

Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb

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In few American suburbs have firearms played a more central role in civic destiny than they have in the city of Compton in Southern California. In 1953, a pair of Colt .45 pistols, wielded by black Korean War veteran Alfred Jackson and his wife, Luquella, served as tools of the last resort for African Americans integrating a hostile white suburb.¹ The Jacksons' determination to defend themselves against the churning white mob, which had assembled in front of the Jackson home just as their moving van arrived, had the intended effect: when Alfred's close friend stepped out of the house with a 12-gauge shotgun, the crowd dispersed. The Jacksons' victory in this unheralded "battle for Compton" precipitated a rapid recomposition of the population of this historically white suburb, allowing a relatively well employed segment of Southern California's black population to enjoy the benefits of the much-vaunted suburban California lifestyle of the 1950s and 1960s. Compton quickly became an anomalous beacon of hope, the pride of thousands of middle-class African Americans in Southern California through the 1970s.

Yet by the 1980s, Compton had become something else entirely: a metonym for the urban crisis. As the isolated street gang skirmishes of the late 1970s devolved into a brutal guerilla war for control of the lucrative crack cocaine trade in the 1980s, young Comptonites turned their guns upon themselves, spraying their own neighborhoods with bullets, riddling with lethal lead the very homes that had inspired such hope in the 1950s. During the late 1980s and early 1990s Hollywood's film and popular music industries exploited the growing regional notoriety of Compton, transforming the city into a national symbol of racialized blight and crime. In recent years the diffusion of "Compton" has even gone international: in the late 1990s Japanese teenagers eagerly ordered hats with the word "Compton" embroidered in gangster font on the brim from Japanese-language editions of Southern California's *Lowrider* magazine.² Ironically, Japanese competition in the automotive and steel industries in the early 1980s had been a significant source of economic decline

in Compton, and by the 1990s, a cynical representation of the city had become one of its chief exports.

How Compton made this sweeping transition, from an exemplary African American suburb to an urban nightmare, is at once a story of social and economic historical transformation: *de jure* desegregation, shifting regional and global labor demand, declining retail sales, and changing municipal tax burdens. But it is also a story of perceptual change as well, about what Compton once represented, to both insiders and outsiders, and what it has come to represent. By the late 1980s, that perception of Compton arguably became more influential to the city's destiny than its own real history. That Compton ever represented anything other than what it now does seems inconceivable, a fact that makes the excavation of its historic meaning and representation all the more important.

Antediluvian Compton

Compton's contemporary notoriety belies its historic ordinariness: by the standards of 1920s' Los Angeles, it was an unexceptional city, typical, in fact, of a cluster of suburbs like Huntington Park, South Gate, Bell Gardens, Lynwood, Maywood, and Bell, that lay adjacent to and mostly east of Alameda Boulevard. These working-class suburbs, described so well in Becky Nicolaides's work, shared a common central-city geography and blue-collar composition that distinguished them from the more distant, affluent, and consumption-oriented suburbs of the post-World War II era.³ The "Hub City's" boosters touted the affordability of houses in Compton and their proximity to the two adjacent poles of Los Angeles County's industrial core, the Eastside Industrial District and Central Manufacturing District.

The vision of Compton as "the ideal home city" and as a "residential center for industrial workers" appealed to thousands of California-bound migrants from the Midwest between the 1920s and the 1950s, who sought suburban tranquility amid ample blue-collar employment.⁴ Equally enthusiastic were industrial employers in the region's automobile, steel, and food-processing plants, who benefited from a large supply of mortgage-conscious white workers in close proximity. Conditions in Compton, the Industrial Department of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce noted in its 1920s promotional literature, "were good, since workers may live close to their work in inexpensive homes of individuality, where flowers and gardens may be grown the year round. White help prevails."⁵ Recognizing these "ideal" circumstances, the National Civic League awarded its prestigious 1952 All-American Cities Award

to Compton, one of only eleven American cities to receive the coveted honor that year.

Central, of course, to Compton's "All-American" identity was the fierce maintenance of racial exclusion by the city's white home owners, real estate brokers, civic leaders, and law enforcement personnel, who, combined, constituted a virtual phalanx against racial integration. Unquestionably, white home owners were the advance guard, first instituting highly effective racially restrictive housing covenants in 1921.⁶ Bolstering these covenants were real estate brokers, whose licenses could be revoked for integrating neighborhoods, and the FHA, which flatly denied loans in areas not covered by covenants as a matter of policy. And the Compton City Council sanctioned the maintenance of Compton's whiteness repeatedly, but most conspicuously in the early years of World War II, when it forcefully resisted the construction of a public housing complex in Compton because it was considered "Negro housing."⁷ Finally, law enforcement agencies in Compton, and all of its adjacent working-class suburbs, vigorously defended the racialized boundaries of urban space by regularly harassing black motorists who dared to cross them.

Rallying behind the slogan "Keep the Negroes North of 130th Street," militant defenders of Compton's whiteness were incredibly successful.⁸ As late as 1948, even as waves of African American migrants flooded Los Angeles, Compton's segregationists held the day: of a population of forty-five thousand, fewer than fifty were African Americans. The only exception to Compton's lily-white composition was the presence of a very small Mexican barrio on the northern tip of the city, immediately adjacent to the unincorporated areas of Willowbrook and Watts. Compton's whites successfully contained that small population of Mexicans by refusing to sell them homes outside of the barrio, or "pricing" Mexicans out by advocating civic improvements near the barrio.⁹ But in Compton, as with the rest of Southern California and probably most of the Southwest, white hostility toward Mexicans was never as intense as the dread, fear, and hatred they felt toward blacks. Mexicans—by virtue of their lighter complexions, and their critical role in the labor market of the region—generally occupied a middling social status, somewhere between that of blacks and whites.¹⁰ If many whites thought of Mexicans as a necessary evil, blacks were both unnecessary and evil.

But the late 1940s and early 1950s were dangerous years for Compton's segregationists. First, pressure from the west was rising rapidly. Southern California's great black migration—which was at high tide between World War II and the late 1960s—was rapidly transforming the adjacent city of Los Angeles. Neighborhoods like Watts, Willowbrook, and Avalon, which had

been highly diverse, multiracial communities prior to World War II, were becoming steadily blacker and blacker, and after World War II, they approached 100 percent African American populations.¹¹ Second, many African Americans desired to leave the racial confines of South Central. A 1956 Urban League survey of 678 black families in Los Angeles revealed, in fact, that 84 percent would buy or rent in a “nonminority” neighborhood if they could.¹² Third, the landmark Supreme Court decisions *Shelley v. Kramer* and *Barrows v. Jackson*, handed down in 1948 and 1953 respectively, effectively abolished racially restrictive housing covenants, the most entrenched barrier to neighborhood integration. Finally, a growing proportion of African American families were now enjoying double incomes, quickly integrating both blue- and white-collar occupations in many sectors of the region’s dynamic labor market. Recognizing that the overcrowded and disproportionately poor community of South Central could not sustain their vision of the American Dream, these families increasingly set their sights westerly and easterly, seeking middle-class stability in communities like West Adams, Crenshaw, and Compton.

As black ambition surged, so too did the vigilance of those whites determined to limit black residential mobility. Throughout the region, white home owners employed various techniques (at least twenty-six different ones, according to a 1947 study by the Los Angeles Urban League) to “scare off” prospective black home buyers, including vandalism, cross burnings, bombings, and death threats.¹³ White resistance surfaced in the formerly white neighborhoods of South Central, in the more distant San Fernando Valley, and, most stridently, east of Alameda. A white home owner in Huntington Park, which lay to the north and east of Compton, complained to Governor Earl Warren, “In Southern States they have laws that keep the ‘niggers’ in their places, but unfortunately, for the white race in this state, there is nothing to control them . . . I think that there should be separate places for the Negroes to live instead of continually coming to white communities.”¹⁴ This renewed antiblack hostility made the racial integration of white suburbs by blacks an extremely unlikely prospect long after the legal victories of desegregation had been achieved.

Blacks and the American Dream in Compton

Ultimately, however, geography was destiny for Compton. Unlike its neighboring blue-collar suburbs, much of Compton lay to the west of Alameda, immediately adjacent to the areas of increased black concentration. In the 1940s, perhaps before the imminent threat of racial integration was perceived

by the city council, Compton eagerly annexed large parcels of unincorporated space on its southwestern periphery with the hopes of boosting the city's already substantial tax base through new residential and industrial development. But after the legal scaffolding of de jure segregation fell with *Shelley* and *Barrows*, undeveloped parcels of that recently annexed land were exposed to housing developers who saw the great financial potential in building new, unrestricted housing, just east of the ghetto. Several developers, Davenport Builders chief among them, did just that, selling the first unrestricted homes in 1952 on a patch of land that had only recently been a cornfield.¹⁵

As the Davenport development suggests, the end of de jure segregation prompted a variety of responses from local whites in Compton. Although most whites abhorred and resisted integration, some recognized its market potential. Because African Americans seeking homes outside of South Central were generally willing to pay more for homes in Compton than whites were, some white home owners quickly sold to the aspiring black suburbanites, usually to the great consternation of their neighbors. Some whites in Compton likely tried to convince their white neighbors of the value of integration, to prevent wholesale white flight and potential property devaluation. (In Crenshaw, a group called Crenshaw Neighbors had some success in this vein through the 1970s, but I have found no evidence of a similar organization in Compton).¹⁶ Finally, there were some reported incidents of liberal whites, genuinely sympathetic to black aspirations, buying houses in Compton so that they could quickly resell to blacks, without a profit.¹⁷

But the overwhelming response to black aspirations in Compton and elsewhere in Southern California was massive resistance by segregationists. Trouble began at Enterprise Middle School, an integrated Compton school between Central and Avalon on Compton Boulevard, where black and white students engaged in sporadic clashes in January of 1953. The next month, several white property owners were beaten and threatened for listing their properties with the South Los Angeles Realty Investment Company, which sold to both white and black buyers.¹⁸ In the following months, shrewd Comptonites in a white home owners' association scoured the city codes in search of a way to punish real estate agents who sold to blacks, finally dredging up an obscure and never-enforced law prohibiting the "peddling" of real estate within Compton city limits and arresting five real estate agents.¹⁹ In May, exasperated white home owners resorted to vandalism and picketing, staking out a spot in the Jacksons' driveway, before being driven off by the well-armed black family.

Sporadic acts of vandalism continued through the summer of 1953, but white residents increasingly recognized that the settlement of blacks in

Compton could not be stopped. Instead of attempting coexistence, many white Compton home owners decided to leave rather than risk a loss in property value. This reaction, common in transitional neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles County and the United States, was exacerbated in Compton by white and black real estate brokers who sought to stimulate a “panic selling” frenzy. Unscrupulous real estate agents of both races warned white home owners that unless they sold quickly, their property value would plummet. During the 1950s, panic selling and continued black in-migration dramatically reshaped Compton’s racial composition. African Americans, who represented less than 5 percent of Compton’s population in 1950, represented 40 percent of its population by 1960. In 1961 Loren Miller observed, with some ambivalence, Compton’s rapid growth as a black suburb: “I doubt there are any other cities of Compton’s size that can boast—if that’s the word—a comparable percentage of Negroes.”²⁰

In striking contrast to the pattern of residential succession typical throughout the United States at the time, African Americans in Compton did not move into dilapidated homes in declining neighborhoods. “For once,” one prominent African American observed of Compton’s new black suburbanites, “the Negro did not move into slums; for once he came into good housing.”²¹ Indeed, the census of 1960 would reveal that 93 percent of Compton blacks lived in homes built since 1940 and more than half of those in homes built since 1950. Not only were Compton’s homes new, but also big. Almost 75 percent of black households in Compton had four to five rooms.²² In all except the skin color of a quickly rising proportion of its residents, Compton continued to look very much like the fabled American suburb of the 1950s, well into the late 1960s, and in some pockets, to the present (fig. 1).

Despite the persistence of racism in Compton, African Americans truly benefited from their suburban relocation. Indeed, the suburban dream of peace and comfort came true for the thousands of blue-collar African Americans who moved to Compton during the 1950s. When white journalist Richard Elman visited Compton in the 1960s, he was amazed by this new black suburbia. Compton’s superior racially integrated schools, he observed, had created a much better crop of black students than one found in the ghettos of Watts or South Central: “Compton has become a city which sends its Negro high-school graduates to state colleges, to Berkeley and UCLA, and some even can afford to go as far away as Fisk.”²³ Locally, black families increasingly sent their children to Compton Community College, considered at the time to be one of the state’s best community colleges.

African Americans in Compton perceived themselves, and were perceived by many other African Americans, as thoroughly middle class. Compton’s



Figure 1. A far cry from the “ghetto” imagery of poverty, blight, and gang warfare increasingly associated with Compton by the 1980s, this photograph from 1982 suggests the resilience and vitality of the lower-middle-class dream in Compton. Photograph by Mike Mullen, *Herald Examiner* Collection, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library.

black residents were representative of that group of blacks who secured steady blue-collar employment along the industrial corridor. The material benefits of that employment, revealed in figures from the 1960 census, truly set them apart from their cohort west of the city. Most strikingly, unemployment in Compton was less than a third of that in Watts. A much higher proportion of men and women in Compton worked as full-time factory operatives than did those in Watts. Seventeen percent of black men in Compton were craftsmen and about one-third were operatives. Another 17 percent were professional and clerical workers. Twenty-four percent of Compton’s black women were factory operatives, 20 percent were clerical workers, and 9 percent were professionals. Accordingly, median income of Compton residents was almost twice that of Watts residents.²⁴ Although contemporary observers and subsequent scholars viewed black migration to Compton as “ghetto sprawl,” or an extension of the black ghetto, it clearly was not. For Compton’s residents, the city was far from the ghetto. Even blacks forced to buy older homes in Compton felt a bit of the suburban dream. Mary Cuthbertson, an African

American migrant from North Carolina remembered how her late husband felt about owning a home in Compton: “It was a very old house, but being the first house he owned in his lifetime, it just meant a lot to him to *own your own house*.”²⁵ In contrast to the physical deterioration of Watts, Compton’s proud, black home owners had meticulously groomed gardens and, for the most part, well-maintained housing. A white resident of Compton candidly acknowledged that the new black neighbors “are stable; in our neighborhood they are of a good class; many buy their homes and take good care of them; we wouldn’t exchange Compton for any other place.”²⁶ A white businessman in Compton grudgingly admitted to a white reporter: “Of course they’re [African Americans] moving into our city and there’s nothing legal we can do to stop it. But you would be surprised—I’ll take you through some of the streets they took over—clean as anything you want to see.”²⁷ And a reporter for the *New York Times* marveled, in 1969, at the “life styles of Compton” where “nurses and small-business men take meticulous care of their small, frame houses and colorful flower gardens.”²⁸ Although Compton was adjacent to Watts and Willowbrook, it was, for its residents, worlds away. The distinction often earned the scorn of blacks “left behind” in Watts. One complained that “our middle-class Negroes who move out to Compton . . . don’t care about us.”²⁹

Deindustrialization, Death, and Taxes

On the eve of the infamous Watts riot of 1965, the maintenance of the American Dream for blacks in Compton was still conceivable, as was relative racial peace between the city’s now equally divided populations. To be sure, whites still maintained a firm grip on power in the city, including a virtual racial monopoly in city politics, law enforcement, and the local newspaper, the *Compton Herald-American*. But blacks were making political progress, most conspicuously in 1963, a banner year for African Americans in Southern California. In Los Angeles, and after decades of frustration, blacks finally made political headway, gaining a remarkable three seats on the fifteen-seat Los Angeles City Council, one occupied by future black mayor Tom Bradley. But for black Comptonites the far more exciting victory that year was scored by local automobile sales manager Douglas Dollarhide, Compton’s first black city councilman and, later, first black mayor.³⁰ Dollarhide’s rise, and the subsequent elections of African Americans to positions in city government, established Compton as the “vanguard of black empowerment” in the United States, a fact not lost on proud Comptonites.³¹

Furthermore, while most whites throughout Southern California probably ignored the class dimensions of the August riot—perceiving it as a universal

“black phenomenon”—there is evidence that at least some whites in Compton made far more subtle distinctions between those African Americans in the ghetto of Watts and those in Compton. For example, when rioters in Watts and Willowbrook moved toward Compton, they met with fierce resistance from whites *and* blacks, who collectively—if only temporarily—identified as home owners, rather than members of different racial groups. Leroy Conley, a black man who headed the Business Men’s Association in Compton organized a group of black and white Comptonites armed with shotguns to repel the potential invaders. “We were all working together,” Conley recalled. “There wasn’t any black or white.”³²

But this peace under fire was short-lived. The far more enduring legacy of the Watts riot was its stimulation of wholesale white flight from Compton. As whites left Compton, they also abandoned their retail businesses, leaving Compton’s Central Business district, which stretched along Compton Boulevard between Willowbrook and Alameda, virtually empty by the late 1960s (see figs. 2 and 3). Deprived of this crucial tax base, and lacking much significant industrial development, Compton compensated by raising property taxes to one of the highest levels in the county.³³ Additionally, under mayoralty of Dollarhide, Compton began its ongoing quest to expand its tax base through the annexation of unincorporated county land. In 1968, the city annexed five hundred acres of vacant land for an industrial park, but tenants were slow to move into the city, whose reputation, quite unfairly, was tarnished by the Watts riot (the remaining seventeen acres of this tract, appraised at \$1.4 million, was sold, out of desperation, to a developer for \$500,000 in 1982).³⁴ And, according to Mike Davis, when Dollarhide sought permits for greater annexation from the all-white County Local Area Formation Commission, Compton was systematically passed over for wealthier, white-majority communities like Long Beach, Carson, and Torrance.³⁵

Simultaneously, Southern California’s economy and labor market underwent a transformation that seriously undermined the pillars of black prosperity in Compton: a sharp decline in steady, unionized, blue-collar, manufacturing employment in, and immediately adjacent to, black Los Angeles. Although the 1965 Watts riot would certainly accelerate industrial flight from Los Angeles, that process was already well under way as early as 1963, when the out-migration of jobs in furniture, metal, electrical, textile, and oil refining machinery industries from South Central was first documented by researchers from UCLA’s Institute of Industrial Relations. Following a trend set by the aircraft, aerospace, and electronics firms in prior decades, manufacturers increasingly sought to lower their tax burden, expand their plant size, and, it was hoped, connect to new markets by leaving the central city. Between mid-1963



Figure 2. A typical street scene on Compton Boulevard, the main thoroughfare of Compton's thriving retail district, shortly before Christmas, 1954. From the *Herald Examiner* Collection, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library.

Figure 3. Compton Boulevard, abandoned, 1982. The swift departure of white-owned businesses in the late 1960s and 1970s not only crippled the once-thriving retail district, but also erased a critical component of the city's tax base. Photograph by Mike Mullen, *Herald Examiner* Collection, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library.



and mid-1964, thirty-three industrial manufacturing firms left South Central and parts of East Los Angeles.³⁶ The pace of this process intensified through the 1970s as Chrysler, Goodrich, Uniroyal, U.S. Steel, Norris Industries, Ford Motors, Firestone, Goodyear, Bethlehem Steel, and General Motors all left the region, culminating in a devastating wave of plant closures between 1978 and 1982 that eliminated more than seventy thousand jobs in blue-collar occupations along the Alameda corridor.³⁷ Having climbed steadily for two decades, the proportion of the black male workforce working as operatives in manufacturing firms began to fall in the 1960s, and their absolute employment in manufacturing dropped in the early 1970s.

With more than a third of its population employed in manufacturing industries, Compton was probably affected more than any other black area in Southern California. Although the unemployment rate remained much lower than neighboring Watts and Willowbrook, it crept from 8.7 to 10 percent for black men between 1960 and 1970. One reporter from the *New York Times* observed that black “residents noticed changes: Stores are closing, the streets are dirtier, the merchandise is shoddier.” Consequently, the children of Compton felt very differently about the city than their parents had when they moved there in the 1950s. One black teenager felt “the kids should have something they can be proud of. Now they just hang their heads when they mention Compton.”³⁸

Far more troublesome, however, than Compton teenagers’ tendency to “hang their heads,” was their propensity to join street gangs. Coinciding, and undoubtedly fueled by, the decline in legitimate employment opportunities was the explosive rise in black street gangs in Compton and throughout black Los Angeles during the early 1970s. Although the initial black gangs of the 1940s were largely defensive—protecting black youth from marauding gangs of white, segregationist teens—by the late 1960s, gang warfare had become a purely internecine affair, pitting black youth against black youth based simply on the neighborhoods in which they lived. Shortly after the 1969 founding of the Crips at Fremont High School in South Central, a group of black youth on Piru Street in Compton started the Bloods, adopting the red color of their local high school, Centennial High.³⁹ This territoriality intensified in the 1980s, as black gangs competed for control of the lucrative trade in “rock” cocaine (crack), a very affordable, easily distributable, and highly addictive drug.⁴⁰ Compton became the epicenter of gang violence and has consistently had the greatest number of gangs of any city in Los Angeles County other than Los Angeles itself. The disproportionate popularity of gangs in Compton relative to other black areas in Southern California can be explained partially by a

demographic anomaly: by 1969, Compton had one of the highest proportions of youth of any Southern California city, with almost half of the population under eighteen years of age.⁴¹ But clearly, gang affiliation was also about a renunciation of the “straight” life, an angry response to the failed promises of this once-proud city.

Shortly after holding hearings in 1974 and early 1975, the Los Angeles County Grand Jury published a grim inventory of rising gang violence, dysfunctional schools, corrupt civic administrators, inadequate public transportation, excessive taxation, poor law enforcement, and unusually high welfare dependency. But the report also records the battle cry of Compton’s aging, and increasingly outnumbered, middle class. Longtime middle-class residents excoriated the values, behavior, and goals of Compton’s poorer newcomers, fighting desperately to save the waning American Dream in Compton.⁴²

That Compton, by the late 1970s, was in deep trouble was confirmed in a careful and rigorous Rand study in 1982, “Troubled Suburbs: An Exploratory Study.” Prepared for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the report analyzed a number of variables—including education, income, crime, employment, and municipal fiscal health—and produced a list of eighty-four “troubled” suburbs, fourteen of which were considered “disaster areas.”⁴³ Not surprisingly, Compton made this later list. Yet what was far more illuminating about the report was not that Compton was in “trouble,” but rather that it was not *uniquely* troubled. In fact, the Rand report found that the scarcely cited suburbs of Hoboken, New Jersey; Highland Park, Michigan; Chester, Pennsylvania; East St. Louis, Illinois; Camden, New Jersey; and Alton, Illinois, were all considerably more “troubled” than Compton. Compton, according to the clear-eyed report, was not *anomalous* (with the exception of its uniquely large black population and its prevalent black leadership), but rather *typical* of America’s declining suburbs.

Representing Compton and Creating Metonymy

If Compton had already achieved some regional notoriety among whites by the early 1960s, this fact was, apparently, not generally known outside of California. Ironically, it was this ignorance of the racial transition swiftly underfoot in Compton that contributed to one of its most nuanced chronicles, Richard M. Elman’s *Ill at Ease in Compton*, published in 1967. A Jewish Brooklyn native and freelance writer, Elman was sent to Compton in 1964 at the behest of the New York public television station to cover voter behavior prior to the Goldwater-Johnson election. Selected cursorily by East Coast researchers as a “typical” American suburb, Compton defied Elman’s expectations and

those of the news show's producers. After informing the producer that almost half of Compton's population was black, Elman and the cameramen were told to "shoot around some of these Negroes." According to Elman, the producer rejected the idea of including blacks in the news feature because "it just wouldn't be a typical American town. I asked for Main Street USA and you've given us Harlem." Ultimately, Compton's black population was "excised on the cutting room floor," leaving a public television report a decade behind the time: a Compton of 1954 perhaps, but not of 1964. "The educationalists," Elman recalled, "presented a portrait of the typical American voter that was as bland as it was boring and as boring as it was white."⁴⁴

His curiosity about Compton piqued, Elman returned in 1967, two years after the Watts riot and shortly after finishing his first book, the *Poorhouse State: The American Way of Life on Public Assistance* (1966). The Compton that Elman encountered was still a thoroughly divided city, predominantly black west of Alameda and exclusively white to the east, and it was the destiny of this border that created the underlying tension in Elman's reportage. *Ill at Ease in Compton* depicts a Compton whose fate is not yet sealed, a Compton that is not necessarily destined to be either solidly black or predominantly poor, a Compton in which interracial coexistence is still conceivable, if greatly under attack. It is also a city whose black residents are "safely lower-middle-class" and live in neighborhoods where "motorboats and campers are parked with about the same profusion as in the white neighborhoods."⁴⁵ Despite the many signs that Compton still represented what it had a decade earlier—a refuge from ghetto life for middle-class African Americans—Elman was sensitive to the extent to which that vision depended on whites staying in Compton. The mounting flight of white home owners and businessmen undercut the very promise of that vision. "It is getting harder and harder," Elman wrote, "for the black man to aspire even to Compton when he looks around him and sees the way the white man's children feel about it."⁴⁶

Had whites in Compton carefully read Elman's work—which they most assuredly did not—the future of the city might have been quite different. His interview with "Jewish housewife" Dahlia Gottlieb, for example, is a portrait of peaceful coexistence between whites and blacks. Far from regretting the arrival of blacks, Gottlieb derived a sense of satisfaction with the multiracial world she and her neighbors were creating, and evinced a strong sense of admiration for the strivings of lower-middle-class African Americans.⁴⁷ Harry Dolan, who reviewed *Ill at Ease in Compton* for the *New York Times* was sensitive to the potential for interracial coexistence in Compton, but also to its fragility. "Elman," he wrote, "has found that the new world of the Negro is something like the land promised by the old songs. For the first time many

Negro men work at jobs that lift them into the middle class.” “But with this,” he continued, “comes the built-in problem of troubled suburbia.” What “remains to be seen,” Dolan concluded, was whether the responses of blacks and whites to “modern American life will cause friction and racial tension, or be resolved on a new level of human cooperation.”⁴⁸ The historic significance of *Ill at Ease in Compton* lies not in its literary splendor or its popularity (according to Pantheon’s sales department, the book sold fewer than three thousand copies). Rather it was the last publicly known account of Compton that recognized the potential for the city’s alternative future.

Between the publication of *Ill at Ease in Compton* and the 1980s, “Compton” began its dreary metamorphosis from place name to metonym. The 1969 mayoral election of Douglas Dollarhide drew nationwide attention, though of a highly ambiguous nature. The *Los Angeles Times* somewhat condescendingly regarded Dollarhide’s mayoralty—and the near monopoly blacks now held in local politics—as “an experiment in Negro self-government.” The *New York Times* quizzically examined the “woes” of this “test tube” city. Although the *New York Times* coverage of Compton was generally sympathetic, it clearly posed to readers the very question that Dollarhide anticipated: “People are saying we can’t do it. They are saying that we can’t govern ourselves.”⁴⁹ The 1973 election of Doris Davis, one of the nation’s first black women mayors, further intensified the curiosity about and scrutiny of Compton. And what this scrutiny turned up was almost always a story of decline. By 1973, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* unceremoniously described Compton as a “ghetto of poverty, crime, gang violence, unemployment and blight.”⁵⁰ It is not, of course, that descriptions of Compton were wholly inaccurate. Rather it is that Compton was no more “troubled” than a number of other suburbs explored by Rand in 1982 and, in fact, far less troubled than several.

But if the material circumstances of Compton were typical of America’s declining suburbs, its location was not; its geographic proximity to the heart of the nation’s film and music industry further shaped Compton’s transformation to metonym. If this transition had begun prior to the 1980s, it was greatly accelerated by the release of *Straight Outta Compton* (1988, Ruthless/Priority), by the rap group NWA (Niggas With Attitude). Banned from most radio stations—and more important, MTV—the album nonetheless became an instant hit, ultimately selling more than three million copies.⁵¹ NWA’s presumably autobiographical account of life in Compton portrayed an infinitely bleak social landscape, where “ruthless” gangsters got high, stole cars, “blasted” other gangsters, “slaughtered” police officers, and tricked “bitches” into having sex with them. The incendiary “F*** the Police”—in which a ferocious MC Ren portrays himself as a “sniper” determined to murder police offic-

ers—drew the censure of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and focused media attention on violence in rap. So inflammatory was NWA that the group was the subject of a feature in *Newsweek* in 1990. If *Newsweek's* national readership knew not of Compton before the article, they found out that the “appalling expressions of attitude” uttered by NWA came directly from the “sorry Los Angeles slum of Compton.”⁵² Setting aside the album’s historic role in the long-standing debate over freedom of artistic expression in the United States, much of the significance of *Straight Outta Compton* lay in its definitional power, its role in creating a national, even global, perception of a place largely disconnected from its history.

The power of this role was not lost on the members of NWA, who were far more savvy than they professed to be on the tracks of *Straight Outta Compton*. “It’s just an image,” MC Ren later candidly told the *Los Angeles Times*. “We got to do something that would distinguish ourselves. We was just trying to be different.”⁵³ That “hard” image—a staple of rap music since the 1980s—was indelibly linked to Compton by a group of African American youth who did not, themselves, always embody it. Easy-E (Eric Wright), despite his brief career as a drug dealer, was the product of a lower-middle-class home, the son of a U.S. postal worker; Ice Cube (O’Shea Jackson), the main voice of NWA, had to be lured back from Arizona—where he had gone to take advanced architecture courses—to record the album.⁵⁴

But the fact that NWA manufactured, to a certain degree, their own “hardness” should not—and did not—distract listeners from the essentially honest and authentic reportage delivered on *Straight Outta Compton*. NWA did not invent images from the streets of Compton, but rather selectively filtered them in a way to deliver the most sensational and shocking impression to listeners. Of course, NWA’s desire to locate Compton was not sociological but mostly commercial: part of NWA’s place naming and claiming was a direct challenge to the hegemony of East Coast rappers, who’d long relied on Queens and the Bronx to communicate an urban sensibility.⁵⁵ A highly specialized discourse, in fact, was increasingly typical of rap during this era, but NWA shifted that discourse to Los Angeles, and also upped the ante with gratuitous glorifications of violence. In this context, NWA (and subsequent performers Compton’s Most Wanted and DJ Quick) was involved in an innocuous, competitive, and essentially playful contest between regions, not unlike professional athletes proclaiming the superiority of their own region or team. But on the streets that NWA described, place claiming and territoriality also had deadly consequences, informing the menacing gangster interrogatory, what you claim? vernacularly synonymous with, where you from? or, what gang are you in?

After NWA, “Compton” became a virtually irresistible, and imminently exploitable, metonym for rappers, and more influentially, filmmakers. In director John Singleton’s powerful Oscar-nominated 1991 film, *Boyz in the Hood*, Compton makes a brief appearance as the most insidious and forsaken zone of greater South Central Los Angeles. In a central scene halfway through the film, Jason “Furious” Styles (Lawrence Fishburne)—a small businessman and perennial disciplinarian—coaxes his son, Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding Jr.), and his best friend, Ricky Baker (Morris Chesnut), to leave the relative gentility of their native South Central for a didactic excursion to Compton. As Tre and Ricky exit the car, they regard Compton warily, eyeing the gang-bangers and hustlers congregating in the littered yard of a ramshackle home. There Furious Styles delivers an impassioned monologue about the causes of deterioration in Compton. Relying on the viewer’s popular perception of Compton (consider that the title of the film is drawn from the NWA song of the same name, featured on its first album, *NWA and the Posse*), Singleton casually reverses the general historic reality here. Determined to show the vitality and striving of lower-middle-class black Los Angeles, but unwilling to confound viewers accustomed to a particular vision of Compton, Singleton depicts a blighted Compton in contrast to the well-maintained homes and lawns of neighboring South Central.

The Hughes Brothers’ 1993 *Menace II Society* presents a similarly cynical representation of Compton, though in a different way. The film is set exclusively in Watts, and primarily in and around its notorious Jordan Downs housing project. But Compton nonetheless plays an important role, not as a physical space, but as an idea. For example, when troubled thug Chauncy (Clifton Powell) angrily dismisses a white co-conspirator from his Watts house, he challenges him to find his way safely out of Watts on Compton Avenue.⁵⁶ This ominous send-off has the intended effect, sending the unnamed white character (one of only several in the film) scurrying nervously back to his car. If he understands the implication, so too do the viewers, and in this sense both the characters and the directors exploit the same vision of Compton. Similarly, the soundtrack is punctuated with well-timed and conspicuous references to Compton, when scenes require an added hint of infamy. For example, even as vengeful Caine “Kaydee” Lawson (Tyron Turner) approaches a moment of clarity—contemplating his friends’ invitation to leave Watts for Kansas—the relative calm is disrupted by DJ Quick’s warning not to “fuck” with African Americans from Compton. An unyieldingly bleak film, *Menace II Society* served to further confirm the notoriety of Compton.

But popular culture, it should be remembered, has always been a two-way street, requiring not only production, but also willful consumption. The immediate popularity of NWA's early demo tapes among black youth in South Central suggests that the group was clearly tapping into imagery, sounds, and beats that reverberated locally. And for African Americans nationally, NWA did what most rap has done for African Americans: it conveyed—as Tricia Rose put it—the “pulse, pleasures, and problems of black urban life.”⁵⁷ But mainstream success in the United States, by definition, requires the support of white consumers, and *Straight Outta Compton* was no exception. In fact, Priority Records estimated that 80 percent of its customers were white, male teenagers in suburbs. This figure is unverifiable and likely exaggerated, but it is roughly consistent with recent surveys by *Source* magazine showing that 70 percent of rap consumers are white.⁵⁸ Of course, white consumption of black popular culture has a long history in the United States, dating back, at least, to the jazz age of the 1920s.⁵⁹ But that process has arguably been more complex since NWA, as the one-upmanship of gangster rap has pushed the genre further into the realm of explicit violence and graphic sex. White consumers of rap music are now not only buying into an image of “coolness,” but also often one of extreme narcissism, misogyny, and violence, perpetrated by African Americans. As Bill Yousman has effectively argued, this consumption reflects a simultaneous “blackophilia” and “blackophobia” among white consumers, allowing white consumers to “contain their fears and animosities towards Blacks through rituals . . . of adoration.”⁶⁰

Similarly, *Boyz in the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, and other “hood” films of the early 1990s were widely viewed by both black and white audiences. Black films had long presented dark images of “the hood” to white viewers. Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), for example, depicted the unnamed streets and boulevards of Los Angeles as a white-controlled maze, constraining the physical and sexual prowess of the badman protagonist, Sweetback. But the novelty of hood films of the 1990s was their naming and claiming of specific places, and in this sense the genre served as the visual counterpart to the hip-hop music of the era. These films also served as urban geography lessons—no matter how flawed—for white audiences both eager and fearful to know of the hood. Ironically, however, whatever nuanced messages of hope and humanity these films tried to assert were likely lost on theater-goers who found themselves participating in uneasy reenactments of the films’ violence themes, as fights and shootings erupted at screenings of *Boyz* and *New Jack City* nationwide.

What's in a Name? The Elision of "Compton"

The naming of streets—as a number of scholars have explored—can be a powerful act, shaping regional memory and identification and reinforcing reigning political ideologies.⁶¹ For African Americans in particular, the creation of a commemorative landscape through the naming of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevards throughout the country has been an important place-claiming ritual. After much resistance and political wrangling, Los Angeles's own Santa Barbara Avenue was renamed Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in 1982. In Los Angeles and elsewhere, African Americans viewed this process not only as a victory for the memory of the slain civil rights leader, but also an official recognition and affirmation of the presence of African Americans in white-majority cities. But blacks in Compton discovered that the renaming of places could also be used as an unceremonious *renunciation* of their place in the larger metropolis. By the late 1980s, in fact, the word *Compton* had become so powerfully suggestive, so notorious, the city's surrounding suburbs successfully lobbied to literally erase Compton from their city maps.

The process of eliding Compton began in 1985, when the Dominguez Medical Center moved its mail room from one side of the hospital to the other in order to switch the mailing address from Compton to Long Beach. No sooner had the ink dried on this change than the city council of Paramount, lying to the east of Compton across the Los Angeles River voted to rename its two-mile stretch of Compton Boulevard, Somerset Boulevard. In an attempt to lure Southern California development moguls Kaufman & Broad to build a \$14 million single-family home complex there, the heavily Latino city voted to change the name in 1986. Testament to Compton's transition to metonym, one Paramount businessman who supported the name change argued that "the word *Compton* does not paint a picture of a first-class residential community since the area is too well known for the slums and strife that existed there for the last 20 or so years." A Paramount real estate broker—apparently unaware of Paramount's shared status as a "disaster area" in the 1982 Rand report—stated, "It's good for the area. We are supporting it because they have a number of problems across the freeway (in Compton)."⁶²

The renaming movement lay dormant for two years until late in 1988 (the same year NWA released *Straight Outta Compton*) when Compton's neighbor to the west, Gardena, voted to change its stretch of Compton Boulevard to Marine Avenue for "consistency" with Manhattan Beach. Within the next two years, Lawndale, Hawthorne, and finally Redondo Beach all changed their respective stretches of Compton Boulevard as well, and, in an instant, Compton

Boulevard was gone in all but the notorious city itself.⁶³ Compton's leadership recognized this move for what it was: an attempt to disassociate from the reputation of the predominantly black and crime-ridden suburb. Former Compton city councilman Robert Adams defended his city: "I've lived in Compton 39 years, and I think Compton is one of the nicest cities around. We got first-class citizens here, law-abiding citizens." "But," he continued, "the majority of those citizens are black, and you still have bigots out there."⁶⁴

The final, and certainly most ironic, blow in the battle to erase Compton from the map actually came from Comptonites. In the summer of 1990, the unincorporated area known as East Compton furtively, and successfully, petitioned the county to change its name to East Rancho Dominguez. Initially shocked by the perceived betrayal, Comptonites soon recognized that the disassociation was an ironic boon for them. It was, in fact, East Compton that had disproportionately besmirched the name of Compton during the 1980s. Law enforcement agencies had long considered East Compton one of the most dangerous areas in Compton because its proximity to the 710 freeway made it the most coveted region in Compton's raging drug wars.⁶⁵ Evidently, for East Comptonites, the name "Compton" had become a more terrifying specter than the real crime and violence it had so long implied. One would be hard-pressed to find a more telling example of the practical triumph of *ideas* about places over the actual *histories* of places. This triumph would have been problematic for Compton during any era, but during the wave of urban disinvestment of the Reagan and Bush era, it had disastrous consequences.

Representing Contemporary Compton

If popular representations and perceptions of Compton have failed to reflect the complex history of Compton, they've also failed to accurately portray its contemporary demographic reality. Most conspicuously, Latinos are almost entirely absent from metonymic Compton. This is a glaring oversight given that Latinos already made up 42 percent of the city's population by 1990 and officially became a majority population in 2000.⁶⁶ Understanding the Latino presence is not merely a matter of inclusiveness; it is a matter of reinterpreting the meaning of Compton. Latinos in Compton, of course, have already been the subject of careful scholarly investigation and responsible media reporting, but the extent to which they become part of the popular notion of Compton remains to be seen.⁶⁷ Far more important to Compton's Latinos, however, is the extent to which they are represented *politically* in this longtime bastion of black political empowerment. As political scientist Regina Freer has demon-

strated, Compton's black leaders have generally "viewed the assertion of Latino demands as a threat to not only their own individual power, but more broadly as threats to African American political empowerment."⁶⁸ In the early years of the new century, African American political leaders are waging what may be their final battle to claim and define Compton, under vastly different circumstances than those encountered by Alfred and Luquella Jackson in 1953.

In 1998, Catherine Borek, a teacher at Dominguez High School embarked on a daunting task: to produce the first dramatic play at the school in more than twenty years, the 1938 Thornton Wilder classic, *Our Town*. Chronicled in the independent 2002 documentary *OT: Our Town*, the production proceeds, against all odds, in a school best known for generating gang members and professional basketball players. In it, a remarkable group of black and Latino teenagers reinvent this all-American play about family life in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, giving it a bit of local flavor, but, more important, challenging stereotypes about Compton's youth. After a successful opening night, the precocious stage manager, Ebony Starr Norwood-Brown, contemplates the meaning of the play. For her, it demonstrated "we're not that different" from people "even in Idaho," "but we're *way* different from what you think we are." Of course most Americans never will see this independent release, and that is a shame, because it has the potential to create a new perception of Compton, one worthy of the abiding character and ambition of a healthy proportion of the residents in this long-maligned city.

But the story of Compton is not just one of rectifying misrepresentations. There is a larger lesson here about the heavily freighted nature of geographic descriptors. Place names are rarely just that; in most cases we use them to refer to or imply a larger set of events, ideas, and developments in our personal and collective memories. Most of us recognize that when we say "Paris in the Springtime," we are referring to a whole collection of feelings and senses associated with a geographic location and place in time and not simply an exact spot during a particular month. Yet we are generally insensitive to the ways in which metonymy and other rhetorical devices have *political* as well as linguistic consequences. Compton is just one example of the dire consequences of metonymy misused, when a place name is employed as a condensed representation of a host of urban ills of which it is but a small part. We are extraordinarily sensitive to the consequences of stereotyping people, ethnicities, genders, and races, yet we remain insufficiently skeptical about what we imply when we think we are simply referring to a place.

Notes

1. "Full Compton Story Told in Eagle Series," *California Eagle*, May 14, 1953, 1, 2, 8.
2. John L. Mitchell, "Lowrider Cruising to Japanese Market," *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 1996, 1.
3. Becky Nicolaides, "'Where the Working Man Is Welcomed': Working-Class Suburbs in Los Angeles, 1900–1940," *Pacific Historical Review* 68 (November 1999): 517–59; Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). See also Greg Hise, "Industry and Imaginative Geographies," and Mike Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop: Ford and Darwin in 1920s Los Angeles," in *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, ed. Tom Sitton and William Deverall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 13–44, 97–122.
4. These booster descriptions appear in the Compton ephemera in folder 19, box 83, of the Don Meadows Collection, Special Collections, University of California, Irvine.
5. Davis, "Sunshine and Open Shop," 117.
6. Al Camarillo, "Black and Brown in Compton: Demographic Change, Suburban Decline, and Intergroup Relations in a South Central Los Angeles Community, 1950–2000," in *Not Just Black and White: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity, Then and Now*, ed. George Frederickson and Nancy Foner (Los Angeles: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 364.
7. The proposed project was subsequently relocated to Watts. See "Testimony of Loren Miller," *Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, Transcripts*, vol. X, 6–10.
8. The slogan "Keep the Negroes North of 130th Street" appears in Loren Miller's discussion of race restrictions in the 1940s (cited above). In the *California Eagle* ("Compton Acquits All Five Realty Board Brokers," May 7, 1953, 1, 8), it appears as "Keep the Negroes North of 134th Street." This discrepancy reflects the fact that, as blacks continued to push southward, segregationists regularly issued updated rallying cries against further black encroachment, repeatedly defining and redefining a geography of exclusion.
9. See Alberto M. Camarillo, "Chicano Urban History: A Study of Compton's Barrio, 1936–1970," *Aztlán* 2 (spring 1970): 79–106; "Black and Brown in Compton," 358–76.
10. I elaborate on this regional racial dynamic in *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). See also Neil Foley, *White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
11. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population and Housing: Statistics for Census Tracts*, vol. 2 (Washington: GPO, 1942), 4–6; *Census of Population: 1950, Census Tract Statistics, Los Angeles, California and Adjacent Area* (Washington: GPO, 1952), 9–53; *Census of Population and Housing: 1960, Census Tracts, Los Angeles-Long Beach, Calif. Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area* (Washington: GPO, 1962), 25–161.
12. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings Held in Los Angeles and San Francisco, January 25–28, 1960* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960), 203.
13. *Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights* 158–59.
14. William C. Arderly to Earl Warren, July 17, 1946, folder 3640:3677, Earl Warren Papers, California State Archives, Sacramento.
15. Sylvester Gibbs, interview with author, June 2, 1998, Los Angeles, California. Transcripts of this and other interviews were donated to the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, where they can be viewed.
16. The activities of Crenshaw Neighbors are chronicled in the journal *The Integrator*, copies of which are available at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, in Los Angeles.
17. Camarillo, "Black and Brown in Compton," 364.
18. "Vigilantes Brutally Beat Man over Sale to Negroes," *California Eagle*, February 19, 1953, 1–2.
19. "Compton Acquits All Five Realty Board Brokers," *California Eagle*, May 7, 1953, 1, 8.
20. In fact, Miller was right: according to the census of 1970, Compton had the largest proportion of blacks of any American suburb. See Judith Fernandez and John Pincus, *Troubled Suburbs: An Exploratory Study* (Rand: Santa Monica, 1982), 137.
21. Welfare Planning Council, *Compton: A Community in Transition; A Needs and Resources Study of the Compton Area*, (Los Angeles: 1962), 36.
22. *1960 Census Tracts*, 850.
23. Richard Elman, *Ill at Ease in Compton* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 24.
24. *1960 Census Tracts*, 577.

25. Mary Cuthbertson, interview with author, July 20, 1998, Los Angeles, California.
26. *Compton: A Community in Transition*, 82.
27. Bob Ellis, "Compton Residents Agree: Negroes Can't Be Kept Out," *California Eagle*, June 18, 1953, 2.
28. Steven V. Roberts, "Compton, Calif., 65% Negro, Believes in Integration and in Peaceful Change," *New York Times*, June 8, 1969, 65.
29. *Watts Writers' Workshop, from the Ashes: Voices of Watts* (New York: New American Library, 1967), 8.
30. Roberts, "Compton, Calif., 65% Negro," 65.
31. Regina Freer, "Black Brown Cities: Black Urban Regimes and the Challenge of Changing Demographics," unpublished paper presented at the Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Denver, Colorado, March 27–29, 2003.
32. Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 119.
33. Ahmed Mohammed Widaatalla, "Effect of Racial Change on the Tax Base of the City of Compton" (doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1970), 13, 37–40.
34. Frank Clifford, "Compton Development: Was Price Right?" *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1982, sec. 2, 1, 4.
35. Mike Davis, *Dead Cities: And Other Tales* (New York: New Press, 2002), 280.
36. Joel D. Leidner, "Major Factors in Industrial Location," appendix 7, in *Hard-Core Unemployment and Poverty in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Los Angeles, 1965).
37. Edward Soja, Rebecca Morales, and Goetz Wolff, "Urban Restructuring: An Analysis of Social and Spatial Change in Los Angeles," *Economic Geography* 59 (1983), 217; Donahoe, "Workers' Response to Plant Closures: The Cases of Steel and Auto in Southeast Los Angeles, 1935–1986" (doctoral dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1987), 98.
38. Earl Caldwell, "City in California, 72% Black, Looks to Future Despite Woes," *New York Times*, January 19, 1972, 18.
39. Alejandro A. Alonso, "Territoriality among African-American Street Gangs in Los Angeles" (master's thesis, Department of Geography, University of Southern California, 1999), 90, 94, 104.
40. Malcolm W. Klein and Cheryl L. Maxson, "Rock' Sales in South Los Angeles," *Sociology and Social Research* 69 (July 1985): 561–65.
41. Widaatalla, "Effect of Racial Change," 83.
42. Los Angeles County Grand Jury, *Public Hearing: City of Compton* (1975), 13–14.
43. These "disaster areas" were National City (CA), McKeesport (PA), Huntington Park (CA), Baldwin Park (CA), Bell Gardens (CA), Paramount (CA), Covington (KY), Hoboken (NJ), Highland Park (MI), Chester (PA), East St. Louis (IL), Camden (NJ), Alton (IL), and Compton. Judith Fernandez and John Pincus, *Troubled Suburbs: An Exploratory Study* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1982), 77–78.
44. Elman, *Ill at Ease in Compton*, 14–17.
45. *Ibid.*, 23–24.
46. *Ibid.*, 201.
47. *Ibid.*, 173–75.
48. Harry Dolan, "Lily-White No More," *New York Times*, July 9, 1967, 199.
49. Davis, *Dead Cities*, 279; Roberts, "Compton, Calif., 65% Negro," 65; Earl Caldwell, "City in California, 72% Black, Looks to Future Despite Woes," *New York Times*, January 19, 1972, 18.
50. Jean Douglas Murphy, "Doris Davis Running Hard and Fast," *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 1973, sec. 10, 1, 18.
51. Terry McDermott, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2002, 1.
52. Jerry Adler, "The Rap Attitude," *Newsweek* (March 19, 1990), 56–58.
53. McDermott, "Parental Advisory," 1.
54. *Ibid.*
55. See, Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 193–96; Brian Cross, *It's Not about Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1993), 37.
56. Compton Avenue, the north-south thoroughfare, runs primarily through the Willowbrook section of Los Angeles and should not be confused with Compton Boulevard, the major east-west thoroughfare that runs through Compton.

57. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 4.
58. Bill Yousman, "Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy," *Communication Theory* 13 (November 2003): 367.
59. See Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Night Life and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
60. Yousman, "Blackophilia and Blackophobia," 369.
61. For work on the politics of place naming in general, see Cohen and Kliot, "Place-names in Israel's Ideological Struggle Over the Administered Territories," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (December 1992): 653–80; Azaryahu, "The Power of Commemorative Street Names," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 (1992): 311–30; L. D. Berg and Kearns, "Naming as Norming: 'Race,' Gender, and the Identity Politics of Naming Places in Aotearoa, New Zealand," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 (1996): 99–112. For work on African American place naming, see Derek H. Alderman, "Street Names and the Scaling of Memory: The Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. within the African American Community," *Area* 35 (2003): 163–73; "Creating a New Geography of Memory in the South: (Re) Naming of Streets in Honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Southeastern Geographer* 36: 51–69; Jonathan Tilove, *Along Martin Luther King: Travels on Black America's Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2003).
62. Lee Harris, "Paramount Erases 'Compton Boulevard,' Draws Fire," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 1986, 1; Fernandez and Pincus, *Troubled Suburbs*, 77. Paramount's ability to transcend its "disaster" reputation while Compton languished in it, speaks volumes about race relations and racial attitudes in Southern California, where Mexicans are generally regarded by whites as preferable to blacks. The heavy concentration of Latinos in Paramount (who represented more than 72 percent in 2000), for example, did not discourage the establishment of the Paramount Manufacturing & Distribution Center, a 200,000-square-foot facility in 1999. James Flanigan, "Manufacturing, Distribution Facility Opening in Paramount," *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1999, 2.
63. Shawn Hubler, "Racism Seen in Street Name Change," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1989, 6.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Michele Fuetsch, "East Compton's Name Change Riles Officials," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1990, pg. 1.
66. For a brief overview of the recent ethnic succession of Latinos throughout South Central, see Dowell Myers, "Demographic and Housing Transitions in South Central Los Angeles, 1990 to 2000," Population Dynamics Research Group, School of Policy, Planning, and Development, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, April 22, 2002.
67. See, for example, Regina Freer, "Black Brown Cities"; Albert Camarillo, "Black and Brown in Compton"; Michele Fuetsch, "Latino Aspirations on Rise in Compton," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1990, B1; "Latino Reaches Runoff in Compton Council Race," April 18, 1991, 2; Patrick McDonnell, "As Change Overtakes Compton, So Do Tensions," August 21, 1994, A1.
68. Freer, "Black Brown Cities," 23.