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Roots/Raíces: Latino Engagement, Place Identities, and Shared Futures in South Los Angeles

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Roots | Raíces explores a different sort of immigrant integration: the settling of Latinos into a historically African-American place. As we will see, the initial Latino wave arrived to a neighborhood in crisis, one wracked by deindustrialization, a crack epidemic, and militarized police and gangs. The anti-Black prejudices many migrants brought from their home countries were reinforced by daily fears and social distance. But their kids—some who are now prodding their elders in a more open direction—grew up with Black schoolmates and friends and exhibit much tighter solidarity with African Americans. Strikingly, both generations exhibit a special pride in being from South LA; much like their Black neighbors, they celebrate a sense of resilience in the face of challenges and injustice and are often invested in multi-racial coalitions to bring change.

If there is a constant in South LA, it is change: The mega-neighborhood has been through transition after transition for more than a century. Once farmland, the area became the paradigm for white industrial suburbs in the 1920s and on through the post-war period. Black LA, always a presence, grew dramatically in the war years, and Central Avenue flourished, building on its history as a home to Black architecture, a renowned jazz scene, and more. After racially-restrictive housing covenants fell, the Black community moved south and west, providing much needed relief from residential overcrowding. The 1965 Watts Rebellion led to “white flight” that effectively opened up new territory. By 1970, the area now known as South LA—stretching from the 10 freeway to the north, the Alameda Corridor to the east, Imperial Highway to the south, and Baldwin Hills to the west—was 80 percent African American.

But time—and demographics—did not stand still. In the 1980s, job loss from deindustrialization and the combination of high crime and excess policing forced many African Americans to re-consider their futures in the area. The 1992 civil unrest gave another push, particularly for middle-class families worried that their children would be caught up in either gangs or police sweeps. As the Black exodus increased, Latinos moved in, pushed from Latin America by economic crises and civil wars, lured to the US by changing labor demands in the country, and squeezed out of traditional entry points, like Pico-Union just west of downtown, that were literally filling up. The multiple drivers are reflected in demographic diversity: While Central Americans are 14 percent of the county’s Latino population, they comprise 23 percent of South LA’s Latinos. The long-term result of these various flows: The heart of Black LA—South LA—is now nearly two-thirds Latino.

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The demographic transition is captured in these maps, and they make clear that this has not been a geographically even process: The eastern part of South LA has experienced the most Latinization. But neither the data nor the maps can capture the full story: the way that early conflicts have given way to daily accommodations by both African Americans and Latinos, the way in which emerging identities are rooted in a pride of place as well as in a sense of race, the way that a new sort of Latino identity and a new sort of immigrant integration—both inflected by Blackness—are developing. In Roots | Raíces we try to tell that more nuanced story.

The journey takes some time; we took a few years to do the research and a rather lengthy full report reflects that, partly because the story is complex. But knowing that no reader will start down such a path without an enticing preview, we offer here three key punchlines.

First, South LA is a place where the traditional concept of ethnic succession is giving way to the possibilities of ethnic
sedimentation. The typical narrative of neighborhood change is one in which an incoming ethnic group “takes over” and more or less wipes away the past. Whatever the merit of that sort of analysis in describing past immigrant experiences, it does not capture the shifting nature of South LA. The experiences of Latinos in South LA suggest that building on the Blackness of the area—ethnic sedimentation—is a real possibility, particularly when tied to the community-based organizations that are innovating around Black-Latino unity. Such an approach also avoids “triumphalism;” rather than groups swapping influence, it points to building a more just world through the embrace of the sort of multiethnic model that is needed for our majority-minority region (and soon, nation).

Second, in South LA, place identity can be as important as race identity. The palpable sense of pride in the area may be surprising to outside observers, but it links people together. Both older and younger Latino residents express a high degree of
satisfaction with their community, seeing it as a place where they can realize their own version of the American Dream. They also feel bonded with their neighbors. Said one Latino interviewee about interactions with African Americans, “You know, we grew up in each other’s homes, and we grew up together. So to us, it’s a similarity. They’re our people. We struggle, we consider them our people.” So bonding over shared space is crucial—but civic leaders also stressed the need to not be comforted by this common ground and to continue creating conversations about race and to embed anti-racist thinking into organizational structures.

Third, building Latino voice in South LA will require an approach that is both independent and interdependent. Latinos are dramatically underrepresented in leadership positions and their political voice, particularly their voting power, is limited by a combination of factors: immigration status, age, and lackluster registration and turnout. While a Latino agenda is clearly bound up in the problems facing the whole community, certain needs—are immigration, working poverty, and language access—are more acutely felt by Latino residents. So there are good reasons for leadership training that will generate an independent political presence that can articulate particular needs. At the same time, interdependence is key, not just because of the implications for building coalitions but, more fundamentally, because South LA is a place where the anti-Blackness of a region and a nation has played out, has caused decades of systemic injustice at a neighborhood level, and remains a root cause of ongoing struggles. Finding common cause across race is the best way to both win the changes needed for South LA and to model the kind of world we want.

These three big takeaways and the other lessons from this report are important beyond South LA. After all, the neighborhood is emblematic of other places in the US ravaged by deindustrialization, riven by immigration, and riddled by the rise of gangs and the hyper-criminalization of African American and Latino residents. Lessons about Black-Brown work are crucial in many of these places as well as for parts of the US South where immigrants and African Americans are finding that their closer proximity is the new norm. But South LA is also important for the future of Los Angeles: As gentrification sweeps across the city, the multiracial organizing and community resilience in South LA may offer a model of how to develop the neighborhood without displacing the neighbors.

— Latino South LA resident reflecting on African-American neighbors
To undertake a project like this, we had to assemble the right team and the right data. The faculty leads, Manuel Pastor and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, have decades of experience working with community organizing institutions and immigrants. Several members of our initial interview team had direct ties to the area, being born and reared in or near it (Walter Thompson-Hernandez, Jessica Medina, and Kristie Valdez-Guillen) and one (our then post-doctorate fellow, Veronica Montes) is a first-generation immigrant who herself arrived in Los Angeles in the era of the most rapid growth of Latinos in South LA. The professional research staff working on this project (Rhonda Ortiz, Vanessa Carter, Pamela Stephens, and Alejandro Sanchez-Lopez) had a variety of roles, including data analysis, interviews, writing, and project management, but all have multi-year ties with movement-
building organizations in South LA, some for over a decade. In other words, we are not a “disinterested” university research team; we care deeply about the future of South LA.

Once assembled, we went in a bunch of different directions. Pamela Stephens led our demographic data work, utilizing the US Census and other sources (including environmental, health, and green space data) to generate reams of statistical profiles. With some assistance from other analysts at our Center, she developed a unique method for capturing the specific boundaries of South LA, pioneering a method for neighborhood allocation that would become the data backbone for the recent successful Promise Zone application for South LA. Our first quick realization from her work: With South LA containing more than 50 square miles, around 800,000 people, and nearly 30 different neighborhoods, we had to narrow down to dig deep. So we choose three different sub-neighborhoods—Historical South Central, Vermont Square, and Watts—as a way to focus our research attention.

With the neighborhoods in place, each of which seemed archetypical of other neighborhoods in South LA, our team of interviewers took to the streets as quickly as we could get them there. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo was at the helm as five interviewers drew their sample of community respondents from our three neighborhoods of focus, using a snowball sampling method that often started with their own friends and acquaintances and radiated out. We asked our interviewees about their experiences in South LA, their concerns and desires for the future, and then we listened carefully. We also conducted ethnographic observations at parks and gardens, and other public spaces. Over the course of a year we contacted, interviewed, transcribed, coded, and analyzed interviews with 100 Latino residents.

The other half of the team complemented the grassroots work with a more grasstops view: they interviewed 19 African American, Latino, and other civic leaders, some with decades of leadership but all with significant tenures in the area. These interviews were aimed at garnering a more historical and analytical perspective about the evolution of the Latino presence and identity in South LA, uncovering the issues that are pressing today, and also understanding the state of interethnic and neighborhood organizing in South LA.
Latinos in South LA

The first part of *Roots* | *Raíces* explores the reason why Latinos moved en masse to South LA. The reason is quite simple: In the 1980s and 1990s, traditional entry neighborhoods were swelling, due to a massive influx of migrants and, in comparison with other places in LA, the housing stock in South LA was relatively affordable. Another background factor: Immigration at this time became more female and more family-based, leading to a demand for single-family homes, a housing type that dotted the landscape of many South LA neighborhoods.

Why were these homes becoming available? The figure on the next page shows the exodus of African Americans, particularly in the 1990s. Note that the Latino growth outpaced the Black decline, suggesting overcrowding for the new Latino migrants, a pattern that shows up in the data. Single family homes frequently became multi-generational and homeownership rose, with Latino homeownership rates rising from 22 percent in 1980 to 33 percent in 2009-2013, nearly closing the gap with Black homeownership (which actually held steady through the 1980s and 1990s and then declined slightly because of the recent foreclosure crisis).

The uptick in homeownership—as well as the relative decline in recent arrivals and increase in the share of immigrants with more than 20 years in the country—signal the process of sinking roots. By contrast, other measures of “integration” or rootedness have remained low, especially measures of civic engagement. For example, naturalization rates for immigrants in South LA have trailed behind the region: In 2013, 26 percent of immigrants in the area were naturalized citizens compared to 47 percent of immigrants in Los Angeles County. While this is partially a function of immigration status—48 percent of Latino immigrants are undocumented in South LA versus 39 percent in the county—the lack of naturalization for those who are eligible is evidence of a rooted but disconnected population.

The relative lack of civic engagement may be a habit developed early on: In the 1980s and 1990s, newly arriving Latinos sort of “shut in and shut out.” Part of this was a natural immigrant response: Newcomers tend to focus their time on work and family, partly because of the scramble to make finances work in a new country. But it was also due to lingering anti-Black racial stereotypes from home countries and the reinforcement of those views by the anti-Blackness permeating the nation into which they arrived, factors that, along with linguistic isolation, distanced Latinos from their new neighbors. Yet another variable often overlooked in the story: a challenging external environment in which high crime and excess policing made sticking behind closed doors seem a reasonable approach.
Blackness”—a term coined by John Márquez in the Gulf South context. On the one hand, that can mean adopting cultural aspects of the African-American experience in ways that set South LA Latinos apart from “Eastsiders”—where, say, a more traditional Chicano/a or even immigrant identity is more prevalent. For younger Latinos in South LA, musical tastes, patterns of speech, and styles of interactions are infused with Black cultural elements, with one respondent simply saying “You grow up in the aura of Blackness... listening to Vicente Fernandez, but also George Clinton and Al Green.”

But the fact of being “mixed in” has also had profound political impacts. East LA Latinos may encounter the stories of communities tackling injustice through learning about the 1968 Chicano “walk-outs;” South LA Latinos grew up in schools where stories of the civil rights movement and local community rebellions against the police are a more vibrant part of their political grounding. South LA Latinos are also aware that the area has been marginalized because of anti-Black racism—and so they find themselves challenging prejudice in their parents even as they link up with African-American organizers and civic leaders to fight for better schools, reduced criminalization, and more secure employment.

The resulting attitudes that emerged among the first generation are strikingly complex. In our interviews, older Latinos sometimes evidenced racial hostility or, more commonly, simply noted relationships with African Americans that were polite but not close. But the very same individuals would later wax poetic about the African-American neighbor who guided them through the homeownership process, the Black cop that set their errant hijo on the right course, and the co-workers with whom they have shared struggles and triumphs. This is not a simple story and the traces of tension and transformation over time shine through the interviews.

What is clearer is that the children of those first movers—the younger Latinos who grew up in South LA or arrived at an early age—had different experiences. Part of the reason: The second generation has shared significant life experiences and intimacies with their African-American neighbors. They were classmates, teammates, and first loves; generally speaking, they see their South LA experiences and identity as closely linked with African Americans. One interview put it this way: “You are more in tune with the African-American community,” she described, “you’re more mixed in.” As a result, for younger Latinos, both personal and civic identity in South LA has been shaped by African Americans and “foundational

I feel like in South LA you get more of the flava... Like you’re more in tune with your African-American community. Like East LA, they’re probably more Americanized, but they’re still probably more Mexican American and Latino or Salvadorian. You know? They’re more tied to their culture. But here you’re more mixed in.”

— Latina South LA resident
Learning to Lead

While the younger Latino generation may indeed be “mixed in,” learning to lead in that multiracial space can be a challenge. Certainly, Latinos have good reasons to struggle alongside African Americans to confront the economic, social, and environmental challenges facing all South LA residents. For example, both Latino and African-American household incomes in South LA are much lower than that of the average household in Los Angeles County, a pattern illustrated in the figure below. But a more detailed analysis suggests key differences as well: While the two groups are stressed economically, Latinos tend to be more impacted by working poverty while their African-American neighbors tend to experience more joblessness. Both communities also face threats from a carceral state—but over-policing and mass incarceration play out differently and much more forcefully for African Americans while the threats posed by immigration law and the current deportation regime are key to the Latino experience.

Putting together a policy package that can address multiple issues for multiple communities is one of the challenges of building bridges. But beneath that is a more fundamental issue: Becoming a new majority can fuel a sort of “Latino triumphalism,” in which changing demographics trigger a sort of “winner takes all, it’s our turn” kind of politics. That temptation to say “it’s about the numbers” is certainly in the ether: In the general Latino milieu of Los Angeles, many Latinos live where nearly everyone is Latino (think of East LA) and so it may be easier for Latinos citywide to pay less heed to the importance of coalition politics. But that is now impossible for African Americans, who have very few spaces where they are the numeric majority, and it is also problematic for Latinos in South LA. There, many activists contend, the most effective route to challenging racism and economic disparities is a strategy rooted in achieving everyday social justice for all people.

Such an approach is, of course, easier said than done. Focusing on collaboration can be criticized as misplaced when some worry that there are no Latino elected officials in South LA and so it may be easier for Latinos citywide to pay less heed to the importance of coalition politics. But that is now impossible for African Americans, who have very few spaces where they are the numeric majority, and it is also problematic for Latinos in South LA. There, many activists contend, the most effective route to challenging racism and economic disparities is a strategy rooted in achieving everyday social justice for all people.

Black and Latino Median Household Income (2013 dollars), South LA (1990-2013)

Source: US Census Bureau, Geolytics, Inc.
Bringing together groups while navigating differences is hard work but some civic institutions in South LA are succeeding. One common thread among those doing Black-Brown unity work is a commitment to community organizing: Building an authentic base of residents who find common ground in working for justice—and build power to shift systems to do so. And residents do not get there unless the organizers are intentionally multi-racial in their spirit and approach.

Understanding history and sharing stories of migration is a critical piece of the coalitional puzzle. Arturo Ybarra, a longtime leader in Watts explained, “misperceptions started to disappear when we and others and the community started to explain to African-American leaders the reasons these immigrants were coming into the country and the facts. The historical factor helped them to understand the situation.” On the flipside, many Latino leaders in this milieu find it important to center the histories of Black migration and struggle for civil rights in South LA and the African-American community at-large when providing political education to Latinos in South LA.

Representation matters as well—and not just for the emerging Latino populace. Organizers and civic leaders alike are especially sensitive to the palpable sense of Black loss—because as interesting as the Latinization may be to outside observers, the sense that Black LA is being erased is real and can feed resentment. To counter this, some organizations deliberately structure themselves so that African Americans and Latinos have equal weight, even though the underlying populations may be more in the direction of one group than another.

For example, one community leader suggested that any parent outreach without an intentional effort to strike a balance is likely to yield an overwhelming Latino majority, with Black parents feeling left out of the conversation.

Black-Brown unity also requires embedding an analysis of race and racism into the structures of organizations as well as in the broader organizing infrastructure. This can involve a significant amount of internal political education but organizers believe that it pays off. For example, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE) started its campaign on green jobs by first hosting a session on Black and Brown histories in South LA. Jobs are a tough area, partly because of the hyped perception of competition between Black and immigrant workers. Research actually suggests complementarity as the prevailing trend and politics suggest that improving the state of work and economy is a better policy focus than targeting a particular group for exclusion—but backing up that general program with initiatives like the Black Worker Center, a group that specifically advocates for Black workers, helps build and balance the overall organizational ecosystem.
Facing Forward

Latinos who do choose to lead for all often quietly describe the pushback they get. Among broader Latino leadership in Los Angeles, their work to advocate for African Americans can result in marginalization, particularly from those who think the primary goal should be to enhance the political and institutional representation of Latinos. At the same time, coalition-minded Latinos can also find themselves struggling to gain the trust of African-American leaders who wonder if they really can lead for both communities. It is a tiring position to be in and these leaders need to be supported as they find their way to new and more sustainable forms of organizing.

Certainly, strong pipelines for leadership are needed. Fortunately, there is much on which to build: Organizations like Community Coalition (CoCo), CADRE, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE), Community Development Technologies (CDTech), and other multi-racial organizing institutions are turning out leaders who are imbued in this type of transformational civic leadership. CoCo is a particularly interesting example of leadership development and promotion: It was founded by Karen Bass and Sylvia Castillo—Black-Brown from the start—and recently President and CEO Marqueece Harris-Dawson, an African American who is now councilmember for Los Angeles District 8, has been succeeded by longtime organizer, Alberto Retana.

Even as multiracial work and consciousness develops, Latinos need to enhance their political voice. The graph to the right shows the challenge: Latinos comprise 64 percent of South LA but they only represented 28 percent of those who voted in South LA during the 2014 general election. As noted earlier, part of this has to do with naturalization: Only 26 percent of the foreign born are naturalized, about half the figure for the county. Part of it is age: Latinos are younger and this means a smaller share of Latinos are of voting age. But even with all that, the registration fall-off is sharper in South LA than in the county. The data suggest encouraging naturalization and voter registration as two immediate intervention points—even as leaders fight for the broader immigration reform that will give all residents a vote, and so, a greater voice.
Outside of official forms of civic participation, there are many opportunities to engage Latinos. Schools are one strategic place, especially because Latino families see them as key platforms for their children’s success and thus legitimate places to advocate for their interests. Parks and community gardens may be another venue for increasing engagement, particularly for first-generation immigrants who spend their weekends there growing, cultivating, and finding a little piece of solace in a bustling city. Parks and gardens are also common ground: Relative to the county, South LA ranks low when it comes to green space, something that affects all residents. Moreover, when South Central Farm was under threat of closure, African-American activists came out in support, even though the space was overwhelming Latino. These acts of solidarity create new civic lessons for Latinos and such cross-issue and mutually supportive advocacy will be required to build unity.

Moving forward, nearly all the civic leaders we spoke with—and some of the younger Latinos—lifted up the importance of responding to gentrification and resisting displacement when it comes to the future of South LA. Being strategic about the economic investments to come will be an opportunity for cross-community engagement as the fault lines from gentrification may be not between African Americans and Latinos but rather between homeowners who might gain and renters who are likely to lose. But for both Blacks and Latinos, worries about displacement are not just economic; they worry that the communities and neighborhoods that they have fought so hard to build will be erased.

Taking on this challenge will require that South LA step up civic engagement in general and Latino civic engagement in particular. Drawing from our data as well as previous work in this field, we have five recommendations. First, create on-ramps to civic participation, including basic activities like beautifying parks and staging community concerts, so that all South LA residents can start somewhere. Second, increase and deepen Latino leadership for multi-racial coalitions, utilizing the sort of frames and activities we have discussed above. Third, strengthen Black-Latino alliances and understand how investing in autonomous spaces can be part of that. Fourth, build capacity in existing South LA organizations—for historically Black-led organizations who are still working to bring the promises of the civil rights movement to fruition, for Latino-led institutions that were once advocating for a small and new population, as well as for other organizations that tend to be more focused on providing services. Fifth, invest in reframing the public narrative around South LA, particularly in strategic communications that stress the assets of South LA, chart the transformation of tensions over time, and point the way forward to a future together.
A New Model of Immigrant Integration, 
A New Latino Civic Identity

South LA is at once the last remaining stronghold of African Americans in Los Angeles and a place where a new sort of immigrant integration is unfolding. As the Latino population has grown, its members have forged a unique, hybrid identity. It is one that learns from and builds on the work of a Black community that has historically led the fight for political and economic justice and one which is distinctive within the Latino pantheon, set off from the usual Eastside frame and story. There is something new and important happening here—and it holds as many novel lessons for proponents of civic engagement as it does for researchers who will be challenged to understand the multi-ethnic civic identity being built in South LA.

South LA has many needs but it also has tremendous assets. New transit lines are bringing both new connections to other parts of the region and economic development. Organizations are building ties between communities and groups long portrayed as being at odds. And new and creative strategies to realize the promise of South LA are emerging, the most recent example being the successful multi-year, multi-sector, and multi-racial effort to secure Promise Zone designation for a large swath of South LA. We started our study of Latinos in South LA hoping to uncover some interesting statistics, tell some compelling stories, and profile some forward-looking civic work.

We had academic ambitions as well: We wanted to counter-pose concepts of ethnic succession and ethnic sedimentation, race identity and place identity, political independence and organizing interdependence all the while generating a new theory of immigrant integration. We hope that we have done all that—and that we will eventually generate a more nuanced and more complete book that elaborates on these topics. What we did not fully anticipate when we started this journey—even though members of our team had worked in and around South LA for years—was that we would find ourselves doing just what earlier Black migrants as well as our first- and second-generation Latino interviewees did before us: fall in love with the place.

In the last few years, knocking around the Twittersphere has been an inspiring hashtag, #WeAreSouthLA. Meant to evoke a sense of pride in a place of struggle, it is frequently connected to people fighting for living wages and better schools, and against police abuse and racial discrimination. If you peruse the tag, you will notice a myriad of faces, ethnicities, and genders all sharing joy about being from an area others have written off. We are hopeful that Roots | Raíces captures part of that community spirit and shares it with the broader world. We also hope that we can contribute to the organizing and civic engagement that will allow residents to achieve not just their own piece of the American Dream but also their shared goal of an economically vibrant, socially inclusive, and environmentally healthy South LA.
Imagine a neighborhood where people go to buy homes, to build families, to put down roots. Imagine a community where cultures mix, creating a new common identity and fostering connectivity. Imagine a locale where times can be tough but where a sense of resilience and shared hope for better lives creates a vibrant pride of place. Imagine South Los Angeles.

Challenging the public images that dominate the news cycle, residents live in South LA much like residents do anywhere else: taking kids to school, heading to work, celebrating with family and friends on weekends. High unemployment, subpar schools, and a volatile mixture of crime and over-policing are part of the picture—but they are not the entire picture. For many of the over 800,000 residents, South LA is simply the place where they are finding and forging their version of the American Dream.

Indeed, South LA has bristled with a sense of individual, family, and community possibility over the decades—for white Angelenos who helped make it (and adjoining jurisdictions) the region’s first industrial suburb; for African Americans who also came to work in growing industries and who made it a center for jazz, culture, and civil rights; and now for Latinos who are making the place their own as well. Latinos now comprise roughly two-thirds of South LA, a moniker once considered a sort of verbal placeholder for Black Los Angeles.

Roots | Raíces captures part of the story of that last demographic transformation. We try to go beyond the usual media and even academic focus on the tensions caused by these shifts in South LA. We instead flip the script to consider the community that has emerged since, one where daily accommodations and new alliances are the norm, one where a new generation of Latinos may, in fact, be more likely to listen to hip-hop than ranchera. We do this not to be Pollyannaish but to balance the scales: While the first years of demographic transition were indeed tense, time did not stop there and neither should the story. The new South LA is a place where a new sort of immigrant integration and a new sort of Latino identity is being forged.

I. Introduction

By Manuel Pastor and Vanessa Carter
Here, we try to tell that story in a novel and nuanced way. After all, immigrant integration has often been imagined as assimilation into whiteness. Neighborhood change has often been thought about as “ethnic succession” in which one group essentially takes over space from another. The formation of group consciousness is often conceptualized through the prism of racial identity: Consider how the notion of “white” emerged in an earlier generation from the ethnicities that made up immigrant America. One group finding its own civic voice is often seen in terms of creating an independent—and thus, separate—political presence.

The South LA experience challenges traditional views of immigrant integration. Rather than exploring a passage to whiteness, we instead look at what it means to integrate into a Black space—and how that has left an indelible impression on a generation of younger Latinos. Rather than focusing on ethnic succession, we stress “ethnic sedimentation” wherein newcomers build on the legacy of African Americans who were there before and also build vibrant ties with those who remain. Rather than focusing only on racial identity, we note how spatial identity—and the development of a pride of place—can craft common ground. And rather than seeing the path forward for South LA Latinos as simply being a matter of achieving independence, we explore how interdependence and alliance building may be a more fruitful and sustainable strategy.

What’s Gone Before

*Roots | Raíces* is not the first report about the emergence of Latinos in South LA. One of the most influential early reports on this topic was written by David Hayes-Bautista and Gregory Rodriguez (1994). Among the many strengths of their analysis was their pioneering effort to show the differences between Latino identity in East LA and South LA. In short, the former was forged by a more Mexican background as well as more second- and third-generation children of immigrants, and the latter arose from a group that was more immigrant and with more diverse ancestry. While those authors seemed to posit a potentially inevitable conflict between ethnic groups over representation and opportunity in a limited space, more optimistic predictions were offered by one of the co-authors of this report who was writing at about the same time (Pastor 1993). Noting how the Los Angeles civil unrest revealed the demographic transformation as well as the economic desperation of the 1980s, Pastor stressed the distinctions between the African-American and Latino experience of poverty in South LA even as he insisted that both groups would benefit most by working together.
The literature on Black-Latino relations is caught up in this tension between conflict and collaboration, with Camarillo (2004) and Gay (2006) pointing out the role of Black economic insecurity in fueling difference, and Vaca (2004) offering a particularly pessimistic sense of coalitional possibilities. Of course, the reality is complicated and the conflict-driven narrative surely captures part of the story: A particularly nuanced version of the Black-Latino relationship which seems to balance conflict and collaboration is offered in Suro (2009). But such nuance is frequently lacking and some of the literature reads as though tension is inevitable, unavoidable, and unchanging, partly because many of these analyses concentrate on a single point in time rather than evolution over time. Partly as a result, such analyses can feed into a Latino nationalist—“it's our turn”—sort of reaction to demographic shifts that can feed into anti-Blackness and perpetuate both the Black-white color line and racially fragmented cities.

Another set of efforts have focused on coalitional possibilities. For example, Sawyer (2005) posits a much more positive view of Black-Latino relations while Sanchez (2008) stresses an interesting nuance: how a pan-Latino identity that recognizes the role of discrimination can facilitate a sense of commonality with African Americans. This is a view that squares the need for independent Latino and African-American voices with the simultaneous need for interdependent organizing. The coalition frame is also adopted in a series of reports by Alvarado and Jaret (2009), the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (2010), and Grant-Thomas, Sarfati, and Staats (2009) at The Kirwan Institute, as well as a recent book by Kun and Pulido (2014) that is focused on South LA (within that book see Barreto, Gonzalez, and Sanchez (2014).

We have contributed to this more intersectional perspective. Our previous quantitative and qualitative work focused on the economic and social realities in labor markets and communities that have large numbers of immigrants (undocumented and otherwise) and African Americans (Pastor, De Lara, and Scoggins 2011; Pastor and Marcelli 2003). The general conclusion we have drawn is that tension and conflict do have structural roots, but that organizers and leaders can work to find common ground and help communities move forward together. As Telles and colleagues write, “Conflict is far from inevitable, and any particular outcome depends largely on the (in)actions of communities and their leaders” (2011:3).

The body of literature on Black-Latino relations is full of great works—and the best of it acknowledges the co-existence of conflict and collaboration. What has been missing in the literature since those early studies about South LA has been the experience of Latinos themselves. That is, while immigrant integration into a Black space means that identity cannot be disconnected from Black-Latino relations, neither can that identity be reduced to a reflection of racial conversation with another group. Who are these Latinos after all? Where did they come from? How do we best understand their daily lives and quotidian struggles? How does that facilitate forming connections with their Black neighbors? 

Roots | Raíces tries to build on the literature—in some sense, returning to the earliest work—by exploring Latino realities in South LA and providing significant disaggregation by group, geography, and generation. In doing so, we draw key distinctions between those who came from Central America and those who came from Mexico. We point out the differences by sub-neighborhood, stressing how the Latino experience in Historic South Central—which is now overwhelmingly Latino—differs from the experience in Watts, a place where demographic change mirrors the broader South LA area and where Black-established institutions are often stronger.
Figuring out a new model for civic engagement may be one of the central challenges facing South LA. Such a model must respond to Latino concerns but also deeply understand the damage of ongoing anti-Blackness. It must see merit in working together but also in developing autonomous spaces. And it must fully embrace the idea that achieving an independent voice is not at odds with interdependent organizing, and more. We hope that Roots | Raíces contributes to that task of building lasting understanding and partnerships that can achieve a better future for everyone in South LA.

The second generation of Latinos in South LA grew up with African Americans as their neighbors, classmates, friends, and first loves. They have often embraced parts of Black culture even as they have developed a distinct sense of self, often highlighting how they are different (and far tougher as well as far cooler) than Latinos who hail from the Eastside. They often challenge their parents’ prejudices and many have become attached to savvy institutions that are intentional about bringing together Latinos and African Americans to forge new civic coalitions.

As a result, emerging Latino leaders are in the midst of a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, they sense they will be more successful if they lift up the needs of an immigrant and second-generation community in collaboration with African Americans who face similar aspirations, such as, better pay, a cleaner environment, and improved schools. On the other hand, Latinos are significantly underrepresented in civic life, partly because they are young, partly because of challenges with citizenship status, and partly because of institutions that are still adapting to the change in constituencies—all of which contribute to a demand for more Latinos in elected and other leadership positions.
How We Did it: Methodology

Roots | Raíces is not the usual academic production, in which researchers pose questions often rooted in theory. Rather, the roots of this project are in our relationships with community organizers in South LA who first raised questions with us about the changing demographics and their implications for strategy and organizing. At first, this was mostly about generating nuanced data that took ethnic and neighborhood differences seriously. Indeed, our first forays into collaborative work in South LA involved providing detailed data for strategic planning (Terriquez and Carter 2013), and organizers were eager for more. As you will see—data nerds that we are—we took on that task with particular fervor.

Organizers were also concerned about the emerging narrative. The usual doom and gloom story of South LA is not only unbalanced, failing to resonate with the daily experiences of residents, it is also unhelpful for community building. Organizers and leaders were also concerned that as the stories of tensions wane, they could be replaced with a tale of Latino triumphalism in South LA. Such a frame could take what was once sacred ground for Black civil rights organizers (who literally took the ground by challenging racially restrictive housing covenants) and simply rechristen it as Latino tierra. That sort of exclusive and almost nationalist political vision does not resonate with either the Black or Latino organizers with whom we have worked.

So we set out to see what both the data and the residents would tell us. We started with an unusual degree of independence for an odd reason: Whereas the vast majority of our projects start with conversations with organizers and funders, this project lacked an original funding partner. We understood the reluctance as this was a complicated project, fraught with the possibilities of mistakes in analysis that would be politically charged and socially problematic. But thanks to our organizing partners, we had a close-up view of the changes in South LA and we knew that this report was urgent.

So we moved forward on the research while seeking funding partners (who we eventually encountered and who we thank profusely). That meant that we were initially under resourced and so we had to cut some corners in the work. As explained in this chapter, while we achieved a reasonable ethnic mix in our civic leader interviews, we focused our community interviews on Latino residents. The particular focus was partly because that was more of an untold story but it was also partly because of costs. We are still in the field and are supplementing the current work with interviews of African-American residents—so the book that follows this report, we hope, will have an even more complete picture. Stay tuned for what will come, but the point here is that the whole cash-short context also meant that we had lots of freedom to go where our curiosity took us.

And what a journey that was. On the quantitative side, we assembled an extensive dataset that includes individual- and neighborhood-level observations that allowed us to explore different South LA neighborhoods, and to capture distinctions by country-of-origin, documentation status, recency of arrival, and other variables of interest. On the qualitative side, we conducted interviews with 100 Latino community residents (with a focus on three different neighborhoods) as well as nearly 20 interviews with civic leaders who are Black, Latino, Asian American, and White. We also conducted observations in parks and community gardens, as these are gathering places where daily life is lived and community collaboration is often negotiated.
Our team of researchers for the project was carefully constituted and so deserves a bit of explication. One of the project leads, Manuel Pastor, has a long history with key community organizing institutions and many key political leaders based in South LA. He is a leading scholar who often offers data-heavy analyses of issues of racial disparity and immigrant integration. The other project leader, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, is one of the nation's leading scholars of the immigrant experience, including studies on gender, domestic work, faith-based organizing, and most recently a book on immigrants and gardens. She is well-versed in ethnography and helped structure that part of our work. You might guess from this relative set of skills how the work was divided, yet the hallmark of this project was that it followed the sort of dialogue, collaboration, and intersectionality we saw modeled in South LA.

The rest of the team included a then post-doctorate fellow, Veronica Montes, an immigrant from Mexico who was undocumented when she arrived in the 1980s and was able to connect well with some of those who were among the “first generation” of Latino arrivals in South LA. Our main ethnographic researchers—Walter Thompson-Hernandez, Jessica Medina, and Kristie Valdez-Guillen—all were born and reared in or near various parts of South LA. Rhonda Ortiz and Vanessa Carter managed the project: Rhonda’s family lived in South LA when its western edges were multi-ethnic while Vanessa has lived, worked, and played in South LA on and off for the past 10 years. Rounding off our team were Pamela Stephens and Alejandro Sanchez-Lopez, both of whom did much of the number crunching and some of the interviews, and both of whom have relationships with movement-building organizations in South LA.

So, in other words, we were not and are not a “disinterested” university research team; we all care deeply about South LA (and if we did not before, we sure do now). As a result, we have tried to embody a seeming contradiction: Because we care deeply, we have been passionately committed to providing a dispassionate analysis, mostly because we know that a more level-headed approach to tensions and transformations can help South LA achieve a more prosperous and collaborative future.

Arriving at that balance reflects another part of the methodology—which has less to do with how we conducted the research and more with how we conducted ourselves. While the typical relationships in a research team are top-down—the principal investigators lay out the plan and the researchers execute it—this project has involved a continuous dialogue between all members of the research team. Over the past year and a half of research, we have often stopped to come together to “correct course,” so to speak. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement has made its impression on this report in a way that we did not anticipate and the need to challenge anti-Blackness in all its manifestations is now an even more important theme in the analysis.

The project has also involved a dialogue with South LA itself. Aside from some usual academic venues, the early quantitative data was presented at an event at Los Angeles Trade Technical College (LA Trade Tech) to a group of Latino leaders. As the qualitative pieces filled out, we offered additional presentations, particularly in a few community-oriented events at Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science (Drew University) and a student event at California State University, Dominguez Hills. In November 2015, we held a seminar at the University of Southern California (USC) during which our team presented the findings of this report and received comments from Benjamin Torres of Community Development Technologies (CD Tech) at LA Trade Tech, Gloria Walton from Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE), and Josh Sides from...
California State University, Northridge. We also received some important pushback from audience members (including Laura Pulido of USC) but also great enthusiasm, particularly from younger community residents. Their various insights are reflected in this report. As usual, all errors of omission and commission are ours but what strengths may be here reflect the wisdom of the organizers, leaders, and residents who have shared their life stories and policy perspectives with us.

Roadmap to the Report

If you are here, we assume you are more than the casually interested reader, who probably puts this down after the executive summary. You are, we think, in luck—this report is rich with details and insight. But you should also settle down with a cup of tea or coffee as it also takes a while to get through.

Chapter two combines history and data to better contextualize the subsequent ethnographic research. As we note, South LA has always been a place of transition, often a place of hope, and now a place where the dynamics of racism and structural disadvantage play out even as people try to craft a more hopeful future for themselves, their families, and their communities. With this historical picture in place, we turn to a quantitative analysis of the area. Analysis of US Census and other data, led by Pamela Stephens, shows the demographic transition over the decades, the nature of the immigrant and Latino population (which overlap substantially but are different), and the points of commonality and difference in the Latino and Black experience in South LA. The data profile is a scaffolding on which the rest of this report is built.

A few key themes emerge from this chapter. The first involves the timing of the demographic transformation: Latinos were coming to South LA just as traditional immigrant entry points were filling up and African Americans were leaving due to a combination of shrinking employment, rising crime, and excess policing. A second key point is that the change seems permanent: Latinos have put down roots in the neighborhood, mainly through buying homes and building families. A third key point is that Latinos have not been as quick to put down civic roots—at least not through more traditional avenues. Naturalization and voting rates remain remarkably low, especially when compared to the county as a whole.
Third, both African Americans and Latinos in South LA face some shared challenges: poorly performing schools, inadequate access to food and park space, stressed environmental conditions, and inadequate employment. At the same time, there are key differences: For Latinos, the economic challenge stems more from wage depression and working poverty whereas for African Americans, problems center more on the lack of employment. Any shared agenda aimed at Black-Latino unity in South LA will need to address these differences as well as the clear commonalities.

A final nuance is critical for considering some of the political challenges ahead: While Latinos and African Americans find themselves living in South LA together, the experience has been asymmetric countywide. That is, while African Americans have become accustomed to Latino in-migration, the bulk of Latinos who are not in South LA do not have to spend significant time thinking about their economic, social, and political relations with African Americans. Thus, South LA is likely to be the place where this sort of alliance gets better developed and perfected—but the lessons will need to be spread across the county.

Our next chapter goes beyond the quantitative data to turn to the lived experience of Latinos in South LA. In this chapter, led by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Walter Thompson-Hernandez, we draw from interviews with 100 Latino community residents. The chapter begins by comparing the interviewee sample to the range of Latinos living in South LA. We note that there are some distinctions: Our sample is a bit younger and more educated than the South LA population; in particular, we may have oversampled highly-educated, college graduates in the second generation. While this reflects some of the impacts of our snowball sampling strategy (that is, interviewees recommending further interviewees), it also allows us to get at the key point of this chapter: the need to distinguish between generations of Latinos in South LA.

The first wave of Latinos to South LA were, as noted, more likely to harbor anti-Black perspectives, partly because of home country dynamics and partly because of their quick grasp of the racial hierarchy in the US. But another factor was “shutting in and shutting out” South LA, partly because the 1980s and 1990s were times of high stress and high crime. All of this bred some insularity and social distance. Interestingly, what it did not breed was an embrace of whiteness; rather, the drift seems to have been to a stronger pan-ethnic identity (that is, from Guatemalan or Mexican to Latino).

On the other hand, the second-generation often has a deep solidarity with African Americans, partly because these are the kids with whom they have grown up. As a result, they look a bit askance at Latinos in places like East LA who express anti-Black prejudice and many have not had to test their resilience as much (or so they think) in the midst of the sort of challenging circumstances presented in South LA. This generation was schooled in the US, in general, and South LA, in particular, so they tend to put race relations in the context of slavery, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement, and are more likely to see shared concerns across Black and Brown lines.

One interesting thing linking the generations: a tremendous pride of place. An outsider might see distressed corridors or pour over economic statistics but residents put their focus elsewhere.
For the first generation, South LA is where they bought their homes and raised their families. For the second generation, this is where they were educated and often had to fight for that education. Many Latinos see their families settled in for the long haul; we did not hear Latinos talk about South LA as a stepping stone for something different. This pride in place bodes well for developing a Latino civic voice but the ethnographic work in this chapter squares with the data analysis of the previous chapter: There is a high level of civic disengagement that must be overcome.

One gap in this chapter is that we focused on Latino residents and did not, in this first phase of the research, conduct interviews with African-American residents. While we wanted to do this from the inception of the project, we also faced financial constraints that led us to focus on gathering a sizeable sample of Latinos. However, as we finished the project the need to do these interviews came into sharper relief. While the scant attention paid to the Latino experience in South LA certainly deserves a focused research project, being Latino in South LA is intimately bound up with African-American relationships and including Black voices in even this Latino-focused story is part of reversing the trend of Black “erasure”—in which the long-standing African-American community is displaced from the public imagination.

We plead not ignorance of the issues but rather an awareness of the need to lift up an untold story—that of Latinos in South LA—and to do it within the resource constraints we faced. Methodological challenges confronted us as well: To get a full picture, we would have had to interview both those African Americans who left South LA as well as those who stayed. Tracking the diaspora is challenging. In any case, we relied heavily on interviews with Black, Latino, and other civic leaders to capture some of that story and the sense of Black displacement and loss is evident in chapter four. As we are closing up this initial report, our team is actually back out in the field interviewing African-American residents in our three focus neighborhoods. These interviews (as well as the pre-existing interviews with Black civic leaders) have informed how we have edited this report but will also be an important addition to the book that will follow this report (a shameless plug to stay engaged with our research!).

Chapter four examines the institutional landscape of South LA, with a particular focus on whether the institutions have responded to the ongoing demographic changes through being inflexible or in flux. Led by Alejandro Sanchez-Lopez, we build on interviews with 18 civic leaders that focused on their perspectives on immigrant integration, social justice, and the future of South LA. We start with a landscape of institutions, noting the key role of African-American organizations and the relative paucity of Latino-led groups. The institutional gap is more than ethnic; faith-based organizing has weakened as the constituency base for the Black church has shrunk. Business institutions are also limited in power and scope.

One of the major challenges facing South LA is the incorporation of Latino residents into the leadership structure. This is sometimes made more difficult by a Black sense of loss over this historically Black space, as well as concerns about job displacement. We heard about an additional concern that the Latino move-in may be a first step towards gentrification that will exacerbate the Black exodus (and eventually also push out the low-income Latinos currently making their lives in South LA). So, emerging Latino leaders must strike a balance: They have to prove to African-American leaders and residents that they will honor the history and center the experience of Blackness in South LA and that they will go to bat for African Americans—even as they try not to be dismissed by Latino constituencies for not sufficiently lifting up concerns about the lack of Latino power in the decision-making process.
Organizations and leaders that are doing this right tend to focus on insuring that African Americans and Latinos achieve parity in representation in a way that might not just reflect the numbers (particularly given the relative decline in the African-American population). They tend to provide political education that focuses on the history of African Americans in South LA but also lifts up the migration histories of immigrants. They tend to work on common issues like green space but do not shy away from discussing and addressing differences. We found that Latinos advocating in these spaces work to insure a Latino voice but also challenge anti-Blackness in that work, demonstrating solidarity on a daily basis.

One thing that seems to unite leaders is their commitment to history in South LA itself. Leaders and residents tend to more deeply trust “home-grown” leadership partly because the area has been so often neglected or taken advantage of by outsiders. Leaders pointed to the need to develop leadership programs that can provide the skills to move forward together, particularly through curriculum and training that values both immigrant rights and Black liberation and weaves together these struggles in an intersectional way.

Our last chapter is driven by this critical issue of enhancing Latino civic engagement that is both independent and interdependent. While we acknowledge that there are many issues confronting South LA, including job scarcity, threats of gentrification, poorly performing schools, and the lack of access to green space, we suggest that none of these can be addressed without the civic engagement and community organizing that can shift the attention of decision makers. We highlight the special need to engage newer Latino residents in these efforts, partly because they are so often underrepresented in voting and leadership.

Accordingly, we sum up some lessons from the research, including that the Latino population is more diverse than many may assume and that such diversity in terms of generation, national origin, geographic location, and years in South LA (and the US) must be taken into account in
all efforts for civic engagement. We also highlight how different immigrant integration is into a Black space, something that requires analysts to rethink traditional models of “assimilation,” particularly as organizers grapple with the significance of Black culture and politics in how second-generation Latinos conceive of their own identities and political futures.

We then turn to our own recommendations. While policy prescriptions are possible and necessary, we place our focus on generating more vibrant civic leadership. We emphasize the need to encourage naturalization, to create multiple on-ramps for engagement, and to develop programs aimed at finding and training Latino leaders. We stress that supporting autonomous and independent spaces for Latinos and African Americans is not a contradiction but rather may be part of the path to joint work; we highlight organizations doing creative multi-racial organizing that recognize how to strike that balance.

Finally, we conclude this chapter by discussing the need to revise the narrative. Too often, South LA is portrayed as a place of problems not promise, tensions not transformation, conflicts not collaboration. We do not mean to downplay the challenges but we also think an asset-based approach would recognize the work being done to bring neighbors together and create a firmer base for moving ahead. We need to worry about Black erasure and we also need to disrupt narratives that fail to recognize that Latinos have also put down their roots—and how that creates new possibilities for Black and Brown residents building together for South LA.

Of course, the reach of this work extends beyond the larger Los Angeles community. An increasing number of metro areas and states where Blacks and Latinos are living in close proximity give this research relevancy beyond the specific borders bracketing our work. Indeed, the phenomenon of immigrant integration in a Black context has drawn a significant amount of attention from researchers such as Winders (2008, 2013) who explores how migrants from Latin America are complicating the Black-white color line in Nashville, and Telles, Sawyer, and Rivera-Salgado (2011) who explore minority-minority relationships in cities across the US. Alvarado and Jaret (2009) lift up the need in Atkinson County, GA; Greensboro, NC; Miami, FL; and Cobb County (Atlanta), GA. Grant-Thomas and colleagues at the Kirwan Institute (2009) also included
insuring that Latino achievement is not a matter of “hopscotching” over other groups but rather is consistent with lifting up all groups. This is not always an easy balance to strike – but from this work can come adept coalition builders who can point the way to a stronger, multi-ethnic America.

We have seen that sort of coalitional work taking place in South LA – and, like many others, we have been inspired. From the movement to guarantee that all high schools offer college prep courses, to the organizing to induce developers to include community benefits agreements, to the recent successful effort to secure a federal Promise Zone designation for South LA, residents and civic leaders have shown that working together can bring about change. We trust that this report captures at least part of that nuance and hope that it provides both data and a frame that can be useful to those working for a better future for South LA.

Chicago, IL; New York, NY; Baltimore and other counties in Maryland; and parts of Mississippi. To that, BAJI (2010) adds Oakland, CA; Baltimore and Takoma Park, MD; Portland, OR; Newark, NJ; Emporia, KS; San Francisco, CA; New Orleans, LA; Albuquerque, MN; Wichita, KS; and Racine, WI. Mindiola, Flores Niemann, and Nestor Rodriguez (2009) and more recently Márquez (2013) have focused on Houston, TX. And McClain and colleagues (2011) look at Durham, NC; Memphis, TN; and Little Rock, AR and McDermott (2011) at Greenville, SC. We hope that this work adds to the body of knowledge but even more to the toolkit organizers can use in all these locales.

Finally, there are broader implications of this research for the very future of multi-ethnic America. In some religious traditions, there is deep meaning in the saying “the last shall go first.” Certainly, African Americans have been the last when it comes to public investments and public policy in urban America. Building Black-Latino alliances requires recognizing common ground and it also requires a commitment to
Many onlookers have specific images of South Los Angeles that are grounded in media portrayals—and while residents may have their own images based on their experiences, South LA is actually large and diverse both in terms of geography and population. That means that few residents and few leaders can have a sense of all that is going on. So while most of what we present in this report is rightly based on resident and civic leader knowledge, we also thought it would be useful to ground their stories in both history and data.

History is important partly because it provides us with an understanding that the sort of demographic changes experienced in recent decades are not an entirely new phenomenon. Moreover, the issue of race relations is not novel as South LA has been the stage for Southern California (and the nation) to work out its racial challenges: to overcome racially restrictive covenants, to protest against police brutality and economic neglect, and to forge new multiracial coalitions (such as what was embodied in the rise of Mayor Tom Bradley).

History is also the backdrop to and context for the Latinization of South LA—and for the future of Black-Brown organizing and coalition-building. So we begin with a brief history—and then jump to a sort of quantitative scaffolding for the report: a data exploration that offers a working definition of South LA and provides a wide range of data to better understand the Latino experience in South LA—as well as the current relative lack of Latino civic engagement.

“Successive waves of Latin American, Asian, and European immigrants ensured that the black freedom struggle would develop in a strikingly multiracial context.” (Sides 2006:6)
A Brief History

From the Japanese and European farmers who settled in Watts in the early 1900s, to African-American migrants fleeing the Jim Crow South in the early 20th century, to the Latin-American immigrants escaping turmoil in their home countries in the 1980s, people have come to South LA looking for a brighter future. Historically, South LA has always been a place of transition: Once ranches and farmlands, then white suburbs, and now Black and Latino spaces, the history of this mega-neighborhood is the history of Los Angeles, a changing place at the forefront of how America is transforming.

Los Angeles’ complex multiracial character began with the Spanish conquest of Native American lands—a genocidal erasure of indigenous cultures and people in the area that was further accelerated when California became a US state (Madley 2016). However, the 44 founders included people of mixed African, Spanish, and Indigenous descent, fostering a myth of multicultural harmony in the region (Robinson 2010). Indeed, two of California’s subsequent Mexican governors had African ancestry, including Pio Pico after whom Pico Boulevard is named. Yet as Robinson (2010) notes, this heritage was suppressed in a sort of celebration of the “Spanish” influence—perhaps better put, the capacity of the Mexican nation to absorb difference in yet another form of erasure.

With the conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1847, Mexico lost approximately one-half of its territory in the north, and Los Angeles became part of the United States. After the war, most Californios lost title to or possession of their large ranchos to the US government. Land was “annexed bit by bit” by Anglo-American farmers who transformed it into farms yielding sugar beets, celery, and beans in South LA (Zappia 2012:57). They were later joined by other farmers, including Japanese families who operated small “truck farms” in Watts, Compton, and Torrance. Watts residents went so far as to boast about their country living (Surls and Gerber 2016).

The bucolic image of the South LA environs might surprise those unfamiliar with the area’s history, but it is important to recall that Los Angeles was a small town in a largely rural setting for most of the late 19th century (McWilliams 1949). San Francisco in the north was the center of California commerce and finance; for example, in 1880 the population of San Francisco was more than 20 times that of Los Angeles. But the era of Southern California boosterism soon took hold, real estate fever set in (as seems to be a typical pattern for the Southland), and by 1920, Los Angeles’ population equaled that of its northern rival, with the rest of LA County adding another 60 percent to the population of the burgeoning metropolis (Fogelson 1993:78).

The population explosion laid the groundwork for Los Angeles’ Black community and for what would later become known as South Central. Leaving behind the racial violence of the Jim Crow South in search of better jobs and better homes, African Americans came to Los Angeles and joined the small number of other Black Angelenos already here. The attractiveness of Los Angeles was certified by none other than W.E.B. Du Bois: In 1913, he observed that Los Angeles’ Black population was “without doubt the most beautifully housed group of colored people in the United States” (Hunt and Ramón 2010:12). This was in no small part because of the relative economic and housing freedom that were afforded to African Americans throughout the city (Sides 2006).

While racially restricted housing covenants limited exactly what properties could be purchased, by 1910, 40 percent of African Americans were

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Decades of Demographic Change
homeowners—compared to only 2.4 percent of African Americans in New York City and 8 percent in Chicago (Sides 2006:16). The employment side of the equation was not so bright: Most African-American women worked in domestic service while the men frequently worked as railroad porters, barbers, janitors, chauffeurs, and waiters (Robinson 2010:35). Still, some observers have described this era as something of a “golden era” for African Americans (Kun and Pulido 2014:10), partly because the number of African Americans in Los Angeles was small enough to not constitute a threat to whites, whose racial attacks were focused on Mexicans, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans.

In the 1920s, African Americans began to build strong communities—because of forced segregation—just south of downtown Los Angeles. Central Avenue was already “the primary artery of black life, and the intersection with 12th Street remained the center of things…” (Flamming 2005:261). Black residents joined Mexicans, Filipinos, Italians, and others who packed into Central Avenue in an array of housing that ranged from well-tended bungalows to dilapidated shacks. Black-owned businesses and buildings—now-famous as markers of Black cultural life—sprung up, including the Lincoln Theater in 1926 and the Somerville Hotel. Built in 1928 for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) convention, the hotel was renamed the Dunbar Hotel in 1930 and became the West Coast entertainment mecca for Black performers and elites. Black architect Paul Williams designed buildings including Second Baptist Church, a new Elks Hall, and the 28th Street YMCA during this era.

Even as South Central was being formed as a new center of Black culture and influence, change was lurking. The pastures and farmlands of the broader South LA area were being filled in by manufacturing and industry, with housing tracts being created alongside, as Los Angeles sought to craft a new sort of “industrial suburb”—close to employment, far from the city center, and ready to house a largely white working class. Compton, South Gate, and Huntington Park, among other municipalities that adjoined the city of Los Angeles, utilized racial restrictive covenants and racially discriminatory real estate practices to keep the new suburbs exclusively white (Nicolaides 2002). The pattern was also seen in the parts of South LA that were in the City of Los Angeles proper. For example Watts, once a separate city but annexed by Los Angeles in 1926, included African Americans and Japanese Americans but “(a)s of 1920, most Watts settlers were of European descent—Germans, Scots, Greeks, Italians, and Jews . . .” (Avila 2004:26).

The ability to both house and segregate was strained when manufacturing skyrocketed during WWII due to government contracting. Thousands of Black migrants from the South, especially from Texas and Louisiana, came to Los Angeles seeking jobs in wartime munitions plants, which later transitioned to automobile, tire, and steel jobs that were often near South LA. This was a new development, and not just because of the scale; prior to the war, discrimination in manufacturing against Black jobseekers was rampant. But wartime necessities broke down those barriers with long-lasting impacts: “At its peak in the
1950s and early 1960s, the manufacturing sector provided the economic foundation for a Black middle class in South LA. At its high water mark in 1960, 24 percent of employed African American men and 18 percent of employed black women in Los Angeles worked as manufacturing operatives,” which helped to create a form of economic stability for African Americans that, in many cases, did not previously exist (Sides 2012:35).

During this period of in-migration, the limited housing stock for Black residents became apparent. “During WWII, fifty thousand new residents packed into the prewar boundaries of Central Avenue, ten thousand new residents moved to Watts, and seventy thousand crowded into Bronzeville/Little Tokyo” (Sides 2006:98). Mayor of Los Angeles at the time, Fletcher Bowron, tried to meet demand during and after the war by promoting public housing. But while some units did get built, including the Jordan Downs complex in Watts, public housing was portrayed as largely serving minorities and was challenged by the Committee Against Socialist Housing (Sitton 2005:180). In a hotly contested battle, Bowron lost and housing was once again reverted mostly to the private market.

Bowron’s loss came just after the 1948 Supreme Court decision, Shelly v. Kramer, that ended racial covenants and partially opened up the housing market to African Americans (Robinson 2010).

While real estate agents still practiced steering, often reinforced by professional associations and local governments, in the 1950s the Black middle class began to move out to other neighborhoods, including Compton and West Adams. And as a result, school populations shifted: “The three large South Central city high schools, Jefferson, Fremont, and Jordan, which had been multiethnic, became almost exclusively black in the two decades after WWII” (Sides 2006:114).

Despite increased residential mobility, the growing Black population continued to face issues of discrimination and exclusion, topics that were addressed forcefully by two local Black newspapers—the California Eagle and the Los Angeles Sentinel—as well as by the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP, founded in 1913 (and later by the Southern California chapter of the Black Panther Party, established in 1968). Tensions about long-lasting economic and social inequities boiled over in 1965 in the form of the Watts Rebellion.

While prompted by what many believed was the unlawful arrest of an African-American motorist in Watts, the real driving factors of the rebellion were poverty, racism, and problematic police-community relations. When the dust settled days later, 34 people were dead, roughly 1,000 were injured, and there had been nearly $40 million worth of property damage (Sides 2006). But this was not the only effect: The rebellion prompted a wave of white flight that in turn led to a geographic spread of the Black population. By the 1970s, African Americans were moving as far west as Baldwin Hills and the area we now call South LA was roughly 80 percent African American.

All this could have led to a sort of Black renaissance in Los Angeles, with a strong geographic base making Los Angeles the idyllic place for the Black progress, particularly of the middle class, that DuBois had originally envisioned. Sweetening

For many African Americans in Los Angeles, the postwar years brought increased social and spatial isolation from the rest of the city. Most striking was the rapid disappearance of the multiracial character of neighborhoods where they had lived before the war.” (Sides 2006:108)
the prospective deal: In 1973, voters elected Tom Bradley, a South LA resident and the first-elected Black mayor of a major US city—that also happened to be largely white. But just as the politics seemed to be shifting, the economic foundation that had made so much of this possible was crumbling under the pressures of deindustrialization, a process that gained full steam in the 1970s. As usual, pressures for African Americans were felt even earlier: “After climbing steadily for two decades, the proportion of the Black male workforce employed as operatives in manufacturing firms began to fall in the 1960s, and the absolute employment of Black men in manufacturing dropped in the early 1970s” (Sides 2006:180).

As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, other forces began to ravage South LA—and instead of being the base for a Black renaissance, the area became, in the words of one civic leader, the “capital of Black misery.” The crack cocaine epidemic burst onto the national scene, causing drug dependency, increases in crime and gang violence, rising tensions between law enforcement and residents, and ultimately a hyper-criminalized environment—and South LA was ground zero for this epidemic (Banks 2010). In this period, South LA gangs became a “favorite topic of news stories, television programming, and Hollywood movies, both entertaining and frightening people all over the nation and around the world” (Robinson 2010:50). But the consequences were directly felt by many young people, particularly young men, who were, to borrow from Kendrick Lamar’s “Good Kid,” caught between the red and the blue, between the competing gangs that wanted to conscript them and the blue uniforms and red sirens of police that wanted to drag them into the criminal justice system.

Police were often as threatening to residents as the gangs, which was made clear in 1988 when 88 LAPD officers raided two apartment buildings on 39th St. and Dalton Ave., just west of Memorial Coliseum. Intended as a show of force, the police smashed furniture and sprayed graffiti.

According to reporting by the Los Angeles Times (Mitchell 2001; also see Davis 1990:275-276 for more on the raid):

Dozens of residents from the apartments and surrounding neighborhood were rounded up. Many were humiliated or beaten, but none was charged with a crime. The raid netted fewer than six ounces of marijuana and less than an ounce of cocaine. The property damage was so great that the Red Cross offered assistance to 10 adults and 12 minors who were left homeless.

Furthering the sense of collapse: In March of 1991, just weeks after the videotaped beating of Rodney King by the LAPD, Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old Black girl, was shot in the head by a Korean shop owner following a scuffle in which she was accused of shoplifting (Jennings 2016). Soon making matters worse: on November 15, 1991, a jury found the shopkeeper guilty of voluntary manslaughter, for which the presiding judge gave her five years of probation, 400 hours of community service, and a $500 fine (Wilkinson and Clifford 1991). The disregard for Black life was made even clearer in April 1992, when a jury acquitted the officers accused of beating King, ignoring what seemed to be conclusive proof of guilt in the form of a video.

Together, these various phenomena—the slippage of employment, the rise of violence, the risks of over-policing, and the obvious miscarriages of justice—led to a new migration: the out-flight of middle-class African Americans from South LA who had provided a stabilizing presence but were now eager to provide a different environment for their children. By the 1990s, African Americans were moving to “the northern reaches of the county in Palmdale and Lancaster, and east into
in the 1980s and 1990s which the traditional receiving communities could not fully absorb.

In this period, immigrant and Latino families started looking to South LA. Part of the reason was another demographic change: While many still think of Mexican migrants as lone male sojourners, throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and to the current day, immigration to South LA and California in general began to include more women and became more family-based (Gutierrez 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Part of this was due to shifting labor demand: While agriculture continued its pull, services and assembly in urban and suburban areas were open to a more female workforce. Moreover, as restrictive immigration policies and border enforcement intensified in the 1990s, temporary stays became more challenging, back-and-forth visits became less the norm, and so grew the numbers of women, children, and permanently settled families.

As Robinson (2010) notes, this outmigration in the 1980s and 1990s made room for in-migration, and Latinos filled the gap. While the presence of Latinos in South LA was not an entirely new phenomenon (Camarillo 2004, 2007), the numbers of Mexican and Central American immigrants coming to South LA surged in the mid-1980s with continued increases in the decades thereafter (see Figure 1). Newer Latinos came with different histories and impulses which would soon shift the terrain in South LA.

For example, Mexicans in Southern California had long concentrated in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, and parts of the San Gabriel and San Fernando Valleys. But the absorptive capacities of these familiar locales became strained. Economic and social changes were afoot in Mexico which included modernizing agriculture, the peso devaluation in the 1980s, NAFTA in 1994, and the maturation of longstanding immigrant social networks. These events combined with new immigration policies and new labor demands in US metropolitan areas produced a surge in Mexican immigration.
As with the Mexican migrants, spillover ensued as Central American families looking to get out searched for better housing and saw the promising streetscapes and housing fabric of South LA. By 1990, about 19 percent of Latinos in what was then called South Central were from Central America, far short of the 44 percent of Latinos in Westlake (which had been a Mexican entry point before the Central American influx) but just shy of the 23 percent for the city as a whole (Pastor 1993:32). As we will see, that set the stage for further growth such that Central Americans now comprise 23 percent of South LA’s Latinos.

Much of this demographic change seemed to fly under the media radar until the 1992 civil unrest. While the media cast the civil unrest as a primarily African-American affair, Latinos actually constituted slightly more than half of those arrested and were “the single largest ethnic group in the damaged neighborhoods” (Pastor 1995:207). Indeed, in South LA, where most of the damage occurred, Latinos were above 45 percent of the population. Yet as Los Angeles’ Latino political leaders (mostly based in the Eastside) scrambled to understand what happened, they came face to face with a striking fact: Despite the dramatic demographic changes, there were virtually no Latino-based civic organizations in South LA that could contribute to a discussion of the rebuilding process.

The built environment of South LA was appealing to these newcomers: There were many single-family homes with prices that were affordable to those spilling out of the traditional entry points, and there was proximity to job centers such as Downtown LA and the Alameda Corridor. The 1980s saw the biggest uptick in families but in the 1990s, the process accelerated and institutionalized, particularly as small business owners departed from South LA in the wake of the 1992 civil unrest. As Zappia notes, “Latin American immigrants moved into South Los Angeles neighborhoods, setting up businesses, churches, and clinics, just as members of the Korean and Japanese communities were leaving” (Zappia 2012:58).

Central American migration to South LA was also prominent, with its push factor provided by the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala beginning in the late 1970s, and intensifying in the 1980s. Uprooted by war, violence, and economic crisis, thousands of Central Americans—including indigenous Mayans—came to Los Angeles during the 1980s and mostly settled in Westlake, the neighborhood around MacArthur Park and abutting Pico-Union. These migrants established important self-help and advocacy organizations—like the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and others—but by the mid-1980s, this area became a very poor, dangerous neighborhood, plagued by crowded, substandard housing, gang violence, drive-by shootings, and crack cocaine (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).
First, South LA has always been a place in transition, a locale where people go with hopes of a better life. Second, it has always been a place where the racial dramas of Southern California and the nation have played out—racially restrictive covenants and practices, dramatic riots and rebellions, drug epidemics and excess policing, and interethnic tensions and coalitions. Finally, it has always been a place where the future is being made: the dramatic industrialization (and its fall) that shifted a region, the Black politician that commanded a city and rose to national prominence, and the civil unrest that marked a dramatic shift in politics and civic engagement. South LA has always been central to the LA story—and it remains so today.

Development Alternatives (AGENDA)—now called Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE)—which worked to bring together Black and Latino residents, developing and winning campaigns for workforce development (Pastor and Prichard 2012).

While many Latinos have shied away from the public square—worries about legal status probably impacted some immigrants while language and other challenges were also extant—others have become engaged. Some observers think the inclination to be involved with community-based organizations stemmed from home country experiences with labor unions and social movements. Others point to the social, racial, and political realities migrants confront upon arrival in the US and eventually South LA. Another and perhaps more promising story involves the interweaving of Black and Latino youth who have grown up together.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves: While we hope to end this report by discussing the civic infrastructure needed to fully incorporate South LA Latinos, our central focus here is laying an historical groundwork on which to lay the quantitative data. That data offers a contemporary picture as nuanced as we hope this history of South LA has been. But before we turn to that (rather eagerly given our quantitative predilections), it is useful to highlight several themes that emerge from this brief history and that can help to frame the upcoming data profile.
Defining South LA: Data and Methods

In the historical overview, we offered no specific definition of South LA, something that may have been appropriate since South LA was actually evolving and changing in form and boundaries over the decades discussed. But while that necessary fuzziness works for history, data analysis requires some choices that involved more stability.

We define South LA by the same boundaries as those in the Los Angeles Times neighborhood mapping project. Figure 2 illustrates that South LA is a set of 28 smaller neighborhoods, comprising more than 50 square miles—and as such, includes a variety of conditions and experiences; diversity prevails. For example, View Park-Windsor Hills is more affluent than, say, Athens; Hyde Park is far more African American than Florence. Note also that South LA is defined to include areas that are not part of the City of Los Angeles but are rather part of the unincorporated areas of LA County (e.g., Florence-Firestone).

Given this diversity, we chose three areas of focus for our resident interview work: Central Avenue—which includes three LA Times-defined neighborhoods, Historic South-Central, South Park, and Central-Alameda; Vermont Square—which also includes Vermont-Slauson; and Watts. These three neighborhoods have their differences but are all fairly reflective of the demographic landscape of South LA. Some of their distinctions: Central Avenue is the most Latino and became majority Latino first. Of the three, Vermont Square has the greatest share of Central Americans in its Latino population. And while the share of Latinos in Watts mirrors that of South LA as a whole, its Latino population has grown the fastest of the three neighborhoods we consider.

Figure 2: Map of South LA Neighborhoods

Source: Los Angeles Times mapping project.
In what follows we make references to these three neighborhoods to tease out some nuances in the region, and to shed light on the neighborhoods where our interviewees live. In doing both that and offering an overall picture of South LA, we draw from a variety of data sources. The crux of this quantitative analysis focuses on changes in demographics, so we rely heavily the US Census Bureau—including historical data from the Decennial Census for each decade going back to 1970 and summary data from the 2009-2013 American Community Survey (ACS). We also analyzed ACS microdata, pooling data from 2009-2013 from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS, Ruggles et al. 2015) which allow us to provide neighborhood and sub-neighborhood data broken down by more detailed demographic characteristics like race and ethnicity, nativity, and legal status.

The geographic scale at which the US Census Bureau provides microdata—public use microdata areas (PUMAs)—are much larger than the census tracts we used in the summary data and even larger than the smaller neighborhoods that comprise South LA. This means that PUMA-level data without any modifications could lead to some error. For example, if we simply pull from the PUMA that includes Watts, we would have also included Florence, Broadway-Manchester, and Green Meadows—areas that have slightly different populations. So we fit the data by using an iterative proportional fitting procedure, a process that essentially involves reweighting individual observations until we better match the age-gender-race profile of the neighborhood on which we are focusing.

Another novel aspect of our analysis is the inclusion of data on undocumented immigrants which we estimated using our pooled 2009-2013 IPUMS data, the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation, and national aggregate estimates for the undocumented by country of origin. For an explanation of methodology, see Appendix A of Toward a Healthy California (Marcelli, Pastor, and Wallace 2015); here, we have applied the method to a more recent vintage of the Census data.

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I think of Watts as by itself. It’s not South LA, it’s just Watts—the reason being is this is my home, you know. This is completely different than South Central to me. If I go to South Central, I know I’m not in Watts...”

― Fernando Hernandez,* Watts resident
* indicates pseudonym
 Transformation Over Time: Demographic Change in South LA

Above, we described the long stretch of history of South LA; here, we focus on the more recent decades for which data is both readily available and more consistently collected. Of course, the most striking data in that period has been the growth of the Latino population. After the Great Migration of the early and mid-20th century and white flight of the 1960s, by 1970, about 80 percent of the population was African American in the area now defined as South LA. But by 2010, South LA had radically changed and was 64 percent Latino.

The maps in Figures 4a thorough 5b in the following pages show the demographic transformation spatially and illustrate that it has been uneven—so neighborhoods matter. Latinos have been moving into South LA from the north and east, where there are other established Latino communities (e.g., Pico Union, East LA, etc.). Neighborhoods that had a sizeable Latino population—like Historic South-Central—are now Latino by a vast majority. But even those neighborhoods with smaller Latino populations a few decades ago—like Vermont Square/Vermont-Slauson and Watts—are now majority Latino. Among our three areas of study, the share of the Latino population in Watts grew the most, increasing from 16 percent in 1980 to 70 percent in 2010.

The demographic shift in South LA partly reflects countywide trends: In the last three decades the county’s Latino population has more than doubled while its Black population has declined by 12 percent. But as our historical section and the data made clear, these shifts were more pronounced in South LA. While the boom of manufacturing jobs in Los Angeles brought a large Black population into the neighborhood and established a healthy Black middle class, nearly 150,000 Black residents left South LA over the 1980s and 1990s (as shown in Figure 3), as deindustrialization and disinvestment, coupled with rising crime and over-policing, contributed to pushing residents away. As a result, LA County’s Black population became more dispersed. In 1980, nearly half (47 percent) of African Americans in LA County lived in South LA; three decades later only 29 percent of the county’s Black population is in the mega-neighborhood.

Despite the dispersal, it is important to realize the asymmetry of the Black and Latino experiences. While Latinos now make up the majority of the population in South LA, the Latino community is not concentrated in South LA in the same way as is the African-American community: 11 percent...
Figure 4a: Map of Percent African American by Census Tract, 1970

Figure 4b: Map of Percent African American by Census Tract, 2010

Source: US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc
of the county’s Latinos live in South LA, up from 7 percent in 1980, but still well below the nearly 30 percent share for African Americans. As such, South LA still serves as an important political and economic anchoring space for the region’s Black population.

And while there are many non-Latino immigrants in Los Angeles, in our study neighborhoods that experienced the greatest gains in Latino population, they also experienced the greatest gains in their immigrant populations: Watts’ immigrant population grew 391 percent and Vermont Square’s grew 302 percent.11

Part of the larger trends discussed earlier: The Latino surge of the 1980s and 1990s—occurring at the same time that African Americans were leaving in large numbers—was fueled by immigration from Mexico and Central America and the expansion of those populations outside of traditional ethnic enclaves in the Los Angeles area. However, in recent decades the foreign-born population has stabilized.

Figure 6 on the next page shows the nativity of South LA residents by how long they have lived in the US. The figure shows that in the past two decades, the proportion of recent arrivals—immigrants who have been in the US less than 10 years—has declined while the share of those living in the country 21 and more years has increased substantially. A related data point: about 48 percent of Latinos in South LA were born in the US. Among Latino immigrants in South LA, nearly half (46 percent) have been in the country for at least 20 years.12

Another sort of asymmetry is at play, as well. Exposure indices—which measure the likelihood of encountering a person of another group in your neighborhood—are quite different for African Americans and Latinos: The exposure of African Americans to Latinos has been on a steady rise (quadrupling between 1970 and 2000) while the exposure of Latinos to African Americans barely moved over that period (Ethington, Frey, and Myers 2001). In essence, many Latinos have been moving into Black neighborhoods, but few African Americans have been moving into areas with high concentrations of Latinos. This means that African Americans, particularly civic leaders, frequently have to think of alliances with their Latino neighbors or services for their Latino constituents, while Latino residents and leaders in traditionally Latino areas often have the relative luxury of not having to think about Black-Latino relations.

As the Black population declined in South LA, the area’s immigrant population grew—fueling the growth of the neighborhood’s Latino population. The share of immigrants in South LA doubled from 18 percent in 1980 to 36 percent in 2013. In absolute terms, the number of immigrants in the neighborhood increased 161 percent, exceeding the countywide rate of 109 percent.10

Yes, there is a large community of Salvadorans. There’s a growing community in this area and there are a lot of Salvadoran businesses. There’s a lot of Salvadoran, Honduran, and Mexicans. But there are more Salvadoran restaurants.”

— Maria Vasquez, South LA resident
South LA’s Latino population is more diverse than that of the county—due in part to the growth and compositional changes of South LA’s immigrant population. For example, just between 2000 and 2013, the number of Central American immigrants in South LA increased by 28 percent, compared to just 7 percent countywide. Figure 7 illustrates the increasing diversity within the Latino population in South LA compared with the county in the past two decades. About three-quarters of the county’s Latinos are and have been Mexican. On the other hand, in South LA, Central Americans have not only made up a larger share of Latinos, that share grew over the past two decades. So, only 68 percent of South LA Latinos are of Mexican descent, while Central Americans make up nearly a quarter (23 percent) of the population.

We noted above that when civil wars and other political violence ravaged Guatemala and El Salvador in the late 1970s and 1980s, large numbers of Central Americans fled to Los Angeles, initially settling in neighborhoods like Westlake and Pico-Union.
As Los Angeles’ Central American population became more established and those areas became increasingly overcrowded, residents started moving into South LA. Figure 8a and 8b illustrate how that played out geographically: When we examine growth trends for Central Americans in our three areas of focus, Vermont Square—located just southwest of Pico-Union—has a higher concentration of Central Americans than Watts and Central Avenue. About three-quarters of Latinos in Watts and Central Avenue are Mexican, while in Vermont Square only half are Mexican and 38 percent are Central American.\(^{15}\)

The distinct make-up of the Latino community in South LA—particularly the large Central American population and diversity of time in the country among immigrants—has fostered a unique sense of identity in the neighborhood, an identity that is also shaped by sharing space with a large African-American community. We will explore that more in a subsequent chapter utilizing interview data on Latino self-perception.
For now we focus on something worth emphasizing: While the demographic change has been recent and dramatic, it also seems quite permanent because South LA’s Latinos have now sunk roots into the sub-region.

**Putting Down Roots: Settling in South LA**

As the Latino community has grown and become more established in South LA, it has also put down roots in the neighborhood—mainly through buying homes and building families. However, Latinos are not as quick to put down civic roots—at least not through more traditional avenues. Naturalization and voting rates remain remarkably low, especially when compared to the county as a whole.

Figure 9 shows homeownership rates in South LA for Latino and Black households from 1980 to the present, comparing against the county. While homeownership rates are lower in South LA than the county, rates for Latinos have increased over the past few decades. In 1980, when Latinos were just under a quarter of South LA’s population, their homeownership rate was 22 percent. Three decades later that rate was 33 percent. The most significant increase in homeownership for Latinos occurred in the 1990s, following the surge in the Latino population in South LA. Black homeownership remained relatively stagnant over the past few decades until the foreclosure crisis and the 2008 economic downturn. The region’s Latinos and African Americans had higher foreclosure rates than their white counterparts, mostly due to high incidences of predatory lending (Leonard and Flynn 2012). Even so, Latino homeownership rates in South LA slightly rose in the most recent period.

**Figure 9: Homeownership by Race/Ethnicity in South LA and LA County, 1980-2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>LA County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2013</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.
Aside from being younger, Latino households in South LA have different structures: they are more likely to be multigenerational and, of course, far more likely to be mixed status (that is, to include household members that are undocumented or non-citizen immigrants, as well as US citizens). More than three-quarters (78 percent) of Latino households have more than one generation living together—13 percent having three or more generations. Comparatively, only 44 percent of South LA’s Black households are multigenerational with about 6 percent having three or more generations. Latino households are also multigenerational in terms of immigration status: The majority (72 percent) of Latino youth under the age of 18 are second generation—they are native born, with at least one immigrant parent. Furthermore, about 36 percent of all youth live with at least one undocumented parent and the vast majority (88 percent) of those youth are US born.

Figure 10 shows the length of time Latino and Black homeowners have been in their current homes in South LA compared to the county. Trends are similar to that of the county, but still highlight an emerging sense of rootedness among the Latino community, with 44 percent of Latino homeowners having been in their homes for less than 10 years. Indeed, more than three-quarters of Latino homeowners have been in their homes for less than 20 years, corresponding with rising homeownership rates in the past two decades. Flipping to the African-American pattern, nearly half of Black homeowners in South LA (47 percent) have been in their homes for more than 30 years, and a majority (79 percent) for 10 years or more, much higher than the county as a whole. In general, African-American homeowners are aging in place: To further illustrate this point, the median age for Black homeowners in South LA (63 years old) is higher than that of Latino homeowners (49 years old).

Figure 10: Black and Latino Homeownership by Length of Time in Residence, South LA and LA County, 2009-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>South LA</th>
<th></th>
<th>LA County</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30+ years</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29 years</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–19 years</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.
The pattern suggests that Latino adults, a group that is largely immigrant—76 percent of Latino adults are foreign born and 36 percent are undocumented—are establishing their families in South LA. One side of that is homeownership: Latino immigrants in South LA own homes at rates similar to their US-born counterparts—31 percent and 29 percent, respectively. Undocumented Latino immigrants are the least likely to own their homes (13 percent) while naturalized Latino immigrants are the most likely to own their homes (52 percent). An astonishing 50 percent of South LA Latino immigrants who have been in the US for more than 30 years own their home. That rate surpasses the overall county homeownership rate (46 percent).

However, Latinos in South LA are not integrating by other measures—particularly measures associated with civic participation. For one, Latinos in South LA have lower rates of English language acquisition than their counterparts countywide: only 40 percent of Latino immigrants speak English at least “well” compared to 51 percent in the county. The disparity is smaller for more recent arrivals: Looking at Latino immigrants who have been in the US for less than 10 years, in South LA 33 percent speak English at least “well” compared to 39 percent for the county. Of course, lower English language acquisition does not discount the rootedness of the Latino population, but it has implications for engaging with English-speaking neighbors, for naturalization, and for political participation.

Naturalization rates for immigrants in South LA have trailed: In 2013, 26 percent of Latino immigrants in the area were naturalized citizens compared to 47 percent of Latino immigrants in Los Angeles County. Disparities between naturalization rates in South LA and the county have widened over time, as illustrated in Figure 11. While these disparities can be partially explained by a high share of undocumented immigrants—48 percent of Latino immigrants are undocumented in South LA versus 39 percent in the county—the lack of naturalization for those who are eligible is evidence of a rooted but disconnected population. Meanwhile, the majority of undocumented Latino immigrants—58 percent—have been in the US for more than 10 years, suggesting that they and their children are not going anywhere, and so efforts to engage that population would be important for the full realization of democracy in South LA.

Figure 11: Change in Percent Foreign-born Population and Foreign-born Population that is Naturalized, 1990 to 2009-2013

Source: US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc. Note: The universe for the percent foreign-born is the total population while the universe for percent naturalized is the foreign-born population.
Of course, the real political leverage comes with voting and Figure 12 shows the yet untapped potential of Latinos as part of South LA’s electorate. Latinos make up 59 percent of the neighborhood’s voting age population—those ages 18 and older—and 41 percent of those eligible to vote by virtue of not just age but US citizenship. However, in South LA, only 35 percent of those who registered for the 2014 general election were Latino, and only 28 percent of South LA voters in that election were Latino. So while 59 percent of South LA’s adult population is Latino, just over a quarter of South LA voters were Latino.

So, then, get-out-the-vote efforts, a path to legalization, and naturalization and citizenship campaigns are vital. Of course, there are many ways to be civically engaged beyond formal electoral means: through political education, neighborhood organizing, giving testimony, etc. which are part and parcel to the work of the civic engagement organizations discussed later in this report.

Figure 12: Civic Engagement of Latinos as Share of the Total Population in South LA and LA County

Source: US Census Bureau, UC Berkeley Statewide Database. Note: Voting age population refers to the population ages 18 and older. Citizen voting age population refers to the population ages 18 and older who are citizens.
Race and Place: Points of Conflict and Commonality

In South LA, Latinos and African Americans have to contend with many common issues—including poverty, economic inequalities, struggling schools, and environmental inequality—often more than their counterparts countywide. But coming together also means acknowledging that universal goals such as improving family income necessitates recognizing different strategies. For example, Latinos are more likely to experience working poverty while African Americans often contend more forcefully with unemployment: Addressing each issue is important but the strategies can be distinct even if complementary (Pastor et al. 2011).

South LA is one of the most low-income areas of Los Angeles County: the overall poverty rate for South LA is 34 percent, nearly double that of the county (18 percent). Figure 13 shows that median incomes have been low and stagnant for Latino and Black households over the past few decades but also that the median Latino household income is higher than that of Black counterparts. At the same time, Latino households are larger than Black households: The average household size for Latinos in South LA is 4.6 people, whereas it is 2.4 for African Americans. Partly because of this, poverty rates for Latinos are higher—in 2013, 35 percent of Latinos were in poverty compared to 29 percent of African Americans.

**Figure 13: Black and Latino Median Household Income (2013 $), South LA, 1990-2013**

![Graph showing median household income for Black, Latino, and LA County households in South LA from 1990 to 2013.](source: US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.)
SHIFTING SPACES:
Decades of Demographic Change

Figure 14: Black and Latino Mortgage and Rent Burden in South LA and LA County, 2009-2013

Source: US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.
Note: Housing burden is defined as paying more than 30 percent of household income on housing costs. Renter costs are defined as gross monthly rent plus utilities; owner costs include but are not limited to mortgage payments or any other debts on the property, taxes, insurance, and utilities.

Figure 15: Black and Latino Unemployment Rates, South LA, 1980-2013

Source: US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.
Note: A person is unemployed if they are in the labor force and currently looking for work. The unemployment rate is the share of unemployed persons out of the total labor force (the sum of those currently employed and those unemployed).
Even though the cost of housing in South LA is lower than other places in the region, high poverty and low incomes makes affordability an issue for the area’s residents. Figure 14 on the previous page shows the burden of housing costs for Black and Latino homeowners and renters; following the practice of the US Census Bureau, we define “housing burden” as spending more than 30 percent of household income on rent or mortgage and other housing costs. The graph shows that housing burden is higher in South LA than the county, for homeowners and renters alike—although it tends to be worse for Latinos and worse for renters.

The issue of housing affordability for Latinos in particular is underscored by high rates of overcrowding—19 percent of Latino households in South LA are overcrowded compared to 11 percent of Latino households countywide.

So while South LA is relatively affordable, its residents are struggling to meet housing costs. Compounding the issue of affordability is the risk and reality of gentrification, which puts residents who are more economically insecure—especially renters—at higher risk for displacement from their homes.

“...Everybody wants to live in South LA. Now they’re like if you’re poor, if you’re rich, you have downtown right there, and that’s with the gentrification.”

— Cynthia Ventura,* South LA resident

From outside South LA, the threats of gentrification might be perceived as quite fantastical: Really, in South LA? But the challenges feel very real in some of the neighborhoods, partly as pressure drifts in from downtown and the same housing stock that attracted African Americans, then Latinos, remain ready for the taking. Of particular concern: The redevelopment along the Crenshaw corridor has already sparked gentrification in neighborhoods like Baldwin Hills/Crenshaw and Leimert Park, partly as a result of the extension of the light rail system (Mu’min 2015).

But while Latinos and African Americans in South LA both face challenges to economic stability, these challenges are often manifested in different forms. For example, for African Americans, unemployment is a major barrier. As Figure 15 on the previous page illustrates, in 2013 the unemployment rate for Latinos in South LA was 12 percent, comparable to the county. But for African Americans in South LA that rate was 21 percent. Figure 15 also shows that the unemployment rate for African Americans has shot up over the past three decades—especially in the last decade, but for Latinos the rate has actually slowly declined since 1990.

High unemployment rates can discourage people from entering or re-entering the workforce, as we can see in the difference in labor force participation rates: in 2013, the rate for African Americans was 53 percent compared to 65 percent for Latinos. There is also significant variation in labor force participation rates by gender—while Black men and women in South LA have similar rates (54 percent and 51 percent, respectively), the rate for Latino men (78 percent) is substantially higher than that for Latina women (54 percent). Disparities by gender are less likely due to systemic causes of discouragement from the workforce and more likely because Latina women with families are more likely to stay home, especially if they have limited childcare options. And as we have mentioned earlier, Latino households are much more likely to be comprised of families than African-American households.
Nonetheless, for Latinos, working poverty is a more salient issue than unemployment. We define those in working poverty as full-time workers between the ages of 25 and 64 living at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level. Figure 16 shows that 36 percent of Latino full-time workers in South LA are in working poverty, more than triple the rate for African Americans. Difference in earnings helps to explain this, as the median wage for Latino workers in South LA is nearly $10 an hour while Black workers earn $18 an hour.

The relatively younger age profile of Latinos compared to African Americans does not explain away the wage differences: Figure 17 shows that the median wage for Latinos hovers around $10 an hour across all age groups, while it steadily increases for African Americans.

Source: CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

Source: CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data. Note: Wages are reported for full-time workers between the ages of 25 and 64. A full-time worker works at least 50 weeks in a year for at least 35 hours a week.
LA Latinos ages 25 and older have less than a high school degree, compared to just 16 percent of African Americans, while Black adults are three times as likely to have a bachelor's degree as Latinos (17 percent versus 4 percent). Differences in educational attainment are likely part of differences in the wage-age gradient. That said, Figure 18 illustrates that there are still disparities between Black and Latino wages as educational attainment increases. These disparities are compounded by lower educational attainment for South LA Latinos than their African-American counterparts: The majority (63 percent) of South LA Latinos ages 25 and older have less than a high school degree, compared to just 16 percent of African Americans, while Black adults are three times as likely to have a bachelor's degree as Latinos (17 percent versus 4 percent).28

Figure 19 shows educational attainment by nativity: 69 percent of Latino immigrants have less than a high school diploma, compared to just 27 percent of US-born Latinos.29 Recall from earlier that about three-quarters of the adult Latino population is foreign-born and slightly more than a third are undocumented, and the latter are likely to be not only less educated but also less able to secure stable employment.

![Figure 18: Median Wages by Race/Ethnicity and Education, South LA, 2009-2013](image)

![Figure 19: Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity and Nativity, South LA, 2009-2013](image)
Figure 20: Demographic Composition of Schools in South LA, (a) 1981 and (b) 2013

Source: California Department of Education, Data Reporting Office.
Understanding workforce differences, particularly with regard to the experience of unemployment and the impact of low wages, is not a recipe for conflict but rather a guide to concerted action. Our interview with the Black Worker Center, discussed later in Chapter IV, sheds some light on how to engage the realities of Black unemployment and connect them to the struggles that Latino workers face around wage depression.

One area where there are clear commonalities is education. About three-quarters of South LA’s youth (under age 18) are Latino, a dramatic increase from three decades ago when only 30 percent of youth were Latino. Indeed, Figure 20 on the previous page shows the massive demographic shift in South LA high schools. Whereas Black students were the majority in all South LA schools in 1981, that is now only the case at Crenshaw and Dorsey high schools, both on the western side of South LA, and Washington Prep. Moreover, only two of the eight high schools have majority Latino staff—Jefferson and Locke. This may have implications for the ability of high school staff to connect with their Latino students and, even more so, the parents of these students.

Indeed, students and parents need to work together as much as possible: South LA’s schools are underperforming for all students. Figure 21 shows that all eleven of South LA’s high schools—for which data were available—have much lower Academic Performance Index (API) scores than the LAUSD average—which is already below the target API score of 800.31 CADRE and Community Coalition, community-based organizations included in the interviews drawn on in Chapter IV are just two of the organizations working to improve local public schools.
South LA residents are also experiencing barriers to healthy living—particularly around low food and park access. In fact, according to data from the US Department of Agriculture, about 22 percent of census tracts in South LA are marked as having low food access—that is, tracts where at least 33 percent of residents or 500 people live more than a half mile from a supermarket and without vehicle access, or live more than 20 miles from a supermarket (Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture n.d.). And Figure 22 shows just how park poor the neighborhood is:

The only significant green space in South LA is the Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area, located in one of the most affluent areas of South LA. In 2016, the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation conducted an assessment of park needs and—unsurprisingly—all of the study areas in South LA, except the one immediately around Kenneth Hahn, were identified having ‘very high’ park needs. This study not only looks at the amount of park land available in a neighborhood, but also considers things like the condition of parks, amenities they
The barriers to healthy living extend beyond access to tangible resources to cumulative impacts of environmental burdens. Figure 23 maps scores from CalEnviroScreen, a state tool designed to measure exposure to environmental burdens and resident vulnerability to these burdens as compared to the rest of the state. The redder the shading, the more the cumulative environmental burden and nearly half (49 percent) of South LA census tracts are in the top 10 percent of all tracts when ranked by burden, statewide. South LA is a hot spot for environmental injustice in California. The barriers to healthy living extend beyond access to tangible resources to cumulative impacts of environmental burdens. Figure 23 maps scores from CalEnviroScreen, a state tool designed to measure exposure to environmental burdens and resident vulnerability to these burdens as compared to the rest of the state. The redder the shading, the more the cumulative environmental burden and nearly half (49 percent) of South LA census tracts are in the top 10 percent of all tracts when ranked by burden, statewide. South LA is a hot spot for environmental injustice in California.22 Because this is a cumulative measure, it will take a coordinated, multi-pronged approach to establish environmental health in South LA.

Figure 23: Environmental Burden and Social Vulnerability in South LA, 2013

Source: California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment.
Finally, violent crime and police relations have been a source of tension for both Black and Latino residents in South LA for decades. Historical data from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) indicate the crime has actually decreased over time. Between 1997 and 2011—the longest span of time that data were available—the number of violent crimes decreased by 43 percent in the South Bureau, which covers South LA and the Los Angeles harbor area. However, more recent data indicate that the top 20 neighborhoods with the most violent crime in Los Angeles County are all located in South LA and the summer of 2015 saw an uptick in violence (Banks 2015).

Residents want increased security but they are also worried about over-policing. After all, both the Watts Rebellion and the Los Angeles civil unrest were triggered by incidents involving police violence, and Latino immigrants also worry about the relationship of law enforcement to immigration authorities despite promises from the LAPD. Striking the balance—tackling crime while taming the police—will be crucial in the coming years.

**Moving Forward**

Always a mecca for new migrants, South LA has seen a dramatic shift over the decades from a largely white to a largely African-American and now a largely Latino mega-neighborhood. This last shift has been particularly dramatic but it has also been uneven: The east side of South LA (which was actually the heart of “South Central”) has shifted the fastest and the most, while the west side has been better able to retain Black residents. One big lesson is that we need neighborhood detail and breakdowns by ancestry, time of arrival, and documentation status to understand South LA.

Once we do that, we see that the Latino community itself has become quite diverse along the lines of nativity, legal status, ancestry, and age—all the while establishing familial, though not civic, roots. And while a more detailed analysis also suggests that Latino residents in South LA tend to experience a different type of workplace discrimination, with wage depression and working poverty as major challenges, there are many similarities they share with Black neighbors by virtue of the neighborhood in which they live: poor employment prospects, inadequate park space, challenges with food access, and issues around the quality of education.

In short, residents have much to gain by both recognizing difference and working together. As we move forward and think about the role the Latino community will play in helping to guide South LA’s future there are three things to consider. First, what does the community’s diversity mean for bolstering an independent—but still interdependent—Latino voice? Second, how do we lift up both the differences and commonalities between Black and Latino communities to build bridges and create a movement for social change? And finally, how can movement building for social justice be grounded in place and race, and held up as a model for other communities?
Harvard professor, Henry (Skip) Louis Gates Jr., once said that because there are nearly 40 million Black Americans in the United States, there are 40 million ways to be Black. His logic applies to the Latino experience in South Los Angeles where there are roughly 500,000 ways to be Latino in South LA. Over the course of a year, we interviewed 100 Latino community residents of South LA. We spoke to a Latina in her 20s who had just graduated from California State University, Los Angeles and returned to South LA to live with her parents in the Vermont Square neighborhood. We spoke to a man who moved from Guatemala in the 1980s and worked as a day laborer until he could afford to rent a small apartment along south Central Avenue. We spoke with a man who was born and raised in Watts who described the strong linguistic and racial ties that he had cultivated with his African-American neighbors and friends. So we have collected 100 different stories—but across this diversity of interviewees, we discovered important common experiences of being Latino in South LA and what those might mean for understanding immigrant integration in the daily life of Latinos in this historically African-American area.

In the previous chapter, we utilized Census data to show precisely how the demographic composition of South LA has changed over time. Here, we report on the ways Latinos have experienced this demographic transition. We found vast generational differences—and, so, that is how we set up the discussion. In brief, the first generation moved to South LA in the 1980s and 1990s to settle down. Although they lived in close physical proximity with African-American residents, social distance prevailed. Part of this was linguistic isolation, but it is also the case that many ended up “shutting out and shutting in,” partly because of fears about the violence raging in South LA during that period. This social and cultural distance from African Americans comes in stunning contrast to younger Latinos who grew up with deep connections to Black neighbors, classmates, and mentors. In what follows, we explore the experiences of both generations and make some suggestions about the implications for civic engagement—that we further draw out in the final chapter of this report.
Methodology

To understand the everyday experiences of Latinos in South LA, we embarked on months of interviews. Using a snowball sampling method—that is asking interviewees for further people to interview—and the existing connections of our researchers, we sketched a portrait based on interviews with 100 Latino community residents in South LA. What was particularly helpful here were the unique set of connections and experiences of our interviewers: Our three research assistants were born and raised in South and Southeast LA, so they pulled from their existing networks as well as their life experiences, which also made for better interviews. Similarly, our then post-doctorate researcher is an immigrant from Mexico who had herself arrived in the US at the age of 18, gaining legal status as a result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, making her a natural fit for connecting with the experience of many of our first generation arrivals. Our lead faculty researcher on the ethnographic work brought three decades of experience with interviewing and writing about Latino immigrants in California. And, of course, our other project director, who participated more extensively in the civic interviews described later, has been connected with South LA in his work for several decades. In short: Our interviewing research team brought roots in South LA and familiarity with Latino immigrant experiences and struggles.

Figure 24: Table of Interviewees Characteristics

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Figure 24 shows more about the interview sample. We conducted 97 interviews with 100 interviewees, spread about evenly across our three focus areas: Watts (35), Central Avenue (32), and Vermont Square (30). Our interviewees have lived here quite a while and represent a very settled subset of South LA: 44 percent of our interviewees said they have lived in South LA between 21-30 years, 34 percent have lived in the area between 11-20 years, and 19 percent have lived in the area 31 years or more. The sample is also balanced by gender—55 percent were women and 45 percent were men. Generationally, 58 percent of our interviewees were second generation, while 42 percent were first generation. Some of our second-generation interviewees were born abroad but immigrated to LA at a young age and, thus, are technically 1.5-generation immigrants but have more similarities with their US-born counterparts. Not included in our table: Many first-generation interviewees self-identify as Hispanic, Latino, or using country-of-origin designations, while the second-generation interviewees tend to self-identify as Chicana/o, Mexican, Central American, and Latina/o.

While our sample is affected by our researchers’ networks, it is not far off from the reality of the neighborhood. For example, our sample is relatively young—but Latinos in South LA are also a young population, as was just shown in the previous chapter, *Shifting Space: Decades of Demographic Change*. However, 26 percent of our respondents were between the ages of 25 and 29—about double the share of that group for the actual population of South LA. The second largest age sample, 18 percent, was between the ages of 18 and 24—comparable to the actual population share (15 percent). With regards to employment, the majority of our sample reported employment (59 percent) while 19 percent reported unemployment with a smattering of other employment responses (see Figure 24).

Probably the biggest skew in the sample is with regard to educational attainment. Of those providing this data (22 interviewees did not), 36 percent of our respondents self-reported that they had attended either a community college or a four-year university as their highest level of education. When looking at only the first generation—those who first moved to South LA—of the 33 people who told us their highest level of
education, only two people reported some amount of college, and the rest reported less than that. So, those in our sample with college educations are overwhelmingly of the second generation. While 29 percent of the full interview sample marked high school, 26 percent self-reported less than a high school education, and a small group, 9 percent, indicated graduate schooling as their highest level of education.

Recalling Figure 19 from *Shifting Space: Decades of Demographic Change*, this sample has higher educational attainment than average for the area. Part of this has to do with the relative youth of the sample, but still only 5 percent of all adults between the ages of 18 and 35 in South LA—the ages of just over half of the interview sample—have a BA degree or higher, while 41 percent have less than a high school diploma.36 While this might suggest re-weighting this sample if one was trying to draw quantitative implications, that is not the point here. Instead, we are really trying to flesh out the story and so utilize these interviews in that effort.

Each interview was about one hour and followed a standard interview guide—in either Spanish or English (although all the quotations that follow are translated for the ease of the readers of this report). These interviews relied on open-ended questions—we were not looking for simple “yes” or “no” answers, but rather we approached these as guided conversations, with all interviewers trained to probe for detailed responses. The interview protocol included a range of questions about race relations, immigration experiences, identity, neighborhood change, green space, and civic engagement. Each interviewee received a $25 gift card as compensation for their time. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded for relevant themes and patterns using Dedoose, a mixed-methods software program. The verbatim transcripts resulted in approximately 15-45 pages of text per interview depending on the length of the interview, and we continue to analyze this rich data.

While this is a very rich dataset, there are some shortcomings in utilizing it to provide a full picture of the Latinization of South LA. In particular, in this first phase of the research, we did not interview African-American residents to collect their perceptions of the changes, partly because some of that story has been told, but mostly because of limited resources. We tried to gather part of that story from the writing of others as well as from our civic leader interviews that did include a number of African Americans, something that is consistent with the ethnic make-up of current leadership. We utilized those interviews to garner personal as well as political reflections on the demographic shifts. However, we are currently in the field interviewing African-American residents and hope to offer that complementary material in a future iteration of this work.

In any case, what did we learn from this wide range of interviews of Latino residents of South LA? In what follows, we break up the story by first looking at the generation of Latinos who moved to South LA, exploring their reasons for doing so, the reception upon their arrival, and their attitudes about South LA, today. We then turn to the generation that grew up in South LA, seeing a very different set of experiences and predilections, particularly regarding how relationships with African Americans have shaped Latino identity. We conclude by discussing the future of Latino civic engagement in South LA, a topic explored more fully in the final chapter of this report.
Latinos Who Moved to South LA

We begin with the first generation—Latinos who moved to South LA. The majority of these Latinos came here decades ago, although some more recent newcomers are considered in this section, as well. Overwhelmingly, the first generation moved to South LA to put down roots. This was facilitated by the affordable housing stock, which for many, was not available in other parts of the city. This first wave of Latino newcomers to South LA moved into African-American neighborhoods, but they also experienced significant social distance from their African-American neighbors.

Several factors explain this social distance. To begin with, the first wave of Latino newcomers arrived in South LA during the 1980s and 1990s, encountering the height of street and gang violence and a raging crack epidemic. Second, many of them also brought with them anti-Black prejudices embedded in the national narratives of their countries of origin. Third, it is also the case that arriving in the United States involves learning this country’s racial hierarchy, one in which the color line has been and remains profound. Among these factors, we believe the most important one in fostering social distance is the temporal dimension: Latino families who moved to South LA during the 1980s and 1990s, when the streets were not safe, had some real reasons to “shut in and shut out.”

However, habits can persist and we found that many of these first generation respondents continued to be relatively insular even as conditions improved. A later cohort of Latinos moving to South LA after 2000 found neighborhoods that were already majority Latino, hence there were even fewer opportunities for interaction and connection with African-American neighbors. Given our interest in exploring immigrant integration in an historically Black space, we focus here on how first generation Latinos were shaped by the earlier neighborhood experiences.

A word before we dig in. In this report, we cannot possibly do justice to the patient ethnographic research we undertook. A book will follow this report, and readers will be able to immerse themselves in the moving stories and diverse experiences of the South LA residents we interviewed. Their stories are well worth the read and there will be insights into Latino experience that go beyond the fairly narrow scope found in this report. Here, we offer largely summary-level results.

Moving to South LA

First-generation interviewees either came to South LA upon first landing in the US, arriving here directly from Mexico or Central America to join a family member or friend, or they were already living in Los Angeles and moved to South LA in search of affordable housing. We begin with those who came here after they had already been living in Los Angeles.

These were largely working-class immigrants from Mexico and Central America, people of modest means and educational backgrounds who worked in jobs in mechanic shops, garment factories, assembly lines, or the expanding service sector. Squaring with the pattern revealed by our historical and data overview, respondents suggested that after renting crowded apartments near downtown—in Pico Union/MacArthur Park, or in the Eastside neighborhoods of Boyle Heights or Lincoln Heights—they came to South LA seeking more elbow room for their growing families (which sometimes included relatives and
in-laws). Some were ready to buy a house as well and they realized that even with pooling two or more incomes, they were outpriced from other LA neighborhoods. In South LA, however, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, real estate prices remained relatively affordable.

The first cohort of Latino newcomers discovered rental opportunities and home affordability in different ways. Consider the story of one Salvadoran interviewee, Zoila Carrillo* (all names of residents are pseudonyms, as indicated by an asterisk). In her interview, she recalled struggling to buy a house so that she and her Guatemalan husband could live near downtown LA, close to their factory jobs. They found nothing in their price range, but on a Sunday outing to visit friends in South LA, the young family had to take a detour due to the LA Marathon—something any Angeleno can relate to—and this led them to drive by an empty house with a “for sale” sign. They called the realtor only to discover that it was already in escrow, but he soon showed them another one in the vicinity of Vermont Square. Señora Carrillo* described the house as “bastante arruinadita,” which means “fairly well ruined,” but this dilapidation is part of what put the property in their price range, so they bought it and started fixing it up.

Homebuyers were a key part of the picture and our previous data analysis showed how the share of Latino householders who were homeowners rose steadily over the decades. But a glance at that data also reveals that even today, two-thirds of Latino households in South LA are renters. The rental market here was also attractive; as Sra. Bertila Lunares* said, “In 1991, what really attracted me to this place were the rent prices.” In an increasingly expensive real estate market, South LA was and remains a relative bargain. As noted by Sra. Carillo*, South LA’s location was additionally attractive because of the close proximity to downtown factories as well as to industrial warehouses and Westside service sector jobs.

Longtime South LA residents such as Sra. Carrillo* drew a mixed portrait of neighborhood life when asked to recall what it was like in the late 1980s:

*Mira, hay cosas que eran buenas...* Look, there were things that were good, and bad things. At that time we were about the only Latinos on the block. And two houses down, there was a Mexican with a (Anglo) American, that’s it. Everyone else was *Moreno* (Black). But the majority of those who lived there were older people, and they were very nice. We never had any problems with any Black neighbors.
Timing matters a great deal in Latino perceptions of racial tension in these neighborhoods. During the 1980s in South LA—then called South Central—these inner-city neighborhoods were in the throes of deindustrialization, with staggering levels of gang activity, street violence and a crack cocaine crisis. While life was peaceful on some blocks, parts of South LA were quite dangerous (as were many other poorer areas in Los Angeles). Street violence, ranging from gang shootings to the daily risk of petty theft (including having gold chains ripped off while waiting for the bus), required Latino newcomers to be mindful and attentive to danger. Indeed, some of our interviewees reported being robbed or assaulted by assailants on the streets, while some were just fearful of the gunshots, crackhouses, and perceived risks.

Sra. Carrillo* walked her daughters to and from school, and when the girls were older and bused out to schools in the San Fernando Valley, she declared that certain places (e.g., some street corners and Martin Luther King, Jr. Park) were strictly off limits. Contrary to what some might expect, Sra. Carrillo* did not blame Black residents for this and, in fact, expressed special appreciation for her elderly African-American neighbors who were also experiencing a broader neighborhood in decline. Indeed, she thought that the arrival of more Latinos contributed to this deterioration and destabilization in the early 1990s. “Cuando empezó...When the community started to change is when more Latinos arrived, and we sometimes started to see a few more problems, more noise.” According to her, Latinos improved the housing stock by making all kinds of home improvements that elderly African-American neighbors may have been too old to take on, but Latinos newcomers also intensified neighborhood problems such as crime and noise.

Some of the residents who moved here in the 1980s and 1990s had heard about street violence, danger, and conflict between African Americans and Latino newcomers, but this did not deter them from moving to South LA. As we spoke about their memories of this period, they shared different reactions, including some that made it clear that it was not just fear of crime but latent racism that colored perceptions:

**Pues, la verdad...**Well, truthfully, I was scared. (Zandra Castro*)

**Antes de vivir aquí...**Before living here, I really hadn’t heard that much, except that there was a little racism between raza Latina and African Americans. (Gabriel Godinez*)

**A mi me comentaban...**They had told me that they were really bad here, that they would just hit you on the street, but soon after moving here, I started selling popsicles on the street. (Miguel Nunez*)

**Pues si...**Well, yes, I had heard that there were a lot of Black people here, and a lot of gangs. And this made us fearful, right? Because, you know, they are sly. (Andrea Rosas*)

**Había mucha pandilla...**There were a lot of gangs....I had never seen anything like this. I mean, when I lived over there, I had never seen things like dead people full of bullets, and all of that scared me. (Yuridia Cortes*)

When I came to the US, I had real bad information about especially this neighborhood because they were telling us that (there) were a lot of Black people in here, and we have to be very careful...we were the only Hispanics here in this area. (Gloria Rubalcaba*)

**Yo tenía la idea...**I had the idea that South Central was always categorized as bad, what would popularly be called ‘area of Blacks.’ And they always say, wherever Blacks live, those are bad neighborhoods because they are plagued by gangs. (Maria Vasquez*)
Most of the first-generation interviewees who had been in South LA during the 1980s and 1990s still had vivid memories of the violent climate. Listen to this range of recollections of what it was like then, and their descriptions of precautionary measures:

*En esos momentos...* At that moment there were lots of well-known gangs. So one couldn’t wear any garment in red, you couldn’t wear black, you couldn’t wear blue...With my son, I would never let him wear anything in red, not even a red baseball cap, as people might think he was in a gang. (Isadora Anderson*)

*Aquí unos años...* For a few years here, it wasn’t very welcoming. Everyone knew that there were gunshots, gangs, drug addicts. (Pablo Segura*)

*Sí, había mucho...* Yes, there were a lot of cholillo (Latino gang members)....We’d hear gunshots here. We wouldn’t go out at night. (Juana Paredes*)

*Cuando nosotros llegamos...* When we arrived it was full of cholos (Latino gang members), you know? Back then it was full of cholos and you would hear gunshot here, gunshot there. (Constancia Escobar*)

If Latino newcomers had heard anything about South LA before moving here, it was generally quite negative. After arriving, some of them had their preconceptions confirmed when they were mugged, robbed, or caught in crossfire between gang battles on the street. Fear and trepidation were common tropes in the first years of settling in. As the years passed, negative preconceptions of South LA were confirmed for some, and dispelled by others—which we explore in this chapter.

People arriving directly from Mexico or Central America typically moved here without any knowledge of South LA. Most of these new arrivals to the United States knew absolutely nothing about the South LA neighborhoods. They came here immediately after crossing the border, which is usually a harrowing experience. They came to South LA because they had a friend or a family member here, and some of them had imagined that a glamorous neighborhood, more like a Hollywood scene from the movies, awaited them.

For example, Pablo Segura*, moved to the heart of the historic Central Avenue neighborhood directly from Tijuana in 1987, after having spent nearly a year working his way from Guatemala to Mexico. The journey through Mexico had been treacherous. He arrived in South LA with nothing, worked as a day laborer, and navigated streets that were much more dangerous than they are today. Through tears, he recalled those days and his struggle to survive, and he recalled, “Yo tenía un concepto...I had the idea that it was like Santa Monica or Beverly Hills. I thought there was no trash here, and then I saw this area.”

In addition, during this period, many Central Americans were also trying to leave the increasingly crowded and violence-prone Pico-Union and MacArthur Park neighborhoods. This area emerged as a Central American neighborhood when refugees fled military violence in Guatemala and El Salvador, but this area too developed into a gang stronghold, with several gangs claiming turf. Some Central American residents sought to escape this climate and moved south, going below the 10 freeway to the Vermont Square/Vermont-Slauson area. These people then helped initiate a chain migration of peers as they told their friends, family members, and coworkers about these opportunities.
A Guatemalan woman, Isadora Anderson,* bought her first house here in the 1980s, and soon she began telling her Latino friends and acquaintances about home buying opportunities in South LA. “I knew this Mexican man, and he and his brothers worked in my garden,” she recalled “They said they were interested in buying a house...So as soon as I saw them putting up a ‘for sale’ sign next door, I went and said, ‘Sir, I have a client.’ I called them, they came and these brothers bought the house.” Just as social networks among friends and family facilitate the transnational migration process across borders, so too these same social mechanisms drew Latino newcomers from other Los Angeles neighborhoods into South LA.

Today some of these Latino homeowners have become owners of multiple properties in South LA, or they have helped their close family members acquire homes in the same vicinity. A handful of these Latino families, like Arturo and Isabel Medina’s* family, have formed small family compounds on a particular block or neighborhood, surrounded by small clusters of homes owned by kin, with, say, a daughter living down the street, a son nearby, each in their own house. As Sra. Medina* proudly noted, as she pointed out the front window, “We now own three here in a circle, this one, that one and the one in front. And my daughter bought another one on 76th.”

In another instance, a Central American couple bought a second, slightly larger house just a few doors down from their first home in the Vermont Square neighborhood. Their eldest daughter was still away attending college then, but she pleaded with them to just rent out the original house until she could return home and take over the payments and the title. Today, the parents and their daughter, who now works as a teacher in a local South LA school, are homeowners on the same block. These extended families now feel deeply anchored here in South LA. For these families, the American Dream—as understood through homeownership—became a reality in South LA. They also feel the satisfaction of achieving the Latina/o dream of living near close family members, ready to lend a hand or socialize without suffering through Los Angeles’ infamously congested traffic.

Yet, moving into South LA meant living in sometimes difficult places. Latino newcomers moved into single-family homes, apartments, and unpermitted backhouses, some of which were not built to code. One young adult recalls his childhood, renting and living in a garage with his family:

*The first home—or, excuse me, the converted garage—was, it wasn’t...very pleasing. It was pretty run down, a basic home, but that’s all we could afford at the time. Yeah, when I lived in that area, we constantly played. We lived behind a hospital. It was really bad....we played in the parking lot of the hospital because at night they didn’t service anybody. So we played soccer there, and there was another secluded area where they had dumpsters, and we played there too. It was bad. We would sometimes go into dumpsters and just, like, look for treasure. (Andrea Rosas*)

Other residents also expressed the hardships experienced with the housing they found in South LA: “Yo creo que...I think that what traumatized me the most (here) was the lack of space. Yes, I felt really desperate” (Gregoria Huerta*).

For those who were able to move toward the dream of homeownership, it was not always an easy, linear process. Sometimes Latino homeowners saw their dreams dashed, at least momentarily, when they were unable to keep up with house payments and wound up losing their homes. Juan Cesar Ortega*, a Guatemalan resident of Watts recalled the joy of buying and then the pain of losing his first home on 115th and Compton (right by the Nickerson Gardens public housing complex). He too had started out living in a garage with his new wife. As he recalled, “Tu te enamoras...
You fall in love, and when you fall in love, you want to be with your partner, and that’s what happened. I went with her and we lived there (in the garage of her family) for two years while we saved a little money to buy a house.”

Working as a jeweler, a family trade he learned in Guatemala while his wife worked in costura, the garment industry, they managed to make a down-payment on a house in Watts. But the dream was short-lived as he was laid off and they could not keep up with the payments. “Entonces quede sin trabajo...So I lost my job, and we lost it (the house). I had to start renting,” he lamented, “after I had become so accustomed to that house.” After finding another job, he and his wife managed to save up again and bought another house in what he considers to be a better, safer area of Watts.

Now, 15 years later, they have raised two children and they all still live there. The tidy interior features formal dining and living room furniture sets adorned with many family photos. The backyard they enjoy has an assortment of tropical fruit trees that remind them of Central America, while a trio of pets—a pit bull, a terrier and a Chihuahua poodle mix—frolic and bark. Juan Cesar* and his wife Delfina* feel “at home” here, and pleased with their neighbors. There is an old-fashioned culture of neighborliness that is shared among African-American and Latino residents with neighbors looking out for one another.

But just a block and a half away, there is a busy boulevard with a liquor store and bus stop that they avoid at all costs. In their view, it is just not safe. This is an instance, one that came up frequently in interviews, of “micro-spaces” around which local residents must navigate: People felt safe in their homes and immediate streets, but they identified pockets of danger and places to avoid in their local neighborhoods. Juan Cesar* reported that he and his neighbors tried addressing these issues by meeting with Councilman Joe Buscaino but said there have been no results. When efforts at civic engagement do not produce the hoped-for response, that can breed cynicism and dissuade further engagement in the future.
While the Cesars now embrace the diversity of their neighbors, many Latino residents responded to tough neighborhood circumstances, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, by withdrawing from local life. Longtime residents unanimously agreed that things had improved, but memories of danger and violence were easily recalled and also identified with particular places around the neighborhood. Moreover, while violent crime has diminished since the 1980s in South LA, it has not disappeared—and not all recollections of violence are from experiences in the distant past. In fact, some events, told vividly, occurred more recently. One Salvadoran resident of Watts recalled the aftermath of a drive-by shooting that killed the teenage boy who lived next door:

* Vinieron los detectives... The detectives came and saw how bullets had hit our front door. And on the front gate where he (teenage murder victim) had been holding on, there on the bars were bullet holes and blood. And I said, “Wow!” I told my husband, “Look, after 5pm in the afternoon,” I said to him, “I don’t want you out there in front.” Right?... and as we went out in front to see the damage, we could hear the cries of the señora, crying for her young son who died. (Rosalinda Guevara*)

A Latino resident who grew up in South LA also recalled recent violence:

* Una vecina de nosotros... a neighbor of ours once commented to my mother that they stabbed someone near our house, in an alley way, and no less, they’ve gone and shot at the house of a neighbor, there on the corner. Take into account that our house is just four doors down...this happened recently, less than a year ago. (Gregoria Huerta*)

And these instances of theft and violence sometimes were not isolated or confined to the streets. Some interviewees related some vivid experiences with violence and burglary of their homes and apartments:

* Esa vez.... That time we went to church, on Sunday, they burglarized our house. Man, they even stole the clothes we had hanging outside to dry. (Emilia Trejo*)

* Cuando vivía allá ... When I lived over there, I had never seen things like that—dead people and they used to shoot and all of that and it really scared me. (Yuridia Cortez*)

* Bueno, el problema que tuvimos... Well, the problem we had two or three months after arriving here is that they broke into our house. They robbed us and took televisions, computers, a little clock, and things like that. (Andres Durantes*)

* No tenía rejas, pero él las puso... It didn’t have fences, but he (husband) put them up. Yet even so, as we were about to celebrate our silver anniversary, they got in through the front door...they came in and stole everything. Everything, including the money we have saved for my silver anniversary. (Zandra Castro*)

Latino newcomers dealt with this situation by essentially retreating inward, by “shutting in and shutting out” in ways that reflected but also bred social distance. One of the Latino civic leaders we interviewed who grew up in South LA said, “In the 90s, there’s always this thing that my parents would say, ‘Cierra la puerta, por que se va a meter un negro.’ It’s, ‘Close the door because a Black person is going to come in.’” Indeed, many of the first generation Latino immigrants grew to fear African Americans, associating Blackness with crime.

Of course, other respondents were more even-handed, acknowledging that the perpetrators of violence included both African Americans and Latinos, often gang members from either group. And one interviewee recalled an instance of a highly coordinated group of Armenian thieves who broke into their house by literally sawing a hole in the wall, allowing them to steal precious gold jewelry passed down from her mother.
Other residents we interviewed related how many Latinos put up fences around their house and bars on the windows. They created elaborate methods for getting around and shuttling their kids to and from school elsewhere. At the same time, it is important to note that both they and the civic leaders we interviewed noted that this “fortress” response was just as common for many of the African-American families who remained.

Some Latino respondents—there was quite a bit of diversity to this end—suggested that stereotypes of South LA were worse than the reality on the streets. One interviewee, Maria Vasquez,* remarked that she never really had any problems. “They always say, wherever Blacks live, those are bad neighborhoods because they are plagued by gangs” she said. “But once we lived here, we saw none of that; I’ve never had any problems. And I’m telling you I’ve lived here since 1986.” Another interviewee, Arturo Medina, related, “Mucha gente….A lot of people, you tell them you live in South Central and they’re scared to come here because (supposedly) ‘they steal, they shoot, the cars aren’t safe.’ They won’t come because they are scared that something will happen to them, but it’s not like that.”

Like these two residents, many Latino first-generation newcomers became familiar and increasingly comfortable moving around South LA. They developed their favorite routes and spots, and sought safety in their social routines. A few of them compared the situation in South LA to urban violence they had experienced in Mexico City, or during the civil wars in Central America. Most of them learned over time that the negative perceptions and stereotypes of a violent South LA were, for them, more hype than reality.

Of course, the negative attitudes toward African Americans by many first-generation Latino residents were also rooted in home country attitudes. Many Latino immigrants who were raised in Mexico or Central America bring with them an unfamiliarity with African Americans, and racist beliefs. In Latin America, there is a less white/Black binary of race than in the United States (Telles 2006). But that does not mean an absence of anti-Black racism. While many Latin American nations relied on African labor, nations such as Honduras and El Salvador developed national narratives that exclude Blackness and promote the ideal of a “Spanish mestizo” nation (Ribas 2016).

By way of example, one of our respondents, a Salvadoran young woman, claimed she had never seen a Black person in El Salvador. According to Tilley, Salvadoran national identity has hinged on “the erasure of indigenous peoples and the denial of a Black contribution altogether” (2005:71). A Guatemalan interviewee, Eugenio Ramirez*, said, “You know, I never met African Americans in Guatemala, even though I later learned there are some.” While Mexico includes significant numbers of people with African origins, especially in the areas of Guerrero and Veracruz, Afro-Mexicans were only recently recognized and counted in the Mexican Census. Each country in Latin America has their own unique history of mestizaje, but in general, the legacy of Spanish colonialism has left cultures and nations that associate whiteness with status, and Blackness with stigma and inferiority.
When people migrate across borders, they bring racial baggage, ideologies and experiences from their country of origin. In recent years, scholars of race and immigration have emphasized transnational aspects of racial identity and racism, noting the ways that ideas about race travel across national borders (Roth 2012; Sawyer 2005). While our first-generation interviewees did not really have the vocabulary to talk about these dynamics, some of the second-generation, younger Latinos raised in South LA, offered insightful perspectives on these dynamics.

In general, they saw their parents’ generation as more distant from African Americans and more racist. In fact, many of them criticized their parents for their anti-Black views, and sometimes they tried to re-educate them. A 26-year-old man, Carlos Rodriguez,* from the Central Avenue neighborhood (see Chapter II for these boundaries) concluded that age and generation separated Latinos and African Americans. “Hispanics and Blacks, like the older they are, the more racist they are,” he said. “Everybody’s grandma’s racist,” he succinctly concluded. One of our civic leaders, a woman of color who had moved to South LA during the 1990s, also noted substantial distrust and racism among the new immigrant generation.

“Yeah. I think it’s definitely more – amongst the folks who are newly arrived here, there’s definitely more distrust and sort of like prejudice towards African Americans.”

One very insightful respondent, a young man raised in the Vermont Square neighborhood, reflected on the extent to which Latino immigrant newcomers’ anti-Blackness is a product of Americanization. He saw Latino anti-Black racism as part of a whitening strategy that appeals to Latino immigrants in their quest to gain acceptance. “When you come here, you know, you hear the word negro and automatically you associate it with dangerous,” he said. “So Latino immigrants...(in) our effort to become Americanized and indoctrinated into America...we just believe what America teaches us, right? And America hates Black, right?” He did not condone these practices, but saw it as part of a larger national problem. “I just see it as part of American culture,” he reasoned. And within these simplistic racial binaries, “white is good and Black is bad, and you know everybody that falls in between sorta has to run to become white.” An effective program of civic leadership designed for South LA residents must address these tensions of race and belonging.
African-American Reception of Latinos

Latino arrivals to South LA in the 1980s coincided with many African-American families fleeing crime, disinvestment, and gang violence in South LA, often relocating to outer-ring suburbs. As one civic leader and long-time resident explained, “As soon as people were in a place that they could move, they did, and they did so for a variety of reasons. Most of the time, the reason I would hear cited would be to get their kids into a decent school and to get their kids away from gang violence... I saw people move to places like Riverside, to Orange County, and then there were those later, a few years later, who actually began to move to the South.”

The general picture given by the civic leader interviews (referenced more later), several of whom were longer-term African-American residents themselves, squares with the history laid out earlier and described above. Essentially, South LA was affected by some degree of “Black flight.” The usual story is that this means a draining of the middle class and that seems to have been the case, a pattern that reduced the financial and social resources available to the area. It also meant that those remaining behind were disproportionately older African-American homeowners (recall the quantitative data we presented earlier) and those who did not have the means to leave.

Newcomers, in turn, could buy or lease the homes of those African Americans who were departing. As Latinos brought their language and culture with them, they often felt marginalized and isolated from existing residents who, in turn, felt like their pre-existing community and social cohesion was being eroded. As one civic leader put it, “…so all of a sudden you didn’t just have a racial shift, you had a language shift as well. So, African Americans...are looking around, and all of a sudden everything’s in Spanish, and they have no idea what just happened, all they know is that they couldn’t get out.” So while language was a barrier for Latinos, it was also a different sort of barrier for African Americans, particularly in terms of getting to know their new neighbors.

But it was not just the language barrier between immigrants and African-American residents that made daily interactions difficult and often spurred resentment of newcomers. While Latino immigrants may have shut in and shut out in response to violence and fear, it is also the case
that the African-American reception of Latinos was not always welcoming. One of the civic leaders who we interviewed remarked:

> I think that the Black/Brown relations that was going on when I first moved to South LA was actually a reflection of a resistance to the growing numbers of Mexicans and Central American folks in communities that were traditionally African American. ’Cause I would hear it all time: “Oh, they’ve taken over our share. That store shut down. It’s Mexican now. Did you see that new Mexican place open?” And, you know, you hear these conversations on the buses. “I never buy from Mexicans…” There was a real pushback and resistance to what African Americans who’d been there for a long time by that point felt was their community being taken over.

South LA, after all, had been one of the few places where African Americans could settle in and buy homes. It was where significant moments in both national and local Black history had unfolded. And even as its Black population was diluted by departures and in-migration of Latinos, it remained one of the most geographically concentrated areas for African Americans and hence a base for political power.

In *The Presumed Alliance*, Nicolas Vaca, described conflicts that resulted from similar population shifts in the neighboring suburb of Compton. A city that had once tried to lift the drawbridges when African Americans first tried to move in in large numbers, Compton, like South LA, saw its population tilt Latino, with political debates rapidly emerging over resources for dual-language learning, the lack of hiring of Latinos in public sector jobs, and Latino political representation overall. Vaca’s analysis essentially suggest that the increase in Latino immigration created racial, economic, and political situations that, in many ways, were met with fear and opposition.

But while our interviews certainly lifted up tensions between first-generation Latinos and Black neighbors, they also uncovered touchingly close engagement, including how African Americans mentored Latinos in parenting in the US context. One Salvadoran mother, Zoila Carrillo,* fondly recalled the African-American senior citizens who volunteered to read to children at the local library. “*Ibamos tres veces…*We would go there three times a week. Elderly grandparents, *morenos*, came to read to the children...as I didn’t know the language, I couldn’t teach the children, but they read to them in English. It was really lovely.” This same Salvadoran mother also worked hard to keep her daughters out of segregated, bilingual classes, thereby ensuring her daughters would be immersed in English and be in classes with Black children, a strategy of immigrant integration that relied on closeness with, and led to an appreciation of, African Americans.

— *African-American South LA Civic Leader*
Another sort of parental mentoring involved a particular sort of cultural translation and orientation to the local context. Many immigrant parents in the US are accustomed to corporal punishment as a means of child discipline, but they quickly learn that in the US, this is not a generally accepted practice. A Salvadoran single mother of four children, Andrea Rosas*, fondly recalled her former next door neighbor, an African-American elderly man who she referred to respectfully as “Don Samuel.” He always complimented her on her well-behaved children, she said, but he had also spent hours counseling her, talking with her about how to discipline children, advising her that here it was not permissible to beat your kids.

She laughingly recalled the despair with which she had greeted this news, covering her hands over her face and chuckling, “Ay, porque... Ay, why I wondered had I even come to this country then?” Don Samuel had been an important mentor to her and her children. “El era...He was like a father to them: He was Black, he was elderly. How he loved my children.” Sra. Rosas* also fondly recalled an elderly African-American woman who had worked at the post office, who somehow knew that she was a struggling single mother. This postal clerk always gave her kids gifts at Christmas time. She also warned her not to send her children to Jefferson High School, where there was so much violence and racial strife at the time.

In another instance, a Guatemalan single mother, Señora Isadora Anderson,* recalled that she had faced many difficulties when her pre-adolescent son went through a rebellious phase, defying her authority and seeking out friendships with kids on the street who were involved in petty vandalism, including throwing rocks at buses. When she spanked him, he called the police on her, who responded and advised her: “Señora...I do the same thing, and I understand because sometimes kids need it. But give it to him on his butt, because if he goes to school with bruises and marks, then we have to get involved.” When the boy became more rebellious later, another African-American police officer stepped in and became a father figure to him. “Me dijo la policia...The police officer told me, ‘I’m going to take charge of this matter, because he needs the strong hand of a man, the strength of a father.’” The police officer began coming around regularly, arriving in uniform, and telling her son to obey his mother, to do his homework and household chores. Eventually the officer and the boy formed a friendship.

A final example: A second-generation daughter recalled her mother’s special friendship with an African-American neighbor. Their shared struggles as single mothers in South LA transcended language barriers. “They were so supportive of each other and helped each other and they didn’t even understand each other, but they both sort of were like you’re a mom and you get it. You know, so like we supported each other you know?” said Karla Sonora.* African-American parental mentorship and support helped Latino immigrant parents restore order in their families, and facilitated immigrant integration in South LA.
It was not just that African-American adults served as mentors and helpers to Latino immigrant parents who were unaccustomed to new demands of parenting in this context; many of the teachers who taught their children in the local schools were also African American. While the sort of personal bonds portrayed above were not typical of everyone (or even of a majority, at least in their responses), the depth of personal interaction and help make this an important nuance to the prevailing narrative of fear, tension, and suspicion between African-American and Latino neighbors in the 1980s and 1990s. One-on-one interracial intimacies grew in the midst of community-wide uncertainty about the new shape of race relations.

While some Latinos recalled receiving significant mentorship and help from African Americans, the dominant stance towards African Americans that we found among our first-generation Latino immigrants was social distance. This was fueled by various factors that we have reviewed above, including anti-Black racism brought from Latin American countries of origin, monolingual Spanish-speaking Latino immigrants’ limited communication with monolingual English-speaking African-American residents, and experiences with street violence and hostility from African-American residents, especially those in youth gangs.

Moreover, African-American and Latino residents, especially in this older generation, have mostly worked in different occupational sectors. Workplaces can be pivotal places for communication, but with many of the earlier wave of Latinas/os working in marginalized jobs in services, the informal sector, and manual labor, they were frequently segregated from African Americans, particularly those working in the public sector, business services, and other mid-range jobs. Limited points of connection during the working day could not make up for other forms of social distance, and the disconnect was likely furthered by the sense by some African Americans,
Race, Language, and Civic Engagement

While some first-generation Latino immigrants in South LA noted warm personal relations with a neighbor or friends or even family members (such as a son-in-law), the major theme we heard involved standing apart. Some reported hostility either to them or from them, but more common was noting that their daily interactions with African-American neighbors often amounted to only superficial daily salutations of “good morning” and “good evening.” “Nos saludamos...we greet one another,” one resident reported, when asked about the quality and depth of interactions with African-American neighbors.

These same dynamics extended to the civic sphere: The shutting in and shutting out also meant standing apart from political engagement. To be sure, there are significant exceptions, as some of our first-generation (or first-mover) interviewees regularly participated in parent teacher organizations or attempted to engage with their local neighborhood council. But for the most part, the first generation Latino interviewees were scarcely able to identify the names of their local elected officials and leaders, being more likely to be able to identify Martin Luther King, Jr. than the councilmember representing them at city hall.

Language barriers contribute to Latino distancing from African Americans and civic life in South LA—and monolingual, Spanish-speaking, Latino immigrants who entered South LA as adults with myriad of work and family responsibilities did not invest a lot of time and energy into learning English. As they explained to us in Spanish:

*El idioma para mi...* For me, language has been a thing that’s limited me in many ways, because it wouldn’t make sense for me to go to a meeting where all the people are just speaking English, and just be watching, I’m going to feel badly and maybe they’re going to laugh at me...language has been a barrier for e in many ways. (Andres Durantes*)

Consequently, Latino interactions with African-American neighbors and local civic associations were and remain limited. Second-generation interviewees, who were generally more engaged and more interactive with African Americans, talk about the racially segregated niches that resulted. Here are some examples of how they view their parents’ experience and stance vis-à-vis African-American neighbors and local civic organizations:

*El desafío, casi siempre....* The challenge, almost always and to this day has been the language. That’s been my challenge. For my kids, no, because they were little and they acquired the language quickly....To this date I can say that I understand [English], but I don’t speak it, and I don’t write it. (Alicia Bermudez*)

*Uno de los desafíos ha sido el idioma....* One of the challenges has been the language, because the majority of morenos do not speak Spanish.... But you know los Hispanos are everywhere, and we always find [each other]. What we would do is go to the supermarkets where Hispanos predominate. (Maria Vasquez*)

Our parents, you know, they’re immigrants, so they kind of feel comfortable, kind of staying in their own little comfort zone. They’re not very interested in learning about community history ‘cause they have other things in mind, like working or their kids. (Veronica Cienfuegos*)

A lot of the older Latinos don’t speak English and a lot of the older Black people don’t speak Spanish. So I don’t think it’s necessarily somebody is trying to be rude or anything like that. It’s just, you don’t speak the language, so... you kind of avoid those situations where you have to interact with people. (Vilma De La Fuente*)
Together, South LA was a powerful stew of language barriers; racialized anxiety (with several drivers mentioned earlier); and segregated work, family, and worship environments. While we cannot pinpoint a single factor—our data do not allow us to disentangle the effects of language, anti-Black racism, the high crime rates of the 1980s and 1990s, and family/work urgencies—we do know that the mix limited Latinos from both forming and maintaining personal relationships with African Americans and participating fully in civic life. But the “shut in and shut out” social distancing of the first generation may be changing: Over time, Latino residents have seen significant transformations in South LA, and they too have transformed themselves and been transformed by their children. One solid base for encouraging civic engagement: With all its ups and downs, South LA remains dear to the heart of the early movers who made South LA their home.

Attitudes about South LA, Today

While Latino immigrant newcomers entered South LA with trepidation or ignorance, over the years they have anchored themselves in the neighborhood and grown to love South LA. Coming to the United States—and to South LA in particular—required many sacrifices and hardships, but most of them feel as though they and their families have benefitted, and in this process they feel indebted to the area that helped them realize some of their dreams. This immigrant narrative is familiar to scholars who study immigration: But the usual story is one in which gratitude is directed at the host nation. Among our respondents, we found that gratitude directed not only at the US, but also at South LA in particular.

For example, Fernando and Julietta Martinez* are a married couple from Michoacan, Mexico who settled with their children in the Florence-Firestone area before moving to Watts in 1990. They bought a house one block away from the Jordan Downs, a 700-unit public housing project that has often been portrayed as a platform for gangs and crime. Yet the husband said, “Creo que cuando nos vinimos a vivir a Watts...I believe that when we came to live in Watts we didn’t even know it was Watts, no?” He had heard about the negative reputation of Watts, but he did not realize that that was where he was buying a house.

Today, this couple feels pride and gratitude for their local community and all the opportunities it has afforded their children. Their children attended local schools, received guidance from African-American teachers and mentors, and have now graduated from some of the nation’s top universities. The couple say they now realize that negative stereotypes about South LA are born of ignorance, as the wife added; “Pues si se sorprenden...Well, if people are surprised and say ‘You live in Watts?’ it’s because there are people to this day who still think that Watts is the worst. But that’s because they don’t know this neighborhood.” Identifying himself as “a Latino, and a Mexican, and now an American citizen,” her husband suggested that their success in launching their children could not have happened elsewhere. He attributed it to the positive opportunities in Watts. “This area of Watts,” he said, “has left me with good satisfaction because from here in this corner called Watts, my children have gone to great universities.”

– Fernando Martinez, *Community Resident

Other Latino respondents expressed love and pride in Watts for providing a pleasant place to live. Mirta Palomares,* who bought a house in Watts

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Other Latino respondents expressed love and pride in Watts for providing a pleasant place to live. Mirta Palomares,* who bought a house in Watts
after renting for many years in crowded East LA, declared that she enjoys a sense of freedom and tranquility in Watts, where she often walks from her home to a large community garden to tend a 1500-square-foot plot of land. A short drive takes her to Compton, where she boards her horse. When asked to describe Watts, she said “Bonito, bonito...Pretty, pretty. For me it’s pretty because I don’t have problems with anyone here...I walk wherever I wish.” Another Watts resident, Maria Vasquez,* expressed pride about living in Watts:

Yo pienso...I think one of the things that makes one feel good is knowing how to adapt to what surrounds you. Because as I tell you, in all the years living here, I’ve never had problems with anybody. Not with neighbors, not with anybody. They come by, we chat, and I know a lot of the neighbors, but up to a point, just so much. But I feel good about that.

And Sra. Carrillo,* now a longtime resident of the Vermont Square neighborhood simply declared, “Esta es mi ciudad...This is my city, this is my home, the place where I have lived for so many years now...I think this is where we will die.” She feels deeply rooted and at home here. When asked if she could live elsewhere, she reasoned that this was the best place for her. In the suburban neighborhoods that are “supposedly good,” she said, “we can’t live there because we can’t afford the properties, and also the people who live in those places, look down on people like me.” Having neighbors who are people of color, who are living and experiencing similar struggles and realities is part of what helps her feel connected and comfortable in South LA. “O sea, que aqui esta más uno en su ambiente...That is, here is where one feels most comfortable, because the people who live here we’re almost all equal, whether it’s people of color or Latino. We’re in the same position.”

Not all first-generation Latino residents waxed euphoric about living in South LA. One man, Andres Durantes* concluded that South LA “represents a place where Hispanic people and people of color have to live together because they don’t have other economic possibilities....if I don’t like it here in South LA, where I can go? I’m not sure, but it would probably be a similar barrio, no?” But he was clearly in the minority, as there were only a few voices echoing his sense of being stuck, remarkable since respondents were fairly consistent in describing the period of arrival as being one of tough times and hard adjustments.

Attitudes like those of Sr. Durantes are exactly why considering time and transformation—so often left out of the tale of South LA—is key. As we showed earlier, many Latinos started off with very negative attitudes about South LA and its association with crime, Black people, and Black culture, but over time, most of them have changed their views. In fact, the majority now express love and pride of place. Latinos in South LA have learned to practice cordial, if somewhat superficial, relations of coexistence with their Black neighbors. For thousands of Mexican and Central American immigrants, South LA is where they have a made a home and raised their families. They have sentimental feelings about the area.

Probably one reason for the current positive view is that South LA has become a safer place than it was in an earlier era, something acknowledged by nearly all the interviewees. Constancia Escobar reflected on the changes that she had seen and attributed them to the police work that was being done. “Ahora yo siento que la policía...I now think the
inherently dangerous place because there were many African Americans,” but this changed when he began to bring his African-American friends to their home. He used those moments and other opportunities to educate his mother about the history of South LA and how African Americans had historically been at the frontlines of the battle for racial, political, and economic equity in the US. With that, her anti-Black views began to soften. This underscores an important point: Just as South LA has not remained stagnant, neither have the viewpoints and outlooks of Latino residents vis-à-vis their African-American neighbors.

The first generation of Latinos to South LA—whether first generation into the country or just into the neighborhood—lived through a very unique historical moment and context that shaped their lives and attitudes. Some came with a very negative stigma about danger in South LA, while others quickly developed one. And because of a mix of strategies for staying safe in a troubled place, language limitations, and racial biases, Latinos who first moved to the neighborhood frequently struggled to build close ties with African Americans, with some exceptions. Few events were designed to build bridges: one younger Latina even suggested that “more public community…festivals and things like that” would be helpful to bring together older members of the community.

While progress toward greater connection and understanding remains uneven, many in this generation of first movers have developed a deep sense of love and pride for the neighborhood. For that group, racial tensions remain but the highly racialized tone exhibited by some has mellowed to some degree. In part, this may be the result of watching the way their own children have experienced South LA with their daily lives bound up with their Black neighbors and classmates. We now turn to that generation.

There’s also a language barrier that a lot of people don’t feel comfortable crossing or just don’t do it. And I think that’s probably the main thing keeping people segregated, I guess. A lot of the older Latinos don’t speak English and a lot of the older Black people don’t speak Spanish. So I don’t think it’s necessarily somebody is trying to be rude or anything like that.”

– Vilma De La Fuente,* Community Resident
Latinos Who Grew Up in South LA

Love and pride in South LA were the overarching themes that came up in our second-generation interviews. While their parents may have retreated into home life because of some of the negative conditions they faced in South LA, younger Latinos that we interviewed have, in a way, almost done the exact opposite. They have embraced South LA, expressing deep love and pride for the place and its people. In their view, they have overcome tough circumstances and they have also done so in concert with African-American friends in South LA.

Indeed, while most of our second-generation Latino interviewees were born and raised in an era of gang violence and drug-trafficking that struck fear in and provoked distancing by their parents, they also shared deep, personal relationships with their African-American neighbors, classmates, and teammates. Together, they faced challenging school environments, rising crime rates, and a surge in over-policing that made daily life difficult. In this section, we explore these experiences and the ways that younger Latinos have developed their own sense of place—and their sense of interwoven destinies—in South LA.

Being Brown, Being Black

Latinos who grew up in South LA have shared music, slang, vocabulary, and lifestyle with African Americans. These younger Latinos consider South LA home, identify with their Black neighbors, and do not feel isolated from Black residents—feelings not often shared by their parents. As one civic leader, Benjamin Torres, put it: “These are kids who were growing up with African Americans and have developed a mutual culture where music, and language, and gestures, and storytelling, and even how they identify—you know...street life—was very similar from Black to Brown.”

I was kind of more raised with [African-American] culture, you know what I mean? So listening to music together, like different things like that, going to parties together. [Our parents] didn’t experience that.”

– Fernando Horacio, *Community Resident
Beyond music, younger Latinos often share with African Americans a mutually constituted sense of what race means in the US. Younger Latinos learned about the Black civil rights movement in the US in school even as they experienced over-criminalization, under-resourced schools, and limited opportunities alongside their Black friends. This pointed them towards critiquing broader systemic dysfunction rather than making generalizations about other racial groups. The second generation also grew to understand that isolated incidents of racially motivated tensions between African Americans and Latinos did not entirely represent Black-Brown relations and could also divert attention from larger forces affecting both groups.

So how did this understanding come about? One key factor: Second-generation Latinos simply had more day-to-day interactions with African Americans. Interviewees spoke at length about what it meant to them to have Black friends:

*We grew up together. You know, they fed us collard greens; we fed them beans. You know, we grew up in each other’s homes, and we grew up together. So to us, it’s a similarity. They’re our people. We struggle, we consider them our people.* (Nancy Suarez*)

Food can be a powerful marker of distinct origins or it can be a sort of welcome mat; in this instance, it was clearly the latter. Other everyday interactions and practices, including interracial friendships and sports, created strong connections. One Latino man commented:

*One of my best friends is Black. I can’t change that. It’s just, it just happened. It’s the way I was raised. It’s the way I grew up and the activity, basketball, sports, it keeps my mind off of the, I guess you would have to say the struggles in life.*

In South LA, it appears that both organized sports and park programming like the “Summer Night Lights” initiative—aimed at combatting gang violence by having late night park programming—may serve as platforms for interracial leisure, cooperation, and relationship building.

Interracial romance also played a role. Many second-generation interviewees either had experienced romantic relationships with African Americans, or had a Latino friend or family member who had. “A lot more relationships are becoming interracial,” Analisa Campana* commented, “A lot more relationships are becoming interracial and I feel like now, African-American people, you know it’s something of the norm to hear that ‘my son is getting married to a Latina, so they’re having a wedding.’” Several of the first-generation interviewees had observed this, too, and spoke lovingly of their African-American son-in-law or a niece’s husband.

Many interviewees spoke with appreciation for parental-like mentorship and guidance from elderly African Americans. One interviewee, Yvette Ramirez* described how she left home while she was underage, yet she learned to thrive because she was taken under the wing of an older African-American woman. Yvette* recalls the older woman saying, “Somebody else might just send you to foster care, ‘cause you’re still under age. … But, I’m not going to do that to you. … I’ve been part of the system, and I’m not going to let you fall into the system. You can stay here as long as you pull your weight.” Yvette* remarked about the woman who took her in: “She’s one of the most influential women in my life.” We heard other instances of the same sort of care, especially in the form of after-school guidance and babysitting for working parents.

Latino youth also sought out African-American peers to learn from them. In another instance, one interviewee spoke about spending time with his Black classmates in order to learn English.
By the time I was transitioning to high school, I had been here about three or four years and my English wasn’t necessarily the best... I was lucky enough to always have really kind-hearted, good kids that were African-American that would help me out... Why would I hang out with the Latino kids? I needed to learn English, and the Black kids knew English, so I needed to play with them. Most of my teachers were African American and most of the kids were African American as well, so it just seemed the norm for me. It’s not until my parents talked about violence and then we actually purchased a home and I saw what African American males did to my father that I began to think of African Americans as violent, but even then I had examples of kids who were not. So it kind of balanced out for me. (Lydia Quintanilla*)

In short, unlike their parents, second-generation Latinos had close relationships with African Americans which allowed them to develop a counter-narrative that rejected false sweeping assumptions about Black violence. Through their immersion in school, sports, and friendships, younger Latinos developed a more complicated understanding of race and ethnicity in South LA that seems to be well-primed for developing coalitions and shared civic projects with African Americans, a topic we take up in chapter five on Facing Forward: Lessons, Recommendations, and Conclusion.

Our younger respondents acknowledged that Latinos and African Americans have experienced systemic racism and hardship together. One interviewee poignantly reflected:

I think we face similar challenges. I think you know, economically we’re both oppressed. You know I think that our communities like South Los Angeles lack the resources...doesn’t matter what the culture is, we don’t have the power to bring things like hospitals. You know like quality supermarkets, transportation issues, access
to parks, all of those things that contribute to a good quality health we are absolutely impacted in the same way. Right, we always have been, it doesn’t matter whether the population is majority Latino or majority African American. We face those challenges and so we do share more in common than not. (Eugenio Ramirez*)

I mean—housing, crime, exploitation, mass incarceration, mediocre education, lack of programs for opportunities to go to college. Jeez, I mean it runs the gamut, the only difference really other than all the ones that we face is that Black folks are more underemployed, but Mexicans are more underpaid which is why they get hired. (Edwin Coto*)

Our second-generation interviewees often contextualized Black-Brown conflicts in terms of systemic issues of racism and inequality. This comes in contrast to the first generation, who often offered sweeping generalizations about race, partly based on their own background prejudice, the influences of US society, and the particularly difficult period in which they arrived.

The children of Latino immigrants are also seeing efforts by African Americans to work with Latinos. This comes in sharp contrast to how their parents were received (e.g., African Americans refusing to shop at Latino businesses). Our younger interviewees cited examples of learning from African Americans and of Black residents absorbing Latino culture—even gaining fluency in Spanish. One interviewee said:

I used to get made fun of for speaking Spanish. Now...the girl in McDonald’s speaks Spanish. The African-American girl at McDonald’s, she’s like, really good [at] Spanish, you know. She’s, like, I’m working on it. And I hear that all the time because we’re everywhere, so I guess they kinda feel like they need to—need to learn it. But the acceptance is also a lot better. A lot better.

The level of everyday accommodation—a part of quotidian existence that is sorely absent from media accounts of South LA—is increasing and, for this woman, the changes have been noticeable. More broadly, younger Latinos have experienced the good and the bad, the love and camaraderie between Black and Latino friends, as well as the instances of tension and violence that still crop up. In essence, their experience of Black-Brown South LA is textured in a much deeper way than that of their parents—and, likely, more than that of most Americans. And these intimate connections are part of the bedrock of their pride and love for South LA.

**Place, Race, and Identity**

From the Watts Uprising in 1965, to the crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980s, to the 1992 civil unrest, and a litany of sensational media reports, South LA has tended to be characterized as a community on the brink of collapse. Even as the outside world had been bombarded with negative images, second-generation Latinos have developed a positive “place-based” identity. That is, they see being from South LA as different from being from other places; there is a deep solidarity with those who have faced similar struggles and overcome the challenges of the neighborhood, creating a strong sense of both resilience and community.

To start, many interviewees related the joy they take in South LA. One woman reflected extensively on the ease of the neighborhood—that she could so easily buy breakfast tamales from the tamale man, or run down to Vernon and Figueroa and “pick up some bomb ass tacos or handmade tortillas and be able to feed my kids” recalled Yvette Ramirez.* Another interviewee, Cynthia Ventura,* described the neighborhood almost like a tightknit village, saying, “I love the sense of community, and I feel like some other places people are like snobby or stuck up, but there’s always a sense of community, because everybody is kind of like in some sort of related situation.”
Going a level deeper, the pride in South LA also comes from a sense of overcoming hardship. When asked what it meant to be a Latina in South LA, one of our interviewees, Analisa Campana,* replied, “It means that you can still overcome poverty. That you can move up, that you don’t have to stay in the situation that you’re in.” She continued: “I don’t think that there is a specific ‘Latina’ in South LA, but it’s up to you. I mean, I’m proud and have never been ashamed.” After all, many of the anecdotes that were shared relayed a story of migration that often involved escaping desperate circumstances. They (or more often their parents) fled violent and tough economic conditions in their home country, or they were simply trying to find somewhere to live on a limited budget.

Another unique aspect of being Latino in South LA is being “more mixed in” with African Americans than in other Latino communities throughout Los Angeles. Many of our second-generation Latino interviewees frequently underscored that their Latino identities are inflected with African-American cultural traditions. In fact, they spoke about their “Latinidad” as constituting a blend of Latino and Black influences. One interviewee put it this way:

I feel like in South LA you get more of the flava. ... Like you’re more in tune with your African-American community. Like East LA, they’re probably more Americanized, but they’re still probably more Mexican American and Latino or Salvadoran. You know? They’re more tied to their culture. But here you’re more mixed in. (Analisa Campana*)

And another offered this statement of Latino identity:

I would say there’s a huge difference, you know growing up especially when I got to college and I noticed the differences. I would always, you know, I have my earrings, I got my do-rags...You know you grow up in the aura of Blackness if I can say that... That’s very different, you know, like from the way you speak to the things you like. You know, you grew up listening to Vicente Fernandez, but also George Clinton and Al Green. Right and so it’s real different, you know. You grew up learning as much about...well you get to college caring as much about the Brown Berets as you do you know the Black Panthers because you sort of, you know, relate to all of that. You think about the Crips and the Bloods and you don’t just think about, you know, all Black folks you don’t know, you think about your friends whose uncles were already in the gangs when they were born. (Edwin Coto*)

The second generation that was raised in South LA grew up with African Americans, allowing them a different set of experiences than Latinos had in other parts of the city. Growing up Latino in South LA over the past few decades means that it was nearly impossible to think about yourself without thinking about African Americans. For race relations, as this next chapter of the report will show, that can make all the difference.

East LA is often viewed as a sort of iconic Chicana/o barrio but many of the younger Latinos raised in South LA actively resisted what they felt was a kind of homogenous Chicano or Mexican American identity based in the East LA experience. Several described how their relatives’ lives in East LA and adjacent communities differed from their own. One young woman, Cecilia Rodriguez,* reported that she and her sister, daughters of Central American parents, felt insulted by the offensive anti-Black racism they heard from their cousins who lived on the Eastside. In fact, Cecilia* suggested that African Americans—the friends...
The Watts community is located in the southeastern part of South LA, bordering Lynwood and South Gate. While the 1965 Watts Rebellion was the first event to catapult Watts onto the national stage, the area has its own long and storied history. Originally known as Mudtown, it was a separate city before being annexed by Los Angeles. Its residents project a distinct pride of place, as these voices attest:

I don’t feel like I grew up in South Central. Like, I feel like South Central is a complete different monster, and like, South Central is like, over here, like, south of downtown LA. Like, that’s what I think South Central is. And like, I lived in Watts, like, until I was 19, like, in Watts. So that’s where I’m from. (Marco Rivera*)

I think of Watts as by itself. It’s not South LA, it’s just Watts, the reason being this is my home. You know, this is completely different than South Central to me. If I go to South Central, I know I’m not in Watts, but I also don’t feel the same urgency to get home or get in the house as you know, it’s hard to explain, but this is not part of South LA right here, this is Watts. (Fernando Hernandez*)

And that actually made me have pride in that I was from Watts and that’s why when we’re talking about South Central and Watts, it is and it isn’t. Geographically, you can say it’s part of Watts, but the mentality of people in Watts is “this is Watts, this is not South Central.” South Central is something that’s a little bit worse than Watts, and then because you had interacted with a few people from South Gate that made you feel differently about your neighborhood. (Lydia Quintanilla*)

The sharp sense of community identification contrasted with other interviews from Vermont Square and Central Avenue where residents tended to use broader terms like South Central or South LA to describe their community. There was also a distinct sense of a community that was “often left in the shadows” (Carla Hernandez*). She also noted:

If you consider South LA up to USC, yeah, you definitely see different, like it’s community housing and SAJE and all these advocacy organization that are doing very effective work and partnerships. You know, like you see the investment in the community. Watts hasn’t gotten there yet. You know, and you start like, I mean, in my mind, if you map it, the northern part of South LA has way more investment than the southern part and then kind of Watts falls out of it. (Carla Hernandez*)

The sense of abandonment is particularly striking since Watts is the home of one of South LA’s oldest and most established economic development entities, the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) as well as one of the few Latino-focused organizing efforts, the Watts/Century Latino Organization. Insuring that the distinct place pride in Watts translates into garnering needed (and deserved) resources is a critical challenge for the future.
and peers they grew up with in South LA—were their true extended family:

My cousins who grew up in Lincoln Heights or in East LA, they will make comments about—ignorant comments—that have to do with race when they refer to African Americans, and both my sister and I react very differently. To us, it’s like you’re talking about our extended family almost because it did become like an extended family. They were the ones that were around there, that would see me walk home, that were extending a helping hand to my parents when they needed it. (Cecilia Rodriguez*)

Other young Latinas and Latinos raised in South LA were similarly offended by the anti-Black racism of Chicanos and Latinos from East LA. They felt more affinity with African Americans from South LA than with co-ethnic Latinos from the Eastside because of shared experiences:

I don’t relate to Latinos in East LA...It’s completely different and I think that you know that it is because you grew up around Black culture. And not just Black culture, what you see on TV, but actual Black culture and waking up in the morning and your neighbors are Black and going to school and you know your classmates are Black and your friends are Black. (Eugenio Ramirez*)

You might be Latino in East LA and you might grow up with a hatred for African Americans...it might sound ridiculous when I say it, but I know for a fact that there are whole housing projects in East LA, who, if an African American moves in they will actually come to your door and ask you to move out because they don’t like Black people living there. (Fernando Hernandez*)

I work in the Staples Center...So you have people from the Eastside that actually do need to work on their relationships with African Americans. Because, ‘Let’s hang out,’ ‘Who’s going?’...Yeah, but he’s Black...that kind of sucks. Right here in the Southside...it’s easy to get to know people and make friendships, no matter the ethnicity. (Pedro Sanchez*)

Some of the sense of difference was reinforced by the Eastside reaction: South LA Latinos report feeling ostracized by relatives because of their association with South LA’s Black community. This led to marginalization and isolation from the Latino communities in East and Northeast LA—helping to create a Latino identity unique to South LA.

This sense from the interviews squares with the research: One of the earliest reports on Latinos in South LA stress how the Latino political leadership of the 1970s and 1980s largely ignored the burgeoning population that was moving into South LA, leaving Latino residents disconnected from the broader political institutions and Latino organizations in the region (Hayes-Bautista and Rodriguez 1994).

There are also key differences between the broader Eastside and South LA. While once a multiracial community, as the 20th century progressed, Boyle Heights and East LA became a Mexican barrio, home to a rich Chicano history and to third and fourth-generation residents. South LA Latinos are primarily first- or second-generation immigrants and include people from Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, and elsewhere. The experience of South LA Latinos was defined in part by their experience as first-generation movers into an unfamiliar community, detached from the traditional Latino strongholds in the region.

One of our civic leader interviewees, Jorge Nuño, put it well:

What I notice about being in the Eastside, it’s their history. I remember, I was at my friend’s house and his mom and his grandmother were speaking English...I’ve never heard that. I’ve never seen that...I was never exposed to a third-generation Latino.

Another sort of language difference came up as well. One interviewee from Watts explained how her brother’s speech closely resembled African-American vernacular and that if you closed your eyes, “you’d probably think he was African American.” She later expanded on her point by describing some of the differences between how Latinos in East LA spoke and Latinos in Watts. “I think it’s the slang that we have,” she explained.
qualitative and quantitative evidence that leads them to suggest that Latinos, like Asian Americans, are increasingly identifying as multiracial, and with greater social distance from Black people than from whites. Others have suggested that there are countervailing influences, including a chilly reception in the US that may be leading immigrants and their offspring to instead steer away from whiteness (Pulido and Pastor 2013).

We believe that a spatial, temporal, and generational perspective of the Latino experience in South LA sheds a different light on these processes. For example, our interviews with Latinos in South LA reveal unambiguous generational differences in the way Latinos engage with African Americans and Black culture at large. The first generation of Latino immigrants settled in what were then majority African-American neighborhoods, but they remained somewhat insular and socially distant from Black neighbors. This distance was reinforced by anti-Black racial ideologies from their home countries as well as by a lack of knowledge of racial and political history in the US. Unlike their children, most had never sat in a classroom where they learned about Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, or American civic engagement. As we have emphasized, they arrived when South LA was besot with the painful aftermath of deindustrialization and divestment, a crack epidemic, gang warfare, and police violence. The result was a fair degree of social distance and insularity from African Americans. As we saw, first-generation interviewees did recall gestures of help, mentorship, and friendship from Black neighbors and teachers but for the most part, these experiences were fleeting. Interestingly, however, this has not fed into what some analysts seem to predict: it did not produce an affinity with the white population. Rather, it solidified their identities as Latinos. In South LA, particularly in the Vermont Square neighborhood—which exhibits the most diversity of Latinos in terms of national

**Understanding Generational Difference**

Over 100 years ago, the eminent scholar W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) declared that the Black-White color line is “the problem of the Twentieth Century.” During the last four decades, as immigration from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean have dramatically changed the complexion of the US, social scientists have analyzed how intermarriage, multiracial identities, and the increasing population of Asian Americans and Latino Americans have shifted the color line. Sociologists Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean (2004, 2007, 2010), for example, amass

“So I start to learn that there were Chicano kids who were growing up in South Central... They spoke Spanish, they spoke English different than the kids on the Eastside. They were into hip-hop music unlike some of the Eastside guys. They weren’t all traditional cholos like the Eastside kids.”

— Civic Leader
In short, place matters. That is, where Latinos live and their social class makes a difference in terms of their racial/ethnic identities. As race scholar Laura Pulido has shown together with Manuel Pastor (2013) in an analysis of seven counties in Southern California, Latinos who are middle-class and live in suburban areas are more likely to identify as white, while Latinos who are lower-income, working-class, and live in inner-city neighborhoods are more likely to select “some other race” when asked by the US Census. Pulido and Pastor remind us of the important dynamics that are actively “spatializing racial identity.” In other words, middle-class Latinos living in suburban areas may experience a very different color line than those living and working in inner-city areas such as South LA.

Finally, as we consider the shifting color line, recall that Latino immigration has traditionally been studied through the lens of assimilation to a white majority, with that drift to whiteness considered to be a marker of upward mobility. As an ancillary, paradigms such as segmented assimilation have assumed that proximity and affiliation with African Americans in inner-city contexts would signal and prompt downward mobility for new Latino immigrants (Portes and Zhou 1993). Thus far, our study of first- and second-generation residents in South LA offers a more complex story. Our first-generation respondents, while not closely aligned with their African-American neighbors, are the parents of now young adult children who express close affinities with African Americans and South LA—and both generations are finding some degree of success. These set of patterns suggest a need to rethink the dynamics shaping Latino immigrant integration in Black neighborhoods.
In concluding this portion of the research, we were struck by a remarkable sort of contradiction. There is a depth of pride about South LA, both for the early arrivals and for those who grew up there. But at the same time, the interviews square with what the data suggested in the previous chapter: There is not yet a strong civic culture for Latinos in South LA. Here again, generations matter. The first arrivals were working-class people who were employed at a myriad of jobs, and busy raising their families while they commuted around Los Angeles. In their prime working years, they kept to the basics: raising their families and earning income to pay the bills. As many of them explained, they were also struggling to learn English, but they had little time to study and they generally worked in monolingual Spanish speaking environments. In addition, as South LA became more Latino, it also afforded them possibilities for worshipping, shopping, and doing most of their daily and weekly transactions in Spanish, allowing them to live in a bubble where learning English was not required. These factors bred a sense of separation from civic life: They might know their neighbors, but not their city council representatives. The social distance was exacerbated by the racism immigrants might have brought with them but also by the era of arrival: Latinos who moved to South LA in the 1980s and 1990s encountered challenges to their security and safety, and this prompted them to shut in and shut out. There are a few significant exceptions of first-generation civic leaders who were nurtured by civic organizations in South LA, but insularity rather than civic engagement characterizes the majority of their experiences.

So what is the outlook of younger Latinos on politics, civic engagement, and the future of their neighborhood? Are they similarly insular and removed from local civic engagement? The responses varied, but in general, our research leads us to believe that the seeds for Latino leaders of multiracial coalitions are ready to sprout. Of course, the terrain is tough: Few Latinos are currently in elected positions or at the helm of community organizations. “I’m pretty sure they are out there,” one of our interviewees, Fernando Hernandez,* stated as he explained the reasons for his own lack of political participation. “But I didn’t pay attention to it, because it didn’t concern me. I mean, it concerns me because it’s my community, but it’s something that I don’t pay attention to because I’m focused on me.”

Of course, this affects more than one person: the strains of hardship and poverty Fernando* identified as limiting his involvement in the political process is actually something commonly shared in South LA. But it’s also sort of a vicious circle: improving the economy may be key to stirring political engagement but South LA will not get the attention it deserves without a significant uptick in the civic engagement of all its residents.

A strong social foundation is already in place for raising civic awareness. The sentiment of love and pride for the place and people of South LA has created a new type of “rootedness” and commitment among younger Latinos. While their parents sought homeownership and a stable...
place for their families—one type of rootedness—younger Latinos tend to see beyond individual social mobility and homeownership.

Many of those who have returned to the area after attending college outside of South LA express an interest in being involved in improving the welfare of the region. They want to “give back” to their community, an ethos that Agius Vallejo (2012) has noted among second-generation children from poor Latino immigrant families, that they are fulfilling at a collective- and neighborhood-level.

How are they doing this? Some are already working as teachers and community organizers and we heard from many others who want to improve their South LA neighborhoods. They are developing themselves as professionals, and in the process, devoting their efforts and expertise to community-wide uplift. Many of them spoke about wanting to help local youth, both African American and Latino.

These quotes reflect quite a shift from decades past where there was a sentiment of “to make it, you had to leave the ‘hood,” and sometimes Latino students heard this advice from their own teachers. This was, in fact, one of the reasons many of the second-generation respondents cited for choosing to stay in South LA and raise their children in the community where they grew up.

One set of issues that younger Latinos are thinking about is the potential gentrification and displacement of residents from South LA. Seeing the development downtown, they believe that African Americans and Latinos will once again be the victims of unregulated and unfair housing practices. “With gentrification, you notice that there’s communities, like in Echo Park, Silver Lake where the lowest people have been pushed out,” one resident explained. “Now they’re pushing out more towards East LA now, and to the Avenues and all that. So they’re pushing people out. And it’s going to happen to South Central eventually, too” (Lydia Quintanilla*). These fears are substantiated by the ongoing development of the Crenshaw district and neighborhoods adjacent to USC and downtown LA.

Ultimately, our interview questions about the civic engagement of younger Latinos revealed a low level of current engagement but experiences and outlooks that may prompt them to be more involved in the future. Fortunately, many of the challenges that have impeded first-generation Latinos’ civic participation, like language barriers and citizenship, do not exist for the second-generation. The next wave of South LA civic leaders are highly likely to include a strong Latino component, and because younger Latinos have experiences of deep interdependence with African Americans, they are well-positioned to exercise a more common ground approach to leadership for this multiracial mega-neighborhood.
South Los Angeles has many stories. Once the site of white industrial suburbs, once the mecca for the Black Great Migration, and once the terrain for rebellions that sought to redefine race relations and community policing, it has also been the locale for the integration of Latino immigrants within a Black space. In Chapter III, we discussed how that process has led to a new Latino identity, one that stands apart from the Chicanismo of East LA and the traditional immigrant stories of Pico-Union and elsewhere. Rather, we see, considerably in the second-generation, a unique Latino identity linked to the African-American community and its members, leaders, and institutions that have shaped South LA. At the same time, Latinos coming of age in South LA and looking to exercise political and civic influence have found few avenues for voice and representation.

The need for civic vehicles is not surprising given the rapid demographic shift over the past 30 years; the region’s civic and social institutions have struggled to adapt to the influx of Latinos and the out-migration of African-American families. Relations between African-American and Latino communities have evolved with time, and the racial tension and social upheaval of the 1980s and 1990s have given way to familiarity and (occasional) collaboration between residents. However, friction remains when it comes to leadership reflecting and recognizing the changing demographic landscape of South LA.

As a new generation of homegrown Latinos comes of age, they are increasingly frustrated with the lack of Latino politicians and are eager for representation. Perceived competition around access to resources remains a major dynamic in an historically marginalized area. The tension created by perceived competition can create barriers to collaboration and solidarity but they are, in some sense, not surprising: as one interviewee put it, these tensions develop when you “leave people to fight over crumbs.” And the slow pace of civic change and Latino incorporation may be a recipe for continued tension.
The future is what the leaders of South LA will make of it—and this will require addressing the existing disconnect between residents and civic institutions.

In this chapter, we draw on interviews with community leaders from public, private, and nonprofit institutions in South LA. Over a nine-month period, we interviewed 18 civic leaders, including a handful of next generation leaders who have emerged over the last decade. We asked them about their involvement in South LA, their perceptions of the social impacts of demographic change, Black-Latino coalition building, parks and green spaces, and the future of South LA. The leaders cover a range of sectors, industries, and professions, and in determining who to interview we were sure to include new voices that could speak to the changing dynamics of South LA. Many of the organizations and leaders profiled here have helped create place-based unity and have worked to ensure that residents can thrive. In particular, we spoke with leaders that both focused on integrating the Latino majority and sought to do so in a way that acknowledges, celebrates, and furthers the reality that South LA is the heart of Black LA.

The key question that drives this chapter: Are the current institutional structures inflexible or in flux? What will it take to open up and better incorporate Latino concerns? And what are the elements that will make that collaboration possible? To address these questions, we begin with an overview of the institutional landscape in South LA, with a focus on how the region’s organizations have changed (or not) in recent decades in tandem with demographic changes. We then profile how some organizations are effectively responding to the new Latino majority and are innovating around Black-Brown collaboration and grassroots engagement. Finally, we close the chapter with a look at South LA’s future: the place-based political identity of South LA and strategies for increasing civic engagement and grassroots leadership, particularly amongst Latinos.

Reasons for hope remain. South LA Councilmembers Marqueece Harris-Dawson and Curren Price have both championed initiatives that reflect the demographic changes of South LA, including Spanish-language programming and efforts to promote Latino political participation. Latino civic leaders like Alberto Retana (Community Coalition) and Benjamin Torres (Community Development Technologies) have taken the helm of community organizations previously led by African Americans, while a crop of Black leaders (e.g., Gloria Walton, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education) are welcoming Latinos into their organizational structure. These and other leaders have shown through their actions that Latinos and African Americans can lead together. Key organizations are bridging the racial divide by embedding a systemic understanding of race and racism—especially of anti-Blackness, which we reference later within their structures, as well as addressing differences between Black and Latino communities head on.
Institutions: Inflexible or In Flux?

As South LA became the center of Black LA, African Americans developed institutions that could address challenges and could lead the community forward. Most of the region’s anchor institutions for African Americans were at the front of the fight for civil rights and social justice. Among others, the local chapters for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Urban League, and the NAACP are all located in or near South LA. Additionally, many African-American churches with historical significance, including the Second Baptist Church (where Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X spoke) and First African Methodist Episcopal Church (the oldest African-American founded church in the city), continue to hold political power even as many attendees are no longer neighborhood residents.37

More recently, Black-led organizations like Community Coalition (CoCo) and Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE) have emerged, organizing and advocating in historically African-American communities but often with strategies and staffs that reflect the changing demography and incorporate Latinos as well. There is a sort of generational tension between the older and newer formations that is the flip side of the generational issues reviewed for Latino residents earlier: younger Black leaders, having grown up with Latinos, often see cross-ethnic solidarity as necessary to build into institutional DNA.

While South LA has many organizations and institutions, there are key gaps. For example, in our focus areas of Central Avenue, Vermont Square, and Watts, the lack of commercial institutions and few large-scale retail centers is noticeable—only in 2016 did a Business Improvement District (BID) formalize on Central Avenue, the historic heart of Black LA. In contrast, we found a relative abundance of community-based and faith-based institutions, with the latter often serving dual (or even triple) roles as places of worship, civic engagement, and services.

With regard to the faith-based institutions, some of the leaders (both African-American and Latino) that we interviewed noted key differences by race and ethnicity. While many African-American, faith-based institutions double as political and civic centers, this is less true of Latino churches. As one interviewee noted, “Now if you compare the Catholic Church which most immigrants embrace, you notice the involvement of the Catholic church trying to help this critical mass of immigrants.” Additionally, another interviewee explained how there is a subset of Latino churches which “believe that politics and religion should never commingle.” Thus, while Black houses of worship have long histories of political engagement, Latino churches have a different and complicated history, some outright eschewing civic engagement.38 The disconnect between Latino churches and civic engagement is all the more significant in South LA, where there are few Latino-centric institutions.

We also found that the most prominent institutions retain Black leadership, even in neighborhoods that have become majority Latino. While this reflects the historical legacy, Black leadership is also something many African Americans in South LA hope to preserve. Black institutions represent Black self-determination.
For all its changes and challenges, South LA remains the single most important concentration of Black people and Black political power in Southern California. Multiple interviewees stressed the importance of African-American institutions and history when discussing voting and other forms of civic engagement.

Oftentimes, Latinos who have moved into South LA are unaware of the importance of these Black institutions—not just for South LA residents but for African Americans in Los Angeles as a whole. Our interviewees recognized the need for Black and Latino residents to share their histories, including stories of migration from the US South and from Latin America. At the same time, civic leaders stressed that as the Black community shrinks, there are worries that the special history of African Americans in this place will be erased. One interviewee noted that while new immigrants bring a narrative of gratitude, Black people have been rooted in this nation for centuries, and South LA has “a really deeply embedded oppression.”

The foundational narrative contrasts against and nuances the sometimes optimistic perspective of newcomers.

Civic leaders suggested that sharing Black history is not just important for mutual understanding but that there is a missed opportunity if Latinos (and other residents) remain disconnected from the broader struggle for Black liberation and self-determination in our nation. As one interviewee summed it up: “There’s not a greater community of color than the African-American community that sees the critical importance of civic participation and voting.” Black-led institutions have served as stewards for justice in African-American communities, primarily in areas with limited public services and infrastructure. Moreover, improvements attained through Black politics often benefit all people of color. So, the future of South LA hinges upon connecting this legacy and network with an emerging Latino majority with its own challenges and grievances.

What Kind of Latino

The Latino community in South LA is diverse. Public institutions, in particular, might struggle to connect with constituencies if Latinos are seen as monolithic.

For example: Community policing efforts have contributed to a decrease in violence and are rooted in long-term network cultivation with African-American institutions. However, some leaders have expressed concern that networks are not yet in place for diverse Latino communities. One of the African-American elected officials we interviewed noted how, “When you begin to try to understand what neighborhoods you are involved in policing, you’ve got to know whether it’s Guatemalans or Mexicans.” Often, Central Americans and other subgroups are overlooked within broader governance structures.

Furthermore, ethnic mixing is part and parcel to immigrant integration. South LA’s growing Afro-Latino population showcases how, as one interviewee put it, “LA is [still] a gateway city. still has the 8th largest Black population [in the US], but second largest when you [only] count biracial Black folks” (for those data points, see Rastogi et al. 2011). In South LA, the lines between Blacks and Latinos cannot be neatly drawn. (For more on Blaxicans, see Thompson-Hernandez, n.d.)
Tensions and Tightropes

While greater inclusion of Latinos in Black civic institutions could lead to enhanced numbers and more political strength, the impulse toward incorporation is dampened by fears of a zero-sum outcome. In other words, some think that a rising Latino voice will directly result in Black loss. Sometimes, these tensions develop around specific neighborhoods: ‘I think even how Leimert Park has developed as a political entity—not just as a collection of homes or businesses, but as a political entity—has also been a response. There’s been this very real putting their foot down and being like, “This is going to stay Black,”’ according to one interviewee. Given the historic role Black leaders and institutions have held as agents of change in the community, it is understandable why they could become defensive of perceived outsiders who may not be aware of the legacy of Black institutions in South LA.

Concerns about Black erasure are exacerbated by a perception that the new Latino majority receives more resources from the City and nonprofit institutions. More than one interviewee warned of the cyclical nature of politics and social services, noting that Black residents were once the primary focus (in the same way that Latinos currently are) until Latinos came along: ‘Most of our Black parents have been around a long time—they still live in the neighborhood, they grew up here, and they’re like, “Oh, the same thing happened to us. They gave us all the programs.”’ Some of these same leaders warned that such Latino favoritism would only happen for as long as was politically convenient, and afterwards Latinos would be pushed aside along with African Americans.

Another reason for unease: To some Black residents, Latino in-migration was not merely seen as replacement of departing Blacks but purposeful displacement, a feeling distinctly resonant in light of the looming gentrification of South LA. One of our respondents expressed a common view: The Latino influx has helped soften the ground in a way that will make whites comfortable enough to move in and gentrify South LA. The same respondent noted, ‘So that got me thinking about public housing, public schools, and the nexus where poor public policy drives out a group, and how through an artificial inducement, there’s an appearance that all of a sudden the Latino population sort of converged on the community all at once. But why were there all these opportunities to move in?’ The long history of segregation and marginalization of African Americans in South LA, as discussed in Chapter II has made Black leaders and residents distrustful of housing policies in the region.
Thus, to many residents, these changes are not simply a reflection of “natural” market dynamics, but they are propelled by racialized public policy decisions.

While much of the out-migration of African-American residents was driven by a desire to escape rising crime, crumbling infrastructure, and lack of opportunity, the displacement-oriented view of demographic change is reinforced by particular examples of push-out. As one interviewee noted, “If your kid can’t go to school in the neighborhood that he lives in, then there’s a strong possibility that you’re going to move to where you can be closer to his school. And if you go to court, and the court says you’ve got these violations—and I have actual experiences with people that worked here—where [you] were told that if they stayed in Los Angeles, [you]’d go to jail, that [you] needed to move out,” then you would move out. Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s the departure of Black residents is seen by some as involuntary and part of a broader process of erosion of the African-American community.

Some respondents reflected on the palpable sense of loss in South LA’s Black community. As one leader noted, “It’s a grief, it’s a mourning that I hear from African Americans over their loss of community identity. It’s a sadness because in the past 15 years everything was just, like, “all of a sudden I live in a new neighborhood, and I didn’t move.” While South LA was initially forged by racist redlining and restrictive covenants, it also became the epicenter of Black freedom and pride. Changing neighborhood demographics has meant a moving constituency that has left Black institutions vulnerable. While some institutions have scrambled to survive by shifting their focus from Black to Latino residents, this can reasonably compound a sense of loss for the African-American community. As a result, the Latinos who moved in, especially immigrants and Spanish-speakers, have sometimes been a target for Black resentment and pain.

Compounding the problem has been a sense of competition over education, jobs, and resources. For example, schools in South LA—now more frequently headed and staffed by Latinos—have disproportionately targeted and suspended Black students (Watanabe 2014). Some civic leaders have called attention to this, noting, “One of the things that he showed me is how Black kids were moving out of the district at a rate of some exponential number to Latinos, and they were given truancy citations, where there’s a demand to appear, at a much higher rate.” Because Latino parents usually make up the majority, they often exercise more influence with administrators and school officials than Black parents. Leaders that organize around schools noted that even when school administrators are African American, there is still friction and bias against Black students.
Our interviewees also talked about Latinos and African Americans contesting in other institutions that distribute key resources. For example, one Latino respondent noted, “You see all the upper management [at the County level] being African American and then the lower management is Latino. But African Americans fought for those positions for many years and finally got there, but now the whole community changed around them. But now... do they want to let go of that power?” In this single quote, several dynamics are highlighted: Latino frustrations with under-representation, an acknowledgement of the fears among African Americans about public and nonprofit resource loss, and a grudging Latino respect for and recognition of how African-American gains were hard-won. Later, we reflect on the capacities required for an elected official to truly represent both African Americans and Latinos (or any diverse community).

Tensions about demographic change could be eased with more resources for all residents, but nearly all civic leaders that we interviewed pointed to a scarcity of jobs, housing, and opportunity as driving factors perpetuating community division. Certainly, all residents have been hard hit by the collapse of the manufacturing industry as well as by a lack of public and private investment in South LA (see Chapter II for that history). Recalling the earlier data, Latinos and African Americans share similar levels of household poverty. At the same time, joblessness has been of particular importance for African Americans—a reality of which the LA Black Worker Center is painfully aware and working to change.

Immigrants have been an easy scapegoat for the lack of jobs. The narrative of immigrants displacing African-American workers has received support by some researchers (Borjas et al. 1997; Borjas, Grogger, and Hanson 2006), although the very same authors have revised their analyses to point to a more limited impact of immigrants on Black workers (Borjas, Grogger, and Hanson 2010). Meanwhile, other economic studies have shown minimal impacts on Black workers (Card 2005) and our own work suggests that immigration is only affecting those African Americans at the lowest skill-levels and actually has sharper negative effects on existing immigrants (Pastor, De Lara, and Scoggins 2011).

While the data indicate a more complex reality, the sense of competition is real and sets the terms for political division. Data can play a part in fostering alliances between Black and Latino workers by grounding a policy approach in improving both job access and working conditions—tackling the unemployment and working poverty issues that impact Blacks more in the first case and Latinos more in the second. But data alone will not do the trick: Community organizing and civic engagement is necessary to bring neighbors together.
Building Bridges

Building bridges requires organizers and leaders to find common interests but also to recognize all the historical and emotional dynamics discussed above. Multiple interviewees noted that this requires getting beyond a simple “same struggle, same fight” approach: Just because both African Americans and Latinos face challenges does not mean that they face exactly the same challenges. Both African-American and Latino leaders worried that Latinos can fall into the trap of thinking that because both groups are oppressed and marginalized that their obstacles and suffering are equal. For Latinos, the threat of having families separated by immigration law is deeply felt. The threat of family separation has parallels to the foster care system and its dramatic effect on Black families. For African Americans, arrest and incarceration rates are much higher than for Latinos, a fact that has long-lasting impact on job trajectories.

Of course, when African Americans insist that their situation is particularly acute, this can trigger a troubling response along the lines of “just get over it.” One leader expanded on the problems with this mindset, noting: “Because if you get told, “just get over it,” you’re going to harbor a bitterness toward the other, [but] there’s nowhere really to direct it. And so the result of that is that it’s rare for African Americans and Latinos to work together.’ In short, bridges are hard to build when different experiences are neither understood nor respected.

Just as it behooves Black leaders to better understand and incorporate new—well, now not-so-new—Latino neighbors, it is important for Latino leaders and residents to better understand the Black experience. Many of South LA’s Latino leaders know this, notably those who grew up there—in contrast to other Latinos in Southern California, most of whom did not grow up in a Black space where Black institutions and political structures were and are still present.

Working toward unity requires Latinos to take account of the sense of loss and resentment among African Americans and to work against internalized anti-Blackness (see the sub-section that follows). Not doing so can prevent Latinos from finding common ground with African Americans.

Working to build ties is especially urgent as political representation has not kept up with demographic transition. For example, in nearby Compton, the residents elected their first Latino City Councilmember in 2013 at a time when Latinos comprised two-thirds of that city’s population. As one local observer put it: African Americans “got here first, took over from the whites, and now it’s difficult for them to let go” (The Economist 2007). Indeed, while African Americans are seeing their schools become majority Latino, their service providers transitioning to Latino clientele, and their stores becoming Spanish-language oriented, one of the few remaining arenas where African Americans remain firmly entrenched is politics.

Many Latino leaders resent being on the sidelines. One noted: “…you know for a fact that there is no—not a single Latino elected—officially in South Los Angeles. Not a single one. So, we don’t have political representation.” Interviewees indicated the growing perception that older
CoCo took an existing campaign to reduce the concentration of liquor stores in South LA, and spearheaded a coalition to prevent the rebuilding of such stores that had burned down in the riots (McMillan 1992).

CoCo remains intentional about its work to improve the neighborhood and to bridge the Black-Brown divide. Both it and CADRE (Community Asset Development Re-defining Education) argue that one key way to do this is to insist on bringing an equal share of Black and Latino voices to the table. For instance, when explaining CADRE’s parent outreach strategy, Maisie Chin remarked how “if you don’t make it very focused on parity, and you just go knock on doors, and you go stand in front of schools, and you do presentations at school, you will only have Latino parents. Because if you only have Latino parents, Black parents will see that and they actually won’t come.” Chin suggests that unless organizations focus on parity, Latino parents, who are the majority, can fail to see the marginalization of Black parents and Black students in the school system. So CADRE constantly focuses on targeted outreach to Black parents while stressing to Latino parents that both groups must have an equal share of power at the table. CADRE builds Black-Brown unity into “the conscious practice of the organization.”

Organizing Together

Even as tensions over power, representation, and ownership continue to affect and afflict institutions in South LA, new organizations have emerged with innovative models, structures, and tactics to build cross-group solidarity and drive grassroots movement building. Several of these efforts were catalyzed by the 1992 civil unrest (Pastor and Prichard 2012). One such organization was founded in 1990 by Karen Bass in close partnership with Sylvia Castillo: Community Coalition (CoCo) has lead with Black-Brown unity at its center since its beginning. Originally created as a direct response to the crack cocaine epidemic and gang violence—hence its original name, the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse, Prevention, and Treatment—
Some interviewees stressed the need to not just focus on numerical representation, but to also lift up the role of history—from two directions. For example, Tim Watkins of Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) noted the long history of Black and Latino residents living in poverty in the region, and stressed how current residents need to understand the “cultural experience of who’s been here.” Recognizing the significance of South LA as a Black space is important, not just for the Black residents, but also for the Latinos who are moving into and growing up in the area. While multi-racial organizations like CoCo, SCOPE, and others include trainings that lift up the histories of South LA and its people, Latino-centric groups need to do this, too. Purposeful recognition of the historic relevance of Black organizing and politics, especially in neighborhoods that are still seen as African-American, can strengthen organizing and representation.

Migration histories also matter. Arturo Ybarra of the Watts/Century Latino Organization (WCLO)—one of the pioneers of Mexican-immigrant organizing in Watts—reflected that when he arrived in the late 1960s, it was difficult to establish dialogue between Latinos and African Americans. The misperceptions that abounded, especially around immigrants, were only overcome once the historical trajectory of Latino immigration was laid out, and common connections around overcoming oppression were established. As he states, “these misperceptions started to disappear when we and others and the community started to explain to African-American leaders the reasons these immigrants were coming into the country, and the facts. The historical factor helped them to understand the situation.” In general, history matters and organizers are using political education to contextualize the current conditions in South LA towards lasting connections between groups. Of course, one noted obstacle is the language barrier between Black and Brown residents. One leader working at a primarily Latino community garden noted: “So, Stanford-Avalon, the meeting is just not conducive to anyone who is not Spanish speaking.” By contrast, the LAPD’s Community-Police Advisory Boards (C-PAB) for South LA has separate meetings with African-American and Latino clergy, due to the logistics of holding bilingual meetings. While these duplicate meetings result in isolation from the other, they are needed, if temporary, workaround. Instead, the long-term solution needs “to actively find the logistical challenges so that you can build capacity within your organization in a meaningful way to do” the communication work necessary to build unity across groups, said Joanne Kim (formerly of CoCo and now staff for LA City Council District 8).

Once trust is built, organizations can also shift the focus to what groups have in common. One commonality is how an unjust economy generates the job scarcity and lack of economic opportunity for both Black and Latino workers. SCOPE is one organization that has prioritized broad issues of economic justice in its campaigns. Executive Director Gloria Walton notes, “There is a lot of commonality with the suffering from economic conditions.” Recent campaigns include the “Fight for $15,” which resulted in Los Angeles
activists, celebrities, and organizers stepped in with others to fight the closure. The Black leaders who fought for South Central Farm not only supported the Latino farmers, but in the process also transformed the space, which was not always welcoming to Black folks, to be more inclusive, according to Neelam Sharma of Community Services Unlimited (CSU). Though the farm closed, it did “become a beacon for unity,” lead to greater acceptance from the Latino farmers, and helped foster unity between Black organizers and Latino residents.

Another area of commonality: the lack of green spaces, primarily parks and gardens. In recent years campaigns around parks—such as CoCo’s efforts to revitalize MLK Jr. Park (see the box in Chapter V. —have emerged as vehicles to bring communities together and combat disinvestment in South LA. As one leader put it, “both communities want green space, more parks, and access to healthy foods.” Effective organizations are working to build understanding and awareness of these universal place-based concerns shared by both Black and Latino residents. Such common ground work should be a complement to taking on each other’s more specific issues. One interviewee shared a story of a Latino parent who refused to criminalize a Black student, and how other Latino parents ostracized her as a result:

So on several instances, we had stories from our Latino parents when they’ve literally said, “I don’t want that kid suspended.” I don’t know if you realize how impactful that is... She really was adamant about not suspending [the Black student]. And she was part of that clique of very involved Latino moms—and she got ostracized for that because she had a chance to get rid of that kid, and she [refused]. I always tell that story because it’s my way of illustrating that none of the elected [officials], none of the civic narratives touch on this level of political choice that people actually have to make.

Such choices of solidarity are daily. Consider the fight to save South LA’s South Central Farm, one of the largest urban farm and community gardens in the country that came under threat of closure in the mid-2000s. While the farmers were largely Mexican and Central American, African-American
Combatting Anti-Blackness

While we have noted that institutions and leaders need to adapt to shifting demographics and stressed the importance of sharing history and building ties to do so, we also want to emphasize a key responsibility for emerging Latino leaders: combatting the anti-Blackness that permeates our nation, existent in many immigrants’ countries of origin, and getting in the way of the trust building necessary for the future of South LA. This is not a simple task.

Benjamin Torres (CD Tech) and Alberto Retana (CoCo) note that Latino leaders can sometimes encounter the distrust of Black leaders and residents. Benjamin Torres explains: ‘There’s that older African-American guard who’s like, “Okay, do we really trust you? Do we really know you? Can you really think Black/Brown?”’ Black leaders young and old exhibit concern about the emergence of non-Black leadership in a time when the Black political base in LA is already eroding. These dynamics were present in the 2013 election of Curren Price as City Council member for the 9th district; while Price himself sought votes from every quarter, there were fears of losing a historically-Black City Council seat, along with some hint of Latino triumphalism in the hope that ethnic representation would shift (Zahniser 2013).

At the same time, Latino leaders who try to respond to these concerns by centering African-American perspectives and history in their work can anticipate Latino pushback. As Benjamin Torres puts it, “You get this pressure from both sides when you’re trying to do this Black/Brown work when you’re a Chicano.” Latino residents are clamoring for Latino elected officials and some focus their resentment on the African-American elected officials whom they see as blocking Latinos. Latinos who are perceived as being too close to Black leadership can also get caught up in the frustration. It is a tough balancing act but one a new generation of leaders is increasingly embracing.

The concept of leading for both Black and Brown communities was a key frame for the 2015 campaign of Marqueece Harris-Dawson for Los Angeles Council District 8, the only district where African Americans still make up the largest voting group. Harris-Dawson was the President and CEO of CoCo (and was succeeded in his position by a Latino) and is well-versed in Black-Brown work, which made him a favorable candidate among Latinos in the district. As a councilmember, Harris-Dawson (along with fellow Black Councilmember Curren Price) is making inroads with Latino communities in South LA and building new cultural and civic connections—including Dia De Los Muertos celebrations and equal language access via bilingual interpreters at public meetings. Harris-Dawson fosters engagement and education by holding monthly community meetings and prioritizes improving universal conditions, including safety and infrastructure (Jennings 2016).

The political journey of now County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas is another illustration of multiethnic leadership in South LA. Shortly after being elected to the Los Angeles City Council in 1991, Ridley-Thomas founded the Empowerment Congress, a pioneering model of civic engagement run through neighborhood councils that remains to this day (Rohrlich 1998). After nearly 12 years as a City Councilmember, he became a State Assemblymember, then a State Senator, and in 2008 became a Los Angeles County Supervisor.
Some interviewees commented that white-led organizations in South LA can indirectly spark conflict and act as a barrier to Black-Brown collaboration. For example, one respondent focused on the distribution of nonprofit resources in the region, noting that "there's a lot of white-led organizations in South LA... [and] we don't see those same kind of investments in the people-of-color-led organizations." As a result, Black- and Brown-led organizations can be pitted against one another in a fight over resources.

In that election, he was pitted against Bernard Parks, the former Chief of Police and a central figure among the local Black political establishment—as well as a fellow Bradley mentee (Mitchell 2008). Foreshadowing South LA's political future, Ridley-Thomas won in part because of his more diverse and progressive base, including his ties to growing Latino communities. Since then, Ridley-Thomas has pushed for inclusive policies and campaigns, such as re-opening the King/Drew hospital, a medical facility whose clientele is majority Latino (Karlamangla 2015).

Of course leadership in South LA is not just about Black or Brown. The inherent tensions around power and representation in South LA create unique opportunities for other residents of color to take up leadership. Three civic leaders that we interviewed are Asian American, and they reflected on how their race/ethnicity allowed them to be mediators in Black and Brown spaces: By not claiming either group, they are perceived as neutral. One explained it as such: "I'm not African American or Mexican or Central American. And so I think that made it possible for me to be in spaces that other people couldn't be in, or would be more fearful in being in." In this case, place trumped race: The very same leaders noted it was necessary to establish their ties to South LA and make the place-based connections that signal their commitment and authenticity.

To build a way through racial tension and gain the trust of Black stakeholders, Latino leaders often practice anti-racist thinking within their organization, institutionalize practices that tackle anti-Blackness, and make it clear to Latino residents why Black liberation is foundational. There are similar needs for African-American leaders to challenge anti-immigrant sentiments among Black residents. But as we have noted, given the asymmetry of intergroup exposure, and the legacy of the civil rights struggle, such leaders have often had more practice at lifting up the rights of others. For both, what matters most is developing a fuller understanding of each group’s history, struggles, and needs—and building on the pride in the place that both call home: South LA.

But when I think about how to do CADRE, and how not to do anything that fuels Black and Brown competition, it has tangibly guided the structure of our organization, the structure of our practice, and the structure of how we move in the world as an organization. There are practice and principles, but there’s a literal structure to it, too. Because once a proactive [strategy] is done over and over again, it is a pillar of your organization, and it will hold your organization up in tough times.”

— Maisie Chin, CADRE
Forging the Future

While some Latino leaders do pay attention to challenging anti-Blackness, they are also confronted with a reality more compelling to many residents on the ground: the gap between the numbers and the representation of Latinos in South LA. Every Latino leader we interviewed noted the lack of executive-level leadership in positions of power, even beyond the political arena. At the same time, some worried that the call for Latino civic power runs the risk of devolving into the rhetoric of ethnic succession, where Latinos—primarily younger, native-born residents who are eager to become involved—develop an exclusionary mindset where “the future of South Los Angeles is already Latino.”

Some Latino leaders we interviewed are cautioning against a “nationalistic, Latino nativist kind of mentality,” one which justifies itself by “saying it’s about the numbers.” The worry is that the Latino leadership that would emerge from such an impulse would be exclusionary, would refuse to partner with African-American institutions, and could lead to outright conflict. Indeed, Black leaders might heed the example of Lynwood as a cautionary tale: “In the next-door city of Lynwood, Hispanics were largely kept out of power until they became a majority. After seizing control of the city council in 1997 they demolished the black political machine” (The Economist 2007).

Instead, our interviewees (of all backgrounds) are making the case for greater political education, organizing, and empowerment of Latino residents and emerging leaders—and that it is in the interest of the African-American political class to push for Latino inclusion. Some Latino leaders with experience in other parts of Los Angeles also stress that politicizing Latino residents is necessary to avoid the pitfalls of identity politics that plagued some Latino communities in Southeast LA. In their view, the lack of grassroots infrastructure facilitated a take-over of city council by business interests hiding behind identity politics. Such an outcome repeated in South LA would solve little as the underlying structures of injustice, particularly in the economy, would remain in place.

Encouraging Latino Civic Engagement

So, how can South LA Latinos become engaged in their communities? Some leaders alluded to building on the work of, say, the Empowerment Congress, while others mentioned labor unions. Immigrant Latinos have been remarkably open to union organizing, albeit, often in occupations that were historically Black but are now majority Latino, like hotel workers and janitors. To combat tensions around labor displacement, to shore up Black-Brown unity, and to enhance union density, LA’s labor movement has organized security guards and undertaken a variety of initiatives to promote Black workers (Milman, Bloom, and Narro 2010). In South LA, the Black Worker Center is focused on ensuring that African Americans get a fair share of the construction and other jobs being generated by public investments. So, labor is an important part of the picture in terms of encouraging Latino civic engagement and there is also a balance required to ensure Black inclusion.
Other interviewees talked about the potential role of faith-based organizing. A major obstacle is the relative lack of political engagement of Latino churches in the region; one interviewee noted that historically “there are very few progressive churches and priests that are based in South LA.” The landscape may be changing: One interviewee suggested that there were two different types of Latino churches in South LA, the more conservative and traditional churches that are insular and apolitical, and a segment of evangelical churches that are civically active and might constitute a base for organizing and engagement. Some Latino pastors are connecting to civic action through La Red, a Southern California, faith-based, grassroots organization that focuses on bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform to bring undocumented residents out of the shadows. Some neighborhoods are moving forward by integrating local, even neighborhood-level, public institutions. One interviewee explained how in Watts “we organized Latinos and that was the first time in the history of the Watts Neighborhood Council in which there was a high participation of Latinos and the people who wanted to be elected, were elected.” As another interviewee pointed out: “At the neighborhood level, I saw, actually, a lot of collaboration between Latinos and African Americans, and I saw that they understood that they were being neglected.” Building on the shared struggle of Black and Latino folks at the personal and community level makes it that much easier for people to come together—and also that much easier for Latinos to find a welcoming path to engagement.

In recent years, place-based investments—such as The California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative—have created spaces for greater synergy between South LA organizations. Vehicles for collaboration and information-sharing like the BHC allow for community-based organizations, membership groups, service nonprofits, and public sector institutions to come together to work holistically around South LA. Additionally, organizations are beginning to look beyond South LA to connect with Latino-based groups elsewhere that may have the expertise to work with specific Latino populations. For example, SCOPE is looking to collaborate and learn from the East Los Angeles Community Corporation because of its particular expertise with street vendors.

Of course, Latinos will be more engaged when everyone in South LA is more engaged. A wide range of issues exist around which Black and Brown communities can and already do work together. Black and Latino communities (especially the former) suffer from disproportionate levels of criminalization and incarceration. The killing of African Americans by police (such as the death of Ezell Ford in South LA a mere two days after Mike Brown was killed in Ferguson) has coalesced into a national movement (Day 2015), which has
given momentum to coalitions in South LA. These coalitions are gaining prominence by focusing on initiatives like Prop 47, the recently-passed state bill aimed at shrinking the prison pipeline and reinvesting in criminalized communities. Other organizers are connecting the plights of the undocumented and the formerly incarcerated (of which there are many in South LA), helping to generate solidarity, foster engagement, and build community alliances.

Immigration is also an important opportunity: Multiple interviewees noted that immigrants are often more politically engaged than native-born Latinos because of the greater obstacles they face. While the Latino vote is limited due to a combination of immigrant status, age, and turnout (see Chapter II), immigrants can still be politically involved. The political climate around immigration, rising deportations, and sharply polarized politics may spur engagement, just like Prop 187 catalyzed civic action in an earlier era. Indeed, it is already happening with some linkages to the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Linthicum and Lee 2016; Preston 2016).

Immigration provides an additional opportunity to build Black-Brown alliances in South LA. Currently, “immigrant” is often used synonymously with Latino, a phenomenon that renders Black and Asian immigrants invisible. Similarly, while Black and Brown communities are framed as separate, Afro-Latinos clearly belong to both groups (Thompson-Hernandez n.d.). If Latino immigrants’ rights groups broaden their frame, it can be a win-win: greater involvement of Latino immigrants in South LA, integration of Black immigrant voices, and increased solidarity and ties with Black organizations and residents.

Nuevo South for Civic Engagement

Jorge Nuño, like many South LA residents, was taught that he needed to “leave the ‘hood” to succeed. Nuño made a career for himself as a graphic designer on the Westside. He and friends decided to merge their company and make the move back to South LA. At the risk of losing entertainment industry clientele, the decision to relocate to his old neighborhood, Historic South Central, was political. He wanted to challenge the belief he had been taught as a youth: that success was found outside of South LA’s boundaries.

When Nuño returned to Historical South Central, he found that neighbors hardly spoke to each other, streets were empty after dark, and folks felt unsafe. Based on what local youth asked for, Nuño began Nuevo South in 2010, a 501(c)3 organization that encourages South LA kids to use technology and media for entrepreneurship. Through Nuevo South, Jorge and community members transformed their block. According to Nuño, since its opening, Nuevo South has helped over 150 students and parents become civically engaged at the neighborhood level.

Nuevo South seeks to build new Latino civic engagement. Nuño fears that if current leaders do not address and incorporate Latinos, all of South LA is susceptible to co-optation: “If all this tension is going on, our talent is leaving [referring to Black displacement], the only people that are the civic leaders could easily exploit that community because it’s in chaos; it’s vulnerable to anyone. The people that are in the know and engaged, they could just take the political power.”

Latinos in South LA are integral to the Nuevo South. In a district that is historically African American but now majority Latino, Nuño is running to become the new councilmember of Los Angeles Council District 9. Win or lose, efforts by those homegrown residents like Nuño to reach out and engage the political system are key to creating and sustaining a new Latino civic identity in South LA.
Next Generation Issues, Next Generation Leaders

While our report has focused on the biggest change in South LA—the growth of its Latino population—it is not the only shift the region has undergone. When asked for their thoughts on the future of South LA, nearly every civic leader brought up residential displacement as a primary concern. Some cited examples of how Black and Latino families are already being pushed out and how the broader housing market squeeze in Los Angeles is now impacting South LA. The resurgence of Los Angeles’s downtown has made nearby neighborhoods more desirable, and the increased demand is beginning to spill over into the community. Tim Watkins of WLCAC recounted how “all of a sudden, places are being called ‘downtown’ that were never downtown, that were always South LA.”

Gentrification is a complex phenomenon and unifying to resist displacement will be challenging. Older Black and newer Latino homeowners have much to gain (literally) from increased property values. In this context, homeowners and renters can easily become pitted against one another. Political education will be critical to draw focus to the larger challenge: the lack of housing in Los Angeles and the power of capital to erase decades of community building. Some organizers have sought to bridge the divide by insisting on community benefits agreements and investments in affordable housing, particularly in the neighborhoods immediately abutting downtown and the University of Southern California (Pastor et al. 2015).

Leaders that work in Watts were also concerned about the role of public housing, as Watts (in)famously has the highest concentration of public housing projects west of the Mississippi River. While the Jordan Downs redevelopment is being marketed as zero-displacement, community leaders remain concerned about residents and those living nearby. As the impact of the Los Angeles housing crunch continues to reverberate through South LA (which has some of the cheapest land in the region and a high share of renters), Latino residents are positioned to join others in the fight to preserve the area as an affordable place to raise families. The threat of displacement could actually serve to energize Latinos towards deeper civic engagement and collaboration with African-American neighbors.

So what sort of leaders are needed to tackle these emerging issues? One way to answer that question is to understand the leadership that already exists. Of those we interviewed, they exhibited three common qualities. The first was a deep passion for social justice that has not extinguished with time. The 1992 civil uprising was a pivotal moment, with some saying that their current work was catalyzed “really because of 1992. I am that generation.” Younger leaders, even those not from Los Angeles, were drawn to the work being done here: In South LA, one can “be an agent of change.” Whether it was the embers lit in 1992 or the figurative fire of...
emerging community groups and newly pressing challenges, the leaders we interviewed were passionate and in it for the long haul.

A second commonality in our interviews: deep roots or connections to South LA. Civic leaders and residents alike highlighted a place-based identity that has taken hold in South LA—and part of that identity is skepticism and distrust of perceived outsiders. The long list of broken promises and neglect of South LA has made residents wary of people who live outside the community and those seen to be merely parachuting in or passing by. Many current leaders have insider status and future leaders (of all backgrounds) will need to be part of the community they hope to represent or work in. Fortunately, there seems to be a generation of “home-grown” leaders ready and willing to jump in to do the work.

Our interviewees also talked about the importance of coalitions and developing future leaders who can establish equitable agency between Black and Brown residents. Though addressing anti-Blackness and building organizations in solidarity with Black institutions is essential, South LA leaders need to also address the specific needs and challenges that Latino residents face. Both Latinos and African Americans find it challenging to lead for everyone without being accused of ignoring or favoring emerging Latinos or overemphasizing or disrespecting established African Americans.

For Latinos who are an overwhelming majority of residents, but a distinct minority in leadership, this may be a particular tension. Benjamin Torres (Community Development Technologies, CDTech) explained how Latinos who consider themselves allies in Black-Brown work can feel pressured by an older Black leadership to constantly signal that they are “down for the cause.” The result is Latino leaders not engaging with Latino communities as much or avoiding Latino-centric outreach, something that gives rise to another set of complaints. More broadly, the asymmetry of organizational leadership can push some leaders to downplay issues of how power is distributed at the executive level, or how they and their organizations interact with the few Latino-based groups doing collaborative work in South LA.

Along with addressing the grassroots Black-Brown dynamics, institutions need to create pipelines for future Latino leaders in South LA. There are few avenues for Latinos from the region to gain access to leadership development programs. Some interviewees insisted that institutions and organizations that target Latino politicization should do so in a way that avoids a nationalistic lens or zero-sum competition with Black institutions. To do this, they suggested, the best organizations may be those that are explicitly coalitional (e.g., SCOPE, CDTech, CoCo, and others) as they can impart a political framework that values both immigrant rights and Black liberation and weaves together these struggles in an intersectional way. For these observers, leaders developed in such spaces may be the best to eventually start Latino-based organizations that will embrace independence and interdependence, advocating strongly for Latinos while being mindful to the need to represent the interests of all of South LA.
Which Way, South LA

While the demographic changes in South LA have been rapid and dramatic, the institutional changes have been slower. The civic leaders we interviewed were all aware of population shifts and institutional mismatches. At the same time, all were motivated by a deep pride of place—and an equally profound sense that the economic, social, and environmental problems facing South LA require coming together to make change.

The real question facing the region is exactly how to do that. South LA continues to face structural challenges, such as a lack of economic opportunities and barriers to engagement. Also lingering are prejudices by both African Americans and (especially) Latinos toward each other and real asymmetries in economic and institutional life. One can call for common ground on educational improvement but many African-American parents believe that Latinos have more access to school administrators. You can claim a shared agenda for economic justice but it is clear that African Americans are more plagued by issues of joblessness while Latinos, specifically immigrants, are more affected by lower wages. You can draw the connections between deportation and over-incarceration but the insecurities each induces are felt in different ways.

Some organizations have been able to bridge divides, often through grounding the discussion in a recognition of each other’s histories. While this is a key step, organizers we interviewed suggest that leaders also need to challenge their own communities. That is, Latino organizations should aggressively address anti-Blackness within Latino communities and refrain from casting the desire to transform the political landscape as a matter of ethnic succession. In turn, Black organizations need to incorporate (or at least acknowledge) that Latino residents make up the new majority and understand the need for shared political education and civic engagement. Together, both groups have the opportunity and responsibility to build towards a brighter future for South LA.

In looking forward, there are models to build upon, case studies to lift up, and best practices to emulate. While much work remains to be done, especially around integrating Latino voices within the region’s leadership, South LA has a deep bench of passionate and rooted leaders, many of whom are developing an integrated political framework that builds upon past movements. If this is coupled with new leadership pipelines for the growing Latino community, the region can provide a model for navigating a set of demographic and political changes that are occurring in places across the nation.
V. Facing Forward: Lessons, Recommendations, and Conclusion

By Vanessa Carter and Manuel Pastor

For the last several years, a hashtag—#WeAreSouthLA—has been making its way through the Twittersphere. Meant to evoke a sense of pride and also a sense of struggle, it is frequently connected to people fighting for living wages and better schools, and against police abuse and racial discrimination. If you peruse the tag, you will notice a myriad of faces, ethnicities, and genders all sharing joy about being from an area others have frequently written off.

The reason for the pride and sense of optimism: The future of Los Angeles—and maybe even the nation—is being forged in South Los Angeles. Wracked by sharp demographic changes, its people have developed new modes of alliance building across race. Ravaged by historic disinvestment and economic downturns, its residents are now working to insure that the city's comeback will not price out long-time residents. Erased from popular media, South LA is now showing new ways to understand immigrant integration and Latino identity in both theory and practice.

In this chapter, we try to sum up our long journey through the history, the data, and the interviews. With thanks to you for sticking with us this far, we promise a faster ride at the end. Indeed, while we start by lifting up some lessons from the research, especially noting what we think we understand better (and hope you do, too), we then pivot to offer some recommendations for funders, civic leaders, and community organizers about ways to address one of the issues that has surfaced through the research: the need to promote Latino civic engagement in South LA.

We focus on civic engagement not because this is the only challenge South LA faces. No program to remove structural injustices and improve the well-being of the area's residents would be complete without addressing the lack of jobs, the threat of gentrification, the spike in homelessness, the threat of deportation and criminalization, the troubled education system, the shortage of parks and green space, the gaps in food access, and the myriad of other issues. But none of this will change without a robust civic sector that can force policy attention, attract business, and build community.
We focus on Latino civic engagement not to promote one group but rather to recognize that a community cannot truly be strong when part of it is left out. We also understand what community organizers have highlighted: that African Americans also feel disenfranchised, not only by the difficult economic conditions facing South LA but by a palpable sense of loss of place. Partly because of this, we and others have suggested that Latinos need to show solidarity and understanding, and recognize and combat the anti-Blackness so deeply embedded in our society. At the same time, enhancing Latino involvement and voice is essential: South LA will not make progress on eroding systemic inequities unless all in South LA are working together for a brighter multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual future.

After two years of data collection, we are struck by how much more there is to do. We deployed our interviewing resources to make sure we understood the Latino experience, but a complete story requires talking to African Americans who stayed as well as those who left. We plumbed much of the quantitative data to better grasp the complexities of Latino social and economic life in South LA but a deeper portrayal would involve more statistics on health, policing, and jobs. Finally, we interviewed a range of civic leaders to understand the politics of demographic change, but the new challenges of gentrification would require a whole detour through the arcana of real estate development and community plans.

We did learn something, however, and so here we lift up a few lessons. The big takeaway: Monolithic views of Latinos in South LA, just like monolithic views of South LA, do not cut it. A range of generations and geographies matter to identity, a distinction between being rooted and being engaged is clear, and a complex experience that challenges academic notions of immigrant integration and neighborhood change is evident.

**Latinos in South LA are Both Numerous and Diverse**

Outsiders may view South LA as a single entity, sort of Compton writ large (or at least the movie version of Compton). Just as the real South LA is a collection of distinct neighborhoods, each with its own past and future (more on that later in this chapter), the real experience of Latinos in South LA is varied, too. One size does not fit all; there is no one way to be Latino in South LA.

So while the headline may be that South LA is now two-thirds Latino, a full understanding requires exploring the variations in the Latino experience by immigrant generation and nativity, race and ethnicity, and space and place.
The first Latinos who moved to South LA tended to be more isolated from public life, especially in comparison to their kids. Some hold or held anti-Black prejudices from their home country and the U.S. racial order reinforced such beliefs; moreover, they arrived in South LA at a time when the streets were more dangerous and this, along with the usual preoccupations of immigrants with simply working, surviving and holding families together, led them to tend to “shut in and shut out.” However, beneath that tale is more complexity: this first generation has also experienced important, though perhaps few, relationships with African-American neighbors who helped them raise their kids or acquire their first home or simply get to the know the area.

By contrast, younger Latinos, starting from childhood, often have maintained close relationships with African Americans—and they have nudged their parents to do the same. Of course, the second generation is also not without its complexity: The same person can tell you about being beaten by “the Black kids” when young and then having nearly all Black friends in high school. They see themselves as distinct from Eastside Latinos and they articulate Black inflections to their identity that come from growing up in the same schools and communities as African Americans—they are similar in terms of the music they like, the heroes they worship, and the politics they practice.

The Latino community in South LA is also more Central American than some might think. While the traditional immigrant enclave of MacArthur Park and Westlake remains a focal point for Central Americans, South LA is today home to many who found those communities overcrowded and so spilled over to other parts of the Southland. The reasons Central Americans came to the US—namely, profoundly traumatic civil wars as well as economic dislocation—give them a distinct trajectory from Mexicans and other Latino groups, and many have arrived with more experience with politics. Beyond nationality, Latinos are also diverse in their racial makeup: While “Latino” and “African American” are often treated as mutually exclusive categories, the Afro-Latino population is significant (as well as immigrants from Africa). More research needs to be done on those specific groups in the future.

Finally, neighborhoods have nuance. The LA Times mapping project’s definition of South LA includes 28 neighborhoods; Vermont Square is not Central Avenue is not Watts is not Leimert Park. The data profiles show socio-demographic difference by neighborhoods, with Central Avenue more Latino than the other two areas that were the focal point for our interviews (Watts and Vermont Square). Neighborhood residents certainly feel that their neighborhoods are distinct, with interviewees from Watts the most insistent to that end. Neighborhood differences also have implications for Latino identity in Central Avenue which is much less likely to be connected to African Americans and in Watts is much more likely to be steeped in (or at least affected by) Black history and Black pride.
2. **Rootedness does not Mean Civic Engagement**

We found that Latinos have put down roots into South LA. Many moved to the area in pursuit of more affordable homeownership—even as many are now mortgage burdened. Latino immigrants have built their families in South LA, with household sizes generally larger than those of African-American households in the neighborhood. Many extended homemaking from their houses to the parks and community gardens in the region. Finally, many younger Latinos are returning to South LA, some with goals of improving the neighborhood for their families and the next generation.

However, civic engagement has not always followed putting down roots. There are some structural barriers: The undocumented are permanently locked out of voting for the political figures whose decisions help structure their lives. For those immigrants who have legal status and can become citizens, naturalization rates are frustratingly low. And for those naturalized and US-born Latino residents who can vote, the turnout is still worse than that of all Latinos in Los Angeles County.

Part of this may be that some Latinos immigrate with a history of distrust of or disenfranchisement by their government. Another part of this may have to do with civic engagement organizations that are not accustomed to working with Latinos and service organizations that serve Latinos but might not do civic engagement work. However, some places that develop grassroots civic culture, including parent engagement at local schools, leadership at community gardens, and voter engagement efforts that can introduce residents to a broader spectrum of engagement that is not limited to voting.

The data suggest the possibility for engagement but also the cultivation it will require. In general, we heard that residents were not attached to civic institutions—which makes sense when one looks at the data point provided by voter behavior—and often could not even name their local officials. The lack of civic engagement suggests that local institutions can do a great deal to improve awareness—which can also benefit Black residents if done right. Overall improvements in civic engagement can also help representatives leverage voting and organizing power to secure more resources for South LA.
3. Latinos are Proud of South LA

South LA—as a place, as a community—means something to its residents. No one denies the struggles that the data analysis makes plain; folks are honest about gangs and crime, economic challenges, and the tattered public infrastructure. However, many also see the best in their neighborhood; Latino residents love the *tamale* man, the Slauson swap-meet, the way cultures mix in South LA. Few residents connected this “pride of place” with a full understanding of the history of the region—to be honest, it was a feat for our research team to get the whole scope of the history together because it seemed to be scattered across multiple sources. What is abundantly clear is that for many, South LA is happily home.

Again, struggle seems to be a key part of this South LA identity; to say “happily home” is not to associate residence with a situation comedy but rather with pride in survival. The data presented earlier shows no shortage of injustice but the shared experience of environmental injustice, of grocery store scarcity, of undesirable workplace outcomes, and more has become a rallying point rather than a cause of rejection. Interviewees took pride in their personal and familial resilience as well as when communities came together to build towards something better. South LA bears the brunt of this nation’s racism, its residents know it, and they view themselves as tougher and better for having come through it.

Parks are important in forging this pride of place. South LA is considered one of the most park-poor communities in Los Angeles County, but the parks that do exist have become a convening space for community life—sometimes across lines of race and generation. Struggle to expand and protect green space has also helped promote civic engagement: The campaigns to save the South Central Farm and to remake Martin Luther King Park on Western (see the next section on parks) have helped disparate communities come together. For younger Latinos, parks have been a place of play with and mentorship by African Americans. For immigrant Latinos, community gardens allow them to connect with agricultural practices that remind them of the lives they led in their home countries as well as providing economic help. Gardens are even a generative place where organizations like Community Services Unlimited are trying to grow produce as well as community.
4. Blackness Matters to Latino Civic Identity

The Latino identity that has evolved in South LA is intimately connected with Blackness. When Latinos began moving into South LA en masse, it was a predominantly Black neighborhood. The downside of this: South LA reflects the ways in which anti-Blackness was and is woven into America’s economic and political structure; South LA was (and is) a place of criminalization, over-policing, and purposeful economic neglect. Yet it also meant that housing was affordable and accessible and many immigrant families found it possible to realize the dream of homeownership, often through crowding together to pool incomes.

In any case, those Latinos who moved to South LA in the 1980s and 1990s arrived in a primarily African-American context—and their initial encounters with a landscape characterized by a volatile mix of deindustrialization, job loss, crack cocaine, militarized gangs, and excess crime did little to diminish the anti-Black sentiment that traveled with them from home countries. Yet some of our interviews revealed an odd cognitive dissonance: Older respondents who exhibit prejudice also fawn over their Black son-in-law or African-American neighbor. They are also often challenged by their second-generation children who feel intolerant of and embarrassed by their parents’ anti-Black attitudes, ones that are not in tune with the experiences of younger Latinos.

Indeed, a majority—though not all—of our second-generation interviewees expressed a balanced, relational view of African Americans and often a deep respect for Black culture and politics. After all, Latinos reared in South LA were classmates, teammates, and friends with African Americans. These younger Latinos found themselves educating their parents about racism and reported the ways that South LA’s foundational Blackness enriched their daily lives. Recall Analisa Campana*41 saying, “I feel like in South LA you get more of the flava… Like you’re more in tune with your African-American community.”

So, building multiracial coalitions that acknowledge, engage, and center Blackness in their work may come more naturally to Latinos in South LA. The message from civic leaders who are building multiracial coalitions for all residents of South LA: focus on addressing anti-Blackness in the public policy arena or get out of the business of social change. In essence, the ethos of their sentiment was that without rooting out the racism that has afflicted South LA, the issues facing the neighborhood—and the broader challenges facing our nation—will never be addressed.
5. The South LA Experience Offers a New Model of Immigrant Integration

The traditional story academics tell of neighborhood demographic change is that of ethnic succession—the template set by white flight from central cities. In this model, a new group moves in, an old group leaves, and previous history is more or less erased by the newcomers. Such a narrative is about tension, conflict, and difference, and it encourages—indeed celebrates—a sort of ethnic triumphalism for the new group.

Whether this sort of frame was ever truly descriptive of neighborhood transformation, its limits in the current era are increasingly clear. The ideas of succession and erasure offer little analytical space to understand the transformations over time that we see in South LA in both attitudes and institutions. In our view, a more useful approach for understanding such shifts may be ethnic sedimentation, an emerging recognition of the ways in which new groups can build on the past, including the phenomenon of Latino newcomers building on the wisdom, spirit, and experience of the African-American community in fighting injustice.

Another wrinkle in the usual take on immigrant integration and neighborhood change: the interplay between an identity based on place and one based on race. Normally, an ethnic group comes into its own over time, learning to make claims based on its heritage. But consider the quote from the earlier chapter: “You know, we grew up in each other’s homes, and we grew up together. So to us, it’s a similarity. They’re our people. We struggle, we consider them our people.” What stands out is the common ground of South LA as a crucible for struggling together. While forging lasting coalitions does require tackling race, challenging ignorance, and embedding anti-racism into the structure of organizations, the #WeAreSouthLA hashtag says so much about the bonding role of place.

The last twist in the usual tale of ethnic change: Any honest reading of South LA will note that the Latino majority lacks the political and institutional influence that would be consistent with its numbers. That would usually lead to a push for an independent political voice that can battle for its constituents but the situation in South LA is more complex. While Latinos seem to want more and more prominent positions in civic life, we heard that call in the context of an agenda that is both Latino-serving and bridge-building; that is both focused on specific concerns and casts a wide net to general issues like health, jobs, and parks; and that is both independent and interdependent.
Recommendations for the Future

So how do we develop that independent and interdependent Latino leadership that can erode systemic injustices? The gap is clear: there are no Latino elected officials in South LA and very few service-based organizations and nonprofits headed by Latinos. Key examples of Latinos leaders include Benjamin Torres of CDTech and Alberto Retana of Community Coalition who have taken up where prominent African-American leaders left off (Dr. Denise Fairchild and now Councilman Marqueece Harris-Dawson). This suggests the ways in which careful cultivation of new leadership can strengthen community fabric.

Creating a pipeline for future leaders means encouraging engagement at the grassroots as well as at the grasststops. The need to do this right is critical: unless enmeshed in a broader social justice framework that centers on and builds upon the Black legacy in South LA, the emerging Latino political identity could be swayed towards a type of “its our turn” framework that would stoke Black-Latino conflict (e.g. some of what Vaca 2004 reports). Our recommendations are made with that goal of interethnic community-building in mind: Raising up one voice should be part of raising up all voices. We also acknowledge the need to move from engagement to action and that requires a full policy agenda; as we stressed in the introduction, our focus here is on enhancing civic engagement, particularly of Latinos, as a first step toward that agenda.

Create On-Ramps to Broad Forms of Civic Engagement

On-ramps to civic engagement will help integrate Latinos into civic life. The quantitative data analysis makes clear that Latinos are frequently underrepresented in voting due to a combination of immigration status, age, and less-than-stellar voting rates. The community interview section related how first-generation Latinos often got caught up in their daily work lives, tended to “shut in and shut out,” and have often developed a habit of not being intertwined in traditional civic life in South LA. Some of their kids are getting involved—many having been politicized in college—but most second-generation Latinos have not gone to college and many remain unaware of engagement opportunities.

So how do organizations meet residents where they are at and build on-ramps to engagement? For the first generation, our recommendations to encourage engagement are quite straightforward: Start with schools. One civic leader interviewee connected to LA Voice (a PICO affiliate) is organizing mostly Latino parents in Watts, while Parent University, a collaborative effort between SEIU (a labor union) and the UCLA Labor Center, has provided Latino and African-American union members with workshops geared at providing information
about their rights and their children’s educational experiences (Terriquez et al. 2009). Community gardens are also an important locale, although they tend to be significantly more male than female (Hondagneu-Sotelo, forthcoming). There are a number of other avenues which offer hope, including organizing around parks (see the next section, Parks Provide On-Ramps to Engagement).

A clear need in South LA for first-generation immigrants, though, is becoming documented and gaining citizenship. The legacy of turning out the Black vote in South LA is strong—and that can be expanded to include get-out-the-vote efforts targeting Latinos—the longer-term process needed to become a voter should be developed. It means walking with immigrants through the long processes of naturalization and citizenship. Los Angeles-based organizations like the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) and others have been at the forefront of this work. Moreover, by getting all groups involved in efforts to reform our immigration laws, South LA can help create better and broader pathways to citizenship.

Formal voting rights are not the only vehicle for expressing community voice. Undocumented immigrants, formerly incarcerated residents, and youth are all able to be broadly civically engaged. Opportunities can include door-knocking, shaping policy demands, attending city council meetings, etc. Of course, voting remains important and some organizations are expanding their impact by shifting towards “integrated voter engagement” wherein election cycles are a time to meet new residents and between elections become a time to deepen political education and nurture local leadership (see literature round-up on this topic in Pastor, Perera, and Wander 2013; also see Pillsbury and Rivera 2004). As an example, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education’s (SCOPE) get-out-the-vote efforts around Prop 47 increased their voter contacts and organizers have since returned to those residents to talk about the neighborhood, to build the base, and to develop new leadership.

Youth organizing is also crucial to bridging between African American and Latino communities; recall the shared experiences that were described earlier in this report and consider how that more easily lends to multiracial and multilingual organizing. Youth organizing is central for CADRE, Nuevo Sur, and the Community Coalition, among others—and many of Community Coalition’s youth leaders have gone on to work at other social-justice organizations. An additional side benefit: Research has found that civic engagement complements school work and helps students to be more resilient both in the classroom and when challenging institutions (see Pastor et al. 2010 for a discussion of that literature).
Community Coalition’s annual Powerfest, a daylong music festival with civic workshops, grew out of CoCo’s campaign to reclaim Martin Luther King, Jr. Park. Residents cleaned up the park and lobbied City Hall to invest money, build a new basketball and tennis court, update the recreation center, and improve the effects of a nearby nuisance liquor store. They were successful and soon after, CoCo organized the first-ever Eggstravaganza, an Easter egg hunt for families, which eventually evolved into Powerfest, according to our interviewees.

However, all this almost did not happen: When CoCo first decided to focus on the King Estates neighborhood, where the park is located, it was squarely focused on nuisance abatement. But residents insisted on revitalizing the park as well; while CoCo’s goals of abatements were welcome, residents also wanted community benefits, and a specific focus on the park. Now the park has improved infrastructure and offers better programming, the liquor store has evolved into a community market, and Powerfest is one of CoCo’s signature events.

While many civic engagement organizations might want to stay focused on policy, community-building efforts with realistic on-ramps to community engagement that are guided by community members’ concerns are also needed to involve new residents in community efforts. Parks appear to provide one such opportunity: They are a community resource and one of the few public gathering places in South LA accessible to residents.

Another example: City Councilmember Curren Price held a community meeting for residents to provide input on which parks need resources as part of a countywide parks planning effort (Los Angeles County Department of Parks & Recreation 2016). The discussion about the future of South LA parks was lively and candid; at least one member took over the mic. This type of engagement can be a first step towards further civic engagement.

For more on MLK, Jr. Park, see: http://cocosouthla.org/king-estates-case-study/
Increase and Deepen Latino Leadership for Multiracial Coalitions

South LA has a clear need for more Latino leaders who were born and reared in the neighborhood. As noted above, second-generation Latinos in South LA may be distinctly well-suited to lead progressive, multiracial coalitions for social justice—such alliances come more naturally to them and many have experience with multiracial groups. However, some civic leaders stress that being a Latino leader who honors Black history and struggles is not a given, but requires training and practice—and a willingness to tolerate suspicions from both Latinos and Blacks. Trying to be a bridge between the two means struggling to be fully trusted by both. So it is a skill, perhaps an art, that needs to be taught—and it should be because this is exactly the type of leadership needed.

Leadership pipelines are critical—and pieces of these pipelines are already in place. Public Allies Los Angeles (PALA) is a program at Community Development Technology (CDTech) at Los Angeles Trade Tech College that builds multiracial leadership for social-justice movement building. Working from the AmeriCorps program, Public Allies “combines full-time, paid apprenticeships in nonprofits with intensive skills training, active community-building projects, personalized coaching, and critical reflection.” Leadership pipelines are critical—and pieces of these pipelines are already in place. Public Allies Los Angeles (PALA) is a program at Community Development Technology (CDTech) at Los Angeles Trade Tech College that builds multiracial leadership for social-justice movement building. Working from the AmeriCorps program, Public Allies “combines full-time, paid apprenticeships in nonprofits with intensive skills training, active community-building projects, personalized coaching, and critical reflection.”

The Los Angeles affiliate places leaders throughout organizations in Los Angeles and South LA, providing skills and experience “rooted in a social justice framework.” PALA and leadership training programs are critical, and one piece of the leadership pipeline.

Latino leadership in South LA also requires very specific political education that includes the migration stories of Latinos and African Americans to South LA. Movement building organizations, like Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), Mobilize the Immigrant Vote (MIV), and CultureStrike, are developing curriculum to promote the interconnectedness between Black and immigrant communities which could be adapted to the South LA context. The Miami Worker’s Center has used a model of popular education—a weekly series called Circles of Consciousness—where they use historical and global issues to get to root problems and then connect them with everyday realities (Pastor and LoPresti 2007). And cross-racial mentors are key to making all this come alive.

One issue that came up in interviews: the need to ensure that women and immigrants also have access to the roles that some Latino men are beginning to play. For example, first-generation Latino men appear to have a more engaged role in South LA community gardens, although they are not always from South LA and this is generally a stage that is not that public. Meanwhile, Aurea Montes at Community Coalition exemplifies the sort of female leadership of which there is too little: Reared in South LA and a long-time member of Community Coalition, she is now part of the executive team of the organization. South LA organizations need support not only to “graduate” and hire community leaders who have been developed within Black-Latino spaces, but also to be purposeful in prioritizing too often marginalized voices and perspectives.
3. Strengthen Black-Latino Alliances by Investing in Autonomous Spaces

Seemingly strange after we have talked so much about coming together, we stress that developing autonomous spaces for Latinos and African Americans is actually a building block for effective Black-Latino coalitions. For example, SPACES, under the leadership of Dushaw Hockett, a long-time Black organizer for immigrant rights, developed the concept of “Black spaces” as “a gathering space for healing and reflecting on the Black Experience.” The creation of a Black space is not to be opposed to important work with immigrants but rather to strengthen it by allowing for honest and difficult in-group discussions. Parallel to this, in South LA some Latino leaders are considering creating a Latino space to prepare Latinos for multiracial leadership and to more directly tackle anti-Blackness.

Again, these sort of efforts do not come out of a nationalistic impulse, but rather a sense that some work needs to be done inside communities in order to connect with other communities. In that sense, it is entirely appropriate to celebrate the efforts of the Watts/Century Latino Organization and support the creation of a Black Workers Center. The latter lifts up reaching discouraged workers, the importance of strong anti-discrimination enforcement, and other issues of particular importance to Black workers and their families. The former exists to support Latinos in Watts—promoting civic engagement, community economic development, services, and more. It is both/and, not either/or; in the world of organizing and developing community voice, both autonomy and connection are needed.

Much of the work on the connection side is reliant on trust and the practices it takes to build trust. One such practice is intentionality about creating spaces where Blacks and Latinos are both fully represented; as written about earlier, CoCo and CADRE focus on bringing an equal share of Black and Brown representatives to the table to avoid tipping the dialogue too heavily towards Latino voices. Another practice, one used by SCOPE, for example, is to hold honest dialogues in the midst of campaigns that lift up the tensions between Black and Latino residents. The conversations can be contentious, but they bring real issues to the forefront in a way that helps organizations to move forward together (for an example, see the conclusion of Pastor 2014).

One thing that can help is working intentionally at the intersection of issues. For South LA, deportation and incarceration are both examples of criminalization and over-policing that pull families apart, disrupt work (and, so, income), and throw communities into chaos.
(Ortiz-Cuevas 2014; The Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society 2016). Other intersections include the nature of jobs; while unemployment has more salience in the Black community and working poverty is more pressing for Latinos, both come down to the quality of and access to employment. Working in solidarity on these issues will make tangible the experience of “I’ve got your back and you’ve got mine.” Part of this is also working through the logistical issues, like how to hold bilingual meetings when bringing groups together, a practice well-developed by many of the community organizing groups featured in this report.

4. Strengthen Capacity in Existing South LA Organizations

When we looked at the organizations serving our three focus areas, we found many. In a place that has lacked an economic engine and where lower-income people reside, there are a number of service organizations that attend to daily economic, food, health, religious, and other needs. But all of the organizations need investment in capacity to be in touch with the changing demography.

An investment in capacity necessitates a balanced approach. For service and government agencies, dual-language capabilities and broader cultural programming will need to become part of the institutional DNA, partly to ensure these important institutions serving South LA survive rather than find themselves supplanted by new organizations coming to the neighborhood. On the other hand, it is important to recall that while some parts of South LA are almost entirely Latino—Central Avenue is nearly 90 percent Latino—South LA remains the heart of Black Los Angeles in a way that is not comparable for Latinos. Indeed, while 29 percent of all Black residents in LA County live in South LA, this is true for only 13 percent of Latinos.

Within the realm of civic leadership, there are several issues of capacity and approach. Some Black-led organizations, if their focus is South LA, will have to adapt to and incorporate the changing population to stay relevant. Latino-focused organizations also have a choice ahead: even as they raise issues of representation and service delivery, they can lift up the full scope of concerns in South LA, becoming not just insular Latino organizations but leaders for multiracial coalitions. In general, focusing on immigrant integration in a Black place is a broader, more complex charge—and organizations that have taken up the mantle of Black-Latino organizing can continue to lead the way.

We recommend further investments in organizing groups that can engage all residents, validate and channel their struggles, and help them band together to make change. Such community-based engagement is needed now more than ever, particularly given the coming pressures for gentrification in South LA.
One weak area, however, is the faith-based organizing infrastructure—striking since South LA was one of the bedrocks for such organizing in the past.

In any case, a thorough analysis of the overall organizing landscape and investments to make it stronger would seem to be a proper role for philanthropy. The California Endowment is putting money into an effort called the Building Healthy Communities Initiative, one of 14 such investment sites in the state is in South LA. However, it only covers a small section of a large area and more dollars from a diverse set of funders will be needed. Moreover, South LA recently won a Federal Promise Zone designation, which can help funnel federal resources into the community and is itself a reflection of interethnic and intersectoral organizing.

A Promising Future for South LA

In June of 2016, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Julian Castro announced that part of South LA would become a Promise Zone. A landmark (if unexpected) victory, the announcement made Los Angeles the only city with two such zones. The story of how it came to be is a testament to the leaders, organizing, and ethos of collaboration that has been decades in the making in South LA. And now, the rest of the country is taking notice.

When the South LA Transit Empowerment Zone (SLATE-Z) originally came together to apply for a Promise Zone, the coalition of over 50 partners ran into federal institutional barriers. Ineligible to apply in 2014, its 2015 application ended up scoring low across multiple categories, most notably housing. For example, when compared with Detroit, which is plagued with high vacancy rates, Los Angeles’ overcrowding and homelessness did not register on HUD’s metrics.

With the assistance of Congresswomen Karen Bass and Lucille Roybal-Allard, SLATE-Z hosted Secretary Castro during a visit to South LA during which he witnessed firsthand the need and potential of the area. Indeed, the visit (and our own complementary data analysis) was so effective that HUD changed its guidelines to include additional areas of opportunity. Now, the Promise Zone will receive direct assistance from a dedicated federal staffer and the potential to access tens of millions of dollars in federal grants.

Perhaps more important than the Promise Zone itself is the commitment from SLATE-Z members—which includes many organizations highlighted in this report—to implement the shared vision that initially brought the group together. With the bottoms-up approach for which the Promise Zone program allows, the community residents and leaders that fought for the designation are now more likely to be the ones leading South LA into a brighter future.

Source: Sulaiman 2016; for more on Promise Zones see https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/promise-zones/promise-zones-overview/
5. Invest in Reframing South LA in the Public Narrative

On the 20th anniversary of the Los Angeles Civil Unrest, the *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial entitled “Seizing the post-riot moment” with the following tagline: “Today, 20 years after the violence of 1992, Los Angeles is chastened and uncertain. But there are many people at the community level working to making the city better” (LA Times editorial 2012). Such a narrative turn was historic since every other major anniversary of the civil unrest portrayed South LA as “poverty-as-usual.” Breaking through the media noise again is exactly what is needed for South LA today.

Many stories are told over and over again about the tensions in South LA and the divides between Latino and African-American communities. While we do not want to be Pollyannaish and pretend that tensions do not exist, such narratives make the work of forward-looking organizations—like those profiled in this report—a challenge. In some ways, they must start with countering a wrong narrative and expose the systemic issues at work to even begin laying out an alternative—to residents, funders, and politicians. Political elites can help to move communities towards commonality (Wallsten and Nteta 2011) but new resources to shift the narrative and soften the (common) ground are also key.

Consider, for example, two ways to think about a city that adjoins South LA: Compton. The typical tale offered in the press: it is a city that is economically distressed, crime-ridden, and saddled with racial conflict. Elements of truth are there but consider a set of questions driven by an effort to look at assets not deficits: How did such a small city generate the Williams sisters in tennis and dozens of NFL and NBA players? What is it about growing up in Compton that gave the world both NWA and Kendrik Lamar in both music and the music business? And how bright could the city’s future be given that it enjoys affordable real estate, easy freeway access, and the busiest rail line which links the community to explosive growth in downtown Los Angeles?

The untold story is that South LA also has a lot to offer the region, the state, and the nation. Rather than being typecast solely as a place of poverty and crime and unrest, South LA also needs to be seen as a place for new beginnings for our nation. It is the place where immigrant integration is taking a different path, where Black and Brown relations are setting a new example, and where the city may see the last, best hope to have development that does not lead to massive displacement. Strategic communications are part of this effort: USC Annenberg Media Center’s “Intersections” and KCRW’s “Below the Ten: Life in South LA” contribute towards this end, as can outlets like KCET’s Departures and Zócalo Public Square.

*Photo by Community Coalition/Leroy Hamilton*
South LA is at once the last bastion of Black space in Los Angeles and a place where a new sort of immigrant integration is unfolding. As the Latino population has grown, it has forged a unique and hybrid identity, one that learns from and often builds on the work of a Black community that has historically led the fight for political and economic justice both locally and nationally and one which is distinctive within the Latino pantheon, set off from the usual Eastside frame and story. There is something new and important happening here—and it holds as many novel lessons for proponents of civic engagement as it does for researchers who will be challenged to understand the multiethnic civic identity being built in South LA.

Utilizing civic identity will be crucial because while this is a place with many assets, especially its people, it is also a mega-neighborhood with many needs. If the quality of life is to improve for all residents, the area needs more parks, more grocery stores, better transit, and stronger protections against evictions and foreclosures. If residents are to feel more secure and better positioned for the future, they would also benefit from reduced criminalization, a shift from punitive policing to community services, more successful re-entry programs, more attention to foster care, and a sweeping upgrade in the education system. And if families are to thrive, the area will need improvements in employment, an expansion of community health clinics, and wide-reaching immigration reform—and barring that, implementation of DAPA.

The area will also need to address a problem many outside observers still fail to appreciate: the risks of gentrification. Some residents and many leaders and organizations fear that lower-income families will be displaced by the forces of development as downtown spills south, USC expands, and light rail lines are laid along the Crenshaw Boulevard corridor. While some Black and Latino homeowners might be excited by increased housing values, gentrification could split the community by homeowners versus renters, and so creative approaches to ensure community benefits—in the form of local jobs, business opportunities, and affordable housing—will need to be encouraged.
Policy change to protect and enhance community will not happen without the sort of civic engagement that shifts power and politics, and that has been our focus in the recommendations of this chapter. In calling for that, we have suggested the development of grassroots leadership that can better activate Latino (as well as all) residents, and forge a civic identity that is both boldly Latino and that emphatically embraces the Black tradition of South LA, both independent and interdependent. There are clear challenges to making this happen: The eastern edges of South LA are progressively more Latino and while more second-generation and Latino-elected leadership is needed and welcome, this could tip the balance towards an “our turn” style of politics.

While these risks of ethnic tension and division are there, there is also much to build on: a second generation of Latinos that more readily sees its future intertwined with that of their Black neighbors and friends, a set of organizations that are modeling multiracial alliances, and a pride of place that means that a commitment to South LA can trump many other dimension of identity. The need to forge these alliances is now, partly because addressing the future requires getting ahead of the community-building curve. And what happens in South LA will not stay in South LA: Investing in new forms of both African-American and Latino leadership can prepare us for the challenges and needs of a city and country that will continue to be increasingly multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual.

We started our study of Latinos in South LA hoping to uncover some interesting statistics, tell some compelling stories, and profile some forward-looking civic work. What we did not fully anticipate—even though members of our team had worked in and around South LA for years—was that we would find ourselves doing just what earlier Black migrants as well as our first and second-generation Latino interviewees did before us: falling in love with the place.

The resilience of its people, the pride of place they demonstrate, the sense of promise they embody—all neatly captured in the #WeAreSouthLA hashtag—are evident. We hope that this study captures part of that spirit and contributes to the organizing and engagement that will allow residents to achieve their goals, not just of their own piece of the American Dream but also of forging an economically vibrant, socially inclusive, and environmentally healthy South LA.
References


Endnotes

1. For the sake of simplicity, throughout the report we use “Latinos” to refer to both women and men; when we use Latina that refers specifically to a woman.

2. Asian immigrants were the targets of the Alien Land Law (1913), California legislation which prohibited Asian immigrants from owning land. During the Great Depression, the federally implemented mass deportation programs, euphemistically called “repatriation,” removed not only foreign-born Mexican residents but also thousands of US citizens of Mexican origin.

3. For that project, see here: http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/.

4. US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.

5. US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.


7. US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.


9. US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.

10. US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.

11. US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.

12. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

13. US Census Bureau, Geolytics Inc.


16. By more than one generation, we mean grandparents and/or children present in the household.

17. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

18. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

19. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

20. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

21. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

22. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 ACS data.

23. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 ACS data.

24. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

25. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

26. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 ACS data. Note: The labor force participation rate is defined as the share of people either employed or actively looking for work out of the total population 16 years and older.

27. CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.
CSII analysis of 2009-2013 ACS data. Note: Educational attainment is reported for the population 25 years and older.

CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

California Department of Education, Data Reporting Office.

For more information about API Scores see: https://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Pages/UnderstandingTheAPI.aspx.

The CalEnviroScreen is a tool created to help identify communities that face severe environmental burdens – such as poor air quality – as well as those socio-economically positioned to be more vulnerable to those burdens. For more on the CalEnviroScreen, see http://oehha.ca.gov/ej/ces2.html.

Los Angeles Police Department. See: http://assets.lapdonline.org/assets/pdf/map_bureau_south.pdf.


CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

CSII analysis of 2009-2013 pooled IPUMS data.

For more on Second Baptist's history, see https://www.laconservancy.org/locations/second-baptist-church; for more on First AME, see http://famechurch.org/about.html.

In an interview, Dr. Juan Martínez of Fuller Theological Seminary identified a few trends that have kept Latino churches from engaging. First, and historically, Latino Protestant Churches have been very small and on the margins of the social structures of the US, so they often saw no way to influence the issues. Second, Protestant churches in Latin America had no official role in society because Catholicism was the state religion. Third, Pentecostal theology—which influences many churches in South LA—has focused on bringing personal change in people, assuming that if people change that will have an impact on society. And, finally, Latino churches have sometimes been assumed to be allies by others who have not taken the time to understand them. Dr. Martinez lifted up the work that the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) has done to understand Latino churches and bring them into the work from a place of an authentic, reciprocal relationship.

For a brief primer on the role of anti-Blackness in the US, see Nakagawa (2012). See also Banks (2006) for an example of anti-Blackness in Mexico.

See the previous endonote on the history and landscape of Latino churches based on an interview with Dr. Juan Martínez of Fuller Theological Seminary.

All names of residents are pseudonyms, as indicated by an asterisk.


For more on Public Allies Los Angeles, see http://palacdtech.org/about/.

For more on SPACEs, see here: http://www.thespacesproject.org/intergroup-resources.
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List of Interviewees

* All affiliations indicate role at time of interview.

Julie Beals, Executive Director, Los Angeles Community Garden Council
Maisie Chin, Executive Director & Co-Founder, CADRE
Ana Cubas, President & Founder, Latina Public Service Academy
Marqueece Harris-Dawson, Councilmember, Council District 8, City of Los Angeles
Joanne Kim, Chief Operating Officer, Community Coalition
Lisa Lockwood, Organizer, LA Voice
Juan Martinez, Professor of Hispanic Studies and Pastoral Leadership, Fuller Theological Seminary
Aurea Montes-Rodriguez, Vice President of Organizational Growth, Community Coalition
Jorge Nuñó, Founder & Board Chair, Nuevo South Community Development Corporation
Paloma Perez-McEvoy, Deputy Chief of Staff and Counsel, Council District 9, City of Los Angeles
Curren Price, Councilmember, Council District 9, City of Los Angeles
Alberto Retana, Executive Vice President, Community Coalition (currently President & CEO)
Mark Ridley-Thomas, Supervisor, Los Angeles County Second District
Neelam Sharma, Executive Director, Community Services United (CSU)
Lola Smallwood Cuevas, Director, Los Angeles Black Worker Center (BWC)
Benjamin Torres, President & CEO, Community Development Technologies Center (CDTech), Los Angeles Trade Technical College (LATTC)
Gloria Walton, President & CEO, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE)
Tim Watkins, President & CEO, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC)
Arturo Ybarra, Founder & Executive Director, Watts/Century Latino Organization (WCLO)
#RootsRaices

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