

KELLIE JONES

SOUTH OF PICO



African American
Artists in Los Angeles in
the 1960s and 1970s

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Duke University Press • Durham and London • 2017

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Heather Hensley

Typeset in Minion Pro and Helvetica Neue by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jones, Kellie, [date] author.

Title: South of Pico : African American artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s / Kellie Jones.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016040906 (print) | LCCN 2016041331 (ebook)

ISBN 9780822361459 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822361640 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822374169 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: African American artists—California—Los Angeles. | African American arts—Social aspects—California—Los Angeles—History—20th century. | Artists and community—California—Los Angeles—History—20th century. | African Americans—California—Los Angeles—History—20th century. | Los Angeles (Calif.)—Race relations—History—20th century.

Classification: LCC N6538.N5 J668 2017 (print) | LCC N6538.N5 (ebook) |

DDC 700.89/96073—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016040906>

COVER ART: Senga Nengudi setting up for a performance with *R.S.V.P. #X* in her Los Angeles studio, 1976. Just Above Midtown Gallery Archives. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

FRONTISPICE: Noah Purifoy installing *66 Signs of Neon* exhibition at University of Southern California, Los Angeles, c. 1966. Photograph by Harry Drinkwater. Courtesy Jafel Drinkwater.

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the Columbia University Institute for Research in African American Studies, and Department of Art History and Archaeology, which provided funds toward the publication of this book.

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the Wyeth Foundation for American Art Publication Fund of the College Art Association.



FOR GUTHRIE
whose name means freedom

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Working on this project over the years has only heightened my appreciation for the treasure troves housed in libraries and archives all over the world. I am forever thankful to Columbia University Libraries, in particular Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library; libraries at the University of Pennsylvania; Yale University Art and Architecture Library; the Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Special Collections and Visual Resources; New York University, Bobst Library and The Fales Library & Special Collections; Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the librarian Sharon Howard; Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, and Randall Burkett, curator; the libraries at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Balch Art Research Library, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and especially University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, and particularly the librarians Jeffrey Rankin and Octavio Olvera. Interview excerpts with Kinshasha Holman Conwill, Alonzo Davis, Cecil Ferguson, Marvin Harden, Suzanne Jackson, Samella Lewis, John Outterbridge, William Pajaud, Noah Purifoy, John Riddle, Betye Saar, Curtis Tann, and Ruth Waddy were conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library. I thank them for their assistance.

My writing benefited from several residencies and fellowships: from the Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio Study and Conference Center, Italy; Terra Foundation for American Art in Europe, Giverny, France; McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC; and Columbia University. Thanks to all for believing in this book.

While I have lectured on this project in academic institutions around the country, one of the largest engagements with it came from the five years (2008–13) when I served as curator of the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980* at the Hammer Museum, UCLA. The show was based on this book in progress, but the book itself also benefited from further involvements with artists, the recovery of individual archives, and the photographing of works that were thought lost or were unknown. I have been fortunate to be in dialogue with most of the artists in the exhibition, and I will always be grateful for their generosity. Dale Brockman Davis and Alonzo Davis and C. Ian White deserve special mention, along with Samella Lewis and Senga Nengudi, whose predilections for the archive have contributed to this project in many ways. I regret that Houston Conwill and William Pajaud along with curators Cecil Ferguson and Karen Higa are not here to see this book come to fruition.

At the Hammer I would like to thank visionary director Ann Philbin along with the myriad museum staff who contributed to such a well-received exhibition. Special thanks goes to Gary Garrels, then senior curator at the Hammer, who after our chance meeting put the exhibition in motion. Naima Keith was the curatorial research assistant for *Now Dig This!* Her insight, focus, and intimate knowledge of things Los Angeles contributed to the show's power. She developed the title for the exhibition and schooled me in the nuances of "south of Pico," which led me to the title for this book. *Now Dig This!* was part of the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time initiative—a wide-ranging, regionwide undertaking documenting Southern California's contributions to artistic movements in the postwar period. I enjoyed the dialogue with other wonderful projects highlighting Art West.

Now Dig This! traveled to MoMA PS1 in New York and the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, MA. I would like to thank all the wonderful people at each venue for making it look stellar. Another highlight was having a symposium dedicated to the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. *Now Dig This!* was an award-winning exhibition: it received accolades from the International Association of Art Critics U.S. (Best Thematic Exhibition in the U.S. for 2012–13); and *Artforum* celebrated it as one of the best exhibitions of 2011 and 2012.

I am thrilled to have the opportunity to continue to work with Duke University Press. Its institutional culture around authors, "the visual," and the art of the African Diaspora is unparalleled, and I am so pleased that *South of Pico* has found a home here. Much appreciation goes to my editor, Ken Wisnoker, who has created a welcoming and supportive environment; I cherish

his patience and friendship. Thanks also to Jade Brooks for graciously keeping me attuned to details and deadlines. Many entities have been generous with images and permissions; special thanks goes to the African American Performance Art Archive and John Bowles at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and Wendy Hurlock Baker and Elizabeth Willson Christopher; Brockman Gallery Archives; Thomas Erben Gallery; Emily Gonzalez at the Hammer Museum; Alexander Gray Associates; Maren Hassinger; Just Above Midtown Gallery Archives and Linda Goode Bryant; Nasher Sculpture Center and Catherine Craft; Michael Rosenfeld Gallery; Jack Tilton, Connie Rogers Tilton, and Lauren Hudgins at Tilton Gallery; Charles White Archives; and White Cube. At Columbia University, the Institute for Research in African American Studies and the Department of Art History and Archaeology have also provided for the book's visual production. Gabe Rodriguez and Emily Shaw in the Media Center for Art History make sure that all things media are impeccable; I am infinitely grateful for all their aid with this project as well as others.

I have benefited from the support of wonderful colleagues and departmental homes in the academy. In my early years as an assistant professor at Yale University in the History of Art and African American Studies departments, I was fortunate to work and share with a dynamic group of people who provided an atmosphere charged with strong ideas and enthusiasm. As a New Yorker, it has been a dream to teach art history in my hometown. I am grateful to Columbia University and the Department of Art History and Archaeology, including eminent faculty from the Barnard College side. I have an amazing array of colleagues who have encouraged my work and with whom I also share stellar students and great ideas. I would be bereft as a intellectual without the exciting community I have found at Columbia's Institute for Research in African American Studies. Colleagues at the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality; the Jazz Studies Group; and at Barnard, Africana Studies and the Barnard Center for Research on Women have also been important to my life at Columbia. The students in the various iterations of my Black West course continually encouraged me to consider these materials through new frames. Others' assistance with research have helped shape this project too: Louisa Boiman, Drew Bucilla, Dawn Chan, Dasha Chapman, Danielle Elliott, Brandi Hughes, Jerlina Love, Courtney Martin, Debra Singleton, and Irene Small. Martha Scott Burton has been exquisite in pulling together all the final details. The aid of Jane Lusaka and Camille O'Garro has been unparalleled.

Over the arc of writing this book I have been sustained in all sorts of

ways by friends and family, including, among many others, Elizabeth Alexander, Saritha Clements, Alicia Loving Cortes, Cheryl Finley, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Thelma Golden, Farah Jasmine Griffin, the Hightowers, the Jones/Dudley clan, Maurine Knighton, Alicia Hall Moran and Jason Moran, Donna Mungen, Alondra Nelson, Fatimah Tobing Rony, Lorna Simpson, Franklin Sirmans, Jacqueline Stewart, Roberto Tejada, Patricia Welcome, and Deborah Willis. My Brooklyn neighbors from Bedford-Stuyvesant and beyond including the Hattie Carthan Community Garden and Market have been crucial to my well-being. My family of origin was my first intellectual community and continues to keep me energized as a writer and curator. My mother, Hettie Jones, and my late father, Amiri Baraka, never gave up on art as the key to our life as humans on this planet. This is the path I continue to follow. The Browns of Harlem—my sister Lisa, her husband Ken, and my niece Zoe—the amazing Hurricane Brown, writer, musician, actor, humanitarian; the Harvests of New Jersey—Keith, Gary, and Deborah and their families—are the coolest cousins ever; the extended Baraka family and the Enoch Archie clan are an inspiration. The family I was gifted in marriage continues to amaze and inspire. My mother-in-love, Celia Ramsey Wynn, together with the Ramseys and the Rosses, have embraced me from the moment I met them. And the younger generations always teach me something new about the world. I am so proud to call Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. my life partner. His companionship and conversation continue to bring me motivation, comfort, and joy.

INTRODUCTION

South of Pico: Migration, Art, and Black Los Angeles

IN 1966 MIRIAM MATTHEWS, a collector and former librarian, wrote to artist Charles White to commission an image of Biddy Mason, the nineteenth-century black pioneer and former slave who had challenged California's shifting black codes.¹ White had always been captivated by the ways the visual could annotate history, and throughout his career he was sought out by all manner of people to illuminate missing or overlooked aspects of the human narrative.² What did change for White in the 1960s was the way he approached his craft, as he further complicated the pictorial surface *and* the understanding of history itself.

White's Biddy Mason project follows another important picture of a nineteenth-century figure commissioned by the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company. Made from Chinese ink on illustration board, Charles White's *General Moses (Harriet Tubman)*, 1965 (plate 1), is a portrait of this important slave absconder, conductor on the Underground Railroad, abolitionist, and Union spy during the Civil War. In White's almost six-foot drawing, Tubman, the composition's center of gravity, sits on a boulder, as if she is taking a brief rest from the task at hand. She stares out at us with a direct, relentless gaze. The artist takes on history—American, African American, and also diasporic—in a commentary on transatlantic slavery. As in many of White's later works, the landscape is elusive—a small patch of grass and

a large craggy stone—more schematic and metaphoric than composed in detail. He uses alternating pools of ink and cross-hatching to create the appearance of a highly textured surface and portray a jagged, rough-hewn, and heavy form. In sitting on the rock, Harriet is rendered part of it, her skirt all but indistinguishable from the craggy plane, her feet blending into the grassy ground.

White was one of a handful of African American artists, like Jacob Lawrence and Elizabeth Catlett, who had made their mark in the 1930s and 1940s with social-realist styles and themes that revolved around black history and politics. In the early 1960s, their work received renewed interest from a younger group who were grappling with their own social and political obligations as artists against the landscape of the civil rights and nascent Black Power movements. For David Hammons, White's presence in Los Angeles was a revelation; as he mused in 1970, "I never knew there were 'black' painters, or artists, or anything until I found out about him—which was maybe three years ago. There's no way I could have got the information in my art history classes. It's like I just found out a couple of years ago about Negro cowboys, and I was shocked about that."³

In 1963, so the story goes, David Hammons had set out from Springfield, Illinois, in his not-so-new car. When it broke down just outside of town, he repaired it but didn't return the few short miles back home. Instead he kept going, determined at all costs to keep traveling west and to his destination, Los Angeles.⁴ Like many artists heading from the countryside or the small town to the sprawling metropolis, Hammons was drawn as much to the adventures of the big city itself as to the locale of culture and avant-garde activity. In the mid-twentieth century, others of his generation also journeyed west from the midregions of the United States: Bruce Nauman (born Fort Wayne, Indiana), Ed Ruscha (born Omaha, Nebraska), and Judy Chicago (born in Chicago) all sought to stake a claim in the Los Angeles art game. They studied art and began showing their work there in the early 1960s as the city came into its own as a major cultural capital.

What differentiates Hammons's story from these others to a certain degree is its imbrication in another narrative. It is a tale, to be sure, of a larger African American community in Los Angeles in the same period, one that brought us cultural nationalism, the Watts Rebellion, the syndicated TV dance show *Soul Train*, and the films of Charles Burnett as well as a major community of visual artists. Like Hammons, most of the artists discussed in this book—including Charles White (born Chicago), John Outterbridge (born Greenville, North Carolina), Noah Purifoy (born Snow Hill, Alabama), and Senga Nengudi

(born Chicago), among others—made their way to California as adults or as children. Those born in Los Angeles, like Betye Saar, were the children of people who had made that same journey. What is significant about this seemingly simple, almost unnoticeable fact is its tie to the much larger, two-century-long narrative of black migration.

African American migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was nothing less than black people willing into existence their presence in modern American life. It represents their resolve to make a new world in the aftermath of human bondage and stake their claim in the United States. It is a narrative that stretches out one hundred years from the moment of freedom, a tale with a genesis in southern climes that then moved north and west. And it is a tale of the role of place in that claim, particularly the role of the West as a site of possibility, peace, and utopia. Artists such as White and Saar, Purifoy and Outterbridge, Hammons and Nengudi, like most African Americans in the twentieth century, were part of this massive relocation of people in some way. My goal here is to understand and demonstrate how their work speaks to the dislocations and cultural reinvention of migration, its materials of loss and of possibility, and sense of reinscription of the new in style and practice.

CRISSCROSSING THE WORLD

While nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American migrations provide a material and intellectual basis for the artwork discussed in this book, the human relocation actually began centuries earlier. The migration of people from Africa all across the globe is historic and legendary, codified now in academic investigations and a field of study that focuses on the African Diaspora. The forced migrations associated with the transatlantic slave trade that began five hundred years ago have been well researched by others and will not be discussed in detail here.⁵

Other migration was voluntary. For example, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, scores of people migrated from Central Mexico to the northern border. Indeed, some of the first people of African descent in the land that eventually would become the western United States spoke Spanish. In 1781, Spanish colonial officials established the legendary *Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciuncula* between the San Gabriel Mission and Santa Barbara's Presidio. Mexico's Sinaloa province had a substantial population of people of African descent; twenty-six of the forty-six people who completed the five-hundred-mile journey overland and by sea from Sinaloa to Alta California were black. The pioneers who settled the cities of San Antonio

and Laredo in Texas had a similar racial makeup.⁶ Less than a century later, black sailors from the West Indies and other places would jump ship in San Francisco to take part in the gold rush.

Yet such movement, even when self-propelled, is often not just a one-time or permanent thing. There is the notion of crisscrossing, as historian Darlene Clark Hine has posited—forward and backward, but not relentless and linear due to factors such as the scrutiny of black movement, lack of capital, the need to care for relatives left behind, and keeping in touch with “home.” In the notion of crisscross we find as well Michel de Certeau’s notion of ellipsis, the “gap in spatial continuum,” a journey whose synecdochic movements nevertheless compose the semblance of a whole. Voluntary migrations encompassed where people could go and where they could get to, on the physical plane and in the metaphysical cosmic order. And their movement, their quest, was ongoing.⁷

Between 1910 and 1970 more than 6.5 million African Americans left the southern United States for points north and west in what has been called the Great Migration, one of the largest and fastest internal migrations in history.⁸ This massive shift of black Americans can be thought of in two phases. The first was one centered around World War I, when some 1.8 million people made the journey. The second phase, which drew women and men to the industries of World War II, took 5 million African Americans out of the South. (In 1940, 78 percent of African Americans lived in the southern United States; by 1970 the number had dropped to 53 percent.) The journey north may have begun with interstate relocation, then accelerated in a trek from farm to town, and from there to the city, the (cultural) capital. Furthermore, in what historian Shirley Ann Moore has characterized as “ever-widening circles of secondary migration,” people travelled in stages, even in the late nineteenth century: from the rural South to its cities, from southern cities to those of the North and Midwest, and finally to the West Coast.⁹ By the putative end of the Great Migration, the word “urban” had become interchangeable with “black.” And there were the classic “push” and “pull” factors of migration: the “push” of the decline in agricultural livelihood, the specter of forced labor (a fear that slavery would reassert itself in the coming future), political and state repression, and the unrelenting violence against persons of African descent; and the “pull” of industrial work and wages, greater access to education, land, and autonomy.¹⁰

PROMISED LANDS

Railroad porters and peripatetic church choirs were among the scouts for new locations, bringing back information with each trip. Those traveling by train or bus might be forced to stand until they crossed the Mason-Dixon line. Other journeys, like those of David Hammons and John Outterbridge, were made by car, “with their ‘mementos, histories, and hope, all tied to the top.’”¹¹ For African Americans, moving west represented a relocation toward the openness of possibilities, a place without the same sedimented authority. It was a move toward nonfixity and flexibility, the no-place of utopia. In this sense, the West became interchangeable with other locales that African Americans imagined offered prosperity and freedom from brutality and second-class citizenship. Was it a space in this country or a space in the world? Was it California, Africa, or Kansas?

Africa had loomed large as a place of promise in African American minds throughout the nineteenth century. In 1877, facing the abrogation of their political rights under the threat of death and bodily harm, as many as ninety-eight thousand people in New Orleans put their names on emigration lists for Liberia.¹² Emigration Clubs and Liberia Clubs abounded in the Reconstruction period, as did the conversation about places where black people might live a life of untrammelled citizenship. Other locations in the Diaspora, such as the West Indies and even Cyprus, were suggested as sites for peaceful settlement by blacks and whites alike.¹³ But for people without access to vast amounts of capital and one step removed from enslavement, traveling within the United States was challenge enough.

Kansas Clubs were also founded in places like Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana. Kansas had entered the union as a free state in 1861; it was a storied stop on the Underground Railroad and home of the radical abolitionist John Brown as well as other “jayhawkers,” slave absconders who went into Missouri and led the enslaved across state lines to freedom. After slavery ended, Kansas, and in many respects the West, took Canada’s place as the promised land in African American imaginations. Homestead acts that encouraged settlement and land ownership in western states and territories added to the optimistic outlook.¹⁴ Well into the twentieth century, black towns with names like Blackdom (New Mexico); Booktee, Canadian Colored, and Liberty (Oklahoma); Independence Heights (Texas); and, perhaps the most famous, Nicodemus (Kansas) were established. The founders sought sites of self-determination and humanity that these expressive acts of naming gestured toward, where their families could flourish and live as equals under the

law. But when these places and others in the western United States were also characterized by unequal treatment, Africa persisted in the imagination as a haven. More than one migrant arrived in Kansas from the South and, impatient with continuing restrictions to the exercise of freedom, then made plans to head to Africa, only to run out of money in Chicago and decide to stay.¹⁵

Farah Jasmine Griffin, Dana Cuff, and Katherine McKittrick have all explored the uneasy and conflicted notion of “safe space” with regard to migration. For Griffin these are material and discursive sites that evoke the ancestral; they are devices used to negotiate the migrants’ new terrain. The ancestral safe space is informed by either the acceptance or rejection of the South as the ancestor and either the rejection of heritage as provincial custom or the acceptance of it in the invocation of music, ritual, language, or food that “takes one home” in memory. It is a reference to the real locales of the American South and, by extension, cultural formations of the African Diaspora but also to psychic space, the home one carries within. For Cuff safe space is understood as a version of homeplace, which is provisional: it is a site of comfort that may also be filled with myriad insecurities for those without access to power. In the words of McKittrick, homeplace is created from a “usable paradoxical space,” one that is self-actualizing yet is also to a certain degree informed by compromise.¹⁶

The creation of art and culture also evokes safe spaces as ancestral forms and forces, whether as actual material inheritance, physical object structures and style, or the power of intellectual meaning—intention made visible. Charles White’s portraits of heroines such as Harriet Tubman and depictions of southern workers and migrants, Betye Saar’s dreamscapes, Noah Purifoy’s assemblages of urban transformation, John Outterbridge’s notions of a material homeplace, and Houston Conwill’s installations and performative sites do not necessarily long for the South, Africa, or the diaspora (fig. I.1). But they do create safe spaces for contemplation, peace, beauty, the articulation of love, aesthetics, and resistance. These works are antagonistic to traditional geographies and create a notion of security and home, which in turn defines the discursive notion of ancestor.

In the twentieth century, African Americans headed west via car, train, or bus. But in the nineteenth century, they had walked. As Hine reminds us, “Blacks challenged with their feet the boundaries of freedom.”¹⁷ Similarly, theorist Michel de Certeau engages the figure of the walker, the person on the ground who rearticulates, and reinscribes, the city/state in her own image, a “migrational” force all but invisible on the city plan, outside the “panoptic power” of the grid. For de Certeau, walking implies the rhetoric of the “pedes-



FIG. 1.1 Curator Beate Inaya and artists Daniel LaRue Johnson, Charles White, and Betye Saar at the Negro and Creative Arts Exhibit, August 12, 1962. Courtesy Betye Saar and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

trian speech act,” which appropriates the topographical and offers a language of alternate social relations, connecting positions on the map that are unexpected in the dominant cartographic imagination. The walker is the dreamer, in search of her own true and proper form. The walker exits from the proscribed geographic plan, and in doing so reconfigures it, improvising, inventing something new. Black migrations were spatial movements, bodies creating new paths to selfhood and enfranchisement.¹⁸

THINKING SPACE

Migrations, then, are motion and action, the articulation of new routes away from a feudal past and toward a modern future. As initiated by African Americans, these activities look to find places where people thrive; they are gestures that inscribe a world for emergence, growth, a renovation of selfhood, and a revision of citizenship. These are assertions of space—cultural or political, as land or property—that create place, whether actual sites in the world or positions in the global imagination. Yet such affirmative declara-

tions of location are also matched by their inversions: the negative valences of apartness, constriction, refusal. As much as migration was spatial claim, segregation was the denial of space, both intellectual and physical, its compression and constriction. While the West did not have the same histories of black enslavement as the South did, the African American westerner remained an ambivalent figure to a certain degree; she was not so much an individual as a representative of the masses, a notion that unleashed the white supremacist fear of a black planet. The public sphere, locations of labor, educational settings, and housing were some of the arenas that continued as nodes of friction to full engagement of black citizenry, even in California and the paradise of black Los Angeles. Such examples show us how the uneven, asymmetrical, or patently malicious and unjust application of spatial logic informed experience and expression.

Numerous writers have described southern migrant pleasures in public places in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities—shopping, movies, theaters, concert halls, promenades, and public parks, even the ability to sleep on the beach on hot nights. In Los Angeles, performance venues—such as Club Alabama, Elks Hall, and the Jungle Room along Central Avenue—were legendary, and cafés, clubs, and music halls were among the few places that were consistently integrated.¹⁹ In other areas, access was still circumscribed socially even after legal barriers were dismantled. For example, the California Supreme Court ruled against segregation of public pools in 1932, but the practice continued into the 1940s, with African Americans sometimes allowed to enter only the day before the facility was cleaned. While African Americans could spend their money at the Santa Monica Pier Amusement concessions, they were restricted to only a sliver of beach below it; this area was known as the Inkwell. The black-owned Bruce's Beach, a section of Manhattan Beach, provided African Americans with a resort area until it was demolished through eminent domain in the 1920s. Indeed, as Eric Avila has noted, as municipalities were required to more thoroughly integrate public amenities and amusements throughout the country, these spaces were often increasingly abandoned by whites, resulting at times in eventual closure.²⁰

Industrial labor was another major factor drawing African Americans north and west and represented the proletarianization of the black workforce, a chance to leave the agricultural work and sharecropping that seemed so much like “warmed over slavery.”²¹ In terms of industrial production, Los Angeles was second only to Chicago by the early 1960s, and its productivity lasted into the 1970s, part of what Avila describes as the westward drift of capital in the post–World War II period. Much of this economic growth was

in the aircraft/aerospace industry, which became the largest manufacturing area in the United States with expansion into electronic equipment as well as space technologies; by 1957, it employed as much as one-third of the region's workforce.

Most African American migrants in this period were young, married women, a fact that would affect civil rights, Black Power, and arts activism in the latter half of the century. Yet even as early as 1900, most of the black population of Los Angeles was female, evidence of the fact that women had been on the move early in the century.²² When artist and activist Ruth Waddy (born Lincoln, Nebraska) was denied a job at Lockheed Industries in Chicago, she headed to Los Angeles and found work with Douglas Aircraft.²³ Growth in public sector jobs (transportation) and those in government (health, education, and housing) opened more opportunities to African Americans. John Outterbridge found employment as a bus driver in Chicago. He made a good wage and could choose a schedule that enabled him to continue working as an artist, similar to a number of the musicians who eventually became a part of Chicago's avant-garde. While Outterbridge knew such professional experience could easily translate into a career on the West Coast, when he arrived in Los Angeles in 1963 he was determined to be employed in the arts.²⁴

Although Executive Order 8802 barred discrimination in the defense industries after 1941, unions in these fields were allowed to continue discriminatory policies in exchange for "labor stability and productivity." African Americans, barred from general union membership, paid dues to separate auxiliary unions, which not surprisingly offered fewer protections. They received lower wages, were restricted in the types of positions they could hold and the promotions they could win; they also could not head racially mixed crews.²⁵ Entertainment was another strong industry in Los Angeles, and musicians found employment in the booming nightclub scene along Central Avenue as well as in the film industry. Denied membership in the local branch of the American Federation of Musicians, African American musicians founded Local 767 in 1920.²⁶ Their union facility, Elks Hall, served not only as a location to rehearse and to find jobs but also as a meeting place and cultural center.

There were many similarities in the physical spaces African Americans made for themselves to promote professional advancement and training. For instance, new skills required for welders and burners in the shipping industry were often passed from one recently trained worker to others in de facto "schools" in home garages. A corollary can be made with the art exhibitions—in homes, in garages, and around pools—that were created in Los Angeles of



FIG. 1.2 Group exhibition at the Altadena, CA, home of Alvin and Jeffalyn Johnson, June 1962. Courtesy Betye Saar and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

the 1950s and 1960s (fig. 1.2). Just as African Americans carved out their own passageways toward industrial labor, they did the same in the pursuit of their place in the world of contemporary art.

As civil rights activism claimed more and more victories, African Americans integrated the industrial workforce with greater ease. Yet the moment when much headway was made, at the dawn of the 1960s, was the moment of the decline of heavy manufacturing as an economic force. The deindustrialization of urban Los Angeles paralleled a suburbanization of jobs. African Americans found obstacles to suburban employment not only due to diffi-

culties of transportation but because they continued to be barred from living in nearby areas, a scenario played out all over the country during this period. As Avila argues, suburbanization was created in response to the push of racial integration in urban areas. New spatial and economic structures of separation upheld white supremacy and continued the tradition of separate and inequitable resources.²⁷

In education's segregated spaces, we can find direct links back to slavery and proscriptions against black literacy. It is another arena in which to identify spatial constructs of difference, as in, for example, the inadequate facilities for black public schools in rented buildings, churches, and barns in nineteenth-century Texas. Responding to a growing African American population in the early part of the twentieth century, Arizona passed a law in which schools with only one black pupil were required to put up a screen around the child's desk to shield her from the rest of the class. In 1950s Chicago, rather than integrate half-empty "white" schools, authorities chose to ease overcrowding in facilities for blacks by bringing in trailers to serve as additional classrooms and having students attend in double shifts.²⁸

Many today have heard of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 case that struck down legal segregation in this country, overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and in which future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, then a lawyer with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), argued for the plaintiffs. Yet what is often forgotten is that the lead case was western: *Oliver L. Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. While gender and region played a part in the decision to make Brown the lead plaintiff, another reason was that African Americans in Kansas had brought eleven cases to their courts since the nineteenth century, petitioning for equal education on behalf of their children.²⁹

Art historian Amy Weisser has quantified in detail the physical inequities of the educational spaces addressed by *Brown v. Board of Education*. Driven certainly by lesser financial resources extended for African American education, items included less acreage; fewer "amenities" such as auditoriums, lunchrooms, playrooms; outhouses rather than indoor plumbing; wood rather than masonry construction; larger class sizes, and so on. Yet, in many cases, those constructing the facilities for African Americans thought they were perfectly adequate, even generous, for the basic education that this servant class warranted. As Weisser notes, "To varying degrees, these buildings internalize[d] disparities in education between the races."³⁰ Like many of these students, John Outterbridge grew up in North Carolina able to see a school from his home that he was prohibited from attending.

Los Angeles public schools emerged in a multicultural environment, serving Asian, Latino, African American, Native American, and white pupils. In the nineteenth century, however, California law allowed the separation of whites once there were ten or more students of color. This practice continued into the next century, with liberal transfer policies that allowed white students to leave their racially mixed district schools for those where whites were in the majority. Over time, this led to segregated institutions. By the 1970s, Los Angeles was one of the battlegrounds in the ongoing struggle for desegregation and educational equity, reinforcing the view that education continued to be an important emblem of citizenship.³¹

LIVING SPACES

In their quest to (re)make home, black migrants sought places to live, flourish, relax, work, and be happy. Giving perhaps the most substantial definition to Freud's concept of the unhomely, however, their dwellings often became the antitheses of safe spaces. The artists discussed in this book, working in Los Angeles between roughly 1960 and 1980, in some way addressed these ideas. All sought to create sites of a metaphysical home, places of the dream, wellsprings of the creative, even when the notion of homeplace, like the real space of housing, was a significant arena of contention.

Architectural historian Bradford C. Grant has spoken of the roots of residential segregation in slavery, with slave quarters of vast plantations as the beginnings of black ghettos. It is a theory supported by an event that preceded Martin Luther King Jr.'s inauguration of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign: his visit to a road lined with decrepit shacks on Cotton Street in the Delta town of Marks, Mississippi. McKittrick has also addressed the topography of southern plantations. While analyzing the organization of these places as city structures in microcosm, she focuses specifically on the location of the auction block in their planning, a fragment insignificant in terms of architectural beauty and structure but one that was the very fulcrum of slavery's economic engine.³²

Could the needs and desires of African Americans ever be represented in the modern residential spaces that emerged from such roots? In this light, the infamous kitchenette apartment is emblematic. The first homes of many migrants when they arrived in cities like Chicago and Los Angeles, kitchenettes were typically older apartments that had been subdivided into one- or two-room units. Each floor of five or six kitchenettes might share one bathroom.

For writers such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks, the kitchenette represented the overcrowding of urban ghettos and was a metaphor for the restrictions on African American life as well as a symbol of community.³³

In Los Angeles, such dwellings could be found in the neighborhoods of Bunker Hill and Little Tokyo. During the World War II internment of Japanese Americans, speculators bought property in neighborhoods where they'd lived and created kitchenette apartments for African American migrants, who were arriving in large numbers. For a time, in fact, Little Tokyo was known as Bronzeville, a reference to the renowned black neighborhood in Chicago. As historian Daniel Widener comments, "Little Tokyos became Bronzeilles all along the [West] coast, as blacks moved into vacant houses and storefronts."³⁴

Little Tokyo in Los Angeles was seemingly well situated to receive migrants, located just south of Union Station where the Southern Pacific Railroad ended its route from Houston and New Orleans. Indeed, some of the first substantial African American communities in Los Angeles and Oakland had sprung up in the nineteenth century around the termini of west-bound rail lines and were inhabited by African American Pullman porters and their families. It was the squalor of substandard housing and confined and restricted living represented by kitchenette apartments that Noah Purifoy mined in his controversial environment *Niggers Ain't Never Ever Gonna Be Nothin'—All They Want to Do Is Drink and Fuck*, which appeared at the Brockman Gallery in March 1971.

Racially restrictive covenants—delineating who could buy, sell, and live in specific parts of the city—had first appeared in late nineteenth-century Los Angeles, but were in frequent use by the 1920s. Such legal proscriptions were reinforced with extralegal reminders like Ku Klux Klan activity. People of color were seen as antithetical to the "Anglo" profile the city took pains to develop, with nostalgic images of archetypal cowboys and the western frontier such as those found in dime-store novels and Wild West shows, and increasingly manufactured by the budding Hollywood industry.

Such "possessive investment in whiteness," as scholar George Lipsitz has cogently described it, also extended to the perception of who was entitled to the suburban home. Indeed, as architect Craig L. Wilkins reminds us, the very notion of "possession," and its realization in forms of property, has been constructed as fundamentally antithetical to black life. Historic relational or spatial strategies posited (white) subjectivity against (black) objectification, with whites as owners and blacks as owned. Thus an articulation of home ownership signified a normative whiteness from the start. White ethnicity was

gradually made invisible in the suburbs, at a remove from the urban public sphere, and articulated against an increasingly spatially distinctive “other” in ghettos and slums.³⁵

Between 1917 and 1948, however, activists in Los Angeles—at times, a mix of African Americans, Jews, Japanese, Chinese, and Mexicans—banded together to fight such residential circumscription. From 1945 to 1948, more suits connected to housing rights were filed in Los Angeles than in the rest of the country combined, culminating in the federal ban against restrictive residential covenants in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948).³⁶

As African Americans battled for the right to live out their dreams in the seaside paradise of Los Angeles, debates about public housing were added to the mix. The Housing Act of 1949 initiated nationwide programs of urban renewal. Under the guise of massive projects with a utopian veneer—clean, safe, affordable living spaces—public housing went hand in hand with “slum clearance.” In effect, the only neighborhoods open to people of color and the poor were labeled as blighted, where aspects of racial diversity were deemed “inharmonious” to future development. The dismantling of the urban neighborhood also represented the destruction of its economic industrial core, and the move from manufacturing to the service industries. In effect, diverse city spaces—from homes to sites of leisure—were targeted for removal, making way for the suburban megalopolis.³⁷

This effectively destabilized notions of acceptance and home, and was visited on new arrivals and the politically weak by a government encouraged by powerful real estate interests. For many, such programs amounted to little more than “urban removal,” as many of the projects came to be known. Bowing to the “customs” and “traditions” of segregation, federal, state, and local governments continued to allow public housing only in certain areas, while razing existing homes and communities. Watts was one such site, where three major residential projects—Imperial Courts, Jordan Downs, and Nickerson Gardens—were completed by the mid-1950s. The latter two, designed by African American architect Paul Revere Williams with Richard Neutra, were low-rise structures that incorporated landscaping with broad green spaces, courtyards, and personal garden plots, in keeping with the idea of the availability of beauty and modernity for all. While described as transitional spaces, as people eventually were supposed to be able to buy their own homes, in reality these places concentrated poverty and failed to maintain services for such a dense population. More and more, they became spaces of containment and isolation.³⁸

ART AND (SOCIAL) SPACE SOUTH OF PICO

There is a saying among black Angelenos that all black folks live south of Pico Boulevard. While this is, of course, an exaggeration, south of Pico we can indeed find major black communities, from the core of Central Avenue to Watts and Compton south, to Leimert Park and Baldwin Hills to the west and north, areas where the more affluent were able to move with the fall of restrictive covenants. “South of Pico” is also a metaphor for African American migrations and the ancestral home of most black Angelenos. Furthermore, Pico Boulevard is named for Pío Pico, a businessman, politician, and the last Mexican governor of California. His life in Los Angeles spanned its reality as both a Mexican and a U.S. city. He was also a person of African descent.³⁹

Thinking of Pico both as a demarcation of division and a hidden history of blackness opens the door to the spatial as well. Spatial theory—in the writings of geographers, philosophers, architects, historians, and art historians—helps us see migration and segregation not just as arenas of social and historical movement and juridical challenge but as the articulation of spatial structure, what Henri Lefebvre has called (social) space. Through it, we can see and understand how people shape their worlds through creative force. The question for us here is, how do artists translate the same experiences into form? How do they transform what they find into what they would like it to be? How, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, do these “things become the measure of life’s actions upon them”? And how is the spatial imperative, seen in life’s physical peregrinations and diremptions, found in this “compromise between mind and matter, the point of their crossing one into the other” that place represents?⁴⁰

White, Saar, Hammons, Purifoy, and Maren Hassinger lived through segregation in various dimensions, applications, iterations. However, their generations also experienced greater social and spatial freedoms in the American twentieth century. Nevertheless, like African American migrants, they were faced with conscriptions around education, politics, labor, housing, and in the public sphere. How did they respond as artists to the social and spatial world as they found it? If the rise of the civil rights and black power movements reflected the changing nature of social and political activism, how did this affect artistic expression, inflecting not only the artists’ intellectual peregrinations but also the material conditions of the artwork itself?

Several authors have offered positions significant to my thinking about how artists and others articulate spatial prerogatives. According to Lefebvre, “(Social) space is a (social) product.” It is at once “a field of action” and

“a basis of action”; quantitative in its expanses and qualitative as a depth of thought; material in its physical articulation and matériel in the work that it does.⁴¹ Social space is the interpenetration of “real” space as a material thing with space as mental construct and philosophical iteration. Social space is articulated in the mundane actions of daily life, charted by planners and cartographers as well as by artists’ imaginings. Bodies produce social space for their gestures; as such, the built environment follows from a biomorphic core or logic, which underpins architectonics to come. Thus the layers of the built environment—buildings, objects, art—house the trace of corporeal sensibilities. If for Lefebvre space is a container of social relationships, art historian Miwon Kwon sees space, in the site specificity of art of the late twentieth century, as constructed of divergent forms, both material and immaterial. For Kwon, site is simultaneously phenomenological—a physical iteration of practice—and social and institutional, in its conscription of bodies and imbrication in structures such as museums. However, it is Kwon’s sense of site as discursive formation that is perhaps most intriguing and, like Lefebvre’s social space, threads itself through all types of spaces—concrete, ethereal, and those of memory. Here the notion of site shuttles between “a physical location—grounded, fixed, actual” and a “vector” that is “ungrounded, fluid, virtual.”⁴²

Geographer Katherine McKittrick offers another significant framing of spatial thought, that of the sociospatial. If “all knowledges are geographic,” she argues, then positionality is geography. In other words, what do you know, and from where do you know it? McKittrick thinks about black geographies and bodily ownership. Like Wilkins, she considers the history of black people through the lens of objecthood, demarcated by “discourses of possession and captivity of the flesh” occasioned by its attachment to the material fragment of the auction block. Because the black body historically is an object that is owned rather than a subject that possesses, it is ungeographic; black is, rather, a concept that “is cast as a momentary evidence of the violence of abstract space, an interruption in transparent space, a different (all-body) answer to otherwise undifferentiated geographies.” McKittrick’s project is the consideration of respatialization of black as body, as form, as geography, and as a site of contestation and complexity rather than dispossession or peripheral schema. It is located within and outside traditional space, elucidates “black social particularities and knowledges,” and ultimately offers a new and expanded understanding of the normative.⁴³

These iterations on the spatial demonstrate its broad conceptual thrust and framing for art historical thinking. Notions of the object in space might be

what interests art historians most. What is the mass, volume, density, shape, color? What actions does the object want from or require of its beholder? This last point, however, concerning the object of art's relational mode, also indicates art's social framing and networks as well as its dialogue with the body about space, and signals to the larger discursive mode of the spatial that I want to consider here.

Applying spatial theory to the art object helps us consider how African American migrants thought about and named places and spaces, about the importance of place to those who don't have one or are always searching for one—those who are patently ungeographic, as McKittrick indicates. We can consider further the role of the imaginary/expressive/cultural in that search, the need to imagine someplace beautiful and amazing on a daily basis. As Kwon suggests, the persistent “adherence to the actuality of places (in memory, in longing)” is perhaps “a means of survival.”⁴⁴

Place, in the work of the artists considered here, signals desire both to think about the future and to reconsider and reframe the past. In effect, these two positions become interchangeable, as Grosz intimates, in “a reciprocal interaction between the virtual and the real, an undecidable reversibility, as if the image could take the place of an object and force the object behind the constraints of the mirror's plane.” The real is converted into a different order, transformed through the concept of the virtual, iterations of an “endless openness” or future.⁴⁵ Space as real and imagined, as discursive, offers this spectrum of positions and art presents new creative and life-forms that assert “new geographic formulations” and new spatial demands.⁴⁶

ART AND BLACK LOS ANGELES

Between 1960 and 1980, the time period of this study, the art scene in Los Angeles generally, and certainly among African American artists, became a vibrant, engaged, and activist community. Works tied to traditional media—painting, drawing, prints, sculpture—gave way to dematerialized postminimal installation and body-centered performance. Within these styles and formats were spatial ideas that changed how artists accessed and incorporated notions of history and virtuality, the real and the imagined. These ideas were present throughout the period and used to varying degrees, though earlier works, not surprisingly, evidence a greater interest in history and didactic formulas, while later production moves toward the abstract and ephemeral.

Charles White's mode in the twenty years prior to his move to Los Angeles was in the social-realist vein, re-presenting and repositioning African

American figures as subjects of accomplishment rather than the inhuman and unhistorical empty vessels that the label “slave” suggested. Centered on solid rock, Tubman’s geographic presence in *General Moses* (*Harriet Tubman*) belies the attachment to the perch of the auction block. Metaphorical rather than patently documentary in its presentation, its gloss on freedom is also more broadly allegorical. The drawing was created the same year the Voting Rights Act passed, which dismantled impediments to black enfranchisement in many parts of the United States. The 1965 act and White’s piece both marked the centennial of the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. The didactic and pedagogical nature of the work in this context seems clear.

We see this same instrumental approach to storytelling and meaning in the earliest works of White’s pupil David Hammons. He attended art classes at various institutions throughout the city but particularly sought out White at the Otis Art Institute. White’s influence can be seen in Hammons’s early choice of the graphic medium as well as in his works’ political content. In pieces such as *Boy with Flag*, 1968 (plate 2), a young black man stands behind the U.S. standard, emerging from its shadows, yet still seemingly bifurcated by its cutting edges, which appear to slice through the body. Hammons classically embodies the edifying style of the Black Arts Movement in his figurative presentation and commentary on U.S. racism. The piece also refers to history in its implications of unequal treatment under the law, and African Americans as three-quarters human, as suggested by the partial portrait.

Through the figure of Hammons, we can also chart the evolving visual aesthetics of the community of African American artists in California in the 1960s and 1970s as well as the move from didactic formulas to those that rely on abstraction, dematerialized practices, and performance. We can map these changing aesthetics, for example, in Hammons’s works from the 1970s that use black hair, such as the “gardens” of hair threaded on flexible wire (fig. I.3) he “planted” in the damp sand along the shores of the southern California beaches. These were intended to be some version of saltwater grasses; somehow the hybrid cattails seem familiar yet out of place, too close to the water’s edge, strangely shaped yet bending easily in the cool ocean breeze. Their importance also lay in their temporary and ephemeral nature: they were made of materials and sited in places that assured their disappearance over time. Yet, as Hammons himself would later recount, hair acted as a signifier of the black body: even though nonobjective in form, it remained self-referential: “I got a visual object and medium that was pure [and] nonsexual, which spoke to everything I wanted to say.”⁴⁷



FIG. 1.3 David Hammons, *Hair and Wire*, Venice Beach, California, 1977. Site-specific installation. Photograph by Bruce Talamon. Courtesy the artist and Bruce Talamon © All rights reserved.

Similar ephemeral works, structured as installations, by Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger are emblematic of the turn to a more freewheeling (in)formal visual play. Examples include gatherings of pantyhose filled with sand draped across spaces and rooms, Nengudi's signature works from the 1970s. Like Hammons, Hassinger planted "gardens" indoors and out from Los Angeles to New York. Yet hers were more massive, formed from towering expanses of unfurled, industrial-grade cable and wire rope. The shift from didactic works to those of greater abstraction by these African American artists of Los Angeles was a move from historical to virtual content—from the consideration of the past, whether distant or immediate, to the imagining of the future. This occurs via a presence that is ancestral, which may appear as a physical trace in style, remains, sound, and spatial technics—a metaphoric hint, a utopic gleam.

This reach across time brings us toward a model of Afro-futurism, which, as scholar Alondra Nelson suggests, uses what is bygone to explain the present *and* prophesize what is yet to come. It glosses time that is not the past but yet not detached from it either; instead, it is "contiguous yet continually transformed."⁴⁸ Time and space are not linear; technologies are not always new but lean on earlier and often anachronistic formulas as antennas of the future. This book examines how artists cast an eye toward what came before

and think to what lies ahead through modes that are at once historical and futuristic. After Farah Jasmine Griffin I want to think about the art considered here as different kinds of migration narratives, embodying this aspect in their material facture, their intellectual positioning, and their pursuit of African Diaspora cultural form.

In this volume, chapter 1, “Emerge: Putting Southern California on the Art World Map,” focuses primarily on Charles White, Betye Saar, and Melvin Edwards as Los Angeles came into its own as a cultural capital in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These artists were part of a generation that willed an African American art community into existence with little traditional art world support. They mounted exhibitions in homes, community centers, churches, and black-owned businesses. Their examples and mentorship were a catalytic force creating and helping to sustain a vibrant black arts scene in the city. White’s career took him to Los Angeles in 1956 after he’d made a name for himself in his hometown of Chicago as well as New York. He arrived in the city with an international reputation, one that made him one of the most important African American artists up to that period. Trained as a designer and experimenting with interiors and jewelry while she worked as a social worker, California native Betye Saar emerged as a serious printmaker. Her early works on paper also codify the appearance of feminist themes, which she would build on in the decades to come. Melvin Edwards was one of the West Coast’s first black superstar artists, with important shows at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Santa Barbara Museum. White and Saar also represent the twinned concerns with the historical (in the former’s interest in singular figures of the black past) and virtual (in the latter’s growing focus on spiritual practice and metaphysics), while Edwards’s abstract practice seems to combine these two positions.

Chapter 2, “Claim: Assemblage and Self-Possession,” focuses on the role of assemblage within the black art-making communities of Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s. The West Coast became highly visible with mainstream acceptance of assemblage as an important artistic strategy, particularly with its canonization in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1961 *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition. It is often seen as a form of critical practice, laced with such notions in the ruined consumer products of its facture, indicative of both the fraud of 1950s consumer society and its platitudes. Also embedded in the narrative of assemblage is the concept of transformation, the alchemy of taking a thing discarded and changing it into a thing of (re)use.

Assemblage was a clear metaphor for the process of change—the transformation of psyche and social existence—required of art in the rhetoric of



FIG. 1.4 Adam Avila, *Maren Hassinger in front of Twelve Trees*, 1978. Site-specific installation, Los Angeles. Courtesy Maren Hassinger.

the Black Arts Movement, art that “advance[d] social consciousness and promote[d] black development.”⁴⁹ Each artist discussed in this chapter, however, approached the genre from a slightly different direction. Noah Purifoy used assemblage as a system of artistic activism and institutional critique in the period immediately following the Watts Rebellion. John Outterbridge’s pieces run more toward a metaphoric narrative that invokes ancestral aesthetics of vernacular art making in black communities as alternate paradigms that intersect with West Coast art practices. Betye Saar, for her part, created temples and altars to spirituality using the fragments of humanity embedded in the discarded.

In chapter 3, “Organize: Building an Exhibitionary Complex,” I look at the ways in which African Americans in Los Angeles marshaled the art world in order to disseminate and support their art. Change in the 1960s and 1970s also brought a shift in the traditional museum and gallery scene. Other spaces were brought into existence by artists themselves, including Alonzo Davis and Dale Brockman Davis, Suzanne Jackson, and Samella Lewis. Chapter 4, “In Motion: The Performative Impulse,” moves away from the didactic subject matter connected to civil rights and black power and toward greater abstract, dematerialized, and conceptual modes. During the 1970s, artists such as Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger (fig. 1.4), Houston Conwill, and David

Hammons began to experiment with postminimal ephemerality and performance.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a number of artists who had made Los Angeles an art capital began heading to New York. David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, and Houston Conwill had all relocated there by 1980. Most certainly the presence of these practitioners and others on the East Coast affected New York's expanding discourse of visual and cultural diversity. The concluding chapter, "Noshun: Black Los Angeles and the Global Imagination," considers where their experiences in Los Angeles took them and contextualizes their work in the global continuum, the direction their diasporic turn ultimately led.

CHAPTER ONE

Emerge: Putting Southern California on the Art World Map

SO WHAT WERE THE CULTURAL gestures that signaled the emergence of this active and vibrant African American artists community in postwar Los Angeles revealing the life of the black modern? For those deemed “ungeographic” these indicators importantly delineated place, plotting the mind’s effects on matter. These spaces of/for creativity, for nurturing burgeoning aesthetics, were hard won. They were safe spaces and homeplaces that remembered the ancestral. But they were also in many ways provisional and negotiated, carved and pried out of the larger American dream.

This chapter focuses on the ways three artists established a strong African American creative presence in Los Angeles in the postwar period. In Charles White, we see how a singular figure coalesced a community as the 1950s became the 1960s. He had commanding East Coast credentials as well as an impressive portfolio and offered an image of professionalism. His presence on the West Coast also points to the role that Hollywood played in the development of black artists. Betye Saar emerged from the solid design background that was the hallmark of many African American artists in midcentury Los Angeles. Accolades for her works on paper in large, all-city shows at the beginning of the 1960s set her on the path to fine arts success.

Melvin Edwards became one of the city’s African American art stars in the mid-1960s. His expressive sculptures in welded metal, like the work of

White and Saar, engaged both historical and contemporary time and intuited the architectural. They articulated visions of space and site that visualized a new and exciting yet conflicted future. They outlined the contemporary fight for housing, channeling too the architecturally insignificant yet economic powerhouse of the auction block, its pervasiveness as well as its provisional and fragmentary nature. Edwards opened an adversarial space in found metal sculpture, one whose formal tensions framed historical ones of property ownership and possession against the specter of black objecthood.

These objects made by White, Saar, and Edwards to some degree pursue utopic space through the imagining of diaspora. It is a transhistorical space of solidarity wrought through black expressive culture and signals the importance of the imaginary in making the ground for community. The early careers of these frontrunners took us into the 1960s and cut a path for the emergence of a cadre of professional artists.

“THE ARTIST IS CHARLES WHITE”

Toward the middle of the film *For Love of Ivy* (1968) (plate 3), the owner of a trucking company escorts Ivy Moore, the potential love interest of his colleague Jack Parks (Sidney Poitier), to Parks’s swank bachelor pad. As he and Ivy (Abbey Lincoln) enter the stunning duplex, arrayed with books and art, they pause in front of a charcoal drawing. “The artist is Charles White,” exclaims the man, Billy Talbot (played by Leon Bibb), as Ivy looks on in awe. The paired tondos of the drawing, smoky heads of a man and a woman, later hover over moments of sensuality and seduction, the first such love scene with black characters in popular film. It also marks perhaps the first time a work by an African American artist is singled out specifically as not only a symbol of status, but of something beautiful *and* coveted for a mass movie-going audience.¹

While *For Love of Ivy* introduces the discussion of White’s work within the film, allowing it to “perform” as a character, another piece, *Folk Singer*, 1957–58, had appeared a year earlier in the now more famous interracial drama *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* (1967). There art asserts itself silently in the study of newspaper man Matt Drayton (Spencer Tracy), future father-in-law of Dr. John Prentice (Poitier). White’s print hauntingly symbolizes the irony of white people consuming African American cultural objects and yet continuing to deny equal treatment to black people in American society. But *Folk Singer* also points to the inevitable: black people will become a part of this home and that larger construct called America.

Indeed, 1967 was a banner year for White, a consummate painter, draftsman, and master-printer. He had a solo show at the Palm Springs Desert Museum and another at Howard University, and his work was featured abroad, in exhibitions in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland.² Perhaps even more significant was the release of the book *Images of Dignity: The Drawings of Charles White*, purportedly the first monograph on a living African American artist. The book features commentary by White's dealer, Benjamin Horowitz; the preeminent historian of African American artists, James A. Porter; and popular entertainer Harry Belafonte. Horowitz provides an overview of White's trajectory as an artist, spiced with lively anecdotes outlining his career.³ Porter describes White as a historian whose murals brought out sublimated African American history even as he was immersed in a cubist formula of overlapping forms, "pauses," and the "discontinuity of shapes."⁴

However, it is Belafonte's foreword that adds something extra to the monograph. The performer calls White's art "tremendously American," and in doing so links the artist to his own focus on folk or historical form, what he identifies as "Negro Americana."⁵ Belafonte not only was an inspiration for many of White's pieces about music generally and folk music in particular; he was also a collector of the artist's work and a lifelong friend.⁶ Similar to Poitier, he used his star power as a matinee idol—the first American singer to sell more than a million records (*Calypso*, 1956) and the first African American to win an Emmy, for the variety show *Tonight with Belafonte* (1959)—to make things happen for other black artists. Like Dennis Hopper and Dean Stockwell, Hollywood actors who bankrolled the Ferus Gallery crowd, Poitier and Belafonte (and later NFL player turned actor and artist Bernie Casey) played the same role in African American creative communities.⁷

White's engagement with Hollywood began soon after he arrived in Los Angeles in 1956, following more than a decade in New York. He created the title drawings for the film *Anna Lucasta* (1958). A family drama with an all-black cast, it fit well with 1950s films that were more serious, message-oriented, and controversial, shedding the gloss of 1940s black musical fanfare and attempting to channel the changing tide of U.S. society.⁸ White created three drawings for the film, one each of principals Eartha Kitt (plate 4) and Sammy Davis Jr., and a third tableau involving the other major figures played by Rex Ingram, Frederick O'Neal, and Georgia Burke. While title drawings ordinarily appeared at the opening of a film, the detailed and consummate nature of White's pieces made producers situate them at the movie's end, where the camera pans over them and the credits roll. White made it very clear that the images were not merely illustrations and that they were



FIG. 1.1 Sidney Poitier, Charles White, Ivan Dixon, and Tony Curtis on the set of the film *The Defiant Ones*, 1958. Courtesy Charles White Archives.

not to be used for advertising purposes. His drawings fared better in *Tonight with Belafonte*, where they were used as intertitles, carrying the action from scene to scene, between performances of Odetta, Brownie McGhee, Arthur Mitchell, and others.⁹

Having once considered an acting career, White had close relationships with actors, musicians, as well as writers and enjoyed visiting movie and TV sets whenever friends such as Poitier, Ivan Dixon, and others were in the cast (fig. 1.1). He attended movie premiers, including the July 1969 opening for Gordon Parks's *The Learning Tree*. White and Parks had been friends since their early days as artists in Chicago and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) circles of the 1930s.¹⁰ Black Hollywood and the performance world supported artists in other ways as well. Poitier, Belafonte, Bill Cosby, Eartha Kitt, Nat King Cole, Lorraine Hansberry, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis were among White's long list of collectors.¹¹

However, the Charles White who arrived on the Hollywood scene in the mid-1950s was already an important artist. He had traveled and shown work around the globe; lived in Mexico, received John Hay Whitney and Rosenwald fellowships, among others; and executed major murals nationwide. He

had shown consistently with American Contemporary Artists (ACA) Galleries in New York since 1947 and had been celebrated in the U.S. and foreign press. Such an artist of international acclaim was heralded by the African American weekly the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, which noted his arrival on the train known as the “Super Chief from New York” in the early fall of 1956.¹²

Indeed, White’s renown in this period was matched only by that of Jacob Lawrence and, to a certain degree, Elizabeth Catlett. Yet until his first solo show at Heritage Gallery in 1964, some eight years after he hit the West Coast, White’s support from the traditional art sector was scant. Between 1957 and 1967, a major art scene emerged in Los Angeles with the rise of the Ferus, Dwan, Huysman, and other galleries and *Artforum’s* relocation from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 1965. However, the representation of African Americans in these traditional venues was negligible.

White’s first solo exhibition in Los Angeles is emblematic of the cultural climate facing African American artists at the time and the role black Hollywood and black communities played in bringing the work of prominent and unknown artists into view. The weeklong show at the University of Southern California (USC) in April 1958 presented thirteen drawings and prints on the theme of spirituals. Three of these came from Belafonte’s collection. The presentation was sponsored by the State Association of Colored Women’s Clubs and the Southwest Symphony Association, a collective of black classical musicians. A few years later, Judson Powell would emerge from the latter organization to collaborate with Noah Purifoy on art-making activities at the Watts Towers Arts Center.¹³

Another significant exhibition of White’s work was held in September 1959 at the Pacific Town Club (PTC), a private social club of black professional men. It lasted only two days, from September 12 to 13, and proceeds from the opening event raised funds for a student art scholarship. Established in the mid-1930s, PTC was one of the few such associations with a permanent clubhouse. In 1952, the group built a new building, a midcentury modern facility designed by architect and PTC member (and in 1947, its president) Paul Revere Williams. The following year, biannual art shows of similar length and purpose as White’s were being held at the site.¹⁴ Williams designed buildings in the 1930s and 1960s for PTC member John Lamar Hill, owner of the Angelus Funeral Home. Other clients included club members Norman O. Houston and George A. Beavers Jr., principals of Golden State Mutual Life Insurance, whose flagship building at 4332 W. Adams Boulevard (at Western) was located blocks away from the PTC structure at 1999 W. Adams (corner of Montclair). One of Williams’s earliest commissions was a redesign of the

Twenty-Eighth Street YMCA, where he added, among other things, exterior tondos featuring portraits of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. These decorative touches were meant to visualize and celebrate the African American community served by the facility. Like other YMCAs throughout the country in the 1920s and 1930s, it was a meeting place for those making and interested in African American arts and culture.¹⁵

Williams's buildings were prominent structures in Los Angeles. They signify the black community's engagement with and ability to commission major arts projects and how an artist like White could be supported, no matter his reception by the larger art community at the time. However, Williams is best known for the homes he designed for Hollywood stars—among many others, Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, and Lon Chaney. As with Belafonte, and Poitier, Williams's productive relationship with Hollywood allowed him to take part in creative projects with black communities.

Articles in *Negro Digest* and *Ebony* in June and July 1967, respectively, demonstrate how White's images, story, and reputation were disseminated in black literary and popular networks and outside strict mainstream art world circles. *Negro Digest* was an intellectual journal with probing thought pieces on art and culture. Originally patterned after *Reader's Digest*, it changed its name to *Black World* in 1970, reflecting the climate of Black Power. *Ebony*, of course, was the flagship monthly of African American life; it began publication in 1945 in the era of pictorial magazines and chronicled movers and shakers and current affairs in glossy print. Both magazines were published by Chicago-based media titan John Johnson and Johnson Publishing. The articles on White appeared with the release of his monograph *Images of Dignity*. While the *Negro Digest* essay keenly focused on that event, *Ebony* used the occasion to provide a wide-ranging and lavishly illustrated spread. And there was clearly a dialogue between the two on White's "everyman" imagery and the contours of his artistic career and life.¹⁶

The responses to the *Ebony* article demonstrate White's popular appeal. He received letters of admiration from all over the country as well as inquiries about purchasing the work. Correspondence came from as far away as Ghana, where Alex Amofa Kophi of Kumasi sent photographs of his own paintings and sought advice on a budding artistic career.¹⁷ The African letters demonstrate the wide circulation of the Johnson Publishing empire as well as *Ebony*'s interest in stories about Africa's independence movements, political figures, and new heads of state, who appeared on its covers during this period. White's drawing, *Two Brothers I Have Had on Earth—One of Spirit, One of Sod*, 1965, is prominently displayed in the *Ebony* piece. It is listed as owned by Sékou