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Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA

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BLACK LOS ANGELES: A PREVIEW

Introduction

The majority of the settlers who founded Los Angeles in 1781 had African roots. That profound black presence has continued, over the years, to both shape the city and to be shaped by it. Today, Los Angeles County has the second-largest African American population in the nation, and 54.4 percent of California's black population — more than 1.3 million people — is concentrated in the five-county area surrounding Los Angeles. While this large black population represents a relatively small proportion of the region's overall population, its social, cultural, and political impact cannot be overstated.

For the past eight years, the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA has been engaged in a major research initiative, the Black Los Angeles Project, which explores the historical and contemporary contours of black life in Los Angeles. Bringing together the work of scholars from across Southern California, the project has produced a 16-chapter book titled, *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* (NYU Press, 2010).

Each chapter in the book presents a case study or historical vignette that engages with five central themes: communities and neighborhoods; religious life; political participation; cultural production; and social justice. Collectively, these chapters aim to connect the dots between the past, present, and future of black life in the city.



Figure 1. "The Critic's Corner," 2007, by Ernie Barnes. This image anchors the cover of *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*.

Ernie Barnes was born in Durham, NC in 1938 and played professional football in the 1960s before moving to Los Angeles. The Bunche Center nominated Barnes as a UC Regent's Lecturer for Fall 2009, but he passed away in April of 2009 before realizing the honor.

The following anecdotes convey the spirit of the chapters comprising each of the book's four sections: Space, People, Image, and Action.

Space

Mapping Black Los Angeles

by Paul Robinson¹

2

In 1880, the black population in Los Angeles County numbered just 188 persons. Unlike in other areas of the nation, this population was spread throughout the growing city and not spatially isolated from other groups (see Figure 2). Sixty years later, however, Los Angeles' black population had grown to 70,781 and was largely confined to a single area of Los Angeles (see Figure 3). By 1970, the black population had grown ten-fold to 759,091, primarily filling out the area of Los Angeles that had come to be known as "South Central" (see Figure 4). Two decades later, the black population had grown by more than 200,000 persons to 992,674 and was beginning to spread out into the desert communities surrounding the city (see Figure 5), while Latino residents increasingly moved into "South Central." This trend continued into the early years of the 21st century. In 2008, the black population – 944,798 – was less concentrated in "South Central" than it had been at any point throughout the past four decades and resided in more areas of the Los Angeles region, particularly in outlying desert communities (see Figure 6).

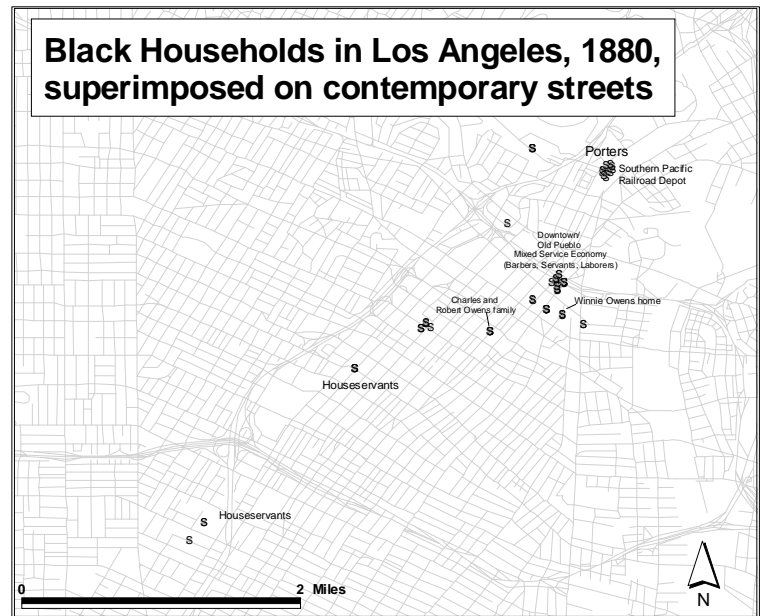


Figure 2. Black Households in Los Angeles, 1880.

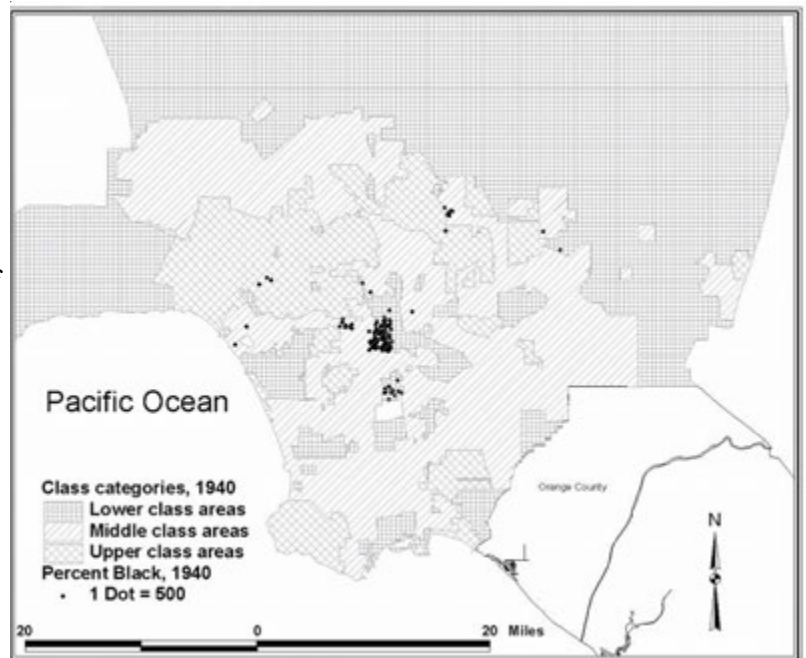


Figure 3. Black Population and Relative Home Value, 1940.

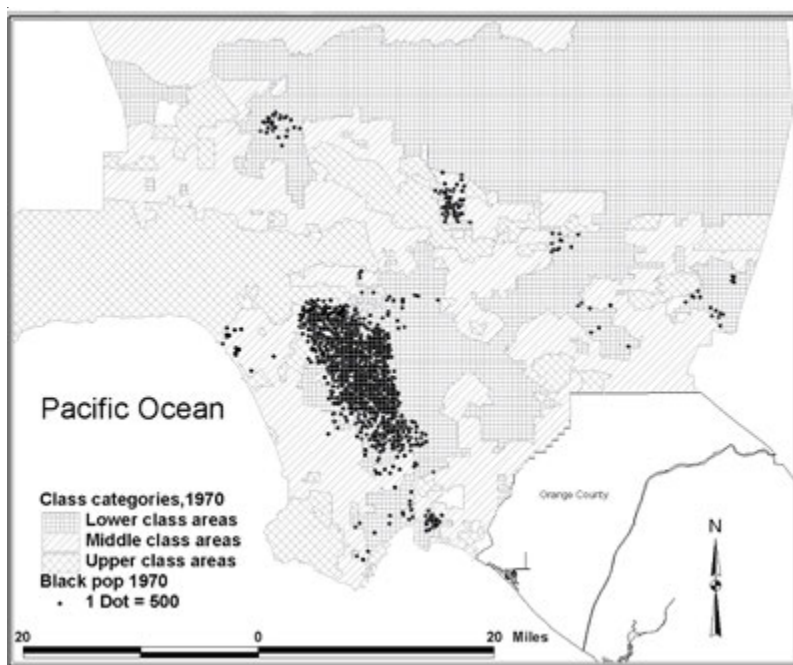


Figure 4. Black Population and Relative Home Value, 1970.

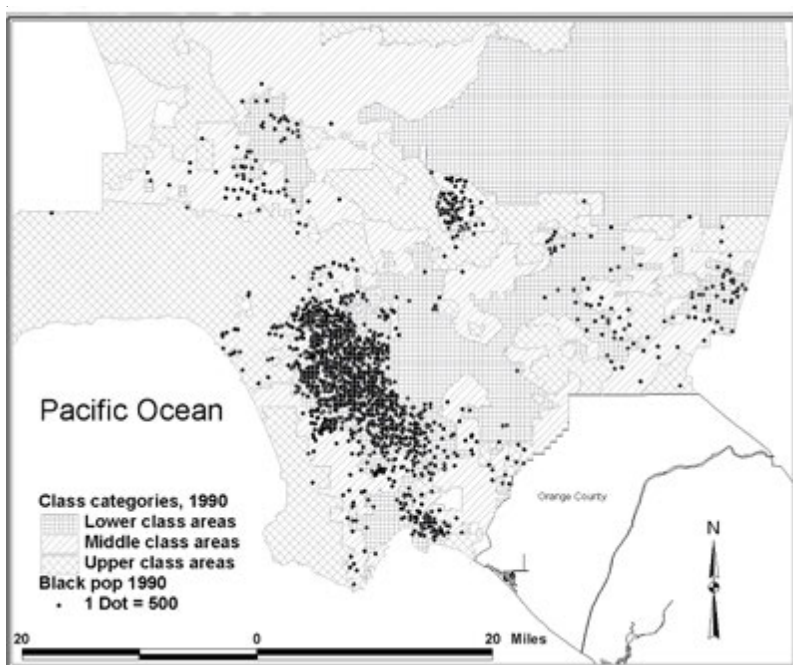


Figure 5. Black Population and Relative Home Value, 1990.

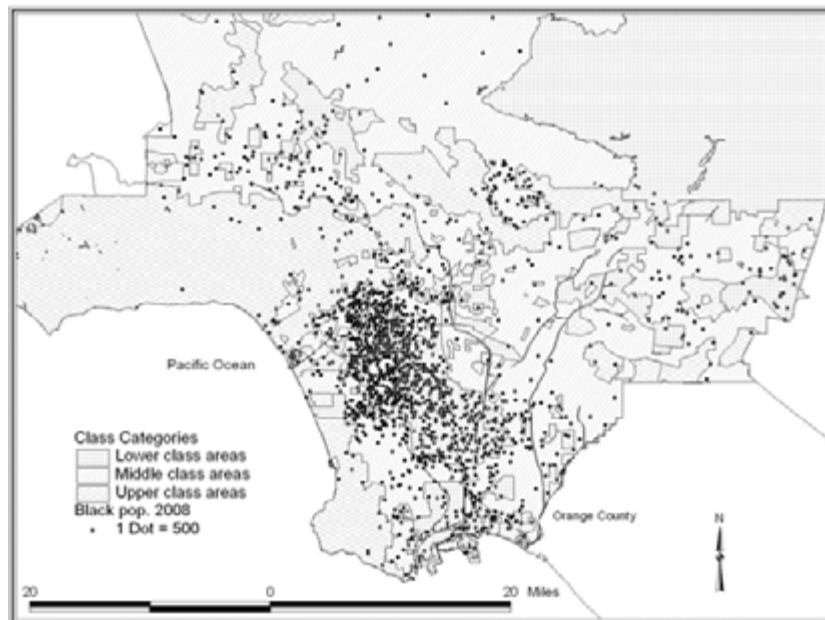


Figure 6. Black Population and Relative Home Value, 2008.

People

Transfiguration Church in Leimert Park/ Crenshaw District²

by Faustina DuCros

Transfiguration Catholic Church and School on West Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. and 3rd Avenue in Leimert Park was one of the key Catholic institutions (among others) for the Louisiana migrants who settled in this area of Los Angeles during the 1940s through the 1970s. It remains such today, albeit on a smaller scale. The Black Louisiana community of migrants identified themselves as having strong Catholic and Creole roots. Here are a few recollections by first and second-generation migrants on the role Transfiguration, and the Catholic parishes in general, played in organizing their lives as migrants.

Interview 33: [A]nd I remember telling all my friends in elementary school at Transfiguration, “Oh, I’m moving over to Leimert Park over on Norton Avenue.” [...] [A]nd my parents always wanted to live in that area because the houses were Spanish style, nice manicured lawns. And you know, we’d go there, you know, weekly to see you know, and my mother and father would always say, “You know, someday we’re gonna find us a house over here and we’re gonna move over there.” (Parents migrated 1956, second-generation male, 50 years old)

Interview 35: [T]here’s a lot of history in Los Angeles of the Creoles because many of them moved to the West from parts of Louisiana. Mostly New Orleans. And they sort of invaded, I’ll say, the Avenues, which from Arlington going west. Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, Edgemoor off of Jefferson, down to Exposition. That was kind of the Creole area. Then they had the Creoles that lived east of Crenshaw, from Santa Barbara, which is now Martin Luther, over to 39th, even to Exposition. The church, which is Transfiguration, on Fourth, where Leimert Boulevard meets Martin Luther. That’s where the Catholic Church was. (Migrated 1931, second-generation male, 77 years old)

Interview 10: [...] [P]eople who migrated from New Orleans, they all stayed around Arlington, off of Slauson. My daddy’s friends all—up off of Jefferson. Everybody was kinda in the little confine. [...] So, when I first arrived, my husband had known that a lot of the Creoles were in the so-called Crenshaw area that—now they—everything is Crenshaw area with a derogatory connotation when that wasn’t the way. So, we looked where our friends were located. [...] And they refer to the area now as The Jungle, but, at first, this is where a lot of the Creoles were living at the time, in the St. Bernadette’s Parish, up in that area, or—and Transfiguration’s Parish. (Migrated 1965, first-generation female, 70 years old)



Figure 7. "I See You," (Linocut) 2005, by Samella Lewis.

Dr. Lewis was born in New Orleans in 1924. She paved the way for a burgeoning black art scene to take off in Los Angeles when she moved to the city in 1964 and created gallery space for black artists and published scholarly books and journals on black Los Angeles art.³

Hip Hop Ministries in L.A.

by Christina Zanfagna

On the corner of Western Avenue and 85th Street stands the Love and Faith Christian Center—a church straddling the border of Los Angeles and Inglewood and known for its Coffee on the Corner program. The church also is known for a weekly holy hip hop ministry called Club Judah, which was created by Pastor Colette Toomer-Cruz for her adolescent, hip hop-loving daughter. On Saturday nights, they roll out the pews, set up large circular tables with black table cloths, dim the lights and create a club-like atmosphere for young people to experience God in a "hip," relaxed environment. Club Judah falls between the cracks of the classic binary of the church and the streets and is an example of some of the new hip hop worship experiences that look to bring believers and non-believers into the same space, creating a kind of sacred/secular borderlands.

While the club is in session the room remains very dark. The stage, which serves as the pulpit area during church services, is infused with colored lights against a maroon curtain. The interior space, like the exterior of the building, is stark and unadorned. As the night comes to a close, everyone present helps to dismantle and re-convert the club back into a church space for Sunday morning service. The fluorescent lights flicker on; those present fold up the tables and chairs and stack them neatly in rows against the walls. The youth who are invited there in the hopes of religious conversion are also a part of the spatial conversion of the evening.

The site was home to a Western Surplus (gun store) before the building was looted and burned during the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, the carcass then renovated into a place of worship. Undergoing a kind of urban alchemy, the plain, unassuming white façade of the building now reads "House of Judah." In the Bible, "Judah" is known as the fourth son of Jacob and Leah—the forebear of one of the tribes of Israel—and is now known to mean "praised" or "praise." Therefore, Club Judah quite literally means Club Praise—a club where one praises instead of parties and gets high on Christ instead of drugs or alcohol. It currently acts as the main consistent loci and crossroads of holy hip hop activity in Los Angeles.

More and more, L.A. church buildings are used for a wide range of activities within the city. For instance, the Battle Zone, an annual hip hop dance competition that features the South Central-born street dance called krumping – a hyperkinetic dance resembling street fighting, moshing, sanctified church spirit possession, and aerobic striptease – takes place at the Great Western Forum in Inglewood, Los Angeles. The Forum was formerly the home arena for the Los Angeles Lakers and now houses the mega-church congregation of Faithful Central Bible Church, where hip hop-inspired gospel star Kirk Franklin runs the musical program on Sundays and hosts a bi-weekly hip hop "Take Over" service. To further complicate matters, the Battle Zone competition begins with a Christian prayer, while youth at Franklin's "Take Over" often krump during Christian rap interludes throughout the service. The arena fuses elements of sport, competition, media, and religion and is shaped by entanglements of culture, power, and space.

Image

Soul Train

by Karisa Peer

*Soul Train*⁴ was the first nationally syndicated, all-black dance show to hit American airwaves. Don Cornelius, an established Chicago radio personality, created *Soul Train* in 1969 in an effort to present popular black music and trendy black dance moves to a broader audience. With Sears as an initial sponsor, Cornelius used his broadcasting connections to get *Soul Train* on the air.

Soul Train originally ran five times per week on local Chicago station WCIU-TV. Its continued success prompted Cornelius to move the show to Los Angeles. The Los Angeles show premiered on October 2, 1971, with musical guest Gladys Knight and the Pips. The program reached audiences in the Detroit, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Cleveland, Houston, Philadelphia and San Francisco markets. Eventually, *Soul Train* was syndicated broadly, reaching national and international markets.⁵

Soul Train had style and elements that were new to television and uniquely Afrocentric. The “*Soul Train Line*,” where two lines of dancers pair up and dance down the center of the line from the start to the end, taking their place at the back of the line when they completed their dance routine, was a distinguishing characteristic of the show and was soon copied by youth of all races in parties across America. Another popular feature of the show was the “*Soul Train Scramble Board*,” where scrambled letters were placed on a magnet board and two dancers were given one minute to figure out and spell the name of the guest musical performer or a famous historical African American figure. Don Cornelius, who hosted the program for over 24 years, created the now famous greeting, “Welcome to the hippest trip in America” and signed off the show with, “We wish you love, peace...and soul!”⁶

Soul Train was one of the longest shows to air on national television, with episodes produced from 1971 until the 2005-2006 season. During the 1970s and 1980s, many top African American performers graced the *Soul Train* stage, including Michael Jackson, James Brown, and Aretha Franklin.⁷ Yet the *Soul Train* dancers (see Figure 8), who created and showcased new dance moves became celebrities in their own right and spawned the careers of numerous performers, including Vivica A. Fox, Nick Cannon, Rosie Perez, Jody

Watley, Damita Jo Freeman, William “Tyrone” Swann, Sharon Hill, and Fred ‘Rerun’ Berry. In the early 21st century, television shows such as “So You Think You Can Dance” and “America’s Best Dance Crew” utilized many *Soul Train* elements and incorporated them into their programs.⁸



Figure 8. Jocelyn Banks and Fred Camble on “*Soul Train*” television program, Calif., 1975. Source: *Los Angeles Times* photographic archive, UCLA Library.

In the 1990s and first few years of the 21st century, *Soul Train* began to shift its focus to hip hop and rap music, playing fewer traditional soul and R&B sounds. Don Cornelius retired from hosting in 1993 and guest hosts took over until 1997, when three young, black male hosts took over for the rest of its television run.

In 2002, Don Cornelius began producing the *Soul Train Music Awards*. Cornelius hoped to expand the *Soul Train* brand while creating a space that specifically acknowledged black entertainment and music.⁹ In June 2008, Cornelius sold the *Soul Train* franchise to MadVision Entertainment, which planned to launch a new *Soul Train* website, create DVDs of past episodes, and reinvent a contemporary version of the program.¹⁰ *Soul Train*, like Dick Clark’s *American Bandstand*,¹¹ was a television dance show pioneer. But unlike Clark’s show, *Soul Train* featured black musical performers and dancers, bringing African American music and Black Los Angeles culture to a wider, mainstream audience and, by doing so, becoming a staple of American popular culture.



Figure 9. "Olympic Neighborhood Games," 1984, by Ernie Barnes.

Barnes transitioned into art from a career as an NFL football player. Early in his art career, he created sports-themed paintings, such as this representation of the 1984 Olympic Games in Black Los Angeles.¹²



Figure 10. "Sam & Sidney," 1988, by Ernie Barnes.

A Jewish and African American art collaborative formed in the post-Watts Riots era that helped provide black artists space to feature their works. The shows from these partnerships highlighted Jewish themes, such as this painting, which depicts an African American and Jewish man walking together through a Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles.¹³

Action

Womanist Leadership and Systemic Confines

by Melina Abdullah

When one typically imagines “womanist” leadership, tax structures and budget battles don’t immediately come to mind. Toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century, however, the budget and tax structure emerged as two of the three top priorities for California Speaker Karen Bass – the first black woman in America to lead a state legislative body.^{14,15} So how does a womanist leader define her role in the immediacy of the budget battle as a part of a broader, more transformational vision? In what ways might a womanist elected official engage a system that is essentially “anti-womanist” (i.e., rigid, hierarchical and built to sustain rather than transform itself and the existing political structure)? Is transformation or even non-reformist reform from within the existing system possible?¹⁶

The 2008-2009 California budget battle stands as a very tangible example of the rigidity of existing political structures in the face of efforts to—even minimally—reshape societal commitments and rethink individual obligations to collective empowerment. As she prepared to do battle over the budget in the fall of 2008, Bass, who resides in the Baldwin Vista area of Los Angeles, observed:

The budget is thrust upon me. I walked into the \$15 billion deficit, so I have no choice but to make that front and center. What is important to me is to look at the root causes and that leads me to the tax structure. Our tax structure was established in the 1930s for an industrial-based economy that doesn’t even exist anymore... If we could figure out how to modernize our tax structure, I could actually leave office feeling like I had made a huge contribution toward the stabilization of revenues so that every year we’re not faced with constantly cutting safety net programs, because, to me, that should always be my number one priority...worrying about the social and economic conditions in my community. Even though the tax structure is 40,000 feet away, it is absolutely a root cause because every time we have a downturn in the economy, what affects us is what gets cut the most.¹⁷



Figure 11. Honorable Speaker Karen Bass.
Source: Office of Speaker Karen Bass, 47th Assembly District.

So was Speaker Bass actually able to use the budget fight as one means of restructuring the tax system? In short, the answer is no. In one of the most drawn out fights in legislative history, Speaker Bass, a womanist and a self-defined progressive, found herself forced to make concessions that placed her at odds with some who would seem to be natural allies. Her vision of overhauling the tax structure was challenged with ferocity, and the notion of increasing revenues to retain and invest in the “safety net” programs she committed herself to was flatly rejected by the Republican minority in the legislature. California required a two-thirds vote to pass a budget, which gave the minority party a great deal of power.

In her efforts to get the budget out, Bass often found herself at odds with Assemblymember Sandre Swanson of Oakland. Swanson was not simply any Assemblymember, but the Co-Chair of the Legislative Black Caucus and one of the most progressive members of the Assembly. Groomed by famed Congressman Barbara Lee, Swanson “voted his conscience,” opposing a budget deal that capped spending and included a limit on the

wages for home healthcare workers at \$9.50 per hour. In response to his refusal to follow party leadership, Bass stripped Swanson of his position as Chair of the Labor and Employment committee.¹⁸

The budget deal, including the spending cap, ultimately made it out of the legislature, despite Swanson's opposition. It included cuts to safety net programs and an extension on state sales taxes—which Bass admits is a regressive tax on poor and working-class people.

Bass continued to infuse her womanist identity and progressive vision into her leadership, but often found herself limited by the rigidity of the system. In his discussion of non-reformist reforms, Manning Marable¹⁹ is careful to note that the reforms are not, in and of themselves, the transformation sought. They just make transformational efforts more possible. Perhaps transformative efforts belong to political outsiders. Perhaps Speaker Bass will again turn to her grassroots alliance partners—including the People's Council that she initiated—to push for structural transformation. As a political insider, Bass will soften up the ground for transformation from the outside. Through 2009, the system had proven to be too rigid to allow for one person—despite her title or commitment—to create fundamental change from within.

Notes

¹ Paul Robinson, "Race, Space and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. D. Hunt and A. C. Ramon (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

² Interviews from Faustina DuCros' doctoral research (in progress), Department of Sociology, UCLA.

³ Paul Von Blum, "Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. D. Hunt and A. C. Ramon (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

⁴ WCIU-TV and first-run syndication, 1971 to 2006.

⁵ Steve Holsey, "Three Decades Later, Soul Train is still on Track," *Michigan Chronicle*, May 15, 2002, <http://proquest.umi.com> (April 9, 2009).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Brian Stelter, "After 38 Years, 'Soul Train' Gets New Owner," *New York Times*, June 17, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/17/business/media/17soul.html?_r=2 (April 10, 2009).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Charles Reeves, "The Soul Train," *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 30, 1996, <http://proquest.umi.com> (April 9, 2009).

¹⁰ Brian Stelter, "After 38 Years, 'Soul Train' Gets New Owner," *New York Times*, June 17, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/17/business/media/17soul.html?_r=2 (April 10, 2009).

¹¹ ABC, 1952 to 1989.

¹² Paul Von Blum, "Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. D. Hunt and A. C. Ramon (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The third priority is foster care.

¹⁵ Karen Bass, interview by Melina Abdullah and Regina Freer, Los Angeles, California, August 8, 2008.

¹⁶ Manning Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Karen Bass, interview by Melina Abdullah and Regina Freer, Los Angeles, California, August 8, 2008.

¹⁸ Steve Harmon, "Oakland Assemblyman Loses Chairmanship Over Vote," *Oakland Tribune*, March 4, 2009.

¹⁹ Manning Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

About the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies

Established in 1969 as an organized research unit (ORU) of the University of California, Los Angeles, the Ralph J. Bunche Center is one of the oldest centers in the nation devoted to the study of African American life, history, and culture. For more information, please visit www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu. You can also find the Bunche Center on YouTube and Facebook.

Editors

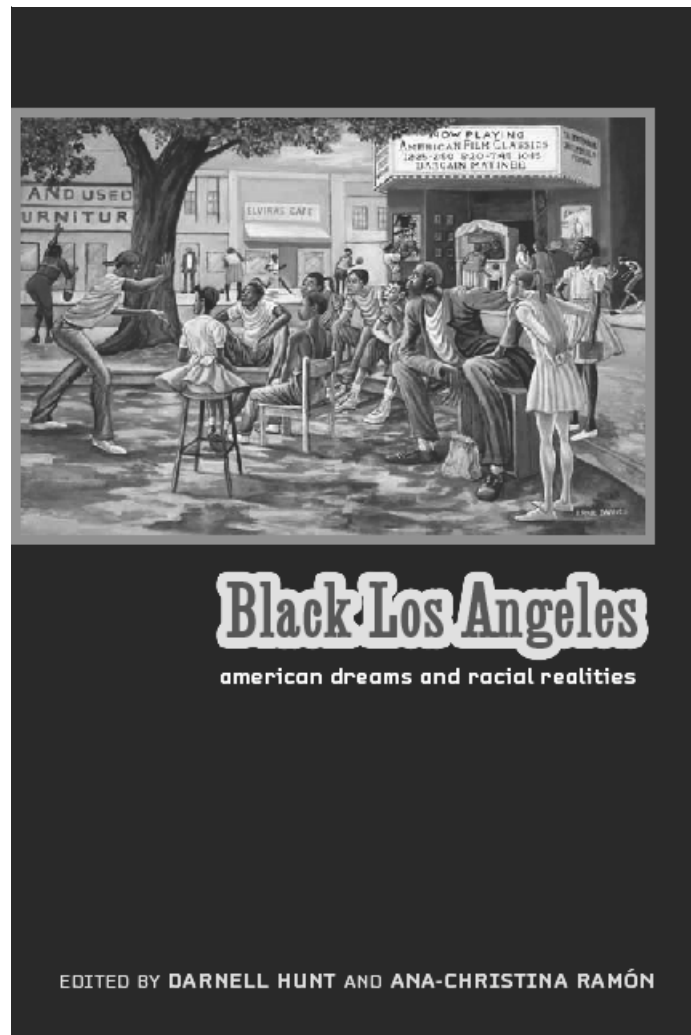
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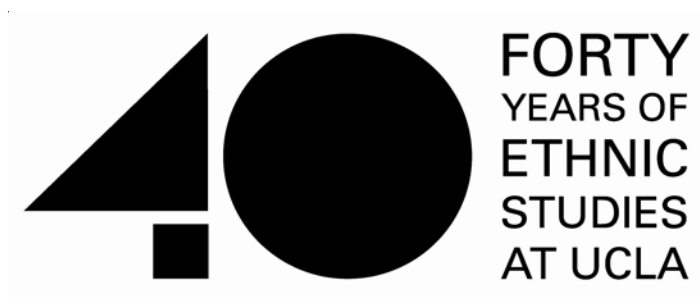
11



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