ODD MAN OUT: SHIFTING NOTIONS OF CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND MARGINALIZATION IN THE POWER STRUGGLE FOR ALHAMBRA, 1940S TO 1970S

Elwing Suong Gonzalez

In the late 1940s, fair housing legislation set in motion great demographic changes in cities and suburbs throughout California and the United States. As the Supreme Court as well as the state and federal governments slowly chipped away at de jure residential segregation, previously white suburban enclaves opened up to people of color traditionally consigned to adjoining urban centers and their immediate periphery. Historians have created a narrative along the lines of a black and white racial divide. However, this shift from the dichotomy of ethnic, racialized urban centers and exclusive white suburbs occurred in waves of migration and settlement that were contingent not only on race but also class, culture, and national origin. While the black and white racial polarity has been one of the most influential and deep-seated divides throughout United States history and does provide an influential context for the experiences of other racialized ethnic and racial groups in the United States, it alone does not provide enough insight to the specific experiences of these other groups.

Much has been written about the historical development of Los Angeles and Southern California, suburbanization, and residential segregation.[1] While these studies are thorough in exploring their particular

[1] Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith Books, 1973); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United*

subjects and lend much to the field of urban history, there are several assumptions, which are apparent in these and other similar studies on these subjects. Because most of the studies on policies of residential segregation and subsequent white flight[2] have focused on urban centers of the Mid-West and the East Coast, one assumption is that patterns of residential settlement and issues of segregation in the mid- to late-twentieth century were based upon a black/white disjuncture. Even more recent studies focusing on specific areas within Southern California continue to spotlight primarily on suburbanization and residential segregation from a black/white perspective.[3] Several studies combine all three subjects mentioned above to produce analyses of the development of suburbs around Los Angeles as impacted by residential segregation and its aftermath. They expand upon the traditional black-white lens to examine the impact on other communities of color.[4] However, they also continue to work largely within the black-white dichotomy and they assume that there was a clear dividing line between those *fleeing* (i.e. whites) and those *invading* (i.e. people of color).

In Alhambra, California, a suburb eight miles east of downtown Los Angeles, the end to de jure residential segregation resulted in various waves of non-Anglo settlement and subsequent white flight. Just as the movement towards the end of residential segregation occurred in steps, ultimately leading to open housing, so did the transformation of the largely Anglo community occur in various steps as waves of different ethnic groups moved into the city. In addition, class, language, country of origin, and culture also played significant roles in the nature of and responses to demographic changes. This article examines the results of the end of de jure residential segregation and subsequent waves of settlement by Italian-Americans, Mexican-Americans and Asian-Americans in predominantly white Alhambra and how class, ethnicity, and culture influenced these results. I argue that these demographic shifts generated a variety of complex and often

---

States (Oxford: University Press, 1987); David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy & White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University Press, 2007).

[2] The term "White flight" originated in the 1960s following the end of de jure residential segregation to describe the movement of white residents out of communities that were becoming racially integrated. Eric Avila Jackson*, Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* (Los Angeles: University Press, 2004).

[3] Josh Sides*, L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University Press, 2002).

[4] Avila; Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

conflicting responses – from acceptance to ambivalence, hostility to flight – felt first by the school district and city government, then by the residents at large and finally evident in the city's economic and commercial changes.

Alhambra was a white enclave within the state's "white spot," close to other similar exclusively white and middle class communities such as South Pasadena, Monterey Park, and San Gabriel. As of 1950, Alhambra's population remained nearly entirely white, with only 0.4 percent of the city's population categorized as "Negro" or "other race," and only 0.5 percent of the white population listed as born in Mexico or other Latin American countries. Middle class Alhambra remained out of reach for many low-income minorities, with the city's median family income 17.1 percent higher than the county's and 20.2 percent higher than the state's, and with a population that had completed higher levels of formal education.[5] However, racially restrictive covenants, biased lending, and real estate practices also played a role in the local exclusion of non-Anglo residents.

Residential discrimination was one form of racial discrimination that allowed for the continuation of institutionalized and private prejudices and biases, and was facilitated in a number of ways, adapting to challenges to its dominance in American society. Racially restrictive covenants were created by individual homeowners and upheld by U.S. courts in order to maintain residential segregation. The discriminatory lending practices of banking institutions and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and exclusionary policies of real estate brokers and developers also worked together to maintain residential segregation in "the place of open violence and social custom" as U.S. Courts "slowly extricated themselves from the business of segregation."[6] Racially restrictive covenants were contracts homebuyers signed upon purchasing their homes in which they agreed not to sell to anyone of a racial or religious group considered undesirable and therefore a threat to property values in the area. These covenants had been private agreements between individuals involved in the transaction, but they were ultimately upheld in U.S. courts. The FHA policies also played a large role supporting the use of covenants in that a large part of the qualifications for home loan distribution remained contingent upon the property values of the neighborhoods, and the FHA viewed even a very small number of minority occupants in a neighborhood reason to redline the area, making it

[5] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of Population and Housing – California*, 1950, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/37778768v2p5_TOC.pdf (accessed September 24, 2008).

[6] Joan M. Jensen, "Apartheid: Pacific Coast Style," *Pacific Coast Review*, vol. 38, no. 3 (1969), 336, 338.

ineligible for loans.[7] The real estate industry, in conjunction with these federal policies, upheld residential segregation when they vowed in their code of ethics to "never be instrumental in introducing to a neighborhood…any members of any race or nationality…whose presence will be clearly detrimental to property values in that neighborhood."[8]

In 1948 under *Shelley v. Kramer*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled restrictive covenants unenforceable by law, but "it gratuitously gave encouragement to racists by assuring them that covenants were legal if voluntarily enforced."[9] In addition, the trend moved toward open-housing, at least in California, when in 1950, the state passed both the Hawkins Act and the Unruh Civil Rights Act, two pieces of legislation which "prohibited discriminatory practices in business establishments" including "construction companies selling homes and…real estate brokers."[10] Some of the immediate effects of these government decisions regarding residential segregation, in conjunction with the economic prosperity facilitated by World War II, were the changes in the make-up of the white population of Alhambra. As open housing became more of a reality in California law, and white flight translated to a decline in the urban and immediate peripheral suburban real estate markets, real estate owners, builders, and agents were forced to sell and cater to non-Anglo "ethnic" white groups.[11]

The previously predominantly white Anglo population became more diverse as "ethnic" whites from neighboring ethnic enclaves ascended the ladder towards the middle class and sought to settle outside the increasingly crowded urban center. The foreign-born population of the city also transformed from predominantly originating in the United Kingdom and Canada, to one which increasingly had its origins in Italy and Germany. Throughout the first four decades since its founding in 1915, the majority of Alhambra's "foreign stock" was from either the United Kingdom or Canada. According to the 1950 census, only 13 percent of the "foreign stock"

---

[7] Mark Wild, *Street Meeting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 203. "Redlining" was a term coined by community activists in the 1960's to describe the practice of denying or making difficult the acquisition of services (such as home loans, insurance, employment, etc.) to those residing in areas which were "redlined" on a map, indicating that the area was either predominantly populated by non-whites or racially integrated.

[8] William H. Brown, Jr. "Access to Housing: The Role of the Real Estate Industry," *Economic Geography*, vol. 48, No. 1 (1972), 68.

[9] Jensen, 337.

[10] Gene Blake, "Proposition 14: The Cases for and Against," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1964, K1.

[11] William J Siembieda, "Suburbanization of Ethnics of Color" *Annals AAPSS* (November 1975), 121.

population was Italian and 8 percent hailed from Germany. By 1960 the numbers jumped to 54 percent and 33 percent respectively, which may indicate the changing attitudes towards both "ethnic" whites and residential segregation. The Federal Housing Authority was able to open doors to home ownership via home loans and the introduction of relatively more relaxed state and federal legislation regarding housing restrictions. As a result, inner cities were essentially stripped of "much of its middle class constituency" of non-Anglo American background. These groups, which had up to this point resided in inner city cores, quickly fled to the suburbs.[12]

The relatively large Italian population developed in Alhambra as Italians and Italian-Americans moved out of the inner city areas of Little Italy (around North Broadway in Los Angeles) and from East Los Angeles, Lincoln Heights, and Boyle Heights. Relative to other immigrant groups that came to Los Angeles in the first few decades of the twentieth century, "the Italian migration contained higher numbers of skilled workers, mostly from northern Italy, who were able to achieve a noticeable degree of social mobility."[13] Additionally, as they became economically prosperous from the wartime economic boom "and their need to cling to their own diminished, Italian- Americans began to move away from North Broadway to Alhambra," among other suburbs.[14] These Italians were able to easily assimilate into middle class Alhambra as Italians as a whole were increasingly accepted as "white" within the American mainstream.[15]

Italians were not the only "ethnic" whites to whom the doors of the suburbs opened in Los Angeles. Armenians and Armenian-Americans also left their "well-knit East Side colony" in East Los Angeles which "thinned out as war-prosperous residents scattered to better homes"[16] in communities such as Alhambra. These communities saw subsequent local development of Armenian churches and schools. Alhambra's Jewish population also saw an increase during this period as the city went from one in which in the 1920s, residents could point out "'The Jew' – the only one,"[17] to a population of "Eastside Jews, [who] by virtue of their commercial success as service providers, began to enjoy a newfound affluence and initiated an exodus out

---

[12] Jackson, 203-208, 206.
[13] Wild, 29.
[14] Sharon E. Fay, "Italian-American Loses Hyphen, but Not Identity," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1967, E1.
[15] *Los Angeles Times*, "War Altered Los Angeles: International Colonies," December 14, 1947, A1.
[16] Ibid.
[17] James Real. "In Old Alhambra, A Show of KKK Muscle: Mumbo Jumbo, a Cross Burning, a 'Parade'," *Los Angeles Times,* January 15, 1975, D5.

of Boyle Heights."[18] The Jewish population of Alhambra grew rapidly leading up to World War II and during the post-war period, illustrated by the founding of a number of Jewish day schools, centers, and synagogues in Alhambra during the period, as well as a number of community and cultural organizing efforts.[19] Because Southern California had never been affected by large-scale European immigration, the racial diversity developing in the area as a result of World War II migrations caused a "whitening" of various ethnic groups (such as Jews, Italians, Armenians, etc.). "White" became a much broader amalgamation of those of European descent.[20]

While the city's white population became increasingly ethnically diverse, the other, non-ethnic characteristics of these incoming residents – income, level of education, and rates of home-ownership – remained in line with those of the former residents. This kept Alhambra a middle class suburb of single-family residences and a "Main Street" commercial center with the median income remaining consistently higher than the county and state medians from its inception throughout most of the 1960s.[21] However, these first non-Anglo migrants to Alhambra – able to settle there because of new housing legislation and their newly acquired middle-class and "white" status – effectively opened the door to a more diverse range of subsequent settlers.

The "white spot" that Alhambra occupied until the 1950s, was surrounded by the Mexican and Mexican-American *barrios* of South San Gabriel, East Los Angeles, and El Sereno. As with the Italian, Jewish and Armenian residents who had preceded them, the Mexican-American population moving into Alhambra was also middle class, with higher income and education levels than their counterparts throughout the county and state. Following the end of World War II, "ethnic" and working class whites moved out of the urban cores they had shared with minorities to suburbs, which federal programs had opened up. In addition, many minority soldiers returned from the war expecting to be treated as heroes and rewarded for their service. An increase in immigration further crowded the inner city and made resources scarce, causing upper-class minorities to seek entrance into the suburban "good life." Mexican-Americans, in their ambiguous position of American racial categories that often revolved around the black/white/Asian triad, and their racialized history as foreign "other" possessed a "racial indeterminacy." They had the ability to "straddle the

[18] Avila, 43.
[19] *Los Angeles Times*, January 1940 – December 1960.
[20] Siembieda, 120; Avila, 43; Sides, 96.
[21] U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Characteristics of Population and Housing – California*, 1920–1970, http://www.census.gov/index.html (accessed September 24, 2008).

fence between chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs."[22] In the 1950s as more "ethnic" whites settled Alhambra, the "Spanish surnamed" population began to increase as well, though at a slower pace than other white groups.

Once housing became more open in those surrounding suburbs, Hispanic residents steadily began to migrate out of the inner city. The growth of Alhambra's Hispanic population continued into the 1960s and quickly outpaced the growth of the non-Hispanic white population of the city during the decade. This resulted from the rapid overall growth of the Hispanic population in Los Angeles due to economic changes in California. However, it was also facilitated in part by California's continued path on the trajectory towards open housing, as illustrated by the 1962 California Supreme Court rulings of *Burks v. Poppy Construction Co.* and *Swan v. Burkett*, which upheld the state's 1950 fair-housing acts, and by the state's 1963 Rumford Act broadening the ban on discriminatory housing practices.[23]

While Alhambra's population did change throughout the 1950s and 1960s to include a more diverse population and a markedly growing Hispanic population, African- Americans still remained largely absent as "the San Gabriel Valley [where Alhambra is located] was a particularly notorious citadel of restrictionism."[24] Affluent African- Americans sought to move out of the inner city, but were prevented by restrictive practices. While the African-American population grew in Los Angeles and neighboring Pasadena, surrounding suburbs, including Alhambra, continued to maintain an African- American community comprising less than 1 percent of the city's total population. As a result, African-Americans who did live in Pasadena were only able to settle in the northwest area that bordered Altadena, which had become open, in large part due to the fact that they were "obviously almost totally excluded in the surrounding areas" including Alhambra.[25]

As mentioned above, the initial Hispanic population that settled Alhambra on the heels of middle-class Italians, Jews and Armenians likewise easily assimilated into the predominantly Anglo community, as most were born in the United States, English speakers, and also middle

---

[22] Avila, 52.
[23] Associated Press, "Legislature Outlaws Bias in Housing," *Alhambra Post-Advocate*, June 22, 1963, 1-A
[24] Davis, 163.
[25] Jack Birkinshaw. "Nearby Cities Seen as Pasadena Ghetto Relief," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1968, SGB1.

class.[26] As the 1960s progressed into the next decade, the incoming Mexican American population began to show marked differences in comparison to the earlier generation. Because the city had historically been composed of either native-born residents or foreign-born immigrants from the United Kingdom or Canada, language became a primary issue that divided earlier settlers from newer residents of color. From the end of the 1960s to the end of the 1970s, while the population of Alhambra grew by only 4 percent, the Spanish-speaking population nearly doubled, increasing from 13.3 percent to 25.7 percent of the population. In addition, those entering the city in the late 1960s and the 1970s were mostly foreign-born, possessing lower levels of education and a lower median income, which were factors that would greatly change the nature of the community, leading to future conflict. The median income of the residents of the city of Alhambra remained higher than the state and county medians until the 1970s, when demographic changes meant a much larger and more diverse Hispanic population had developed in the city. By 1980, the median family income of Alhambra residents fell below that of Los Angeles County for the first time in its nearly eighty-year history. This was in large part due to the fact that throughout this period, as the Hispanic population grew, it became economically diverse; with the median Hispanic income remaining 7 percent lower than the city median from the late 1960s throughout the 1970s.[27]

Community leaders and organizations may not have been fully aware of the implications these demographic changes had, but they *were* aware of the economic changes, resulting in part from those demographic shifts. As Alhambra's population grew and demographics changed, one notable impact on the city was the shift away from the traditional owner-occupied, single-family residences that characterized the suburb prior to the 1970s. In the 1940s, the percentage of owner-occupied residences in the city was much higher than the county average with 66 percent of the housing units in the city owner-occupied. However, over the next two decades, during the city's first large-scale demographic change, the percentage of renter-occupied units in the city grew rapidly, outpacing the county's rate at 49 percent compared to Alhambra's 55 percent by the end of the 1960s, and it remained the same

[26] U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Characteristics of Population and Housing – California*, 1950 – 1970, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/37778768v2p5_TOC.pdf http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/12533879v1p6_TOC.pdf http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1970a_ca1-01.pdf (accessed September 24, 2008).

[27] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of Population and Housing – California*, 1970 – 1980, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980a_caAB-01.pdf (accessed September 24, 2008).

throughout the 1970s.[28] Hoping the city would be rediscovered, city planners pointed to its "strategic position promoting it "as a nice residential and business community within seven miles of downtown Los Angeles."[29] These favorable qualities did attract new residents, but not necessarily the wealth or commercial investment needed to combat a moribund local commercial and industrial sector.

Because the city's population grew substantially in the both the 1940s and1960s, the focus on building residentially over the nearly three decades since World War II caused the city to become "overgrown in one area (residential housing) [while] others have shrunk in proportion." The uneven development attributed to "the conversion of older residential areas to multiple unit housing" in response to demographic changes contributed to the city's total assessments and property value during the period.[30] But it also meant a shift away from the single-family, owner-occupied nature of Alhambra that had initially attracted so many of its residents. While this meant more profits for developers and former residents who had redeveloped their properties into multiple rental units, this movement toward a majority of renters and large apartment buildings, raised concerns with both residents and planners who recognized the pressure on the city to rapidly increase the amount of available housing. The city council too was divided as they recognized that "most of the people in [the] area had worked hard for years and saved their money to purchase their homes to be in a residential area"[31] and they needed "to preserve the existing single-family characteristics," as "much of the strength of the community lies in the ownership of single-family homes."[32] Inherent in all of these comments were classist undertones as residents feared that not only did the development of apartments mean lower property values but also a change in the class and cultural landscape of the city.

While the newer demographics of Alhambra in the 1960s may have been in stark contrast to those of the pre-war period, the changes were not unique to Alhambra. Throughout the West San Gabriel Valley, immigration, migration from inner city areas, and white flight to the eastern parts of the

---

[28] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of Housing – California*, 1950, 1960 & 1970.

[29] "Land Boom Under Way in Valley," *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1964, N1; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of Housing – California*, 1940 – 1970. Peyton Canary, "Mayor Seeks a Revitalized Alhambra," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1967, E8.

[30] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of Housing – California*, 1940 – 1970. Canary, Peyton, "Mayor Seeks a Revitalized Alhambra," "Land Boom Under Way in Valley."

[31] Alhambra City Council, Meeting Minutes, Meeting of October 20, 1964, Book # 34, Alhambra City Hall Archives.

[32] Alhambra City Council, Meeting Minutes, Meeting of April 2, 1968, Book # 38.

Valley, West Los Angeles, and Orange County served to shake up older suburbs. These changes transformed not only the "residential atmosphere" of these areas which had formerly been seen as "one of the amenities" they had to offer, but also the success of the main urban commercial center.[33] Towards the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, "deteriorating urban cores" were a "major issue in scores of cities throughout the nation," as the middle class moved out of those urban centers and to the periphery, to the perceived safety of farther-out suburbs.[34]

In Alhambra, the central commercial district centered on Main Street, and into the 1950s, it stood as the central shopping district for many neighboring cities, such as Monterey Park, San Gabriel, East Los Angeles, El Sereno, Rosemead and beyond. As Main Street lost businesses, suburban strip malls developed in the eastern San Gabriel Valley and growth continued out there, "especially in the foothills and at the eastern edge."[35] By 1969, the Alhambra Redevelopment Agency announced that Main Street faced "'almost certain economic death' without rehabilitation."[36] Early on, planners warned the city that it "could not retain its present pattern of 'commercial ribs' on Valley Boulevard and Main Street," and that Alhambra "would lose at least a third of their businesses to other communities through competition."[37] Ready competition existed in the Eastern San Gabriel Valley cities of Arcadia and West Covina, each building their own multi-million dollar indoor strip-malls in order to boost their own tax bases and commercial centers.

Deterioration and development occurred simultaneously in Alhambra as demographic changes and white flight led to a declining commercial center and incoming, lower-income, residents created a demand for affordable apartments. The combination of these two trends struck a chord in certain segments of the population and created conflict between younger residents and members of city government who prioritized economic revitalization and redevelopment and older residents who wanted to slow down the impending growth of the city. This older generation included the "first generation of arriving home-owners" from the 194s and 1950s, who had worked hard to find a place in the suburbs and would fight relentlessly

---

[33] Ibid.
[34] "L.A. Firm Probes Urban Ills," *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 1971, I1.
[35] Mike Ward, "Population Gains in East, Sags in West," *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 1976, SG1.
[36] Peyton Canary, "Alhambra Studies Way to Rescue Downtown," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1969, SG8.
[37] "Alhambra Crossroads: Future of City at Stake," *Alhambra Post-Advocate*, October 23 1964,1-A.

"to prevent further urbanization and loss of rural amenities."[38] They viewed this growth as a period during which "much of [Alhambra's] natural and historical beauty had been destroyed"[39] and that further destruction loomed as "single-family tracts were suddenly inundated by waves of apartment construction…perceived as a categorical threat to the detached culture of low-density residential life."[40] In 1966, the latter segment of the community proclaimed themselves "a group of concerned, dedicated community leaders [which]…had banded together to form the Alhambra Historical Society for the primary purpose of acquiring and preserving those items and artifacts which had contributed so much to Alhambra's life and personality."[41] This struggle also included racial undertones in Alhambra and the rest of the San Gabriel Valley.[42]

The struggle between progress and preservation reached its pinnacle in the late 1960s over the "Gray House," a late-nineteenth century Victorian mansion which sat on the edge the Alhambra's civic center near the Main Street commercial district. Its elderly owners had allowed the house to fall into disrepair and it faced possible demolition. By 1966, the Gray House was "one of the few remaining examples of Alhambra's turn-of-the-century architecture,"[43] but was also considered an eyesore by many residents and city officials who felt that "the place cannot be left as it is…because the house and grounds are unsightly and plagued by vandalism."[44] For more than two years the Alhambra Historical Society and the City Council debated the fate of the house, the historical society suggesting it become the site of their museum. During this battle, the house sat vacant, prompting a neighboring apartment complex owner to complain that his property's proximity to the old house meant it was "constantly being plagued by vandalism."[45] In the end, the redevelopment of the city took priority over the preservation of its past and the house was demolished, the city's new police station was later erected in its place.

While the demographic, legislative, and social changes of the post-World War II period were very complex and multi-layered, they have often

---

[38] Davis, 174.
[39] Alhambra City Council, Meeting Minutes, Meeting of February 20, 1968, Book # 38.
[40] Davis, 170.
[41] Alhambra City Council, Meeting Minutes, Meeting of February 20, 1968, Book # 38.
[42] Davis, 206.
[43] "Alhambra Historical Group May Give 70-Year-Old-House New Life," *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1966, SG8.
[44] Peyton Canary, "Council to Get Report on Historical Mansion," *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1968, SG8.
[45] Alhambra City Council, Meeting Minutes, Meeting of February 20, 1968, Book # 38.

been portrayed as simply resulting in "black" cities and "white" suburbs which created "two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal."[46] This period of dramatic changes in the United States was not as simple as black and white, exclusion and inclusion, acceptance and flight, urban and suburban. Issues of ethnicity, race, class, language and culture all contributed to the development of communities as they transitioned into new modes of development and settlement in the face of integration, migration and immigration. Alhambra illustrates this complexity with its history of dramatic demographic changes that occurred in waves outside of the black/white dichotomy but completely within the context of racialized American society.

[46] Avila, 5.