

Race and Immigration in Changing Communities of the United States

George J. SANCHEZ

In December of 1998, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton kicked off the West Coast version of a White House initiative dedicated to preserving historic American sites by visiting a run-down, largely abandoned synagogue located in Boyle Heights, a community in East Los Angeles now consisting of a population made up almost exclusively of Latinos. While other sites chosen for the “Save America’s Treasures” campaign included New York’s Louis Armstrong archives, Boston’s Henry Wadsworth Longfellow house and San Francisco’s Conservatory of Flowers, the Breed Street Synagogue evoked a different sort of historical remembrance, one somewhat out of synch with the current community surrounding the synagogue. While Clinton addressed a crowd of about 500 made up of local politicians, academic conservators and historians, and representatives of Los Angeles’ dispersed Jewish community, local Mexican American residents stood on the sidelines curious and somewhat bemused. “This shul and the work we are doing together to preserve it for future generations is an important statement,” the First Lady told the crowd. “We believe that there must be continuity between generations . . . Boyle Heights immigrants today can think back to those immigrants 60 to 70 years ago who did not speak English—they spoke Yiddish. In honoring this particular building, we honor the past.”¹

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This evocation of the past by the First Lady, I will argue, is a selective rendering of the past, one intended to connect generations of immigrants and immigrant children from different backgrounds together, but usually masking the complexity of urban neighborhoods and the racial dynamics within them. Most importantly, Mrs. Clinton's comments reflect an overwhelming assumption by Americans, including many urban specialists, that we can characterize the changing demographics of American cities as simply a continuing saga of ethnic succession, with one immigrant group gradually and naturally replacing another group of former newcomers as they move up the economic ladder. Indeed, the complicated racial and ethnic history of Boyle Heights, a research project that has consumed me recently, points instead to a story in which few population movements are "natural," much discontinuity between generations and groups is evident, and historical memory is likely to be contested for some time to come.

Indeed, multiracial communities of cultural exchange and conflict have probably been the norm in working class Los Angeles throughout the 20th century, and probably in cities throughout the Western half of the nation, not the exception. Indeed, these mixed communities allow urban scholars to compare the diversity of ethnic communities in the late twentieth century to the seemingly transitional ethnic communities of the early twentieth century. Watts, for example, in the heart of south central Los Angeles had a majority Mexican population until the late 1920s, when African Americans from the American South began to migrate in large numbers to the city. Likewise, Boyle Heights in east Los Angeles was the center of the Jewish community of L.A. in the 1920s, as well as home to a large Japanese American population stretching east from Little Tokyo and a sizable Mexican American group. In Los Angeles, commentators rarely discuss the longstanding Asian and Latino communities which have been part of the region's history since the city's founding, relying instead on depictions of these racial groups as almost wholly recent immigrants, but these groups, along with African Americans and European ethnics have been critical in establishing the diversity of Los Angeles' Eastside and Southside.

It is in the period following World War II and probably reaching its peak in the late 1960s, Los Angeles experienced more strict racial segregation and a diminution of multiracial communities. While the Westside and San Fernando Valleys of Los Angeles had always been off limits to racial others, fortified in this period through racially restrictive

covenants, the rest of L.A., especially the Eastside and the Southside had remained racially and ethnically diverse with working class people. The postwar period, however, saw Jews, Italians, and to a lesser extent, Japanese, left Boyle Heights, and witnessed south Central's African American population grow while others—including Mexicans and working class whites leave. By the time of the 1965 Watts Riots, racially exclusive neighborhoods had become commonplace throughout the Los Angeles basin.

More recently, post-World War II racially restrictive policies of segregation have been replaced by a return to class-based zoning. This change, coupled with extensive post-1965 immigration, has created new communities of racial interaction in most urban centers in the United States. Most of these, however, include few white Americans. Yet, multiracial communities as diverse as "Uptown" and "Edgewater" in Chicago, "Mt. Pleasant" in Washington, D.C., and "Sunset Park" and "Jackson Heights" in New York City have begun to focus attention on this seemingly new phenomenon. This interesting constellation of multicultural enclaves has produced some rather noteworthy, but not altogether new, racial dynamics. Much residential community interaction between Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans has occurred in urban centers in the American West, and certainly Los Angeles, over the past one-hundred years, but never before in such a visible—i.e. national—fashion.

This historical fact has not kept residents of these areas, and urban historians I would add, from thinking that these multiracial communities are at odds with longstanding cultural and traditional patterns. And in Los Angeles and elsewhere, the notion that a "community" is by definition dominated by one racial group has even been codified into the naming of neighborhoods, such as Koreatown or Little Tokyo. This codification has, once again, been turned on its head as urban communities have once again become multiracial sites of interaction with new immigration and urban settlement patterns.

The 1965 U.S. Immigration Act and changing global economic dynamics of the late twentieth century have completely transformed immigration to the United States and the makeup of American urban centers. An era in which over four-fifths of all immigrants to the U.S. came from Europe has been replaced, since 1965, with a period in which two-thirds of newcomers to the United States have come from Latin America and Asia. The emphasis on family reunification in the 1965 Act, intended

as a way of insuring that the national origins of new immigrants would mirror those of the overall American population, have instead contributed to a thorough invigoration of immigration from Asia and Latin America. Indeed, most demographers predict that the combined populations of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans will become the majority of the American population by the middle of this century. In some important urban centers, such as New York City and Los Angeles, that situation has already arrived, forever changing the dynamics of American identity, group dynamics, and urban society.

This shift in the sources of the nation's immigrants, coupled with the higher birthrates among Latinos and Asian Americans have led to the pronounced demographic transition, as well as towards an emphasis on continued shifts towards these youthful populations in the future workforce and political electorate. One of the most shocking statistics from the 2000 census is that it appears as if the Latino population has already surpassed the African American population in the United States to become the nation's largest minority group, numbering 35.5 million as compared to 34.2 million. Although demographers had predicted this transformation to take place one or two decades into the 21st century, it was a surprise to most that it had occurred already at the start of the century. The surge of the Latino population was especially notable in the 1990s, advancing over 12 million from the figure in 1990, or, put another way, estimates that close to one-third of the Latino population of 2000 arrived in the U.S. either by birth or immigration in the decade of the 1990s.

The contemporary demographic portrait of Latinos in the United States is notable for both its changes and continuities with the past. While half of the nation's Latinos continue to live in two states—California and Texas—burgeoning Latino communities have emerged in the South and the greater Midwest where few existed before. North Carolina and Georgia, along with Iowa and Kansas, have emerged as major new areas of growth for the Latino population. This growth has been so rapid, in fact, that in the state of Kansas, Latinos now outnumber African Americans as the largest minority group. Latinos are currently 20 percent of the population of Omaha, Nebraska. Indeed, the greatest rate of growth was in the Midwest, where Latinos—7 of 10 of them Mexicans—grew by 80 percent to 3.1 million. While major populations of Latinos now exist from almost all areas of Latin American and the Caribbean, Latinos of Mexican descent continue to dominate the national figures at

66% of the whole, a percentage that has remained fairly constant throughout the 20th century. Currently, more than 1 in every 14 U.S. resident now traces his or her ancestry to Mexico.

But this national transformation has undoubtedly been led by more rapid change in those states which traditionally draw the bulk of immigrants to the United States: New York, Florida, Texas and particularly California. According to the 2000 U.S. census, California no longer has a racial majority, and Latinos are on schedule to become the state's largest racial group by 2040. Fueling this cultural transformation is the unprecedented growth of the Latino population in Los Angeles and surrounding southern California counties. Census data from year 2000 indicates that the Latino population in Los Angeles County is over 4 million strong, a 20 percent rise since 1990.² Latinos are already the largest single group in Los Angeles County, composing 44 percent of the county's population, and are on track to become the majority of the county by 2010. By 2040, Latinos are projected to be 64 percent of the county's population.³

The growth which has already taken place is staggering from a variety of perspectives. L.A. figures dwarf the next ranked county in the nation, Dade County in Florida, with 1.1 million Latinos, or the five boroughs of New York City, with a combined total of just over 2 million. L.A.'s Latino growth took place in a county whose overall population growth was just 7.4 percent, with the non-Latino white dropping by 18 percent in the 1990s and forming less than one-third of all residents, while the African American percentage of the population declining to 10 percent of the total. Only the Asian and Pacific Islander population in Los Angeles County grew similarly by 26 percent since 1990, to almost 1.2 million.

The growth in surrounding counties, however, is even more dramatic than Los Angeles', since it begins from a smaller base. Orange County, whose population in 1980 was 80 percent white, had a non-white majority in 2000, is projected to have a Latino plurality by 2020, and a near Latino majority by 2040.⁴ Its Latino population grew by 46 percent since 1990 to 875,000, making Orange County the fifth largest Latino population in any county in the nation, and currently represents 28 percent of its total population. Rapid demographic change in a city like Buena Park, for example, saw the white population drop from 71 percent to 38 percent in the 1990s. The ranks of Latinos in San Diego County also rose by 48 percent since 1990, 45 percent in Ventura County, 72 percent in

Riverside County, and 66 percent in San Bernardino County. In all southern California counties totalled together, nonwhites outnumber whites by more than 3 million.

This demographic transformation has led to a variety of responses by American citizens, ranging from fears of an immigrant takeover and displacement of traditional American values to an embrace of multiculturalism and hope for a new America unified by toleration and diversity. One particular area of concern has been within diverse urban populations now finding themselves sharing the same neighborhood, but competing for political power and local resources. In these cities, racial groups struggle to communicate and work together despite differences in language, citizenship, and economic power. Moreover, when long-standing racial tension exists just below the surface of urban areas, one public spark may be enough to launch a huge conflict between social groups, not just limited to those in power.

When black motorist Rodney King was pulled over by LAPD in the San Fernando Valley in 1991, and four officers, with others watching, had begun to beat him, this was nothing new in what passed for policing in Los Angeles. That it was caught on a video recorder and broadcast worldwide did make it notable for exposing the harshness of the treatment of minority suspects by the LAPD. As these four white officers were put on trial for the beating in 1992, many hoped that there would finally be justice against the police for this inhumane beating. As the trial progressed, and was moved to almost-all-white Simi Valley at the outskirts of the region, where many of the white LAPD officers actually lived, many in the minority communities began bracing themselves for a familiar pattern of justice denied.

The not guilty verdicts of four Los Angeles police officers on April 30, 1992, sparked the worst modern race riot in US history. Over the four days of the L.A. Riots, the dynamics of racial and class tensions, rage against the police, and anti-foreign sentiment came together in violent, unpredictable fashion. From the corner of Florence and Normandie (just four miles to our south), the mayhem spread to engulf the city. Fifty-two lives were lost and 2,383 people were injured. About one billion dollars of damage was done to residences and businesses, and over 14,000 arrests were made. In the first three days of rioting, over 4,000 fires were set and 1,800 people were treated for gunshot wounds. The destruction occurred throughout the Los Angeles basin, and the participants and victims were indeed multiethnic.

The image of Reginald Denny, a white truck driver, being pulled from his cab at the corner of Florence and Normandie Avenues in South Central Los Angeles, beaten and spat upon by a group of young African American males, quickly became a counter image of the inhumane beating of black motorist Rodney King, caught on video a year earlier. But a closer look at the victims of violence at the corner of Florence and Normandie reveals that at least thirty other individuals were beaten at that corner, most pulled from their cars, some requiring extensive hospitalization. Only one other victim of the violence at that corner besides Denny was white—and he was, like Denny, a truckdriver passing through the region. All others were people of color, including a Mexican couple and their one year old child, hit with rocks and bottles; a Japanese-American man, stripped, beaten and kicked after being mistaken for Korean; a Vietnamese manicurist left stunned and bloodied after being robbed; and a Latino family with two five-year old twin girls, who each suffered shattered glass wounds in the face and upper body. All of these acts of violence occurred before Reginald Denny appeared.

Indeed, the very first victims at Florence and Normandie were all Latino residents who lived in the neighborhood. Marisa Bejar was driving her car through the intersection at 5:45 pm when a metal-covered phone book sailed through her car window opening up a 13-stitch cut. Her husband, Francisco Aragon, quickly got clobbered on the forehead with a piece of wood, while their 7-month old infant suffered minor scratches when a large metal sign was hurled through the rear window. Minutes later when Manuel Vaca drove his '73 Buick into the intersection, Antonine Miller and Damian Williams threw rocks through the windshield, stopping the car. Six men pulled Vaca, his wife and brother from their car, beat and robbed them. As Anthony Brown remembered, he kicked at Vaca "because he was Mexican and everybody else was doin' it." Among these early victims at Florence and Normandie was Sylvia Castro, a fourth-generation Mexican American and prominent activist in South Central, was shocked when bricks and bottles shattered her car window. Having worked closely with gang members in the area, she was able to escape with only a bloodied nose by speeding away.

Later after Denny's assault was recorded and broadcast worldwide, several shocked Black residents of the area risked their lives to save other victims. James Henry left his porch to pull Raul Aguilar, an immigrant from Belize, to safety after he had been beaten into a coma and had a car run over his legs. Donald Jones, an off-duty fireman, protected Sai-Choi

Choi after several men beat and robbed him. Gregory Alan-Williams pulled a badly wounded Takao Hirata from the bloody intersection. Another savior at that corner was 59 year old Reverend Bennie Newton, pastor of the Light of Love Church. He rescued the life of Fidel Lopez, a 20 year resident of Los Angeles from Guatamala. Lopez, driving back to his home one block from the intersection, was pulled from his car, and later required 29 stiches in his forehead for a wound received by a blow from an auto stereo, 17 stiches to his ear, which someone had tried to slice off, and 12 stiches under his chin. Laying unconscious in the street from the beating, Lopez had motor oil poured down his throat and his face and genitals spraypainted blue. His life was saved when Newton began praying over his prostrate body with a bible in the air.

Latinos were the single largest ethnic group arrested during the period of the Riots, not only for curfew violations and undocumented status, but also as looters of their local Korean merchants. In fact, 43 percent of those arrested during the riots were Latino, while only 34 percent were African-American, contradicting the notion that the Los Angeles Riots was a simple Black-Korean conflict. Indeed, it was largely a Latino population living in Koreatown that looted neighborhood stores in that area.

Estimates also indicate that between 30 to 40 percent of stores that were lost were Chicano-or Latino-owned, especially in south Central. Moreover, during the three days of rioting, the Immigration and Naturalization Service took advantage of those arrested for curfew violations to deport over 2,000 Latino aliens. Yet the wider media and most academic accounts of the events of 1992 in Los Angeles largely ignored the Latino role because it disturbs strongly held beliefs in notions of community, belonging, and race in this country.

Since May 1992, more clearly visible evidence appeared which allowed most social commentators to identify the mid-1990s as one experiencing a particularly sharp rise in American nativism. Two years after the Los Angeles Riots, California voters would resurrect their long-standing history as leaders in anti-immigrant efforts since the days of Chinese Exclusion by passing Proposition 187, a state initiative intended to punish illegal immigrants by restricting their access to schools, medicinal care, and other social services.⁵ This would be accomplished by deputizing social service providers as immigration inspectors, including teachers, social workers, and doctors, and forcing them to identify to local law enforcement officials students and clients who had entered the country illegally. Polls showed that this piece of legislation won

widespread approval across a range of ethnic groups, including 67% of whites (who formed 80% of the total electorate) and 50% of both Asian Americans and African-Americans, with only 23% of Latinos voting in favor.

As the participants in the violence at Florence and Normandie indicate, interracial understanding and an inclusive sense of "community" is not simply formed by living in close proximity to those from other racial/ethnic groups. Rather, what is disturbing about the Los Angeles Riots is the insistence that "community" reflects a single racial group. The irony of Black protesters stopping construction projects in south central Los Angeles on the basis that no one from the "community" was employed, even when Latino workers were their neighbors seemed to be lost on everyone concerned. Moreover, these strategies of protest usually encouraged African American entrepreneurs who had long left the residential neighborhood to return to invest and to hire (but not to live), with the untested assumption that they would be more likely to hire other Blacks.

How have the immigrants themselves responded to these recent attacks? One response has been a marked increase in political involvement among all immigrants in U.S. politics, on the local and national level. Immigrant citizens and American-born ethnics in these communities have also heightened their own political involvement to fight for the rights of immigrants with the acknowledgement that their own racial construction often hangs in the balance. One of the most concrete expressions of this new political consciousness is the upsurge in the rates of naturalization among legal immigrants across the nation. The INS office in Los Angeles began receiving as many as 2000 applications a day for naturalization after passage of Proposition 187, and offices around the country experienced similar increases. 1995 turned out to produce an all-time high of over 1 million immigrants becoming new American citizens.

While on the surface, these developments of political incorporation seem to reflect patterns of Americanization among earlier European immigrant groups to the U.S., this is a decidedly ambivalent Americanism borne of racial tension and anti-foreign sentiment. One 1994 statewide poll in California found that 25 percent of immigrants in the state personally feared discrimination and violence directed at them by virtue of looking foreign.

Outward acts of nativism seemed to have slowed in California since

1996, when the state's economy began a prolonged economic upturn. Some are currently worried that with recent economic problems exacerbated by the terrorist attacks of September 11th of 2001, we may return to a period of intense anti-immigrant backlash and racialized nativism. What has not changed is the immense demographic transition that has characterized Los Angeles since 1965. While immigration is still large, California now only attracts one-fourth of all the immigrants to the U.S., as opposed to one-third that it did in the 1980s. But still these cumulative numbers have led to more profound demographic transitions.

Los Angeles, the most populous county in the United States, added over 656,000 residents in the 1990s. Latinos now make up close to half of all the county's residents, with whites falling back to 38%. Asian Americans have now surpassed African Americans as the third largest group in the county. Statewide in 2000, California now has a population with no ethnic majority, as whites fell from 57% of the state's population in 1990 to 47% in 2000. With the Latino population of the state now at 29%, most demographers believe that Latinos will overtake whites as the largest group in the state within two decades, much like they already are in Los Angeles. By then, Los Angeles's population is likely to be as much as 2/3rds Latino.

While the 1992 riots in Los Angeles may be the most negative (and well-publicized) result of this close interaction, daily life in many urban centers often finds plenty of arenas of cooperation and many examples of successful crossing of cultural boundaries. As a historian of Los Angeles, I have looked for communities of diversity in the city's past which can provide insight into how people from different cultural backgrounds have lived side-by-side before. My research into racial interaction in Boyle Heights, one neighborhood in East Los Angeles, points to a region which functioned remarkably well as a diverse American community, despite being often assaulted by local, national and international trauma and displacement.

My own historical work has turned decidedly towards understanding multiracial communities of the past and racial and ethnic interaction within them, patterns that we might call civil society in the making, in order to give some guidance to others concerning how we might live together despite all differences in backgrounds and origins. Boyle Heights, a neighborhood in East Los Angeles, has served as the principal Jewish community of the city, always had a substantial Japanese American population, sometimes with a significant African American

population, and now a community which is 98 percent Latino. Virtually every ethnic group in Los Angeles has lived in the neighborhood for some period, and strong ties to the community have been maintained by people who have long moved out of the neighborhood. At least on the surface, it is a neighborhood that generated strong community ties across racial lines and may be considered a model civil society of pluralism and inclusion.

Yet it is clear from my research that government policy of the late 1930s and 1940s systematically attacked this and other similar multi-ethnic communities for the reason that they were considered unstable and injurious to a civil community of order. The 1937 Federal Housing Act, which got the U.S. federal government for the first time into the business of insuring residential mortgages, also prompted government surveys of all neighborhoods in the United States in order to rank them for risk in terms of investment and mortgage loans. These ranks determined whether it would be relatively difficult or easy for homebuyers to get federally insured loans for home purchases, thereby directly affecting neighborhood stability and ability to be fully engaged in local civil society. While federally guaranteed insurance made it possible for the average American to own a home, it set up a system which was highly racialized and discriminatory towards community diversity.

Boyle Heights, with its racially mixed population, was determined to be "hopelessly heterogeneous" with "subversive racial elements" and was assigned the lowest possible rank, as were other similar communities in Los Angeles such as Watts. In the 1940s and 1950s this made it less possible for residents to buy their homes in these neighborhoods, and those with increased means tended to move out to more homogeneous areas. By 1960, 43 percent of all residential mortgages in the United States were federally insured, either by the Federal Housing Authority or by the Veterans Administration. All over the country these policies led directly to greater segregation and more inequality between city centers and suburbs. For example, mostly white St. Louis County received ten times more FHA loans than the City of St. Louis.

Despite these attacks, residents of Boyle Heights organized in the 1940s and 1950s for greater representation, aided by the Industrial Areas Foundation, by creating the Community Services Organization (CSO) and successfully electing Edward Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council in 1949, the first Mexican American on the council in the twentieth century. Roybal was elected despite the fact that he was not allowed

to buy a house in some parts of his own district by virtue of his race and racially restrictive covenants. The CSO itself led voter registration efforts and was instrumental in bringing attention to the local needs of the diverse residents. Organization of the CSO was heavily funded by the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles, among other entities, but always saw its mission as giving greater voice to the increasing population of Mexican Americans in Boyle Heights. This was an organization in which multiethnic membership and funding did not preclude a strategy which was about ethnic empowerment.

But alas, the CSO could not turn the tide of racial segregation and the subsequent exit of many non-Mexican residents from the area. Though it continues to be an active force in Boyle Heights, the CSO currently serves the needs of new immigrant populations from Mexico and Central America which now dominate the neighborhood. While Boyle Heights itself has become almost entirely Latino, other neighborhoods in Los Angeles, such as Compton, Watts, and Koreatown, have been racially and ethnically diversified by the rapid increase of Latino migration. It is in these neighborhoods that the future of civil society hangs in the balance, determining whether new coalitions can arise that look beyond the future of just one racial group to see whether the entire society can benefit from cooperation and economic development. But these communities can also look to the past to view similar neighborhoods in which residents worked together for a common good, yet also disagreed and sometimes split. My research indicates that government policy can aid or hurt these efforts, having longterm implications for the contours of civil society in urban areas. Indeed, it is in these local arenas in which many learn the true meaning of American identity, for better or for worse.

I was drawn to the Boyle Heights project in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, when it seemed as if many social commentators thought that the racial diversity of south Central Los Angeles and other communities in L.A. inevitably led to social conflict. I became interested in finding one particular area in Los Angeles where I could trace the changing levels of interaction—both positive and negative—over time in order to witness whether or not “people got along,” and what historical factors played into these relationships. Luckily for me, various organizations in Los Angeles had the same motivation at about the same time, and I have been doing research with a collective of four organizations to do a museum exhibition of this neighborhood over the past half-decade. This exhibition will open on September 8th of this year at the Japanese

American National Museum, the lead organization for this research; the other members of the collective are the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California, Self-help Graphics, a Chicano arts collective, and the International Institute, a social service organization which has been serving Boyle Heights for over one hundred years.

This collective has held a variety of community forums over the past few years, bringing together different generations of newcomers to Los Angeles that had rarely met: today's largely recent Latino immigrants in the neighborhood and an older group of white, Jewish, African-American, Asian-American, and Latino citizens who had first entered Boyle Heights in the mid-20th century but no longer lived in the community. It also plugged us into networks of friendships from each generation who had lived in Boyle Heights, who often stayed in extremely close contact with each other, sometimes for decades after they had actually physically moved away from Boyle Heights.

Having been trained as a twentieth century American historian whose research focuses on immigration and race in urban areas, the importance of the histories of communities like Boyle Heights cannot be underestimated. Most of the history written about urban neighborhoods takes as a given that the norm in the 20th century has been racially exclusive communities best characterized as ghettos or barrios. But increasingly, historians are finding this to be a mischaracterization across the nation; much more widespread has been racially mixed areas in which the dynamics and hierarchies of racial power and differentiation were played out in neighborhood politics and personal relationships, as well as being sites of interaction which taught everyone the meaning of American identity.

At one particular forum held at the International Institute a couple of years ago, I noticed an elderly African American woman enter the auditorium carrying two plastic grocery sacks full of what appeared to be letters. Molly Wilson-Murphy represented the comparatively small African American community of Boyle Heights, but the packages she carried represented the power of ethnic interaction that this project hopes to capture. Mrs. Wilson-Murphy had carefully brought this package of letters to our forum to hand them over to the Japanese American National Museum after more than a half-century of storing them in her closet at home. During World War II, she had carefully written letters every week to five of her Japanese American friends who were taken away from Boyle Heights to internment camps. What she carried into the auditorium

last year were the return letters from these five friends. These letters told us stories of young teenage friends from high school from different backgrounds who had sustained their friendships by committing themselves to communicating with each other despite the distance that our government had placed between them.

In one letter, Sandie Saito (now Okada), told her friend Molly what she would encounter if she came to visit the Santa Anita Racetrack, where Japanese Americans from Boyle Heights were first taken in 1942 before being sent to more permanent internment camps, by drawing a picture at the end of her letter.⁶ These two friends, separated by the racial prejudice and government action of the 1940s, would continue their friendship via mail, and Molly never forgot her friends throughout this period. Now, fifty-five years later, Mrs. Wilson-Murphy finally saw a historical project that would tell this story to a wider public, and we would be entrusted with these precious memories. This simple act of friendship, conducted during the most hostile of periods, gave me hope regarding maintaining significant relationships across cultures in times of war, as well as inspiration concerning the importance of public engagement that could tell these too often forgotten stories to multiple audiences.

The very project of historical reconstruction of this neighborhood, done in conjunction with the Japanese American National Museum, has itself produced a new common spirit, bringing together individuals from a variety of racial backgrounds who long ago left Boyle Heights with current Latino residents of the neighborhood who had previously rarely met. Together, a new sense of community empowerment has emerged which promises to point residents of Los Angeles towards a common future by recognizing the bonds which tied people together in the past.

NOTES

¹ *Los Angeles Times*, 11 December 1998, Metro, B:1.

² Larry Gordon, "L.A. County Leads U.S. by Large Margins in Numbers of Latinos, Asians," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 September 1998, p. A24.

³ David Haldane, "O.C. in 2040: Near Majority of Latinos Far Fewer Whites," *Los Angeles Times*, pp. B1, B7.

⁴ Nancy Cleeland, "Great Diversity in Expectations," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 September 1998, pp. A1, A20.

⁵ Gordon, "L.A. County . . .," *Los Angeles Times*, p. A24.

⁶ These letters are now in the possession of the Japanese American National Museum, and some will be used in an exhibition on racial interaction in the Boyle Heights neighborhood, scheduled to open in Los Angeles at the museum in Fall 2002.