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African Americans in Western Historiography Since 2000



SINCE THE 1970s, the history of the African American West has evolved into an exciting branch of scholarship. The largest and most dynamic area of study has focused on Black urban experiences and Black political expressions in the twentieth century—a period when the western region’s Black population grew from 710,400 persons in 1940 to almost 6 million persons in the 2000 census.¹ The first regional synthesis to conceptualize how the African American western frontier connected to the twentieth-century urban-industrial West was Quintard Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier* (1998). Prior to this publication, most histories of the Black West examined the 1850s to the early 1900s. Central to this framework was that from 1528 to 1970 the African American West was rooted in strikingly complex race relations with other populations of color. Also, its importance was anchored in the lived experiences and community memories of the westerners themselves. Subgenres that still privilege the western frontier approach include sophisticated histories pioneered by Delilah Beasley, Kenneth M. Hamilton, Kevin Mulroy, Glenda Riley, and W. Sherman Savage, among others.² Their work on the rural Black West, African American–Native American relations, and biographies that illuminate Black western experiences has provided firm ground from which new works have emerged, developed, and flourished, including studies by a new generation of scholars such as Kendra T. Field, Polly Bugros McLean, Tiya Miles, and Bernadette Pruitt.

Where is the field’s narrative?

In the past thirty years, the period that has received the most attention from historians of the Black West covers the 1940s to the end of the civil rights era in 1970.³ Historians Albert Broussard, Lawrence De Graaf, Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, Gretchen Lemke-

Santangelo, and Quintard Taylor, to mention a few, pioneered the understanding that African American life made its greatest impact on the western United States during World War II and in the postwar period. During this time frame, often referred to as the Second Great Migration, the Black western population nearly tripled, from 1,343,931 to 3,409,006.⁴ Studies have focused on the places most affected by the rise of industrial jobs in defense industries and by metropolitan growth. Understudied in this narrative have been how the Double Victory Campaign—which sought victory over fascism abroad during World War II and victory over racism on the home front—and how military bases in places like Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Great Falls, Montana, became conduits for notable Black population growth and activism in the postwar West. That said, the central discourse for the last generation of scholars revolved around finding what was significant about the African American West, and they did this largely by writing about the agency of Black westerners in their quests to escape the Jim Crow South and to find urban-industrial employment, equal housing, equal opportunity, and equal rights. Metropolitan areas on the West Coast and in the Southwest received the greatest influx of African Americans, where restrictive covenants, redlining, and limited economic opportunities concentrated Black populations in “hoods” such as the Fillmore District of San Francisco and South Phoenix.

For most, this history began in 1940 after Black leaders pressured President Franklin D. Roosevelt into issuing Executive Order 8802 in 1941, which prohibited employment discrimination in defense industries with federal government contracts. Arguably, West Coast cities like Portland, Oregon, and Oakland, California, felt the most immediate impact where, for the first time, Blacks became the largest population of color. Most of these working-age

African Americans migrated from Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma, determined to make the region live up to their “expectations of equality.”⁵ Blacks like the Anderson and Dollarhyde families in San Jose overcame socioeconomic constraints by working multiple jobs, pooling their resources, and staying grounded in Black southern culture through their families, the consumption of soul food, social clubs, music, and worship. This cultural heritage has had immeasurable impact on the U.S. West in many respects, from the preparation of family recipes at Denver’s Cora Faye’s Café, to hearing cutting-edge jazz and R&B from Seattle’s Quincy Jones and Ray Charles Robinson at places like the Central District’s YMCA, to participating in faiths that echoed the messages of San Francisco’s Reverend Howard Thurman in extending salvation beyond the Black church to the civil rights arena and the streets.⁶

After the war, segregated housing through restrictive covenants and redlining was the first signal for most Black westerners that systemic racism was getting worse, not better. This development was also brought about through unfair practices in education, employment, policing, and voting, which had devastating impacts on most African Americans, such as “Black Rosie” Margaret Starks and defense factory worker Willie Stokes. A few notable texts that cover this history include Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo’s *Abiding Courage* (1996), Shirley Ann Wilson Moore’s *To Place Our Deeds* (2000), Albert Broussard’s *Expectations of Equality* (2012), and Dwayne A. Mack’s *Black Spokane* (2014). With this in mind, most Black westerners became victims of central city deindustrialization, military base closures, chronic un- and underemployment, and race discrimination ranging from implicit bias to violence and systemic oppression. This abrupt turn of events notably reversed wartime Black middle-class growth in metropolitan areas from Oahu, Hawai’i, to Beaumont, Texas. For Black youth like future Black Panther Party leader and UCLA student Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, this divestment of the western inner city led to the postwar rise of a multiracial youth culture made up of street gangs, and a street culture informed by a culture of masked political dissidence that took the place of labor unions and living wage employment for dislocated workers in places where police abuse became the norm, as it

did in Compton, California.⁷ This work can be best found in histories written about the Black working class and social movements, including Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Race Rebels* (1996), Gerald Horne’s *Fire This Time* (1997), and Donna Murch’s *Living for the City* (2010). What this research has concluded is that many Black westerners tried to overcome this loss of hope by combining their resources with like-minded community members of color and becoming freedom rights activists.⁸

Where does the field need to go?

We must now consider expanding the field into studies that explicitly embrace intersectional, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches. The intersectional approach takes into account the historical, social, and political-economic context of Black westerners, with the aim to acknowledge and critically spotlight what was/is unique about the African American West on an intersection of relevant grounds, such as race, place, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, among other factors. The interdisciplinary approach involves the joining of multiple academic disciplines, which since 1990 has been the most popular approach for scholars of the African American West to make new discoveries. Finally, the transdisciplinary approach purposefully transcends branch-of-knowledge barriers in order to uncover new knowledge, with information that perhaps would have never been considered or permitted due to the static parameters of academic disciplines, such as the publication of Black westerners in overlooked places like Montana as addressed in Laura J. Arata’s biographical work on Sarah Bickford, Montana vigilantes, and dark tourism in *Race and the Wild West* (2020). Combined, these methodologies will promote research fluidity and create new knowledge similar to the work that has been produced in Black/Ethnic Studies. The time that ought to be covered is up to *at least* the year 2000. Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new generation of scholars—either working with or within Black Studies departments and programs—has emerged to examine community activism and public policy, social movements, multiracial relations, written expression and art, and community formation within the contexts of Black families and the urban/suburban West. These

scholars include, among others, Robert Bauman, Scot Brown, Marne L. Campbell, Kendra T. Field, Kevin Allen Leonard, Emily Lutenski, Dwayne A. Mack, Bernadette Pruitt, Herbert G. Ruffin, Josh Sides, and Daniel Widener.

With the exception of African–Native American histories, what the bulk of recent African American West histories have in common is that their examinations are placed in the urban context, which begins in 1945 and continues into and beyond 1970. This era was most notable for Black suburbanization, the rise of the truly disadvantaged in urban working-poor America, the bifurcation of Black America, the lived intersections of race-class-gender-sexuality, and the continued struggle for social justice. Similar to a growing list of postwar histories on the Black West, Robert Self’s *American Babylon* (2003) identifies the slow-to-moderate pace of racial and economic political reform that transformed the civil rights struggle in western communities in the period after 1965, moving gradually from “Freedom Now” to “Black Power.” Despite the passage of civil rights legislation, African Americans were still systemically harmed by unfair practices in education, employment, housing, and policing, which in the latter half of the 1960s led to urban rebellions in places like Watts, California, and Kansas City, Missouri. Concerning the rapidly evolving post-1970 narrative, scholars such as Marta Effinger-Crichlow, Diane C. Fujino, Darnell Hunt, Tracey Owens Patton, Laura Pulido, and Karla Slocum and academics who are experts in Theater/Literature/Women and Gender Studies/Black Studies, Asian American Studies/Black Studies, Sociology/Black Studies, Communications and Journalism/Black Studies, American Geography/Critical Ethnic Studies, and Anthropology/Black Studies have shaped these works, rather than historians, demonstrating the strength of interdisciplinary research.

In my own work I attempt to address the post-1970 period through the examination of African American suburbanization/urbanization and Black empowerment, using history, sociology, cultural anthropology, public policy, and popular culture as my methods. An example that I give in *Freedom’s Racial Frontier* (2018) is that for most African Americans the democratization of the western United States was closely connected to affirmative action and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. As in the 1940s, with new hope came

new frustration for most Black Americans, as these gains in higher education and employment have been challenged in high courts since *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) and the conservative realignment of the U.S. political economy in the 1980s. Most Black westerners that thrived during this realignment had college training, worked in predominantly White professional environments, and lived in communities that the Black poor could not afford.⁹ They contributed to a demographic revolution in which the Black suburban population grew from 13 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 2000—or from 2.5 million people in 1960 to 11.9 million people by 2000.¹⁰ A large percentage of this activity occurred in the Southwest, in Denver, and along the West Coast within accidental suburban metropolises that survived the post-1970s deindustrialization and in communities like greater Dallas-Fort Worth—places with postindustrial economies that had intersected suburban-industrial development with the industries of amusement, high technology, medicine, military, petroleum, research university, and retirement, to name a few.¹¹ These were also places where the Black population grew much faster than general urban and suburban populations, with population percentage increases that ranged from 113 percent in Moreno Valley to 4,315,300 percent in North Las Vegas.¹² The most troubling aspect of this growth has been that for most middle-class Black westerners, their dreams were and are being achieved within the context of social fragmentation and relative isolation from one another.

Another unfortunate and misunderstood western development involves the bifurcation of formerly centralized Black communities. For the African American West in the post-1980s, the flight of capital and of Blacks from central cities has heightened the gulf between the Black middle class and the Black working poor, and has been a major contributor to the rise of perpetually poor populations and non-effective strategies. Other factors include the void in organizing Black empowerment, the rise of neo-conservatism and neoliberalism, the War on Drugs policy, and the military- and prison-industrial complexes. In communities excluded from dynamic post-suburban growth, such as South Central L.A., the ghetto has not become a thing of the past—it has become more concentrated with poor people of

Black population growth in the fastest-growing suburban communities, 1950–2010 Source: Herbert G. Ruffin II and Dwayne A. Mack, eds. *Freedom's Racial Frontier: African Americans in the Twentieth-Century West* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 23–24.

Community	State	Metro area	Starting population			2000 population		Population change	
			Year	Total	Black	Total	Black	% Total	% Black
Chandler	AZ	Phoenix	1950	3,799	13	176,581	11,276	4,548	34,846
Gilbert	AZ	Phoenix	1980	5,717	42	109,697	6,987	1,819	4,231
Glendale	AZ	Phoenix	1950	8,179	361	218,812	13,686	2,575	3,691
Mesa	AZ	Phoenix	1950	16,790	271	396,375	15,289	2,261	5,542
Peoria	AZ	Phoenix	1960	2,593	0	108,364	5,182	4,079	518,200
Scottsdale	AZ	Phoenix	1960	10,026	0	202,705	3,652	1,922	365,200
Tempe	AZ	Phoenix	1950	7,684	18	158,625	9,551	1,964	52,961
Anaheim	CA	Los Angeles	1950	14,556	52	328,014	9,347	2,153	17,875
Corona City	CA	Los Angeles	1950	10,223	22	124,966	8,934	1,122	40,509
Costa Mesa	CA	Los Angeles	1960	37,550	38	108,724	1,640	190	4,216
Fontana	CA	Los Angeles	1960	14,659	1	128,929	19,574	780	1,957,300
Fullerton City	CA	Los Angeles	1950	13,958	33	126,003	3,138	803	9,409
Irvine	CA	Los Angeles	1980	62,134	916	143,072	3,718	130	306
Lancaster	CA	Los Angeles	1950	3,594	2	118,718	32,083	3,203	160,050
Moreno Valley	CA	Los Angeles	1990	118,779	16,402	142,381	34,889	20	113
Ontario	CA	Los Angeles	1950	22,872	112	158,007	10,561	591	9,329
Orange	CA	Los Angeles	1950	10,027	2	128,821	2,227	1,185	111,250
Oxnard	CA	Los Angeles	1950	21,567	496	170,358	5,771	690	1,064
Rancho Cucamonga	CA	Los Angeles	1980	55,250	1,221	127,743	15,246	131	1,149
Riverside	CA	Los Angeles	1950	46,764	888	255,166	21,421	446	2,312
San Bernardino	CA	Los Angeles	1950	63,058	915	185,401	31,582	194	3,352
Santa Ana	CA	Los Angeles	1950	45,533	214	337,977	4,856	642	2,169
Santa Clarita	CA	Los Angeles	1990	110,642	1,695	151,088	5,623	37	232
Simi Valley	CA	Los Angeles	1970	56,676	183	111,351	1,739	96	850
Thousand Oaks	CA	Los Angeles	1960	2,934	4	117,005	1,674	3,888	41,750
Chula Vista	CA	San Diego	1950	15,927	39	173,556	11,219	990	28,667
Escondido	CA	San Diego	1950	6,544	2	133,559	3,585	1,941	179,150
Oceanside	CA	San Diego	1950	12,881	87	161,029	7,873	1,150	8,949
Daly City	CA	San Francisco	1950	15,191	5	103,621	3,600	582	71,900
Fremont	CA	San Francisco	1960	43,790	8	203,413	7,103	365	88,676
Santa Rosa	CA	San Francisco	1950	17,902	23	147,595	4,079	724	17,635
Sunnyvale	CA	San Francisco	1950	9,829	12	131,760	2,735	1,241	10,242
Aurora	CO	Denver	1950	11,421	6	276,393	51,196	2,320	853,167
Lakewood	CO	Denver	1960	19,338	45	144,126	2,231	645	1,333
Westminster	CO	Denver	1960	13,850	NA	100,940	1,505	629	62,900
Henderson	NV	Las Vegas	1950	3,643	1	175,381	13,142	4,714	1,314,100
North Las Vegas	NV	Las Vegas	1950	3,875	0	115,488	43,153	2,880	4,315,300
Salem	OR	Portland	1950	43,140	63	136,924	2,283	217	3,524
Arlington	TX	Dallas	1950	7,692	171	332,969	68,792	4,229	40,129
Carrollton	TX	Dallas	1960	4,242	137	109,576	10,001	2,483	7,200
Garland	TX	Dallas	1950	10,571	217	215,768	32,980	1,941	15,098
Grand Prairie	TX	Dallas	1950	14,594	311	127,427	35,390	773	11,279
Irving	TX	Dallas	1950	2,621	0	191,615	26,522	7,211	2,652,200
Mesquite	TX	Dallas	1960	27,526	101	124,523	30,534	352	30,132
Plano	TX	Dallas	1960	3,695	880	222,030	19,697	5,909	2,138
West Valley City	UT	Salt Lake City	1980	72,378	497	108,896	2,533	50	410
Bellevue	WA	Seattle	1960	12,809	14	109,569	2,815	755	20,007

color. This condition was brought to public attention by the Kerner Commission in 1968, and more recently by entertainers such as Compton rap legend-entrepreneur-philosopher Ice Cube, in songs like “Endangered Species” and “What Can I Do?”¹³

In the twenty-first century, African American westerners continue to work diligently toward making the region live up to their expectations of equality. Their individual and collective pursuits for first-class citizenship continue to be rooted in conflict as “American citizens” unable to pursue their dreams due to unconscious bias and systemic racism. Their efforts to fight inequality range from antipoverty programs as addressed in Robert Bauman’s *Race and the War on Poverty* (2008) to events and programs that have yet to be fully explored, such as Black History Month, Juneteenth, Sankofa Day, and Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the Dr. King Jr. parade.¹⁴ Other African Americans have empowered themselves by forming community organizations and Black businesses, and by engaging in multiracial political coalitions to end racism. For this work to move ahead, scholars must interrogate the global call for Black Lives Matter, and its necessity in 2020.

For African Americans, the neoliberal realignment of western societies and persistent systemic racism and police mistreatment have resulted in youth taking their cues from the 1960s civil rights/Black Power struggle. They use this history to inform their own freedom rights agenda, expressed today through hip-hop and grassroots activism ranging from individual actions by celebrities like Kendrick Lamar and Colin Kaepernick to the Black Lives Matter movement. These acts demand better understanding within their historical context. In the U.S. West, anti-racism

protests, borderline stagflation, the coronavirus pandemic, demands for environmental justice, problems related to immigration, neoliberalism, militarism, multiracial relations, police abuse, White supremacy, and the struggle for gender and sexual equality represent the tip of a long list of research areas that historians must explore in the upcoming decades.

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Notes

1. Social Explorer Datasets (SE), Census 1890-1940, digitally transcribed by Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Edited, verified by Michael Haines. Compiled, edited, and verified by Social Explorer; Social Explorer Tables (SE), Census 1960 (U.S., county, and state), Social Explorer and U.S. Census Bureau; and Social Explorer Tables/Datasets (SE), Census 1970–2000, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer.

2. See Delilah Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: Times Mirror, 1919), <https://archive.org/details/negrotrailblazeroobeas>; Kenneth M. Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991); Kevin Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border: The Seminole Maroons in Florida, the Indian Territory, Coahuila, and Texas* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Univ. Press, 1993); Glenda Riley, “American Daughters: Black Women in the American West,” *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 38:2 (Spring 1998): 14–27, https://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/shpo/AfricanAmerican/CensusData/riley_american_daughters.pdf; and W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977).

3. See Herbert G. Ruffin II, “Bibliographic Essay: The Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century West,” in Herbert G. Ruffin II and Dwayne A. Mack, eds., *Freedom’s Racial Frontier: African Americans in the Twentieth-Century West* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 363–86.

4. Social Explorer Datasets (SE), Census 1940; Social Explorer Tables (SE), Census 1960 (U.S., county, and state); and Social Explorer Tables/Datasets (SE), Census 1970-2010.

5. For more on the term “expectations of equality” see Albert S. Broussard, *Expectations of Equality: A History of Black Westerners* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2012), xi–xvi.

6. See Herbert G. Ruffin II, *Uninvited Neighbors: African Americans in Silicon Valley, 1769-1990* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 78–91; Jessica B. Harris, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 139–66; *Cora Faye’s Café: Home Cook’n & Soul Food*, “About Us” (<http://corafayes.com/about-us/>); Quincy Jones, *Q: The Autobiography of Quincy Jones* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002); Lulie Haddad and PBS, “Howard Thurman” in *This Far By Faith: African American Spiritual Journeys* (2003) <http://www.pbs.org/>

[thisfarbyfaith/people/howard_thurman.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/howard_thurman.html); and “Guide My Feet” (transcript), http://www-tc.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/transcript/episode_3.pdf.

7. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 7–9; Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1997); Gerald Horne, “Black Fire: ‘Riot’ and ‘Revolt’ in Los Angeles, 1965 and 1992,” in Lawrence B. De Graaf et al., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, 377, 381, 385–87, 393; Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2010), 45–49; Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 169–98; and Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle’s Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1994), 233.

8. See Dwonna Goldstone, *Integrating the 40 Acres: The Fifty-Year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2012), 14–30; Cheryl Brown Henderson, “Lucinda Todd and the Invisible Petitioners of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas,” in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600–2000*, Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, eds. (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 312–26; Linda Williams Reese, “Clara Luper and the Civil Rights Movement in Oklahoma City, 1958–1964,” in *African American Women Confront the West*, 331–33; Cheryl Elizabeth Brown Wattle, *A Step Toward Brown v. Board of Education: Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher and Her Fight to End Segregation* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2014); and Matthew Whitaker, *Race Work: The Rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Urban West* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2005), 133–72. Also see Brent Campney, “‘Hold the Line’: The Defense of Jim Crow in Lawrence, 1945–1961,” *Kansas History* 33:1 (2010): 22–41, https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2010spring_campney.pdf.

9. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 1–19, 59–96; Blackpast.org, “University of California Regents v. Bakke, 1978” <http://www.Blackpast.org/primary/university-california-regents-v-bakke-1978>; Broussard, *Expectations of*

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10. Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), 255.

11. Robert Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 1987), 3–14; Sig Christenson, “S.A., Texas could gain in wake of troop cuts, BRAC,” (March 3, 2014), <http://www.expressnews.com/news/local/military/article/S-A-Texas-could-gain-in-wake-of-troop-cuts-BRAC-5285609.php>; John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992), 1–13; Mike Gallagher, “S.A. must preserve ‘Military City, USA,’” *My San Antonio* (July 9, 2015), <http://www.mysanantonio.com/opinion/commentary/article/S-A-must-preserve-Military-City-USA-6376357.php>; Bruce Katz and Robert Lang, eds., *Redefining Urban and Suburban America: Evidence from Census 2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 106; Ruffin, *Uninvited Neighbors*, 141–99, 202–5, 212–26; and John Virtue, *The Black Soldiers Who Built the Alaska Highway: A History of Four U.S. Army Regiments in the North, 1942–1943* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 6–17, 185–94.

12. Robert E. Lang and Patrick A. Simmons, “‘Boomburbs’: The Emergence of Large, Fast-Growing Suburban Cities in the United States,” Fannie Mae

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13. Mark Baldassare, ed., *The Los Angeles Riot: Lessons for the Urban Future* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 1–13; Lawrence Bobo, Melvin L. Oliver, James H. Johnson Jr., and Abel Valenzuela Jr., eds., *Prismatic Metropolis: Inequality in Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000); Broussard, *Expectations of Equality*, 185–94; Bullard, *Invisible Houston*, 3–14; Doreen Carvajal, “Bittersweet Nostalgia: Housing Gains Disbanded Much of Santa Ana’s Black Community” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 30, 1994; Maco L. Faniel, *Hip-Hop in Houston: Origin & Legacy* (Charleston, SC:

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