

Why Are Multiracial Communities So Dangerous?

A Comparative Look at Hawai'i; Cape Town, South Africa; and Boyle Heights, California

ABSTRACT This essay was the author's presidential address at the annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch, American Historical Association, in Waikoloa Beach, Hawai'i, on August 6, 2016. The address compares three multiracial communities—in Boyle Heights, California; Cape Town, South Africa; and various sites in Hawai'i—and asks why these areas often sparked controversy and were considered dangerous by the powers governing these societies. How these communities became multiracial through labor migration and urban land policies is explored, as well as the nature of interracial life that was created. Each of these communities shares a common history of interracial radicalism that threatened white supremacy, as well as confronting policies of forced removals that attempted to destroy their multiracial nature. Finally, the address, given in Hawai'i at the end of the Obama presidency, addresses the importance of keeping local histories alive through projects of historical memory and museums of conscience. **KEYWORDS** Hawai'i, Cape Town, Boyle Heights, restrictive covenants, multiracial

For more than twenty years, I have been exploring the history of multiracial communities in the United States and beyond. I want to take you on a bit of a journey through this terrain to ask: why are multiracial communities so dangerous to so many in the historical past and even in the present? The title of this conference—"Uncharted Terrain: The Challenge of Re-Imagining Traveling to the Past"—evokes the notion that traveling to the past is a challenging experience, and my own journey has taken me to unexpected places and uncharted terrain. But most of my travels began with efforts to understand the multiracial history of the neighborhood I was born into: an enclave of East Los Angeles, California, called Boyle Heights.

However, tonight I must start by saying a few words about our very location here in the state of Hawai'i. As we conclude the last days of the presidency of the first president from Hawai'i, Barack Obama, and spend time exploring his birthplace, I want to remind us all of how easy it is to see

Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 86, Number 1, pps. 153–170. ISSN 0030-8684, electronic ISSN 1533-8584 © 2017 by the Pacific Coast Branch, American Historical Association. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2017.86.1.153>.

only a multiracial paradise around us during our travels.¹ Whether seduced by the heat, the trade winds, or the Aloha spirit, we tend to forget the larger history of colonialism, struggle, and survival that marks the history of Hawai‘i, beginning with the landing of the British captain James Cook in Kealakekua Bay just a few miles south of us on this island in 1788. The supposed discovery of these islands was followed by a host of European and U.S. traders that shook native Hawaiian culture to its core. It introduced foreign missionaries, planters, and wealthy white advisors to the Hawaiian kingdom who eventually transformed the islands from kin-based production to an export economy focused on a global marketplace and constructed a new class of wage laborers.²

On *this* island, you can see the transition in concrete form by going up to the Waimea Plains, where the rolling hills and grasslands in the shadow of Mauna Kea volcano give evidence of a cowboy culture called “paniolo” by the Hawaiians. When the next British explorer of the eighteenth century, Captain George Vancouver, purposefully left cattle from California on this island in February 1793, the livestock flourished in the Hawaiian environment. But the intention of the British explorer was merely to encourage the natives to breed them as food for British trading ships that used Hawai‘i as a stopover to China and the Americas. One author called this approach “cattle colonialism” by western powers, bringing Hawai‘i into the orbit of European and U.S. trade.³ In the 1830s, King Kamehameha III employed Mexican vaqueros, most famously Joaquín Armas from San Diego, California, to train indigenous Hawaiians to corral the cattle. The Hawaiian name “paniols”—from “españoles”—a name that would stick to the Hawaiian cowboys, indicated a global and multiracial process that would further immerse the islands into the growing hide and tallow trade in the Pacific. The cattle economy eventually required fencing and a new private property governance structure that pushed the Hawaiian kingdom toward a landscape of parceled land, European notions of land ownership, and concentration in the hands of foreign commoners like John Palmer Parker of Parker Ranch.

1. Indeed, depicting Hawai‘i as a multiracial paradise has a long scholarly tradition. For a review of this substantial historiography, see Jonathan Y. Okamura, *Ethnicity and Inequality in Hawai‘i* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 7–16.

2. See Gary Okihiro, *Cane Fires: The Anti-Japanese Movement in Hawaii, 1865–1945* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1991), 3–7.

3. See John Ryan Fischer, *Cattle Colonialism: An Environmental History of the Conquest of California and Hawai‘i* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

CAPITALISM, LABOR MIGRATION, AND MULTIRACIAL COMMUNITIES

The cultural borrowings across the Pacific that shaped paniolos eventually increased with the labor needs of the growing sugar cane culture that took over Hawaiian land and agriculture in the late nineteenth century. Further east from Waimea is Honokaa, where in June 1893, all 250 sugar cane workers went on strike and marched into town from the nearby fields to protest the shooting of a fellow Japanese worker by a supervisor.⁴ Historian and good friend Gary Okihiro calls this event one of many “cane fires” that erupted as acts of resistance as workers protested oppression on Hawai‘i’s plantations at the end of nineteenth century. These events were precursors to the major strikes that hit the sugar industry after the U.S. annexation of Hawai‘i in 1900 and the termination of penal contract labor. Major plantation walkouts followed in 1909, 1920, and 1924, often led by Japanese or Filipino workers but also involving native Hawaiians, Chinese, Portuguese, and Puerto Rican migrant laborers. All of these workers were brought to fulfill the expanding labor needs of the growing sugar and pineapple plantations.

Across the globe, the dramatic transformation of rural economies that pushed migrant workers to Hawai‘i in the late nineteenth century also propelled many of them towards Boyle Heights in California. The turn to commercial agriculture in Japan, Mexico, and Italy alienated many villagers from their families’ traditional farmland, turning them into a pool of working-class individuals in need of wage labor to survive.⁵ Many of these migrants were coming from societies embedded in revolutionary movements and brought with them ideologies of socialism, communism, or communitarianism, and histories of organizing. While recruiting workers from abroad was critical to building a low-wage labor force for industrial production, it was also dangerous because of the potential for organized resistance, emerging from workers who were familiar with each other’s abilities to improve their labor condition.

The *haole*, or white elite, that controlled the Hawaiian plantations known as the Big Five, were perfectly aware that when they recruited a multinational work force, they were making it more difficult to organize collectively against

4. Okihiro, *Cane Fires*, 42.

5. See, for example, Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–29; Stephanie Lewthwaite, *Race, Place, and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 20–22; and Donna R. Gabaccia, “Worker Internationalism and Italian Labor Migration, 1870–1914,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 45 (Spring 1994), 64.

the white elite minority landowners. In an 1883 planter newsletter, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association explained that they were recruiting Portuguese workers because, “we need them especially as an *offset* to the Chinese; not that the Chinese are undesirable—far from it—but we lay great stress on the necessity of having our labor *mixed*. By employing different nationalities, there is less danger of collusion among laborers, and the employer, on the whole, secures better discipline.”⁶ Haole planters skillfully utilized racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences, along with national distrust to keep labor radicalism from taking root among the intentionally divided labor force.

But the potential unification of this multiracial labor force is also one of the reasons why Hawaiian workers would eventually be seen as dangerous in the face of white supremacy and domination. In 1938, when Hilo’s longshoremen joined local residents across racial and ethnic divides to protest wage cutting by preventing the unloading of cargo at the port, the Hilo Chamber of Commerce enlisted the support of the local sheriff. On August 1, 1938, in what would become known as the Hilo Massacre, police bayoneted, clubbed, and shot at the crowd supporting the striking longshoremen, sending fifty-one to the community hospital.⁷ This level of confrontation would only grow after World War II under Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) locals of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU). The increase in conflict led decisively to the successful and widespread sugar strike of 1946, organized by native Hawaiian, Japanese, Filipino, Portuguese, and other workers under the banner of inter-racialism. Uniting dock and plantation workers in the sugar and pineapple industries under the notion of “ending racial discrimination,” the ILWU successfully advanced workers’ rights and wages, while leading Hawaiian politics into an era of Democratic Party rule and a commitment toward full and equal opportunity for all.⁸

CREATING URBAN MIXTURE FROM POLICIES OF SEGREGATION

Now, I am not the first to be drawn to a comparison between the Hawaiian struggle for social equality and the well-known battle against apartheid in

6. Samuel T. Alexander, G.N. Wilcox, William O. Smith, and A. Unna, “Report of the Committee on Labor,” *Planters Monthly* 2 (November 1883), 245, Hawaiian Collection, Special Collection, University of Hawai‘i, Manoa, quoted in Moon-Kie Jung, *Reworking Race: The Making of Hawaii’s Interracial Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 73.

7. Jung, *Reworking Race*, 126–27.

8. *Ibid.*, 168–74.

South Africa. My friend Gary Okihiro did that in his early work over forty years ago. But I was struck by similarities between the Hawaiian stories I have just relayed to you, pieces of the South African narrative that are not often told, and the accounts of the multiracial Boyle Heights that I know so well. Each of these communities has their own unique tale, but I believe it is possible for scholars to engage in worthwhile comparison across nations, regions, and national histories. Personally, this comparison has helped me better understand the multiracial history of Los Angeles and put it in dialogue with those elsewhere in the world. This comparative approach is especially appropriate when it involves the diverse and interracial Boyle Heights, where the coming together of Mexican, Jewish, Japanese, and other Americans crafted a progressive culture of political coalitions and democratic living that often goes unacknowledged in local history. Unfortunately, Los Angeles history is so often remembered as one of intense segregation and distinct ghettos, barrios, and lily-white suburbs, that we tend to ignore the deep roots of the city's working-class and middle-class culture that has brought groups together. As my book on the interracial history of Boyle Heights nears completion, I am interested in telling this story of unification to help shape a progressive, democratic culture in a city that tends to forget this tradition.

Since the fall of the apartheid system of government and the release of the African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela in 1994, Cape Town, South Africa, has also been struggling to understand its own history. In the attempt to draw back the curtain that the National Party's apartheid policy put on local history, Cape Town scholars have begun to acknowledge the pre-apartheid reality of urban areas like District Six, where large tracts of the inner city "were complex mixtures of white, coloured, and African people and essentially working and lower middle classes."⁹ As a longstanding colonial city, Cape Town was designed with imposing buildings at the center of the town's main road, with the merchant class surrounding the focal point. The city's well-to-do had homes nearby. But after the abolition of slavery in 1834, interspersed were the less substantial homes of free blacks and eventually the homes of people who would come to be known as coloured, often the descendants of Muslim or Indian immigrants who had come to Cape Town hundreds of years earlier. As a port city, Cape Town drew immigrants from around the world, whereupon District Six thrived with Jewish and Muslim

9. Carin Soudien, "Memory in the Remaking of Cape Town," in *City-Site-Museum: Reviewing Memory Practices at the District Six Museum*, 19.

merchants and developed a healthy urban jazz scene in the early twentieth century that drew sailors from docking ships and residents from neighboring communities.

As a racially mixed community made up of working-class and lower-middle-class residents just east of the city center, I, as a scholar of Boyle Heights and Los Angeles, connected so well with District Six, a community of about sixty thousand people in early twentieth-century South Africa. You also probably understand why I am so drawn to the multiracial history of Hawai'i. Boyle Heights, District Six, and large parts of Hawai'i were interracial communities that grew in the middle decades of the twentieth century despite, and sometimes because of, the segregation policies that marked their respective societies. Residents of contemporary Boyle Heights sometimes forget that the reasons for the existence of an interracial community are the social and racial backgrounds of residents, which kept them out of most of the other neighborhoods that were growing in Los Angeles during the early twentieth century. Indeed, the Boyle Heights we now remember was a result of the city's leadership in supporting racially restrictive covenants in most of its neighborhoods in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In 1892, federal courts ruled that state and municipal governments could not themselves discriminate. Instead, they allowed individuals to enter residential contracts that could discriminate or prohibit selling property to members of certain racial groups. With this green light, the first racially restrictive covenant filed in Los Angeles occurred in 1902, using the all-inclusive term of "non-Caucasians" to define those who could not purchase property. Within a few years, cities throughout southern California applied restrictive covenants against Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, African Americans, and sometimes Armenians, Jews, Italians, and others seen at the time as racially undesirable.¹⁰ The Los Angeles Realty Board, founded in 1903, led regional efforts to organize the real estate industry, professionalize its membership, and institute racially restrictive covenants in as many established neighborhoods and new residential developments as possible. When the Supreme Court of California handed down a 1919 ruling that invalidated restrictive covenants against property purchases, the Los Angeles, San Diego, Pasadena, and Laguna Beach realty boards, white developers, homeowners'

10. "Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1960," *United States Commission on Civil Rights*, Los Angeles, California (United States Government Printing Office, 1960), 207–78; Christopher Jimenez y West, "More Than My Color: Space, Politics and Identity in Los Angeles, 1940–1973" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2007), chap. 2.

associations, and realtors throughout the state quickly rewrote or added restrictive covenants against the occupancy of homes by certain racial groups—a restriction that the Supreme Court allowed. By the mid-1920s, the typical deed of most houses bought or sold in California stated that, “said premises shall not [be] . . . occupied or used by any person or persons other than those of the Caucasian race, provided, however, that the foregoing restriction shall not be construed to prohibit the keeping of domestic servants of any race.”¹¹ The racial covenants, coupled with other exclusionary measures, were highly effective by the 1920s in both affluent and working-class communities throughout southern California, with few African Americans, Latinos, or Asian Americans living inside the highly restricted areas.

What effect did this growing restriction against selling or renting to families of color have upon their choices for living in southern California? Outside of a few outlying rural districts, the traditional downtown residential communities around the plaza and Chinatown remained a key starting point for Angelinos of color who first arrived in the city during the early twentieth century. In addition to the original “foreign districts,” the neighborhoods that remained in the manufacturing zones became racially and ethnically mixed, particularly those along the railroad tracks and industrialized Los Angeles River. This pattern also held true in the growing Eastside Industrial District, which stretched beyond the city limits to Whittier. New districts to the east and south that lay adjacent, or connected by rail lines to these industrial zones, like Boyle Heights, Watts, and Belvedere, were relatively open to all. Each of these neighborhoods was racially and ethnically diverse in the early twentieth century, containing African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos, as well as disparaged white ethnic groups like Jews and Italians.¹²

Ironically, in both Los Angeles and Cape Town, the general rules of segregation that governed most of their districts—what I would call urban apartheid—created the opportunity for a few areas to be racially mixed. And this is how both Boyle Heights and District Six came to be interracial communities so close—indeed, within viewing distance—from the city center of each growing metropolis of the early twentieth century.

11. Douglas Flammig, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Univ. of California Press, 2005), 218–19.

12. Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 18–56.

PULSING LIFE INTO INTERRACIAL COMMUNITIES

It is important to note that Hawai'i and both of these districts created a discourse of remembrance, saving for future generations a sense of the mid-twentieth-century multiracial community that they felt was eventually lost to bulldozers and out-migrations. In Cape Town, I have run across very personal literature that sounds so familiar to my Boyle Heights-trained sensibilities. One author, Youssuf "Joe" Rassol, begins a chapter of his memoir describing his neighborhood in this way:

How best can we the children of District Six protect its memory from fading away? To me those bare bulldozed acres had more life, more zest, more fire, more warmth and care than many other places one could mention. To have been part of that pulsing life was an unforgettable education and privilege, the memory of which I would dearly like to rekindle in those who remember District Six in its heyday, and to provide a realistic picture to their children . . . So let me take you on a walk through streets that once buzzed with the joy of life, and look at it through my ten year old eyes as I headed for school each morning.¹³

Like so many individuals whom I have interviewed about the history of Boyle Heights, growing up in such an interracial neighborhood, despite its poverty and shortcomings, had an important impact on its former residents: the ability to connect with people from all backgrounds.

The passion with which individuals remember their time in these neighborhoods is palpable. "I loved the congested streets, familiar faces, voices and sounds, the twinkling view of the bay at night, and the solid presence of Table Mountain every time you raised your eyes," wrote Noor Ebrahim in his autobiography.¹⁴ "It was home. District Six and its people shaped me, showed me who I was and how I should be if I wanted to get on in life." While these accounts are full of nostalgia, they also reflect the very real advantages and lasting legacy of growing up in an interracial neighborhood that supported individual group expression, interracial friendships, and coalition-building.

In Hawai'i today, some of the same feelings that stem from a multiracial community are expressed through the creation of a "local" identity that contrasts with the *haoles* who come from outside the region. As a term first used to collectively categorize multiracial people in the early 1930s, this local

13. Yousef (Joe) Rassool, *District Six: Lest We Forget* (self-published, 2014), 59.

14. Noor Ebrahim, *Noor's Story: My Life in District Six* (I.M. Publishing, 1999, 1st ed.; 2013, 9th ed.), 15.

identity seems to capture a working-class affinity across racial groups, linking individuals back to plantation workers, even as they made their way to urban society. As one Hawaiian student expressed in 2005, “Local to me means not only being born and raised here, but having an appreciation for the many histories, cultures, and [ethnic] groups here. Local also means being . . . open to the rich diversity found in these islands.”¹⁵ According to the sociologist Jonathan Okamura, this deeply historical local identity has again transformed with the globalization of the islands in the 1970s and 1980s, placing whites, servicemen of all races, global businessmen, and tourists from the United States and Asia on the outside.¹⁶

Those who have been interviewed about growing up in Boyle Heights talk similarly about the advantages of being raised in a multiracial community, as compared to the much more sterile environments they entered once they left “the Heights.” Leo Frumkin, who was born in Boyle Heights during the World War I era to Jewish immigrants from Russia and the Ukraine, talked about how people were introduced to the world around them by interacting with their Boyle Heights neighbors:

You grew up in a community that was a multi-racial community, so you learned to appreciate—not tolerate—but appreciate other cultures. You became socially conscious . . . It was a large family. It was really a very large family. You slept in each other’s homes. You’d eat at each other’s homes. Kids in my block, their parents would give me tortillas and my mother would give them matzos two or three times a year . . . It was a fellowship. I don’t know what term you would use, except that you became internationalists. At least [that’s] what I became.¹⁷

The Tin Horse by Janice Steinberg is an important work of fiction about growing up Jewish in Boyle Heights, where the main protagonist Elaine Greenstein learns the history of the neighborhood from her father. “Papa was right that our involuntary League of Nations formed a surprisingly harmonious community. When I was growing up, Boyle Heights was home to people from fifty different ethnic groups. And we didn’t dissolve into some kind of trendy melting pot; each of the largest groups—the Mexicans, the Japanese, and especially the Jews, who were over half of Boyle Heights’

15. Quoted in Okamura, *Ethnicity and Inequality in Hawai‘i*, 119.

16. *Ibid.*, 113–23.

17. Leo Frumkin, interview by Ken Burt and Sojin Kim, December 19, 2001, Tarzana, Calif. Re-examining Boyle Heights Project transcript, pp. 26–27.

residents then—had it[s] own neighborhood.”¹⁸ This ability to live peacefully with others amidst diversity, while maintaining one’s own ethnic and religious traditions, was a vivid memory for those who grew up in Boyle Heights, Hawai‘i, and District Six, even as their surroundings became more exclusive and discriminatory.

These experiences and their related remembrances contradicted the main tenets of white supremacy in each society: that a working multiracial neighborhood was an impossibility because of deep ethnic and racial hatreds, as well as the economic and social competition for resources embedded in the poverty of these communities. Instead, residents remembered neighbors helping neighbors and finding ways to communicate across national and linguistic differences. Their experiences pointed toward an alternative way of living together, instead of taking on the highly segregated nature of society promoted by white supremacists and elites that governed each region. In this way, community memories made the assumptions that governed the ideology of white supremacy dangerous.

NURTURING INTERRACIAL RADICALISM

These communities also fostered more progressive politics among their residents than was typical of the surrounding neighborhoods. In South Africa, District Six hosted Mahatma Gandhi before his departure in August 1914 to lead efforts towards the independence of India from colonial Britain.¹⁹ Similarly, Cesar Chavez was trained in the Community Services Organization in Boyle Heights before forming the United Farm Workers labor union in the early 1960s. And key to the growth of progressive interracialism among the longshoremen of Hawai‘i was the network of seaman like Harry Kamoku of Hilo and Yasuki Arakaki of the Ola‘a plantation, who travelled to West Coast CIO training sessions to learn how to fight racial division and run multilingual union meetings.²⁰ Most significantly, these communities all contained a lively leftist group of interracial radicals who were willing to confront racist government officials, despite the odds. What we celebrate in local “progressive cultures” is first, a long line of interracial labor unions, from the garment worker’s union to the carpenter’s union to the longshoreman’s

18. Janice Steinberg, *The Tin Horse: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2013), 30.

19. Rassool, *Lest We Forget*, 25–34.

20. Jung, *Reworking Race*, 110–11, 167.

union, that proved to be a training ground for community activists and interracial politics.

After World War II, Boyle Heights was described as a “laboratory for democracy” with the city council election of Edward Roybal in 1949, as a result of organizing by the Community Services Organization.²¹ And it would be Roybal who led efforts for fair housing and employment in Los Angeles during the 1950s, while most of his fellow city council members were unequivocally against such measures in the anti-Communist McCarthy era.²² Like the attacks on Roybal as a communist sympathizer, seven ILWU leaders in Hawai‘i were arrested in 1951 and later convicted in 1953 in violation of the notorious Smith Act, which made it a criminal offense to advocate the overthrow of the U.S. government. In reaction to these convictions and other anti-communist measures, such as the mandating of loyalty oaths at the University of Hawaii, protests occurred throughout the islands, starting with a twenty thousand worker walkout by ILWU locals that brought port traffic to a halt. Most importantly, Hawaiian voters reacted in November 1954 by overwhelmingly voting for the Democratic Party and overturning fifty-two years of Republican and Big Five corporate control of local politics. As explained brilliantly by the historian Gerald Horne, “the existence of an apartheid-like system, with . . . the ‘boss *haole* elite’ at the top of the pyramid, made it difficult for the Asian-Pacific electoral majority to swallow the bitter pill that those who had rescued them from misery . . . were the villains.”²³ Led by the future senator and Japanese American war hero Daniel Inouye, the explicitly multi-racial progressives in the Democratic Party would lead Hawai‘i into statehood and control Hawaiian politics for decades to come.²⁴

Interracialism went hand-in-hand with progressive politics in all these communities. Because of that, the communities were seen as threats to local government officials who were committed to racial separation and

21. Joseph Esquith of the Michigan-Soto Jewish Community Center was the first to call Boyle Heights a “laboratory of democracy,” when testifying before the Tenney Committee investigating communist infiltration in California institutions. See Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 201.

22. See George J. Sanchez, “Edward R. Roybal and the Politics of Multiracialism,” *Southern California Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 57–73.

23. Gerald Horne, *Fighting in Paradise: Labor Unions, Racism, and Communists in the Making of Modern Hawai‘i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011), 275. See chapters 13–15 of this book for detailed coverage of the importance of this political turnaround in Hawaiian politics.

24. See Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 275–93; and Tom Coffman, *The Island Edge of America: A Political History of Hawai‘i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003), 148–53.

conservative politics. In South Africa, the industrializing economy of World War II led to an increase of black migration to the cities, an expansion of multiracial unionism, and a growing fear of merging radical ideologies, multiracial organizing, and a direct challenge to white minority rule.

In response, the brutality of the apartheid system of government was sparked in 1948 when the Afrikaner-dominated National Party took the reins of government and quickly moved to enact and enforce racial separation. Apartheid—which means apartness in Afrikaans—meant to National Party leaders that South Africa was not *one* nation but actually four separate and distinct racial groups: whites, blacks, coloureds, and Indians. The Population Registration Act of 1950 forced each South African adult to obtain an identity card, which officially put them in one of these four categories. Within the same year, the Group Areas Act of 1950 required that each group live in a separate residential area, apart from the others. The apartheid government also moved to outlaw the Communist Party and its accused sympathizers, African unionism, and racially mixed union branches, thereby putting a legislative end to workers who organized across racial lines.²⁵

THE LEGACY OF FORCED REMOVALS

An interracial community like District Six proved to be a long-lasting and consistent thorn in the side of the apartheid government, because the roots of its interracialism were multi-generational, and the strength of its interracial ties were not only based on labor organizing, but also on community networks. On the national level, the government set up a homelands system, deciding that the black majority did not belong to the nation but rather to separate urban area homelands like Cape Town, where the functioning of the local economy kept a neighborhood like District Six together. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the apartheid government started a campaign of forced removals to enact separation. District Six was the first of over sixty areas in the greater Cape Town region to be declared a White Group zone on February 11, 1967. Eventually, over sixty thousand people from District Six were forcibly removed to the townships on the barren wastelands of the Cape Flats. In spite of this policy, so many people stayed put in District Six, that the government decided to bulldoze residences and businesses through the 1970s and 1980s to ensure that no one could actually inhabit the

25. Peter Alexander, *Workers, War & the Origins of Apartheid: Labour & Politics in South Africa, 1939–48* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), esp. 80–97, 118–26.

neighborhood. To this day, most of the land in District Six, directly next to the Cape Town city center, remains structurally barren.

The history of District Six shows that a functioning interracial community in the midst of a government committed to racial separation and white supremacy is threatening and risks demolition from officials committed to a policy of urban apartheid. Surely, you might ask, here is where the histories of Boyle Heights and District Six depart from each other? Although I admit that the brutality of the South African history of apartheid is unique, I see many similarities in the history of Boyle Heights.

The issue of forced removal is critical. Once I began to compare these sites, the tangled history of forced removals in Boyle Heights became clearer in my historical mind. In my first book, I attempted to place the understudied history of Mexican repatriation from Los Angeles into a wider history of the region. In 1931, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors put together the largest organized repatriation campaign in U.S. history, ironically targeting Mexican immigrants in a city that their ancestors had founded 150 years prior.²⁶ When the last of the county's repatriation trains had left Los Angeles in 1934, over thirteen thousand Mexican residents of southern California had been sent back to Mexico at a total cost of almost \$200,000 to the taxpayers of Los Angeles County.²⁷ In just the first half of the 1930s, Los Angeles lost fifty thousand Mexican residents, nearly one-third of its Hispanic population, as civic leaders in both the city and the county initiated efforts to scare, cajole, deport, or encourage Mexican aliens to leave the region. County Supervisor Frank Shaw used aggressive and innovative measures to rise rapidly in Los Angeles politics, eventually becoming the mayor in 1933 on a platform to enact a "New Deal for Los Angeles."²⁸

This is only the first of three critical examples over a twelve-year period of forced expulsion from the same Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles. Usually discussed separately by academic scholars, the repatriation of Mexican Americans in the 1930s, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and the forced removal of urban residents to make way for public housing and extensive freeway construction all occurred

26. Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929–1939* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), 42, 86–87.

27. Figures from *Ibid.*, 172–73.

28. Frank Shaw's estimates of savings from the repatriations of \$200,000 a month, or over \$2 million total were wildly exaggerated. A better estimate is a modest half million dollars, which barely made a dent in relief needs.

within similar racially mixed neighborhoods. I argue that a certain ideology developed among city leaders and urban planners that joined local politicians and bureaucrats on both the conservative and liberal sides of the political spectrum in the region, linking racial depravity and urban space. This ideology associated particular neighborhoods like Boyle Heights with slum conditions and urban decay, and it prompted local officials to consider residents of these neighborhoods as utterly (re)movable in order to make way for their plans to improve social conditions and urban progress. My argument is that historians of race in urban America should view these key events of the Depression and World War II periods as intimately linked in ideology and process, even though they principally affected different racial groups who were often living next door to each other.

The incarceration of Japanese American residents in late 1941 and 1942 was promoted and carried out by the same county welfare departments that had, for eleven years, been moving Mexican aliens and their American-born children south across the border. Throughout January 1941, Los Angeles administrator Wayne Allen was sent on the behalf of the county to Washington, D.C., to plead for assistance for destitute Japanese American families, who were left without a wage earner because of the immediate incarceration of Japanese American teachers, editors, and community leaders. When it became clear that little federal support would be forthcoming, local officials responsible for providing welfare assistance began to advocate that the families of these potential “enemy aliens” should be sent to join their incarcerated heads of households, rather than be left under the care of the county. This advocacy eventually led to a unanimous resolution by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors that encouraged President Franklin D. Roosevelt to physically remove the Japanese origin population from the West Coast of the United States. When the president made his decision in late February, and the evacuations began later that spring, Boyle Heights lost a significant number of its residents. As a result, Jews, Mexicans, and Molokans in the region saw neighbors and classmates sell their possessions and leave their homes like many others had done in the past.²⁹

Urban renewal and slum clearance prompted the third series of forced removals in Boyle Heights. When federal officials made public funds available

29. For a wider discussion of the links between these historical events, see George J. Sanchez, “Disposable People, Expendable Neighborhoods: Repatriation, Internment and Other Population Removals,” in *A Companion to Los Angeles*, eds. William Deverell and Greg Hise (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

to support major urban projects like slum clearance and public works operations, Mayor Frank Shaw led the city's elite in plans to initiate the obliteration of the entire neighborhood for the sake of the so-called public good. This intense period of urban renewal and ethnic cleansing focused on the building of Aliso Village and the Santa Ana Freeway, which separated and segregated Boyle Heights residents in a way that isolated their voices of opposition to oppression.³⁰ This pattern of highway construction would severely cripple Boyle Heights over the next twenty years. By 1960, four other freeways had been built through Boyle Heights, carving up neighborhoods and placing barriers and eyesores throughout the area. The massive East Los Angeles interchange, which connected three major thoroughfares, was built in the 1950s in the southernmost part of the Flats (at the western edge of Boyle Heights), displacing another five thousand residents. Altogether, the freeways would devour almost 15 percent of the land in Boyle Heights by the time construction was completed. For some like James Tolmasov, whose family was forced out of the Flats in the 1930s by urban renewal, displacement would occur several times over. His family bought a home on Lanfranco Street in the eastern part of Boyle Heights after leaving the Flats, only to have that two-story home taken over by the state in the 1950s in order to build Highway 60.³¹

To understand localized government action spurred along by the emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II, it is critical to comprehend the particular processes of racialization at work in Los Angeles. Mainly, racial targeting of specific populations was superimposed onto the geographic landscape of Los Angeles, making certain neighborhoods like the Flats, or the larger Boyle Heights area, susceptible to urban reform efforts that were aimed at moving out and restructuring populations to fit the racial nativist sentiments of city officials, elite civic leaders, and protected middle-class populations. This pattern of dealing with urban populations was well-established by World War II and would become a fundamental source of knowledge utilized to process the removal of Japanese and Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. These three forms of population removals played a critical part in reshaping interracial Boyle Heights and eventually made it

30. Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 135–38, 151, 158–59.

31. James Tolmasov, interview by Sojin Kim, April 17, 2001, Japanese American National Museum, pp. 1–2.

more difficult to sustain the interconnections among the people that marked its neighborhood.

ALTERNATIVE MEMORIES AND MULTIRACIAL HISTORIES

Most collective histories and individual stories about the reshaping of interracial districts like Boyle Heights in the post–World War II era describe tales of decision-making by white ethnics, like Jewish or Italian city dwellers who would eventually move out of crumbling inner cities to open up suburbs. This story of “white flight” fits narratives of upward mobility and advancement, while allowing the contemporary configuration of urban spaces to produce a certain amount of white guilt, yet takes public policy and political officials off the hook. In other words, it allows us to place South African apartheid policy in one category of “racist hell,” while we absolve U.S. policy makers as neutral or generic on the issue of racial separation. The distinctive cooperation between the U.S. federal government and local private actors characterizes U.S. urban policy as a public-private relationship that is certainly different, but not separate from, the total brutality of the South African apartheid system. My research into the 1938 Federal Housing Act makes clear that our government played a critical role in undermining the interracial community of Boyle Heights in the post–World War II era.

As various political historians have demonstrated, the New Deal ushered in an activist government with an intensity never seen before at the federal level.³² Through applied social science research, fiscal policy, and direct intervention, the federal government reshaped local communities throughout the United States, and in doing so, was an active presence in defining the terms of racialization. Officials during the late New Deal continued to show hostility toward the notion that ethnic residents should be living side-by-side in mixed neighborhoods, and they later instilled this in federal policy. In 1939, for example, the Federal Housing Authority gave its lowest possible rating to Boyle Heights specifically because its ethnic diversity supposedly made it a bad risk for housing assistance:

This is a “melting pot” area and is literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements. It is seriously doubted whether there is a single block in the area which does not contain detrimental racial

32. See, for example, Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

elements and there are very few districts which are not hopelessly heterogeneous.³³

In Los Angeles, I have been working with the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California, partly to make sure that the Boyle Heights of our past is remembered as an interracial space and not simply the old Jewish community that has now been revitalized as a Mexican neighborhood. The myth of ethnic succession looms large in U.S. urban history, just as the apartheid neighborhoods in South Africa may appear to be naturalized onto the nation's landscape, even when the policies have been overturned. In post-apartheid South Africa, it has been difficult for local historians to reclaim the history of interracial neighborhoods like District Six. Even though the community has formed the District Six Museum, a wonderful institution that is trying to retell this history in vivid form, the local Cape Town government consistently pressures the institution to do more to enact a living memory of the neighborhood as a largely "Coloured community of the past." And even with a Hawaiian president in the White House, we see that the vivid and longstanding history of interracial communities still manages to be depicted as completely new, and something to be afraid of, by those who want to "make America great again"—an idea that is fundamentally "un-American" in light of the country's racial and ethnic origins.

Though I recognize the uniqueness of each racialized form of governance and hierarchy that was present in Hawai'i, Cape Town, and Boyle Heights, I believe that this comparison illuminates several critical features of each neighborhood. It is clear to me that the relationship between geography and identity is powerful in all these stories, and that those of us who are lucky enough to grow up in interracial communities are left with a lasting legacy that usually shapes the rest of our lives. Furthermore, these communities were all formed by the forces of industrial capitalism and global migration at the turn of the twentieth century but came of age at a moment in the mid-twentieth century when the children of migrants fought to become full citizens of their respective societies. Lastly, these stories point to the forced removals of "disposable" people, something that no nation should be proud of but that also needs to be remembered and retold so we can truly say "never again." Each community nurtured a history of resistance to white supremacy

33. Area D-53, Los Angeles 1939, p. 7, Home Owners Loan Corporation City Survey Files, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Quoted in George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 137.

in active political movements and also in the everyday interracial living that marked Boyle Heights, District Six, and life here in Hawai'i. This racially mixed way of life proved to be a direct threat to the power of white supremacy in each society but can act today as a symbol of what is positive and powerful, as we face the demographic changes and challenges of our own historical era.

Aloha! ■

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NOTE

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of various research assistants, including Krystal Cervantes, Maria Jose Plascencia, and Veronica Garcia. The success of the conference itself could not have been achieved without the hard work and masterful leadership of Ana Elizabeth Rosas of the University of California, Irvine, and Mark Tanachai Padoongpatt of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the two program co-chairs. In addition, the success of the presentation of the address on the Big Island of Hawai'i could not have been possible without the love and support of my wife, Debra Massey Sánchez, my sister-in-law, Peggy Massey Wendzel, and our family friend, Paul-ette Baca. Finally, thanks to PCB Executive Director Kevin Leonard and to Marc Rodriguez, managing editor of *Pacific Historical Review*, for their help and support in this effort.