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The 'black section' of the neighborhood
Collective visibility and collective invisibility as sources of place identity

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ABSTRACT ■ The public identity of a neighborhood does not always reflect its demographic composition. Some groups sustain their collective visibility as they experience demographic decline. Oakwood, a neighborhood in Los Angeles where African Americans once made up the largest segment of the population, is still known as the 'black section of Venice' despite the fact that Latinos have outnumbered African Americans since 1980 and whites have outnumbered them since 1990. Historical and ethnographic research illuminates the divergent processes through which African Americans and Latinos became associated with Oakwood, established qualitatively distinct ties to the area, and maintained differing degrees of influence over its local culture. African Americans' social institutions, political organizations, visible patterns of public interaction, and periodic celebrations and commemorations enabled them to sustain their claim to the neighborhood, while Latino immigrants' marginal citizenship status, avoidance of public spaces, and affiliation with other places prevented them from attaining collective visibility.

KEY WORDS ■ neighborhood, place identity, collective visibility, collective invisibility, color line

About 8500 people live in the one-and-a-half square-mile area called Oakwood, which consists of two census tracts in the center of Venice, a coastal community in Los Angeles. Its name is derived from Oakwood Avenue, where the area's central gathering place, the Oakwood Community Center and Park, is located. For decades, residents and city officials have defined Oakwood as the 'black section of Venice', and activists have commonly described it as the last remaining 'pocket of poverty' in the vicinity because of the low-income housing that was constructed by an African American community organization during the 1970s.

The public perception of Oakwood as a black neighborhood masks the dramatic demographic transition that took place there between 1970 and 2000. In 1970, African Americans made up the largest racial-ethnic group in Oakwood, at 45 percent of the population, with Latinos following at 31 percent.[1] By 1980, those proportions had been inverted, with Latinos making up 45 percent of the population and African Americans following at 30 percent. According to the 2000 census, Latinos still make up the largest single racial-ethnic group in the Oakwood area, at 47 percent, but non-Hispanic whites follow them at 33 percent, trailed by African Americans at 15 percent (see Table 1).

African Americans have sustained collective visibility despite dramatic demographic decline, while Latinos have remained collectively invisible despite dramatic demographic growth. How and why has a contradiction between Oakwood's demographic composition and the public perception of its identity continued for so many years?

According to Harvey Molotch et al. (2000), urban sociologists have given too little thought to the mechanisms that govern the coherence and continuity of place character, that is, the perception of a place's features that distinguish it from other places. To explore how 'place differences develop and persist', they examine how 'physical and social elements cohere' at a particular time and place, giving rise to the perception of local

Table 1. Oakwood Population by Black and Hispanic, 1960–2000

Year	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*	*1990*	*2000*
Total Population	8228	8152	8962	9216	8536
Black Population	3191	3660	2729	2022	1244
Percent Black	39%	45%	30%	22%	15%
Hispanic Population	1481	2635	4039	4572	4049
Percent Hispanic	18%	32%	45%	49.60%	47%

Source: U.S. Censuses (1960–2000).

character, and they show how people have actively drawn upon the 'existing conditions' in a place, creating continuity in each city's place character over time (Molotch et al., 2000: 816, 793).

Focusing on the coherence and continuity of place character is a useful starting point for this inquiry. African Americans and Latinos initiated connections to Oakwood at different periods of time, established qualitatively distinct ties to the area, and exercised differing degrees of influence over its local culture. I use the concepts of collective visibility and collective invisibility to make sense of these contrasting historical trajectories and the continuing contradiction between Oakwood's demographic composition and the public perception of its identity.

Collective visibility and collective invisibility in place identity

How do some populations become associated with certain places? Once established, how does the perception persist? Scholars have described place character as the outcome of the construction and accumulation of observable features. People envision, at a given moment, a combination of signs, building structures, bodies in public spaces, and other observable qualities that filters their perception of a place through a storied lens (Firey, 1945; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Strauss, 1976; Suttles, 1984). I refer to the construction of internal place attributes as collective visibility.[2] Several features have coalesced in Oakwood to generate collective visibility for African Americans, including a solid institutional infrastructure, a culture of public interaction, labeling of spaces in honor or memory of community members, and ceremonial events, as well as other collective actions.

A group that achieves collective visibility becomes intertwined with the identity of a neighborhood, often overshadowing the presence of other groups. The social cohesion of African Americans in Oakwood during the early 20th century laid a foundation that later generations built upon, sustaining and reinforcing their connections to this territory even as the black population declined. 'Interaction ritual chains' (Collins, 2004: 7), the historical web of social situations in which individuals present 'solidarity and symbols of group membership', connect a population with local institutions and symbols over time, creating moments of visible social cohesion that reinforce public perceptions of the group's collective presence.

Neighborhood ethnographers have pointed to the role of the majority population in achieving collective visibility at the expense of minority groups (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Suttles, 1968). Yet, the contradiction between Oakwood's demographic composition and the perception of its identity makes that explanation insufficient. Other Los Angeles neighborhoods exhibit a similar contradiction: Latinos make up over 70 percent of

the population in Koreatown, and over 60 percent of the population in Watts, the city's most famous 'African American neighborhood'.[3] Because Latinos have made up the largest segment of Oakwood's population for decades, we must also consider why they have not developed this same degree of social cohesion. As Collins (2004: 4) notes, people's 'mix of situations across time' can 'differ from other persons' pathways'. Whereas African Americans initiated and sustained a culture of collective visibility, Latinos have faced constraints in their daily lives that have given rise to a culture of collective invisibility.

A number of scholars have explained how powerful agents, often affiliated with the state, impose the conditions for collective invisibility (Bourdieu, 1991; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Wacquant, 2001). Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992: 230) defines 'collective invisibility' as the way a population 'is lost to the public census and to state and municipal statistics'. Loïc Wacquant (2001: 98) discusses how slavery, Jim Crow, the ghetto, and the hyperghetto have culminated in a system that renders the problems of the black ghetto invisible. In my study of neighborhood identity, collective invisibility arises from the constraints imposed upon the daily lives of Latinos that have limited their capacity to challenge or take part in the existing local culture and hidden them from the public view of the place they live.

I use a historical and comparative ethnographic approach to emphasize how the collective visibility of the African American population and the collective invisibility of the Latino population were generated and maintained over time. Historical ethnography of urban neighborhoods encompasses both internal and external constraints and possibilities and examines both the micro-dynamics that influence social interaction and collective organization and the macro-dynamics that influence neighborhood demography and politics. This approach studies all these dimensions as they interact and shape a place over time. I focus on neighborhood history as a grounded phenomenon, paying close attention to the historical structure of opportunities and constraints as people have experienced them and as they have influenced collective responses during different periods.

This study draws upon data compiled from oral histories, interviews, informal conversations, observations, photographs, maps, local newspapers, and censuses. First, I show how deliberate efforts to render African Americans collectively invisible in Venice created conditions in which social cohesion in Oakwood initially became possible. Segregation, institutionalization, community organization, public interaction, and stigmatization have supported and sustained Oakwood's identity as the 'black section of Venice'. I then discuss how a different set of constraints and opportunities – state-authorized harassment of undocumented

immigrants, interactions with and perceptions of a changing territorial African American community, the diversity of Latin Americans' origins, and their participation in community spaces beyond Oakwood's boundaries – have led Latinos to remain collectively invisible within Oakwood. I conclude by analyzing the mechanisms that support and sustain collective visibility and collective invisibility over time.

Oakwood becomes the 'black section of Venice'

Arthur Reese moved from Louisiana to Venice in 1903, becoming the first African American to live in the community. Before the beachside amusement park opened to the public in 1905, he was employed by the developer, Abbot Kinney, in the company's janitorial department. A brilliant decorator, Reese played an important role in creating Venice's identity as a carnival location. Kinney relied on him to invent floats, banners, and festival themes that attracted people to the fantasy environment. At the same time that African Americans were forbidden from participating in public events on the famous Venice Pier, Reese and his team, comprising mostly African American men, worked to construct its identity as a leisure-time destination.

Kinney permitted servants and laborers, some of them African American, to build houses on a mostly empty tract of land located north of the canals. Navalette Bailey, who at 92 is the oldest surviving member of Reese's extended family, says that when Reese first came to Los Angeles:

> he ran on the railroad and he heard about this area, with the canals being put in. It was going to be a replica of Venice, Italy … So one of his stops out here, on the railroad, he met Kinney. And he got talking with Kinney, and he made suggestions, and Kinney was interested in him. He needed someone to clean the pier, and different jobs, and there was nobody to do it … The blacks that were here [in Los Angeles] were living in [central and downtown] Los Angeles mostly and they didn't want to come down here [to Venice] because it was a long distance for them to come to work everyday. So [Kinney] wanted somebody to come and settle.

Reese bought a parcel of land in this section. According to his granddaughter, Sonia Reese Davis, 'he built a house, and he encouraged his cousins to come and build a little shack in the back of his house. And they did … Each one in secession would build houses on the back of their houses and bring more relatives. So they started the black community that way.'[4]

One of Reese's cousins, Irving Tabor, took a job sweeping the Venice Pier and eventually became Kinney's personal chauffeur. Over time, the two men became quite close, and when Kinney passed away in 1920, he left Tabor his house located on the Grand Canal, the central waterway and the most

luxurious residential setting in Venice. Tabor was aware that no black family could live in such close proximity to wealthy whites. A team of Tabor's friends and relatives split the house into three sections and hauled it on trucks to Oakwood, the only area where African Americans were permitted to live, where they then reassembled it. Members of the Tabor family lived there for decades.

Navalette Bailey, Irving Tabor's niece, is an encyclopedia of local knowledge, having lived her entire life in the neighborhood. Flipping through old black and white photographs and newspaper clippings as we sit in the living room of the house her father built, she recounts her family's early experiences in Oakwood.

> Andrew: When you came here, how'd you know that you had to live behind West Washington Boulevard and Lincoln? How'd you know that this was the area?
>
> Navalette: This was the only place that they would sell to you. We knew.
>
> Andrew: Did your family try to buy in other areas?
>
> Navalette: No, we never did. But right here in this area, Jataun's family, they were the last ones [in the extended family] to come out. My dad moved 'em all in there … There were two or three houses built from the ground up, but the others were brought in, and there were eight altogether. So, as the family came out, they all had places to stay anyway, and their kids, later on, had a place to stay … So when more families were coming in, when the neighbors found out, you know, they resented it – the white neighbors did. My dad and them would go over at night, and check 'em out, you know, with guns on 'em and everything. Because they threatened to burn 'em out. Then my youngest uncle, my dad's youngest brother, he bought a house across the street. He bought it from a guy that wanted to get away from us so he sold him the house. That was the property across the street, and now we were spread out all over two, three blocks.

As the African American population of Venice grew steadily over the next 50 years (see Table 2), restrictive covenants on housing, exclusion from stores, restaurants, beaches, and other activities, and racist encounters with residents and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers in surrounding white neighborhoods limited black residents' movements and rendered them collectively invisible to the rest of Venice. James Thomas, now in his 80s, who moved to Los Angeles from Hope, Arkansas, in 1936, describes the geographical boundaries around Oakwood: 'See you wasn't accepted across Lincoln. You wasn't accepted too much south of California. And you didn't cross Washington. Never! We just knew we were outside of where we was supposed to be.' Lila Riley, now in her 60s, recalls that during her childhood (see Figure 1):

Table 2 Growth of the African American population, 1910–2000

Year	*African American population*
1910	33
1920	102
1930	330
1940	346
1950	1157
1960	3368
1970	4013
1980	3503
1990	3142
2000	2248

Sources: United States Censuses, 1960–2000; Cunningham (1976), 1910–1950.

> Then the blacks couldn't go east of Lincoln . . . Brooks Avenue, they changed the name on the east side of Lincoln. West we called it 'Brooks' and then on the east, when you cross Lincoln, they called it 'Lake Street'. They didn't want to be associated with poor black people.

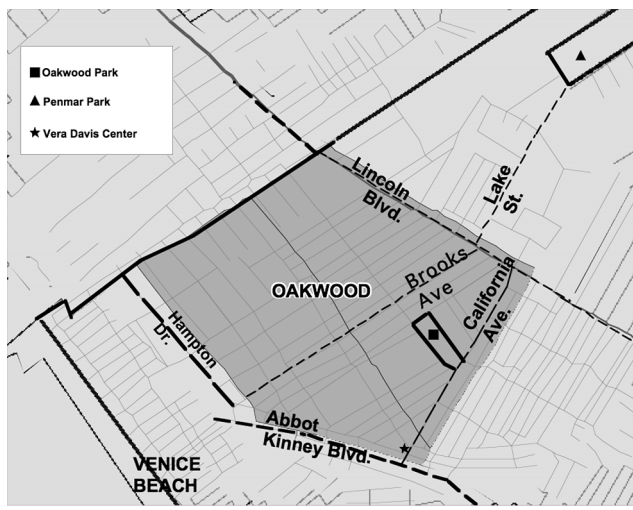

Figure 1 Map of spatial boundaries in Oakwood

These constraints strengthened the ties between different waves of black migrants who came to Oakwood, reinforcing their collective attachment to the place and producing a strong local culture. Although African Americans in Oakwood never constituted a majority of neighborhood residents, they became the largest demographic group. Entire streets were filled with houses owned and apartments rented by black families, giving rise to a culture of public interaction. Lakesha Holt, now in her 50s, describes growing up in the tightly knit neighborhood.

> That would be a real community, because they would watch us. And if anything would happen, Miss Reese would call my parents before I even got home. 'I saw your little girl and she was doing this, or this, or that. She's on her way.' Or coming from this way, you'd know everybody. Older people … sat out on their front porches and they watched you. We knew everybody … And they all knew you, because we were a family, we were a community. I remember when I was little, walking to school, every single house you'd know them. Hi Miss Carter. Hi Miss Yates. Hi Miss McClendon. All the way down the street. Because those old people would be out there just to make sure, and if they saw anything funny they would come out. They'd be like, 'You get away from those kids', doing this, that, or the other! 'You leave 'em alone! You get away from 'em!' And they would. You didn't take no stuff, because people knew, from one point to the next everybody knew each other.

Local institutions and public places fostered continuity of this culture over time. By 1912, although there were only 30-some black residents, Oakwood already had two African American churches (Cunningham, 1976). Fifty years later, the First Baptist Church had over 600 members (Adler, 1969). Five black churches have served as gathering places, building bridges among families with different socioeconomic backgrounds and enabling African Americans from other neighborhoods as well as those who moved away to forge and sustain ties to Oakwood. Because these are the only religious institutions in the neighborhood, the collective presence of African Americans is especially visible.

The African American community has a history of building organizations, nonprofit institutions, and smaller grassroots political groups. During the 1960s and 1970s, when Oakwood experienced a severe contraction in employment opportunities that was typical of African American neighborhoods throughout the country,[5] local activists – all longstanding residents, many of them homeowners – searched for new ways to improve the livelihoods of their relatives, friends, and neighbors. Community organizations helped people acquire affordable housing, provided food baskets for those in need, offered opportunities to voice complaints about alleged police harassment, opened up teen centers and

after-school programs, created job-training services, and started a theater group for children.

The most important of these organizations was Project Action. When federal funding was made available to black communities after the 1965 Watts Riots, Project Action secured resources for the construction of 14 buildings of subsidized housing that are scattered through the neighborhood (see Figure 2). The project, collectively called Holiday Venice, was occupied mostly by the children and grandchildren of long-term African American homeowners and renters in Oakwood. During the 1970s, when Oakwood was incrementally becoming Latino in its demographic makeup, 98 percent of the residents living in the 176 units in the first eight buildings were African American (Cunningham, 1976).

After Project Action fell into receivership, a private developer purchased the properties. Although the buildings became designated as Project-Based Section 8 housing, a program run by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that gives the developer stable subsidies from the government while tenants are chosen on the basis of their exceptionally low incomes and special needs, units were often allocated in ways that circumvented the bureaucratic rules by negotiating with a local building manager. The discontinuity in property ownership and federal housing programs was countered by the continuation of an informal process through which long-time local residents obtained housing in Holiday Venice.

Shanisse Small, a third-generation resident in her 40s, describes how she got an apartment in Holiday Venice when she was 18. She had filed a regular application and heard nothing for nine months.

> Shanisse: My friend Larisa, she called me and was like, 'Let's go see if they have any apartments … Joe [the manager] said he was going to give me an apartment, he gonna give you one too.' … So we went over there and we talked to him. And he was like, 'Do you think you're ready for an apartment? You already had one baby, and I see you're pregnant again.' I was like 'Yeah, and I can't bring no baby into my mom's house again, she gonna kill me.' He was like, 'OK, well I got some apartments coming up and I'll see if you're responsible … and I'll think about getting you one.'
>
> Andrew: At this time there was no waiting list or anything like that? I mean, now it's really hard to get apartments in there and Section 8 has a really long waiting list.
>
> Shanisse: No. At this time the list was moving [snapping her fingers to show the rapid pace] … See, then, when these apartments were first built, they were built for the community. People that lived in the community got 'em. That's how it worked.

The dispersed placement of the 14 buildings throughout Oakwood, coupled with occupants' connections with long-term homeowners, gave African American residents a sense of stability and territorial control, unlike more concentrated public housing projects that are often isolated from the surrounding neighborhood. Years later, when the buildings were sold once again and the new owners attempted to dissolve the Section 8 contracts with HUD, although Latinos had become a large residential contingent in the 14 buildings, it was almost entirely African American homeowners and renters who joined together to resolve this crisis and protect the community's subsidized housing.[6]

A history of organized attachment to Oakwood has enabled African American activists to promote its identity as the 'black section of Venice'. They have persuaded city leaders and developers to label spaces to celebrate the memory of important community members. Streets and housing complexes are named after the Reese and Tabor families. The sports field at the Oakwood Park was renamed in memory of an African American resident influential in organizing the youth football league. When the Venice Library moved out of Oakwood, the old building was renamed the Vera Davis Center in memory of a local black activist and became used for community social service programs. The block surrounding the First Baptist Church was renamed Holmes Square, in memory of its long-term pastor who passed away in 1999.

The visibility of institutions and memorials evokes a historical narrative about the organizational capacity of the African American community, even

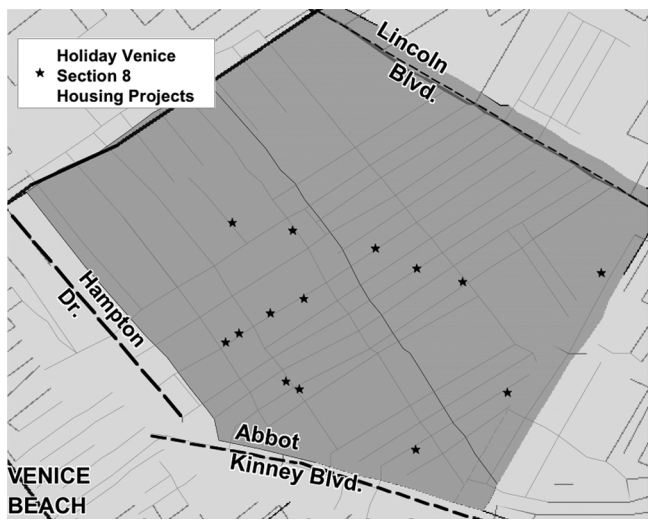

Figure 2 Map of the distribution of housing projects in Oakwood

though the black population has declined. Symbolism, however, only carries a story if community practices and rituals reinforce it. African Americans sustain their collective visibility through their continued use of neighborhood institutions and by staging well-attended events. Oakwood Park is the central and most visible public space in the neighborhood. Over the course of decades, the directors of the park have been African American men. African American seniors have long congregated at the picnic tables on a daily basis to play dominoes and reminisce about the past. African American activists have organized and held meetings and protests in and around the park. African American children have used the gym and resources in the recreation center.

Young black men and women also hang out around the park. While many are just socializing, drug and gang related activities are particularly visible. The drug trade has been commonplace on the streets of Oakwood since the emergence of the Shoreline Crips in the 1970s. Police have contained much of their activities in the vicinity of the park, pushing together African Americans with different routines into the same physical space and enabling the LAPD to monitor the area through the use of 24-hour surveillance cameras.

In the 1990s, a widely publicized gang war broke out in Oakwood between the local African American gang and two Latino gangs, the Venice 13 and the Culver City Boys. Seventeen people were murdered and over 50 more were shot in just 10 months in this small area (Umemoto, 2006). As Venice 13 recruited more members, it did not sustain visible connections with Oakwood. Members of the Shoreline Crips, on the other hand, continued to operate out of Oakwood's public spaces. Gang members who no longer lived in the neighborhood returned to Oakwood Park on a daily basis, sometimes staying with friends and relatives nearby. When a former gang member whose grandmother and uncle still lived in Oakwood gave me a tour of the area, it lasted over six hours because he repeatedly stopped to talk with people he knew.

Today, Shoreline Crips continue to tag public buildings (see Figure 3), reinforcing the public association between 'black' and 'crime'. Despite the internal economic and cultural heterogeneity of the black community, collective stigmatization has led new white residents moving into Oakwood to raise concerns about the congregation of African Americans in public spaces. Ceremonial events and political meetings become moments of African American visibility. Crowds of families and friends come together, sometimes associating openly with gang members, and drawing the attention of politicians and law enforcement officers. I describe one occasion from my fieldnotes:

> What began as a funeral turned into an all-day reunion that lasted for many hours, and people around the neighborhood, made uneasy by the number of black people in the streets, repeatedly called the police. Throughout the

Figure 3 Photograph of the Oakwood Community Center with Venice Shoreline Crip Tag

> day, the community gathering slowly transformed into a site of intense police surveillance, as LAPD cars continued to drive around in circles and officers monitored the streets on foot to make sure things were 'under control'. Angry about the heightened police presence, African Americans participating in the social event questioned why they were under the watchful eye of the police, becoming defensive about their right to visit family and friends and celebrate the life of a community member.

Constraints that historically rendered African Americans invisible from white residents and visitors in the rest of Venice facilitated the development of collective visibility in Oakwood. Black community-based organizations have obtained resources from the city and the state and drawn recognition from politicians at all levels. During the course of six years of research, I attended over a dozen political forums held by the city specifically to address the issues of the black community that never even mentioned the Latino majority. This phenomenon raises a host of questions about how Latino residents fit into an evolving urban 'color line' (Du Bois, 1989 [1903]; Gans, 1999; Lee and Bean, 2007). In the next section, I focus on how and why the substantial growth of Oakwood's Latino population has not had a proportionate degree of influence over public perceptions of the local environment.

Latinization without Latino identity

The Latinization of Los Angeles has had an overwhelming influence on the city's public culture. In 2005, Los Angeles elected its first Latino mayor since the 19th century. The remnants of a Mexican mural movement appear on walls throughout the city. Businesses operate on the sweat of low-income Latino men and women. Latin American-influenced restaurants exist in every neighborhood. Vendors from Mexico and Central America distribute fresh produce on countless street corners. Latino gardeners and Latina nannies and housekeepers tend to the homes of LA's white, middle and upper classes. Public marches draw attention to tens of thousands of underpaid, non-unionized Latino laborers and hundreds of thousands of Latino men, women, and families to protest proposed federal legislation targeting undocumented immigrants.

The visible Latinization of Los Angeles has not translated into collective visibility in Oakwood. During the 1970s, Latinos were moving into Oakwood in such large numbers that they overtook African Americans as the largest demographic group. In this neighborhood, however, the collective invisibility of the Latino population and the collective visibility of the African American population have reinforced each other.

Historically, African Americans who migrated to Oakwood shared a common origin in the southern United States and developed institutions that supported associations between those who arrived at different periods. Latinos, by contrast, came from a wide variety of places in different phases, which contributed to their lack of social cohesion in Oakwood.

Some immigrants from Mexico who arrived before the 1960s developed multigenerational ties to the area and established closer relationships with African American families as children grew up and went to school together. The second phase of Latino population growth, which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, consisted largely of undocumented immigrants from Jalisco, Nayarit, and Guadalajara in Mexico, and San Salvador in El Salvador. When Interstate 10 was extended into Santa Monica in the mid-1960s, a Latino neighborhood was uprooted, leading some families to relocate to Oakwood. More recently, undocumented immigrants from Oaxaca in Southern Mexico have moved into the area; today they probably make up the largest segment of the Latin American population.

Over time and across generations, Latinos in Oakwood have adopted a more private lifestyle than the neighborhood's African Americans. Different cohorts have remained fragmented rather than coalescing around a common identity, and they tend to participate in an array of institutions and social activities beyond rather than within Oakwood.

Historically, those who came without papers or overstayed their visas found that their precarious legal position constrained their relationship to the locality. Immigration officers monitored and harassed them, generating a palpable sense of fear about occupying public space. Juan Gutierrez, now in his mid-50s, moved from Guadalajara to Los Angeles in the 1960s. He said, 'They hunted for us. They would wait at different places, bus stops, where we worked, and around the neighborhood, just looking for us.' Silvia Vargas, now in her late 50s, told me that her bus driver would avoid dropping off residents at the bus stops when he spotted immigration officers waiting; he wanted to give his regular riders, almost all of whom were Latino, a chance to escape.

Their justifiable fear of immigration authorities forced undocumented immigrants to remain discreet in their activities. Many traveled between home and work not by public transit but less visibly, walking several miles to work in hotels and restaurants in Santa Monica and navigating through back roads and alleyways – a central feature of Los Angeles neighborhoods. Maria Beltran, an undocumented Salvadoran immigrant, explained that they avoided going out to parks, restaurants, movies, or other public places; instead they often held parties in their already crowded apartments.

Latinos arriving during this period also encountered a neighborhood with a well-organized African American community, which helped to shape their perceptions of racial and ethnic differences. For new immigrants, language barriers limited their social contacts with black people in the neighborhood.

Despite African Americans' marginalized status in relation to whites, Latino immigrants saw them as 'Americans'. Sal Beltran, the 30-year-old son of undocumented immigrants who grew up in Oakwood, pointed to the differences between African Americans and Latinos: 'Black people were very patriotic in their views. The African Americans saw themselves as just that. "We're American. We're African Americans." And that's how they viewed it first and foremost.' Impoverished African Americans sometimes expressed hostility toward undocumented immigrants who, they believed, obtained jobs that paid less than the minimum wage. The outcome was a rise in street crime aimed at Latinos, which reinforced their sense of insecurity and a belief that some African Americans were dangerous.

Latino residents often found themselves in a difficult predicament, risking being robbed as they avoided immigration authorities by walking through back alleys. One former resident, Cecilia Aguilar, now in her mid-50s, described the fear she and other Latinas felt while walking home from work:

> I had to go through the neighborhood, and every day I thought about if I was going to be attacked, ya know, mugged. Ya know, they [African

> Americans] stop you and take your money … It was a frightening feeling. But everyone in my family, all the women, someone was always robbed on the way home.

The visibility of African Americans exacerbated Latinos' fears. Louis Moreno, a third-generation Latino resident now in his mid-50s who grew up in the neighborhood, recalled the culture of street life in Oakwood: 'there were so many blacks on the streets. Just standing around, hanging out. On the corners, outside their houses, at the park, just everywhere. Not like it is now, where there's a few here and there about. They were everywhere.'

Sal Beltran and Pedro Gonzalez, both Latino men in their 30s, explained that the older generation was uncomfortable with African Americans not only because they worried about being mugged but also because of the sheer number of black people they observed in public.

> Sal: There wasn't much association [with African Americans] for them [their parents].
>
> Pedro: A little bit more for us [children of immigrants], because we knew a lot of kids at school.
>
> Sal: 'Muchos negros.' [They both laugh.]
>
> Pedro: [Still laughing, he repeats] 'Muchos negros.' We heard that all the time, 'muchos negros'. Because they felt like black people were everywhere … Always out there, chillin' and everything.

Latinos in Oakwood did not coalesce socially or unify politically. Those who had been in Oakwood for a longer period of time tended to distance themselves from those who had arrived more recently. They grew up in the neighborhood and became Americanized in their values and beliefs. They avoided close associations with new immigrants so as not to draw attention to themselves as different. Louis Moreno, a third generation Mexican American now in his late 50s, remembered with regret how as a teenager he and his friends called the new Latin American immigrants 'Putos', 'Wetbacks', or other derogatory terms that separated them from others in the neighborhood. He stressed the strength of the ties between long-time residents that linked Latinos and African Americans and the fragility of the ties between new Latino immigrants and older Mexican American residents:

> Anyone that was unfamiliar, whether they were new to the neighborhood or were coming to visit or whatever, they were considered suspect. We knew who lived here, on our streets – black and brown. We knew the familiar faces. So new people were the ones that we took a second look at.

As African American activists worked hard to solve problems through collective efforts, Latinos largely distanced themselves from local political

involvement. Only when the stakes were extremely high, involving employment or immigration policy, did Latinos organize politically. Maria Daldivia, a Latina activist during the early 1990s, said that many Latinos told her that they were too busy working to attend meetings, and undocumented immigrants did not want to risk public participation because of their citizenship status. Daldivia pointed out to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that although African American women had a long tradition of grassroots activism in Oakwood, Latina women were hesitant about joining without the support of their husbands.[7] Liliana Vasquez, now in her mid-40s, moved with her family to Venice from Nayarit, Mexico, when she was five years old. She articulated the view that different phases of migration have generated different 'types of Latinos', which has limited their cohesion and collective visibility.

> There isn't like a social component to the Latino community here somehow. Or a centrally localized place where people congregate, basically. Not like black people, who have their park and their groups and, ya know, their leaders. Maybe you go to church, everybody worships, and then maybe they have a little something once in a while. But they [Latinos] don't really rally around issues. Also, another thing is there's different types of Latinos that are here. The newer people, like the Oaxacans. There's a lot of Oaxacans who, ya know, I have absolutely nothing in common with. And then there's the people that have been here for a long time. Also you have the gang and drug type families and that whole environment too.

Latinos have participated in public life, but they have not established institutions, spaces, and interaction ritual chains (Collins, 2004) within the boundaries of Oakwood that make them collectively visible. They have commonly attended churches outside of Oakwood and even Venice. Since the 1980s, the Oaxacan community, for instance, has attended St Anne's Catholic Church in nearby Santa Monica (see Figure 4). St Anne's provides a vibrant public life, including festivals, ritual celebrations, parties, political meetings, and services and resources, but it is located more than four miles away from Oakwood.

Latino residents also commonly use public spaces in other parts of Venice. They describe the Oakwood Park as an exclusive site for African American sociality. Carlos, a Latino man in his late 30s who grew up in Venice, said:

> We didn't have access to resources, or access to school settings … [O]ne thing you have to ask yourself is, who uses the recreation center at the Oakwood Park? Who uses the California space [Vera Davis Center]? So even to this day, these people [African Americans] feel very comfortable going in there. But we [Latinos] don't. And in fact, every time when a Latino went

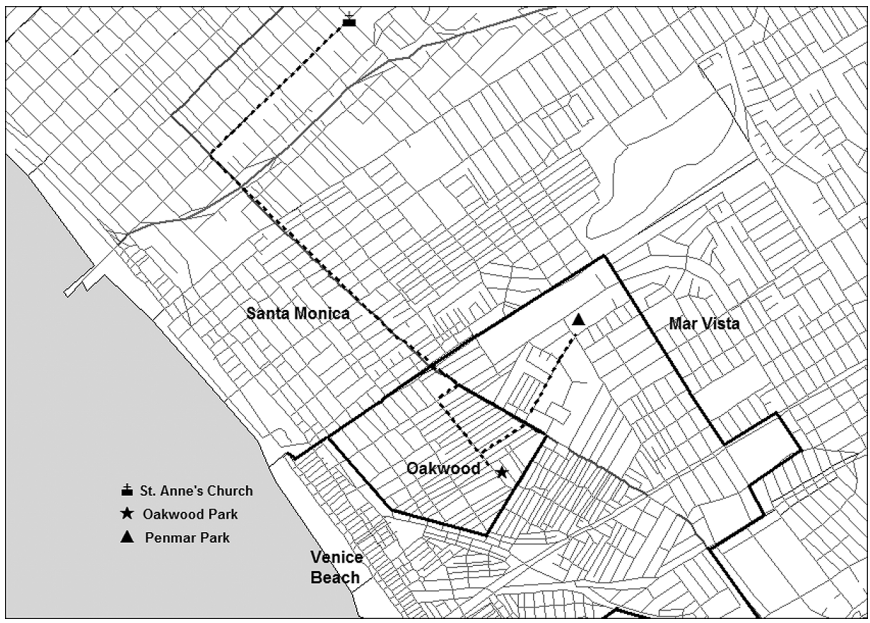

Figure 4 Map of Latino residents' routes to a church and a park beyond Oakwood

> in there to use it, they pushed us out. They always found ways to weed us out … by picking fights, by making us look like we were instigators, and by making us look like we were going in there and starting racial tension. And what we took from that was that they were saying, those are our resources, we don't want you freeloading on them … And our parents had no idea that these places existed for the youth. All they knew was that these were places that the blacks hung out. That's the way that they saw it … Because of the relationship we had with them, they would always tell us, 'No quiero que va en alli'. We don't want you to go there, we don't want you to hang out there.

Latinos found alternative avenues for public participation, regularly attending events and activities elsewhere. Penmar Park, located about a mile east of Lincoln Boulevard, has a history as a Latino site for cultural events, festivities, and celebrations (see Figure 4).

This series of constraints that Latinos encountered impeded the development of social cohesion and political unity and facilitated their participation in institutions and spaces outside of Oakwood. The collective invisibility of the Latino population has helped to sustain the collective visibility of the African American population as its numbers have fallen.

Reinventing the white/black paradigm

During the last decade, as wealthier whites have moved into Oakwood and overtaken African Americans as the second largest segment of the neighborhood's population, some have organized in private to challenge the public culture of the African American community. This effort to limit African American visibility and control their activities in public spaces is strangely similar to the racial politics that prevailed in the early 20th century when African Americans were rendered invisible from the rest of Venice by being confined to Oakwood.

The new cohort of white residents works behind the scenes, paying attention to public spaces and lobbying city council members and LAPD officers to respond to any hint of 'trouble'. They persuaded the police to park a mobile police station in front of the Oakwood Park and Recreation Center; then the LAPD mounted surveillance cameras to monitor the park and nearby sidewalks and streets. Complaints to the representative on the Los Angeles City Council motivated her to temporarily remove the picnic tables in the Oakwood park, eliminating a central site of sociality for elderly black men. Many newcomers absorb the historic culture of racial stigmatization, associating African American public life with danger and categorizing the black population as a uniform entity, blurring its internal cultural and economic heterogeneity.

As white residents in Oakwood work behind the scenes politically, they construct their own privatized, exclusive domains as a sign of privilege. Their large houses and condominiums, surrounded by tall fences or stone walls, signal a culture of privacy. Although African Americans continue to be the largest group at neighborhood political meetings, they are now forced to defend their collective presence to the city councilman, LAPD officers, and representatives from the Department of Parks and Recreation. They often transform meetings into ritual performances by pointing out how new patterns of surveillance and racial and economic change fall into a long history of harassment against the African American community. In Oakwood, as the conflict over territory has emerged through the lens of white/black dynamics, the Latino population, which is still the largest segment of the local population, has been completely overshadowed.

Conclusion

Understanding how different racial-ethnic groups became differentially associated with a neighborhood they shared requires us to analyze how that place became publicly identified with one group and how that

identification persisted over time as the area underwent marked demographic shifts. Some scholars have sought to explain the association between a population and a territory by calling attention to the demographic majority's interest in shaping outsiders' perceptions. By the logic of territorial density, the largest group produces a system of signs that points outsiders to a particular interpretation of the locality (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). In Oakwood, however, demographic predominance is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain collective visibility: the neighborhood remained identified with African Americans long after their numbers had been surpassed by Latinos. Historical circumstances provided conditions for distinct path-dependent relationships to local institutions and symbols over time. The constraints and opportunities that African Americans encountered enabled them to construct and reinforce a collective representation, while the constraints and opportunities that Latinos encountered undermined the possibility of a pathway to collective representation for them.

Urban ethnographers studying African American communities have dispelled the myth of black homogeneity by showing the political rifts, diverse lifestyles, divergent class and status positions, and varied character types among individuals of African descent (Anderson, 1978, 1999; Duneier, 1999; Pattillo, 2007). Several key mechanisms underlie 'interaction ritual chains' (Collins, 2004), the web of situations through which individuals come together over time. In Oakwood, these interaction patterns combined to propel African Americans toward collective visibility: institution-building; a culture of public sociability; political organization and collective action; labeling of spaces in honor or memory of residents; and stigmatization by others. Collective visibility based on a public perception of social cohesion has continued to label Oakwood as the 'black section' of Venice.

Institutionalization provides a stable set of resources, including a location for meaningful associations. Churches, community-based organizations, commercial establishments, and other forms of group affiliation provide opportunities for interactions that link past and present (Collins, 2004). Churches continue to attract people of the same racial background despite their geographic dispersion (McRoberts, 2003), and organizations fight for the protection of historical attachments, supporting territorial connections across economic and generational positions through job training, construction of affordable housing, and social service agencies.

A culture of public interaction and occasional collective actions in public spaces attract attention and help to reproduce visibility. African Americans defined the street culture in the neighborhood through regular use of the Oakwood Park and collective celebrations, protests, and other

ritual performances, thus cementing this place's public identity. Latino immigrants, by contrast, have tended to avoid attracting attention on the streets, rarely congregating in the park, and participating in organized activities elsewhere. The contrast between the two groups' patterned uses of neighborhood spaces, recurring and mutually reinforcing among African Americans and fragmented and disparate among Latinos, strengthens public perceptions.

Signs visible to passersby correlate in their minds with patterns of public interaction. For African Americans, labels honoring their collective history in this place link past and present. Signs naming spaces in memory of black residents become recognition of territorial status and a way to link together various elements of the neighborhood. The perception of racial cohesion motivates politicians to meet with black community leaders and hold large collective forums, a ritual performance in Oakwood by which African Americans draw attention to police harassment, crime, and misrepresentation and address the 'problems of the black community' even as black people constitute a small and declining minority of residents.

By focusing on the historical formation, sustenance, and ramifications of collective visibility and collective invisibility, this article addresses concerns about the problematic place of Latinos in a culture that historically defines the color line through the prism of black and white (Du Bois, 1989 [1903]; Gans, 1999; Lee and Bean, 2007). The more recent influx of white residents may affect the territorial status of Oakwood in a way Latin American immigration has not. The path-dependent direction of territorial association is quickly shifting to a white–black lens, reinforcing the collective invisibility of the Latino population. Some newer white residents stigmatize African American public life by categorizing the black community as homogeneous, and long-time African American residents complain about new residents' lack of interest in getting to know their neighbors. This binary opposition reveals the potential for new chains of interaction rituals and a new pathway toward collective visibility as politicians and law enforcement officials focus their energies on white–black relations. The Latino population, still the neighborhood's largest demographic segment, remains collectively invisible on this emerging public front.

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Notes

1 Table 1 is based on data from the United States Census, which uses the term Hispanic to refer to individuals of any Hispanic origin regardless of geographic location. Throughout the article, I use Latino to refer to individuals of Latin American origin. In conversations and interviews, persons of Latin American origin consistently used this term. The reader will notice, however, that when people identified as 'Mexican American', I adopted their term.

2 The case of Oakwood, where a number of residential characteristics have come together over time to enable its public perception as an African American neighborhood, can be juxtaposed to other cases where outsiders have imposed labels on places without attending to their internal attributes. Burgess's definition of community areas is the most famous case in the history of sociology, although there are many others like it across urban landscapes. According to Sudhir Venkatesh (2001: 276–7), Burgess's effort to 'prescribe' stable community areas in Chicago was often at odds with his sociological efforts to 'describe' the 'uncertainty, fluidity, and discordance' in the city's settlement patterns. Outsiders impose stability in place identity despite the fluctuation of its internal characteristics. In Oakwood, the perseverance of its identity as a 'black neighborhood' is the result of an ongoing relationship between internal and external labels.

3 This demographic information comes from the Los Angeles Almanac [http://www.laalmanac.com/population/po24la.htm].

4 Interview with Sonia Reese Davis about her grandfather and the history of Venice, by Farai Chideya for National Public Radio, 4 July 2005, available online at: [http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4728758].

5 William J. Wilson (1987, 1996) argues that structural shifts in the national economy produced terrible consequences for African American urban communities across the country as meaningful work opportunities rapidly disappeared. This analysis shifts explanations of black poverty from racism, which has always existed, to the combination of historic patterns of racism with current patterns of economic restructuring. Notwithstanding the advances won by the civil rights movement, the contraction of employment opportunities for less-educated African Americans, particularly a substantial loss of jobs in manufacturing industries, led to a sharp decline in the economic resources available in black urban communities. Wilson's model applies to Venice, where the aviation industry, which had provided previous generations of Oakwood residents with reasonably stable and relatively well-paying employment, contracted severely.

6 The informal process used to obtain housing in Holiday Venice projects has dissolved, altering the composition of the 14 buildings' residents. The rising number of Latino tenants and shrinking number of African American

tenants has been a source of controversy and has affected the organizing potential of the Holiday Venice Tenants Association. During the 1990s, the tenants joined forces with African American homeowners to influence contract negotiations between the property owner and HUD to uphold the contracts until they expired. Recently, as the property owner has been attempting to pay off mortgages with HUD in order to move away from affordable housing status, leaders of the tenants association are finding it difficult to mobilize tenants.

7 Shawn Doherty, 'Not Welcome', *Los Angeles Times*, 5 March 1992, p. 1.

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