ROOTS RAíCES

Latino Engagement, Place Identities, and Shared Futures in South Los Angeles

Executive Summary
July 2016

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USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (CSII)
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Learn more about the Roots/Raíces project and download the full report at: http://dornsife.usc.edu/CSII/roots-raices-south-la

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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.
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
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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.

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—around 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

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.

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— Latino South LA resident reflecting on African-American neighbors
The Research Project

*Roots | Raìces* was borne out of relationships with community groups and community leaders in South LA. Some of these leaders have been stressing the need for a positive assets-based story of South LA, particularly one that shows how the earlier tensions associated with the Latino shift have been transformed over time. Others have emphasized their worries that as Latino numbers grow, the likelihood of an “it’s our turn” approach becomes more likely and countering that with a narrative that rejects triumphalism and celebrates collaboration seems especially timely. Finally, many leaders have been concerned about the lack of Latino representation and simply wanted a historical and social analysis that could lift up the Black experience even as it grounded the Latino experience in South LA and could thus be part of a curriculum to prepare Latinos for multiethnic leadership.

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 18 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.
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 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.

“
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 there is a dearth of Latino leaders in civic life. Many young and old residents are clamoring for representation—in the exact same institutions that were hard won by African Americans. This pressure will only increase as the share of Latinos increases over the next decades. Navigating an alternative pathway is imperative—one which fosters an independent Latino voice even as it builds interdependent and long-lasting coalitions that fight anti-Blackness.
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

![Civic Engagement of Latinos as Share of the Total Population in South LA and LA County](#)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LA County</th>
<th>South LA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population, 2009 to 2013</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Age Population, 2009 to 2013</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen Voting Age Population, 2009 to 2013</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered to Vote, 2014 General Election</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted, 2014 General Election</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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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.

> Download the full #RootsRaices report and learn more at bit.ly/rootsraices.