The Los Angeles Domino Affect: Ethnic Shifts in Los Angeles Neighborhoods, Compton and Leimert Park

By William Marshall Jr.

A class photo from Virginia Elementary School. On the far right is the first grade teacher who taught at this school for 14 years, 1946-1950 and 1953-1962. Located on the far left is Bessie Bruington-Burke, the first Black teacher and later the first Black Principal of the whole West side. 1954 | Courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library

The history of Los Angeles, California shares a split image amongst Americans as a city of romantic beaches and lavish lifestyles intertwined with an enormous street gang culture. Television and music associates African American neighborhoods with the rap group "N.W.A." "Straight outta Compton" and the film "Boyz N Da Hood" by John Singleton representing the struggles and realities of African Americans in 20th century Los Angeles. What is missing from the history of Los Angeles presented to the greater American society in reference to African Americans in the city is the ethnicities of people who resided in Los Angeles before African Americans. Studies show in 1940

Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and Seattle remained the whitest major cities in the United States of America (Fly Away Rutkoff Scott 287).[1] African Americans were a small minority in Los Angeles accumulating only 5 percent of the city's population. Prior to the late 1940s their small population was legally marginalized into segregated neighborhoods away from white middle class neighborhoods caused by restrictive housing covenant laws.

In 1948 the Supreme Court case Shelly v. Kraemer ruled housing covenants illegal. Realtors were forbidden to discriminate against non-whites to purchase homes in neighborhoods they desired. The restrictive laws underway after the 1940's the reality in the practice of segregated neighborhoods persisted in years to come. Middle class white Angelinos feared a large influx of African-American families moving into their neighborhoods due to the stigma a large influx of African American would depreciate their property value. These white middle class residents were oblivious to the different socio-economic classes in the African-American community. In this essay I will present to the reader that as a large influx of unskilled and uneducated African Americans arrived into Los Angeles during the great migration during World War II in search of the available industrial jobs, there was influx an educated and upwardly mobile social class of African Americans dispersing throughout Los Angeles. These two different classes of people shared the same ethnic origins, but held two distinct socio-economic positions that transformed Los Angeles neighborhoods in different ways. I will present to the reader how the arrival of African Americans into Los Angeles transformed the city of Compton and the "Leimert Park" neighborhood.

Before the great migration of African Americans into the city of Compton in the 1950s the city of Compton held a different title of representation which has been applied to the city since the release of NWA "Straight outta of Compton" in 1988. The city held the alias as the Industrial Heart of the California Southland a small city with more than enough industrial jobs to supply its residents and those in nearby cities. Compton held branches of large industrial corporations throughout the city such as, Westinghouse Electric Corporation and General Steel Pipe and Supply.[2] Furthermore, the city possessed a major retail store status containing major stores Sears and many small family owned retail stores that served Compton residents. This suburban image of the city of Compton may seem difficult to believe, but the city composed white middle class residents and attracted white middle class home seekers. The jobs available, shopping centers, and western style homes with a patio and front yard illustrates real estate value in association with ethnicities residing

in a city. According the images in a 1940 Compton Union High School Yearbook the high school resembled a college in its maintenance and architecture. The staff, faculty, students, and athletes at Compton Union high school in 1940 were all whites.

White-middle class status in Compton was not only represented in its single family home neighborhoods, but in low-income housing neighborhoods as well. Generally, housing projects are characterized as uncomfortable and run-down housing composed of poor African American families. In the city of Compton during World War II the term housing projects upheld a positive definition, a prime example of the positive image on low income housing was the "Park Village" housing projects. According to "Images of America-Compton" by Robert Lee Johnson, "In order to alleviate the crowding in substandard housing, the city of Los Angeles in conjunction with the federal government built "Park Village" in Compton for defense workers; it only housed white families" (113). This is a significant element in relation to Compton's real estate value in the context the city held. Housing project residents lived similar lifestyles to those in single family home neighborhoods. Furthermore, Park Village housed only white families which was in contrast to the later built housing projects such as Nickerson Gardens, Imperial Courts, and Jordan Downs in Watts which primarily housed uneducated and unskilled African American families. Eventually, Park Village lost its housing projects symbol for defense workers during World War II once some residents formed a homeowners association and bought the community.

Significant reasons to white neighborhoods in inner city Los Angeles prior to the 1950s was the practice of de jure segregation in housing. Prior to 1948 housing covenant laws were throughout Los Angeles were segregating middle class African-Americans and other minorities from white middle class neighborhoods. According to a 1937 Restrictive Housing Covenant document produced by the Francis Land Company, "No race or nationality other those whom the premises intended, shall use or occupy any building on any lot unless they are domestic servants employed by owners or tenants".[3] Non-whites excluded from purchasing homes in white middle class neighborhoods were marginalized into living amongst each other. An example is the Little Tokyo neighborhood prior to World War I-World War II later known as Bronzeville by the African American community. Because the city's white elites were preoccupied with building a business-friendly "open shop" town in white Los Angles neighborhoods by subduing white labor unions, both Black and Japanese Americans simultaneously faced exclusion from white neighborhoods (Kurashige 2).[4] African American and Japanese American

residents established businesses in the same neighborhood and worked amongst each other in the Little Tokyo neighborhood.

During World War II the executive order for removal of Japanese-Americans in the United States to internment camps transformed Little Tokyo into Bronzeville which became a neighborhood composed solely of African American residents. The Southern Diaspora composed of African American migrants from the southeast United States in search of war time industry jobs and social freedom from Jim Crow laws added to the black population in Bronzeville. In the Southern Diaspora during the second migration which taken place during World War II led to the transformation of metropolitan cities throughout the United States. Newly arrived blacks entered into defense industry occupations contributing to World War II war time production simultaneously contributed to the transformation of American music and pop culture. Jazz music which black migrants taken with them from the South into California expanded entertainment in Los Angeles.

Bronzeville claimed a theater and club scene almost as energetic and disreputable as Harlem and, in terms of musical development, probably more important (Gregory 138).[5] Central Ave. nearby Bronzeville had become the center of African American entertainment and business. Many Southern migrants created the Jazz scene in Los Angeles in nightclubs on Central Avenue imitating the Jazz quarters in New Orleans, Louisiana and Houston, Texas. As opposed to the non-welcoming of African-Americans into Los Angeles, the black entertainment district on Central Avenue welcomed white viewers and listeners throughout the city. Many racially prejudice middle class whites in Los Angeles were reluctant to live amongst African Americans, but they were attracted to jazz music and African American entertainment. Jazz music on Central Ave. sparked the curiosity and intrigues of middle class whites in the city making them wonder how were these black Americans as talented as they were in music and dance. "The whites came to the blues and jazz clubs on Central Avenue in Los Angeles to listen and learn, taking many of the sounds they heard and turning them into numbers that big crowds of young whites danced to in the ballrooms and clubs across town" (Gregory 138 139).[6] The theft of African American jazz bands style of music and dance by white jazz bands attracted mainstream white audiences and transformed mainstream music and pop culture in Los Angeles.

By the 1950's Bronzeville and Central Avenue experienced historical changes in residency, business, and entertainment. In the 1950s African Americans were able to purchase homes in middle class white neighborhoods they had long wanted access to reside in. The fall of restrictive covenants and the non-

publicized stories of phenomenal African American women in the struggle for adequate housing for black Angelinos contributed to the growing process for African American families integrating into white middle class neighborhoods. As stated in the thesis by UCLA student Marques Vestal "Black Housing Politics in 1940s South Los Angeles", "Owner and editor of the African American newspaper the "California Eagle" Charlotta Bass demonstrated in her newspaper the fight for equal housing and encouraged interracial and interethnic unity" (5). Easy as it sounds African American families still faced non-welcoming from racially prejudiced residents throughout Los Angeles. Mobs of angry white residents throughout certain sections of Los Angeles persisted to keep African Americans home seekers out of their neighborhoods. An illustration of middle class white resentment to black neighborhoods is illustrated in a photograph in 1952 showing a racist note attached to a cocktail bomb thrown into a newly arrived black residents house saying, "Negros move off Demsmuir street and move north of their neighborhood or they will bomb all Negros off" (The Center Can Hold: Leimert Park and Black Los Angeles KCET.org).

Nevertheless, racial intimidation did not cease the diaspora of African Americans white into middle class neighborhoods. The great migration from the south continued to grow into massive numbers throughout the 1950s and so forth. The city of Compton experienced a transition in its ethnic composition from white middle class residents to black middle class arrivals. A photo from Compton Union High school in 1952 illustrates the ethnic transition in the city of Compton in the 1950s. The boys' basketball team expanded composing more basketball players and an integrated basketball team composing white and African American players. In 1940 the Compton Union High School basketball team was limited in basketball players and the player roster were all white males. The city of Compton gradually transformed into a city of African American middle class families where black males in households worked in blue collar occupations and their children attended Compton Community College and others attended prestigious Universities throughout the United States. According to the article "Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb" ,"Despite the persistence of racism in Compton, the suburban dream of peace and comfort came true for thousands of blue collar African-Americans who moved to Compton in the 1950s" (Sides 588).[7]

The city of Compton experiencing its white flight the neighborhood of Liemert Park experienced a similar event. Leimert Park was a white middle class enclave developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Real estate developer Walter H. Leimert constructed new Spanish colonial revival style homes with

emphasis to attract white middle class home seekers. According to photos in the "Walter H. Leimert and the Selling a Perfect Planned Community" on KCET.org the Leimert Park neighborhood in its early development years demonstrated the preservation of middle class white identity and culture. Small home exhibits were conducted by home tour guides and the Leimert Park administration displaying to white home seekers the benefits in the homes and the neighborhood they should reside. By the 1950s many well-to-do black middle class Africans Americans that were already in Los Angeles from the first great migration moved into Leimert Park. An example of middle class blacks that already resided in Los Angeles dispersing into white middle class areas in comparison to Leimert Park is the Golden State Life Mutual Life Insurance Company owner Norman O. Houston. In 1938 black business owner Norman O. Houston bought a home in Sugar Hill, West Adams, but he rented the home to a white tenant until it was better timing for him to reside in the neighborhood (Sides 98).[8]

A common practice before the fall housing of restrictive covenant laws were backdoor purchases in middle class white neighborhoods by middle class African American from the first great migration. They had purchased homes from white real estate agents whom were accepting of their money and they would rent the home to white families until they were allowed to move in. When neighborhoods exceeded a 10 percent black population it was an indicator for whites to not move into those neighborhoods. In the 1950s Leimert Park evolved into a multi-ethnic neighborhood composed of remaining middle class whites and middle class African Americans and Japanese Americans. According to a photograph in the "Growing up Japanese in Crenshaw and Leimert Park" on KCET.org a 1954 Virginia Elementary School class photo shows the multi-ethnic composition in Leimert Park and nearby neighborhoods in the 1950s. Furthermore, the photo demonstrates the expansion of the black middle class from the first great migration. In the photo the students are black, white, and Japanese and the two teachers are black and white women. The black woman Bessie Bruington Burke was the first black teacher and became the first black principal of the whole Westside.

Leimert Park becoming a neighborhood of multi-ethnicities white flight still remained unavoidable due to the over influx of African Americans. Many white middle class neighbors resisted the migration of African Americans in Leimert Park by selling their homes to African American families and fled to predominantly middle class white neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the white flight in Leimert Park experienced a different transition than whites in Compton. White middle class families in Leimert Park neighbored longer with black middle class families than white families in Compton. African American

and white middle class families in Leimert Park had gotten along better than other Los Angeles inner city communities. They had worked in occupations together and African Americans advocated for whites to remain in the neighborhood. The outward migration of jobs which left with other whites that migrated from Leimert Park caused easy-going white families to move. In Compton, white flight occurred at urgency in great numbers the more black families moved into the city.

In 1965 white middle class residency in Compton reached its final chapter as result of the disturbances in the Watts Riots. The 1965 Watts Riots strengthened the "White Panic" which white residents feared a massive concentration of blacks in their neighborhoods because they were going to depreciate their property values. Compton's close distance to Watts the city was impacted by the uprisings scattered incidents occurred during the riots outside of Watts. One incident was when a black leader named Maxcy D. Filer in Compton encountered black youths attacking s white minister that pulled up and stopped to get out of his car in order to pray during a disturbance. Filer had told the minister not to get out his vehicle and keep going, but passionate about praying over the rioting violent youths were not willing to reason with this individual. Furthermore, Filer empathetic about the attacking on the gentleman he assisted him back to his vehicle after being attacked by the violent youths (Horne 120).[9] After the uprisings more whites in Compton and elsewhere in Los Angeles moved further south to Orange County. White middle class residents in Compton fearful of black residents were oblivious to the fact not all African Americans nor a vast majority participated in the Watts riots.

According to an oral history interview with Sargent Dennis Conti by Cal State Dominguez Hills student Martin Slaughter in reflection of the 1965 Watts uprisings Sargent Conti stated, "the riots only involved a small percentage of the black community in Watts the rioters were juveniles and youths that had found this as an opportunity to get what they had long wanted" (Conti Oral History Watts Rebellion).[10]Most of the rioters were from poor homes and were deprived of material possessions they had wanted and were unable to get the riots served as perfect timing for them to engage into store looting stealing possessions they could not afford. Furthermore, these youths found the riots as "a game" an event worth engaging because it was live entertainment. In response to the riots there were African Americans that resisted the rioting, carried firearms in order to protect their businesses, and assisted in cleaning up the burnt down rubble from the destroyed buildings in the aftermath of the riots.

Leimert Park and Compton both enclaves of black middle class existence there were factors that differentiated black middle class families in Leimert Park from Compton. The difference between Leimert Park and Compton was the size space, and area of the homes they lived. Further superior class indicators between the two was genteel behavior, impeccable church attendance, and predilection for fine clothing (LA: City Limits Sides 123).[11] The size and areas of the homes they lived, their etiquette and behavior, and fine clothing made Leimert Park seem more upper middle class than Compton. In reality the families in Leimert Park did not make much more income than those in Compton. In the white community middle class is based on levels of income there is a clear distinction between the elite, middle class, and the poor in the black community middle class is based on social factors. In the 1960's, the changes in geographic character in class within the black communities of Los Angeles during these years left many black Angelinos attempting to cling to regional identities that were increasingly less valid. An example, a middle class black living in Leimert Park was considered a "West Sider" and someone in Watts or Compton an "East Sider" (Hunt 44).[12] This sectional differences presented a silent notion that those in the west side were more upper middle class than those in the east side.

The husbands in both areas worked practically the same blue collar occupations, but the occupations of the wives made a difference in determining which black families were able to purchase homes in Leimert Park in opposition to Compton. The income of the wives in Leimert Park allowed black middle class families to reside in a more spaces a home and neighborhood. Black women in Compton were service workers and industrial operatives, and a few were even clerical workers (LA City Limits: Sides 113).[13] In Leimert Park women worked in professional and managerial positions, but many worked in clerical positions. According to a 1960 statistics, 17 percent of Leimert Park employed black men and 19 percent of its employed black women were professionals, compared to a city wide average of 8 percent for black men and 9 percent for black women (LA City Limits Sides 122).[14] By the 1960s Leimert Park became the new center of black middle class life and entertainment. Ray Charles and his family resided in a home located at 3910 Hepburn Avenue in the late 1960s. In the same time era prominent jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald purchased a home on the same block as Ray Charles and eventually the first black mayor of Los Angeles Tom Bradley purchased a home at 3807 Welland Avenue (Exum 98 99 100).[15]

The practice of white flight eventually transformed into a middle class flight for ethnic minorities. Beginning in the 1950's the willing and able black middle class residents in Watts migrated to Leimert Park due to the newly

built Imperial Courts, Jordan Downs, and Nickerson Gardens housing projects. Black middle class residents in Watts were resentful of the construction of the low income housing projects in Watts withholding the knowledge of the elements of people that were going to move in these communities. They developed a panic in similarity to the "White Panic" holding the notion when too many unskilled and uneducated African Americans move into a neighborhood the property values depreciates. Overnight Watts lost much its remaining middle class. In concentrating the poor in Watts, Los Angeles exacerbated South Centrals postwar problems" (Rutkoff Scott 324).[16] The remaining black middle class in Watts held onto dreams of leaving the neighborhood after the 1965 Watts Riots once they were willing and able.

By the 1970s middle class for ethnic minorities occurred in Leimert Park and Compton. Economic opportunities and income growth made minorities more upward mobile to migrate out of Leimert Park and Compton into newly incorporated cities or cities that were previously forbidden to them. The integration of middle class Japanese-Americans on Crenshaw Ave. in the 1950s in conjunction with middle class blacks and remaining whites Japanese-Americans established restaurants, stores, medical facilities, travel agencies, and so on. According to the article "Crenshaw and the Rise of Multiethnic Los Angeles" by Scott Kurashige, "By the late 1970s more Japanese Americans were moving into the Venice/Culver City area-still quite a diverse place but geographically a bit removed from Crenshaw" (42). Local business owners followed a similar pattern to middle class whites that fled the inner city when they left their businesses fled with them. Japanese-Americans reasons for fleeing Leimert Park varied in contrasted to middle class white many fled solely to the fear of African Americans. Scott Kurashige mentioned, "The pediatrician he'd visited as a child had a wonderful office in the very "nice" section of Crenshaw, but eventually his pediatrician took a position at UCLA in order to gain international recognition for his research on atomic bomb survivors" (Crenshaw and the Rise of Multiethnic Los Angeles 42).

In the city Compton middle class African Americans that were upward mobile fled the city due to growing street gangs, crime, and drugs. Upward mobile middle class African Americans began to search for nearby suburbs to reside in order to flee the rising poverty. By 1968 the City of Carson had become a newly incorporated city in Los Angeles county its suburban homes attracted these middle class families. According to text "Death of a Suburban Dream", "Like Compton, Carson had once been a racially restricted community that was the province of blue-collar whites. Once it incorporated, Carson offered high levels of municipal resources with no property tax, and white collared

African Americans moved to the town" (Strauss 111).[17] Poor residents remaining in Compton contributed to the rising crime rates and brought down property values of the remaining middle class residents. In opposition to poor blacks the city of Carson made it unable for poor blacks to move into the new suburban town. Poor blacks could not afford to move into Carson because the town refused to build any form of low incoming housing (Strauss 111).[18]

The city of Carson which became a new black middle class haven served as an escape from the emerging ghetto in Compton, but the reality is that black middle class neighborhoods are within close distances to black urban ghettos. Leimert Park remained an African American middle class neighborhood, but there were street gangs, crime, and drugs along Crenshaw Ave. that surrounded the neighborhood. An example of black middle neighborhoods closeness to urban ghettos, in the mid-1970s Carson parents requested continuously their school area be annexed out of the Compton Unified School District, citing the lack of academic support in Compton schools. Best case mentioned in regards to this situation is Stevenson Village in Carson the neighborhood's children attended schools in Compton Unified while the majority of Carson's students went to schools in Los Angeles Unified (Death of a Suburban Dream Strauss 140).[19] This is a clear illustration in the legacy of segregating housing in Los Angeles that continued.

By the 1980s the black middle class image became further detached from the city of Compton on street gang wars and the rise of crack cocaine had given it a more negative reputation. The city's education experienced continuous turmoil due to Compton Unified School District's low pay scale for teachers compared to many other local school districts. Low pay scales deterred new teachers away from seeking employment in the school district. Furthermore, the district had loss already existing teachers due to their discontent with the pay they received for having to deal with the behavior problems of students and their parents. In the classroom, Compton's teachers faced violence, or the threat of violence, and routinely asked the district and administrators to help alleviate these perils as well as to compensate them adequately for their work (Death of a Suburban Dream Strauss 174).[20] Generally, the main teachers that felt resentment towards the school district pay scale were substitute teachers. Many substitute teachers had terminated their contracts before their contracts were over for the school year forcing administrative personnel to cover classrooms.

Compton gaining a continuous negative reputation its reputation soon became an attractive symbol in the entertainment industry. In 1988, the rap group "NWA" introduced gangster rap music to the world with their hit record

“Straight outta Compton”. In their song and music video they gave the perception of Compton as a gangster city composed of poor African Americans facing the everyday struggles of life in the city while simultaneously enjoying themselves. Middle class whites historical perception of African Americans and the situations that would occur when too many of them are concentrated in a neighborhood, the hit record “Straight outta Compton” appealed to white suburban youths. Gangster rap music had become a music genre that attracted ethnicities across all color lines putting the city of Compton on the map in mass entertainment. According to Josh Sides, “After NWA, “Compton” became a virtually irresistible and imminently exploitable, metonym for rappers, and more influentially, filmmakers (Straight into Compton 598). The city that began as white middle class enclave, transformed into a black middle class city and eventually a poor black “ghetto”, the exploitation by the entertainment industry now gave the world the image that city of Compton was the way they had seen in the music videos and always had been that way.

In the 1990s the sectional differences between Leimert Park and Compton reappeared in mass media the streets of Compton was perceived as an African American enclave that was unsafe to visit unless you had known someone living in the city while Leimert Park preserved its symbol of black middle class lifestyle. The African American film industry was on the rise in Leimert Park, the main film that represented Leimert Park was “Boyz N Da Hood” by John Singleton. Singleton gave a depiction of South Central Los Angeles ranging from the street gangs that surrounded Leimert Park to the lower middle class African American male teaching his son to become a hardworking positive male image as he grows into a young man. Singleton behind the movie camera was able to show the distinction from the versatile neighborhoods and homes in South Central in opposition to relentless and impoverished neighborhoods in Compton. According to the article “Straight into Compton”, “Determined to show the vitality and striving of lower-middle-class black Los Angeles, but unwilling to confound viewers accustomed to a particular vision of Compton, Singleton depicts a blighted Compton in contrast to the well maintained homes and lawns of neighboring South Central” (Sides 598).

The entertainment observations of black Los Angeles neighborhoods expanded the market for black entertainment. Nevertheless, the white panic of middle class whites residing amongst many African Americans proved to become an inevitable practice. The legacy of segregated housing in Los Angeles continued informally throughout the 1990s with the newly constructed residential housing in predominantly middle class white areas throughout the city and elsewhere in the United States. In this time era the

country experienced a growth in gated communities constructed near costly golf course, landmarks, and leisure establishment occupied by middle class whites. According to the article "Exclusionary Amenities in Residential Communities" by Lior Jacob Strahilevitz, "a substantial number of Americans who purchased homes in mandatory-membership golf communities played no golf. This article offers circumstantial evidence suggesting by purchasing homes in these communities, homeowners may have been paying a premium for residential racial homogeneity (438). Fair housing for all ethnicities in the United States real estate developers were unable to indicate racial preferences through advertisements, but location and prices of real estate are silent indicators to ethnic minorities, especially African Americans these newly developed communities are meant to attract white middle class families. African Americans aren't by law excluded from purchasing homes in these communities, but the reality is that most African Americans are unable to afford to live in these residential communities. As a result, African Americans within certain salary gaps able to move into newly constructed gated communities keeping the neighborhood below the 10 percent black residency margin.

Restrictive housing covenants in Los Angeles before 1948 laid the foundation for segregated housing in years to come. African Americans marginalized into black neighborhoods set apart from white Los Angeles marked the beginning of black neighborhoods in years to come. Little Tokyo served as a center for the black community in Los Angeles as a collective, but the fall of racial housing covenants created the split in social class within the black community residing amongst each other allowing middle class families to purchase homes in Leimert Park and Compton. The influx of migrants from the Southeast of the United States added to the diaspora into previously white middle class Leimert Park and Compton in generations to come. The dawn of the 1965 Watts leading into the 1970s transformed white flight into a middle class of ethnic minorities which upward mobile black families migrated from the city of Compton into newly incorporated city of Carson. The progress of black middle class progress from pre-World War 1-the 1990s is evident African Americans socio-economic status has expanded, but segregated housing is still practiced informally by the construction of residential housing in predominantly white middle areas of the city creating a lesser chance of many African Americans purchasing homes due to real estate location and prices. Negative stereotypes amongst oblivious Americans pertaining to African Americans in Los Angeles I presented to the reader as a large influx of unskilled and uneducated African Americans migrated during the great migration during World War II in search of the available industrial jobs, there was influx an educated and upwardly mobile social class of African Americans

dispersing throughout Los Angeles. These two different classes of people shared the same ethnic origins, but held two distinct socio-economic positions that transformed Leimert Park and Compton in different ways.

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