

Guiding Question: How does Boyle Heights reflect other communities of color in the United States?

- Read the excerpts below to better understand the context of the Los Angeles Chicano movement of the 1960s and the 1968 school walkouts in Boyle Heights.
- Each section is followed by questions that will inform our discussion.

What was it like in Boyle Heights in the post-World World II era?

“Boyle Heights was a multiracial community made up of Mexicans, Jews, Japanese, African Americans, Armenians, Italians, and scattered native whites for most of its history, well into the 1950s, only gradually becoming an almost all-Latino neighborhood for the last fifty years. At the height of Boyle Heights’ multiracial history, in 1940, for example, the Jewish population totaled about 35,000, the Mexican population about 15,000, and the Japanese population about 5,000. This reality tracks with much of the newer historical and sociological literature—which increasingly finds that although concentration and spatial clustering are critical to defining ethnic neighborhoods, communities described as “enclaves” or “immigrant ghettos” are often made up of less than half, if that, of the specific ethnic group that has been said to define the space.” (From George J. Sánchez’s book, *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*, page 7).

“Yet even in racially mixed areas like Boyle Heights...specific racial groups actually live quite isolated from each other. A block-by-block analysis of a household survey conducted by the Works Progress Administration in 1939, for example, indicates that relatively few streets in the neighborhood were not dominated by one group or another...Moreover, that Boyle Heights was a multiracial community did not mean it was immune from racism. Areas of Boyle Heights showed significant disparities in rents, housing conditions, and home ownership rates that were largely based on race.” (Sánchez, page 7).

What is your initial reaction?

Does this remind you of other places, communities or historical patterns?

What questions does this raise for you?

What outside factors shaped Boyle Heights and demographic change in the neighborhood?

“...While the multiracial lore of Boyle Heights is strong in some circles, residents of contemporary Boyle Heights sometimes forget that the reason an interracial community was able to thrive on the Eastside was that racism kept many of its residents out of most of the other neighborhoods that were growing in Los Angeles during the early twentieth century. Indeed, the multiracial Boyle Heights now remembered was a direct result of [racially restrictive covenants](#) that governed who could and could not buy a home in a particular neighborhood throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”

“Put plainly, the history of Boyle Heights shows that a flourishing interracial community in the midst of a government committed to racial separation and white supremacy is deeply threatening and risks demolition from officials committed to a policy of urban apartheid. The issue of forced removal is therefore critical...Usually discussed separately by academic scholars, the ‘repatriation’ of Mexican Americans in the 1930s, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and the forced removal of urban residents to make way for public housing and extensive freeway construction all occurred within similar racially mixed neighborhoods.” (Sánchez, pages 8-11)

“I argue that a certain ideology that linked racial depravity to urban space developed among city leaders and urban planners on both the conservative and liberal sides of the political spectrum. This ideology associated particular neighborhoods like Boyle Heights with slum conditions and urban decay, and it prompted local officials to consider residents of these neighborhoods as utterly (re)movable in order to make progress. My argument is that historians of race in America should view these key events of the Depression and World War II periods as intimately linked in ideology and practice, even though they principally affected different racial groups who were often living next door to each other.” (Sánchez, pages 8-11)

What is your initial reaction?

Does this remind you of other places, communities or historical patterns?

What questions does this raise for you?

How and why did Boyle Heights change after World War II?

“Boyle Heights had always had a small African American community. The earliest black people to move into Boyle Heights had fled the Jim Crow South at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, forming a small, largely lower-middle-class enclave near Evergreen Cemetery...The explosion of Los Angeles’ African American population during World War II and in the immediate postwar period put new housing pressures on multiracial neighborhoods like Boyle Heights. The city’s African American population doubled during the war to 133,082 by 1946, then continued to grow to 171,209 by 1950. In the 1950s, the African American population in Los Angeles almost doubled again, reaching 334,916 by 1960, and rising to 12 percent of the overall population...Because housing continued to be highly segregated, it was often the neighborhoods already established as multiracial in the city that had to absorb the new migrants from the South, and largely into overcrowded conditions.” (Sánchez 187)

“In Boyle Heights during this period, private housing stock was being reduced by the onset of highway construction and public housing. Population pressures were intense because of wartime migrations, including movement of *braceros* and their families during the war, and then after the war, returning servicemen of all racial groups, as well as Japanese American internees....At the conclusion of the war in December 1945, the three Boyle Heights public housing projects were the most racially mixed in Los Angeles...” (Sánchez 188)

“These postwar developments rapidly transformed the community’s demographics. By 1952, the Mexican American population of Boyle Heights had grown to over 40,000 forming close to half the population, while the Jewish population had shrunk to 14,000. The Japanese population remained steady at about 6,500 but showed no propensity toward growth. Increasingly, the non-Mexican population consisted of older persons with few children, while migration of young Mexican and Mexican American families into Boyle Heights dramatically increased, as Boyle Heights increasingly became a less desirable place to live, because of the government’s actions.” (Sánchez 11).

“The growth of the Black population in Boyle Heights, especially in the public housing in the district, engendered overlap and connections between Mexican American and African American families in several key neighborhoods and contributed to a new set of relations between students at local schools and playgrounds. Moreover, community leadership and individual families learned political strategies, shifting ideological positions, and even styles of protest and self-assertion from the growing black civil rights movement, both nationally and locally.” (Sánchez 186)

What is your initial reaction?

Does this remind you of other places, communities or historical patterns?

What questions does this raise for you?

What were the experiences of young people in Boyle Heights in the 1960s?

“The most vulnerable public housing residents were often newcomers to the city, such as black migrants from the US South and former *braceros* from Mexico trying to establish more permanent roots in Los Angeles....One such family was the Crisostomos, who moved into Ramona Gardens in the mid-1950s, after having their application for public housing accepted. (Sánchez, page 188)

“Paula Crisostomo's mother, Frances Crisostomo, had entered political activism through her work with black women organizers in the public housing and welfare rights battles in Ramona Gardens... After moving to Long Beach for three years for her father's work, Paula remembers moving back to Ramona Gardens in 1964 with a new sense of purpose as she entered Lincoln High School.” (Sánchez, pages 191-192)

In 1968, Paula Cristostomo helped lead walkouts at Lincoln High School. Fifty years later, Paula recorded an interview as part of the [Pasadena Time Travel](#) project to commemorate 50 years of activism. Excerpts follow:

“I went to Lincoln High School. There were no political groups or anything. There were clubs. They weren't political at all. I was just a kid going to school. Besides meeting my mentor, Sal Castro, he was one of my teachers. And he invited me to attend what was called then, the Mexican American Leadership Conference that was sponsored by the County Human Relations Commission. There were students from all over the county that attended. And that was a real mind blower to me, because my world was very, very small. Meeting kids who lived in places I had never heard of, like Pomona, I had never heard of that place! To me it was like on Mars.

After the conference, a few of us got together, both high school and college students, and we formed an organization, we called ourselves the Young Citizens for Community Action. We all had similar concerns about our communities and that was our mission, to do what we could to make our communities better. We helped the then-burgeoning United Farmworkers Movement, we protested the Vietnam War, we protested police brutality. But soon enough, we got around to talking about our individual schools. And we realized we had the same complaints. Our buildings were falling down. Our

classrooms were overcrowded. There weren't enough books to go around, the libraries had no books. Our teachers say mean things to us.

Q(interviewer): You mean, racist things?

A(Paula). Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And, we had gone to school hearing that stuff all our lives. We internalized it. It seemed normal to us."

What is your initial reaction?

Does this remind you of other places, communities or historical patterns?

What questions does this raise for you?