate the "serious and in some respects dangerous situation," the committee deemed it "crucial" to get "the socially better blacks' help to implement programs in Central Avenue."¹⁸⁶ With an eye toward righting the seemingly unstable social landscape, the black middle class engaged in numerous efforts designed to integrate newcomers. To shield young, "naïve" women migrants from the "vicious element," for example, the "colored" YWCA, headed by Willie Mae Beavers, a leading figure within the black bourgeoisie, sent out an "urgent appeal" to middle class families to consider offering an "extra bedroom" in their "good home[s]."¹⁸⁷ Striking a patriotic

¹⁸⁶Urban League Collection 203, Box 1, Folder 14, Charles Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹⁸⁷ *California Eagle*, July 8, 1943.

tone, the YWCA pleaded, “This is your chance to help those who work in our industries, live comfortably, thus increasing their efficiency in full participation in our country’s struggle for victory.”¹⁸⁸ So as to allay middle class fears of taking in a ruffian, the YW made clear that “all applicants are personally interviewed ... to assure persons being sent to [homeowners] will fit into the particular household.”¹⁸⁹

Leading churches in the community also worked at integrating newcomers. They vied for migrants and their money by embracing mottos such as, “The Church with a Friendly Welcome,” “The Church of the People is the Mother of Democracy,” “The Stranger’s Home” and by making pitches like “If you are looking for a church home, come we can help you.” To be sure, Church was not only a way to integrate migrants, but it was also a place to socialize them, as an advertisement for Second Baptist Church, one of black Los Angeles’ most influential churches, made clear. “War Workers—Recently come to town—Listen to this message...if you were a Christian and Church Worker back in your home town—don’t be less out here. Don’t neglect God nor His Church. Don’t seek your new acquaintances in saloons and nightclubs. Seek them in God’s Church. Join some Church. You want to be a good citizen. We know you do.”¹⁹⁰ Highlighting the uneasiness with which longtime residents engaged migrants, the announcement swung from invitation to rejection within a couple of sentences. “Sinners and unchurched welcomed,” but, “Texans urged NOT to Crowd Non-Texans out.”¹⁹¹ The church’s “invitation” laid bare middle class concerns about the quality of migrants’ character and

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., July 15, 1943.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., December 9, 1943.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

their effect on community resources. Yet, like Samuel Browne's embrace of his students' music, the church conditionally accepted migrants.

The middle class worked to integrate migrants through other community organizations as well. For example, the Pilgrim House in the Bronzeville section—formerly Little Tokyo before the internment of ethnic Japanese and influx of African Americans—counted many within Los Angeles' black bourgeoisie, including Ruth Temple, George Beavers, and Charlotta Bass as supporters. Like many of the larger black churches, the organization offered a plethora of social services including health, child care, education, housing and employment referrals to migrants. They also offered “healthful” recreation. Perhaps demonstrating a loosening of middle class mores, one year the bourgeoisie leaders staged a dance for recent arrivals that culminated with a “jitterbug contest” and a “Miss Bronzeville” beauty pageant. Challenging notions of beauty that were informed by class and race, an attendee of the pageant reported, “If you'd think all of the beauty is to be found west of Central, you better stop off in Bronzeville and change your mind.”¹⁹² Providing entertainment to migrants, of course, was not the institution's main objective; instead it was an inducement to get culturally questionable migrants under the tutelage of the middle class. The House's real purpose was “to help newcomers to [the] section become adjusted and play their part as loyal citizens of Los Angeles.”¹⁹³ Other bourgeoisie-controlled institutions within the community of Central Avenue that played a similar role included the 28th Street YMCA, Eastside Shelter and the Avalon Community Center. Thus, the middle class did not simply turn their back on newcomers as many histories lead us to believe. Instead, like

¹⁹² Ibid., December 4, 1943.

¹⁹³ Ibid., November 4, 1943.

Samuel Browne, the middle class engaged in a process that at times involved rejection, acceptance and a “cleaning up” of migrants and their culture.

This process of accommodation was never easy though. It was fraught with constant flare-ups. Charges of “Uncle Tom” and “Low-Brow” flowed back and forth across a perceived cultural divide. Ultimately, *Shelley v. Kramer* (1948) and *Barrows v. Jackson* (1953)—the Supreme Court cases that ended the practice of using racially restrictive covenants to bar African Americans (and other racial minorities) from certain neighborhoods—altered the terrain on which this tension would play out in the second half of the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first. The end of racially restrictive covenants opened up the option for many within the middle class to pursue better housing. In theory, this also meant that they could now take advantage of a privilege that many of their white counterparts enjoyed—residential separation from the working class.¹⁹⁴ The geographic westward movement of the middle class, however, attenuated the bond of mutuality that segregation imperfectly imposed on the relationship between the black middle class and working class.

Like so many self-consciously middle class and upwardly mobile residents, Samuel Browne moved westward out of Central Avenue to a neighborhood between Crenshaw and Arlington in the late 1940s.¹⁹⁵ Now, as an outsider, it appears Browne lost touch with and investment in the community he taught. His geographic move seemingly

¹⁹⁴ I use “in theory” because when neighborhoods opened up to the black middle class, the working class soon followed. In some ways, like “white flight,” many within the black middle class kept on the move just one step ahead of “undesirable” neighbors.

¹⁹⁵ Sometime in the early 1960s, Browne moved further west to the all-white and solidly middle class neighborhood of Cheviot Hills. Highlighting his upward climb, his heir(s) sold the house in 1993 (just after he died) for \$460,000. In 2012, the home was valued at \$940,000. At the same time, Browne’s childhood (and young adult) home was valued at \$165,000.

corresponded with a psychological rupture between himself and the neighborhood. During what Browne would call “the turbulent 1950s,” he repeatedly asked the district for a transfer from Jeff. Due to discriminatory teacher placement practices, Browne joked he “might as well have asked for the moon. I got the run around. I didn’t have a chance.”¹⁹⁶ In describing his thinking at the time to an interviewer years later, Browne wistfully reminisced that when he was a child, the teacher’s authority was rarely challenged. By the late 1950s, however, “the whole social fabric [in Central Avenue] changed,” he said.¹⁹⁷ Undoubtedly voicing the thoughts of many within the black bourgeoisie who watched the eclipse of a talented middle class ethos in Central Avenue, Browne remembered: “Other trumpets were being blown, other drums were beating somewhere else. There were distractions and unrest. The breaking of bonds... There was a permissiveness about [the] time. The standards began to drop.”¹⁹⁸ In short, Browne sensed that “a new day was a coming.”¹⁹⁹ He foresaw a day very near when “*other trumpets*” and “*other drums*” would drown out a middle class orientation that prized patience, formal education, self-control and most of all deference to talented tenth leadership on Central Avenue.²⁰⁰ “The handwriting was on the wall,” he later remarked. “I felt it was time to change, to go some place where I could be appreciated.”²⁰¹ In 1961, Jeff’s Vice Principal delivered Samuel Browne the news that he spent years hoping for. Browne was given the opportunity to return to his “first love,” teaching classical music at Pacific Palisades High School in a mostly white and affluent community on Los Angeles’

¹⁹⁶ Browne, interview by Cox, 109.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1979.

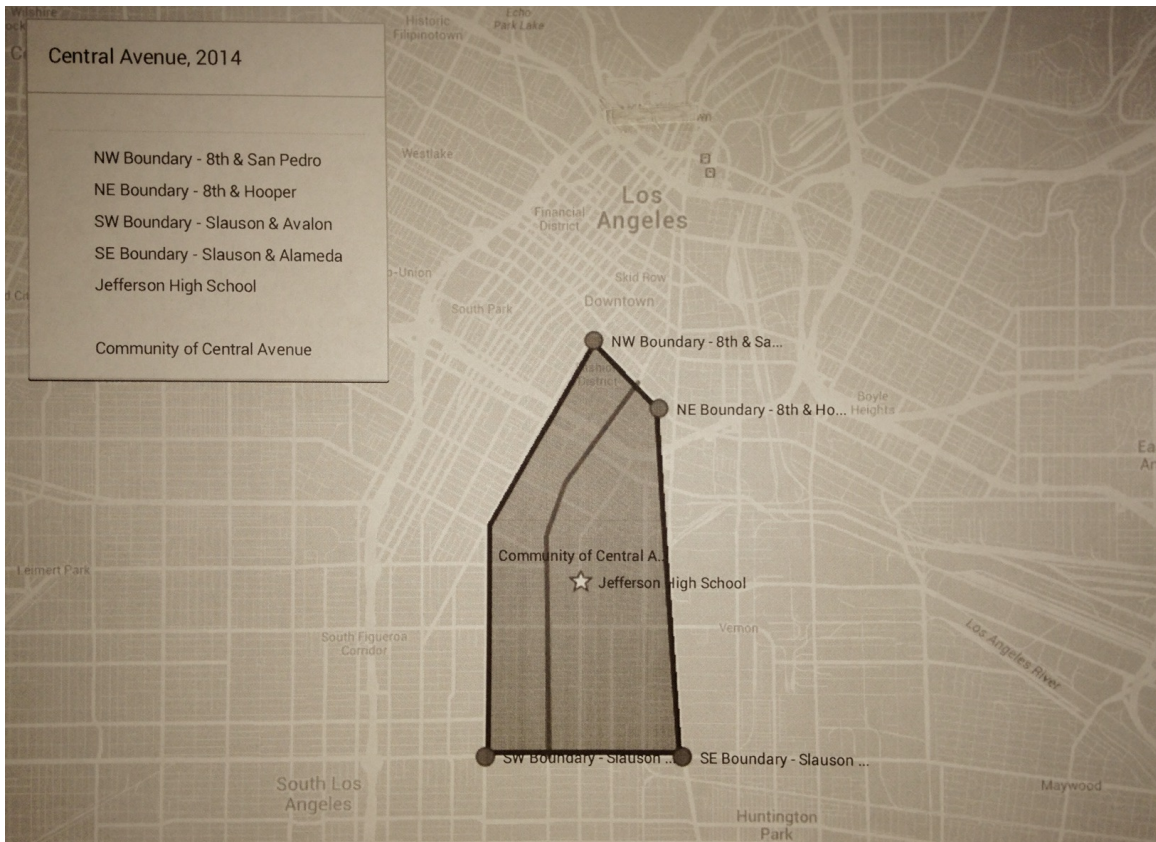
Westside. Here, “Jazz was gone, but the classical music [he] always loved was still there.” His new students “spent their days studying the music of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.” For Browne, Los Angeles’ first African American secondary teacher, “it was a nice place to end a teaching career.”²⁰²

Conclusion

The retreat of a black middle class talented tenth ethos and the rise of an assertive “common man” orientation informed by folk traditions and rooted in the power of the masses in Central Avenue were due to a number of factors including Depression Era politics, mass migration and the World War II era political economy in Los Angeles. Ultimately, however, the black middle class, when given the choice, left those who were “entirely different.” “The breaking of the bonds,” Browne spoke of, then, was more a result of middle class flight than working class pathology. Though many in the middle class made frequent returns to “the community” to “uplift,” their remove from the masses often made them just as suspect as liberal whites. Giving what would be the last recorded reflection of his youth and early adult life in Central Avenue, Browne nostalgically *yet* perceptively asserted, “Those were my happiest days. ... But times change, values shift ... I was lucky I suppose.”²⁰³

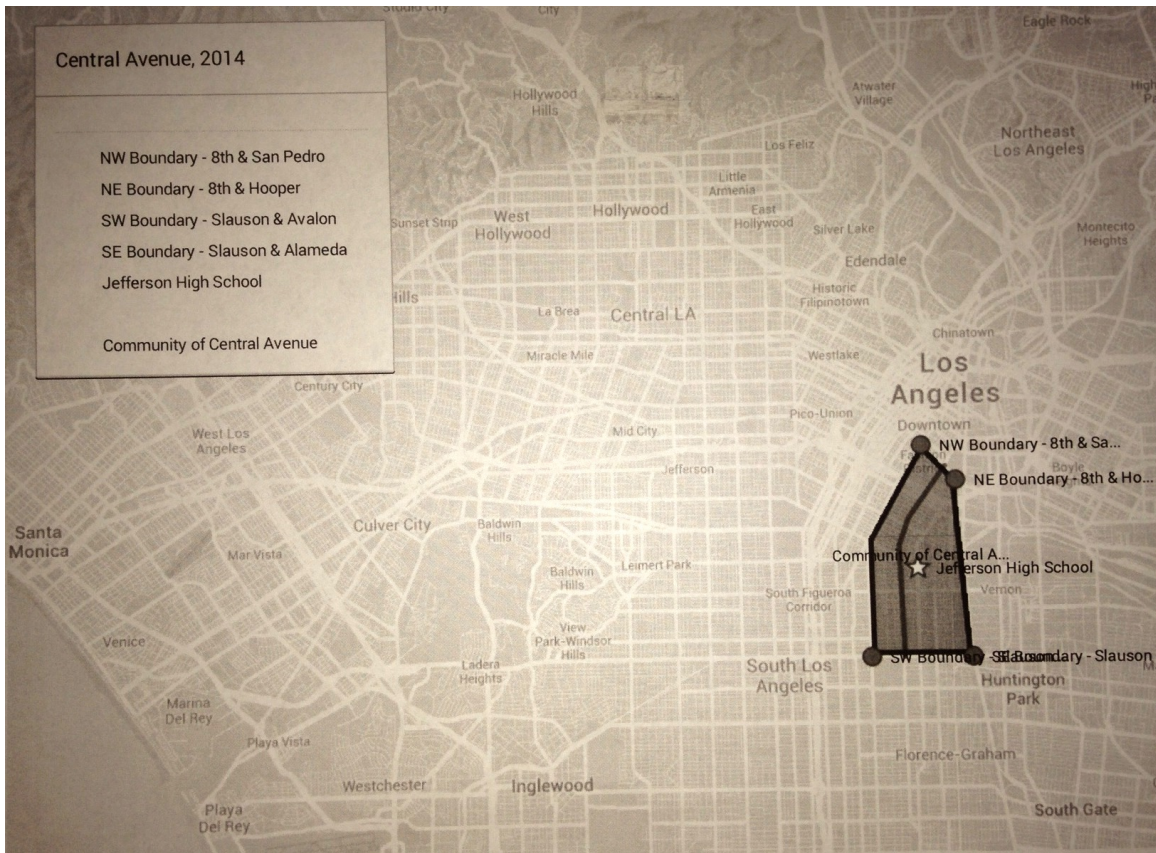
²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.



Central Avenue and Jefferson High School

Central Avenue is the line bisecting the community



Central Avenue and Greater Los Angeles



The original Jefferson High after Long Beach earthquake (circa 1933)

Photo courtesy of LAUSD Art and Artifact Collection



Building a new Jeff (circa 1934)

Photo courtesy of LAUSD Art and Artifact Collection



Built in art-deco style, Jeff's new buildings have no corners (circa 1935)

Photo courtesy of LAUSD Art and Artifact Collection



The entrance to the new Thomas Jefferson High School (circa 1935)

Photo courtesy of LAUSD Art and Artifact Collection



Jefferson High's first principal, Theodore Fulton

Jefferson High School Yearbook 1920



1923 Jeff Yearbook (Ralph Bunche top left)



1932 Jeff Student Council

Jefferson High School Yearbooks, 1923, 1932, 1940



Snapshot of Jeff Senior Class 1940



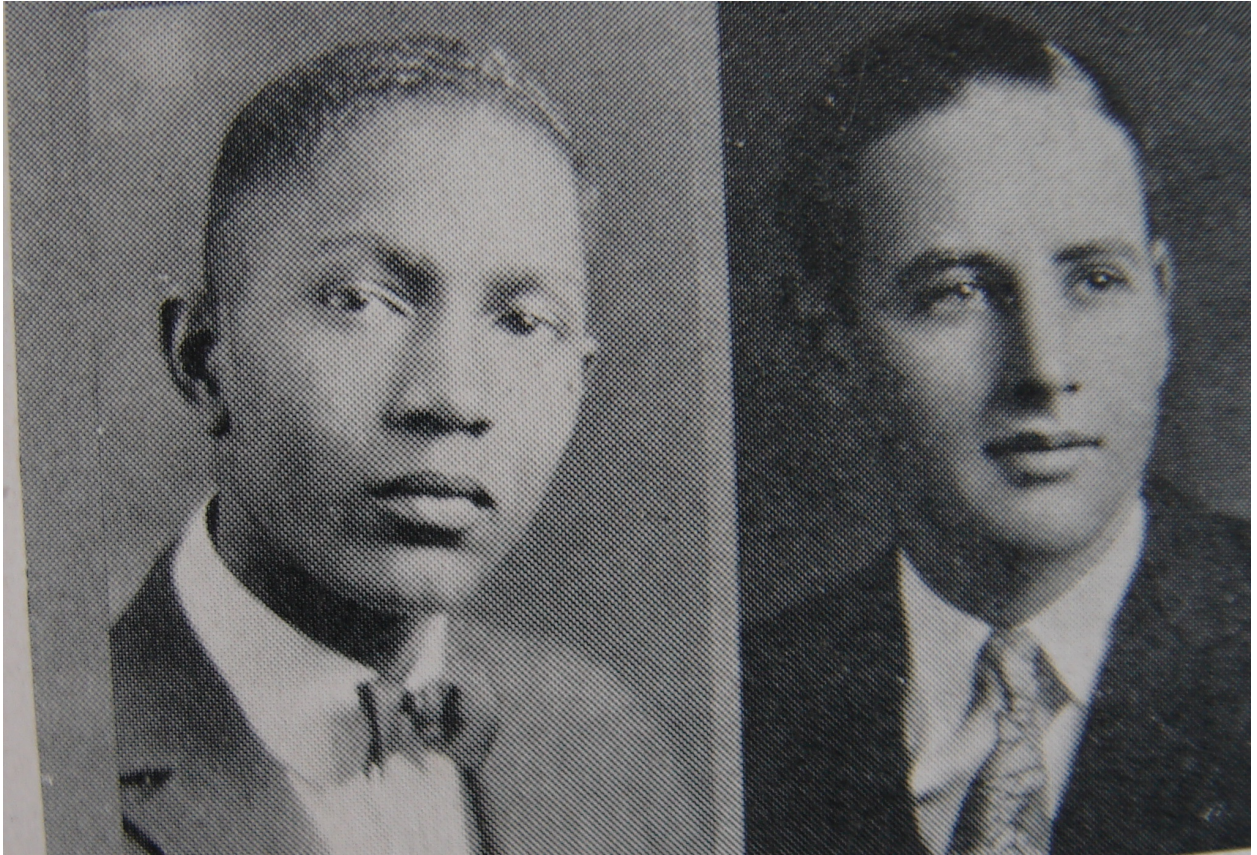
Alvan Burton (left) maintained his connection to Jeff long after graduation

Photo courtesy of Darrell Hobson



Alvan Burton at Jeff

Photo courtesy of Darrell Hobson



Samuel Browne's Senior Class Photo at Jeff (1925)

Jefferson High School Yearbook 1925



Samuel Browne in first yearbook picture after hire (1937)

Jefferson High School Yearbook 1937



Samuel Browne at the end of his career at Jeff (late 1950s)

Photo courtesy of Darrell Hobson



Samuel Browne in action (circa 1936)

Jefferson High School Yearbook 1936



Samuel Browne's Jazz Band (Browne, second from left)

Jefferson High Yearbook 1950



Multiracial Gardening at Jeff (circa 1930)

Photo courtesy of LAUSD Art and Artifact Collection



Domestic Service Training at Jeff

Photo courtesy of LAUSD Art and Artifact Collection



Clubwomen on Central Avenue (mid 1940s)

Photo courtesy of Elmo and Edythe Espree



Clubwoman going out (mid 1940s)

Photo courtesy of Elmo and Edythe Espree



Clubwomen at a social (mid 1940s)

Photo courtesy of Elmo and Edythe Espree

Section 2: The Conundrum of Color-blindness

Chapter 3: Lessons in Freedom: The Progressive School in an Era of Integration

When prompted by an interviewer to share his experience immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Louisiana-native Alvan Burton turned the tables on the questioner. He leaned closer to the microphone and quietly queried: “Do you know what ABC means?” In a slow and deliberate cadence, Burton answered his own question – “American Born Chinese.”²⁰⁴ Burton then went on to explain that some of his classmates at Jefferson High showed up to school shortly after Pearl Harbor with ABC buttons affixed to their shirts. The buttons, according to Burton, were designed to ensure that everyone at Jeff and in the community of Central Avenue knew that the wearer was ethnic Chinese and not the “enemy”—ethnic Japanese. That Burton chose to remember Pearl Harbor through the lens of Jeff and connect it to a negotiation of “otherness” is instructive for a couple of reasons. For starters, Burton’s recollection highlights an important aspect of the black experience in Los Angeles in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, his testimony points to how the schoolhouse was a central site for contests over definitions of race and nation. Indeed, the public school in Los Angeles was a training ground for learning (and unlearning) what was American and what was not.

As hinted at in Burton’s reflections, diversity was one of the defining features of the African American student experience in Los Angeles for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Black Angelenos sat in classrooms with not only ethnic Japanese and

²⁰⁴ Alvan Burton, interview by author, January 22, 2008.

ethnic Chinese, but, also ethnic Filipinos, ethnic Mexicans, Jews and native born and foreign born peoples of European descent. The significance of this polyglot setting to black Angelenos extended beyond simple cultural exchanges. In addition to holding out real world lessons on American freedom and democracy, this “extreme” diversity prompted educators in Los Angeles to embrace a number of ideas associated with Progressive Education. On the surface, these reforms would seem to benefit marginalized groups, including African American students. However, the educational system did not operate in isolation; it was inextricably tied to the local housing and labor market. So no matter how well-intentioned administrators and teachers may have been, education would be bound up with one of America’s most resilient traditions—anti-blackism. Therefore, the progressive reforms that seemed to hold out so much promise never delivered the kind of education that black Angelenos and black migrants envisioned. Nevertheless, as evinced by their efforts, black Angelenos would continue to try to shape public education in Los Angeles in the mold of their California dreams.

Alvan Burton’s family’s odyssey points to an under told aspect of black Los Angeles’ migration story. While numerous observers have romanticized African Americans’ idealization of education in other places and in other times, only a few scholars have explored the issue in its Los Angeles context. This seems particularly odd considering that the California Dream is a popular paradigm for historians in their attempt to make sense of the black Angeleno experience. Most studies present the dreams of decent housing and favorable employment opportunities as the core of what really

made Southern migrants uproot.²⁰⁵ However, if we listen to migrants like Burton, they tell us better education was as central to their aspirations for the good life as a good paying job and a single family home. In their haste to get to the *real* “bread and butter” inducements, historians miss scenes like the Burton family huddled around a photo of Jefferson High School. They overlook comments such as those made by Los Angeles’ future mayor Thomas Bradley, who linked his parents’ decision to move from the South to a desire to provide their children “a good education.” They inadvertently erase from the historical record Edythe Espree’s mother’s explanation that they moved to Los Angeles because “she wanted [her children] to have a better education and [Texas] was too segregated for them.”²⁰⁶ They fail to notice how Oklahoma-native Marshall Royal strung together freedom, segregation and education in his description of his father’s motivation to move to the Golden State. “My father,” he recalled, “always wanted ... to have me taken out of that part of the country [the South] so I could come out to California, which at that time was known as the land of the free, where segregation wasn’t too tough.” “He felt I could get a reasonable education here without pressure.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ For example, in Douglas Flamming’s important work, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), he commits a scant two paragraphs to education in the context of migration. Historian Josh Sides’ *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) views Los Angeles’s “great migration” primarily through the lens of jobs. Quintard Taylor dedicates space in his seminal study *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998) to education, but, it is in connection to post World War II desegregation battles. In his exploration of black migrants’ “dreams” in the pre-war and war period, Taylor elevates economic freedom and freedom from violence as driving forces behind blacks’ decision to uproot. Yet, he faintly mentions education’s place in migrant’s minds as they searched for the “racial frontier.”

²⁰⁶ Edythe Espree, interview by author, January 27, 2011.

²⁰⁷ Marshal Royal, Clora Bryant et al., editors/interviewers, *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 24.

The idea that blacks moved to Los Angeles with “good education” on their minds should come as no surprise. Jim Crow severely limited the educational possibilities in Southern States. In 1915, just one year before Jefferson High School opened, twenty three cities in the American South with twenty thousand or more people, including Mobile, Montgomery, Atlanta, New Orleans, Shreveport, Charlotte, Wilmington, Winston-Salem, Charleston, Columbia, Roanoke, Tampa, Jacksonville, Jackson and Vicksburg, had *no* public secondary schools for African American children. Thus, due to Jim Crow, they constituted zero percent of enrollees at public high schools. Conversely, while the educational opportunities were far from bountiful for whites, 17,814 of them found a public high school to attend in these cities.²⁰⁸ As late as 1940, less than eighteen percent of African American high school age children were enrolled in public secondary schools in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina.²⁰⁹

Moreover, if blacks wanted to provide an *elementary* education to their children, they had to assume a “double tax.” Southern governments were generally resistant to diverting public tax dollars away from white schools. As historian Vanessa Siddle-Walker highlighted in her case study of Caswell County, North Carolina schools, under the best scenario, southern public school administrators would ask black communities to match “public” monies for necessities such as, new buildings, instructional materials, new equipment and/or staff.²¹⁰ A statistical report on rural school construction programs

²⁰⁸ James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 191.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

²¹⁰ Vanessa Siddle-Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

from 1914 to 1932 captured the disproportionate burden southern blacks carried to educate their children. Out of the total construction cost of \$28,408,520 for new buildings, grounds and equipment in all southern states between 1914 and 1932, blacks *donated* \$4,725,891 or 16.6 percent of the total. Whites, who received the majority of these resources, donated \$1,211,975 or 4.3 percent. In Louisiana, where a large percentage of Los Angeles' black migrants originated, African Americans contributed \$457,318 compared to whites \$70,407.²¹¹ Simply put, Jim Crow placed a near prohibitive premium on education for poor and working class southern black aspirants.

In comparison, black Angeleno homeowners on average spent 0.62 cents per school day in tax dollars (with no obligatory "donation") toward their children's education in the 1936-1937 school year.²¹² Even more, black taxpayers got more for their dollar in Los Angeles. In addition to the "Three Rs," African Americans in Los Angeles theoretically had access to a broad program of study that included the arts, commercial and vocational training. In contrast to their southern brethren, they carried out these studies in "state of the art," "safe and beautiful" buildings. Differences in access to a high school education, too, appear stark. In 1934, the entire state of Louisiana had 8,832 black students enrolled in high school out of a total of 65,304 black children ages 14 to 17.²¹³ About the same time, 1,773 black students attended high school in Los Angeles.²¹⁴ In 1938, Jefferson High alone enrolled 1,183 black students. Put another way, Los Angeles'

²¹¹ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 155.

²¹² Vierling Kersey et al., compiler, *Your Children and Their Schools: An Informal Report to the Patrons of the Los Angeles City School District* (Los Angeles: Board of Education, 1937), 36.

²¹³ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 236.

²¹⁴ Lillian Kernaghan Graeber, "A Study of *Attendance* at Thomas Jefferson High School" (MA thesis, University of Southern California, 1938), 52.

black high school enrollment approximated twenty percent of Louisiana's total. The total number of students enrolled in Jefferson High school represented between 10 to 14 percent of the high school students enrolled in the entire state of Louisiana in the mid 1930s. This is striking considering Louisiana's 1930 high school age (ages 14 to 17) population outnumbered the *entire* black population of Los Angeles by 26,410 in 1930 and still outstripped black Angelenos by 1,530 in 1940.²¹⁵ In sum, a far greater percentage of African Americans age fourteen to seventeen attended high school in Los Angeles than in Louisiana. This discrepancy had more to do with access than desire.

Aside from the overall poor quality of southern education, the real problem for blacks desiring a quality education, of course, was Jim Crow. As the numbers above suggest, education in southern states was far from "separate but equal." To be sure, black aspirants recognized the challenges Jim Crow posed to their educational goals. They understood all too well the connections between access, quality and cost of education to segregation, particularly when measured against places outside of the South. Thus, in a half century of black "great" migration, it should come as no surprise that non-segregated education occupied a central space in the imaginings of Southern African Americans. When black migrants packed their bags, many dreamed of a place where the educational system would not separate their children for "equal" treatment.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Los Angeles seemingly delivered on this promise. When teachers cast their gaze onto their pupils in Los Angeles' central neighborhoods during the first thirty or forty years of the twentieth century, they saw "the romantic spirit of the fiery Spaniard softened by the Mexican interlude, the philosophical

²¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth and Sixteenth Census of Population, (1930 & 1940), Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area.*

Chinese crowded from his native land, the Japanese, Yankee of the Orient, North European and South European hungrily searching for a new freedom, Midwesterner and Southerner and Easterner and Native Son and Daughter.”²¹⁶ If not as romantic as this vision, black students found diversity just as pronounced at Jefferson High School. Jeff’s 1930 yearbook spotlights students with surnames such as, Wong, Okamura, Jones, Smith, Sanchez, Marinaro and Cohen. In a senior class comprised of 198 students: 21.7% (43) were of African descent; 8.5% (17) of Latino descent; 6.5% (13) were of Asian descent; and the remaining 63.1% (125) were white or Jewish.²¹⁷ This student body was merely a reflection of the community surrounding the school. Bound by Sixth Street to the North, the Los Angeles River to the East, Slauson Avenue to the South and Main Street to the West, Jefferson High’s attendance boundary was home to perhaps one of the most polyglot communities in the world.²¹⁸ In a single census district (made up of roughly two by two blocks) within the Central Avenue of Thomas Bradley’s youth, we find native and foreign born Russian Jews, Germans, English, Scots, Irish, Turks, Greeks, Poles, Austrians, Italians, Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese and Negroes.²¹⁹ Despite a trend toward a black majority, Central Avenue remained a diverse neighborhood throughout much of the second quarter of the twentieth century. In 1930, for example, black residents made up thirty five percent of the 62nd Assembly District which was the community’s political

²¹⁶ Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 7.

²¹⁷ *Monticellan*, Jefferson High School Yearbook (1930); Of course, this is not an exact science. I used physical characteristics and/or surnames to tabulate. It should also be noted that these numbers are for the senior class. Thus, the numbers may be slightly skewed, as some groups had higher dropout rates.

²¹⁸ “Attendance Boundary Descriptions,” LAUSD Master Planning and Demographics Division.

²¹⁹ 1930 Census, 62nd / 74th Assembly, District 297. Like the Census tract that would be introduced in Los Angeles in 1940, the district covered an area of a few blocks.

designation. Although blacks represented a much larger majority ten years later, other racial groups still constituted forty percent of the district's population. In short, Black Angelenos did not experience the same kind of social isolation as African Americans living in the South or even New York and Chicago during the same period.

Indeed, for African Americans coming of age in Los Angeles during the period, diversity was a defining feature of their experience. In their remembrances, they almost universally make note of the multiracial milieu in which they grew up. For example, when William Elkins' family migrated from Arkansas and settled in the neighborhood around 25th Street and Central Avenue, he was surprised to discover "it was not an all-black community." There "was a Chinese family, a Japanese family and an Italian family [on their] block." "We had a very pleasant experience," he recalled.²²⁰ The racial makeup of the Central Avenue also left a lasting impression on Dallas-native Edythe Espree. Her first home on 49th Street and Central Avenue was in "an all integrated neighborhood." "There were Jews, Germans, Chinese, Japanese and Blacks ... one Mexican lady and Italians ... [that] lived on [her] street." Except for an unfriendly German family across the street, the Espree's also had no problems getting along with their neighbors. "They greeted us. They accepted us. We had no prejudice. We were friends with all of our neighbors" Edythe later remembered.²²¹ Although Kenneth Stuart grew up in Central Avenue in the early 1940s as it became predominantly black, he too, remembered a

²²⁰ William Elkins Jr., "Second Baptist Church," interview by Lorn Foster, oral history transcript, 2007, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

²²¹ Edythe Espree, interview by author, January, 27, 2011.

polychromatic Central Avenue. His “neighbors next to [him] were Jewish” and his neighborhood markets were run by ethnic Italians and Japanese.²²²

Racial diversity is also a dominant theme in African Americans’ recollections of schooling in Pre-World War II Los Angeles. Bradley, who attended Lafayette Junior High in Central Avenue, remembered that it was “an integrated school with a pretty good cross section of racial groups attending.”²²³ Similarly, William Douglass thought it important to highlight that “the schools [he] attended were quite integrated.”²²⁴ Attempting to help an interviewer understand what “integrated” meant, Jazz musician Marshall Royal estimated that “there were about twenty percent blacks, five percent Espanol, two percent Japanese, and the rest would be just regular Caucasians” at Jefferson High School in the late 1920s.²²⁵ William Elkins, who arrived in Los Angeles from Arkansas in 1931, recalled entering “a totally integrated school setting.” Offering a cruder breakdown than Royal, Elkins estimated that “there was a large number of Hispanics at Lafayette. At Jefferson High School, the student body ... was about 65 percent black. The rest, Anglo, white, and not that many Hispanics.” And like most memories of Central Avenue’s multiracial era, Elkins did not perceive any tensions. His was a childhood of peaceful coexistence. He could not “recall a single incident of racial disruption between blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians.”²²⁶

²²² Kenneth Stuart, interview by author, February 19, 2008.

²²³ Thomas Bradley, “African American History,” interview by Bernard Galm, oral history transcript, 1978, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

²²⁴ William Douglass, Clora Bryant et al., editors/interviewers, *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 234.

²²⁵ Marshall Royal, Clora Bryant et al., editors/interviewers, *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 29.

²²⁶ William Elkins interview.

While there may not have been any major “disruptions,” anecdotal evidence suggests that there may have been some confusion arising from encountering “others.” For many black Southerners accustomed to seeing the world in black and white, Central Avenue’s multiethnic social landscape could be bewildering. When five year old Edythe Espree wondered down the street to a new friend’s home shortly after the family’s arrival in Los Angeles, her uncle refused to go out to look for her because “he was scared that the Chinese man would get him.” Laughing about the incident eighty years later, Edythe recalled: “When [her family] came in, they didn’t know nothin’ about Chinese.”²²⁷ Soon after new arrival Barbara Hollis started in her school at Wadsworth Elementary, she discovered she had Jesus in her class. In excitement, she rushed home to tell her mother. Her mother was so disturbed that she went to the school the next morning to find out that Jesus was Jesús.²²⁸ In spite of these misunderstandings, the dominant memory is that “everyone got along just fine.”²²⁹

Of course, we can view these rosy recollections of Central Avenue’s racially harmonious moment as statements about what made the past better than the present. Even still, this admission does not jettison the fact that Central Avenue was racially diverse and that the people who lived in this neighborhood believed that this integration was an important aspect of their experience. As their testimony reveals, for boys and girls like Alvan Burton and Edythe Espree, encounters with “others” is what made their experience in pre-war Los Angeles unique and significant. So, what did this racial diversity “mean” *for* Black Angelenos in first few decades of the twentieth century beyond the abstract and

²²⁷ Edythe Espree interview.

²²⁸ Barbara Hollis, interview by author, February 11, 2008.

²²⁹ Kenneth Stuart, interview by author, February 19, 2008.

superficial? In the next section, we will explore the ways in which educators in Los Angeles gave meaning to diversity.²³⁰

“The school is for all. It knows no racial, religious or political lines.” – Los Angeles City Schools, 1936.

Throughout September of 1936, a plethora of student clubs took to the pages of the *Jeffersonian* “to welcome all new students to Jeff.”²³¹ Represented in this group were the Aerospace club, Craftsman club, Hi-Y Club and the Socialites. Also, extending a hearty greeting were the Chinese Club, Japanese Club, and the El Club Cuauhtemoc. That Jefferson housed so many and such a great variety of clubs under one roof was part and parcel of the overall school design. Like so many other educators in large cities of United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century, teachers and administrators in Los Angeles embraced a number of reforms that promised to bring a rapidly changing society closer to its American ideals. These clubs were one among many manifestations of the efforts of these Progressive educators. With its explicit recognition of diversity and

²³⁰ For other works focused on multiracial/multiethnic California/Los Angeles see, Mark Brilliant’s *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Scott Kurashige’s *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); George Sanchez’s “‘What’s Good for Boyle Heights is Good for the Jews’: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside During the 1950s,” *American Quarterly* 56:3 (September 2004); Allison Varzally’s *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring Outside Ethnic Lines, 1925-1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), Mark Wild’s *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²³¹ *Jeffersonian*, Jefferson High School Newspaper, September 25, 1936.

its emphasis on the concepts of “comprehensiveness” and community-centered schools, the “Progressive” schoolhouse had much to offer Black Angelenos.

Alarmed by the convulsions sent across American life as a result of industrialization, urbanization and mass migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a loose affiliation of middle class men and women looked to realign citizens’ relationship to key institutions in an attempt to stabilize the nation. Searching for order, these Progressives restructured state and local governments and passed laws to eliminate corporate abuses and reduce political corruption. They established programs and legislation that promoted “wholesome” family life. They also sought to change Americans’ conception of the public schoolhouse. Taking their cues from scholars at America’s top institutions such as the University of Chicago and Columbia University, progressive educators sought to buttress American “civilization” against the deleterious forces of the industrial era by democratizing education and developing critical thinkers. When Alvan Burton arrived in Los Angeles, he found public schools that had been profoundly transformed by at least a couple of decades worth of Progressive educational reforms. Although historians generally end the Progressive Era just at World War I, the Progressive Education Movement thrived well into the late 1940s before losing ground to the conservative politics of the early Cold War Era. In Los Angeles, educators’ who espoused progressive educational philosophies wielded their greatest influence in the 1930s and early 1940s, just as tens of thousands of black migrants made their way into Los Angeles City schools.

Progressive Education took root in Los Angeles precisely because the city possessed one of the very conditions middle-class Anglo-Americans saw as potentially

most destabilizing—“extreme diversity.”²³² Los Angeles city schools indeed housed “practically all the children of all the people” from “the far places of the globe.”²³³ Whereas this diversity may have induced temporary social disorientation among some black migrants to Central Avenue, for Los Angeles’ teachers and administrators, it posed serious philosophical and pedagogical questions. Among the most pressing were: What type of education should a heterogeneous student population receive? How do you build a cohesive whole from disparate parts? And most broadly, what is education’s function in a socially complex, industrialized and democratic society? For many in Los Angeles, the philosophies associated with Progressive Education seemed to speak most directly to these urgent questions of the day. The allure of Progressive Education, then, was both its capacity to make sense of diversity and its assurance that Progressive “schools build appreciations and understandings” to “help our most intricate society ... move smoothly.”²³⁴

To help society “move smoothly,” Progressive educators advanced the notion that the school had to serve as an “assimilative force,” where “the centrifugal forces set up by juxtaposition of different groups within one and the same political unit [can] be counteracted.”²³⁵ When situated and managed properly in the schoolhouse, diversity would be a life-sustaining force for America’s “democratically constituted society.”

²³² A March 1936 survey of Los Angeles schools captured this diversity, identifying numerous ethnic groups (in order of their predominance) including—“English, Mexican/Spanish, Jewish, Negro Japanese, Italian, German, Scandinavian, Russian, French, Armenian, Slavic, Chinese, Greek, Dutch, Hungarian, Polish, Austrian and Others.”-Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 29.

²³³ Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 7-9.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²³⁵ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1916), 25.

Turning the fear of “otherness” on its head, Progressives argued “diversity . . . mean[t] novelty, and novelty mean[t] challenge to thought.”²³⁶ By bringing together different groups under the roof of the schoolhouse, the resulting environment would break down “selfish ideals” and “rigid adherence to past customs.” In the wake of this process, we would find a common interest culled from “the more numerous and varied points” of view and a change in “social habit” from once “isolated” and “exclusive” “gangs” or “cliques.”²³⁷ In short, educators need not fear racial or class diversity. Instead, they should wholeheartedly welcome an enlargement of the “sphere of social contacts” within the schools.²³⁸

Bringing about the “recognition of mutual interests,” however, required action on the part of educators. In addition to promoting “freer interaction between social groups,” Los Angeles’ Progressive educators encouraged their peers to design lessons that accentuated the “novelty in diversity.” The Los Angeles teacher’s journal between 1920 and 1945 provides a good window into how educators tried to wrench advantage from diversity. While their efforts changed in name, their practices remained essentially the same. In the 1920s teachers were encouraged to “solve the problem of world peace” by “solving the problem of the relations of the races here.” “We can practice world peace in the management of our schools,” one educator opined.²³⁹ To cultivate a sense of “interdependence,” teachers were told to introduce a “world viewpoint” to the subjects of Language Arts, music and art, geography and history. “Folk music and dances with some

²³⁶ Ibid., 98.

²³⁷ Ibid., 99-100.

²³⁸ Ibid., 100.

²³⁹ Mary M. Foster, “Teaching *Brotherhoodness*,” *Los Angeles School Journal*, Nov. 2, 1925, 10.

account of the land of their origin, and with the use of costumes in their interpretation,” one teacher advised, “may be given to the very little tots.” Older children should be “taught the nationality of each composer, important facts about his life, and his particular contribution to the world of music.” “The high school music appreciation courses, orchestra, chorus, glee club, and vocal and instrumental lessons give further opportunity for learning what we owe to other nationalities,” she added.²⁴⁰ History, too, was “preeminently” suited “for cultivating the ideal of “world brotherhood.” When giving lessons on history, teachers should “call attention to the part played by foreigners or persons of foreign birth in the development of our nation.” And when textbooks reveal a bias, “it lies with the teacher to direct the attention of the pupils to the truly constructive parts and to correct prejudiced views with supplementary selections giving opposite standpoints.”²⁴¹

In the 1930s, with the rise of Progressive educators’ influence, these suggestions were built into the core curriculum. As “cosmopolitanism” became the new buzz word of the early to mid 1930s, Los Angeles city schools implemented Social Living Courses as part of the required program of study. These classes were specifically designed to offer “opportunities for the development of those attitudes which bring about a satisfactory adjustment ... of individuals to other individuals and other groups.”²⁴² To foster this cosmopolitan attitude, Los Angeles schools offered a variety of courses that explored some aspect of a “foreign” culture. One class of students might learn the art of “Japanese

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 54.

flower arrangement.”²⁴³ In another class, students might stage a Chinese “pageant-play,” where they not only had to write the script but also had “to design and make a Chinese plate” and “make the costumes.”²⁴⁴ In another course, a teacher would assign one student in the class to give a report on “prominent Germans” to fit into a unit of study on German culture.²⁴⁵ At Jefferson High School, students could take the only Negro history course offered in the city, where they would “learn the contributions of the Negro to American life and society.”²⁴⁶ These Social Living Courses survived the Depression and carried over into the World War II years, when educators employed the patriotic, yet pluralistic phrase “*All American*” to capture the concept of unity out of diversity. Evincing how engrained the rhetoric of Progressive Education had become, Jefferson students found *Americans All* on the front cover of their 1941 yearbook. Explaining in the introduction why the yearbook staff decided on the title, the editor penned:

At Jefferson, we view a typical segment of America, enlarged, as under a microscope, because we are so close to one another. Our school is one of the most cosmopolitan in Los Angeles. We have in attendance here representatives of five races, more than twice as many nationalities, and almost all of the religious faiths.²⁴⁷

Presumably, as the editor led the reader to believe, everyone “got along nicely” thanks to a “cosmopolitan program of study.”²⁴⁸

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 48.

²⁴⁵ A.L. Benshimol, “Froth,” *Los Angeles School Journal*, January 4, 1937, 8.

²⁴⁶ *Jeffersonian*, September 12, 1938.

²⁴⁷ *Monticellan Yearbook* (1941); Aside from highlighting students’ ostensible cosmopolitan outlook, the yearbook title served a dual purpose. First, it underscored students’ patriotism during time of war. Second, it may have been an expression of solidarity with Jeff’s ethnic Japanese, German and Italian students.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

In addition to offering an “experience” with the novelty of diversity via the curriculum, Progressive educators also tried to bring students to realize “common interests” through extracurricular activities. To this end, Jefferson High School offered its polyglot student population a plethora of ethnic student clubs. Generally, the aim of these groups was to integrate disparate communities into the larger school. In part, this was done by providing a built-in social group for ethnic newcomers. For example, the Chinese Club, Japanese Club and the El Club Cuauhtemoc held dances and socials frequently throughout the year to adjust new students to school life. While these events were open to everyone, they were understood as spaces for the celebration of a particular culture. The ethnic clubs also functioned to familiarize the student body with the particularities of their cultures. On Mexican Independence Day, for example, the Mexican Club dressed in “typical Mexican dress” and sang “traditional Mexican songs.”²⁴⁹ The Negro History Club encouraged “members from all our racial groups” to take the “very interesting” Negro history course.²⁵⁰ Aside from these clubs, Jefferson High also had a German Club, French Club and a Cosmopolitan Club. The Cosmo Club, which studied cultural differences in an international context, regularly boasted in the school newspaper that they were “the most active” and “popular” clubs on campus. Throughout Progressive educators’ reign, then, Los Angeles City

²⁴⁹ *Jeffersonian*, April 30, 1937.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, September 12, 1938.

Schools appeared to make sincere efforts to live up to its creed that “The school is for all. It knows no racial, religious or political lines.”²⁵¹

In the first four decades of the twentieth century, black Angelenos clearly embraced integration and the possibility for a more equal opportunity. Many spoke of Los Angeles’ integrated schools as a harbinger of freedom. As migrants from the Jim Crow South, they had enough first-hand experiences with “separate school systems” to reasonably conclude that “there [could] be no equality” under segregation and “that the equal protection clause of the [Fourteenth] Amendment [was] meaningless” in states that enforce[d] separation in public facilities.”²⁵² Because “the dominant group always [got] the best allocation of public funds in any segregation system,” it was in blacks’ best interest to keep Los Angeles schools integrated.²⁵³ Beyond issues of public funding, blacks saw advantages in mixed schools for other reasons. One African American parent perhaps expressed the sentiments of many others, when she stated, “If my boy goes to school where there are only Negro boys, he is not prepared to get out into the world and get along with the white, the Oriental, the Jew and immigrant.” In an integrated school, she was confident that he would acquire the cultural awareness and the interpersonal skills necessary to be successful in the “business world.”²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 9; Perhaps a more accurate statement from the schools is that they saw lines but believed they could be erased in the schoolhouse.

²⁵² *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 17, 1949. Ironically, de facto segregation had already occurred in most of Los Angeles schools, including Jeff, at the time the editorialist penned this.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 120.

Still, there was another form of “integrated” education that sprung from Progressive educators’ commitment to provide “education for all,” which held out potential benefits to Black students at Jeff. When Progressive educators spoke of “integration,” they were not only referencing an education that erased the lines that separated social groups, but they also were proposing an education where the walls between vocational and academic and between Math, Science, History and English were eliminated. They envisioned “an education in which learning and social application, ideas and practice, work and recognition of the meaning of what is done, are united from the beginning and for all.”²⁵⁵ They saw a classroom that was “child-centered.” That is, a classroom where the child’s *interest* drove the learning process. Instead of stressing uniformity and memorization, the curriculum should be tailored to *each* child’s interests through “differentiated instruction” with a goal of developing critical thinking. *All* children, they stressed, should be introduced to as broad of an education as possible, so they could discover their passion.

For Progressives, these reforms were directly connected to the goal of preventing the entrenchment of new hierarchal divisions in an increasingly diverse society. Challenging the logic that undergirded the dual system of education found in Europe and elsewhere, where educators separated “intelligent” work and “mechanical” training, Progressives argued that this distinction was historical and social, not “intrinsic” and “absolute.”²⁵⁶ For John Dewey and his followers, a segregated education system along these lines was a grave threat to American principles of justice and equality. For, “to split

²⁵⁵ John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1915), 226.

²⁵⁶ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 305.

the system, and give to other, less fortunately situated, an education conceived mainly as specific trade preparation, is to treat the schools as an agency for transferring the older division of labor and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class, into a society nominally democratic.”²⁵⁷ The Progressive panacea to social inequity, then, was “to do away with the dualism and to construct a course of studies which makes thought a guide of free practice for all and which makes leisure a reward of accepting responsibility for service, rather than a state of exemption from it.”²⁵⁸ The Progressive’s comprehensive high school was the embodiment of these ideals. It was to serve as a bulwark for American democracy in the industrial era. Jefferson High School during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s was but one institutional manifestation of this project.

For many blacks arriving from resource-starved schools in the Southern states, Jeff’s Progressive curriculum undoubtedly made an impression. Describing the difference between the education in his native state of Louisiana and Jefferson, Alvan Burton stated, “Blacks in Louisiana got a very basic education. You know, basic math and grammar—not much more. At Jeff, we had all kinds of choices—wood shop, electrical shop, metal shop, drafting, typing, print shop, music and all of the basics. We just had more opportunity.”²⁵⁹ Jefferson’s Fall semester of 1939 schedule of classes supports this point. Jeff students were required to enroll in one of three programs: Academic, Industrial/Vocational and Commercial. Within these groups students could choose from a multitude of courses. For example, within the Industrial grouping, the school offered students several levels of auto electric, auto mechanics, cabinet making, stage craft,

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 372.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 305.

²⁵⁹ Alvan Burton interview.

electricity, general metal, printing and linotype. Those interested in learning how to establish an “efficient, wholesome and harmonious” home life or desiring training in the “woman’s trades” could take up Home Economics. Students in this program could take childcare, flower arrangement, cooking, cosmetology, dressmaking and design, power sewing and domestic service courses. For students with a commercial emphasis, they could take advertising, bookkeeping, business correspondence, business law, business practice, merchandising, office practice, salesmanship, secretarial bookkeeping, shorthand and typing.²⁶⁰ In addition to their focus, students were required to take the “3 Rs” and a Social Living course within their program. In theory, the comprehensive high school presented blacks students far greater possibilities than they had in the Southern secondary school, where they found one at all.

Beyond the benefits of ample course offerings, though, the comprehensive high school also held out great promise for African Americans simply as an idea. For members of one America’s most historically oppressed groups, an approach to education that stressed the fundamental worth of *each individual* and explicitly worked toward leveling society offered obvious advantages. In an era when blacks faced exclusion in nearly all aspects of life, the comprehensive high school in Los Angeles was in theory open to everyone and to all interests. It denounced “the feudal dogma of social predestination” and instead promoted a program of study for *each* student that was “uncoerced,” guided by the individual’s interest rather than group association and based upon “its

²⁶⁰ *Jeffersonian*, September 10, 1942. Alfred Moore, who attended high school in Galveston, Texas in the early 1940s, had it slightly better. His school offered a single woodshop class every year—Interview by author, October 6, 2011.

congeniality” to the student’s own aptitudes.²⁶¹ In this way, it held out the opportunity for the black child to free himself from the totalizing identity of Negro, which in Jim Crow America not only carried with it a stigma of inferiority, but also a heavy economic burden. In short, it promised to unshackle race from fate. The idea of the comprehensive high school, then, offered nothing short of a chance to equally enjoy in the fruits of American life.

To help students and their families enjoy the fruits of a “democratically constituted society,” Progressive educators advanced yet another principle that held out some real benefits, especially for poor and working class African Americans. Influenced by the ideas coming out of the Settlement House Movement regarding the integrative power of institutions, Progressive educators conceived of the public schoolhouse, particularly the comprehensive high school, as *the* community’s center or “the community’s own townhouse.”²⁶² “The school,” they contended, “is *of* the community rather than *in* the community.”²⁶³ This not only meant that schools should be points of community convergence, but, it also suggested that “participation in community activity by individual teachers should be encouraged.”²⁶⁴ It signaled as well that the schoolhouse was to serve as a “clearinghouse institution” where community members could get most of their needs met.

In the quest to make schools community centers, Progressive educators distributed a multitude of social, health and community services from school campuses. At Jeff, students were offered “hot, nourishing lunches” at a “low price.” Students who

²⁶¹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 370.

²⁶² Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 150.

²⁶³ *Los Angeles School Journal*, May 11, 1942, 8.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, April 8, 1940, 15.

were unable to pay the “minimum cost” had the opportunity to “work for their lunches.”²⁶⁵ Jeff students were also given periodic health examinations and dental check-ups. If a problem arose at home, concerned parents could bring their ailing child in to a school physician. If a student showed signs of a vision problem, Jeff’s teachers could refer them to a school optometrist to get glasses, so as to ward off “backwardness.”²⁶⁶ For students seeking employment, Jefferson’s business office offered “indirect placement work.”²⁶⁷

Adults, too, derived direct benefit from the community school. To assist parents with childcare during the summer months, Jeff consistently offered a variety of daytime and evening programs for children, where “all activities [were] carried out under direct supervision.”²⁶⁸ Also, for adults, Jeff housed a popular evening school. For those seeking vocational training or simply self-improvement, Jeff’s evening school offered a plethora of courses. The black newspapers from 1930 to 1950 are filled with advertisements for Jeff’s Evening School. Titles, such as “Night School Opportunities,” “Jeff High Evening School Still Enrolling,” “Traffic Safety Class Begins at Jeff Evening School,” “Jeff Hi to Offer Maid, Janitor Services Courses,” “Jeff Evening School Has 30 Classes for Students” were ubiquitous.²⁶⁹ In 1939, adult residents, who wanted “technical training as well as practical experience,” could choose from a number of courses, including, typing,

²⁶⁵ Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 23.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶⁷ Alice Burger, “Vocational Guidance and *Training of Negro Youth in Los Angeles*” (MA thesis, University of Southern California, 1938), Urban League Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, Charles Young Research Library, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

²⁶⁸ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 8, 1948.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1935 – 1946.

bookkeeping, short-hand, civil service and custodian engineering, maid service, radio, foreign languages and photography.²⁷⁰

Additionally, to reinforce the notion that Jeff belonged to the community, the administration and the district permitted community organizations to utilize Jeff's "extensive" and "well-equipped" facilities. In 1939, for example, the *L.A. Sentinel*, the *California Eagle* and the Association for the Study of African American Life secured permission to celebrate Negro History Week on Jeff's campus. The Prince Hall Masons also found Jeff's campus an ideal setting for their events. They held all sessions of a national conference at the school. Apparently undaunted by Church/State conflicts, even community churches on occasion made use of Jeff's facilities, like when the Peoples' Independent Church hosted an Easter "Kiddies Egg Hunt" on campus.²⁷¹ In 1949, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, used Jefferson's campus as a backdrop for its "back to school" fashion issue. Jeff, of course, also sponsored activities that the community could attend. Black newspapers between 1936 and 1950, advertised for events as varied as, Parent Teacher Association events, "Community Chest" fundraisers, the Annual Christmas Celebration, "Tea Fridays," "Milk Bowl," plays, musical performances and athletic events. In an era prior to the fortification of schools, Jeff also served as a recreational center, where members of the community used its athletic fields and sports courts when school was not in session. By design, Jeff's buildings and grounds were to "serve community meetings, community activities, and community interests."²⁷²

²⁷⁰ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 18, 1939.

²⁷¹ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 9, 1939; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 14, 1949; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 14, 1949.

²⁷² Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 150.

For Black Angelenos, the idea of community-centered schools in and of itself was not necessarily what held out so much promise. After all, many Black Angelenos came from the South where community responsibility for the school was, in a sense, imposed on them by Jim Crow. That is, the black schoolhouse in the South was generally just as much “of the community” as any Progressive school since, if black communities wanted an education for their children in the South, they needed to make it happen. The difference in Los Angeles, however, was that the community school was connected to (and not set apart from) sources of power. Indeed, as enumerated above, Jefferson High offered blacks access to a constellation of public services via the community school. It connected them to a public apparatus that could potentially alleviate some of the burdens placed on them by racism. Moreover, as we shall explore in more depth next chapter, the Progressive’s emphasis on community involvement in schools, also gave blacks access to a *public* voice, which heretofore had historically been largely denied. In theory, then, Progressive Education’s reforms seemingly offered blacks and other historically oppressed groups a path to full-fledged citizenship.

“The fact remains that the great majority of these people are employed at a comparatively low scale of work where special training might be of greater value than would be general academic training.” – Jefferson High School Counselor, 1937.

In spite of its lofty ideals, however, the Progressive’s “democratic” schoolhouse never fully materialized for Black Angelenos. American racism proved too intractable. In schools throughout Los Angeles, the concept of “equality” persistently ran up against deeply engrained notions about the intellectual capacity and cultural deficiencies of

minority students, which worked to delimit the educational opportunities for blacks. But even where educators did not carry with them the heritage of American racism into the classroom, the education of blacks and other minorities would suffer because the educational system was linked to larger structures. When off school grounds, black students lived in a larger community that did not always demonstrate a strong interest in “equal opportunity” and “fair play.” To this, the schoolhouse had no answer.

Black Americans were well-situated to understand that ideas were only as noble as the people who put them into practice. If they had missed this message at home, many young black Angelenos learned this lesson in Los Angeles public schools. Put simply, racial intolerance was never absent from city schools. Before the debut of the Progressive schoolhouse, black students regularly faced the threat of Jim Crow in a “non-segregated school system.” A few examples just hint at how pervasive racial prejudice was in city schools in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. In the century’s first decade, the Los Angeles school board “generously” offered to provide for the education of black children under the roof of the African American First AME church.²⁷³ Not fooled by the board’s designs, black citizens of Los Angeles ultimately rejected this gesture of “generosity.” In 1915, a recent African American high school graduate sensed that “a peculiar method of discrimination against Colored students ha[d] been going on for a few years ... at public occasions.” At her graduation ceremony, she “was

²⁷³ “History of First AME,” Box 8 Folder 7, Miriam Matthews Collection, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA. Also covered in *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 25, 1959. It appears that the Los Angeles Board of Education rented the church to serve as a schoolhouse for black students for a short period. However, a group of concerned Angelenos, led by attorney Horatious Martinez, successfully contested what they perceived to be an attempt to create separate schools.

humiliated and forced to march in the line alone.”²⁷⁴ “Instead of the teachers insisting that there should be no break in the line and impressing upon [the other students] that if they go to public schools they must be willing to come in contact with different races, they made it worse.” By asking each student if they minded an integrated procession, “the majority of the class began to look upon [the black students] as something below them.” Finding solace in thoughts about the afterlife while disabusing any notion that Los Angeles was a black utopia, one of the snubbed graduates maintained that “if ever one gets to heaven it will be the Colored girl graduates from the high schools; for they suffer the miseries of the other place right here.”²⁷⁵ That same year, teachers at Manual Arts designated the black students to give a “special ragtime performance” in a school production. When the students questioned the teachers why they “did not aspire to something higher with which to represent the race,” the students were told that they could perform ragtime or “not appear [in the play] at all.” Attempting to make sense of the teacher’s motives, one of the students opined, “They do not want us to aspire to the classics in art.”²⁷⁶ In 1922, “wide-awake” members of the East Adams Neighborhood Improvement Association exposed a “scheme” to establish Jim Crow schools. Through “shrewd detective work,” the group discovered that “a white vice-principal, a large number of white teachers and an organized white association” were “perfecting plans” to “force down the throats of Los Angeles citizens, separate schools.”²⁷⁷ Clearly, the Progressive Schoolhouse was grafted onto a system where racial prejudice was all too

²⁷⁴ *California Eagle*, June 26, 1915.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, March 5, 1926.

familiar. The introduction of Progressive education's philosophies did little to expunge this tradition.

In fact, "Progressive" educators carried just as much ideological baggage as their predecessors. Despite espousing the virtues of "world brotherhood," Los Angeles educators did not always live up to the values implied in this phrase. For some black Angelenos, close encounters with racism left an indelible impression in their memory of the Progressive schoolhouse. James Taylor remembered sitting in the office of the "well-regarded" athletic director at Manual Arts High School as he angrily shouted, "you're going to schedule us with those niggers at Jordan High School" to another person on the other end of a phone.²⁷⁸ Sid Thompson remembered "like it was yesterday" his junior high physical education teacher barring him from participating with his white classmates in coed dancing on Wednesdays.²⁷⁹ At Jefferson High School, stand-out student Ralph Bunche also discovered the shortcomings of the Progressive schoolhouse. Even as he earned the distinction of valedictorian, Jeff's honor society refused to accept Bunche because of his race. Tellingly, no administrators or faculty advisors pushed through his induction. Apparently, the Progressives emphasis on "interdependence" did not reach all students. When Bunche tried out for Jeff's basketball squad his junior year, several white players threatened to quit if he made the team.²⁸⁰ These recollections stand in stark contrast to Progressives educators' vision for the schoolhouse as an integrative force.

²⁷⁸ James Taylor, "Black Educators in Los Angeles," interview by Alva Moore Stevenson, oral history transcript, 2008, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

²⁷⁹ Sidney Thompson, "Black Educators in Los Angeles," interview by Alva Moore Stevenson, oral history transcript, 2008, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

²⁸⁰ *Westways*, (July 1975).

Ironically, many black Angelenos perceived rising segregation and racism in schools just as Progressive educators reached the pinnacle of their influence. At the same time that Progressive educators bandied about phrases such as “the school for all,” Faye Allen, Los Angeles’ first African American School Board Member noted in a report for the Myrdal Study in 1939 that “there [was] a definite change toward segregation in the schools.”²⁸¹ To beat back this development, the local NAACP, Urban League, Women’s Political Study Club, National Negro Congress found it necessary to form vigilance committees against racial segregation.²⁸² A doctoral student at the University of Southern California, too, saw racism “mounting” in “the attitudes of teachers in schools in Los Angeles.” Attempting to stem its tide, she proposed a plan to “help teachers get over their race prejudices through education and therapy sessions.”²⁸³

About the same time, residents of Central Avenue displayed their frustrations over alleged practices of Jim Crowism on Jefferson High’s campus when they asked for the replacement of the school’s principal. Concluding an investigation of “irregularities,” the Young Democrats charged Principal Dickinson with “foster[ing] racial differences and encourag[ing] and prevent[ing] inter-racial organizations of students.” “He brand[ed] everything inter-racial communistic and radical,” they added, “and [he] maintain[ed] segregation in drama classes.”²⁸⁴ A year later, residents were still debating the issue of

²⁸¹ Willa C. Curry, “Educational and Vocational Guidance of Negroes” (MA thesis, University of Southern California, 1937), Box 1 Folder 13 Los Angeles Urban League Collection, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA.

²⁸² Myrdal Report on Los Angeles Education, Box 2 Folder 13, Los Angeles Urban League Collection.

²⁸³ Dorothy Baruch, “Projected Plan for Experimental Procedures in Reducing Discrimination through Teacher Education,” (1939), Box 1 Folder 24, Los Angeles Urban League Collection, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA.

²⁸⁴ *California Eagle*, May 18, 1939.

segregation on Jeff's campus. The Los Angeles Urban League reported that "there have been continual discussions [in the community] regarding the holding of Senior Prom, due to the fact that Negro, White, Mexican and Oriental young people would have to dance together." Though the dance was ultimately held, after two decades of Progressive reforms, one would not expect that this would be "the first year that such an affair [was] held."²⁸⁵ For those black students who encountered attitudes such as these, "cosmopolitanism" surely struck them as hollow.

Jeff's polyglot setting, then, offered black students a peculiar vantage point to witness "cosmopolitanism" put to the test. Aside from their own experience, Jeff's black students may have gleaned another lesson about the limits of democratic ideals from the experiences of ethnic Mexicans and ethnic Japanese in the Progressive schoolhouse. In an effort to clear the relief rolls of "unworthy" recipients during the Depression, Los Angeles County and city officials decided that sending ethnic Mexicans to Mexico was cheaper than providing aid. Some scholars estimate as many as 500,000 ethnic Mexicans, many of whom were Americans, were sent to Mexico during the 1930's. Although the Mexican population at Jeff grew rapidly (in terms of their year to year increases) in the late 1920's and early 1930's, Los Angeles' repatriation programs during the Depression may have stunted that growth from the mid 1930's to the early 1940's. While it is unclear exactly how many of Jeff's students were affected by this policy, it seems reasonable to assume that Jeff students lost more than a few of their classmates. In spite of repatriation, however, ethnic Mexican students continued to constitute a significant portion of the student body well into the late 1930's. In 1938, for instance, 20.9% (417) of the students

²⁸⁵ Myrdal Report on Los Angeles Education, Los Angeles Urban League Collection Box 2, Folder 13, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA.

at Jeff identified themselves as Spanish-speaking or ethnic Mexican. Still, for those African American students who may have lost a friend, these numbers were meaningless.

Another policy, however, had a much more dramatic impact on Jeff's demographics. In 1938, 117 students, or 5.9% of Jeff's total population, identified themselves as ethnic Japanese. When President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 during World War II, the ethnic Japanese population seemingly vanished overnight. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the loyalty of ethnic Japanese came under scrutiny. Citing the fear of a Japanese fifth column within the United States, President Roosevelt authorized military commanders to designate "military areas" as "exclusion zones", from which "any or all persons may be excluded." Although this order rested on dubious constitutional footing, it was ultimately used to remove ethnic Japanese from the coastal areas in the West to inland internment camps. The *Jeffersonian* quietly recorded the changes resulting from this policy, noting that Mrs. Specht's Algebra III class "dwindled to one pupil." The class started out with five students. But, "as one may [have] gather[ed] from the names," "out of necessity," Hitoshi Ohara, Henry Okamura, Takshi Suruki and Sadako Hayamara "dropped it."²⁸⁶

Japanese internment stirred conflicting feelings within the Jefferson community. On the one hand, students felt compelled to demonstrate their patriotism and express their loyalty to the nation in time of war. On the other hand, many realized that their childhood acquaintances were not the enemy. Alvan Burton probably best expressed the inner-conflict many black students must have felt when he later recalled: "We're all crying with them. We didn't want them to go. They had been our classmates for years. But what

²⁸⁶ *Jeffersonian*, May 8, 1942.

people don't understand, it was necessary. They had to go for their own protection."²⁸⁷

While most, like Burton, resigned themselves to the fact that internment was out of their control, some of Jeff's African American students took matters into their own hands.

Determined to see that the Japanese students who were seniors would graduate, Sherry Landry started a petition to send Jefferson's ethnic Japanese students textbooks at the assembly center at Santa Anita Race Track in Arcadia, California. Like Burton, Edythe Espree remembered everyone in the community crying when their Japanese neighbors were taken away. Pointing to the slipperiness of race and nationality, Edythe later recalled, that the authorities "didn't touch" the Germans across the street from her house. But, it was the "[Japanese] kids [who] were living here for all their life ... who were American citizens" who were removed. Outraged that her childhood friends would not receive recognition for nearly three years of high school work, Edythe Espree marched into Jeff's Vice Principal's office and requested that the school "send [them] their diplomas."²⁸⁸ Ultimately, the efforts of Landry, Espree and undoubtedly many others paid off. Jeff's Japanese-American students not only received books, but those in the class of 1942 also received diplomas.

Even after graduation, the Jefferson community and the internees remained in contact. Jeff students and staff sent letters, pictures, toys, and books, even as most of their classmates moved to internment camps throughout the country. In turn, Jeff's former Japanese students wrote often. Between 1942 and the end of the war, articles with titles such as, "Masao Nishihara Sends Letter From Santa Anita," or "Teachers Get Interesting Letters From Manzanar" or "Mrs. Emma Hibbs Receives Letters from Kay Matsuoko"

²⁸⁷ Alvan Burton, interview by author, January 22, 2008.

²⁸⁸ Edythe Espree, interview by author, January 27, 2011.

appeared in the *Jeffersonian*. The interned students' letters took on a common form. Typically, they assured their former classmates that internment was "not so bad" (perhaps for the eyes of censors). They also frequently expressed their longing to return to Jefferson High. If nothing else, repatriation and internment reminded Jeff's black students of the frailty of freedom, the mutability of race and perhaps of the tenuousness of their own status. Moreover, for many black Angelenos, these developments also must have complicated a definition of freedom that held integration and tolerance as central themes.

Despite experiencing first and second hand the inconsistencies between principle and practice, black Angelenos looked to preserve integration in schools and cosmopolitanism as a principle and as a reality. As seen above, black Angelenos were constantly on alert for any signs of Jim Crow in Los Angeles schools. "In the main, the majority of Negroes [were] in opposition to separate schools," one observer found.²⁸⁹ Another researcher discovered that "practically all [black students and parents] interviewed [for a study on Los Angeles schools] emphasized the aversion to segregation." One black high school student went so far as to state that "they disliked having Negro teachers for [the] reason" that it could be one step toward separate classrooms.²⁹⁰ To be sure, Black Angelenos well understood the alternative to integration.

To make sense of the apparent contradiction between Progressive education's philosophies and Progressive educators' prejudices, we must recall the particular context in which they crafted their ideals. Like the Progressive Movement itself, Progressive

²⁸⁹ Myrdal Report on Los Angeles Education, Los Angeles Urban League Box 2, Folder 13, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA.

²⁹⁰ Burger, "*Training of Negro.*"

Education developed, to a significant degree, from middle class Anglo Americans' anxieties over "others" in their midst. Progressive educators' philosophy on diversity was tied to early twentieth century debates about the assimilability of foreigners and thus rooted in fears of "otherness." They were concerned that "they [foreigners]" would change "us [Americans]" for the worse. The schoolhouse was seen as an important tool by which to change "them" into "us" so as to stave off the degradation of American institutions and traditions.

Although progressive for the era, Progressive's philosophy on diversity markedly differed from late twentieth century "multiculturalism." Whereas latter-day progressives believe in the peaceful coexistence of equally dignified cultures, Progressive educators began with the presumption of cultural deficiency of "others." Ironically, a Principal at Belmont High School in Los Angeles exposed Progressive's attitudes toward "others" in a *critique* of the "radical" Progressive schoolhouse. Advocating for more rigorous training in English, he asked "Are we not already barbarous enough in our national speech without leading our children into a worse condition of language captivity?" Offering the response that he heard "time and time again" from his Progressive colleagues, he retorted, "You'll tell me, I know, that our clientele is taken from a lesser grade of social beings and my answer is that for that reason our standard of demands should be higher and higher. All well enough for a swanky private school with ten students in a class to adopt this new freedom, but what can be said of a class on the Eastside [that is, the Central Avenue district] with 35 and 50 students in a class."²⁹¹ In a study of Jefferson High School, a graduate student more directly articulated Progressive

²⁹¹ A.L. Benshimol, "Froth," *Los Angeles School Journal*, January 4, 1937, 9.

educators' assumption of cultural deficiency, theorizing that "the low place on the list which the Mexican pupils occupy would indicate they are lacking, through their cultural background, in those same characteristics which tend to produce good school attendance."²⁹² Specifically, she argued that ethnic Mexicans "[were] unaccustomed to routine" and "as a group lack[ed] ambition."²⁹³ Even though the attendance of immigrant whites' was subpar, the researcher saw promise, as "they [were] just beginning to break away from the old customs of their parents' countries."²⁹⁴ While blacks, too, had lackluster attendance, the researcher found that they also had room for improvement. Despite coming from families that were "supported by women," blacks' "freedom *is* becoming a fact." "They," according to the researcher, "[were] just beginning to realize that attendance at school is not only compulsory, but desirable."²⁹⁵ Attesting to the Progressive's optimism, excepting "the Mexican peon," the researcher concluded that the Progressive schoolhouse could correct these deficiencies.

Cosmopolitanism in schools, then, extended only so far as quaint expressions of cultural "otherness" did not challenge so-called "authentic" American "manners and customs." Therefore, while educators in Los Angeles believed that the school should acknowledge cultural particularities, they saw its role chiefly as a great homogenizer. That is, there should be opportunities for non-Anglo American students to *perform* their former cultures, but, when the performances ended the school was to produce "all Americans." John Dewey touched on this sentiment when he wrote about the perils of

²⁹² Lillian Graeber, "*A Study of Attendance at Thomas Jefferson High School*" (MA thesis, University of Southern California, 1938), 92.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

socially isolated “others” and the importance of diversity in the school, noting: “The essential point is that isolation makes for rigidity and formal institutionalizing of life, for static and selfish ideals within the group. That savage tribes regard aliens and enemies as synonymous is not accidental. It springs from the fact that they have identified their experience with rigid adherence to their past customs.”²⁹⁶ For Dewey and his followers, the schoolhouse was to play a central role in breaking foreigners of their “rigid” customs and absorbing them into American life.

Starting from this position of cultural deficiency of “others” not only had an impact on the Progressive’s program of cosmopolitanism, but it also informed their concept of the community school. Thus, while the community school, with all of its services, was indeed an integrative force, particularly for marginalized groups, it was a tool for social control as well. Progressive’s talk about tying community and school together was premised partly on the notion that schools “must compensate for the wrong influence of poor homes.”²⁹⁷ As a number of scholars have highlighted in their analyses of Americanization projects, educators consistently found the “wrong influence” in non-Anglo American homes.²⁹⁸ Invoking a form of the “white man’s burden,” a counselor at Jefferson High School fretted that the “responsibility of educators” to students was “indeed great.”²⁹⁹ Not only did school officials have to contend with low intelligent quotients, she noted, but they also had to address problems associated with

²⁹⁶ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 99.

²⁹⁷ Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 9.

²⁹⁸ Responding to the threat of a polyglot society, Los Angeles City Schools established an aggressive Americanization program in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

²⁹⁹ Lillian Graeber and Elsa M. Smith, “Still They Come,” *Los Angeles Schools Journal*, March 6, 1944, 6.

“malnutrition,” “poor hygiene,” and “broken homes.”³⁰⁰ In theory, then, the community school not only brought the community in but also opened up the door for Progressive educators to firmly embed themselves in the lives of those “others” they were attempting to transform. That some of the “others” were not all too comfortable with this relationship can be seen when the same counselor revealed that “the doctors, nurses and health coordinator have been impeded in their examinations and interviews this semester by the attitude of the new pupils.”³⁰¹ The students refused to cooperate under guise of ignorance. For these students and perhaps their parents, the community school was more intrusive than supportive.³⁰²

Evidence also suggests that the Progressive’s community school fell short of becoming the “community’s townhouse” in Central Avenue. In a report for the Myrdal Study, Floyd Covington of the Los Angeles Urban League recorded the difficulties in securing the use of Jeff’s facilities for different non-school organizational meetings. Citing but one example, he shared how Los Angeles City Schools denied the National Negro Congress—an early Civil Rights group—access to Jeff for its meeting, falsely claiming they were “communistic.” Apparently, school officials were not above red-baiting. Hinting at how city schools supported political agendas, Covington noted that denials “held true for other Progressive and liberal groups as well.” If the schoolhouse was the community townhouse, Progressive educators held the key and apparently were reluctant to let those in who openly challenged the status quo.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 6, 7.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰² Myrdal Report on Los Angeles Education, Los Angeles Urban League Box 2, Folder 13, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA.

Progressive educators' ideological baggage, then, was consequential. But their biases not only precluded the establishment of a truly cosmopolitan setting and truncated the potential of the community school. Their prejudices also ran counter to the goals associated with the comprehensive high school. In theory, the comprehensive high school was supposed to place students in programs of study that corresponded to *their* interests and educational goals. By offering *every* student equal access to broad educational opportunities, the progressive schoolhouse was suppose to work toward leveling society. In practice, however, race clearly played an important role in determining programs of study. For many black Angelenos, this was the most disappointing failure of the Progressive educators' program.

Far more disconcerting for black Angelenos than isolated incidents of racial insults were Progressive educators' low expectations for children of color. Black Angelenos consistently and vociferously complained about what they perceived as racially discriminatory student programming. Recollections abound with stories about counselors attempting to steer black children into "race-appropriate" vocational studies. For example, Ralph Bunche's principal at Thirtieth Intermediate School tried to persuade his grandmother that he should take a non-academic program of study. Fortunately, as it turned out, his grandmother insisted that "my grandson is going to college and must be made ready for it."³⁰³ Thomas Bradley, LA's future mayor, recalled teachers at Lafayette Junior High—a feeder school to Jeff—pushing African Americans and ethnic Mexicans toward service jobs and Asians toward gardening and clerking careers. For him, "Lafayette served as the point of greatest awareness of the denial, the deprivation that

³⁰³ *Westways*, July 1975.

blacks experienced in our society.”³⁰⁴ Cecil Fergerson remembered teachers steering blacks toward “manual labor jobs.”³⁰⁵ Margaret Douroux recalled her high school counselor pushing her toward “shorthand and typing” and “not a program to go to college.”³⁰⁶ In the investigation of “irregularities” at Jeff, the residents of Central Avenue asked for the removal of Principal Dickison, in part, for encouraging black students “to take commercial courses rather than academic work.”³⁰⁷ In 1939, an Urban League report captured the tensions arising from this issue between black parents and the “progressive” schoolhouse, noting: “There is a peculiar conflict existing between teachers and parents, in which the tendency seems to be to direct Negro pupils toward vocational and household art courses. Parents object thinking counselors are trying to equip pupils for only the so-called undignified occupations.”³⁰⁸ Though more subtle than direct insult, black Angelenos found race-based student programming just as odious.

Black parents had cause for concern. No matter how much Progressive educators’ espoused individualized education, they could not move away from thinking racially. And thinking racially rarely boded well for African Americans. Highlighting the gulf between black expectations’ and educators’ view of black students ability, a Jefferson High School counselor found that “a much smaller percentage of Negroes plan to go to trade school than to college.” A full fifty percent of Jeff’s black students, he discovered,

³⁰⁴ Thomas Bradley interview.

³⁰⁵ Cecil Fergerson, “African American Artists of Los Angeles,” interview by Karen Anne Mason, oral history transcript, 1990, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

³⁰⁶ Margaret Douroux, “Black Music and Musicians in Los Angeles,” interview by Karin Patterson, oral history transcript, 2007, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

³⁰⁷ *California Eagle*, May 18, 1939.

³⁰⁸ Myrdal Report on Los Angeles Education, Los Angeles Urban League Box 2, Folder 13, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA.

stated that they intended to go to college after high school. Yet, in his estimation, a “study of the facts... would prompt the conclusion that many who stated that they hope to attend other [higher] institutions after graduating from Jefferson were doing some wishful thinking.”³⁰⁹ In another study, another counselor at Jeff told a researcher that “black students are eager to take academic, college prep and will not be dissuaded.”³¹⁰ Further showing how Progressive Education’s precepts did not always apply to black students, Jeff’s Principal condescendingly added, that “*Negroes* have decided they must have a broader education, a more liberal one to accompany their vocational training.”³¹¹ To which the researcher found that “most” counselors would say “they could not come right out and say you are colored and you can’t do that,” “although that [was] often their attitude.”³¹² At the height of Progressive educators’ influence, then, it appears that administrators at Jeff spent more time “dissuading” rather than encouraging black students to pursue their interests through a broad program of study. This, of course, violated the most fundamental principle of the comprehensive high school. Reflecting on the crippling effect of school official’s attitudes on minority students, Thomas Bradley recalled later: “Some [of his classmates] had wonderful minds, but, because of the lack of inspiration or encouragement, they lost their ambition, if they even had it, simply turned to the most menial kinds of jobs that were available or turned to drugs or crime.”³¹³ Many of Central Avenue’s black students, like Bradley, discovered that Progressive educators’ principles on inclusion were only as expansive as the assumptions that undergirded them.

³⁰⁹ Oliver Weston Saul, “Implications For Guidance of High School Pupils From Follow-up Study,” (MA Thesis, University of Southern California, 1939), 36, 41.

³¹⁰ Burger, “Training of Negro.” Emphasis mine.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Thomas Bradley interview.

Even if Progressive educators had checked their biases at the schoolhouse door, the education of black Angelenos would still have suffered because the educational system was bound to a racist labor market. In the first four decades of twentieth century, a racially segregated labor market barred black Angelenos from most professions and many whole industries. Despite a burgeoning industrial complex in and around Central Avenue, the vast majority of African Americans, prior to World War II, were relegated to work in the service economy as domestics, chauffeurs, butlers, mother's help and porters or as day laborers. Thus, if one of the major aims of education was to give students the skills necessary to be successful in future careers of *their* choosing, the guidance of black students became especially tricky. After all, as evinced by their educational aspirations, most blacks desired more than low-wage, low-skilled work. The questions facing the best-intentioned Progressive educators then became: Should we teach blacks students (and other minority students) skills that they will not be able to utilize after secondary school? Or, should we offer African Americans an education that is transferable to "Negro jobs?"

At Jefferson High, school officials grappled with this conundrum in the late 1930s, just as the school's black population topped sixty percent of the total student population. Precisely at the moment of this demographic shift, school officials began to indirectly question the wisdom of Progressive principles as they sought a major overhaul of the school's program. In a "Report on the Organization of Thomas Jefferson High School," the city school's director of instruction, deputy superintendent and assistant superintendent proposed that "a thoroughly scientific study be made of the *true* vocational opportunities open to the Negro in [Central Avenue]" to aid in the

restructuring process.³¹⁴ Answering the call, a graduate student and counselor at Jeff produced a study that asked the following “important” questions: “To what extent should the school be more vocational?” “For what specific vocations should training be given?” “To what extent should the Jefferson High School curriculum be college preparatory?” “To what extent should Jefferson High School give preparation in domestic and household arts?”³¹⁵ That these questions were posed signaled a willingness to break from Progressive education’s core philosophy of a “balanced education” in deference to the demands of a racist labor market.

Ultimately, the counselor showed a very clear preference for a vocational-centered school. All of his recommendations spoke to a strengthening of Jeff’s vocational program over a balanced program of study. For the evening high school, the counselor maintained that “the great majority of these people are employed at a comparatively low scale of work where special training might be of greater value than would be general academic training.”³¹⁶ For the day school, he suggested that “guidance workers should help students to analyze their potentialities for further education, so as to lessen the number who are disappointed in their plans for a college degree.” Instead of promoting college, the counselor argued, the school should focus on providing students training for “the type of work in which they will engage.”³¹⁷ Taking a survey of current Jeff students, graduates and their families, the researcher found that the type of work blacks did and

³¹⁴ Walker Brown, Arthur Gold and Robert Lane, “Report on the Organization of Thomas Jefferson High School,” partially reproduced in Oliver W. Saul’s “Implications for Guidance of High School Pupils from Follow-up Study” (MA Thesis, University of Southern California, 1939); Emphasis mine.

³¹⁵ Saul, “Implications for Guidance of High School Pupils from Follow-up Study,” 2.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

thus should be trained for fell under the categories of semi-skilled and unskilled.³¹⁸ If the readers missed the point, the counselor added that “approximately 80%” of Jeff graduates will find jobs “which do not require additional training.”³¹⁹ The obvious question, then, as the counselor presented it, was why provide a robust academic program of study at Jeff to future maids, porters and chauffeurs. Why not, instead, serve students’ best interests by adjusting them to the dictates of a racially-determined labor hierarchy.

Evidently, the counselor’s ideas had broader support. Beginning in the late 1930s, Jefferson High School was one of the only high schools in Los Angeles to offer custodial courses and the only school to offer a domestic service program to students. The introduction of these courses at this time is significant for two reasons. First, Jefferson was the only high school in Los Angeles with a large black population. Second, racism in the labor market traditionally relegated blacks to custodial and domestic work. Here, then, instead of challenging racially-determined labor hierarchies, school officials supported them. Texas-native Edythe Espree’s counselor placed her in the domestic service program. When asked by an interviewer what the program entailed, Edythe simply stated that it involved “learning how to take care of white folks.”³²⁰ Apparently, some blacks questioned the superintendents’ assertion that the reorganization of Jeff

³¹⁸ The counselor found that 74.4% of Jeff’s evening school students were engaged in unskilled or semi-skilled work. He concluded that 91.7% of Jeff’s day school student and 57.8% of Jeff’s graduates were engaged in similar work.—Saul, “Implications for Guidance,” 27, 29, 74, 75.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³²⁰ Edythe Espree, interview by author, March 2011.

represented “a very definite effort to relate the aims and the work of the school to the needs of *that* community.”³²¹

By adhering to the demands of the “real world,” Los Angeles Progressive schools closed the circle of opportunity to many black aspirants. In addition to steering Edythe Espree and others in her cohort into “race-appropriate” training programs, school officials outright refused to extend certain types of opportunities to black students on the grounds that such training would be useless. The Los Angeles Urban League, for example, waged a decades-long battle against the admission policy of Los Angeles City School’s Frank Wiggins Trade School, which trained students for skilled trades, such as electricians, plumbers, mechanics, pipefitters, and furniture makers. While offering a pathway to upward mobility for many white working class young adults, Wiggins virtually shut its doors to African American aspirants, citing a policy that they were “required to train youth for the jobs in which there is assurance they [would] be place.”³²² Black applicants to Wiggins (and other programs) got caught in the same trap as their parents who sought jobs where unions and industry collaborated to cordon off opportunity for whites. The school told black students that they could not get the training they desired because they could not get the job. Industry would tell them that they could not get the job they wanted because they did not have the training. By encouraging blacks to take training for “Negro jobs” and by excluding them from other opportunities, school officials contributed to the illusion that the segregated labor market was natural and inevitable. In other words, the logic became that blacks were maids and janitors because they were “naturally adapted

³²¹ Walker Brown, Arthur Gold and Robert Lane, “Report on the Organization of Thomas Jefferson High School,” 6; Emphasis mine.

³²² Los Angeles Urban League, Box 1, Folder 8, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA.

and successful” in this kind of work, not because the school system discouraged them from training in skilled or “intelligent” work or because discrimination in the labor market was standard practice.

This run around surely offered some black youth an early lesson on how duplicitous racism was in “non-segregated Los Angeles.” As Thomas Bradley gestured to in his testimony, the combination of low expectations and discouragement from school officials and the realities of a racist labor market presented a formidable obstacle to black academic achievement. Only the most dedicated, headstrong and/or privileged black students stood a fair chance to take full advantage of the offerings of the Progressive schoolhouse. For many more students of color in Los Angeles, though, this troika suffocated their aspirations. Reflecting on his “ambitions of yesterday,” Jefferson student Masao Nishihara rattled off several careers he once dreamt of pursuing, including becoming a doctor and chemical scientist. In his senior year, however, Nishihara ultimately concluded, “they [were] only vague dreams.” “After all this thought,” he continued, “I suppose I will have to content myself with the probable future of most Japanese, the fruitstand.”³²³ Coming to grips with the racialized world of work and perhaps the guidance from school officials, Nishihara, like many of his fellow African American students, not only questioned the value of Progressive education, but, ultimately resigned himself to play the role white America assigned him.

Contravening any simple narrative that cast school officials as unprincipled racists, some Progressive educators, too, acknowledged the deleterious relationship between school and the work world to the education of students of color. Attempting to

³²³ *Monticellan Yearbook* (1941).

get to the core of the problem of truancy of black students at Jeff, an attendance counselor suggested that “the realization of the limited scope of the Negro often discourages young people of talent and promise.” “If a broader field of endeavor were open to them, if their future were a little brighter, if they had a more definite goal toward which to work,” she argued, “there would be no attendance problem” and by correlation better academic success among black students.³²⁴ Put another way, if the school fully extended Progressive education’s principles and reforms to black students and the labor market did not bar black graduates from opportunities, black students would come to school ready to learn. Considering the pervasiveness of racism and intransigence of discrimination in an era before federal protection of African Americans’ “inalienable rights,” it appears that black students were not the only ones engaged in “wishful thinking.”

Conclusion

In some ways, well-intentioned Progressive educators found themselves in a similar position as their black students. Caught between principle and racial realities, Los Angeles’ Progressive educators chose to follow the demands of the “real world” rather than lead American society to what they called a “new social order.” For those educators who harbored animus toward their African American charges, they found a convenient excuse in the racist labor market to delimit the education of black students. For those, however, who believed that comprehensive education was for all, they met the

³²⁴ Graeber, “A Study of Attendance,” 97, 98.

unrelenting challenge of American racism which dogged their every effort to create an environment where “every talent and interest of each child ha[d] opportunity for expression and improvement.”³²⁵ By giving shelter to racist assumptions and conceding to tradition and actual racial conditions, Progressive schoolhouses in Los Angeles, including Jefferson High, ultimately ended up propping up if not reproducing the very hierarchies that they purportedly worked to knock down. For students, such as Alvan Burton, going to school with “others” offered an instructive lesson on how race and citizenship moved in a so-called “progressive” setting.

³²⁵ Kersey et al., *Your Children and Their Schools*, 9.

Chapter 4: A Tale of Two Schools: Segregating the Progressive Schoolhouse in Interwar Los Angeles

In mid March 1941, a group of students from Fremont High School made a short, and what must have been an uneasy trip to Jefferson. They went not for an athletic contest or an academic conference. They went to make amends. Their mission was to apologize for the actions of their fellow students. A month earlier, a mass protest carried out on Fremont's campus created quite a stir not only in Los Angeles but nationwide.³²⁶ Whether driven by genuine contrition or by pressure from a diverse coalition that formed in response to the “untoward” demonstration, the Fremont contingent wanted to publicly express their remorse and decided that Jefferson was the best place to do it. Separated by a mere three miles, Fremont and Jefferson and their surrounding communities shared a lot in common. However, as the conflagration made clear, they were a world apart in the imaginations of many. The “Fremont incident,” the students’ ultimate trek to Jeff and the ensuing controversy sheds tremendous light on race and space in mid-twentieth century Los Angeles.

On February 6, 1941, Charlotta Bass, editor of the *California Eagle*, caught wind of “a sensational report” that a “great bonfire was blazing and a mock lynching was in progress” at Jeff’s neighboring school, Fremont High. Prior to the dispatch, tensions ran high at the school due to the arrival of six new black students. Posters had circulated for weeks throughout the Fremont community of Avalon with declarations such as: “We

³²⁶ Black newspapers across the country—including the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburg Courier*, *New York New Amsterdam News*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American*—covered the incident and the ensuing controversy.

want no niggers in this school.” “This is a white man’s school.” “Go to your own school, and leave us to ours.” A group of Fremont students painted and distributed “black Sambo cards.” Rumors had swirled in the days leading up to the demonstration that a lynching was eminent.³²⁷

Concerned that these actions were part of “some sort of organized campaign” to “Alabamify” Los Angeles, Bass and members of the city’s “progressive forces”—including representatives from the Home Protective Association, the CIO and AFL—hastened to the scene. When they arrived, they spotted numerous signs posted in and around the school, offering such ominous warnings as “Niggers, if you value your life, stay out” and “Jiggs not wanted.” They encountered students distributing leaflets that read: “NO NIGGERS – TEACHERS & ADULTS THAT STILL HAVE BABY BRAINS SAY IT’S THE BAD NATZI’S [sic] & COMMUNISTS TELLING US TO DISLIKE THE NIGGER, BUT IT ISN’T. WE KNOW WHAT WE WANT AND WE DON’T WANT FREMONT TO BE CALLED A ‘BOOGI’ SCHOOL.” Underscoring the “peril” that the “encroachment” of “Negroes” posed to Fremont, the author of one of the leaflets appealed to readers, “HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A GIRL AFTER SHE HAD BEEN RAPED BY A NIGGER??? WELL, SHE WOULD BE BETTER OFF DEAD....— LET’S JUST STOP AND THINK FOR A MOMENT... WIFE?? DAUGHTER?? OR MOTHER?” Dangling from one of the buildings, the progressive contingent saw a black figure with a noose around its neck. One observer summed up the whole scene as a “shameful reversion to savagery.”³²⁸

³²⁷ Charlotta Bass, *Forty Years. Memoirs From the Pages of a Newspaper* (Los Angeles: California Eagle Press, 1960).

³²⁸ *California Eagle*, March 6, 1941.

So how could such a mass act of “bestiality” (as one witness put it) happen in Los Angeles’ “progressive” schools? After all, Fremont High was located in the same school system that promoted “world brotherhood” and officially endorsed equal opportunity. Moreover, what prompted Fremont’s student delegation of goodwill to make an official apology at Jeff? Why were the arguments of “adults with baby brains” so unpersuasive? These questions hint at just how slippery race and racism were in mid-twentieth century Los Angeles. For just at a moment when talk of “racial tolerance” reached a zenith in public discourse, Los Angeles experienced a calcification of racial segregation. The students’ protest at Fremont was not simply an irrational aberration or some smuggled southern import. It was homegrown—it was a direct product of local actions and decisions regarding housing and education. Indeed, underneath their pronouncements of colorblindness, school officials, in partnership with homeowners, real estate agents and developers, encouraged Angelenos to see racial spaces in public places. Thus, by the dawning of the fourth decade of the twentieth century, Fremont students made the journey from “their” school to the “other” school to repent.

And while the kind of assertions to “white” space seen at Fremont is a familiar mid-twentieth-century tale, the case of Los Angeles brings to the fore a less explored process. In an era of growing segregation, black Angelenos also increasingly imagined colored spaces of their own. At the same time protestors yoked their interests in whiteness to Fremont, African Americans wielded Jefferson as symbol of black Los Angeles. Not only did Fremont students and parents make forceful claims to public space based on race, but blacks also pointed to their predominance at Jeff to assert control over the school, albeit through less violent means. Ironically, some of the very same policies

and practices that worked to exclude black Agelenos from the city-at-large offered an institutional foothold at Jeff from which to engage in group politics and community formation and from which to counter negative popular perceptions of blackness. Yet, while arguments for demands such as the hiring of black teachers and administrators gained greater weight within a framework of “our” school, it was always a problematic strategy. To make claims to space based on race after all was to give tacit approval to isolation and its attendant implications.

The symbolic gesture made by Fremont students underscored this new reality and the dilemma it posed. The apology and its acceptance at Jeff ultimately reinforced the underlying logic of the Fremont demonstration. Indeed, the gesture was something of a paradox, reflecting more broadly the duplicitous nature of racism in Los Angeles schools and the city itself. It was both an expression of tolerance and a reaffirmation of a geographic order that assigned a set of racialized expectations to socially constructed, discrete spaces.

Despite their vociferous declarations of irreconcilable difference, Fremont’s would-be lynchers shared plenty in common with their neighbors who attended L.A.’s largest “Boogi” school. Living only a few miles apart and in some cases right across the Avenue from one another, their childhoods were filled with the same sights, sounds and smells. They both traversed neighborhoods comprised of fairly consistent long rectangular blocks ringed by small bungalows with modest size yards. Where the streets intersected, they found mom and pop stores catering to customers looking for convenience. They walked broad thoroughfares under street signs bearing the same names. They probably heard from their parents the same repeated warning to look out for

reckless drivers speeding down the avenues of Central, Avalon and San Pedro, especially after one of the regular pedestrian deaths. Along these major arteries, both groups of students daily passed through commercial districts comprised of small operations, including beer halls, dry cleaners, diners and mid-size enterprises, such as furniture stores, clothing stores, grocery stores and movie theaters.³²⁹ Both Fremont and Jefferson youth were intimately familiar with the sound of rumbling streetcars along the O, S and U lines. On nights when the Los Angeles Angels played, both students might hear the roar of the crowd or see a glow emanating from the lights at Wrigley Field. In transit and recreation their paths could have crossed at any number of places. When an eastern breeze blew, both groups of students might detect the noxious fumes from nearby factories in the Alameda Corridor, where some of their parents worked. They inhabited the same urban environment.

Nothing in their household experiences *dramatically* distinguished them from one another either. In fact, the 1940 census tract information for the areas that included Jefferson and Fremont reveals a strikingly similar home life and socioeconomic condition with only a couple of notable exceptions.³³⁰ In the Jefferson tract, an average 3.23

³²⁹ Los Angeles Sandborn Fire Maps, (1920-1940), Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

³³⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*. The most notable differences between the two tracts were Jefferson homes on average were built earlier. Thus, 9% of homes in this district needed “major repairs,” compared to only 1% of homes in Fremont. And, women in the Jefferson tract worked outside the home in greater numbers. 40.3% of women in the Jefferson were in the labor force, compared to 24.5% of the women in the Fremont tract. It should be noted that this pattern did not hold true for all tracts in Avalon and Central Avenue. There were many tracts in Central Avenue where the percentage of women in the labor force was much lower than many of the tracts in Avalon. Taking all the tracts in Central Avenue and Avalon together, the percentage of women in the labor force was about the same.

persons occupied each of the 1,507 residences. Seventy five percent (1,129) of these were single-family detached homes with a median of 4.0 rooms. In comparison, residents in the Fremont tract averaged 3.24 persons per occupied dwelling. Out of the 1,352 total dwellings, seventy seven percent (1,040) were single-family detached with a median of 4.2 rooms. High school age students made up 6.6% of the Jefferson tract total population, compared to 9.1% in the Fremont tract. The median number of school years completed for residents around Jefferson was 9.4; around Fremont it was 9.2. Both communities were predominantly working-class with laborers, service workers, domestics, operatives and craftsmen constituting 86% of the Jefferson labor force and 70% of Fremont's. And while Fremont had more than three times (350/124) as many residents employed in sales and clerical work, the Jefferson area had twice (65/33) as many professionals. If consumer indexes are any guide to quality of life, again residents of Jeff and Fremont enjoyed some of the same fruits. 95.4% of residents in the Jefferson tract owned a radio compared to 97.4% in the area surrounding Fremont. The average value of a home in the Jefferson area was 60.6% (\$2,803) of the average value of the homes citywide. That compares to homes in the Fremont tract, which were valued at 64.1% (\$2,967) of the citywide average.³³¹ By and large, Fremont and Jeff families were working people on the margins of L.A.'s prosperity. In terms of lived experience generated along the axis of class, they shared much in common.

Given their many commonalities and their close proximity, it would be reasonable to assume that some of the students who attended Jeff would occasionally transfer to Fremont and vice-versa. The tandem of housing and educational policies and practices,

³³¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

however, imposed its own logic on residential and public space. The collusion between these two forces *made* Central Avenue and Jefferson black and Avalon and Fremont white and in the process drew a near impermeable line, at least in the minds of whites, between “ours” and “yours.” Contrary to the essentialist arguments of the Fremont protestors, there was nothing natural, immutable or inevitable about these designations.

The story of residential segregation in Los Angeles has been well documented. Not only have there been numerous studies focused solely on this process, but scholars interested in different ethnic communities have also done much to shed light on the partitioning of Los Angeles.³³² We have learned that Anglo Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century increasingly turned to the law to realize their vision for L.A. as America’s “white spot.” While racial violence and intimidation were always in the tool shed for this project, white Angelenos found a legal innovation of their own making to be the most effective in segregating the cityscape. Adapting a long-recognized instrument, white Angelenos asked restrictive covenants to do the work of racial spacing. Written into the deeds of homes by individuals and developers, *racial* covenants

³³² For pre World War II studies exploring residential segregation in Los Angeles and/or California see, Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1943* (New York: Oxford University, 1993). For World War II/post-war residential segregation, see for example, Eric Avila, *Popular culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

prohibited the purchase or occupancy of a property by non-whites. While other minority groups were regularly barred in these provisions, African Americans were nearly always among those explicitly excluded.

Just as Los Angeles entered a home building boom in the 1920s, the legal regime cleared the way for the wide-scale use of restrictive covenants by giving housing discrimination state sanction. In *Title Guarantee and Trust Company v. Garrott* in 1919, a title company sought repossession of a home covered under racial covenant that had been sold to Homer Garrott, an African American police officer. The State Supreme Court ultimately ruled that Garrott could retain ownership.³³³ However, it made its decision based on the inviolable right of sellers to dispense of their property to whomever they see fit, not on any constitutional rights Garrott possessed. While the decision worked in Garrott's favor, it ultimately gave legal support for a sellers' right to discriminate. The Court's articulation of the supremacy of property owners' rights would undergird racial projects well into twentieth century.

Later the same year, the California Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of racial covenants. In *Los Angeles Investment Company v. Gary*, a developer brought suit against Alfred Gary, an African American who bought a home in a subdivision covered by covenants. In contrast to the covenant in dispute in the Garrott case, Gary's covenant included an exclusionary clause on sell *and* occupancy. Again, the Court rendered a decision that protected the property interest of the African American litigant.³³⁴ However, while the court determined that covenants could not restrain whites from selling homes to blacks, they could bar African Americans from *occupying* them. For Gary and other

³³³ *Title Guarantee and Trust Company v. Garrott* (1919).

³³⁴ *Los Angeles Investment Company v. Gary* (1919).

African Americans, this meant that they could buy a home and pay taxes on it, but not live in it. By solely recognizing whites' right in property and jettisoning ancient property law and black's claims to equal protection and due process, California courts played an important role in segregating the Southland.

Indeed, as a result of these decisions, the practice of restrictive covenants flourished in the interwar years. Clauses such as “No part of said real property shall ever be leased, rented, sold or conveyed to any person who is not of the white or Caucasian race, nor be used or occupied by any person who is not of the white or Caucasian race whether grantee hereunder or any other person” blanketed homes throughout Los Angeles County.³³⁵ By the mid 1940s, after two decades of intensive use, restrictive covenants led many whites to view residential separation as an inalienable right. Homeowners flooded government officials' offices with complaints about “black” encroachment. Writing to Los Angeles County Supervisor John Anson Ford, one woman implored the supervisor to support covenants so as to keep “negroes out the Valley.” Suggesting a spatial plan for the city, she asked “why not keep [blacks] segregated in the part of the City around west Adams and Jefferson?” To stir within Ford the political courage to back the plan, she wrote, “I can get all the petition signers necessary that will back me up, and if necessary will do so.”³³⁶ To be sure, she was not alone in her appeals for democracy and racial justice. J.W. Whitely asked Ford “to give his letter careful consideration” because it reflected “the deliberate decisions and thoughts of 99% of the people.” After dedicating half of the letter “establishing” the “innate” and unbridgeable difference between whites and blacks, Whitely asked the supervisor to spearhead a

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ John Anson Ford Papers, Box 76 Folder ee, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

campaign “to keep any more negroes from coming to the West.” To address the “Negro menace” already present in Los Angeles, Whitely proposed that the county supervisors and city council by “joint action” acquire a “suitable spot” to “place” blacks in “their own all-negro community...with their own churches, and schools and recreational facilities, etc.” Tapping into deeply rooted notions of racialized citizenship and presaging late-twentieth-century majority claims to victimhood, Whitely emphatically concluded, “It is time that we of the majority began standing up for our own rights; democracy is government for the benefit of the majority.”³³⁷ The racial covenant was an ingenious tool, for it channeled racism through the “democratic” process and thus relieved upstanding citizens of the dirty work of extralegal demonstrations, while theoretically binding generations of homeowners to a commitment of racial segregation.

By the time of the Fremont demonstration, restrictive covenants had left their unmistakable imprint on L.A.’s landscape. In 1940, we see a clear trend toward black isolation in Central Avenue. In 1930, African Americans made up 35% of the total population of the district.³³⁸ While still a diverse community ten years later, most of the census tracts abutting the west side of Central from Ninth Street to Slauson now had a significant number of African American residents, ranging from 37% to 54% of the overall population. On the east side of Central, African Americans now made up overwhelming majorities. In the Jefferson tract, for example, African Americans represented 93.4% of the total.³³⁹ By 1950, the combination of housing discrimination

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Douglass Flamming, *Bound For Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

³³⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

and a “great” migration of African Americans to Los Angeles produced a neighborhood where only two tracts out of fifteen fell below 75% African American. In seven of the fifteen tracts, blacks made up over 90% of the total population.³⁴⁰ But not only did Central Avenue become blacker; it became more crowded. Already a densely populated neighborhood, the Jeff tract’s *reported* population increased over 20% (+ 1,075 persons) between 1940 and 1950.³⁴¹ Thus, beginning during World War II, the rapidly growing African American population confined along Central began to push on surrounding neighborhoods, searching for outlets from overcrowding. Hence, we get the arrival of six new black students at Fremont High in 1941.

Restrictive covenants yielded an inverse effect in the Fremont district. Because developers built over 82% of the homes in Avalon between 1919 and 1939, nearly all of the homes were covered by racial covenants.³⁴² This produced a peculiar residential geography, where tracts literally across Slauson Avenue from one another starkly differed in terms of racial composition. For example, just one year before the mock lynching, the tract just to the north of Slauson along San Pedro was home to 2,341 (44%) African Americans. If you walked less than sixty feet across the Avenue you found zero blacks residing in this tract. Again, other than the racial composition, nothing was remarkable

³⁴⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of Population, 1950, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

³⁴¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of Population, 1950, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*. I stress “reported” because many homes during the “Great Migration” housed more than one immediate family that went unreported. Additionally, some properties offered shelter, which violated housing codes, such as converted garages. Obviously, owners of these properties would be reluctant to disclose this information to census takers.

³⁴² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighteenth Census of Population, 1960, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

about these two tracts. The homes in the tract on the north side of Slauson averaged 58.9% of the value of homes citywide, while the homes on the south side were 58.0% of the citywide average. The major difference (on paper at least) was one tract was predominantly black and the other was all white. In the tract encompassing Fremont, people of European descent made up 100% of the total population.³⁴³ These patterns were not just “real” in concrete terms, but they lived in the imaginations of residents.

Segregation attached significance to place and generated and regenerated expectations about what one would find in certain spaces. For all those who traversed this area knew that when you crossed Slauson going south you entered one of Los Angeles’ many “white spots” and when you crossed the Avenue headed north you were in “darktown.” For residents, the meanings embedded in this distinction seemed to take on greater salience *because* they were so close (literally and figuratively) to each other. Jeff students and Fremont students could not have been any further apart for being so close. Housing practices and policies did much to establish “ours” and “yours” in the minds of Fremont protestors and students of goodwill.

To characterize Fremont’s demonstration as a manifestation solely of housing discrimination, however, would be to miss the whole picture. Real estate agents, developers and home sellers were not alone in constructing racial spaces. They needed help. Both the logic and intent of discriminatory housing practices, such as restrictive covenants were fatally compromised without the support of other actors. After all, what good is a racially homogenous neighborhood if your children are exposed to “others” at a racially heterogeneous school? Just as the legal regime supported white homeowners’

³⁴³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

interests in constructing segregated residential areas, school officials proved to be willing collaborators in the production of racialized public spaces. Contrary to their claims of cosmopolitanism and their frequent official pronouncements of racial equality, school officials supported the balkanization of Los Angeles city schools. Although school officials eternally maintained racial innocence, their actions reveal that they were keen to the concerns of segregators.

“He said it would be nice if I left the school.” – Fremont student, 1941

On February 20, 1941, Eddie Ross from the James Weldon Johnson Club appeared before the Board of Education to lodge a complaint that “there seem[ed] to be a condition existing in the Los Angeles City schools which would tend to discriminate against Negro students.”³⁴⁴ Ross pointed to the recent mock lynching at Fremont *as but just one* example. Speaking for the Board, President Askey emphatically responded, “[Los Angeles Schools] would not countenance any discrimination against Negro students.”³⁴⁵ This statement was in fact consistent with the City School’s official position throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As explored in last chapter, Board members and educators went on record fairly consistently supporting notions of tolerance and equality. While these pronouncements took on various forms, generally they affirmed the conviction that public schools were to serve “the children of all residents regardless of

³⁴⁴ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, February 20, 1941, Charles Young Library Special Collections, UCLA.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

race, color, or creed.”³⁴⁶ In an attempt to allay the concerns of progressive citizens, the Superintendent publicly advanced this principle once more. Los Angeles city schools, he proclaimed, wholeheartedly support the “theory and practice of democracy, the principles of tolerance, and the policy of cooperation and unity in school and community life.”³⁴⁷ In this instance, the credo was called on in a defensive posture, rather than offered as an unsolicited assertion of values. Nevertheless, given such regular declarations, “the condition” Ross perceived most certainly could not have existed in Los Angeles City Schools. However, had school officials practiced with the same kind of consistency what they professed, this might have been true. If we focus on school officials’ actions rather than their words, we see that they nurtured the kind of thinking that produced the Fremont demonstration.

Demonstrators’ forceful claim to Fremont based on race was rooted in history. Like many other schools in Los Angeles built in the interwar years, Fremont was established and operated in the service of whiteness. On July 18, 1921, three years prior to Fremont opening, a group of citizens from the community adjoining Central Avenue appeared before the Board. Though they were not certain, these residents anticipated that a new school would soon be built to serve the area and they wanted to provide the Board with some recommendations in selecting a site. Adopting a “fair-minded” approach, J.T. Zeller, the residents’ spokesperson, conveyed to the Board that residents understood that “any citizen, regardless of race or color, is entitled to equal right with the rest of the people.” However, he continued, “it is disastrous to property values in the residential district to plant a person of different color in such a community.” In other words,

³⁴⁶ *Evening Express* (Los Angeles), April 4, 1931. (Board President J.L. Van Norman)

³⁴⁷ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, May 22, 1941.

“property owners” (a recognized euphemism for whites) have “equal right” too. First and foremost, they had the right not to have their children associate with people of color. To prevent “property loss of millions of dollars to [their] community,” Zeller implored the Board “to keep the north of Jefferson and the south of Jefferson districts separate by keeping any school away from the Jefferson Street line.” That is, site the new school far enough from Central Avenue that its boundary would not include African Americans. Like the “good” citizens who wrote Supervisor Ford, Zeller and his supporters had their own vision of a segregated geography.³⁴⁸ Rather than cite the city school’s policy of non-discrimination and dismiss the residents’ request, the Board ordered the recommendation “placed on file for future reference” when it considered “the erection of a school building in the district.”³⁴⁹ When Fremont opened, it was spaced a good distance apart from Jefferson. Tellingly, its attendance boundaries perfectly followed the line drawn by restrictive covenants at Slauson Avenue.

In opening Fremont, it is clear that the Board’s decision to follow racial lines made sense only in the scheme of L.A.’s racial geography. By drawing the attendance boundaries of Fremont to appease white homeowners, the Board manufactured an inter-school imbalance, which resulted in a waste of resources. Within a few years of opening in 1924, Fremont was already overcrowded. Although Fremont was originally designed to house fewer than 2,500 students, by 1928 the student body approached 3,000. By 1931, Fremont was the second most populated high school in Los Angeles, falling just

³⁴⁸ Remarkably residents saw Jefferson as the “black” school before it was even ten percent black.

³⁴⁹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, July 18, 1921.

shy of enrollment at Los Angeles High School.³⁵⁰ Conversely, during the same period, Jefferson's once robust enrollment experienced a sharp decline. By the late 1920s, administrators at Jeff were shuttering classrooms, scaling down course offerings and cutting staff in an effort to reduce costs at the under-utilized school. A study of enrollment data reveals that these trends were interlinked. The year before Fremont opened Jefferson's student population totaled 2,800—2,600 of whom were “white”³⁵¹ and 180 of whom were “black.” In Fremont's inaugural year, Jeff saw a net loss of 380 students. Jeff lost 440 white students (a decrease of 17%) from the year before, while gaining 100 black students. Four years later, Jeff had nearly 1,000 less students than it did when Fremont opened. The total number of white students that attended the school had dropped by 64%, while the total number of African American students attending the school increased by 78.3%. By 1931, Jeff was the smallest high school in Los Angeles. In 1934, a decade after Fremont opened, Jefferson had only 1,720 students—820 of whom were white and 820 of whom were black.³⁵²

By 1929, school officials, too, recognized the inordinate burden of upholding L.A.'s racial geography. In a move toward efficiency and fiscal sense, the Board attempted to reverse the imbalance wrought by their earlier decision to acquiesce to the demands of white homeowners' “interests.” To address the overcrowding at Fremont and under-enrollment at Jeff, the Board expanded Jeff's attendance boundary to include

³⁵⁰ *Jeffersonian*, Jefferson High School newspaper (1931).

³⁵¹ This category of “white” included a small percentage (no more than 10%) of students of Mexican descent.

³⁵² Oliver Weston Saul, “Implications For Guidance of High School Pupils From Follow-Up Study,” (MA Thesis, University of Southern California, 1939), 18. Jeff's attendance finally began to rebound after the 1936 school year as a migration of African Americans to Los Angeles increased.

students in the former Fremont district. The implications of this decision, of course, were not lost on homeowners south of Slauson. Over 800 people residing in the area south of Slauson along Central, signed their name to a petition urging the Board to scrap the new district and maintain the original attendance boundary. Again, instead of standing firm on the principle of color-blindness by summarily dismissing homeowners' demands, the Board referred their request to the attention of the Superintendent.³⁵³

The Superintendent's solution highlights just how far school officials would bend to satisfy white homeowners appeals for racially homogenous districts. Instead of openly "countenancing" racism by returning the attendance boundary to its original form, the Superintendent recognized the supremacy of "community harmony" by designating the area that was added to the Jefferson district as an "optional" zone. This meant that although students in this area were "officially" within the Jeff attendance boundary, they had the option of attending Fremont. In effect, this preserved the original boundary in another name and reinforced Jeff's association with blackness and Fremont's affiliation with whiteness. It did nothing, however, to solve the problem or advance Progressive educators' vision of "integrated education." By 1931, Jefferson was blacker and still under-enrolled at 1,771 students. Fremont was overcrowded and solidly white with 3,279 students.³⁵⁴

The kind of homeowner's activism carried out by Jeff's southern neighbors was not extraordinary, nor was the Board's response. Representatives from community "protective and improvement associations" regularly came before the Board with racial

³⁵³ Irving Hendrick, *The Education of Non-Whites in California, 1849-1970* (San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1977), 93.

³⁵⁴ Saul, "Implications For Guidance," 18; *Jeffersonian* (1931).

maps in mind in the first half of the twentieth century. While some of the most impractical requests were denied, the Board generally attempted to address homeowners' concerns for sake of "community harmony."³⁵⁵ Indeed the same forces that locked in Jeff's southern attendance boundary at Slauson, defined the school's boundaries to the east and west. Had this not been the case, the Board could have easily solved Jeff's enrollment problem by extending its boundary in either direction. Yet, white homeowners in these areas, too, fiercely resisted any changes that would "plant a person of different color" in "their" schools.³⁵⁶ This was especially true of Jeff's neighbors to the east. Although working-class cities such as Huntington Park and South Gate sought out annexation with Los Angeles City Schools during the Depression to relieve its residents of a heavy tax burden, they insisted that "their" schools maintain the "character" of "their" communities. Put differently, they demanded that the Board preserve their "white" schools by perfectly superimposing school attendance boundaries onto covenant enforcement boundaries, especially at Alameda Street.³⁵⁷

When the school officials attempted to redraw attendance boundaries to address enrollment imbalances in a way that did not pay heed to this racial geography, citizens

³⁵⁵ For example, in 1921, the Board rejected a request by a group of parents to dramatically alter a school attendance boundary to accommodate 37 white children.

³⁵⁶ Blacks were not the only ones deemed unsuitable schoolmates. "Improvement associations" also regularly targeted other children of color, particularly of Mexican descent. The type of request made by Elysian Terrace Improvement Association was not uncommon. Adopting a position of white victimhood, the Association implored the Board to change the "attendance lines" of Effie Street School because it was "unfair" to ask Caucasian children to attend an institution where children of Mexican descent predominated. Driving home their point, the association argued that "experience has shown it is almost impossible to Americanize those people."—Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, June 29, 1927.

³⁵⁷ See, Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

came to the Board in force. In June of 1941, for example, the Mayor of South Gate, the Secretary of the Kiwanis Club of Walnut Park, the President of the South Gate Business Men's Association and several citizens appeared before the Board to protest the "proposed plan of extending the geographic boundaries of the High School District west to Compton Avenue."³⁵⁸ If the Board adopted the plan, it would have maximized school resources and thus tax payer dollars. However, it would also have sent black students from Central Avenue and Watts to Huntington Park and South Gate High Schools. Under pressure, the Board withdrew the plan and maintained the Alameda Street boundary. The Board's decision to accommodate white working-class citizens of L.A.'s eastern suburbs produced perhaps the most visible evidence of the Board "countenancing" of racism. Instead of Jordan High School sitting closer to the center of its attendance zone, as had been the customary practice, the Board drew an irregular attendance boundary that placed the school on the far eastern periphery so as to avoid the mixing of white students from South Gate and black students from Watts and Central Avenue. This peculiar layout would eventually draw the attention of civil rights activists and become a focal point in a decades long legal struggle to desegregate Los Angeles schools.³⁵⁹

The children of upwardly-mobile African Americans, who managed to penetrate the wall of white residential restrictions in areas west of Central Avenue, also found that they were unwanted in the "community" school. Sympathetic to white citizen's concerns, the Board proved willing to literally work around these breaches. For instance, before the

³⁵⁸ Los Angeles City Schools Board Minutes, June 9, 1941.

³⁵⁹ See, John and LaRae Caughey, *School Segregation on Our Doorstep, The Los Angeles Story* (Los Angeles: Quail Books, 1966) and John and LaRae Caughey, *Shame of Los Angeles, Segregated Schools, 1970-1971* (Los Angeles: Quail Books, 1971) for history of school case.

1942 school year, black students whose families recently moved to the West Adams district received a letter stating that they had been rezoned to Polytechnic High School. In practical terms, this meant that they would have “to pay carfare” or “catch a ride” to school. Responding to “questions” about the District’s stance on a “policy of removing any particular group or race from one school or another,” the Superintendent assured the families of the black students that the rezoning “affected every pupil within a certain area.” Curiously, however, as Faye Allen, Los Angeles’ first African American Board member pointed out, this decision only affected *the certain area* that was considered “the Negro district.” Pressing on the illogic, Reverend Clayton Russell of Independent’s Church, argued before the Board that there is “a problem” when “students who have to go to another school can walk to a high school in their own district.” Maintaining racial innocence and cutting short further discussion, the Superintendent responded, “that pupils are not registered as being of one race or another.”³⁶⁰ Although school officials’ answer echoed city school’s policy of color-blindness, their action betrayed efficiency, student convenience, common sense and likely their policy of non-discrimination.

School district attendance boundary logs demonstrate the extent to which racism factored into the drawing of Fremont and Jeff zones. Between 1934 and 1957, Jefferson attendance boundary changed only three times. In two of the changes (1937 and 1941), Jeff ceded areas that were overwhelmingly white. This most certainly was not by coincidence. Other than these changes, Jeff’s boundaries went virtually unaltered between 1930 and 1960.³⁶¹ In contrast, Fremont’s attendance boundary changed thirteen

³⁶⁰ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, August 3, 1942.

³⁶¹ Service Boundary Description: Jefferson High, Los Angeles Unified School District Master Planning and Demographics Division. Between 1937 and 1967, Jefferson’s

times, exchanging territory with four high schools (Washington, Gardena, Huntington Park and Manual Arts), excluding its neighbor Jeff.³⁶² Apparently, school officials had greater flexibility in setting Fremont’s boundary. Racism did not stunt the elasticity of Fremont’s attendance zone in the same way it did Jeff’s. Consequently, Jeff would have greater difficulty adjusting to local fluctuations in high school age populations.

The Board’s establishment of optional zones for Jeff and Fremont further reveal inconsistencies. Despite great fluctuations in enrollment, the Board only designated an optional zone within Jeff’s attendance boundary once between the mid 1920s and 1960s. This was to accommodate white homeowners by allowing them to opt out of Jeff (discussed above) in 1929. African Americans in Central Avenue never had an “option” because the Board never established an optional zone anywhere they lived.³⁶³ In contrast, the Board established optional zones within Fremont’s district on thirteen different occasions. In each of these cases, Fremont’s district had two or three optional school zones, including some combination of the following schools—Manual Arts, Washington, Jordan, Huntington Park. Although Jefferson was the closest high school to Fremont, Jefferson was never an optional school for students in Fremont’s boundary.³⁶⁴ By establishing Jeff’s boundaries with such rigidity, the Board made Jeff’s district an island

attendance boundaries took on a triangular shape with the same coordinates—Sixth Street (the top of the triangle) to the north, Alameda Street (on one side) to the east, Slauson Avenue (at the base) to the south and Main Street (on the other side) to the west.

³⁶² Service Boundary Description: Fremont High, Los Angeles Unified School District Master Planning and Demographics Division.

³⁶³ Service Boundary Description: Jefferson High, Los Angeles Unified School District Master Planning and Demographics Division.

³⁶⁴ Service Boundary Description: Fremont High School, Los Angeles Unified School District Master Planning and Demographics Division.

unto itself, where very few came in and only a few who were granted the rare transfer went out.

Thus, the Board's use of optional zones appears to have been stimulated by concerns beyond simply student convenience and balancing enrollments. Frequently, zones were established in transitional areas or, as we see above, on the borders of covenant enforcement. The "option," however, was never two ways. That is, only students in areas where residents were predominantly white held the option. Optional zones worked as cushions, then. Except in the case of the Jordan district where South Gate homeowners' pushed the Board to establish an irregular district, school officials used the "optional zone" to maintain school-centered boundaries while temporarily staving off the impact of neighborhood demographic shifts on these institutions. In other words, it was a handy stopgap measure that school officials could apply to prevent transitioning neighborhoods from yielding mixed schools. Perhaps more important to Los Angeles' Progressive educators, "optional territory" erected the façade whereby a school's demographics was simply the product of choices made by individual homeowners rather than school officials. Seen this way, educators were innocent bystanders in the creation of Los Angeles' "white spots" and "black spots."

Manipulating attendance boundaries was not the only insidious tactic educators used to segregate Los Angeles' racial geography. Rather than *directly* challenge the school system's official policy of non-discrimination, school administrators often found it easier to work in the grey area of their discretion to determine who attended their school. These actions were informal and done on a case-by-case basis. Thus, it was difficult to prove racial intent. Black Angelenos, for example, regularly complained that their

children were disproportionately denied school transfers when compared to other groups. Sustaining such a charge was difficult, however. School officials need only remind African Americans that these decisions were made solely on the particulars (including, student safety/convenience, desired program of study, enrollment figures at sending and receiving school) of *each* request without regard to race. Because school officials ostensibly did not see race, there were no figures to confirm or contradict these claims.

Black Angelenos also complained that site administrators dissuaded African Americans students from attending “white” schools that were in their own district. When Eddie Ross of the James Weldon Johnson Club first approached the Board after the Fremont mock-lynching, he pointed to “the many instances [where] principals try to discourage Negro students from registering at their schools” as one of the “existing conditions” that “tend to discriminate against Negro students.”³⁶⁵ In fact, even before the Fremont demonstration over the enrollment of six African Americans, Fremont’s Principal appears to have pushed out at least two other black students. In a signed affidavit presented to the Board, student Robert Summerrise testified about his “problems” while at Fremont. “[The students] used to throw orange peels and apple cores at me and the only way I could eat my lunch was to go way out on the bleachers,” he stated. “Pretty soon,” Summerrise continued, “some kids told me that I better leave the school or there would be trouble.” When he approached Principal P.J. Inglis to see “if he could call an assembly ... to tell the kids to not pick on us colored fellows,” the Principal “advised” him that “it would be nice if [he] left the school” because “[he] might like it better if [he] went to Jeff or Jordan.” Acknowledging “it’s kind of bad to go to a school

³⁶⁵ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, February 10, 1941.

where no one wants you,” Summerise conceded. The next day, Mr. Inglis “fixed a transfer for [him] to go to Polytechnic High School.”³⁶⁶ Where attendance boundaries and optional zones did not perfectly conform to L.A.’s racial geography, Summerise’s experience shows how school administrators could (and did) offer the “white” school another layer of protection from unwanted students. Informal acts of dissuasion, such as these were difficult to challenge. Aside from overcoming the “he said she said” hurdle, black Angelenos and their supporters were hard-pressed to draw out a complete constellation of discrimination from individual discretionary actions.

“Trying to make the school system look bad.” – School Board member, 1941.

The Board’s response to the Fremont controversy perhaps provides the best window into city school’s complicated relationship with the notion of non-discrimination. When concerned citizens first brought the mock lynching to the Board’s attention on February 20, 1941, Board members and the Superintendent seemed receptive to calls for racial justice. Board member Larrabee reassured the citizens that “assuming [that the allegations] can be verified,” the condition violates not only policy, but also “the spirit of several laws.” Vowing to get to the bottom of the “alleged conditions,” Deputy Superintendent Gould ordered the Superintendent’s Office to “get all the information possible and report back to the Board when all Board members were present.”³⁶⁷

Two weeks elapsed and three Board meetings adjourned and the Board made no mention of the Fremont incident. On March 6, Eddie Ross of the James Weldon Johnson

³⁶⁶ *California Eagle*, March 27, 1941.

³⁶⁷ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, February 20, 1941.

Club approached the Board once more to remind them of their investigation and to introduce “interested persons.” This time the citizens wanted more specificity on the Board’s planned course action. They wanted to know who was on the investigating committee and what the facts were “up to date.” They also asked the Board “to make a public statement on the whole situation so they [would] know how to proceed.” Instead of addressing the citizens’ questions, the President brought the discussion to an end stating, “that the Board will discuss [the citizens’] request and later take such action as it thinks best.”³⁶⁸

Nearly six weeks after the “alleged” demonstration, citizens were still waiting to hear from the Board. On March 24, attorney Robert Robinson went before the Board requesting to “reopen the [Fremont] case today.” Carrying two signed affidavits from two black students who experienced “troubles” at Fremont, Robinson asked that “the Board hold an open hearing to determine the source and the cause of the many incidents of discrimination against Negroes” at Fremont. He further stated that he contacted the Superintendent shortly after the Board’s promise to investigate with information related to the matter and was informed that the Office was “investigating the family background of the Negro students who were in attendance at the John C. Fremont High School” at the time of the demonstration. To “get the facts out” and “encourage anyone who may have witnessed [the demonstration] to step forward,” Robinson again stressed the need for an open meeting. The Board rebuffed Robinson’s recommendation, “doubt[ing] the value” of holding such an assembly. Appealing to the Board’s interest in promoting “community harmony,” Reverend Clayton Russell responded that they “[felt] in all fairness to the John

³⁶⁸ Ibid., March 6, 1941.

C. Fremont High School and to the people in that community, to the Board of Education, to our school system, to the Negro and white citizens that some definite information should be given out to the people.” Elevating World War II imperatives, Russell explained that “[they] were not seeking punishment of the students, but [they] feel during this period of stress where we are all seeking National unity, that those students, if guilty of such action, should be taught true Americanism.”³⁶⁹

On March 26, the Los Angeles City Council chimed in, issuing an official resolution attacking the “conditions” in City Schools that led to the demonstration. It stated: “WHEREAS, this condition of intolerance exists in some of the public schools of the city, apparently uncorrected by the principals of the schools. WHEREAS, segregation of races for racial, religious or other reasons is contrary to the spirit of the Constitution of the United States and the laws of the State of California: THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the City Council go on record as disapproving of such acts of intolerance and prejudice and BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Education be advised of this action.”³⁷⁰

Apparently, the Board was unimpressed. On April 3, they still had not made an official comment. Now the citizens began to connect the actions of the Fremont demonstrators to the policies and practices of the City Schools. The mock-lynching, they argued before the Board, “[was] the result of negligence and inactivity on the part of the school system of this City.” The Board’s failure to establish “correct teaching in [the] schools” precluded “white youth from understand[ing] the true significance of democracy.” “The only way this problem [could] be properly solved [was] in an open

³⁶⁹ Ibid., March 24, 1941.

³⁷⁰ *California Eagle*, March 27, 1941.

hearing,” where “all facts [could] be gathered and presented.” “We believe these facts must be brought out in the open,” the citizens asserted. “We demand the Board move and take its responsibility once and for all.” The Board balked. They ruled to discuss the matter after they saw the Superintendent’s report which they just received. Until then, the President declared that any other discussion on the matter would be considered out of order.³⁷¹

Finally, two months after the “alleged” demonstration the Superintendent released a statement. It did little, however, to assuage the citizens’ concerns. At the first Board meeting after its release, a citizen complained that “the situation in connection with the occurrence at the John C. Fremont High School has not been handled satisfactorily.” “The Statement and Recommendations by the Superintendent,” he observed, “is only a statement of the general policy of the Board of Education, and does not shed a light on what happened at John C. Fremont High School.” In its defense, President Askey suggested that the report was as thorough as it could be. Despite “many complaints,” the Superintendent’s Office found that “they [were] all heresay.” In short, the Board suggested that the mass demonstration involving numerous students and presumably many more witnesses was likely a fiction. The President then, again, called to close discussion on the topic.³⁷² From this point forward, the Board looked to extricate itself from the controversy by recognizing the Coordinating Citizenship Committee, led by Reverend Albert Miller, as the lead investigators in an ongoing “unofficial” enquiry.

The Board’s resolution did not quell protest. On May 15, citizens again came before the Board to press them for answers and action. Clearly feeling the strains of the

³⁷¹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, April 3, 1941.

³⁷² Ibid., April 7, 1941.

controversy, the Board adjusted its position on this occasion. “The *so-called* occurrences or many of them,” stated President Askey, “may have been done by outsiders with the intent to reflect upon the different students and upon the Board of Education.” Fremont students and school officials, then, were the real victims of a plot. Placing this curious turn in context, A.L. Wirin of the ACLU noted that “the original version accepted by the Board was that nothing happened.” “Now,” he continued, “it appears that a lynching actually took place, but the Board *thinks* it was done by outsiders and not by students.” “The fact that a mock lynching took place on the campus is a matter that the Board should take cognizance of and do something about.” “Now that the Board has a statement on record that there was a mock lynching, it is their duty to do something.” The Board, Wirin advised, should have a public hearing and “on its own accord draw up a resolution indicating whether it was committed by outsiders or by students.” Like many citizens who approached the Board before him, Wirin asked the Board to stake out an unequivocal position and take definite action. Instead the Board employed its policy of non-discrimination. “This Board has already gone on record without a dissenting vote that it will not countenance or tolerate such action.” Clearly exasperated, President Askey moved to permanently end the debate, stating: “The Board has gone into this matter repeatedly.”³⁷³ It was time to let it go.

On May 22, the Superintendent endeavored to do just this. “For some time,” the Superintendent wrote in an official statement, “the attention of the Board of Education, the Superintendent, and members of the staff has been directed toward certain occurrences and conditions related to school activities taking place both on and off school

³⁷³ Ibid., May 15, 1941.

property. Because of the undesirable nature of some of the activities and because of the fact that such occurrences were prompted and participated in by individuals outside of the school system, it was found desirable to organize a constructive program both within and without school for purpose of finding a solution to the problem.” After laying out a timeline of events that ostensibly demonstrated school officials’ due diligence, the Superintendent offered the final resolution. He recommended that the Board *officially* approve his statement of policy on non-discrimination drawn up earlier in the controversy. Drawing to a close over three months of debate over “conditions” in City Schools, the Superintendent concluded: “It is further recommended that since the occurrence at Fremont High School on February 6 has been thoroughly investigated by both official agencies, that a thorough study of the matter has been made by the Superintendent and staff, and that the matter has been completely adjusted to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, the entire matter be considered closed.”³⁷⁴

The Board’s handling of the Fremont controversy highlights school officials’ priorities and reveals their level of commitment to a policy of non-discrimination. Instead of taking swift action when the mock lynching came to light, the Board only moved glacially when pressured by concerned citizens. The Board seemed content to allow the mechanisms of bureaucracy to push the issue off the agenda and out of public sight. Their movement, however, was steadily toward denial rather than the truth. When presented with “many complaints,” they questioned the veracity, going so far as to focus the investigation on the families of the six “lynched” students. It took months of pressure to get the Board to finally acknowledge that a demonstration actually took place at Fremont.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., May 22, 1941.

But, according to the Board, the mass lynching really was not what it appeared. Sounding strikingly similar to Jim Crow segregationists, school officials blamed “outsiders” for the “conditions.” And although these “outsiders” carried out such a brazen act of “anti-Americanism” on school campus, the Board never felt compelled to identify them for prosecution. In fact, the Board neither censured nor punished anyone in connection to the protest. Instead, they simply resolved to reaffirm the city school’s commitment to non-discrimination. By blaming shadowy outsiders and trotting out city school’s policy of racial tolerance, the Board hoped to obscure the links between the demonstration and the city school’s policies and practices. In doing so, they never had to address the “conditions.” Here, the official policy of tolerance served as cover for inaction, which in turn supported discrimination. The most damning evidence that school officials “countenanced” racism, then, can be found in their consistent denial of racism itself in city schools.

Thus, the mock lynching at Fremont was in many ways a product of school officials’ own making. Their collaboration, even if reluctant at times, with white homeowners and real estate agents and developers nurtured the expectation that public space should be racial space. That is, the tandem of discriminatory housing and educational practices and policies fortified in the minds of white protestors their exclusive interest in Fremont. Progressive educators’ notion of the community school, too, added to protestors’ claim. If schools were “community townhouses” as Progressive educators purported, then residents of racially exclusive Avalon felt that they should be entitled to determine whom they let in. For demonstrators, Fremont was a symbol of whiteness and all the “good” bound up in this category. To introduce a few African

Americans to the school would adulterate the unadulterated or, as the protestors put it, “turn Fremont into a Boogie school.” That the demonstration happened at Fremont is not surprising. If we use whiteness to define a set of power relations, Fremont students were on its boundaries both literally and figuratively. A contemporary observer to the controversy was not too far off when he noted that the distance (both geographically and economically) between Fremont students and Jeff students was not much more “than a flea could hop.”³⁷⁵ The admission of six black students, then, was not so much an affront to demonstrators’ sensibilities as it was perceived an assault on their status. By drawing attendance boundaries to appease white homeowners, by crafting optional zones to allow for white flight, by denying acts of racism in city schools and using color-blindness as cover, school officials did much to establish this perception and agitate these insecurities. Contrary to their claims of innocence, school officials played a key role in *making* Fremont “white.” These same dynamics made Jefferson “black.”

“The conduct of Jefferson high school has been discussed over and over by the community.” – Jeff Student, 1936

Tellingly, no one within Central Avenue questioned the wisdom of Fremont students offering their apology at Jeff. This is because by the time of the mock lynching, African Americans too saw Jefferson as a symbol of black Los Angeles. As in-migration and segregation transformed Central Avenue, the percentage of African American attending Jeff nearly doubled between 1930 and 1940. In 1930, blacks made up approximately 35% of Jeff’s total population. By 1940, African Americans comprised

³⁷⁵ *California Eagle*, March 20, 1941.

68%. When students demonstrated at Fremont, blacks at Jeff made up over 70% of the school's student body and represented about 60% of the total number of blacks enrolled in Los Angeles County high schools.³⁷⁶ Considering African Americans visibility at Jeff, it is no wonder many saw the institution as a "black" school.³⁷⁷ Predominance alone, however, is not what made Jefferson "black." Indeed, blacks' vision of and for Jeff preceded social reality. Moreover, it was African Americans' active embrace of the school that firmly established its association with black Los Angeles. In an era of economic and social upheaval, African Americans used Jefferson as a binding agent constituting the "black community" in Los Angeles and imbued the institution with their aspirations. This investment carried both risk and reward.

Black newspapers played a central role in establishing and cementing the bonds between Jeff and the black community. In the early 1930s, black newspapers began to routinely report on the happenings at Jeff. Both the *Sentinel* and *Eagle* carried weekly columns with captions such as, "Chatter at Jeff," "From the Jeffersonian," and "At Jefferson" that recorded everyday school life. In other sections, the newspapers kept black Angelenos apprised of activities on campus. They reported on events as varied as the introduction of a new healthcare program, the creation of a Junior Counselor program, Jeff's community Christmas Party, performances by Jeff's musical department,

³⁷⁶ Los Angeles Board Records Box 1596 Folder 3, "Pupil Enrollment and Teachers in Certain Schools and Percentages Negroes to Others" (January 2, 1941); Vierling Kersey et al., compiler, *Your Children and Their Schools: An Informal Report to the Patrons of the Los Angeles City School District* (Los Angeles: Board of Education, 1937), 29; Oliver Weston Saul, "Implications For Guidance of High School Pupils From Follow-up Study," (MA Thesis, University of Southern California, 1939), 18.

³⁷⁷ In 1936, African Americans made up approximately 3.1% (3,397 out of 106,994) of the students enrolled in all of Los Angeles' Junior High and High Schools.—Los Angeles City Schools, Racial and Ethnic Survey (1936).

Open House, student council elections, “faculty out-of-door party,” and school club events. As noted in last chapter, the newspapers also consistently advertised the numerous programs and services—including in education, health, recreation and entertainment—offered at Jeff. Jeff’s athletics also were a staple in the black newspapers. Weekly readers could follow the progress of “their” team. On the last page of the newspaper or in a special pullout section, black Angelenos found headings such as, “Sports Chatter at Jeff High,” “Jordan is Picked to Beat Jeff on Gridiron,” “Jeff Sprints Away,” and “Jefferson Basketball Democrats for All-City.”³⁷⁸ By the late 1930s, the *California Eagle* was even reprinting editorials found in Jefferson’s school newspaper, *The Jeffersonian*, so as to “stimulate greater community interest in what goes on at Jefferson Hi.”³⁷⁹ Thus, even those residents who did not have children attending Jeff likely knew what happened on campus. By reporting on everything from the mundane to the extraordinary at Jeff, black newspapers linked black residents of Central Avenue to the institution and in doing so constructed an “imagined community” spun from Jeff.

By the mid to late 1930s, as African Americans became numerically dominant, black Angelenos began to hold out Jeff as a symbol of black Los Angeles. It was in this period that black Angelenos began to refer to Jeff as “our” school and trumpet Jeff’s successes as community successes. Jeff’s black scholars, for example, frequently received commendation in black newspapers. Graduation garnered special attention from the press. They ran whole pages that included pictures of outstanding students, lists of all the black graduates and the names of African American pupils receiving special

³⁷⁸ *California Eagle* and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 1930-1940.

³⁷⁹ *California Eagle*, October 19, 1939.

honors.³⁸⁰ In 1939, the *Eagle* boasted that “175 of Jeff’s 270 graduates were Negroes.” This represented “the largest number to be graduated from any school or colleges in California,” the writer exclaimed.³⁸¹ The community especially cheered the achievements of Jeff’s black athletes. Jeff’s athletic program was consistently one of the most competitive in the state of California. They were particularly strong in track, football and basketball. Reflecting on the significance of Jeff’s athletes feats to Central Avenue, an editorialist in the *Sentinel* wrote: “Residents of this community have a right to feel a sense of pride in the achievements of the [Jeff’s black] youngsters who represent us at the various schools of the city.”³⁸² When Jeff’s black athletes traveled throughout the city and state, African Americans regarded them as ambassadors of not only Jeff but also black Los Angeles. In the newspapers, they were elevated as examples of what blacks could achieve if the playing field was level in other areas of life. Floyd Covington, President of the Los Angeles Urban League summed up their place within the community and larger society, stating: “The success of the Negro athlete in this section has made him almost an idol for all schools. Therefore, the tendency is to glorify him even by those institutions which may not have any Negroes in the their midst.”³⁸³ The prowess of Jeff’s athletes, then, was a source of community pride. Their activities were closely followed; their achievements ostensibly redounding to black Los Angeles.³⁸⁴ Black leader Celes

³⁸⁰ Every year the black press covered graduation at Jeff. A good example of this coverage can be found in the *California Eagle* June 22, 1939.

³⁸¹ *California Eagle*, June 22, 1939.

³⁸² *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 31, 1934.

³⁸³ Urban League Collection 203, Box 2, Folder 8, Charles Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

³⁸⁴ Clearly, the achievements of Jeff’s black athletes did not subsume their racial identity. Writing about Jeff’s dominant performance, an L.A. Times writer began his column with “Africa Speaks. Eight chocolate-colored, kinky-haired athletes charge into the Coliseum

King succinctly captured Jeff's central place in the imagination of black Los Angeles in the late 1930s. When asked by an interviewer if "at any time" as a youth living on the Westside he felt "deprived" or "outside of the mainstream of blacks," King responded: "Not at all. Because I used to also, on occasion, go over to Jefferson High School for activities. Sometimes when they would have football games or basketball games, I would go over there. So, no, I never felt that."³⁸⁵ For King and many others, Jeff was a symbol of and conduit to black life in Los Angeles.

Jeff's close association with black Los Angeles also motivated black Angelenos to intercede when Jeff students' behavior did not project a positive image. This was particularly true when untoward interactions occurred with groups outside of the community. Interschool athletic events proved to be a great source of concern for the community. In 1936, for example, a "near riot" occurred at a Polytechnic High School football game against Jeff. Apparently miffed about losing, a group of "poor sportsman" from Jeff began to harass spectators from Polytechnic. A fracas ensued which resulted in the occupants of one automobile being severely beaten. The chaos ended when "a corps of policemen" arrived. In the aftermath, black leaders and school officials quickly scheduled conferences to draw up solutions to curb "the lawlessness and misbehavior carried on at Jeff."³⁸⁶

this afternoon from their Central Avenue haunts, heavy favorites to add the all-City cinder-path championship to their already copious collection of track trophies."--- *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1935.

³⁸⁵ Celes King Interview, "Black Leadership in Los Angeles," interview by Bruce Tyler and Robin D.G. Kelley, oral history transcript, 1985-1987, Center for Oral History Research, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

³⁸⁶ *California Eagle*, October 16, 1936.

Black leaders' response to the brawl hints at how deeply enmeshed Jeff was in community life by the mid 1930s. For black Angelenos, Jefferson High was not simply a place for adolescents; it was the community's school. Moreover, Jeff's games were not merely extracurricular activities; they were opportunities to showcase the best (or worst) of black Los Angeles. Embracing Jeff as community property, black leaders immediately took steps to "prevent the dire consequence of Jeff's banishment from the football league" and remove any further mar on black Los Angeles.³⁸⁷

Evidently, their "solutions" were inadequate. Three years later, black Angelenos were still fretting about the behavior of Jeff students at interschool athletic events. In June 1939, Jeff students were again reportedly involved in "instances of lawlessness and vandalism" at the June all-city track meet in the Coliseum. The Board issued "a declaration of future policy" this time, stating that school officials would "quarantine" "the offending school" should another incident arise. Again Jeff was threatened with "suspension ... from active participation in interscholastic athletics" and again community leaders met with school officials in a Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of Good Citizenship "to effect the curtailment of these acts."³⁸⁸

Their recommendations are revealing in that they not only demonstrate the black community's investment in Jeff, but ironically they highlight how black concentration at Jeff increasingly extended the opportunity for black Angelenos to make demands for changes. Using the event as a rallying cry, black leaders offered a broader critique on the origins of "lawlessness." As a starting point, black leaders recommended that the "Chief of Police and his department" cooperate with the black community to establish a

³⁸⁷ *California Eagle*, October, 16 1936.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, August 24, 1939.

citizenship program. They also asked that “a study be made of the playground at Jefferson High school and that if necessary playground directors and custodians be assigned.” Hinting that school might play a role in fostering delinquency, they suggested that “classes in Vocational Guidance be part of the curriculum” and that “a placement bureau be considered and established *with a view toward the needs of the students.*” The black leaders also asked that Jeff’s administration “cooperate with the committee in developing citizenship program.” Additionally, they suggested that “the Municipal Recreation Department consider the advisability of placing Negro playground directors at certain playgrounds as a means of improving citizenship, behavior and character.” Finally, they seemingly looked to evenly distribute the blame, asking that the Superintendent’s Office “consider a broader assignment of Negro teachers in city schools as one means of improving the citizenship, behavior and character” of pupils at *other* schools.³⁸⁹ Both black leaders response to and the black press’ extensive coverage of the disturbances gestures toward the “community’s greater interest in what [went] on at Jeff Hi.”³⁹⁰ A student writing in the editorial section of the *Jeffersonian* well understood this web of mutuality between Jefferson and black Los Angeles. Placing individual actions within a communal context and bringing community pressure to bear, she asked the incorrigible students: “Have you ever stopped to think and realize how the conduct of Jefferson high school has been discussed over and over by the community?”³⁹¹ As just glimpsed in the interschool athletic controversy, concentration wrought by segregation and migration, not only engendered black Angelenos’ psychological attachment to Jeff,

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., October 19, 1939.

³⁹¹ Reprinted in the *California Eagle*, October 19, 1939.

but also gave them an institutional foothold from which to level demands on the educational system.

“It was a very big thing for the black community. People were really rejoicing.” – Samuel Browne

Prior to 1934, black Angelenos, as a group, maintained a relatively low profile in the politics of public education in Los Angeles. Of course, it was not that they were uninterested; rather they operated from a relatively weak position in addressing *group* concerns. They did not have the population, or the mainstream institutional influence to exert any kind of pressure beyond seeking redress for blatant, *individual* acts of discrimination. Furthermore, as shall be discussed in next chapter, black Angelenos were guided by a middle-class ethos that tended to temper more confrontational forms of protest. Thus, in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, black Angelenos showed up in Board minutes only fleetingly.

By mid 1930s, however, conditions had changed. Growing mass migration, segregation and a changing cultural landscape and political consciousness in Central Avenue, paved the way for African Americans to make more forceful group demands on Los Angeles City Schools. Now, black Angelenos and their supporters regularly pressured school officials to support their vision of public education. Because Jeff occupied a central place in the black community and black imagination, it became the locus of these struggles. Thus, the mid 1930s mark the dawning of a sustained period of black activism centered on improving public education for black children. Black

Angelenos' campaign to hire black secondary teachers was the opening salvo in this long battle.

In March 1936, Los Angeles City Schools employed 3,869 High School and Junior High School teachers; not one was African American.³⁹² The *complete* absence of black secondary teachers was in no way a function of black apathy. To be sure, black aspirants were many. The profession of teaching was held in high esteem in black communities because of its association with advanced formal education and stability. Black aspirants, however, to secondary teaching in Los Angeles had to navigate through a nearly impossible gauntlet to obtain a secondary teaching position. The obstacles came early. As discussed in last chapter, school officials made a practice of steering African Americans toward “the type of work in which they will engage.” As already revealed, these educators did not have the professions in mind. College did not bring much encouragement either. African Americans, such as Samuel Browne, who expressed an interest in secondary teaching likely heard at sometime, “there will never be a ‘Negra’ teaching in high school in school system of Los Angeles.”³⁹³ Teacher training, too, posed a particular problem. Aside from hearing the constant reminder that they were training for a job they could never get in Los Angeles, black trainees had difficulty simply getting placed for practice teaching. When universities offering training failed to obtain placement for black students, they explained that they could not find a secondary school willing to host them. When black aspirants and their supporters confronted school

³⁹² Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, July 17, 1939.

³⁹³ Samuel Browne, Bette Cox, editor/interviewer, *Central Avenue: It's Rise and Fall, 1890-1955* (Los Angeles: BEEM Publications, 1993), 103.

officials regarding this practice, they were told that “the assignment of cadets is made upon the recommendation of the teacher training institutions.”³⁹⁴

Those who managed to wend their way through these obstacles only discovered more formidable challenges upon completion of their training. The first was achieving a successful score on the district’s teacher examination to obtain favorable placement on the eligibility lists. Teachers’ examinations consisted of two to three parts, depending on the discipline. Each part was weighted equally in determining a final score. In one part, applicants took a written examination, in which the “papers [were] identified by number only.” In the second part, applicants took an oral examination before a three person committee. The last part was a technical examination, for subjects such as art and music.³⁹⁵ Black applicants consistently performed on par with their peers in the written and technical examinations. It was on the more subjective oral examination that blacks stumbled.

A second and more formidable obstacle, however, was a tripartite pact between administrators, teachers and parents. Site administrators refused to accept prospective black teachers, frequently citing the disruption it would cause. Teachers vehemently protested the prospect of working with a black peer. And parents strenuously objected to black teachers instructing white children. Thus, where blacks were a small minority, as they were throughout the district in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, black teachers found no secondary school doors open to them. All of these factors working in concert effectively screened out “eligible” black candidates to secondary jobs,

³⁹⁴ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, September 20, 1934.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., April 9, 1936.

resulting in a net employment of zero. The conditions found at Jefferson, however, in mid 1930s encouraged African Americans to challenge these practices and policies.

In early fall of 1934, “after meetings with the citizenry as well as students from Jefferson High School,” the communist-affiliated League of Struggle for Negro Rights [LNSR] launched a scathing attack on “the policy of the school board and practices in the school system” in an open letter. Atop the list of the many “malpractices, complaints and discrepancies,” LNSR cited the “policy of the School Board in refusing to employ Negro teachers in the Junior High and High Schools” as most “contrary to all sense of decency and fair play.” Grounding their argument in conditions at Jefferson and McKinley Junior High School, they argued, “this policy became a glaring atrocity when it is considered that enrollment of Negro children [in these schools] approaches or exceeds fifty per cent.” “The failure to employ Negro teachers in schools in the heart of the Negro community is another indication of a policy of discrimination.” Anticipating that the Board would use a defense that pointed to the absence of *qualified* black teachers, LNSR also noted that “schools in the heart of the Negro community refuse to permit prospective Negro teachers to do practice teaching, despite the fact that the prospective teachers may formerly have been pupils at the same schools.” “Behold this absurdity,” the letter continued, “California schools preparing people to teach yet they are not good enough to do so if they happen, by accident of birth, to be black.” Challenging a myth that had operated for decades that L.A. was somehow exceptional in its race relations, they charged, “The attitudes of the School Board is expressive of the General attitude of the American scene, viz., that anything not white is inferior.” “The League of Struggle for

Negro Rights and its supporters,” the author concluded, “declare war on that attitude as expressed in the policies and practices of the school board and its administration.”³⁹⁶

“War” apparently entailed stirring up both the black community and Board meetings. In an effort to force the Board to correct the “absurdity,” representatives from LSNR began a petition drive in earnest. Within a few weeks, LSNR had thousands of signatures on a petition that began:

We, the undersigned, citizens and taxpayers protest the policy and practice of the Board of Education in the refusal to employ Negro school teachers in the secondary schools in Los Angeles. Such action is indicative of discriminatory practice based upon racial prejudice against all Negro people. Hence, we demand the employment of Negro teachers in the secondary schools in the city of Los Angeles in the coming school year.³⁹⁷

They also made several trips to Board meetings where they pressed their claims for black teachers at schools within “the black community.” They reasoned “many of the evils of administration can be checked by employing Negro teachers in the schools who can serve as an overseer to guard the rights of the Negro child and to counteract the malpractices of the administrators in the district.”³⁹⁸ LSNR moored their argument to the linkages between race, space and community control.

While the LSNR sought signatures and made trips to the Board, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* drummed up attention to the cause. As Leon Whitaker, the paper’s editor, would do with certain issues for years to come, he made the hiring of black teachers a cause celebre. Between July and August, the *Sentinel* ran over nine articles dedicated to the

³⁹⁶ Los Angeles City Schools Board Records (Subject Files), August 30, 1934, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

issue. For readers, this kind of exposure not only kept them apprised of the LSNR's activities, but undoubtedly heightened their sense that a serious injustice existed. As early as June, perhaps in the LSNR's planning stages for the campaign, the Sentinel came out in support of a protest. In an editorial, Whitaker fumed, "thus far, there has been no indication that the school heads are planning to abandon their ancient ban against Negro high school teachers." This refusal, Whitaker stated, "betrays the fact that we are still branded as 'inferiors' in the minds of those who direct the destinies of Los Angeles schools."³⁹⁹ "Jefferson high school now has a registration of nearly 50 per cent of pupils who are Negroes," Whitaker noted in another editorial. "Despite this fact, the school is manned by an all white staff."⁴⁰⁰ Issuing a clarion call for action, Whitaker goaded, "It is time to challenge this practice" in "a concerted effort." Highlighting how black Angelenos saw in Jefferson an opportunity to project a public voice heretofore muffled, Whitaker emphatically concluded: "The *group* needs [black teachers]. The very unsatisfactory conditions existing at Jefferson high school require [their] employment." "If Negroes unite[d] and ignore[d] all other differences," Whitaker predicted, black teachers "would be on the job when school started in fall."⁴⁰¹

The Board's response to petitioners' demands established a predictable pattern to black protest for years to come. As it would later do in the Fremont controversy, the Board "assured" citizens that it did "not countenance any discrimination on account of color or race." It further stated that a "complete investigation ha[d] been made of all complaints" and "there was no evidence of real intent to discriminate." "Applications for

³⁹⁹ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 28, 1934.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, July 19, 1934.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, June 28, 1934.

teachers' examinations are received from qualified applicants without regard to race or color." That there were no competitive applications "received from colored people," it argued, "[was] not the fault of the Los Angeles City School administration." In other words, black Angelenos and their supporters imagined discrimination where no racism existed. The absence of black secondary teachers, then, was ostensibly the result of black deficiency and/or disinterest. Neutralizing a strategy that relied on race to bring about racial redress, the Superintendent rejected "the request that the eligibility list be set aside and that Negro teachers be appointed" on the grounds that "doing so would be breaking faith with those who have complied with the regulations of the Board of Education." Indeed to do so, according to the Superintendent, would be to discriminate. "[He] could not recommend that this be done."⁴⁰² LSNR and the *Sentinel* did not get the black teachers they demanded in the 1934/1935 school year.

Nevertheless, black Angelenos' continued to agitate for black secondary teachers over the next two years. More "respectable" black organizations, such as the NAACP, Urban League and the Forum, now joined the chorus calling for changes to the district's hiring practices. Black leaders, including Charlotta Bass, former assemblyman Frederick Roberts and local NAACP president Claude Hudson, engaged school officials behind the scenes and outside of the headlines, searching for compromises. By 1936, black Angelenos ratcheted up their criticisms, as reflected in the pages of the *Eagle*. In a January issue, Charlotta Bass appealed to "fair-minded" citizens by telling the story of a black woman, who was eminently qualified and recently sought employment as a secondary teacher in LA City Schools. When the black aspirant inquired at the district

⁴⁰² Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, September 20, 1934.

offices about when they would hold the next eligibility test, an administrator admonished her for not taking the test sooner. In response, the black aspirant stated, “I did not take the test before because I had been told that colored teachers were not used in high schools.” The administrator then asked, “Did she have in mind any other way she might get into high school [teaching]?” Showing how color-blindness could support racial disparities, the administrator followed up his question with “No appointments were made on the basis of race.” “Would she want her appointment brought about by official irregularities,” he queried. After she gave assurance that she did not expect special treatment, the administrator sent her out bouncing from office to office looking for an application no one seemed to have.⁴⁰³

Whether the events unfolded as told did not so much matter. By 1936, after two years of focused attention, the story pointed to a larger pattern that black Angelenos “knew” to be true. “It [was] just one instance where the present Board of Education has not kept faith with [black] citizens.” It was just another “case which point[ed] directly to racial discrimination [in hiring] on the part of the board.” To begin to restore black Angelenos’ “faith” in the educational system, Bass recommended an immediate African American hire. “We believe that Samuel Browne, an efficient and accomplished musician and one of the best musical instructors in the state, should be given regular employment on the regular day school faculty at Jefferson High.”⁴⁰⁴ Like the more radical LSNR before, Bass’ argument for black teachers drew on two assumptions that were rife with potential contradictions. That is, Jefferson was “black” space, therefore Jeff should have black teachers and the district should *appoint* a black teacher because

⁴⁰³ *California Eagle*, January 10, 1936.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

the hiring process was discriminatory. Given the Board's official policy of non-discrimination and black Angelenos' desire for full-inclusion, these assumptions could easily be cast as inharmonious or worse yet, held out to support an unprogressive social agenda.

Despite the strategy's inherent tensions, it was successful in the short-term. On September 4, 1936, the *California Eagle* announced in large, bold headlines Los Angeles City Schools "NAME NEGROES AS JEFFERSON TEACHERS."⁴⁰⁵ After two years of pressure, Samuel Browne and Hazel Whitaker, both recommendations of the black middle-class leadership, became the city's first black secondary teachers.⁴⁰⁶ Having unsuccessfully sought full-time employment in the district for the previous three years, Browne felt like "the luckiest man in the world." If a few African Americans fretted about the assignment of black teachers at *the* "black" school, Browne had no such concern. "I was proud of Jeff as a student," he recalled. "I wanted to come home again to teach."⁴⁰⁷ Reflecting on his hiring's greater significance, Browne stated, "It was a very big thing for the black community. People were really rejoicing about it."⁴⁰⁸ Apparently, Jeff's all-white staff was less enthused. Browne and Whitaker were later discovered that half of the faculty requested transfers before their arrival.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., September 4, 1936.

⁴⁰⁶ Black Angelenos campaign to hire black secondary teachers also exposed another development of the era. The campaign not only highlighted the recurring tensions between community control and full inclusion, but also brought to the surface emerging frictions between two competing outlooks within black Los Angeles. When Charlotta Bass advised the Board to hire Samuel Browne based on her own "knowledge of the man" and "favorable reports from clubwomen," she was invoking one of these visions.

⁴⁰⁷ Samuel Browne, Bette Cox, editor/interviewer, *Central Avenue: It's Rise and Fall, 1890-1955* (Los Angeles: BEEM Publications, 1993), 106.

⁴⁰⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1979.

Lest the sudden hiring of African Americans secondary teachers give off the wrong impression, school officials went on record several times reaffirming their commitment to a policy of non-discrimination. At the first Board meeting after the appointments, the Superintendent attempted to get out in front of any charges of “irregularities” in the hiring process. “In the recent examinations there were persons of African race who took the examinations and obtained favorable places on the eligibility list,” he reported. “Race, color, political or religious beliefs do not influence the appointments in this school system. These appointments were made because the persons ... had taken the examination in competition and obtained favorable places.”⁴⁰⁹ Over the next couple of weeks, school officials made several of these announcements, even going so far as to request that the black newspapers stress in their reporting that Browne and Whitaker “received their appointment on the basis of merit.” Their actions revealed that they too were engaged in a delicate *public* balancing act between an official policy of non-discrimination and racial realities, between white expectations and black demands. And although school officials were loath to openly discuss race, an assistant superintendent gave some indication where they were internally on these spectrums in his parting instructions to Samuel Browne. Just before Browne assumed his position at Jefferson High, he recalled the superintendent warning him, “Now that you’ve got the job, you’re going to have to do the work of three white men.”⁴¹⁰

In many ways, the hiring of Browne and Whitaker represented a watershed moment for the black community in Los Angeles. Clearly, their appointment lowered the barriers barring black aspirants from teaching junior high and high school. By 1939, Los

⁴⁰⁹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, September 10, 1936.

⁴¹⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1979.

Angeles City schools employed eighteen black secondary teachers.⁴¹¹ By 1945, “about 54” African Americans taught junior high and senior high students in the city.⁴¹² Moreover, the campaign for black secondary teachers marked the first time black Angelenos explicitly demanded—in a sustained-fashion—that public education *proactively* counteract harmful notions of blackness. Indeed LSNR’s whole argument for black teachers was predicated on the notion that only African Americans had a unique understanding and appreciation of black life and culture and thus were best suited to “guard the rights of black students” and ward off their feelings of inferiority. Here, Browne and Whitaker did not disappoint activists. Whitaker’s “unique appreciation” manifested itself in the establishment of the first Negro history class in Los Angeles. Browne recognized and celebrated black artistry, teaching for the first time in Los Angeles schools the black musical forms of jazz and spiritual-inspired choir at Jeff. Moreover, both Samuel Browne and Hazel Whitaker made Jefferson a destination for many black luminaries in Los Angeles. At the invitation of these two teachers, a veritable who’s who of mid-twentieth century black America—including, Lionel Hampton, Nat King Cole, William Grant Still, Ethel Waters, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James “Jimmie” Lunceford, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Paul Williams and Jeff alum, Ralph Bunche graced Jeff’s campus. Browne later noted that these visits were intended to “lift the spirits of black children” by holding out role models to which to aspire. The arguments articulated by LSNR and their supporters would form the basis for black demands well into the twentieth century.

⁴¹¹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, July 17, 1939.

⁴¹² John Anson Ford Papers, “Private Survey on Negro Teachers,” Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

The campaign also ushered in a prolonged period of black activism centered on education with Jeff providing a sphere of institutional influence. Perhaps encouraged by their success with the secondary teacher campaign, black Angelenos took a more assertive stance in their demands at Jeff over the next few years. In 1939, a writer for the *California Eagle* channeled this new emboldened spirit of the period in a front-page article entitled “The Whispering Walls of Jefferson High.” Black Angelenos, the writer declared, “demand an explanation of some things that have happened recently [at the school].” Topping the list of grievances was the removal of Samuel Browne from his positions as band and orchestra leader “without any explanation to him and certainly none to the public” by Jeff’s principal. The writer then went on to list a number of other “irregularities,” which included: “Jefferson High students are denied the opportunity for school social events that are commonplace in other city institutions. Jefferson students are spied upon and burdened with a rigid “non-mixing’ policy decreed by school officials. Jefferson High students are cheated some of the finest experiences of young people can find in school training.” Chancing that the “the whispering walls of Jefferson High School [were] growing sufficiently audible to tickle the ears of the citizens of [Central Avenue], the writer appealed to black Angelenos: “The time for idle, half-baked protests has passed.” “WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?”⁴¹³

A couple of weeks later, the *Eagle* again attempted to arouse interest and assert community control over Jeff. In addition to the resolving the Samuel Browne situation, Charlotta Bass demanded that the Board appoint Emile Milles, an African American certified vocational instructor, to a vacant position in Jeff’s regular day school. “If the

⁴¹³ *California Eagle*, April 13, 1939.

Board of Education should exhibit some interest in these two cases, of such vital concern to the city's Negro population," Bass prodded, "perhaps the group would find some excuse for voting the straight incumbent ticket" in the impending Board election. "There are other fish in the sea," Bass warned.⁴¹⁴

In May, black Angelenos called for the removal of Jeff's principal for "undemocratic and un-American acts" and "his general tyrannical and unsympathetic attitude." Leading the investigation into allegations of "irregularities" at Jeff, the Young Democrats found that the principal willfully sought to oppress Jeff's black students. "He brands everything interracial communistic and radical and he maintains segregation in drama classes," they charged. They also alleged that he encouraged counselors to steer black students "to take commercial courses rather than academic work." "The curriculum facilities on the whole," Young Democrats added, "are not up to the standard of Los Angeles, Fairfax and Manual Arts High school." According to the organization, it was Dickison's dereliction of fiduciary duty that placed "Jefferson ... far down the list of High School ratings."⁴¹⁵

Like the LSNR before them, the Young Democrats claimed Jefferson as "their" school. Their demands reflect the extent to which they expected community control of Jeff. To remedy the "undemocratic" situation, they demanded that the Board replace Dickinson with a principal "who will take a definite interest in the peculiar problems that surround Jefferson and the community [that is, those issues endemic to black Angelenos] and who will work in cooperation with the parents, students and community leaders in a democratic a manner." They also asked that the Board put in place "more sympathetic

⁴¹⁴ *California Eagle*, April 27, 1939.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, May 18, 1939.

counsel[ors] to inspire students on to greater educational heights rather than attempting to restrict them to high school education.” Finally, they asked that school officials establish “the necessary link between parents and the teachers and administrators” and “develop citizenship and awareness on the part of students through the recognition of the Negro History club.”⁴¹⁶ Ultimately, black Angelenos were not able to remove principal Dickison. However, they did get the Board to open an official investigation into the allegations. In doing so, they forced school officials to recognize black Angelenos’ vested interests in Jeff. The campaign to hire secondary teachers and the Young Democrat-led protest marked the beginning of black activism centered at Jeff that would only intensify during World War II and extend well into the last quarter of twentieth century. The notion that Jefferson was “our” school undergirded all of these protests. Thus, less than two years before the Fremont mock lynching, black Angelenos were demanding changes in administration, staff, coursework and extracurricular activities at Jeff, all with the explicit aim to benefit black children. They, like Fremont demonstrators, saw racial space in a public place.

Despite the strength of the “our” school argument, it was nonetheless deeply flawed. To make claims to space based on race was to give tacit approval to segregation and its attendant implications. Evidently, black leaders and activists understood the danger of making these links between race, space and control. For example throughout the secondary teacher campaign, African Americans simultaneously advanced and then retreated from overt claims to “black” space. So on the one hand, we see black activists pointing to African American’s numerical dominance at Jeff and to an implicit argument

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

that Jeff is “their” school as a justification for black teachers at the institution. At the same time, they maintained that “their move [was] not a segregated one and that they [were] not demanding that Jefferson be turned over to Negro teachers.”⁴¹⁷ The LSNR campaign highlighted just how tenuous this argument could be. In their petition drive, they grounded all of their rationales for black secondary teachers in conditions at Jeff (and McKinley) and then turned around and concluded that “they were not pressing a fight for Negro teachers in Negro schools.”⁴¹⁸ For black activists, it was a tight rope to walk. They saw a chance to take advantage of concentration, but doing so could lead to greater isolation. And while they appreciated the newfound leverage they possessed, they too understood the bind they were in. Most were unwilling to exchange the possibility of full-inclusion for segregated opportunity. Their vacillation underscores the sheer dilemma they faced within a “progressive” and racially discriminatory system. Margarete Clark, the Board’s most liberal member, perhaps best foreshadowed the dangers of black Angelenos claiming racial space when she spoke out in support of black activists during the secondary teacher campaign. She remarked: “I have no objection to colored people teaching *in their own district* if they are qualified under the Board’s rules. When the schools train these people for [teaching], the Board should give them an opportunity to use what they learn . . . by giving [them] recognition to teach *in their own* districts.”⁴¹⁹

By the mid 1940s, these words would ring a bit differently in the ears of black Angelenos. While an “our” school argument yielded “about 53” black secondary teachers by 1945, *not one* taught outside of “their” schools. Now, instead of fighting “an ancient

⁴¹⁷ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 19, 1934.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, August 30, 1934.

⁴¹⁹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, September 10, 1936.

policy” of the absolute exclusion of black secondary teachers, black activist increasingly complained about an unspoken practice within the district of maintaining two, separate eligibility lists--one for white teachers eligible to teach in all schools and one for black candidates eligible to teach only in “their” schools.

Conclusion

In the midst of the mock lynching controversy, a “brave” group of Fremont students traveled to Jeff to offer an apology. This act of goodwill succinctly captured some of the paradoxes operating in mid twentieth-century Los Angeles. The gesture was an expression of tolerance. This act recognized the legitimacy of the principles ensconced in the city school’s official policy of non-discrimination. Yet, at the same time, the apology was an acknowledgment and symbolic reaffirmation of separate spaces. After all, Fremont students came to Jeff not because the school had any direct link to the controversy, but because they identified Jefferson as black space. Jeff’s black students accepted the apology at Jeff not because the “untoward” demonstration occurred on its campus, but because they understood Jefferson to symbolize black Los Angeles. Despite their claims to racial innocence, school officials contributed to this racial geography. By drawing attendance boundaries to appease white homeowners, establishing “optional” attendance zones to accommodate white flight, by ignoring clear acts of racial discrimination within city schools, school officials nurtured the kind of expectations that produced the demonstration, the apology *and* its acceptance at Jeff. However, for African Americans, an embrace of Jeff as “their” school was a tricky proposition. While on the

one hand this claim worked to amplify their public voice, on the other hand it gave tacit approval to the logic of segregation and thus their isolation. The apology, then, gestures toward both the promise and perils for black Angelenos in pre-World War II Los Angeles.

Chapter 5: Suspicious Partners: Imperfect Interest Convergences at Jefferson High in World War II Los Angeles

America's entry into World War II dramatically altered the social, political and economic landscape of Los Angeles. Located next to Los Angeles's industrial core and directly in between downtown and the San Pedro shipyards, the working-class neighborhood of Central Avenue perhaps more acutely experienced the transformations wrought by war than most any other community in the city. Between 1940 and 1944, the community's population nearly doubled, adding about 50,000 mostly southern black migrants who sought not only defense industry wages, but also other possibilities found within boomtowns.⁴²⁰

War, however, not only changed the complexion of the neighborhood, but it also reconfigured the socio-political terrain on which all Angelenos' traversed. In doing so, it held out new possibilities for African Americans in their struggle for first class citizenship. With the emergence of a new political economy, African American and their allies found leverage in the exigencies of war. Drawing from lessons learned about protest during the heady politics of the Depression and bolstered by a political culture that traced its roots to a "popular front," African Americans in World War II Los Angeles waged their battle for equality on an unprecedented scale.

⁴²⁰ Golden State Mutual Insurance Collection, Special Census (1944), Box 13, Folder 3, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

What made this new era of activism unique was not only its vigor, but its scope. Black activists during the 1940s adopted a holistic approach to ending structural discrimination. Rather than targeting individual acts or independent axes of discrimination, black activists launched a coordinated attack on various systems of oppression all at once.

While many histories have explored black activism on the defense industry factory floors, fewer studies have traced out the matrix of discrimination as black activist saw it. Standing at Jefferson High School in the shadow of war, we find that African Americans saw employment *and* educational policies and practices intimately bound up and co-constitutive. We discover that protesting the schoolhouse figured just as prominently in African Americans' strategies to win greater opportunity as picketing the factory. We see black activists forge an imperfect interest convergence that would yield unparalleled prosperity for the black working-class. Looking in on school board meetings, we also see the tangled web that racial discrimination weaved in Los Angeles.

In May of 1939, the voters of Los Angeles elected a Jefferson high school teacher to the Los Angeles School Board. Faye Allen was a forty eight-year-old music teacher at the school and a twenty-six year resident of the city. Her election, as a woman was notable, but not extraordinary. Although there were very few women who rose to this level in the Los Angeles school system, at any given time, a woman occupied at least one of the city's Board seats in the four decades prior. Yet, Allen's election by citywide ballot was unprecedented. Faye Allen was not only a woman, but she was also an African American. Relaying the historical significance of the election to its readers, the *Los*

Angeles Times noted that the former Jefferson High teacher was “believed to be the first woman of her race ever to hold public office in an American metropolis.”⁴²¹

At the swearing in ceremony, Angelenos from all parts of city took turns congratulating Allen on her success and commending the citizens of Los Angeles for living up to “great democratic principles that [the] nation [was] founded upon.”⁴²² Dr. Eva Young approached the Board with a bouquet of flowers and announced to the assembly that Allen’s election was “symbolic of an open door, a dawn of a new day in this country” when all individuals, no matter their religion, race or economic status, had “an opportunity to serve according to his or her fitness.”⁴²³ Young continued, stating, that “the Board will [now] be able to serve with a more sympathetic understanding,” that “particular group” to which Allen belonged. Allen’s response to Dr. Young, her prepared remarks at the ceremony and her central message to the media afterward are telling. To whom ever she spoke to in the lead up and immediately following her seating, she stressed above all that she came to office with “no preconceived ideas other than the desire to represent all the people.”⁴²⁴ She felt compelled to continuously stress that she would not work for “any special interest.”

Throughout Allen’s four-year tenure, those within and without the city school system would question her commitment to this statement. The ideology of color-blindness worked to neutralize Allen, as it precluded her from mentioning race in a system rife with racial discrepancies. When she did make note of incongruences

⁴²¹ *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1939.

⁴²² Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records (Fay Allen Papers), Box 914, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1939.

delineated along the lines of race, she was warned she would harm her people. In one controversy related to the placement of black teachers, for example, a fellow board member went so far as to tell Allen she would “crucify” her race if she opened up an investigation into racially discriminatory practices.⁴²⁵ To be sure, Allen’s election was a milestone in the progress of African Americans in Los Angeles and was celebrated as such. However, her comments at her swearing in exposed not only the constraints that Allen faced as a Board member in a “race-neutral” system, but they also reflected the bounded space in which African American activists had to wage their battles for equal opportunity. Allen’s election and tenure captured the paradox that was 1940s Los Angeles for African Americans. It was a place of opportunity and great possibility, and a place fraught with entrenched forms of structural racism that constituted an interlocking system of denial.

“The outburst at Fremont might well have been a blessing in disguise. The Fremont case has served as a rallying point of those progressive forces which are opposed to the strange increase in racial conflicts.” – Charlotta Bass, 1941.

Faye Allen’s successful run for the school board heralded the promise of 1940s Los Angeles. While some contemporary observers speculated that Allen’s light complexion fooled some voters, her election was more likely the result of a budding racial liberalism in pre-war Los Angeles. Fomented in the maelstrom of Depression, a loose multiracial coalition, consisting of socialists, communists, liberal Democrats and

⁴²⁵ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, (Subject Files), Box 1596, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

laborites, emerged in the mid 1930s to support various forms of social leveling. Although the different groups within this “popular front” busied themselves advancing their own agendas, they also increasingly collectively turned their attention toward racial justice. They attacked the pseudo-scientific moorings of racism by denouncing biological arguments of racial superiority and promoting the idea that race was a social construct. To varying degrees, they stressed class-consciousness over race consciousness. In an attempt to win over African Americans to their causes, they became vocal advocates for the protection of blacks’ rights. Their activities drew the ire from many circles within American society, who believed that these “radicals” were attempting to subvert American traditions and institutions. In response to their critics, these left-leaning groups maintained that “true Americanism” meant tolerance, equal opportunity and full integration. Whereas the crisis of the Depression drew this motley group together, the imperatives of unity and full production as war intensified in Europe presented new openings to attack what they deemed sources of oppression.

These racial liberals maintained that the best way to cure the “disorder” of racial prejudice was through education. Beginning in the late 1930s and extending into the late 1940s, interracial and intercultural associations in Los Angeles proliferated, bearing names such as Los Angeles Civic League, Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, Catholic Interracial Council of Los Angeles, Council of Civic Unity, Hollywood Democratic Committee, Council for Interracial Democracy. Unions, such as the California CIO and Los Angeles Federation of Teachers, established divisions within their organizations committed to interracialism. Racial liberals also actively worked in various ethnic associations and frequently appeared side-by-side black organizations, such as local

branches of the National Negro Congress, Urban League, NAACP and the Victory Committee, in times of controversy. These groups engaged in a plethora of activities to promote racial harmony and “democratic living.”⁴²⁶ Some groups distributed quantitative and qualitative information on the causes and consequences of racism. Others provided city schools recommended reading lists and sample lesson plans which integrated racial minorities into the curriculum. Some groups offered workshops to teachers, administrators and other public servants. All of them pressed public systems to end discriminatory practices and shared a mission of elevating minority participation in public institutions. When Faye Allen ran for the school board, it was this diverse coalition that paved her way to a seat. Allen would count as her supporters a great many progressive organizations, including the Los Angeles Federation of Teachers, West Adams Heights Protective Association, CIO, AFL, Hollywood Democratic Committee, Women’s University Club, NAACP, National Negro Congress, Urban League, and the Women’s Council of Hollywood.

Whereas in the last chapter, the Fremont incident was a good place to backtrack from to explore rising black isolation, here it serves as a point of departure to understand the growing force of racial liberalism. The Fremont controversy registered this coalition’s mounting influence and zeal for supporting black rights in World War II Los Angeles. Indeed by the time of mock lynching, Black Angelenos were far from a lone voice in the denunciation of racial discrimination. From the outset, representatives from this progressive coalition inserted themselves squarely in that controversy. When African American newspaperwoman Charlotta Bass hastened to the scene of the demonstration,

⁴²⁶ Progressives of the period frequently used the phrase “democratic living” to describe the society they envisioned. This was a society where interracial cooperation prevailed.

she went with members of the AFL and CIO. Thereafter, progressives maintained a constant and vocal presence at Board meetings.

Beginning with the first Board meeting after the mock lynching, a steady stream of members from the progressive coalition approached the Board in protest. On March 6, “Mrs. Leona McGenty Chamberlin addressed the Board, stating that “she [was] speaking not only as an aspirant to membership on the Board of Education, but also speaking as a member of the Communist Party.” Chamberlin pressed “the Board to make a statement to the press” and asked if “parents participate on the committee that is making the investigation.” Martha Borden, who was a member of the communist-led American Students Union, also approached the Board to demand an investigation.⁴²⁷ The National Negro Congress, harangued the Board as well. Established as a “progressive” umbrella organization for moderate and leftist black groups during the Popular Front era, the Congress criticized the Board stating, “that Negro students have been molested at schools by white students and that they believe this creates an unsafe and unwholesome condition for the community at large.”⁴²⁸

A couple of weeks later, the Workers School of Los Angeles jumped into the fray, pledging “to give unlimited support to all existing committees now working to remedy the disgraceful situation.” “The fact that your Board has seen fit to condone this mock lynching and in abject inactivity has even failed to raise its voice in protest,” one of its representatives argued, “should be sufficient condemnation of the majority of its

⁴²⁷ Students from UCLA, USC, Occidental and City College also appeared before the Board.

⁴²⁸ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, March 6, 1941, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

members.” The School’s representative then concluded with a scathing attack on the school officials. “The utterly contemptible action of the Los Angeles Board of education in refusing even to hear the protests of irate citizens...even to the point of adjourning a meeting in the presence of protestants [sic]...smacks of the tactics of Judge Lynch himself,” he admonished. From School’s perspective, the causes of the demonstration were many, interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Highlighting the depth of progressives’ critique, the Workers School demanded that the Board:

1. Set up an imperial fact-finding committee, representatives of students teachers and members of the Negro community to prepare a factual report of the “mock lynchings” at Fremont High School.
2. Provide adequate opportunities for public reports and discussion of the reports of this and any other interested citizens committees.
3. Discipline, including dismissal from the school system of teachers or students responsible for the “mock lynching.”
4. Provide adequate schools—admission of students to all schools and courses.
5. Provide courses in the school curriculum to eliminate the basis for racial intolerance, including course in Negro history, taught by Negro teachers.

“These are merely minimum steps necessary to begin to remedy the situation,” the School declared. While it may have been “merely the minimum,” the solution was comprehensive; it sought to address discrimination in education, housing and employment in a transparent way.⁴²⁹

The Fremont controversy not only demonstrated the strength and influence of labor in the early 1940s, but it also reflected its move toward racial tolerance. Labor unions had long embraced racially exclusionary policies and practices. However, the establishment of the CIO in 1938 marked a new chapter in race relations within the workingman’s struggle. The CIO’s embrace of racial justice pushed the more

⁴²⁹ *California Eagle*, March 20, 1941.

conservative AFL to adopt, even if tepidly, racial tolerance.⁴³⁰ This turn is evident in the Fremont case. On April 3, a member of the Statewide C.I.O. approached the Board, stating “for some time they have been coming to the Board in connection with the situation which occurred at the John C. Fremont High School.” “Representing some 85,000 persons,” he wished to express “that they in the labor movement [were] opposed” to “this entire idea” of “discriminating against the Negro.” The mock lynching, he argued, was the “result of negligence and inactivity of the school system in connection with the teaching of democracy.”⁴³¹

The ACLU weighed in on the mock lynching as well. On May 15, A.L. Wirin, head counsel for the Southern California ACLU, came before the Board to challenge its handling of the controversy. Still pushing the Board to be more proactive three months after the incident, Wirin argued that “the Board should conduct its own investigation given the gravity of the alleged incident.” “It should be made clear to the public that to whoever is responsible, that sort of thing is something this Board would not tolerate,” he emphatically concluded.⁴³²

Various ethnic organizations also joined the chorus denouncing the Board’s handling of the controversy. Highlighting the ethnic diversity of the coalition, Jerry Spiegelman, a member of a local Jewish organization, condemned the Board, stating “the school system should be the echo of democracy where democracy and tolerance is at its

⁴³⁰ Many AFL unions extended membership to African Americans during the World War II. However, this membership was often in auxiliary (or segregated) unions. Although blacks paid AFL union member fees, they lacked the privilege of voting in the general union. Thus, while some AFL unions rhetorically supported racial tolerance and moved to open up their unions to black membership, they also maintained Jim Crow.

⁴³¹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, April 3, 1941.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, May 15, 1941.

height.” Spiegelman urged the Board to “look into the matter of plays and books that show discrimination against any minority group,” as this “tends to weaken our democracy.” Next, Ramon Welch, a representative of a Mexican American group, asked the Board if it were aware of “the fact that [minority] children [were] subject to psychological abuse [in schools] which causes a definite inferiority complex.” “The real fundamental issue at stake,” he continued, “is whether discrimination in any form shall be continued as a part of the policy of the public school system, whether against the Negro, the Mexican or the Jew, or any minority.”⁴³³

In each of these complaints, the petitioners exploited the exigencies of the looming crises in Europe to drive home their point. Racial discrimination, they argued, was fascism’s ally. It was subversive to democracy and it eroded national unity. If left unaddressed, it could lead to America’s downfall.⁴³⁴

The campaign to resolve the Fremont controversy was waged by a diverse coalition, which included Communists, Socialists, liberal Democrats, members from various ethnic organizations and church and civic groups. Considering such an outpouring of support, Charlotta Bass surmised that “the outburst at Fremont might well have been a blessing in disguise.” “The Fremont case,” the editor observed, “has served

⁴³³ Ibid., April 3, 1941. This suggests that there may have been more interracial collaboration in California than Mark Brilliant allows in his book *The Color of America Has Changed*. Brilliant argues that California’s many “color lines” prevented minority groups from envisioning their agendas as overlapping and thus they never quite found common cause. Education, however, may be the one area that minority groups, if not always actively collaborating, perceived some of the same *fundamental* problems.

⁴³⁴ The African American Double V campaign shows the extent to which the “progressives” and African American activists at the time drew from the same ideological well. African Americans, too, crafted a language that cast racism and “true Americanism” as antithetical. Evidencing this cross-fertilization of ideas, black Angelenos, at the time of the mock lynching, increasingly prefaced their attacks on discriminatory practices with calls for victory against Fascism abroad and victory against racism at home.

as a rallying point of those progressive forces which are opposed” to “the strange increase in racial conflicts.”⁴³⁵

If the Fremont controversy revealed the burgeoning of a robust progressive coalition in Los Angeles, it also highlighted its vulnerabilities. When the coalition sharpened its criticism, the Board targeted this liability. Although it is impossible to know for sure whom the Board spoke of when they identified “outsiders,” they very likely were accusing the same people who came before the Board weekly to demand racial justice at Fremont. Dating back to the First Red Scare, conservatives pinned the label “communist” on those who fought for fundamental change in America. The term, of course, was a pejorative, identifying those who should be considered subversive or “outsiders.” Because America was on cusp of war against fascism at the time of the controversy, the Board may have found more utility in the latter term. The Board’s identification of outsiders could very well have been a shot across the bow directed toward the petitioners to stop “agitating.”

Redbaiting became a strategy of choice for conservatives because it produced the desired effect. It muffled calls for change and thus impeded movement on progressive issues. In the Fremont controversy this appears to be the case too. In the same meeting that the Board revealed the “outsiders” plot, the Board introduced a Citizen’s Committee made up of African Americans, who clearly did not want to be identified with the progressive coalition. Despite radicals’ explicit support for anti-discrimination, many black Angelenos were wary of groups on the far left. A dismayed Floyd Covington of the Los Angeles Urban League noted this tendency in 1940, remarking: “The masses are still

⁴³⁵ *California Eagle*, March 6, 1941.

very largely under the control and influence of conservative leaders and unprogressive ministers.”⁴³⁶ While, in retrospect, Covington overstated and oversimplified black Angelenos’ ideological commitments, there was widespread reluctance to partner with the many groups—regardless of ideology or party affiliation—who were dubbed “communists.”⁴³⁷ Undoubtedly, the stigma that these ideologies carried and the fear of double discrimination turned many blacks away from their programs. And when controversy demanded identifying allies, these concerns also turned them *against* these groups.

Thus, the Board could find “cooperation” in the black community, particularly within that conservative element in which Covington spoke. Concerned that the cause of black Angelenos would be yoked to that of the “radicals,” the Citizens Committee moved to temper the attacks against the Board. Instead of demanding a system-wide change in policy and practice, the Committee declared that “the Negro citizens of Los Angeles ... are satisfied with [the Board’s] report.” “We have not asked these other people to speak for us, as we are well able to handle our problems,” they added.⁴³⁸

The statement was disingenuous on two levels. First, they did not speak for *all* “Negro citizens of Los Angeles.” There was still a great deal of discontent within the black community. Both black newspapers continued to rail against the Board for their

⁴³⁶ Los Angeles Urban League Collection 203 Box 2, Folder 7, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁴³⁷ We see this reluctance by African American leaders to accept the support of progressive groups at other times as well. Many were leery of progressive groups who claimed to have African American’s interests in mind. For example, one black leader wrote to the Board of Supervisors, “we believe that it is important that each member of the Board of Supervisors be informed” that “attempts have been made in the past by left-wing organizations to exploit Negro History Week.” – John Anson Ford Papers, Box 75, Folder ee.

⁴³⁸ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, May 15, 1941.

response to the incident. Moreover, many of the petitioners that continued to approach the Board were African American. Second, as became clear six years later, the Committee was never able to “handle” “their” problems. In distancing themselves from “radicals,” the Committee pledged “the Negro citizens of Los Angeles” to a “resolution” that would only guarantee the status quo.

Nevertheless, for those activists on the ground in 1940s Los Angeles, the budding of racial liberalism was welcomed, even if some of its most vocal proponents were not. As Bass’s comments about the Fremont controversy serving as “rallying point” indicated, the coalescing of racial liberalism (that is, the emergence of support) in World War II Los Angeles offered a wellspring of hope for the near future and undoubtedly energized black activism during the period. In several controversies involving discrimination against African Americans during World War II, we see this multiracial coalition raising their voice for “democratic living.” One of their major concerns was racial disparity in Los Angeles city schools. Early in the decade, activists would focus their attention on a pernicious pattern of teacher assignments.

“We have to talk about race whether we want to or not. We cannot escape. Since we have to talk about it, some program has to be devised to be sure in this maze of Rules and Regulations nothing approaching discrimination happens to creep in.”— Loren Miller, 1940.

In 1936, black Angelenos rejoiced at the assignment of Samuel Browne to Jefferson High School. They hoped his hiring symbolized a major breach in the barrier to opportunity within city schools for black aspirants. Four years later, however, black activists remained dissatisfied with the pace of progress. They still perceived discriminatory practices within the school system’s hiring practices. Beginning in 1940,

black activists regularly attended Board meeting and continued their protest of a process that yielded very few successful African American candidates, particularly at the secondary level. Loren Miller, the famed black attorney, expressed the sentiment of many within the black community when he reported to the Board that “Negroes qualified to teach are not employed in the proper proportion in the public schools.”⁴³⁹

If Miller figured “proper” meant that the percentage of black teachers was proportional to the percentage of African Americans in the total population of Los Angeles, the numbers supported his observation. While 63,774 African Americans resided in Los Angeles in 1940, city schools employed only sixty-four black teachers. Put differently, while blacks made up 4.2% of the city’s total population, they constituted 0.1% of the city’s teaching force. Even where blacks were the majority, African Americans did not achieve “proper” proportion Miller noted. Since Browne’ and Hazel Whitaker’s hire in 1936, predominantly black Jefferson High school added only one more African American teacher by the 1939-1940 school year, bringing the total to three. Although African Americans made up 68% of Jeff’s student population, these three black teachers constituted just 3.8 percent of the total faculty.⁴⁴⁰ Thus, although city schools opened up some opportunity for a few African Americans, blacks saw these gains in employment as negligible. In this section, we will explore black Angelnos efforts to bring about “proper proportion” of black teachers in *all* of the city schools.

⁴³⁹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, Box 1596, Folder 3

⁴⁴⁰ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, Box “Memorandum to Board of Education,” Box 1596, Folder 3, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles; Oliver Weston Saul, “Implications For Guidance of High School Pupils From Follow-Up Study,” (MA Thesis, University of Southern California, 1939), 18; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of Population, 1940, Population and Housing for Census Tracts, Los Angeles/Long Beach Area*.

In response to the activists' charge that the district's employment process discriminated against black aspirants, the Board and Superintendent consistently referred to their commitment to equal opportunity and touted the progress that had been made since 1936. In 1939, the assistant superintendent brought his own figures to a meeting to counter activists' representation of the city school's "record" with regard to racial equality. "The questions raised [by activists] at the previous meeting of the Board of Education," he asserted, "have prompted me to send you some information that has been gathered from the records of the Personnel Division showing the success of Negro applicants as compared with the success of other applicants." In his several "observations," he noted that zero African Americans taught in Los Angeles' high and junior high schools in 1936, but now in 1940, eighteen blacks found employment. Implicitly, he suggested this was an 1800% increase. He further stated that among these eighteen black teachers, one of them received first place on the eligibility list "in recognition of her own superior qualifications." According to the Superintendent these numbers trumped any figures brought by black activists. These numbers proved city school's commitment to non-discrimination, even though these eighteen black teachers made up 0.4 percent of 4,651 high school and junior high school instructors teaching in the city.⁴⁴¹ The school district had a point. At least some blacks, such as Samuel Browne, found employment in the secondary schools of Los Angeles. The district once again narrowed the issue to a question of individual discrimination, rather engaging the issue of structural racism. For black activists, a few were not enough. They insisted that blacks

⁴⁴¹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, (Subject Files), Box 1596.

encountered the same patterns and practices that constrained them in the lead up to Browne's hiring, persisted into the 1940s, despite Browne's groundbreaking hire.

Just as troubling to black activists in the early 1940s was the district's pattern of appointing the few black instructors. They observed an unspoken practice where the district only placed black teachers in areas with significant black populations—that is, those schools in the Central Avenue district. Beginning in 1939, activists regularly attended Board meetings charging the school district with covertly maintaining a dual eligibility list—one list for black candidates to teach in “black” schools and another list for eligible “white” teachers to teach in all schools. In an open letter presented to the Board, the Los Angeles Forum took an early lead on the issue, declaring, “The Forum believes the system of oppointing [sic] Negroes only where Negro pupils constitute the predominant percentage destroy what we have been pleased to call the merit system.”⁴⁴² Representing the Citizen's Committee, Loren Miller was more blunt about the situation. In addressing the Board, Miller stated, “You know Negro teachers are sent to only a small number of schools.”⁴⁴³ “Neither the Board of Education nor its administrative subordinates,” Miller continued, “can blink at the fact that a policy of many years standing requires that Negro teachers be assigned only to schools at which Negro pupils predominate or form a large percentage of the student body.”⁴⁴⁴ For Miller, the problem arising from this practice extended beyond those fortunate few African American who obtained full-time teaching positions. Because black substitute teachers could only teach

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, “Informal Notes,” Box 1596, Folder 3, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁴⁴⁴ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, “Memorandum to Board of Education.”

in “black” schools, Miller argued, their opportunities to get experience was “limited and weighed against him.” The white substitute who found work all-year round in all schools in the city, Miller argued, possessed a distinct advantage in acquiring a full-time position over a black substitute who got intermittent work a few weeks out of the year.

Reflecting the vibrancy of racial liberalism, black Angelenos found support from other sections of the city. Mrs. Spiegel, “a young white mother living in Hollywood,” urged the Board to place black teachers “indiscriminately.” “If white teachers can teach Negro children,” she rationalized, “there is no reason why Negro teachers should not be allowed to teach white children.”⁴⁴⁵ The League for the Defense of American Democracy wrote the Board declaring that they “protest the refusal of the Board of Education to appoint Negro teachers to schools where white children predominate.” They further added, “We regard this as a gross discrimination against a minority group and violation of its democratic rights under the constitution.” Showing how events in Europe and Asia began to figure into local controversies related to discrimination by early 1940, the League implored: “At this time particularly, when the rights of minority groups are being ignored or attacked in almost [sic] every country in the world, it is the duty of democratic, freedom-loving Americans to observe and protect, more devotedly than ever, the civil rights of these groups.” “Since presumably the Board of Education subscribe[d] to this principle,” the League concluded, “it [was] time to carry it out in practice.”⁴⁴⁶

This was seemingly an easier battle to wage for activists. Demonstrating discrepancies in placement, activists thought, certainly was simpler than exposing discriminatory practices in hiring. The facts spoke for themselves. In the 1939-1940

⁴⁴⁵ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, (Subject Files) Box 1596.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

school year, out of the 10,283 teachers employed in the district, 64 were African American. These 64 instructors taught in 17 of the district's 407 schools. These 17 schools were located in Central Avenue and Watts. That is, these teachers found employment in the areas where you found significant numbers of African American students. These were schools where the African American student population constituted between 25.1 percent and 80 percent of the total school population.⁴⁴⁷ Out of 40 senior high schools, four blacks taught in two—Jefferson and Jordan. Jefferson was over sixty percent black in the 1939/1940 school year and Jordan was thirty percent. So it appeared to activists in the early 1940s that Sam Browne's hire indeed opened up opportunities, but it was segregated opportunity. It certainly was not the equal opportunity the Board rhetorically exalted.

When presented with these figures, school officials provided a muddled defense that was held up by their commitment to color-blindness. They steadfastly maintained that they kept just one eligibility list and that they drew names from that list in the order in which each candidate was ranked. "We have never passed any colored person on any list," Superintendent Vierling Kersey emphatically stated. "It would be dishonest not to be fair with [black candidates]."⁴⁴⁸ Board member Askey reassured Miller's group that "the Board [did] not want to classify any teacher as being colored or white." Addressing the one half of Miller's observation that noted whites teach in "black" schools, Askey countered, "as [everyone] knows [blacks] are the minority group, it follows that the majority of applicants for the positions are white" and thus employed throughout the

⁴⁴⁷ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, "Memorandum to the Board."

⁴⁴⁸ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, "Informal Notes."

district.⁴⁴⁹ His remarks left the larger and more important question of why blacks did not teach in “white” schools untouched. The closest Miller got to having school officials acknowledge that race played a role in placement of teachers was in the response of board member Becker. Straddling the line between color-blindness and color-consciousness, a seemingly frustrated Becker offered that he didn’t “believe there has been anything that has detracted from any person who may have taken an examination competing with other people on the eligibility list,” yet he believed that it is “sometimes more practicable to put people in a section where they will be happier.”⁴⁵⁰ Other than this slight deviation, the Board held firm to its policy of race-neutrality in the face of mathematics. That is, irrespective of the concentration of black teachers in black areas, the Superintendent made clear, “Everyone we have come to on every list has been appointed.”⁴⁵¹ Los Angeles city schools did not see or consider race in the placement of teachers.

As with the 1936 campaign to hire black secondary teachers, the school officials’ position of racial innocence pushed black activists into a philosophical and strategic quagmire. To disentangle the web of discrimination covered by racial innocence, black activists had to demand color-conscious solutions. That is, they had to embrace a ideological position that could very easily be seen to contravene the loftier principle of equal opportunity/non-discrimination that the Board espoused and they themselves more broadly supported. The Citizen’s Committee recommendations to the Board reflect just how slippery this position in between color-blindness and color-consciousness was for

⁴⁴⁹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, January 27, 1941.

⁴⁵⁰ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, “Informal Notes.”

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

black activists. Anticipating the school board's usage of racial innocence, the Committee then figured that its best strategy was to tepidly embrace "black" space. Jefferson High was at the focal point of their demands.

Indeed in the list of "policies that ought to be implemented," Jefferson High figured in most of them. The Committee asked that Jefferson Evening School be completely reorganized. First, the Committee requested that core classes such as English, math, history and science be removed from the Federal Emergency Education Program [FEED] and be funded through the district, so as to "guarantee continuity of these classes." Furthermore, they asked that Jefferson's Evening school hire more black teachers, who would be paid from the district's budget rather than FEED. This would spare black teachers the hardship caused by the frequent discontinuance of courses that did not meet federal enrollment requirements. Pressing further, the Committee recommended that the Board install a black administrator at the school, who would have "an extensive knowledge of the community and a thorough understanding of the difficulties that grow out of the Negro's place in American life and in Los Angeles."⁴⁵² This hire would bar against "incongruous situations," such as "where a white person is an instructor in cosmetology." "Doubtless the instructor is qualified in general terms," Miller conceded, but a "Negro should teach the class" because "of the difference in the practical application of cosmetology."⁴⁵³ Demonstrating the challenge color-blindness posed, the committee had to pursue two lines of strategy at once. They would demand preference, while asking for non-discrimination. Miller asked the Board, to "give Negro teachers

⁴⁵² Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, "Memorandum to Board of Education."

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

preference whenever ... instructors are assigned to the schools at which Negroes are permitted to teach,” “so long as the Board follows a policy of refusing to send Negro teachers to [other] schools.” “Some program has to be devised,” Miller insisted, “to be sure that in this maze of Rules and Regulations nothing approaching discrimination happens to creep in.”⁴⁵⁴ The problem for the Committee was that the Board refused to acknowledge the “maze.”

Wielding its official policy of non-discrimination, the Board then turned the Committee’s suggestions into a plea for segregation. Board member Pierce queried “Are they better off or worse off [in St. Louis] – where they have separate schools?” Becker then asked, “Are you representing a majority of the colored people when you say that we ought to limit the employment of Negro teachers to [Jeff] as much as possible.”⁴⁵⁵ Answering his own question, Becker stated, “I don’t think that the colored people would be satisfied if we limit the competition for these particular schools.” Recognizing the Board’s use of color-blindness as cover, an exasperated Miller concluded, “If a Negro applicant goes out to the Douglas Plant, or he goes out to a certain school, we have to talk about race whether we want to or not. We cannot escape.”⁴⁵⁶ Ultimately, the Board may have been more receptive to one half of the Committee’s request than they let on. Five years later, Jefferson High had ten black teachers, Jordan High had sixteen and predominantly Latino Roosevelt High had one. None of Los Angeles’ other high schools

⁴⁵⁴ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, “Informal Notes.”; Four months prior, before Miller’s involvement, the Committee was much more specific in their demands. In a letter written by P. Price Cobbs, dated August 12, 1940, the committee requested that “fifteen Negro teachers, two Negro Counselors ... and one Negro Principal *be appointed*” at Jefferson High school.---Los Angeles Board of Education Records, Box 1596, Folder 3

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

had any.⁴⁵⁷ Thus, black activists' pressure yielded more opportunity, but it remained segregated opportunity well into the next couple of decades, as evinced by Samuel Browne's decade-long struggle to obtain a transfer from Jeff.

The force of African American activists' and racial liberals' arguments for racial justice lay in the contradictions they exposed. Many institutions in Los Angeles, including the school system, claimed to support notions of equality. Yet, as we have explored, practices frequently did not match principle. Thus, juxtaposing practice and principle had limited effect in the prewar period, as we saw in black activists' campaign to hire more teachers. Angelenos (and Americans more generally) were quite adept at smoothing out the inconsistencies between "American ideals" and actual life in Los Angeles. However, as war with a fascist dictator who made race-based claims for lebensraum appeared eminent, African Americans' and their allies' arguments for racial justice took on greater potency. To be sure, World War II energized activists, who pointed to discrepancies in treatment and now could stress the need for national unity. Activists now would juxtapose Hitler's actions with American practices as a strategy. After late 1940, activists increasingly melded together the crises in Europe with racial problems at home. Buoyed by racial liberalism and the exigencies of war, black Angelenos would intensify their attacks on multiple axes of discrimination in Los Angeles in the cover of war. Activists' multi-pronged efforts not only reveal that they saw structural sources of discrimination as intimately bound up and co-constitutive, but their activities also demonstrate their heightened sense of urgency to conquer this "maze" before war's emergency faded.

⁴⁵⁷ John Anson Ford Papers, Box 76, folder ee, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

“Negroes are dismayed by the fact their color is a bar to their becoming skilled workers at the very time when their skills would be needed.” – Clarence Muse, 1950.

At least a full year and a half before Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor, the city of Los Angeles began to prepare for war. Stimulated by lucrative government contracts, airplane and automobile factories and their related industries started the conversion process from civilian to military production. The Port of Los Angeles, too, saw a dramatic uptick in activity as shipbuilders began a hiring spree that would ultimately culminate in the employment of approximately one hundred thousand workers. As industry ramped up production, Los Angeles city schools also directed their efforts toward the crises. On September 5, 1940, the Superintendent announced to the Board that city schools’ Defense Training Program was officially in operation with 44 classes located in 9 high school centers. Just within the first month, the Superintendent reported, seven hundred and eighty four students, who hoped to secure employment in Los Angeles’s burgeoning defense industries, enrolled in one of several course offered by the district, including aircraft sheet metal, foundry work, machine shop, mechanical drafting, pattern making, sheet metal and welding. The courses appeared to be in such demand in the first month of the program that the Superintendent proposed adding a third training session from 10pm to 2am. “It is of significance,” the Superintendent boastfully noted, “that school facilities were made available promptly to meet the need of the National Defense Training Program and the actual training of the qualified students was well under way within a few days after notification of approval of the legislation.”⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁸ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, September 5, 1940.

As suggested in the Superintendent's comments, the training of defense industry workers was a cooperative effort. Although several federal agencies, such as the Office of Emergency Management and the War Production Board directed and funded defense production efforts, carrying out the training also involved the collaboration of federal and state employment offices and local agencies, such as public school systems. Over the course of the war, Los Angeles city schools played an important role in the supply of trained laborers for the region's burgeoning military industrial complex. It opened up shop floors and lent its equipment in high and junior high schools across the city to trainees. As many schools throughout the city converted their shops into defense industry training centers in early 1941, Jefferson High seemed largely unaffected by the growing crisis. Here, the programs and course offerings remained the same. Observing the dramatic economic transformations afoot, black Angelenos anticipated the potential boon brought about by war. Moreover, they immediately comprehended the importance of the district's National Defense training program and "their" school's exclusion from it. While most scholars have focused on battles waged on the factory floors during World War II, a focus on Jeff reveals that the battlefield also extended to the public school system. Indeed, many black activists saw the city schools as a portal to the opportunities wrought by war and thus an opening to first-class citizenship. Located at the center of the black community, Jefferson High figured prominently in black Angelenos' plans for "double victory."

Just four months after the defense training programs opened in Los Angeles city schools, the early numbers dismayed black Angelenos. Out of a total of 2,060 students who completed the training course in the first cohorts, only six (or 0.3%) were African

American.⁴⁵⁹ Acting on these early figures, on January 2, 1941, the Committee on Schools appeared before the Board and urged it to “give serious consideration to a program that will be sufficient to train Negroes in [Los Angeles] for employment in [defense] industries.”⁴⁶⁰ This was the opening plea in a long struggle. Over the next year and a half, black activists and their supporters appeared before the Board consistently, sometimes two to four times a month, to ask “for simple justice and an opportunity for them as a people to develop themselves to serve their Country.”⁴⁶¹

Two weeks after the Committee’s visit, the Negro Veterans Council charged school officials with denying Negro aspirants “the right and privilege of” defense training “by evasion, subterfuge and rank injustice.” In an investigation, they found that vocational guidance and counselors directed blacks away from defense training and “to the few occupations in which the Negro is found in the largest numbers at the present time.” As the specter of war brought about a “pressing need for a spirit of true Americanism and an earnest desire for national unity on the part of every element in our body politic,” they demanded that “training be impartially given.”⁴⁶² Clarence Muse also showed up before the Board. Attempting to tread the fine line between colorblindness and color-consciousness, the famous black actor expressed that “he has never asked anything on the basis of race, that he is an American citizen by birth, by feeling, by spirit.” However, he was there to demand one thing: “that everything that is done for a white student in any school must be done the same for a colored boy.” “There is a difference in education of colored youth,” Muse stated, “in regard to making them capable and

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., March 24, 1941.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., January 2, 1941.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., April 27, 1942.

⁴⁶² Ibid., January 16, 1941.

worthwhile in connection with this defense program.” Muse concluded, “The colored youth can give great service and greater service ... if he receives the same opportunity for education that the white boy receives.”⁴⁶³ Loren Miller followed Muse by connecting African Americans’ right to training to their status as citizens. Miller argued that both whites *and* blacks, as citizens and taxpayers, had a right to the \$100,000 Congress allocated to city schools for the defense program. At the present time, Miller observed, “the money allocated [was] going to be used to train white youth to get jobs in the defense industries.” Miller pointed to the Committee on School’s earlier visit to the Board, stating, “they had asked that something be done, but it remained as it was.”⁴⁶⁴ It was now time for the Board to take action, Miller demanded.

As it had done in earlier controversies, the Board vigorously refuted all charges of bias. Board member Dalton, bluntly expressed the general sentiment of the Board, stating, “as far as he is concerned the Los Angeles city schools have not discriminated against anyone.”⁴⁶⁵ “Los Angeles city schools [did] not countenance racism,” they maintained. If there were discrepancies in the acceptance of white and black applicants to training schools, this had nothing to do with city school’s policies or practices. Instead, the Superintendent offered, that city schools were bound “to enroll only people who would be eligible for appointment to positions in industry.”⁴⁶⁶

In these early days of the struggle, school officials never explicitly stated to whose policy they abided. After several inquiries from black activists over the course of 1941, school officials eventually crafted a response that was multifaceted, if not muddled.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., January 27, 1941.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., April 27, 1942.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., January 27, 1941.

In all of their formulations, the “problem,” if in fact there was one, could be traced back to one or two other actors—federal/state/ local employment agencies and industry. Depending on the day, the Board deflected responsibility to one or both of these forces. Ultimately, they argued that while city schools did not see race, they were hamstrung by the dictates of industry and local and state employment agencies. When school official’s argument was most coherent, it was anchored to some notion of practicality. That is, if blacks were denied training, it had nothing to do with racism on the part of school officials, but rather it had to do with prudent resource allocation in relationship to the reality of the job market. In one of the rare moments when school officials broke from the script of non-bias, board member Larrabee, commented, “Obviously it would not be wise to train a large number of people and then not be able to place them.”⁴⁶⁷ Significantly, however, Larrabee did not identify that “large number of people.” Put another way, deciding who received defense training was about employability, not race. By ascribing the “problem” to larger structural issues, the school officials maintained their racial innocence.

Black activists, of course, saw the problem differently. They saw city schools as but one buttress holding up a larger system of discrimination. The school system *was* one of the structures within the larger structural “maze” of oppression. Having spoken with industry, they heard the same formulation in reverse. Industry told activists that they did not hire blacks because they did not have the proper training.⁴⁶⁸ “So it is a vicious circle all the way around,” noted Faye Allen. “Industry will not take these people if they are not

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., April 27, 1942.

⁴⁶⁸ Industry slowly moved away from overtly discriminatory hiring practices—ie... advertising for white-only workers—after President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802.

trained,” she stated,” and we do not train them because industry will not take them.”⁴⁶⁹

Understanding the interplay between training centers, employment agencies and employers, black activists pressed on all sides hoping to break one barrier, so as to force the others out of the cover of racial innocence. Targeting the city schools, black activists asked that the system accept black aspirants irrespective of their struggles to find employment due to racism. “We take issue with that application of the theory,” asserted one activist to the Board, “which measures employment opportunity for a racial group by the number of that group found in an occupational field or by discriminatory employment policies that a particular racial group may confront.” “It is a very unsound principle of public education,” he continued, “to establish a policy of counseling or vocational education based on the discriminatory practices of private industry at a given time.”⁴⁷⁰

Failing to overcome the city school’s colorblind argument, as it was employed to in admission to training, black activists adjusted their strategy. They increasingly looked to commandeer Jeff and establish a defense-training center on its campus. Placing a defense center in the heart of the black community, activists reasoned, would make it difficult for school officials to deny black applicants. Moreover, this solution would neutralize any internal arguments made by school officials to deny black applicants on the basis of school/residential “harmony.” Finally, this solution would not only open defense training to blacks, but it would also make it accessible. That is, black aspirants would be spared the worry of experiencing hostility in unwelcoming communities and the expense of prohibitive transportation costs. While black activists broached this proposal early in the struggle, it was not until school officials demonstrated recalcitrance on the

⁴⁶⁹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, April 27, 1942.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., January 16, 1941.

admission of black trainees that activists more fervently embraced this as *the* solution. Thus, whereas Miller simply pointed out in January 1941 that “no National Defense Classes are conducted at Thomas Jefferson High School,” by early 1942, activists demanded that the Board satisfy their “reasonable request” of establishing a defense training center at Jeff.

The recently established United Victory Committee spearheaded this second phase of the struggle. On April 22, 1942, the group sent a letter to the Superintendent of city schools, informing him that they had recently held several conferences “with a large group of Negro and White persons who head organizations in the community” to “clarify the Negro’s stand in the war.” The letter stated that “the speakers set forth the Negro’s place as an American citizen and in this world’s conflict every educated hand must be used and every hand must be trained for victory.” After posing several broad questions to the Superintendent, the writer got to the ultimate point “Where are the Negroes’ place in the defense schools as students and teachers?”⁴⁷¹

When the Board received the letter from the UVC, it was undoubtedly familiar with the group. The UVC was a multi-racial umbrella organization, which was led by the Negro Victory Committee. The group, consisting of many of black Los Angeles’ leaders, including P. Price Cobbs, Thomas Griffith, Almena Davis, Leon Washington, and Augustus Hawkins, had created quite a stir over the past few months. Organized in April 1941 by Clayton Russell, the dynamic preacher from People’s Independent Church and the *Eagle’s* editor, Charlotta Bass, the organization had spent much of early 1942 organizing and carrying out mass protests against defense companies and agencies that

⁴⁷¹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Records, (Subject Files), Box, 1596, Folder 3.

discriminated against black workers. In January and February of 1942, the group picketed Douglas and North American aircraft companies. They also demonstrated at the major shipyards. In the summer of 1942, they targeted the United States Employment Service [USES] for refusing to refer black women for jobs in the defense factories. In July, Clayton Russell asked black women in Los Angeles during his popular Sunday radio show to report to the USES office the following Monday morning to demand fair treatment and a job. Two thousand five hundred women showed up. Overwhelmed by the number of black applicants, the office ended up shutting its doors early. In addition to registering black Angelenos discontent, the demonstration secured a promise from the director of the local USES branch to talk with his supervisors about amending USES policies.⁴⁷² Blunting any hope that this might be a breakthrough, however, the director also made clear “that certain things were outside [USES’s] jurisdiction, such as the establishment of training classes.”⁴⁷³ These protests were animated by a core conviction that would become known as “double victory.” Forged in the crises of war, black protest organizations throughout the country, including the UVC, embraced a mission to defeat fascism abroad and racism at home. Emphasizing blacks’ stake in the war and trumpeting their commitment as American citizens, the UVC demanded full participation to bring about victory.

In mid 1942, the UVC did not have to look too hard to find patterns of discrimination in the defense industries and thus targets to protest. Although President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which prohibited discrimination in the defense industries, on June 25, 1941, racial bias in the employment persisted largely

⁴⁷² Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, August 3, 1942.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

unabated. In January 1941, the Fair Employment Practice Committee—the agency established under Executive Order 8802 to investigate incidents of discrimination—found that African Americans faced wide-scale racism in Los Angeles defense industries. They reported that blacks were completely shutout of many factories, wholly excluded from certain job categories and barred from most trade unions. As a result, African Americans made up fewer than two percent of all workers in the Terminal Island shipyards in mid 1942.⁴⁷⁴ Those who found work were employed in the least desirable and lowest paying jobs. In April 1942, the Minority Division of the War Production Board estimated that out of the two hundred thousand workers employed by the aircraft companies, African Americans constituted less than one thousand (or less than 0.5%).⁴⁷⁵ Most of these black laborers, the division found, also worked in low-level positions removed from production, such as janitors. As late as May 1942, African Americans made up less than one percent of total workforce in war-related production.⁴⁷⁶ The UVC saw similar figures in the city school’s defense training centers. Despite earlier pleas to the board by other activists, blacks still constituted less than one percent of trainees out of the city school’s defense program.

Attempting to break this “vicious circle,” the UVC turned their attention to city schools. On April 2, 1942, the organization appeared before the board with supporters. Revels Cayton, State Vice President of the Congress Industrial Organizations, Kendrick Watson of the Spanish Speaking People Committee and Guy Nunn of the Minority Division of the War Production Board joined in the discussion of a “problem of great

⁴⁷⁴ Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Ground of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 132.

⁴⁷⁵ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, April 27, 1942.

⁴⁷⁶ Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 144.

concern to [the black] community.” After hounding industry and the United States Employment Service to end discriminatory practices for the past year, their struggle had led them to city schools. Indeed, industry and employment placement services pointed them to the Board. Both groups maintained that they employed or referred so few black for defense jobs because so few blacks were properly trained. Following the “maze,” UVC now stood before the Board asking it “to do the fair square thing by [African American].”⁴⁷⁷ Elevating the exigencies of the current situation, they stressed the “real necessity for involving every single American citizen in this war effort.” If the Board continued to follow a policy that barred African American applicants from training opportunities, Nunn argued, the War Production Board “will not be able to engender the necessary manpower to win the war.” There was a lack of trained workers, Nunn stressed. “Some of the responsibility rests with the employers,” Nunn acknowledged. However, he continued, the WPB’s task of securing sufficient manpower was “made doubly difficult because of this lack of training.” “It would be of great assistance to them,” Nunn entreated, “if the Board would set up schools easily accessible to [African Americans] and to set up courses which are in demand.” Due to the trouble blacks faced in securing defense training elsewhere in the city, the UVC urged the Board to set up a fully operational training center at Jefferson high. Nunn promised that “if the Board will train these people [the WPB] will place them.”⁴⁷⁸

The Board responded in a predictable fashion. It denied that school officials ever engaged in racially discriminatory practices. Board member Larrabee articulated the position of all board members except for Allen, asserting “he [did] not think it will be

⁴⁷⁷ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, April 27, 1942.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

found that there [had] been any reluctance on the part of this school system to offer training courses to Negroes.”⁴⁷⁹ They deflected blame for racial disparities. “The apparent failure to offer training facilities,” they suggested “[had] been influenced by the uncertainty of placement.” This was a factor that lay outside of the Board’s control. Attempting to push activists further along in the “maze,” the Board maintained that this “[was] a matter which [lay] primarily with governmental influences upon employers.”⁴⁸⁰ Furthermore, the Superintendent added, even if the WPB, CIO and UVC were able to open up job opportunities for blacks, the Board could not simply open a training center at Jeff. Jeff, the Superintendent reported, lacked the equipment to train defense workers. Perhaps in the “spirit in the cooperation,” none of the petitioners noted that black Angelenos proposed the establishment of a defense center at Jeff over sixteen months prior or that many of the current centers operating in city schools acquired necessary machinery within this time. Turning the responsibility back on to the petitioners, and specifically to Nunn who represented the federal government, the Superintendent suggested, “that if machinery can be obtained from Washington for the establishment of these classes, it would be a fine thing.”⁴⁸¹ The discussion concluded with Board members supporting the general idea of harnessing all manpower to win the war and the Superintendent suggesting that the UVC and their allies confer with the County Board of Education. Although the UVC did not secure a promise, school officials’ receptiveness at the end of the meeting, even if tepid, was encouraging.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

If activists came out of the meeting hopeful, their optimism was short-lived. Four months later, the UVC were back before the Board. This time 62nd Assemblyman Augustus Hawkins joined them. Hawkins began by reminding the Board of the activists' two yearlong struggle with the school system to open up training opportunities for African Americans. In the current context, Hawkins argued, this issue had now become a "concern to all American citizens."⁴⁸² "The problem," Reverend Clayton Russell insisted, "[was] vital to America and American democracy." In a "very serious war that [was] threatening the freedom of every American citizen," Russell continued, "everyone should have the necessary training." In the months since their last visit to the Board, Russell pointed out that the UVC continued "to encounter several problems of discrimination in the training of minority groups." Once again, the UVC demanded that the Board "immediately" establish the defense center at Jeff, "so they can proceed with the training to win the war." Highlighting how black activists walked a fine line in their demands between color-consciousness and colorblindness, Russell insisted that the training classes at Jeff were not "just for Negroes but for others living in [Central Avenue]."⁴⁸³

The Board and Superintendent responded with the same excuses that they had offered previously. However, this time they implicated the federal government. They could not open up the defense-training center because "there [was] no equipment at Jefferson high school that [was] suitable and approvable for defense training classes." They suggested that the activists look to Washington, "where it [was] necessary to secure priorities for the materials."⁴⁸⁴ When Board member, Faye Allen, asked what was holding

⁴⁸² Ibid., August 3, 1942.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

up the establishment of an aeronautical class at Jeff, the Superintendent offered the familiar response that city schools could only establish those classes where successful trainees would be guaranteed employment. However, this time the Superintendent emphasized that the city schools must advance certify with the federal government that trainees will be accepted for employment. Adding more complexity to the issue, the Superintendent revealed that “the only people who are eligible to enroll [in defense classes] are people sent by the United States Employment Service.”⁴⁸⁵ So the new logic of school officials was that establishing a defense center at Jeff would not yield more black trainees because the USES would not send black aspirants to the center because industry would not hire them. Thus, it made no sense for the city schools to establish a center where there would be few successful trainees. Furthermore, the Board took issue with the petitioners’ request for training in a specific area where it was understood that a specific group would be served. “Programs must not necessarily be limited to any minority group,” the Board president commented, “as the Board had no policy of segregation.”⁴⁸⁶ Searching for an opening in this “vicious circle,” Faye Allen asked, “If the United States Employment Service refuse[d] to say they will not send Negroes, why are these classes not opened?”⁴⁸⁷ The Superintendent responded stating that USES approved the enrollment of city schools defense classes and “they only send people whom they believe to be qualified.”⁴⁸⁸ The circle was complete again. And although it appeared that the Board would continue its pattern of obfuscation, activists walked away

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

from this meeting with a success. The Board agreed to meet with representatives from the various protest organizations in a special session on a *specific* day and at a *specific* time.

On August 6, 1942, the committee representing the various protest organizations met with the Board. After two and a half hours the Board agreed to open defense training classes at Jeff and sent “a telegram and other communication” urging the approval of a request for necessary materials. Within a month, Jefferson had defense classes operating on its campus. The *California Eagle* captured the enthusiasm of many within Central Avenue for such opportunities when it announced on September 3, 1942 “Jefferson is selected to offer war training in the field of aeronautics!”⁴⁸⁹ Over the course of the war, in addition to the aeronautics classes, Jefferson offered welding, radio operation and ship fitting courses. Jefferson, then, served as a portal for many black Angelenos into the defense industry.⁴⁹⁰

The opening up of training and thus more broadly the opening up of the defense industry came to fruition due to the efforts of numerous organizations. Groups such as, League of Negro Veterans, CIO, Negro Church Alliance, National Negro Congress of Los Angeles, United Victory Committee, War Production Board Minority Division, Spanish Speaking People Committee, NAACP, Urban League, Black Newspaper Coalition and the Allied Organizations Against Discrimination in National Defense, brought their struggle not only to the factory, but also to the schoolhouse. Their

⁴⁸⁹ *California Eagle*, September 3, 1942.

⁴⁹⁰ Mexican Americans waged a similar battle to get defense industry training classes in East Los Angeles at Roosevelt high school. In fact, black activists and Mexican American activists sometimes made their demands for training at the same Board meeting. On a couple of occasions, it even appears that there was some coordination. Mexican Americans’ struggle, however, continued well after the Board made the decision to designate Jefferson as a training center.

coordinated attack on multiple axes of discrimination produced stunning results. By late 1942, over ten percent of all city schools defense trainees were black.⁴⁹¹ By late 1942, 30,000 blacks held jobs in the defense industry. African American share of the city's war-related production work grew from less than one percent in May 1942 to more than five percent in 1944. In mid 1942, over five thousand African Americans found work in the big three—Douglas, Lockheed and North American—aircraft plants.⁴⁹² By the end of the war African Americans made up 7.5% of North American Aircraft's and Douglas's total workforce, respectively. In March 1945, African Americans made up over 11% of the shipbuilding and repair, over 9% of Iron and Steel.⁴⁹³ Such was the optimism of the period, a War Manpower Commission report noted, "It is hoped that in the reconversion of local assembly plants, non-whites will retain the jobs they have found in these plants, now devoted to war production."⁴⁹⁴ When considering blacks made up no more than 7.5% of the total population in Los Angeles by the end of the war, these figures seemed to signal the dawning of a new day in African Americans' quest for equal opportunity.⁴⁹⁵

Conclusion

World War II represented a watershed moment in black activism in Los Angeles. Black Angelenos challenged discriminatory practices in housing, employment and

⁴⁹¹ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, October 1, 1942.

⁴⁹² Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 144.

⁴⁹³ Golden State Insurance Collection, (Los Angeles Fair Practices Committee Report), Box 9, Folder 1.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, (War Manpower Report, April 20, 1945), Box 9, Folder 1.

⁴⁹⁵ A special census conducted in 1944 estimated that 118,888 blacks lived in Los Angeles.

education. Buoyed by racial liberalism and drawing from lessons learned about mass action during the heady politics of the New Deal, black Angelenos accomplished much during the war years. They opened up more opportunities for black teachers. They broke down barriers to training in schools and employment in defense factories. They integrated the streetcar system in Los Angeles. Under the crises of war, activists forged imperfect interest convergences. As a result of their efforts, black Angelenos experienced an unprecedented level of prosperity during World War II.

Conclusion

As the shadow of World War II receded, a new day appeared to have dawned in Los Angeles. The exigencies of war and the combined forces of black activism and racial liberalism seemed to produce a significant breach in racism's walls of denial. This "new day," however, was ephemeral. Despite the inroads that African Americans made during the war years, racial discrimination proved intractable. Discriminatory housing practices continued to hem them in isolated neighborhoods. Consequently, Central Avenue became blacker, more populated and more deteriorated. By the mid 1940s, public officials spoke of a "crisis" in the neighborhood that they linked to a housing shortage and slum conditions. Moreover, most of the factory jobs that black activists won during the war evaporated. By 1949, North American Aircraft shed 1,150 black workers. The remaining 450 black workers represented 3% of the total workforce. Douglas Aircraft lost 3,950 African American workers. The fifty who remained constituted 1% of the total. Only 2% of African Americans found mostly low-wage work in Los Angeles's growing auto industry.⁴⁹⁶ On a "typical day" in 1949, the state employment office reported that although African Americans made up 8% of Los Angeles' total population, they represented about 21% of the unemployment claims processed.⁴⁹⁷

To be sure, the paradoxes that dogged African American life in "progressive" Los Angeles throughout the war persisted. Perhaps few events highlighted the countervailing forces in the immediate post-war period more than a second controversy at Fremont

⁴⁹⁶ Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 208.

⁴⁹⁷ Golden State Insurance Collection, Box 9, Folder 1.

High. In 1947, Fremont students garnered national attention when they dragged out their nooses once more. An estimated five hundred students walked out of classes to stage another mock lynching of black students at the school. While, on the one hand, this incident highlighted the impotence of racial liberalism, it also revealed its influence. Several groups, including the NAACP, the Los Angeles Federation of Teachers, the Council of Civic Unity, the Southland Jewish Organization and Watts Coordinating Council came out immediately in protest of the demonstration. They demanded that the Board not only punish the participating students, but that it require Fremont to organize an assembly on interracial unity and send material on racial tolerance and intercultural relations to the parents of the students of Fremont.⁴⁹⁸ They also asked that the Curriculum Division for the city schools establish a permanent program of intercultural education designed to foster an “appreciation of people of minority groups.”⁴⁹⁹

The school board responded with its stock pronouncement of a commitment to non-discrimination, assuring activists, “this Board has not tolerated and will not tolerate racial discrimination or segregation of students because of race, creed or color.” But in a dramatic about-face in posture from the 1941 lynching, the Superintendent vowed to “act promptly to correct” the “deplorable un-American situation.” Instead of denying responsibility, school officials took swift action this time. Students were required to sign a pledge stating that “all pupils living in the Fremont district are expected to attend Fremont High School and that all Fremont students are entitled to the same privileges.” School official placed participating students on probation for a semester and barred them from representing the school in any capacity. Graduating seniors could not participate in

⁴⁹⁸ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, March 24, 1947.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., March 27, 1947.

senior class activities or receive a diploma with the class at the graduation ceremony.⁵⁰⁰

This time school official acted as they spoke. It would appear, then, that black activism and the force of racial liberalism won the day.⁵⁰¹

However, the Fremont incident also pointed to the challenges black activists and their supporters would face in the coming years. Although school officials acknowledged that a mock lynching took place on Fremont's campus, they spent most of their time insisting that communists stirred up the tensions that produced the demonstration. Thus, just days after President Harry Truman outlined for the American people the grave dangers posed by the Soviet Union, school officials saw communists in their midst.⁵⁰² "False charges have been broadcast over the radio within the past three or four days, prior to anything happening at Fremont High School, that we had "Jim Crow" schools in Los Angeles," the Board president stated. He asserted that "this was done by Communists in a Communist broadcast."⁵⁰³ Blaming communists for the lynching had a dual effect. It undermined the legitimacy of the discrimination and it worked to marginalize the petitioners regardless of their affiliation. By connecting protest for racial redress to communism, school officials blunted activists' challenges in the immediate post-war era. Now, demands that smacked of fundamental change were labeled un-American and subversive. Thus, whereas black activists and racial liberals found success in wielding a

⁵⁰⁰ *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 29, 1947.

⁵⁰¹ Just as likely, however, the walls of the black ghetto expanded to such an extent that educators could no longer "protect" the school, which was now "in the heart of the area heatedly contested in state courts over race restrictive covenants."--
Chicago Defender, March 29, 1947.

⁵⁰² President Truman delivered his Truman Doctrine speech on March 12, 1947. The Fremont mock lynching took place on the March 14, 1947.

⁵⁰³ Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education Minutes, March 17, 1942.

concept of “Americanism” during the war years, demands for national unity worked against them in a Cold War.

Moreover, even though school officials acted on principle in the high-profile Fremont incident, they did not abandon their practice of colorblind discrimination in the postwar years. Not long after the Fremont incident, Samuel Browne, a twelve-year veteran teacher, applied for a transfer from Jeff and was rejected. This would be the first of several denials over the next decade. It was not until 1961 that school officials only began to relent on an unofficial policy that rested on the notion that black teachers could not teach in “white” schools and Browne received the transfer he desired. To be sure, then, black Angelenos witnessed an expansion of opportunity in the war years. But much of it was segregated opportunity. The problem with segregated opportunity, for black Angelenos in the postwar period, was that much of it dried up once there was no longer the impetus or compelling case for cooperation wrought by World War. The links and tensions between community control and integration, between segregated opportunity and equal opportunity played out well into the twentieth century.

Our collective historical memory pinpoints the mid 1960s, with its showdown between non-violent black integrationists and militant black nationalists, as the fateful moment when competing approaches to black freedom collided. However, *Lessons on Freedom* not only underscores that African Americans faced this crossroad much earlier, but also demonstrates that these seemingly distinct strategies frequently overlapped. Their conjoiner was color-blind discrimination and this was a product from outside the American South. That is, the conundrum of racial innocence in the midst of racial

Angelenos are still grappling with inequalities in opportunity within a paradigm of color-blindness. Indeed color-blind innocence has proven much more adaptable and resilient than Jim Crow.

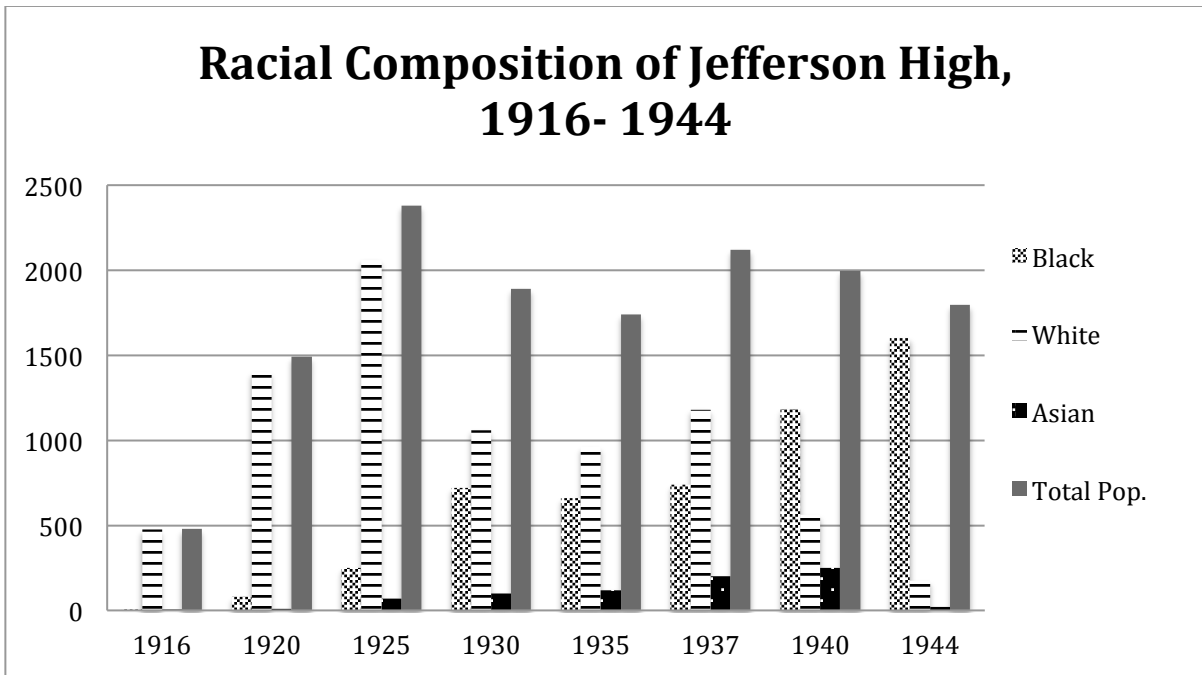
Thus, although *Lessons on Freedom* is confined to the second quarter of the twentieth-century, its implications are far-reaching. By placing racial innocence in pre-WWII Los Angeles, *Lessons on Freedom* begins to answer questions such as: What ideological veins did neo-conservatives tap to build the conservative movement? How did some whites come to see themselves as victims of racial injustice in the late twentieth-century? Why did blacks struggles for freedom vacillate between community control and integration in post-Civil Rights era America? Although the answers to these questions of contemporary import are surely many, *Lessons on Freedom* insists that the story must begin with those historical actors who had been primed for decades in the discourse of color-blindness in “progressive” and racially discriminatory communities during an era of “great” migration.

Between 1920 and 1950, Central Avenue underwent tremendous transformation. The neighborhood changed complexion, as a white working class community turned into an interracial neighborhood, which then gave way to a black community. Spurred by New Deal politics and mass migration, the cultural and political terrain on which residents traversed also dramatically shifted. This alteration opened up new forms of black protests, culminating in mass activism of the early 1940s. These new lines of protest produced stunning results. Black activists in the 1940s not only (temporarily) opened up opportunity on the factory floor and in the schoolhouse, but they also set in motion the legal process that would dismantle de jure residential segregation. In 1948,

their efforts bore fruit. Los Angeles' own Loren Miller along with Thurgood Marshall convinced the United States Supreme Court that racially restrictive covenants violated the Constitution. The decision in *Shelley v. Kramer* brought new changes to Central Avenue. It initiated a westward exodus of African Americans to areas previously covered by covenants.

By 1954, the Burtons looked to exercise their new residential freedom. They were among those black Angelenos who found the grass greener outside of Central Avenue. Like many upwardly mobile African Americans, Burton moved west to the Victoria Park housing tract between Crenshaw and West Boulevards, where he remained for the next fifty years. Despite the change in residence, Alvan maintained a close connection to the community of Central Avenue over the next five decades through his volunteer work at Jefferson High School. On November 5, 2009, Alvan's California Dreams ended a stones-throw from where they began. At Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church, located directly across the street from Jefferson High's main entrance, mourners came out to pay respects to a man who was drawn to Los Angeles by a neighborhood high school and retained loyalty to Central Avenue through this community institution. For people like Alvan Burton, Jefferson High and Central Avenue extended numerous lessons on freedom.

Appendix

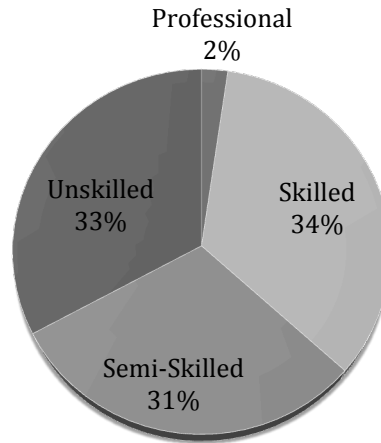


Racial Composition of Jefferson High School, 1916 – 1944

* A relatively small percentage of Latinos (no more than 15% at any given time) are included in the category of white. Surveyors during this period did not delineate between white and Latino.

(Compiled from various sources, including Los Angeles City Schools Racial/Ethnic Survey 1937, Oliver Weston Saul, “Implications for Guidance of High School Pupils From Follow-up Study” (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1939), and *Los Angeles School Journal* March 6, 1944).

Work Experience of Fathers of Jefferson High Students, 1937



Professional:

Dentist
 Doctor
 Minister
 Teacher

% of total in professional work = 2.3%

Skilled Work:

Barber
 Civil Service
 Clerk
 Carpenter
 Mechanic
 Music
 Painter
 Plasterer
 Printer
 Plumber
 Tailor
 Typing or Bookkeeping

% of total in skilled work = 34.4%

Semi-skilled Work:

Butcher
 Café
 Cook
 Chauffeur
 Dry-cleaner
 Factory
 Grocer
 Gardener
 Hotel
 Janitor

Semi-skilled continued

Laundry
 Office
 Railroad
 Real Estate
 Salesmen
 Service Station
 Truck driver
 Theater
 Waiter

% of total in semi-skilled work = 30.4%

Unskilled Work:

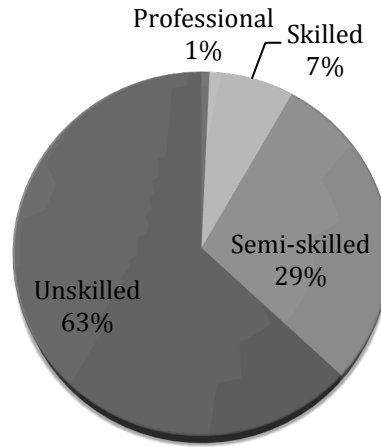
Laborer
 Odd jobs
 Porter
 Watchman
 Works Progress Administration

% of total in unskilled work = 32.8%

Percentage of fathers employed out of total = 60.1%

*** Adapted from Oliver Weston Saul, "Implications for Guidance of High School Pupils From Follow-up Study" (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1939).**

Work Experience of Mothers of Jefferson High Students



Professional:

Teacher

% of total in professional work = 0.7%

Skilled Work:

Civil Service
 Clerk
 Cosmetology Contractor
 Music
 Painter
 Printer
 Tailor
 Typing or Bookkeeping

% of total in skilled work = 7.5%

Semi-skilled Work:

Café
 Cook
 Dry-cleaner
 Factory
 Grocer
 Gardener
 Hotel
 Laundry

Semi-skilled continued

Office
 Railroad
 Real Estate
 Saleswomen
 Sewing
 Theater
 Waitress

% of total in semi-skilled work = 28.8%

Unskilled Work:

Housework
 Laborer
 Maid
 Odd jobs

% of total in unskilled work = 62.9%

Percentage of mothers employed = 31.5%

*** Adapted from Oliver Weston Saul, "Implications for Guidance of High School Pupils From Follow-up Study" (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1939).**

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