

Decoding the ‘Metrosea’:

Geographies of Incorporation in Los Angeles

“The emergence of Southern California as a ‘metrosea’ of fragmented and insular local sovereignties – often depicted in urbanist literature as an ‘accident’ of unplanned growth – was in fact the result of deliberate shaping” (Davis 1990, 164).

“In the suburb one might live and die without marring the image of an innocent world, except when some shadow of its evil fell over a column in the newspaper... This was not merely a child-centered environment; it was based on a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificed to the pleasure principle.” (Lewis Mumford quoted in Jackson 1985, 155-156).

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Introduction

Los Angeles is an anachronism, and has been “different” from the beginning (Fulton 1997, 13). Over the years it has blossomed into a “polycentric, polycultural, polyglot metropolis regarded by many as the prototype of contemporary urbanization.” As Michael Dear’s primary example of the *Postmodern Urban Condition*, Los Angeles is characterized as a *dual city*, plagued by systemic segregation and socioeconomic polarization across “game-board”-like landscape of disjointed urban outcomes. Such characterizations do not bode well for the future of urban growth in the U.S., with Dear predicting an end result of “dystopian, unsustainable frontiers” (Dear 2000, 4).¹

Yet despite the broad implications of such conditions on our collective urban future, “too few analyses have traced how this broad class of polarizations is translated into the spatial structure of cities” (Dear 2000, 160). Focusing further, I take guidance from Massey’s call to shift from chronicling the lives of the oppressed, to documenting the “means by which the [wealthy] maintain and reproduce their affluence” (Massey 1996, 409). As the primary engine of greater-urban growth, and one of Los Angeles’ formative processes, suburbanization of upwardly-mobile whites has played an integral role in building this segregated landscape (Massey and Denton 1993). The primary goal of this research study is to use empirical data and an explicitly spatial perspective to more defini-

¹ As with anything and everything postmodern (nay, anything academic?) this work has inspired its share of vehement ‘critiques’ (or maulings?), most notably Sui (1999). For a response to this, and other more substantial critiques, see Dear et al. (2000, 3, 147).

tively explore patterns of political division and reorganization as they relate to changes in geographies of race. As the opening quote from Davis explains, this landscape is *not* random, and thus there is much to uncover about the logic of its formation.

To best attempt this goal, I chose to use municipal incorporation as my primary metric, due in part to data acquisition issues. For the purposes of this paper, I define incorporation as the creation of a self-governing municipality from either unincorporated county lands (i.e. Los Angeles County), or another municipality through secession (in this case, the City of Los Angeles). As a first step in evaluating the relationship between incorporation and residential segregation, I will use the following as a guiding research question: *is there a spatial correlation between regional changes in black population and incorporation in Los Angeles?*

I begin this exploration with some background on land-use policy, incorporation, and suburbanization as they apply to Los Angeles. I will show how this paper fits into the existing literature, and provide a basis for the analysis to follow. But first, I will detail the explicitly spatial conceptual model of *encroachment*-driven incorporation within which the analysis will be framed. This leads us into the implementation of the framework and analysis of results, a section which will depend heavily on the use of maps illustrating changes in black population and incorporation in Los Angeles. After a brief discussion of the implications of my findings, and some of the difficulties encountered, the conclusion will reconnect the research to its core goal and its associated urban social policy perspective.

Background

As Mike Davis has shown in his exhaustive scholarship, Los Angelino homeowners spent the first half of the twentieth century working to establish what Robert Fishman has called a ‘bourgeois utopia’—racially and economically homogenous residential enclaves glorifying the single-family home (Davis 1990, 160). Once established, homeowners began the process of entrenchment and defense that would define the years to come. It is these processes that we seek to uncover and understand, and in doing so attempt to answer Massey’s call for an examination of the “means by which the [wealthy] maintain and reproduce their affluence” (Massey 1996, 409). As a readily available and easily measurable mechanism for urban land-use control, I use incorporation as a proxy for intentional changes to the urban landscape via land-use control.

Davis divides twentieth century homeowner activism in Los Angeles into two epochs: the first, from 1920-1960, concentrated on the establishment of suburban enclaves. The second epoch was defined by the defense of the suburban dream against unwanted development (especially multi-family housing and its associated minority populations). Throughout the second period, the primary political actors were Homeowners’ Association (HA), grassroots coalitions of homeowners rallied around a common neighborhood vision. Davis is quick to point out that the HA, the “essential infrastructure” of the pro-suburban (pro-incorporation and anti-development) movement, is also the latest link in a

“white-supremacist genealogy” of various instruments, used to maintain racial segregation its explicit designation fell out of legal favor in the late 1940’s (Davis 1990, 160).²

Incorporation itself was rare until after the Korean War, when ‘merchant builders’ sought greater control over their mass-produced suburban communities (Davis 1990, 165-6). Here we segway to the pioneering work of Gary Miller, whose study of the 26 new ‘minimal cities’ created in the wake of the Lakewood Plan between 1954 and 1960 was the first piece of scholarship to study incorporation specifically (1981). He frames this series of incorporations of county land as a “revolt of the rich against the poor” (Miller 1981, 9). Judgments on the motives behind such border-wrangling have since been echoed by Robert Reich’s “The Secession of the Successful” (1991) and Boudreau and Keil’s “Seceding from Responsibility?” (2001).

Eager to prevent eminent annexation by Long Beach, the developers of Lakewood searched for a more cost-effective means of incorporating, without the tax burden of establishing new municipal services. The ‘Lakewood Plan’, by negotiating for Lakewood to contract its vital services to L.A. County (at a discount rate): “allowed suburban communities to reclaim control over zoning and land use without the burden of public expenditures proportionate to those of older [, more exclusive] cities.” The following wave of incorporations also unified homeowners “around an anti-bureaucratic, anti-welfare ideol-

² “HA’s first appeared on the *political* scene in the 1920s as instruments of white mobilization against attempt by Blacks to buy homes outside the ghetto... 95 per cent of the city’s housing stock in the 1920s was effectively put off limits to Blacks and Asians” (Davis 1990, 161).

ogy,” as well as extending residential segregation across a “vast metropolitan space” (Miller 1981, 85; Davis 1990, 165-166).

The post-1960 period was characterized by the now-unified homeowners setting out to protect their hard-won territories. As the development industry continued to expand its new “faux-rural” residential areas, it didn’t realize the homeowners it was installing “would have a powerful interest in trying to pull up the gangplanks to prevent further urbanization and loss of rural amenities” (Davis 1990, 174). This, combined with concerns over ‘tax-colonization’³ by the City of Los Angeles, helped introduce municipal incorporation as a widely used, and formidable weapon in the homeowner arsenal. Rather than serve the public good, Reich argues, such land-use reform has been earnestly implemented by practitioners of a new suburban citizenship, wherein “one’s duties consist [solely] of satisfying one’s obligations to private property” (Reich 1991).

This anti-development mindset was partly a reaction against cultural echoes of historical urban conditions, combined with Los Angeles’ infamous historical anti-urbanism (Fulton 1997, 13).⁴ As the primary residents of these hollowed-out urban cores,

³ The following decades are rife with examples of battles from the San Fernando Valley-ites yearning to escape being a ‘tax-colony’ of the city, to the South Bay and San Gabriel Valley’s tax revolts following several unsuccessful secession attempts (Davis 1990, 181-3). In the 1970’s it became a density revolt, which used land-use policy to fight affordable multifamily housing. These mobilizations continue to reverberate today.

⁴ Though Los Angeles was the first to incorporate such sentiments into its very identity, the feeling was fairly universal: “*Get your children into the country. The cities murder children. The hot pavements, the dust, the noise, are fatal in many cases, and harmful always. The history of successful men is nearly always the history of country boys.*” –*Wilmington, Delaware, real-estate advertisement, 1905* (Jackson 1985, 138)

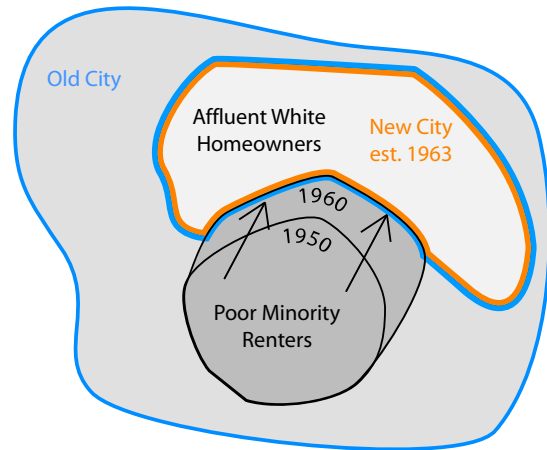
yet hemmed in by unofficial hard lines of segregation, I argue that black citizens overflowing the imposed bounds of their designated “ghettos” served as harbingers of urban woe, compounding the already powerful and ever-present forces of racism (and thus racial segregation) for its own sake. Especially following the traumatic events of the 1965 Watts riots, white flight (and thus incorporation as the stationary corollary) was accelerated drastically (Davis 1990, 163).

Conceptual Model

With fear of “Negro Invasion” on the rise, residents had 2 (legal) choices: flee to suburbs, or if such a move was undesirable or too costly, incorporate as a separate city and re-zone to exclude lower income, “undesirable” minority populations (Davis 1990, 163). Thus, the study follows most lines of the Tiebout (that people ‘vote with their feet,’ or incorporate). However, I attempt to correct the “insufficient attention” given to its most spatial aspect, land-use control (Musso 2001, 150). Mark Purcell agrees that homeowner activism itself is essentially and necessarily spatial, used by homeowners to “defend and proactively realize their spatial vision in the material space of their neighborhoods.”⁵ The act itself also implies a reaction to outside stimulus (threat)—a corrective response to a “constant spatial mismatch between the geography homeowners want and the geography they actually experience” (Purcell 2001, 178-9). I argue that, as a particularly inflammatory member of the latter, black residents overflowing the imposed borders of their design-

⁵ Using a dual-faceted definition of space (from Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1996)

nated “ghettoes” served as a threat of “encroachment” causing some white affluent homeowners to incorporate. Thus I expect to find spatial correlations between positive changes in black population, and incorporation.



Implementation

I implemented the conceptual model using a GIS built from tract-level NHGIS census data from 1960-2000. This data was re-aggregated into 2000 tract boundaries using Cascading Density Weighting (see Schroeder, forthcoming), allowing me to compute change variables by directly comparing the value of a 2000 tract at 1960, 1970 and 1980. The main data I attached to these tract polygons are percent black population, calculated as inter-decadal change in percent black, my main independent variable. The main drawback of this data layer is its spatial limitation to the 1950 metro area of Los Angeles, far smaller than that of 1960.

The second layer of data consists of census polygons for all cities in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. I joined these polygons to a list of California cities with dates of incorporation (The California Association of Local Agency Formation Commissions 2008). I then constructed a bivariate map for each decade, showing the period’s initial composition (percent black) and resulting change (change percent black). Figure 1 shows the accompanying legend, with *initial* percent black on the x -axis, symbolized with a

transparent overlay of shades of blue, and *change* in percent black on the *y*-axis, symbolized with a split green/purple gradient indicating +100% to -100% change.

The resulting scheme allows the reader to easily identify and distinguish the three main area types of interest: historically black areas that remained black (shown in blue), historically white areas that remained white (shown as the lightest purple), and most important, historically

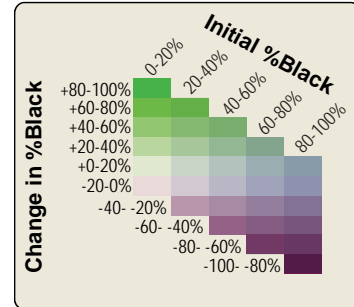


Figure 1. Bivariate Legend

white areas that became mixed or predominantly black. The first two classes represent the pre-existing landscape of segregation, with ‘undesirable’ populations sufficiently contained within their respective ghettos. I hypothesize that it is the third category which, in the eyes of suburbanites, represented a dangerous change from established patterns, and a geographic threat to their suburban lifestyle. I thus expect to find instances of correlation between such tracts and nearby municipal incorporation.

Results & Analysis

Using the maps (see appendix), we clearly see several patterns. The first is an approximately bimodal distribution of black population change, with two or three nodes of black population. Secondly, by the beginning of our study period (1960) most of the study area has already incorporated. Moreover, the growth of the suburban population outside Los Angeles city limits (a majority of the County’s population by 1950) offered a new terrain for homeowner separatism: this time with the aim of putting the more permanent barriers of independent incorporation and exclusive land-use zoning between

themselves and non-white, or non-home-owning populations. More disturbing is the clear evidence of segregation against the city's black population, which is constrained to several areas until its inevitable overflow. As described by Davis, "the only conceivable *lebensraum* was south and southwest, where lower-middle-class white homeowners bitterly contested housing integration, block by block" (Davis 1990, 164).

However, the two main concentrations of black population experienced nearby incorporation during either the 1960's or 1970's, following my hypothesis of basic correlation. Which brings me to our two 'case studies', in the north, *La Cañada Flintridge* incorporating in 1976 and in the southern inset, Carson incorporating in 1968.

Discussion

While the actual analysis produced some interesting results, it raised more questions (and created/revealed more problems) than it answered (or solved). These processes are immensely complex, and any attempt to reduce them down to one variable (even if over space) is necessarily incomplete, even misleading. Only through a true multivariate analysis can such co-variance be taken into account and thus a decent picture of the actual relationships emerges.

The lack of historical data also creates a significant limitation, since almost all of the incorporation in the study *area* occurred before the study *period*. While incorporation did continue into the 60's and 70's, it was concentrated most heavily on the as-yet unincorporated fringe, even extending beyond the County of Los Angeles itself.

Also not represented in the data are unsuccessful secession attempts, as well as *consolidations*, of which there have been at least a half dozen. Interesting additions to this analysis would be maps of the changing city limits of the city proper, as much of this territory was likely annexed by the city before any eventual secession. The nature of the political processes that leads to incorporation include a built-in lag time that can be very significant, and can easily exceed the temporal resolution (10 years) of the study. For example, La Cañada Flintridge first (unsuccessful) vote on incorporation was in 1964. But it took 12 years of political struggle for the vote to finally pass in 1976 (City of La Canada Flintridge)!⁶ This occurred across the South Bay and San Gabriel Valley (our northernmost inset) with both making repeated attempts to secede from L.A. during the early 1970's (Davis 1990, 183).

This illuminates the many competing interests at play, and the effect they have on any attempt to quantify and study the phenomenon as a proxy for anything other than

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1. ⁶ *First, there is a wide perception that] corruption is endemic in local land use administration, so that municipal autonomy is simply a license for bribery of local officials by developers.*
 2. *Second, zoning is now widely viewed, not as governmental regulation for the public interest, but as legal codification of private property rights which ignores the wider social effects of zoning and is aimed largely at economic and racial exclusion.*
 3. *Third, the result of both exclusionary zoning and growth control is seen to be a severe restriction on metropolitan housing supplies and distribution of tax base, with significant effects on both poorer households and central cities. Such controls are most prominent at the fringes of our major metropolitan areas. (Windsor 1980, 396-397)*

itself. Luckily, racial change stayed fairly consistent across the period, with the changes of the 60's merely continuing during the 1970's. As the figures indicate, most green areas in the 1960 maps (from low to high percent black) become blue areas in the 1970's (from high to high percent black) surrounded by green areas. This pattern clearly supports the basic spatial underpinnings of my conceptual model, which depicts black population expanding from a given location into surrounding areas. Left unresolved, however, is any clear understanding of how such expansion effected the nearby political process.

Conclusion

There have been volumes of research indicating the destructive consequences of residential segregation. From Allport's "intergroup contact hypothesis"⁷ to the vast array of environmental justice and public health research linking minority communities to disproportionate rates of chronic illness and exposure⁸ (Farley 2008, 606).

While this paper set out with ambitious goals of answering the calls of established scholars, it quickly became apparent that due to limitations in time, space and data, such efforts would likely be thwarted. However, despite the lack of clear connections or answers, this paper maps out one possible path through this difficult field of interdiscipli-

⁷ Points to contact between minority and majority groups as one of the most important factors leading to changes in majority group discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp 2005; Farley 2008, 614)

⁸ For the work that started it all, see: (Chavis Jr and Lee 1987). For the twenty-year follow-up showing that little progress has been made: (Bullard et al. 2007) Other significant contributors include Laura Pulido (Pulido 2000), who explicitly calls the phenomenon *environmental racism*, and especially identifies *white privilege* as a "highly structural and spatial form of racism"

nary analysis, allowing future studies to avoid my many pitfalls. The social impetus for this research remains as strong as ever, limited only by access to data and time. It is my hope that others will pick up where I have left off.

In the policy arena, Los Angeles decided in 2000 it had had enough secession and angst, and instituted a system of neighborhood councils (NC's) to empower those who had decried a lack of responsiveness and representation. From the charter itself, they seek to "promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs" (Jun 2007, 108). A healthy amount of skepticism is warranted, given that this appears little less than a belated attempt to stem an ever-pressing tide of secession. Raco and Flint warn of a resulting "spatial manifestation of socioeconomic inequalities between locations," compounding the already ever-present polarizations. For any policy efforts to succeed, they must address the basic imbalance of power that underlies the current Los Angelino landscape.

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