

BLACK LEADERS OF LEISURE, THEIR CALIFORNIA DREAMS DURING THE JIM CROW ERA AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE STORIES TODAY

SLIDE 1: TITLE/INTRO

My name is Alison Rose Jefferson. I am a historian, heritage conservation consultant and a third generation Californian. I am currently a Getty Conservation Institute Scholar in Residence. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the California Reparations Task Force education process today.

Today I will briefly explore the hidden stories of my current research on the historical African American experience and public policies to conserve it in the Venice district of Los Angeles' California Coastal zone and that are showcased in my recent book, *Living the California Dream, African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era*. Black Californians made American history by challenging racial and class hierarchies when they claimed space in California from colonial times to their occupation and claiming of public recreational space at the core of the state's formative, twentieth century identity. These places became sites of resistance in the social and economic development of attractive inland resorts and beaches relatively free from white citizens' harassment. In Los Angeles recreation and relaxation were an essential component of liberty and cultural equity, as well as contested ground in the struggle for freedom.

I will focus on stories of the beach areas that were associated with African Americans from the 1900s to 1960. Each site has its own development history of a

specific sort with its own set of social, political, and economic particulars, as well as racialized issues of the time and place.

SLIDE 2: STOKES QUOTE

Before I get into the details of these stories I want to make a few comments on my work and this process we are involved with today. Intentionally my work is a social justice action practice to expand knowledge for the construction of a more inclusive public culture, historical memory, and national identity encompassing the diverse experiences of the American people and to help dismantle institutional racism.

After the examination of the extent and impact of the legacies of systemic racism on contemporary forms of racism, I have high hopes the Task Force will institute a transformative approach in its mission. I hope there will be “a systemic response” which government can use to produce creative, adoptable and meaningful effective legal, policy and institutional measures that aid in dismantling structures and measures which contribute to political, social and economic inequalities to address the root causes and drivers of racism at the collective **and** individual level. These measures should include reparation, restitution and rehabilitation in various forms such as formal acknowledgements and apologies, memorialization, financial compensation, institutional and educational reforms and awareness raising to transform the discourse to debunk false narratives that have permitted a succession of racially discriminatory policies and systems to persist in the state.¹

In my work I join others to convey individual narratives and national values in shaping the histories of who we are as Americans and influencing the ongoing discussion about people in our society who are considered worth celebrating and

remembering, while also addressing issues of marginalization and challenges to oppression, bigotry, and institutional racism. This work provides enlightenment, and inspires change as I hope the Task Force's work will also accomplish.

We have to ensure there is a collective understanding of our diverse and multi-layered history that is learned by all in the public square. Recognition of more diverse sites and creation of new public displays that recognize the underrepresented and challenge hegemonic and White supremacist narratives will also help connect to a more representative history and identity which can be a vehicle for healing and education, as well as cultural tourism in communities.

For this to happen we need to increase equitable access to deep knowledge – from places that create and preserve our cultural record **and** from scholarly texts to community collections in archives, libraries and other repositories. The stories and materials of historically underrepresented groups must be included in these narratives and cultural records to help ensure that more authentic, reflective, complex, and nuanced stories are revealed, preserved, and told as this helps build an informed, culturally diverse, and civically engaged society. The Task Force recommendations should include ideas for funding this important work. As we are seeing today this knowledge can be used by people, such as elected officials like yourselves, to shape our present and future.

SLIDE 3: LEISURE SITE MAP

These stories I will touch on have implications for our lives today as we can see how the denial of the benefits of coastal access, historically and in contemporary times continue to be civil rights, social justice and health issues. “Places to play at the beach

are not luxuries or amenities,” but an example of “a fundamental human right under the United Nations Declaration of Rights of the Child.” “[California state and] federal civil rights laws guarantee equal access to publicly funded resources and prohibit intentional discrimination and unjustified discriminatory impacts by recipients of federal funding, including the Coastal Commission, based on race, color or national origin.” But there continue to be disparate impacts due to the legacy of discrimination’s past and current expressions which must be overcome in providing opportunity for all on our coasts and otherwise.²

Race, power, privilege, and wealth often have influenced and restricted leisure opportunities just as these factors determined who was able to take advantage of economic and social opportunities in Southern California. Even with these impacts African Americans in their building and enjoyment of these leisure communities -- through creative assertion claimed and performed full humanity, civic membership, as well as social and economic development resourcefulness and self-determination.

SLIDE 4: CA EAGLE AD, 1908

This history is layered with stories about group and individual circumstances, and chronicles about migration patterns, socio-economic status, cultural practices, education and employment opportunities, and social power. These private and public spaces stories are inseparable in their composition and reflection of the structural racial exclusion and class exploitation imposed on African Americans and other marginalized groups.

African Americans began moving in larger numbers to the Los Angeles environs in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, joining a multi-ethnic

community that included Whites and people of color, as well as immigrants of many national backgrounds. Their stories are about public and private memories of African Americans of all socio-economic classes — the “New Negro,” who migrated from United States southern states to northern, mid-western, and far western parts in the post-WWI decades to escape the worst of Jim Crow era racist anti-Black restrictions and violence. These migrants were more self-confident and sometimes militant in demanding their rights as citizens and consumers.

Like everyone else moving to the state, African Americans embraced the booster promoted California Dream of a leisure lifestyle as “a permanent way of life” in picturesque outdoor settings, a mild climate and new life opportunities, even while discrimination and lax enforcement of California’s civil rights laws established as early as 1893 many times prevented them from using various public or private facilities and buying land in many areas for decades into the twentieth century. Despite the challenges, throughout the early twentieth century great migration African Americans actively participated in California’s growth and nurtured a rich cultural milieu that included the emergence of West Coast Jazz.

BRUCE’S BEACH

SLIDE 5: THE BRUCES, CA. 1920

In the news lately, Bruce’s Beach in Manhattan Beach, a Pacific Rim community in southwestern Los Angeles County was an early successful African American residential resort community and day trippers leisure destination which began in 1912. Racial discriminatory measures aided by destructive use of state power in 1924

eliminated their residential and economic development, with attempts to erase the site's memory from history. Only through political assertion has a limited revival of the history of Bruce's Beach and its incorporation into the public record emerged in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

SLIDE 6: WILLA BRUCE, LA TIMES 1912

The Bruce's Beach landholders and visitors were not alone in facing legal sanctions and private harassment actions discouraging African Americans from visiting and settling in particular beach locales as the region's population increased during the 1920s. In 1925, African Americans were forced by White-run civic and business groups to give up on developing a beachfront resort in El Segundo. Other beach enterprises suffered similar fates. The most violent intimidation campaign to evict African Americans from enjoying the beach was the destruction of the nearly completed Pacific Beach Club in Huntington Beach. Arsonists burned the beautiful new facility to the ground shortly before it was to open in 1926.³

SLIDE 7: BRUCE'S LODGE AND GUESTS, CA. 1920

There were confrontations and assaults across decades, some of which turned violent aimed to bar African Americans from public beaches. Activists mounted informal and legal challenges to these discriminatory practices endeavored by Whites. **SLIDE 8: KKK** Even with such White violence and attempts to evict African Americans from public beach space at various places along the Southern California coast, this community's days of recreation and relaxation occurred unabated.⁴

Although the Bruce's Beach community was razed, a successful NAACP protest and legal maneuvers for unfettered beach access propelled African Americans' more

confident assertion of their legal rights which in the coming decades contributed to racial restriction attempts at public beaches fading away. This was an important civil rights and beach access victory not just for African Americans, but for all Californians.

SLIDE 9: BB COUPLE POSING, 1927

As the twentieth century advanced, African Americans around the U.S., would increasingly utilize legal actions and public protests to dismantle legally sanctioned, along with informally enforced discrimination and segregation in public accommodations.

In 2007 the park site was officially named Bruce's Beach, eighty years after the Black resort community was destroyed. **SLIDE 10: 2007 BRUCE'S BEACH**

RENAMING EVENT

The public commemoration opened up broader claims and community benefit in the identified sense of place in the landscape of America and the region that allows for a more culturally inclusive, collective identity, and social history encompassing a public memory. This has been occurring even with a signage text that dilutes, misrepresents and partially omits the site's historical truths and understanding. The site continues to hold a contentious place in the Manhattan Beach community's heritage, civic identity, and collective consciousness.

SLIDE 11: NEWSOM BILL SIGNING 2021

As the Task Force is aware, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed Senate Bill 796 to allow Los Angeles County supervisors to return the beachfront property they owned to the descendants of resort business owners Charles and Willa Bruce from whom it was wrongfully taken in the 1920s.

SLIDE 12: BRUCE'S BEACH LAND ID

What Los Angeles County and State officials are doing is an example of what reparations could look like in some situations and opens up new ways of thinking about how to redress and commemorate African American social injustices that have not been looked at in the past.

This restitution act of giving the land back to the Bruce family descendants opens opportunities for recouping generation wealth building that was lost. It will also provide some psychologically healing for the lost opportunity for the family and the African American community in general. These moves are a good thing, but we must think more deeply about the events of 100 years ago and their legacy. This act will not provide tangible benefits to the purged African Americans of all classes from Manhattan Beach that lost out on a vibrant socio-cultural economic space where today they make up less than half a percent of the city's 35,000 population. For broader benefits to occur elected officials need to see to it that socio-cultural economic public policies and programs are developed that encourage African American community opportunities in Manhattan Beach and at other California beaches.

SANTA MONICA

SLIDE 13: MRS. DIDON AND SM OCEAN PARK BEACH

In the City of Santa Monica founded in the 1880s, African Americans were **able** to build a sustained community of land owners and renters that began a few blocks from the Pacific shoreline in the environs of the Santa Monica Civic Center and high school, and Phillips Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the first African American institution established in the city in 1906. This local church was the first spiritual outpost

established by the CME denomination on the Pacific slope. Santa Monica is the only seaside community in the region featuring a historical African American community with an institution as old as Phillips Chapel.

A short way south a Venice enclave also forming was considered part of this early Santa Monica Black community.

SLIDE 14: PHILLIPS CHAPEL, 1909/2000S

In the years surrounding Phillips Chapel purchasing its own building in 1908 at 4th and Bay streets, the oceanfront area down the hill around Pico Boulevard, south a few blocks to Bicknell Street emerged as a gather place where African Americans from all over the Los Angeles environs and beyond came to enjoy the beach's pleasures. While the boundaries shifted through time, it was a popular beach destination for many African Americans to the early 1960s.

SLIDE 15: SM EARLY AF AM MAP

Establishments in the area provided services and accommodations for African Americans from Santa Monica and elsewhere, particularly to those who came to enjoy the Pacific Ocean a few books away. Black regional residents and Los Angeles entrepreneurs attempting leisure space service business expansion for their community were challenged by various White supremacist private hoarding of benefits and public policy measures inhibiting residential expansion and economic development close to the Pacific Ocean shoreline.

SLIDE 16: NEWSPAPER HEADLINES, 1922

One prominent example of this sabotage of African American beach service business development occurred in 1922 when a Black investment group was blocked

from developing a first-class resort and amusement facilities along the oceanfront at Pico Boulevard. The plan was met with protests from White citizens and businessmen, and Santa Monica officials blocked the development from happening. After the Black investment group abandoned its plan, the property was purchased by White developers. Their resort plans were approved, and the iconic Casa del Mar Club (now a hotel) and another beach club, the Edgewater (now the hotel, Shutters on the Beach), were built before 1930.⁵

SLIDE 17: EBONY BEACH CLUB

Another high profile act of White supremacist sabotage of African American land acquisition for amusement facilities near the beach occurred in the 1950s when Santa Monica city authorities rushed in to take over land through eminent domain proceedings for a purported parking lot, forcing Black investors to abandon the Ebony Beach Club project. These investors put up a giant sign asserting racial discrimination and tried to stop the city's proceedings in Superior Court, but lost. In the twenty-first century, the upscale Viceroy Hotel sits on the land where the Ebony Beach Club was to open at Ocean Avenue and Pico Boulevard. The city continues to own this site and derives economic benefit from the hotel's revenues and occupancy taxes. The city could have done the same deal with the Black investment group.⁶

The African American residential community of homeowners and renters who worked in various service employment and operated small businesses was pushed further inland due to the impacts of displacement from waves of urban renewal infrastructure projects and anti-Black housing practices, including racist restrictive covenants and discriminatory loan policies, along with other private practices and public

policies. It has persisted into the twentieth-first century despite Santa Monica's White elites' racist, anti-Black actions and beach business economic sabotage. The local Black community's continuance has mattered in the reclamation of place and memory in twenty-first century heritage conservation efforts and public history programming that have been initiated by citizen groups and public officials.

SLIDE 18: Public Beach Programs

Local and national landmarking of Phillips Chapel and the Bay Street Beach Historic District, respectively, have engaged the public to learn about Santa Monica's historical African American experience in U.S. history.

Other contemporary programming such as -- Nick Gabaldon Day, California Coastal Cleanup Day, field trips for youngsters from inland areas and the Belmar History + Art Project -- actively connect African Americans and others to more complex culturally inclusive stories of our collective national history, **SLIDE 19: BELMAR HISTORY**

+ ART

heritage conservation issues, beach wildlife appreciation and watershed stewardship, as well as aspirations to environmental justice policies involving beach access issues and social action, intersecting with beach recreation. African American youth and those from other marginalized groups living in California inland areas in some of this programming get the chance to have of introductory surfing lessons as part of the beach recreation experience which opens up new ways for them to realize their full potential as human beings.⁷

This programming help to make these local stories more visible and shows how the struggle for cultural equity, along with social, political and economic issues, reshaped the long freedom rights struggle.

VENICE, A LOS ANGELES DISTRICT IN THE CA COASTAL ZONE

SLIDE 21: EDWARD A. REESE, 1917

In Los Angeles' Venice district of the California Coastal zone, African Americans began formation of a small neighborhood around 1910. This thriving enclave of land owners and renters who worked for the White-owned amusement businesses and opened small service businesses evolved in a multi-ethnic socio-cultural-political environment. This enclave has experienced waves of gentrification over the last half century. The most recent wave of higher income Whites employed in the entertainment and computer technology industries are buying up

SLIDE 20: VENICE MAP

properties and indulging wealthier and Whiter tastes which have had a more visible impact in marginalization of the Venice district's African American middle class and lower income homeowners and renters.

Living a few blocks from the Pacific Oceanfront, this African American enclave is the most enduring in Los Angeles and the California coastal zone into early twentieth century decades. Today, gentrification is not only creating a change in the character of this Venice enclave neighborhood by reducing its racial, social and economic diversity, but city politics are allowing the erasure of the historic legacy and heritage of the Black pioneers and their descendent community. The

SLIDE 22: CA EAGLE RESORT ADS, 1925

African American population has remained due to tenacity and skills of contesting and navigating discrimination. Public officials such as yourselves need to lead the development and implementation of policies and programming to recognize and maintain this African American residency and legacy in Los Angeles' Venice district.

CONCLUSION

In Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica, Venice, and other California coastal zone cities African Americans have not obtained the full cultural, social and economic benefits they could have potentially been developed because of the impacts of the legacy of discrimination over the decades. They have face waves of anti-Black discriminatory practices in actions of economic sabotage by White supremacy to diminish Black wealth-building in private practices and public policies. People living by the beach have the opportunity to make inroads in ocean watersports historically rooted in Whiteness in Southern California which could be important to various types of socio-economic attainment. African Americans have continue to be marginalized in their able to experience these opportunities due to lack of access.

African Americans have contributed to the socio-cultural-political environment and growth of the region and to making the colorful history of California. We have a right to historical and cultural sites, a place in the American identity, and the joys of cultural expression and self-fulfillment, along with access to clean air, clean water, and enjoyment of all America's natural and socio-economic resources.

SLIDE 23: THANK YOU/CLOSING

In closing all tools of public policy, education, conservation and curation available must be used to expand knowledge for recognition of the underrepresented and disempowered in the redefining and construction of a more inclusive public culture, historical memory, and national identity encompassing diverse experiences of the American people **and** to help dismantle institutional racism for greater equity and justice in cultural and socio-economic attainment for all Californians.

RESOURCES SUPPORTING ARJ COMMENTS

My ideas about redress measures were in part informed by the “Report of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights,” Human Rights Council, Forty-seven session, June 21–July 9, 2021, accessed November 27, 2021, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/122/03/PDF/G2112203.pdf?OpenElement> and William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen’s *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

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² Robert Garcia, Marce Gtierre-Graudins and Amy Trainer, “California Coastal Access and Climate Justice for All,” (all quotes), National Recreation and Parks Association, April 1, 2016, accessed November 27, 2021, <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2016/april/california-coastal-access-and-climate-justice-for-all/>.

³ Alison Rose Jefferson, *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 94-95.

⁴ Jefferson, 85-86.

⁵ Jefferson, Chapter 3.

⁶ Alison Rose Jefferson, “Reconstruction and Reclamation: The Erased African American Experience in Santa Monica’s History” (Belmar History + Art project, 2020), 129-132.

⁷ Daniel H. Krymkowski. *The Color of Culture: African American Underrepresentation in the Fine Arts and Outdoor Recreation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 9.