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The Black Prisoners Project: Reflective Essay
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In the early 20th century, business leaders and government officials idealized Los Angeles as the “Aryan City of the Sun,” a land of opportunity in the west. Despite the growth of a vibrant, successful Black community in the heart of the city, the state instituted more stringent policing and imprisonment in the 1920’s and 1930’s to assert segregation and control. Guided by our Capstone Professor, Kelly Lytle Hernandez, we sought to reconstruct a few of these African Americans’ life stories prior to arrest and after imprisonment. Beginning with San Quentin sentencing documents, we endeavored to humanize the inmates by collecting information that would provide insight into their lives beyond their imprisonment. Shadowed by the construct of race, poverty, and tension with institutional authority that defined Depression-era Black Los Angeles, these working-class histories were left untold. With the Black Prisoners Project website, we hope to change that.

In order to better understand the historical moment in which imprisoned Black Angelenos lived, we first read secondary historical literature such as Quintard Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier* and Douglas Flamming’s *Bound for Freedom*. These pieces contextualized the California prison system’s structure of containment and control that Professor Lytle Hernandez introduced to us in her course on Mass-Imprisonment in Los Angeles in Fall 2014, as well as the experiences and struggles of Black Los Angeles during the Great Depression.

In Winter 2015, we began our original research by consulting Ancestry.com via the UCLA Library website. We used the information provided in the San Quentin sentencing documents to narrow our search for the inmates. Using the database, we consulted Federal Census records, voter lists, city directories, birth, death and marriage certificates, military records, and California State prison registration. We could not locate records for a number of the

inmates. Rather than a setback, this lack of information suggested the itinerant nature and poor economic conditions of African Americans in Depression-era Los Angeles. Without the perspective obtained through Ancestry.com, these inmates remained mere criminals, deprived of a multidimensional life history.

Next, we utilized newspaper archives to provide further insight into Black Los Angeles. Newspaper articles provided both an account of the inmates' cases and an example of how mass media portrayed their crimes and experiences in the black community. For instance, the Los Angeles Times provided detailed descriptions of the more high-profile crimes such as murder. We also consulted Black publications, such as the California Eagle and the Los Angeles Sentinel. These newspapers offered a voice for the concerns and interests of the black community with regard to racial discrimination, treatment by law enforcement, and political developments. Finally, we consulted UCLA's Library Special Collections, where we read Homer Broome's, LAPD's Black History 1886-1976. This book revealed a critical history of racial discrimination within law enforcement during the time of the inmates' arrests. Additionally, we found files for one of the inmates, Robert Wesley Wells, which consisted of letters to judges and other court documents. The information found at YRL Special Collections even led us to the Southern California Library, where we discovered an entire archive collection on Robert Wesley Wells, including original letters he wrote in the mid 1900's.

The individual life stories of the San Quentin inmates revealed overarching themes about Black Los Angeles during the 1920's and 1930's. In an effort to disseminate these larger patterns, we furthered our research and wrote short essays about prison road camps, car thieves, and the Civil Rights Congress involvement in Robert Wesley Wells' case. These individual

research papers enabled us to further examine overlooked and informative facets of both law enforcement and the experiences of Black Angelenos in this era.

For some, research stops at the shelves of libraries, but the Black Prisoners Project, in its efforts to rip the inmates' story off the page, exists within Los Angeles itself. The Black Prisoners Project enabled us to see and live history. We visited the former addresses of the inmates in South Central Los Angeles and took a tour of the legendary Dunbar Hotel, the hub of the 1920s Los Angeles Black community. We learned about the inmates' childhoods, their working-class jobs, and their families. We connected with their everyday lives. Thus, the Black Prisoners Project is as much a history of the present as it is a journey into the past, as mass-imprisonment continues to plague Los Angeles and affect the lives of many men and women today.

The Black Prisoners Project: Bibliography

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