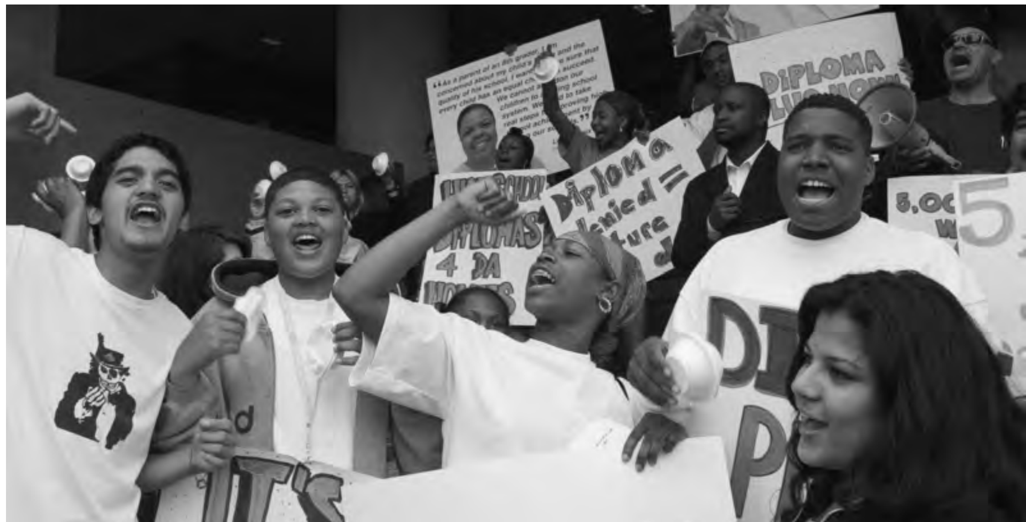
To Live and Let Live in South Los Angeles



Black-brown unity: Students outside the L.A. Unified School District protest the California High School Exit Exam.

COURTESY COMMUNITY COALITION

by Rene P. Ciria-Cruz

"Day to day, we all get along," says South Los Angeles community leader Arturo Ybarra, unintentionally alluding to Rodney King's famous post-riot plea, "Can't we all just get along?" Ybarra, a gentle, dark-complexioned man in his early sixties, is president of the Watts/Century Latino Organization (WCLO), the most visible Latino association the neighborhood. Having lived in Watts since 1969, Ybarra has witnessed the changes that unnerved the thousands of African American residents who have left for the suburbs over the years.

If Ybarra can't help sounding slightly apprehensive, it's because the bitter national quarrel over immigration has struck a discordant note in black-Latino relations, and he lives in a neighborhood shared, sometimes warily, by both communities. "There are problems," Ybarra admits, "but we're not always at each other's throats like the general impression."

Pundits have grimly warned of impending conflicts between the two communities ever since the U.S. Census declared Latinos the largest U.S. minority in 2000. Forty million of them now make up 14.5% of the U.S. population; African Americans, almost 13%.

With the debate being framed as a question of how to deal with Latino immigrant workers taking jobs from African Americans, black-brown friction emerged as a focus of media interest. Pundits both black and white charged that the huge pro-immigration marches of spring 2006 preempted blacks' struggle for equality and social justice.

News media have lately targeted South Los Angeles, the 22-square-mile district formerly known as South Central, as a place to mine black-brown relations for cautionary tales. These have included a July 2006 triple killing in which two gunmen described as black shot three Latinos, including a 10-year-old boy, on a sidewalk. A month later, four members of a Latino gang in northeast Los Angeles were convicted of federal hate crimes for a spree of assaults and killings, from 1995 to 2001, aimed at pushing blacks out of Highland Park, a predominantly Latino neighborhood. This marked the first conviction of Latino gang members under hate crime law.

These narratives of urban violence, however, often misrepresent the experiences of people like Ybarra, who has stayed put in his Watts neighborhood, reconciled to both the frictions and promises of rapid demographic change. There are many like him—African American and Latino community leaders in South Los Angeles—who insist that ethnic harmony is possible. But are these organizers strong enough to serve as shock absorbers and bridges of communication while group interests clash?

A look at their experience shows how old-fashioned community organizing can resolve conflicts in places like South Los Angeles that

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This is an adapted excerpt from a series of articles that originally appeared on NAM's Web site, news.newamericamedia.org.

have suddenly been altered by immigration. Nationwide, the work and influence of such largely self-designated community stewards will be crucial in bolstering U.S. ethnic groups' ability to get along.

SOUTH LOS ANGELES IS URBAN AMERICA WRIT SMALL. What happens here won't stay here, especially as the country, from coast to coast, is swept by what the Brookings Institution has called "an explosion of diversity" through immigration.[1] As the site of the Rodney King riots, the area also occupies a unique place in the United States' pantheon of social unrest. South Los Angeles is today home to about 383,000 people, about two thirds of them Latino, one third black. This represents a drastic change from 1980, when blacks composed 64% of the area's residents. The transition hasn't been smooth, as Ybarra tells anyone who asks.

An influx of Mexican and Central American immigrants coincided with the deep recession of the 1970s and 1980s, along with cuts in government social spending. The end of the Cold War shrank the once-mighty aerospace industry, while automotive and heavy manufacturing plants moved abroad. South Los Angeles lost an estimated 75,000 jobs between 1970 and 1980 alone. Nonetheless, the legacy of trade unionism in the heyday of manufacturing and aerospace has boosted present-day grassroots advocacy.

Along with deindustrialization, the crack epidemic and gang wars of the 1980s and 1990s triggered the exodus of middle-class blacks. Latino immigrants took their place, drawn by low-paying jobs in the service sector; apparel and textiles manufacturing; food processing; or furniture work. These enterprises replaced the heavy industries that once created the district's middle class. They are similar to the jobs that now draw immigrants to cities and towns in the Midwest and the South.

Ybarra and many South L.A. activists have persistently navigated these rough waters, condemning inept or unjust policies, challenging parochial political agendas, and creating alternatives to the nihilistic street culture. Some of these activists were schooled in the politics of the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s, or have learned lessons from that past. The vision of unity carried over from earlier decades—recognizing African Americans and Latinos' shared status as society's underdogs—has helped preserve oases of interethnic solidarity in neighborhoods that could have been torn apart.

These days, intermittent school yard brawls and street shootings are unfailingly reported as potential racial incidents. In Watts, however, daily interaction between African Americans and Latinos seems uneventful.

"The divide isn't as big as it's made up to be," insists Andre Herndon, the young executive editor of the Wave Newspaper Group, an African American chain. "We get more angry letters upset about our conservative columnist than about immigration," he adds. "Immigration is talked about as a zero-sum game—they come, we lose. But it isn't a zero-sum game. There have always been scapegoats for economic problems. It was blacks then, it's immigrants now. Who's next?"

With a population of about 23,000 and a per capita income of $7,000, Watts is one of Los Angeles' poorest quarters. Half of its families and individuals live below the federal poverty level, according to the 2000 Census. The arrival of Latinos is often blamed for the mass departure of African Americans, but Jim Smith, a middle-aged consultant for the Youth and Family Center, says they left because of the violence.

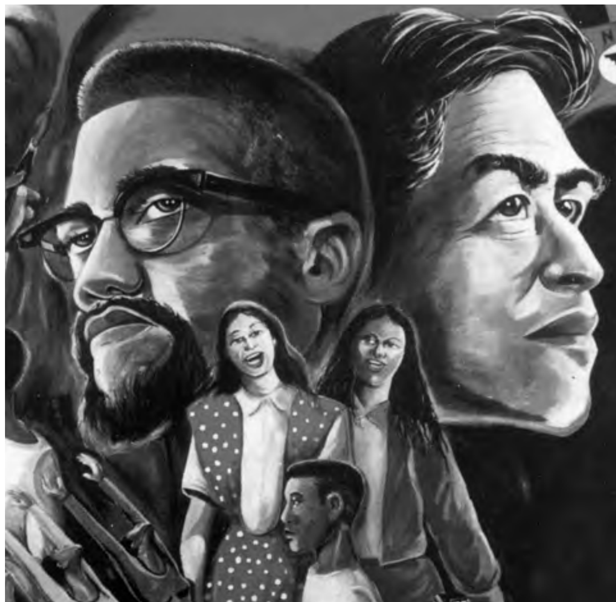
"Improved social mobility also enabled many blacks to migrate to the Inland Empire, like Riverside or Palmdale in Antelope Valley," Smith says. This left the poorest blacks living in the shadow of the more numerous new arrivals.

African Americans now sense a decline in their political clout. While Watts remains a bastion of local black politics, it's now predominantly Latino, which heightens feelings of vulnerability among some black political leaders.

Smith, for example, wants to run for city council. "I've worked for four mayors and for this community through riots, fires, gang wars, earthquakes. Got a good record," he says. He thinks, however, that this may be his last opportunity to run for office.

"Hispanics have taken over businesses, schools, the neighborhood," Smith says. "They're now the economic cornerstone of the community. Without them Watts would be a ghost town. Of course they'll want to vote for their own." He adds as an afterthought, "I have nothing against that—it's a fact of life—as long as they serve everybody. Antonio Villaraigosa is doing fine because he's still the mayor of all the city."

Ybarra protests that media have hyped the conflicts, while ignoring the history of links built between the communities. He should know. His WCLO was born in 1990, when blacks and Latinos came together to defeat a controversial redevelopment plan. Founders of WCLO became acquainted with black community organizers in the midst of that fight, and they have long memories of what they built. Ybarra is particularly proud of the long-standing ties he has forged with African American leaders. "The Watts Economic Development Advisory Council is 95% black," he says, "but they elected me vice president."



Vision and Motion, a mural on Crenshaw Boulevard in South Los Angeles

ELLIOT PINKNEY / SPARC

Inside the WCLO offices, a boarded-up one-story former liquor store on blighted Wilmington Boulevard, some walls are covered with photos of past events—a parent-student school cleanup drive, a gala fundraising dinner, a Cinco de Mayo celebration. All show a mix of black and brown faces, including those of elected officials like congresswoman Maxine Waters and County Supervisor Yvonne Braithwaite Burke. "We have tutoring, community cleanups, celebrations, housing assistance, savings and finance education, you name it," Ybarra explains. "We serve everyone, Latinos and blacks. Look at those pictures."

Yet just the previous Sunday, a few miles away in Leimert Park in another section of South Los Angeles, a small group of African Americans led by conservative black activist Ted Hayes and white members of the Minutemen Project railed against Latinos for allegedly elbowing blacks out of jobs and other opportunities.

"Ted Hayes and the Minutemen had 12 people in their anti-immigration rally in Leimert Park," says Aurea Montes-Rodriguez, associate director of the Community Coalition on South Vermont Avenue, near Watts. "And they got a lot of coverage," she adds, chuckling. By contrast, about 100 people, most of them black, came to the Coalition two weeks earlier for a forum on immigration, Montes-Rodriguez says. "We've had hundreds of African Americans come to the protests against [the Sensenbrenner bill, which would have made undocumented immigration a felony]," she says, "but no one seems to notice."

At the height of the immigrant marches in spring 2006, a local reporter quipped that talk of escalating tensions had spawned a "brown-black dialogue industry," casting cynicism on the effectiveness of such exchanges. However, grassroots efforts to tackle immediate and common problems have been the most potent form of bringing Latinos and African Americans together, resulting in easy working relations among neighborhood advocates and residents. "African Americans and Latinos have lived together, worked together, and struggled together here," says Marqueece Harris-Dawson, executive director of the Coalition. "Conflicts between them are isolated incidents."

The roots of the Community Coalition were planted in 1990 when Karen Bass, now a State Assembly member, led a neighborhood anti-substance-abuse group that at first targeted crack houses, then liquor stores, after a survey of residents showed the latter to be more powerful magnets of criminal activity. There were about 700 liquor stores for 80,000 residents, reportedly twice as many as in the entire state of Rhode Island. Fortuitously, the 1992 riots destroyed about 200 of them.

Bass founded the Community Coalition, made up of both African Americans and Latinos. The group began a furious drive to keep the stores, as well as sex-and-drugs motels, from rebuilding. By expertly badgering officials at land-use hearings, convening protests, and circulating a petition that drew 35,000 signatures, the community blocked the return of 150 liquor stores.

There are still too many for comfort, and to prepare for more battles the Coalition continues to train residents in land-use activism. But a slow transformation has begun. Small clothing and hardware shops, grocery stores, and coin laundries have replaced several the liquor stores. Proud of their success, residents helped put the popular Bass in the state legislature.

In 1996, students belonging to the South Central Youth Empowered Through Action (SC-YEA, or Say Yeah), a program sponsored by the Coalition, distributed disposable cameras to a score of their Latino and African American peers to document the deteriorating state of their public schools. One high school, for example, had one toilet for its 3,000 students. Meanwhile, most of the city's $2 billion school improvement fund was being slated for wealthier neighborhoods.

Gathering pictures and other evidence, the students shocked school officials into setting aside $153 million for improvements, resulting in nearly 2,000 repairs in 120 schools. Victories such as these have brought the core of the Coalition's nearly 4,000 dues-paying members closer together.

Over the years, young African Americans and Latinos have gravitated to the Coalition. In a campaign begun in 2000, Coalition youths won a major victory by persuading the L.A. school board to reform the curriculum. South L.A. schools had been dominated by vocational courses, while well-off districts had plenty of college-preparatory subjects, which the Coalition's youths demanded and won equal access to.

"It was truly a joint effort by both black and brown students," Sheilagh Polk, a spokesperson for the group, told the *Los Angeles Sentinel*.

ARTURO YBARRA ADMITS THINGS DIDN'T LOOK VERY promising in Watts in the late 1980s. "There was a lot of resentment against us 'foreigners,' as Latinos started moving into the housing projects, which were mostly black," Ybarra recalls. "Latinos were harassed or became victims of burglaries, vandalism, and random violence." Younger Latinos often retaliated, but before anything could be done about the rising violence, the threat of mass eviction brought together leaders of both communities in 1989.

The Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) wanted to turn parts of Watts into an industrial park. Through eminent domain, the agency had the power to buy and raze properties, displacing thousands of residents. Already organized, the black community rose in protest. Ybarra was alarmed that Latinos weren't in the public meetings, although they already constituted more than half of Watts' population and were going to be the most affected by the looming evictions.

Ybarra had been an activist since the age of 15 in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. As a university student he survived the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City and was detained and tortured. He came to Watts in 1969, became a union steward, and joined the anti-war Chicano Moratorium and the United Farm Workers movement. With the threat of evictions in 1989, his organizing instincts kicked in again. He enlisted the help of a local priest, Ramon Gaitán, and got Latinos to join community meetings that had previously been attended mostly by African Americans.

Soon, with Ybarra and his allies providing Spanish translation, more Latinos than blacks were attending, and by August 1990, the Watts/Century Latino Organization was a working organization. The gap between the communities didn't altogether disappear. "Blacks began drifting away from the meetings, discouraged by the Spanish translations," Ybarra admits. "But we did manage to get state officials through Maxine Waters to pass a bill declaring that eminent domain need not be the main force for redevelopment." The CRA's plans were shelved.

This first taste of victory led to more joint actions between activists from the two communities. Their meetings turned to more general concerns like schools, pollution, crime, and violence. "We identified human relations between us as the most pressing problem," Ybarra recalls. In 1994, after about 350 cases of ethnic violence in the housing projects, a joint task force of the WCLO and the Watts Health Foundation sued the public housing authority. In 1996 they reached a settlement that included several surveys of occupants about their needs, better policing and enforcement of public housing regulations, and more community activities.

Simultaneously, the task force changed public housing regulations to include educational activities and strict anti-drug measures. A conflict resolution and mediation committee was set up. The Watts Community Bridges launched cultural exchanges, featuring tours of black museums and Latino landmarks to dispel misunderstandings. A 1994 campaign against polluted drinking water forced water authorities to install new pipes. Parents and Students Organized, a group made up of African Americans and Latinos, has held school cleanup drives and cooperated with principals to improve students' academic performance.

Since these community-organizing efforts began, Ybarra says, the incidence of ethnic violence in the projects has dropped significantly.

"The street violence these days isn't ethnic," confirms Jim Smith, a consultant for the Youth and Family Center. "The shootings are often gang initiations—doesn't matter what ethnicity you are, you're just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Leaders in both communities are gently handling relations between African Americans and Latinos, again testing activists' resolve in evading political and cultural trip wires. But talk of black-brown conflict has actually brought increased sensitivity to the danger of communal strife. Mayor Villaraigosa has intervened in some schoolyard brawls, wary of any triggers for racial violence. And there will be many instances worthy of vigilance.

After the July 2006 triple killing of Latinos in South Los Angeles, community leaders quickly organized a Black and Brown Unity Walk to defuse simmering racial tension. "We have a lot of friends who are African Americans," Miguel Marcial, a cousin of one the victims, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "We're neighbors. We have to live together."

NOTES

Critical Mass: Latino Labor and Politics in California

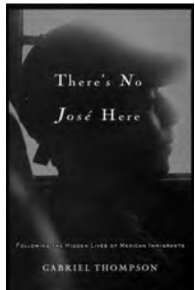
1. Janice Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); Jennifer Gordon, *Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
2. Compare Fine's national mapping of the worker centers at www.epinet.org/content.cfm?id=2221 with the geography of the marches shown at www.mrss.com/news/groundswell-report_Final.pdf, p. 2.
3. Gordon, *Suburban Sweatshops*, pp. 275–78.
4. Louis DeSipio, "Building America, One Person at a Time: Naturalization and Political Behavior of the Naturalized in Contemporary American Politics," in Gary Gerstle and John Mollenkopf, eds., *E Pluribus Unum? Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), pp. 80–86.
5. Jack Citron and Benjamin Highton, *How Race, Ethnicity and Immigration Shape the California Electorate* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2002), pp. 28–29.
6. The standard comparison is to Texas, where Republicans still capture much of the Latino vote. The difference is partly a product of former Republican governor Pete Wilson's having sponsored Prop. 187, as well as the weakness of organized labor in Texas.
7. Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).
8. U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, "N-400 Naturalization Benefits: Monthly Statistical Report for December 2006," www.uscis.gov/files/article/N400%20NATURALIZATION%20BENEFITS_Dec06.pdf.
9. David R. Ayón, "Immigration and the 2006 Elections," *U.S.-Mexico Policy Bulletin*, no. 8 (December 2006), Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Mexico Institute.

To Live and Let Live in South Los Angeles

1. William H. Frey, "Diversity Spreads Out: Metropolitan Shifts in Hispanic, Asian, and Black Populations Since 2000," Brookings Institution, March 2006.

Reviews: Books & More

THERE'S NO JOSE HERE: FOLLOWING THE HIDDEN LIVES OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS



by Gabriel Thompson, 2007, Nation, 320 pages, $14.95 paperback.

THE QUINTESSENTIAL CITY OF immigrants, New York, has seen in the last 15 years a massive influx of Mexican immigrant workers, mostly from the city and surrounding areas of Puebla. Go to delis or restaurants throughout the city; take a livery cab in Brooklyn or Queens; or pass by an apartment building under renovation, and their systematic absorption into the local service economy is immediately obvious. But despite their prominence, they remain somehow invisible, perhaps in particular to yuppie technocrats, who are also migrating to this and other global cities in droves.

It is this invisibility that independent journalist Gabriel Thompson seeks to undo in his *There's No José Here: Following the Hidden Lives of Mexican Immigrants*. Thompson, a "white middle-class suburbanite," as he calls himself, chronicles his friendship with Enrique, a Brooklyn cab driver, and his family, using the familiar conventions, and sometimes clichés, of narrative journalism.

The story begins in 2002 at Flaco's, a hole-in-the-wall luncheonette blocks away from the Pratt Area Community Council, a housing advocacy group where Thompson worked as an organizer. Enrique—described as a lovable loudmouth but also a fierce community leader—immediately shares his housing woes, which include a basement flooded with sewage, a backyard full of garbage, druggie squatters barbecuing on the first floor, exposed wiring, rats galore, and, tragically, two young daughters poisoned by the century-old tenement's lead paint.

Enrique clicks with Thompson and invites him into his life. And what a life it is. Having left his hometown, Cuicatlán, at the age of 16, Enrique arrived in Brooklyn, a far cry from the dusty campo he'd known all his life, and began working as dishwasher. Having come to the United States *de mojado* (illegally, or "as a wetback," as many undocumented immigrants call themselves), he later became a U.S. citizen. But he still identifies as a *mojado*, Thompson writes, someone who is "always being chased in one way or another, whose duty it [is] to outsmart the authorities."

That, in this case, means confronting the do-nothing New York housing authorities, even as Thompson's organization, with the crucial help of local activists like