

Introduction

Dreaming of Black Los Angeles

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Over a fast-paced montage of images—Los Angeles’s downtown skyline, home-lined hillsides, street signs—and accompanied by a hip-hop-inspired musical theme, we hear the voices of several black teenagers:

Male #1: Welcome to Los Angeles . . .

Female #1: . . . our Los Angeles

Male #1: Baldwin Hills.

Female #1: City in the Clouds.

Jonathan: Not all black people live in the ’hood.

Moriah: Some of us live in big houses with amazing vistas.

Ashley: We are the sons and daughters of doctors, actors, and athletes . . .

Seiko: . . . as well as policemen, nurses, and teachers.

Lor’Rena: This is where the Black Beverly Hills meets.

Staci: The mean streets of Crenshaw and Inglewood below.

Aungel: Some of us are blessed with opportunities . . .

Justin: . . . and some of us will always struggle for a better tomorrow.

Gerren: But what unites us is greater than what separates us . . .

Sal: . . . because we share more than just a neighborhood.

Female #2: This is Baldwin Hills . . . and this is our reality.

So begins a typical episode of Black Entertainment Television’s *Baldwin Hills*,¹ a scripted “reality” program that debuted on the black-oriented cable network in 2007. Developed by a white production company,² *Baldwin Hills* was among BET’s most popular shows in 2007. It was seen in nearly 1 million black homes coast to coast when it debuted and was reviewed

in the nation's most influential media. The *New York Times*, for example, headlined its review "The Posh Princes and Princesses of the Hills," and described the title-sequence voice-overs presented above as "unabashed sociological pleading."³ At issue, of course, was the teen-targeted show's apparent status as a counternarrative to a more dominant narrative that placed black people in the ghetto, their children at constant risk of being swept up by drug and gang culture, and their dreams for a "better tomorrow" permanently on hold. Wrote the *New York Times*:

[T]he show's 11 cast members, ages 16 to 19, whose upper-middle-class parents include two former NBA stars, are the smartest, funniest, most charming and generally most well-behaved group of teenagers imaginable. Instead of the drama of racial inequality, we get the more ordinary drama of spoiled kids trying, very politely, to take advantage of their parents.⁴

This example of "highly satisfying, if not exactly exciting, television," as the newspaper put it, provides us with an apt point of entry for introducing the issues that concern us in this volume. It is telling that white sensibilities played such a defining role in a show airing on a black-oriented cable network and targeted at black teens. The history of American television, after all, is one of white domination.⁵ The "Hood and the Hills" concept that drives the show, as one of the white creators labeled it,⁶ highlights the drama of black diversity in Los Angeles at the expense of the "drama of racial inequality." As a consequence, the history of a place like Baldwin Hills is erased. The static snapshots circulated by the show offer little context for making sense of the black lives depicted on the screen. Baldwin Hills just is. The black people who live there just are.

The Black Los Angeles Project

This book, by contrast, has everything to do with context. *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* is a historically grounded, multidisciplinary exploration into the ups and downs of black life in a huge American metropolis. It is an attempt to connect the dots between the past, present, and future of a space that was seeded centuries ago with a profound black presence, that has attracted hundreds of thousands of black migrants in the intervening years, but that, oddly enough, is only

marginally understood as a black place. *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* aims to situate black-identified places like Baldwin Hills, as well as the people who live, work, and play there, within the context of a much broader space my colleagues and I think of as “Black Los Angeles.”

Over the past eight years, the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) has hosted a series of workshops involving scholars and community members, all under the rubric of the “Black Los Angeles Project,” in order to identify relevant questions and effective methods for interrogating this book’s rather complex object of inquiry. A term like “Black Los Angeles,” we found, raises interesting questions about what is meant by “black” and by “Los Angeles.” With “black,” we ultimately agreed that we were invoking all of the racial meanings that have been applied to people of African descent throughout American history. These “racial projects”⁷ have distinguished “black people” from “white people” (e.g., skin color, facial features, cultural differences), primarily as a means of subordinating the former to the latter (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow, institutional racism). In this sense, our decision to center the concept of “black” in this book had much more to do with power and politics than with any objectively verifiable differences between the “races” that may exist in nature. And even though chapters in this book consider the rather remarkable multicultural history of Los Angeles, it was the fundamental binary relationship between “blackness” and “whiteness” that framed our inquiry.⁸

“Los Angeles,” of course, is a city that has objectively defined, geographic boundaries. Its 498.3 square miles—among the largest of American cities—was home to 3.8 million residents in 2006.⁹ But when we speak of “Los Angeles” in this book we invoke the much broader understanding of a place that incorporates areas of the Southern California region lying beyond the formal city limits.¹⁰ The notion of the Los Angeles metropolitan area gets us a bit closer to the space we have in mind. Nearly 13 million people resided in this area in 2005,¹¹ people who hailed from all over the globe and who spoke more than 200 different languages. The idea of “Black Los Angeles” brings it all together to define a unique urban space in which people of African descent—who both struggle with and celebrate the meanings associated with “blackness” in America—have developed and continue to develop a sense of community. Five core themes have anchored our efforts to understand “Black Los Angeles:” communities and neighborhoods; religious life; political participation; cultural

production; and social justice. Each of the sixteen chapters that comprise this book presents a case study or historical vignette that traverses the entire range of these themes. The book is organized into four sections: “Space,” three chapters that trace the evolution of black communities in Los Angeles; “People,” four chapters that tell the stories of people who’ve faced particular challenges in the city; “Image,” five chapters that attempt to make sense of media representations and self-representations about Black Los Angeles; and “Action,” four chapters that document community interventions successful in bringing about progressive change.

No single volume can tell the whole story that is Black Los Angeles. Collectively, the chapters comprising this book merely aim to make clearer what the complexities of day-to-day life in a big city often obfuscate. They attempt to stitch together a big picture from meaningful details, specific cases carefully selected by scholars and community members from the myriad possibilities, because of their potential for revealing what lies at the heart of black life in Los Angeles.

Throughout its history, Los Angeles has been imagined as the city of dreams.¹² Whether it was the region’s reputation as a temperate paradise with expansive, palm tree-lined beaches and mountain vistas, the real estate boosterism that attracted white midwesterners to the area throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or the association of the city with the Hollywood image factories that later took root there, Los Angeles has figured prominently in the popular American imagination. Often this imagery portrayed the West Coast, which Los Angeles has come to anchor, as a final frontier. This wide-open destination, teeming with possibilities, has at times symbolized the pursuit of the American Dream.

The idea of the “American Dream,” is the subject of countless artistic and academic works. This is so because the idea has been such a cornerstone of American culture, one that has inspired people to strive for a better tomorrow, while also functioning as an ideology masking the fundamentally unequal distribution of power and privilege in American society. The idea is firmly rooted in the early days of what would become America, when Puritans came to North America to establish a society based on the Puritan ideal of the “good life.” It has evolved throughout the centuries with focuses on upward mobility, home ownership, and equality.

But whereas for most Americans, the idea of the American Dream has resonated comfortably with the core of their being *as Americans*, for African Americans the dream has evoked significantly more ambivalence.

This is because “racial realities,” which we invoke in the second half of this book’s subtitle, are also a core component of the American landscape. As such, they create tensions and contradictions acutely felt by a people who have never enjoyed full citizenship in this country because of their race. Indeed, these realities have inspired poets like Langston Hughes to write of a “dream deferred,” visionaries like Martin Luther King Jr. to talk about his “dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed,” and activists like Eldridge Cleaver to employ the idea of the American Dream in order to “struggle against the American nightmare.” It is this basic tension between dreams and realities that each of the chapters in this book explores in its own way. It is this tension that the case of Baldwin Hills so effectively introduces.

The “Real” Baldwin Hills

It should surprise no one that a show like BET’s *Baldwin Hills* would have captured the imagination of so many African American youth in the first decade of the 2000s. These viewers, as evidenced by the hundreds of posts to the show’s BET message board, obviously derived pleasure from their struggles to reconcile what they were seeing with their own day-to-day experiences.¹³ Despite the show’s calculated focus on the “ordinary drama of spoiled kids trying, very politely, to take advantage of their parents,” the imagery mass-communicated by the show necessarily invoked an enduring tension between American Dreams and racial realities, between the material trappings of success and the stubborn reality of race. This is a tension that less-affluent black viewers could not help but find provocative as they compared the privileged black lives depicted in the show to their own. Meanwhile, more affluent black youth (like my goddaughter who lived in an upscale, white neighborhood in Tennessee) likely found the show compelling because of its simultaneous depiction of upper-middle-class status infused with the flavor of black community—a happy marriage missing from their own, otherwise happy lives.

My wife and I moved to Baldwin Hills in 1994. Fresh out of graduate school, we stumbled upon a secluded community realtors referred to as “Baldwin Vista” and fell in love with a modestly sized, yet stylish two-bedroom-and-den home on a quiet street terminated by a cul-de-sac. When we saw the house we knew immediately that it was our dream first home. Boasting a tree-filtered, 180-degree view of the city—which

included the famous Hollywood sign, Los Angeles's ever-evolving downtown skyline, and the high-rise buildings that line Wilshire Boulevard from downtown to the sea—the house was nestled in the Baldwin Hills among several other more impressive structures on the street, many of which, we would learn, were distinctive homes that had been featured in *Architectural Digest* in the 1950s and 1960s. I had come of age in Washington, DC, one of America's more conventional “chocolate cities.” I hadn't seen another black community quite like the one we'd just moved into.

“Baldwin Hills” refers to prime real estate in Southwest Los Angeles, a community fifteen minutes from everywhere,¹⁴ which received its name from E. J. “Lucky” Baldwin, a cattle rancher and horse racer who acquired the land in the nineteenth century from the original, Spanish land grant holders.¹⁵ In chapter 1, Paul Robinson systematically chronicles the processes by which the Spanish era of the eighteenth century gave rise to the more familiar racial topography of twenty-first-century Los Angeles. For now, it's important to note that “Lucky” Baldwin's Rancho Cienega o Paso de la Tijera would eventually be parceled out, developed by the Baldwin Hills Company and other developers in the 1940s and 1950s, before becoming more recognizable today as the tony, majority-black communities of Baldwin Hills Estates, Baldwin Vista, Ladera Heights, and View Park—which collectively provide the backdrop for BET's *Baldwin Hills*.¹⁶

Baldwin Hills, in interesting ways, encapsulates many of the contradictions that comprise Black Los Angeles. On the one hand, it is recognized as one of the most affluent black communities in America. On the other, it is located in “South Los Angeles”—a relatively undesirable area of Los Angeles once referred to as “South Central,” acquiring its name from one of the city's earliest black neighborhoods on South Central Avenue. As Dionne Bennett shows in chapter 8, this geographically ill-defined area has been associated with gangs, drugs, and violence in American popular culture, particularly since at least the mid 1980s. Alex Alonso pays particular attention to the presence of street gangs in the area in chapter 5, when he presents a history of black gangs in Los Angeles. Indeed, my wife and I were able to afford our first home in Baldwin Vista primarily because of what sits at the foot of the hill: less than half a mile away, rests Baldwin Village, or “The Jungle” as locals call it, a sprawling black and Latino low-income apartment complex infamous for gang violence and serving as the location for the apartment of actor Denzel Washington's rogue cop in *Training Day* (see fig. I.1). The moniker “The Jungle,” of course, was a classic double entendre. So-named for the lush tropical



Figure I.1. Baldwin Village, with Baldwin Hills homes in background. Photo courtesy of Darnell Hunt.

foliage that engulfs the area's several surrounding blocks, it came to signify negative stereotypes associated with the mostly poor and working-class people who lived there. Our first home, perched in the hills directly above this community, would have been priced significantly out of our reach had it been located on Los Angeles's Anglo-identified Westside. But this property-value maxim didn't always apply to Baldwin Hills.

The case of Baldwin Hills exposes tensions between the promise of Los Angeles and racial realities related to the passage of time and the transition of space. When the sprawling area known as Baldwin Hills was first developed in the 1940s and 1950s, it was one of the most exclusive communities in all of Southern California. Indeed, the area was nicknamed "Pill Hill" because of the preponderance of doctors who called the hills home. Whereas Los Angeles's Westside would increasingly come to signify "white space" in the "colorblind" times of the late twentieth century, Baldwin Hills was explicitly *defined* as such during its conception. Despite a Supreme Court decision that challenged the legality of racially

restrictive covenants in 1948, the declaration of restrictions attached to the deed for each home in the area sought to ensure that Baldwin Hills would remain a white space in perpetuity.¹⁷ Accordingly, the original deed for our first home (which was built in 1953) included the following notable restrictions:

1. No part of any said realty shall ever be sold, conveyed, leased, or rented to any person not of the white or Caucasian race.
2. No part of any said realty shall ever at any time be used or occupied or be permitted to be used or occupied by any person not of the white or Caucasian race, except such as are in the employ of the resident owner or resident tenants of said property.¹⁸

In other words—housekeepers, maids, butlers, and gardeners aside—these declarations worked to assure affluent, white homebuyers that Baldwin Hills would be devoid of color. And so it was in the early days. This centrally located community of amazing vistas, cool ocean breezes, architecturally significant housing, and nearby, whites-only golf course, constituted, shortly after its development, an exclusive white wonderland. And far from being the property-values liability that it was in the early 2000s, “The Jungle” of the 1950s and early 1960s comprised trendy, luxury apartments that appealed to well-heeled whites who were all too happy to reside at the foot of the hills.

So what happened?

Scholars of residential segregation in America have written extensively about the role white fears of an impending minority threat play in motivating “white flight” from urban areas,¹⁹ a phenomenon aided by realtors who exploit real or perceived declines in property values to encourage white homeowners to sell their homes to nonwhite families.²⁰ As more homes are sold, more trickle onto the market. Eventually a “tipping point” is reached, after which the process accelerates and rather dramatically transforms the neighborhood from white to minority space.²¹ Paul Robinson’s decade-by-decade mapping of racial demographics in chapter 1 shows how this process has helped shape the geographic contours of “Black Los Angeles” over the years. What happened in Baldwin Hills, to be sure, constitutes but a specific Los Angeles incarnation of a more general American racial process.

Nevertheless, there are several notable peculiarities about the case of Baldwin Hills that bear consideration here, with many of these peculiari-

ties rooted in the particulars of Los Angeles. For example, white flight from Baldwin Hills clearly accelerated in the years following the 1965 Watts riots—not only the nation’s costliest urban uprisings up to that point, but also a signature black rebellion that arguably signaled the end of the civil rights era and the rise of Black Power.²² Although most of the activities associated with the Watts uprisings occurred several miles away from the tranquil environs of Baldwin Hills, many of the original white homeowners in the area undoubtedly found the explosion of black outrage too close for comfort.

One of these pioneers, a neighbor who lived across the street from our first home, provided us with stories about why he and his wife, unlike many of the original homeowners, decided to stay. In his eighties when we first moved into the neighborhood, he regularly talked to us about his attachment to his one-of-a-kind house with a view, about the natural beauty of the surrounding area that could not be easily duplicated elsewhere. A retired professor, he noted that the street and the one immediately below had been developed by a consortium of fifty-three professors from the University of Southern California in the early 1950s, after they acquired seventeen acres from the Baldwin Hills Company and divided it into individual lots.²³ “Troydale,” as the close-knit community was known in honor of USC’s “Trojans” nickname, would become virtually all black by the mid-1970s, after nearly all of my neighbor’s white peers abandoned him and the area.

By late 1999, we had expanded our family and were looking to move to a larger home. We found one in the same neighborhood, a little farther up the hill, which doubled our living space and also provided a nice view of the city’s skyline through a canyon. Then, a few years later, we moved again in the same neighborhood, this time to a comparable-sized home that was notable for its stunning, unobstructed, 180-degree view of the city from downtown to the hills of the Westside. Built in 1960 and featured in a 1962 edition of *Architectural Digest*, the home was designed by a white architect who had once served as chief designer for Los Angeles’s famed black architect to the stars, Paul Williams.²⁴ The home underscored another peculiarity about Baldwin Hills that is quintessential Los Angeles: the area’s association with black celebrity.

In the early years of racial transition, Baldwin Hills became home to dozens of black celebrities and athletes who happily snatched up the one-of-a-kind properties vacated by whites who had fled farther west. The last home we purchased in the neighborhood, in 2003, had been purchased by

actress Roxie Roker in 1975 from the widow of the white dentist who built the house in 1960. Roker, her husband Sy Kravitz, and young son Lenny (who would attend Beverly Hills High School and later become a rock star) had moved from New York to Los Angeles so that Roker could co-star in the 1970s and 1980s hit sitcom, *The Jeffersons*.²⁵ Redd Foxx (*Sanford and Son*), Esther Rolle (*Good Times*), film director John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*), rapper Ice Cube, and basketball stars A. C. Green and Byron Scott of the Los Angeles Lakers are also among the “names” who called Baldwin Hills home at one point in their careers.

One of the themes emerging from this book is that Black Los Angeles has had a profound effect on how we think about Black America, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century, when the Hollywood television and film industries, in conjunction with professional sports, assumed center stage in the stories the nation told about itself. Nancy Yuen’s work in chapter 9 shows how black actors invariably found themselves in the position of interpreting the roles they played in television and film—even when the story was set in other places—through the prism of their experiences of being black and living in Los Angeles. It is no accident that Motown Records moved to Los Angeles in 1972 or that the SOLAR label, as Scot Brown explores in chapter 11, became such a force in the black music world of the 1970s and 1980s. Late twentieth-century Los Angeles had become the nation’s media capital.

Of course, not all of Los Angeles’s black celebrities chose to live in Baldwin Hills nor were most of Baldwin Hills’s black residents, after the transition, rich and famous. Some—like California’s first black congresswoman, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, or the state’s first black female Speaker of the Assembly, Karen Bass—were public servants who, while well known, would not be considered celebrities by most. The reputations of these Baldwin Hills residents were grounded in their ability to engage the difficult, day-to-day work of politics, to connect with the common woman and common man and, in the end, to impact the material conditions faced by blacks in the city, region, and state. Burke’s lengthy tenure as a Los Angeles County supervisor figures prominently in chapter 12, when Ana-Christina Ramón and I examine the politics behind the rise and fall of Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital, a facility erected in the aftermath of the Watts uprisings to serve the largely black community in the area. Melina Abdullah and Regina Freer examine Bass’s contributions in chapter 13, which considers the rich legacy of black female leaders in the city who labored to bridge electoral politics with community organizing.

Despite the glamour often associated with Baldwin Hills, the majority of its residents since the transition have been more ordinary black Angelenos. They were upwardly mobile, middle-class professionals like the next-door neighbors we had when we lived in our first, modest-sized “Troydale” home. A postal worker and a schoolteacher, the couple had purchased their hillside home from the original white owners at the height of the neighborhood’s racial transition in 1971. For this couple, for the hundreds of black police officers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, professors, and small business owners who also moved into the community during the early period, and for those, like us, who followed a generation later, Baldwin Hills represented the attainment of a distinctively black version of the American Dream. Ironically, it was a dream made possible for most by white flight, depressed property values, and declining amenities.

Driving south on La Brea Avenue, the house-lined Baldwin Hills looming ahead to either side of the road, one couldn’t help but notice the aging strip malls and shopping centers that stood in the early 2000s and wonder what the area must have been like in its white heyday, when local businesses catered to a more upscale crowd, before residents who could do better abandoned neighborhood schools for other options, and before a shopping center at the foot of the hills burned down in the Los Angeles “riots” of 1992, forever singeing the boundaries of the community. Despite the distinctive hillside homes, despite the unparalleled views of the city, and despite the almost mythic allure Baldwin Hills had achieved over the years in the black imagination, the fact remains that residents of Baldwin Hills routinely found it necessary to leave this hallowed black space and head farther west in order to obtain the type of services—quality schooling for their children, well-stocked and adequately staffed stores, trendy restaurants—commensurate with the dream. Arguably, the dream represented by Baldwin Hills was a mixed blessing that had much to say about the experience of being black in Los Angeles and in America.

The Dream of Black Los Angeles

In “Colored California,” an article published in a 1913 issue of *The Crisis*,²⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois writes about his first visit to Los Angeles. What immediately strikes the reader about the piece is the exuberance with which Du Bois, the era’s eminent scholar of race, describes the promise that Los Angeles holds for black people. Sixty years before Baldwin Hills would

become a signature black residential space, Du Bois had already proclaimed Los Angeles as something of a housing mecca for blacks. Speaking of the black residents who greeted him in Los Angeles, he writes, “They are without doubt the most beautifully housed group of colored people in the United States.”²⁷ Du Bois goes on to devote considerable space in the article to several images that showcase the smart homes of enterprising black residents. Indeed, one such image, of the “beautiful home of Mr. and Mrs. William Foster,” adorns the issue’s cover.

But Du Bois concedes that the city was no racial paradise—“The color line is there and sharply drawn,” he notes. He then describes the segregationist practices that organized public life in the city, much as they did in other cities throughout America during the period. “Women have had difficulty in having gloves and shoes fitted at the stores, the hotels do not welcome colored people, the restaurants are not for all that hunger.”²⁸

Du Bois’s observations about the early color line in Los Angeles are echoed in the 1936 doctoral dissertation of a young black man who studied at the University of Southern California—the predominantly white, private university about two miles from the center of Los Angeles’s black community of the day. Max Bond, uncle of future NAACP chairman Julian Bond, explains that Los Angeles’s color line began to harden around the time of Du Bois’s visit, as more and more enterprising blacks migrated to the city:

Many old settlers report that twenty years ago Negroes were welcomed patrons of many of the downtown establishments; they could receive service at any of the downtown restaurants and hotels. . . . The change in attitudes occurred, as has been mentioned, after large increases in the population took place.²⁹

It goes without saying that Los Angeles’s color line, in all of its peculiarity and typicality, is a hulking presence in each of the chapters presented in this book. For example, Andrew Deener’s ethnography of Oakwood (chap. 3) chronicles how Los Angeles’s color line of the early 1900s resulted in the establishment of one of the earliest communities of black homeowners in the city—a seaside enclave that was in decline by the early 2000s due to the dynamics of a real estate market specific to another era. In chapter 2, Reginald Chapple examines how Los Angeles’s color line also led to the establishment of the city’s signature black community of the early twentieth century, Central Avenue, as well as to the rise of

Leimert Park, which eventually replaced Central Avenue as the cultural hub of Black Los Angeles in the late 1960s. Paul Von Blum's chapter on the history of black visual art in Los Angeles (chap. 10) underscores the centrality that Leimert Park assumed in a racialized art world, while Joo-young Lee's chapter explores the experiences of aspiring young black male rappers who gravitated to the Leimert Park cultural scene in lieu of other opportunities for success (chap. 4).

Despite the reality of the color line throughout the city's history, an air of excitement permeates Du Bois's writing about the Los Angeles he encountered in 1913. One gets the sense that in an era constrained by the dictates of Jim Crow, he saw possibilities for black people in the city. Not only did there appear to be a reasonably high level of racial comity between the city's black and white residents, but the black residents did not strike him as accommodationists inclined to settle for their racial subordination: "[T]he better class of people, colored and white, can and do meet each other. There is a great deal of co-operation and good will and the black folk are fighters and not followers of the doctrine of surrender."³⁰

Apparently, Du Bois wasn't alone in his optimism. Los Angeles became an increasingly popular destination for black Americans throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As Edna Bonacich, Lola Smallwood-Cuevas, Lanita Morris, Steven Pitts, and Joshua Bloom note in chapter 15, many of these migrants were pushed out of the South and pulled into Los Angeles because of the growing city's reputation of affording more opportunities for black employment.

Still, there seemed to be something more fundamental to the allure of Los Angeles in the black imagination, something more formative about black expectations regarding the group's place in the city. Park and Burgess's classic volume, *The City*, provides us with insight here when it looks beyond the material factors of the metropolis, typically captured in maps and statistics, and considers the city as a "state of mind." This approach pays particular attention to the "body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments" unique to Los Angeles. *Black Los Angeles*, as Park and Burgess might put it, is not "merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature."³¹

A unique "state of mind," as well as a distinctive ethos and history, indeed seems to have permeated what we think of as "Black Los Angeles." Not only was California named for a mythical black Amazonian queen,

“Califia,” but more than half of the Spanish founders of the city in 1781, as Paul Robinson shows in chapter 1, were of African descent. Moreover, because California was admitted to the Union as a free state in 1850—a fact that Du Bois underscores in his article from *The Crisis*—the foundation was laid for a rather peculiar and flexible racial order in the region.³² At the same time, the pioneering spirit associated with the opening of the West likely tickled the black migrant’s imagination as well. Blacks who came west from more settled and rigidly racist regions of the country clearly saw promise in the growing city, a place where it might actually be possible for blacks to realize the American Dream.

But as the black population of Los Angeles swelled with the influx of migrants from Texas, Louisiana, and elsewhere during the first half of the twentieth century, racial realities more reflective of the Jim Crow South soon followed, eventually challenging the dream that so many had hoped to find in the growing metropolis. By the latter part of the twentieth century, prospects seemed more mixed than in Du Bois’s day. The urban uprisings of 1965 and 1992, as well as the diminished opportunities associated with those living in communities like “The Jungle,” stood side-by-side with black overrepresentation among local elected officials and the enviable lifestyles of black Angelenos living in places like Baldwin Hills. At the same time, a steady stream of immigrants from Central and South America, Asia, and elsewhere had transformed Los Angeles into one of the world’s most diverse cities by the last decades of the twentieth century, a multicultural maze, some blacks feared, which threatened the political clout enjoyed by the region’s large black population. Although the County of Los Angeles boasted the second largest black population in the nation in 2007—nearly a million people—this population represented a relatively small, 9.5 percent of the county’s overall population.³³

Not long after the University of California established a southern branch in Los Angeles in 1919, it enrolled perhaps its most celebrated alumnus. A young Ralph Bunche, who would go on to become the first African American awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950, became the valedictorian of the school’s 1927 class. UCLA would have important connections to Black Los Angeles from its beginnings, educating many of the city’s black luminaries, including Bunche, the color-barrier-transcending Jackie Robinson, and Los Angeles’s “second” black mayor, Tom Bradley,³⁴ among many others. But by the early years of the twenty-first century, as Ana-Christina Ramón and I examine in chapter 16, the local chapters of the National Urban League, NAACP, and other community-based

advocacy groups would be forced to form an alliance to challenge campus admissions policies that threatened to erase the black student presence from the publicly funded campus.

Nonetheless, the dream of a better life lived on for many black Angelenos, despite the often harsh social and economic realities some confronted in the city. For all of the black families in Los Angeles able, for example, to celebrate the academic advancement of their young ones, there were others forced to endure the hardships associated with maintaining ties to loved ones behind bars—like the families interviewed by Belinda Tucker, Neva Pemberton, Mary Weaver, Gwendelyn Rivera, and Carrie Petrucci in chapter 6. While members of the black gay community studied by Mignon Moore in chapter 7 negotiated their place(s) in Black Los Angeles, others wrestled with environmental justice issues that, as Sonya Winton reveals in chapter 14, were largely ignored by mainstream environmental groups. To be sure, the struggle between American dreams and racial realities in Los Angeles continued in the early twenty-first century.

In the final analysis, this book aims to address several critical questions associated with this struggle: What is the nature of the “black” in the space we refer to as “Black Los Angeles?” How can the history of a place be employed to make sense of the racial present? What lessons can be learned that might help make black dreams of a brighter future a reality in the region and beyond? And what can the case of “Black Los Angeles” teach us about race in America? Black Los Angeles is and has always been a space of profound contradictions. Just as Los Angeles has come to symbolize the complexities of the early twenty-first-century city,³⁵ so too has Black Los Angeles come to embody the complex realities of race in so-called “colorblind” times.

NOTES

1. Transcript based on the opening sequence for season two of *Baldwin Hills*.
2. *Baldwin Hills* was produced by Michael McNamara (Director), Sheri Maroufkhani (Executive Producer) and Bill Rademaekers (Executive Producer) of MCFilmworks, according to a July 10, 2008, report from *PR Newswire US*. The first-season DVD and BET website (from July 10, 2008) also identified Mark Brown, an African American actor, as an Executive Producer for the show.
3. Mike Hale, “Posh Princes and Princesses of the Hills,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/07/arts/television/07hale.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=baldwin%20hills%20show&st=cse (accessed August 20, 2008).

4. Ibid.
5. Elsewhere, I chronicle the history of business-as-usual practices in American popular television that, as of the early twenty-first century, still “virtually guaranteed the conservation of a radically insular industry under white control” (Hunt, *Channeling Blackness*, 269).
6. Director Michael McNamara, from interviews featured in “The Creators” on the first-season DVD for the series.
7. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.
8. See Hunt, *Channeling Blackness*.
9. U.S. Census Bureau.
10. For a more detailed discussion of ways of thinking about “Los Angeles,” see Hunt, “Representing ‘Los Angeles.’”
11. U.S. Census Bureau.
12. For example, see M. Davis, *City of Quartz*.
13. For example, one viewer, “kris120379,” had this to say about the show: “I am from L.A. We know how are [sic] people are. This show is so fake and gay. They are actors not reality. They are from Beverly Hills or Hollywood. Why can’t people just be real? Why didn’t BET get real people from L.A.???” (<http://betboards.bet.com/forums/404219/ShowPost.aspx>)
14. Baldwin Hills is centrally located in the Los Angeles Basin, with easy access to the 10 Interstate, the 405 Freeway, and the 110 Freeway. These major Los Angeles freeways surround the area in a triangle with sides about five miles long. Baldwin Hills is less than three miles from the studios of Culver City, less than five miles from the museums of Los Angeles’s Wilshire Corridor, about six miles from Beverly Hills, eight miles from the beaches of Venice and Marina Del Rey, and eight miles from the heart of downtown Los Angeles.
15. Baldwin claims to have imported several hundred black laborers to Los Angeles in the nineteenth century, when the black population was still quite small (Bond, “The Negro in Los Angeles”).
16. In 2000, blacks comprised 78.5 percent of the residents living in Los Angeles’s 90008 zip code and 72.4 percent of the residents living in the city’s 90043 zip code—areas that included most of the Baldwin Hills communities discussed here. Blacks comprised 70.8 percent of Ladera Heights, an unincorporated area of Baldwin Hills. The median income for this community was \$103,174, which was more than twice the national median.
17. See chaps. 1 and 2 for more on this development.
18. Declaration of Restrictions made on April 27, 1951, between the Baldwin Hills Company and the original owner of my home.
19. See Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*.
20. For example, see “Group to Explore Reason for Sale of Ladera Homes” *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 1972, CS1.
21. Gladwell, *Tipping Point*.

22. Horne, *Fire This Time*.
23. "University Faculty Group Owns Tract," *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1951, E1.
24. Paul Williams became the first black certified architect west of the Mississippi in 1921 and later the first black member of the American Institute of Architects. He was known for designing dozens of celebrity homes throughout the Southern California region, as well as prominent public buildings like the Theme Building at Los Angeles International Airport. See Hudson and P. Williams, *Paul R. Williams, Architect*.
25. *The Jeffersons* aired on CBS from 1975 to 1985. Roxie Roker played "Helen Willis," one half of the interracial couple that befriended the Jeffersons as neighbors in their posh New York high-rise.
26. *The Crisis* has been the official journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since the journal was founded by Du Bois in 1910.
27. Du Bois, "Colored California," 193.
28. *Ibid.*, 194.
29. Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles," 288–89. Between 1910 and 1920, according to Bond, Los Angeles's black population grew from 7,599 to 15,579.
30. Du Bois, "Colored California," 194.
31. Cited in Hunt, "Representing 'Los Angeles,'" 322–23.
32. For a more detailed discussion of the peculiarities of California's racial order during the period compared to the rest of the nation, see Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*.
33. U.S. Census Bureau. Only Cook County in Illinois had a larger black population.
34. In chap. 1, Paul Robinson discusses the importance of Tom Bradley, Los Angeles's first black mayor in the American period.
35. See Dear, *From Chicago to L.A.* for a discussion of Los Angeles as a model for understanding urban processes in the twenty-first century.

