Ol’ Time Religion in a Brave New World

It is well known that churches have been the center of the lives of many African-Americans in this country. Although some may not be very religious, members view churches as places to meet others in their community, hold political discussions, hear eloquent speakers, and show off their “Sunday Best.” Indeed, church was a place to see and be seen.

However, it is not known whether Negro church members in Western states had the same opinions about religious institutions at Southerners did. Some authors have written that before the First Great Migration of WWI, black Americans in Western states saw themselves as being more refined than lesser-educated southern Negroes. Douglas Daniels states in his book *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* that early black pioneers were very different from our modern image of ex-slaves. They often attended Shakespearean plays and enjoyed orchestral music over gospel. They shied award from living in black enclaves in the city. They were more than freed-men from the shackles of slavery; they were free-men able to aspire as they pleased.

By looking at the metamorphosis of the Negro churches in Los Angeles from 1885 to 1935, we find that there was a definite change in the role of the churches. The earlier churches became large political machines, while the smaller “store-front” institutions were centers for more simple forms of enjoyment.

The Different Denominations of Los Angeles’ Negro Churches

From the first establishment of a predominantly Afro-American church in Los Angeles after reconstruction to more modern times, there have been a vast variety of religious institutions in Southern California. In 1934, over 60 such institutions were recorded alone.¹

This paper will divide its focus among fifteen distinct denominations:

- Baptist (National Convention)
- African Methodist Episcopal
- African Methodist Episcopal Zion

¹ J. Max Bond. *Black Los Angeles*. page 207
Some of these denominations were modeled after well-established practices found in the Southern states, while others were merely short-lived off-shoots. To understand churches in the West, we must look at how Negro institutions began in the South.

Often, slaves would attend their masters’ institutions, but during the later half of the 1700’s, blacks began establishing small churches throughout the country. Most were copies of slave masters’ institutions, and services were usually held in vacant buildings such as farm houses. Eventually, by the mid 1800’s, more churches with predominantly black congregations sprang up.

During this time, black institutions in the West began to crystallize. However, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 forced many blacks to flee to Canada. It should be no surprise that several Negro churches, including the historic First Baptist Church if Toronto, were established as early as 1840. Abolitionists encouraged the formation of Negro churches, so the Colored Baptist Convention of 1853 was held. In fact, most leaders of the abolitionist movement were Methodist and Baptist preachers.

There was some discussion both during and after the Civil War about the role of black Baptist churches as a significant part of the Baptist church. National Baptist bodies met in Montgomery, Alabama in 1894 to discuss a national union of Negro Baptist ministers. Because nothing was resolved, a second discussion the following year resulted. At this meeting, it was decided that the “Primitive Baptist Churches” were valid institutions, and they were accepted into the mainstream denomination.

Other denominations had different beginnings. Black Methodists withdrew from the Methodist Church as early as 1800, and formed several independent bodies. The African Methodist Episcopal was created in 1816, while the African Methodist Episcopal Zion was created just four years later, in 1821.
The African Methodists met in New York City for twenty-five years starting in 1771, five years after the founding of the John Street Methodist Society. The African Methodists were not a formal society until 1799, when plans were made to purchase property and build a chapel. Reverend John McClaskey, acting for the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, drew up the articles of agreement in 1801. Twenty-six years later, the African Chapel, called Zion, and their companion chapel, Ashbury, withdrew from the Methodist church after a property dispute. Zion’s pastor, Reverend William Stillwell, led the secession. The first yearly conference of this group took place on June 21, 1821, with a total membership of 1,410.

Several independent congregations such as the Independent and Congregational churches sprang up in Los Angeles, as we will see, as off-shoots of larger institutions. Other churches, such as Seventh Day Adventist, Church of Christ, Holiness, and Christian were smaller and did not have a major impact on the political facade of the city. However, many immigrants from the South found these churches as the only places they could truly call “home.”

Black Los Angeles from 1885 to 1900

Black Americans have been in Los Angeles since its founding in 1781. Of the 44 original settlers, 26 were either black or mulatto. In 1900, there were only 2,131 blacks in the city (about 2% of the total population), but by 1910, the population had grown to 7,599. During this period, some blacks concentrated in rooming houses along First and Second streets, while businesses were established on nearby Weller street. However, most blacks did not concentrate themselves in any one area.

There were very few churches in Los Angeles at the time. Negro residents had the option of either attending the racially mixed First Baptist Church, or the First African Methodist Episcopal. Eventually, Negro members of First Baptist decided to create another Negro Institution. On May 13, 1885, Second Baptist Church was founded.

Reverend S. C. Pierce was the first pastor, and served the congregation for two years. Problems developed, so he left the church with members who were faithful to him, and

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2 LarneD rf. h Th City of Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto. page 327
3 Douglas Daniels. Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco. page 72
4 Los Angeles Sentinel. Thursday, May 12, 1994. page C-8
established New Hope Baptist. Reverend C. H. Anderson took his place, and helped build Second Baptist’s first edifice in 1887. The building was located on Maple street, between 7th and 8th avenues. By 1892, when membership began to grow rapidly, a two-story brick edifice was constructed on the same location, 740 Maple Avenue.

Before the First Great Migration: 1900 to 1915

George A. Beavers was born in Atlanta, Georgia on October 30, 1891. His parents were members of a local African Methodist Episcopal Church (St. Paul’s First AME), although Beavers considered them to be devout Christians. George Beavers, Sr. was a laborer in a grocery store, while Annie Andrews did laundry work for private families. They lived very near what is now called Spelman College.

The Beavers moved to Los Angeles in 1903. The three youngest children, George Jr., Mary Elmyra, and Leroy, soon gained new sister when Helen was born in the new city. The family quickly joined the First African Methodist Episcopal, the historic 8th and Towne Avenue church. As a teenager, George, Jr. followed the example his parents had set; he became involved in the church, and was active in the Young People’s Christian Endeavor Society. In fact, Beavers was elected president, and replaced Paul R. Williams.

Beavers became engaged to marry Mae Hutcherson, one of his schoolmates, and a fellow emigrant from Atlanta. After the death of Hutcherson’s mother, and a brief postponement, the two teenagers were married at First AME in 1911. They moved into the house next door to Beaver’s parents, on East Washington Street near Santa Fe Avenue.

As a young adult, George Beavers found the church to be a great foundation.

The social life revolved around churches, and so far as I was concerned, of course, there were other activities, dance, [and] pavilion dance clubs... But being brought up in the Christian environment, I didn’t have any experience with what was called the night-clubs, and things like that.

Well, I think that is generally true [that progressive blacks at the time probably were not so much involved in that kind of social life], and I think the reason goes back to the important part that the church life played in developing [one’s morals]. ... I was greatly influenced by my church

5 J. Max Bond. *Black Los Angeles*. page 203
6 Ranford Hopkins, *In Quest of Full Citizenship*: George Beavers. page 1
7 Paul Revere Williams was a famous architect in Los Angeles during this period. He designed more than 400 homes and 3,000 buildings. He won the Spingarn Medal of the NAACP in 1953.
activities and the training there and the problems that we observed, and problems that we were trying to solve.\(^8\)

The Beavers family did not fit into the typical image of black family migrating from the South. In fact, the black population in Los Angeles was very different before the Great Migration of WWI. By 1920, an impressive 58% of Los Angeleans were from Southern states, while less than 25% were from Pacific states and 27% from West South Central states.\(^9\) However, before 1920 black Angeleans lived as their San Franciscan counterparts did; blacks decided to live not as a concentrated group, but as free-willed Americans.\(^10\) They did not live in one part of the city, and create a concentrated community. In 1900, 37% of California's blacks were from Pacific states, and less than half were from southern states. The largest population came from South Atlantic states. This suggests that a large percentage of the population was made up of native born Californians. These residents actually showed a willingness to adapt non-southern cultures.\(^11\) Earlier black migrants decided to live among wealthy whites and more prominent citizens. This was typical for western Blacks; the same happened in Oakland as well.\(^12\)

\(^8\) Ranford Hopkins, *In Quest of Full Citizenship: George Beavers*. pages 11 - 13

\(^9\) Lawrence De Graff. *The City of Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto*. page 331


\(^11\) Lawrence De Graff. *The City of Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto*. page 331

\(^12\) Douglas Daniels. *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco*. 
George Beaver once described this period by saying,

You have to understand that it was a very small Negro population in California at the time. And they couldn’t follow the patterns of segregation as ... had been done in the South, because there just were not enough black Americans here. ... That was to come later when they [white Americans] learned ... from the South how to promote segregation.  

Many of the politics of blacks in California shifted from northern to southern California by 1906, mostly because the black population was greater in the lower half of the state. Thus, information in general about churches in California can be used to infer details about religious institutions in Los Angeles.

Most of the churches in Southern California during this time were Baptist, with African Methodist Episcopal congregations making a large contribution to Los Angeles’ black religious community. There were no other denominations in California at the time.
The religious community in Los Angeles was very small before the Great Migration. In 1904, there were only two African Methodist Episcopal Churches in Los Angeles, one being First AME (the historic 8th and Towne Avenue church). Each had 400 members. There were still only a handful of Baptist churches. Even so, Second Baptist changed pastors in 1907 when Reverend C. H. Anderson was replaced by Reverend J. L. McCoy.

Although these churches were few in number, they were large in size. This is different from the make-up of churches in Southern states. There, institutions are very small, and have about 30 members. In Los Angeles, most church sizes ranged near 100.
The First Influx of Southerners: 1915 to 1930

George Beavers was so inspired by the church, that he was one of the founders of the PeopleÕs Independent Church of Christ. Beavers recalled how the church was formed.

The excitement of 1915 still lingers in my memory. [There was an] aroused [reaction of a large group of sincere members of First AME ... to the abuse of authority by the bishop of the district. This involved the bishop’s action of terminating the pastorate of the church, Reverend Napoleon P. Greggs, who had made a tremendous impact upon the Los Angeles community, as well as members of the church.

He was a man of sterling character, outstanding ability, Christian zeal, and a most eloquent pulpit orator. He had not served a maximum term of pastorate, and the membership had petitioned the bishop to return him for another term of service.

On October 3, 1915, after trying for several weeks to have the bishop to give some consideration to that petition, a body of members congregated in the Christian Church on East Eighth Street.16

16 The Christian Church was located just down the street from First AME, on the corner of Eighth and Wall. Reverend M. Frederick Mitchell was the pastor.
They declared themselves a separate and independent body under the name and title of First Independent Church.

The group them authorized an invitation to be extended to the Reverend N. P. Greggs to accept the pastorate of the church. On October 6, 1915, the Reverend Greggs accepted the invitation, and the church was born. ... [It] later became known as the People’s Independent Church of Christ, and [was] located at [the corner of] 18th and Paloma streets.

I had the pleasure and privilege of serving as secretary of the organizing group, and was elected to the position of church clerk of the permanent organization.17

The People’s Independent Church of Christ was one of the largest churches in Los Angeles at the time. Reverend N. P. Greggs recalled,

The Bishop and I had a difference, so I left the church [First AME]. Forty-seven members left with me, and we began our church in a hall. We made this move on October 4, 1915.

On March 17, 1916, we had entered our new building, which cost us $25,000. The ground cost $6,500. By 1923, we had outgrown the edifice, so we rebuilt the church at the cost of $40,000. The pipe organ cost $12,900, and the furnishings $6,500. In a few years we had reduced the entire debt to $6,500, but it seemed to me we would never be out of debt.18

The People’s Independent Church of Christ was very involved in the community. It soon created a Young People’s Lyceum, which catered to children ranging from Kindergarten age to young adults.19 It would produce weekend plays involving young children from all religious backgrounds in the local neighborhood. In fact, native Los Angelean Ralph Johnson Bunche acted in a few productions.

Other churches also grew in Los Angeles during this period. Second Baptist changed pastors twice, first when Reverend J. L. McCoy was replaced with Reverend H. D. Prowd in 1915. Prowd served for five years, and apparently was very popular. There were signs that Dr. Prowd was well liked in various parts of the country as well. In 1919, the California Eagle ran the following front page article:

17 Ranford Hopkins, *In Quest of Full Citizenship*: George Beavers. pages 35 - 37
Dr. H. D. Prowd, popular pastor of the Second Baptist Church, after sitting in the session of the National Baptist Convention at Newark, New Jersey, is still in the East being deluged with invitation to visit friends in Cincinnati, New York, and Atlanta. While in the East it is rumored that the Doctor will visit his daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. B. G. Brawley at Atlanta, where Mr. Brawley is dean of Morehouse College and probably will visit Cincinnati en route West where his old friends are clamoring to see him.20

The church was without a pastor for a few months after Dr. Prowd left in late 1920, but soon Dr. Thomas L. Griffith became the fifth pastor in September of 1921. The California Eagle felt this was important enough to run as a front page article.21 Griffith was originally from Virginia, and received his degree from Virginia Union University. Just three years later, Griffith had plans drawn to build another edifice for the church. Both Paul R. Williams, a close friend of George Beavers and member of the People’s Independent Church, and Norman F. Marsh were the architects.

When the new building was completed in late 1925, Dr. Griffith planned to have a grand opening and dedication. None less than Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. of Abyssinian Baptist in New York dedicated the church edifice on Sunday, January 3, 1926.22 The church still meets at this location today, at 2412 Griffith Avenue.

Even the historic 8th and Towne Avenue church - First AME - went through some changes. Its original pastor, Reverend J. Logan Craw, retired in September of 1919, and Reverend Ward took his place.23 First AME was rebuilt in 1921, after it had some damage.24

A young reverend named A. P. Shaw also came into prominence during this period. As pastor of Wesley Methodist Episcopal church (located just down the street from First AME on 8th and San Julian streets), he had the opportunity to speak at and organize some prominent rallies. The following article appeared a 1919 issue of the California Eagle:

All of the people should get in line for the grand rally to be held Monday night, September 29th at Wesley Chapel, 8th and San Julian streets.

At this meeting these notable speakers will expose the cause of the people in all walks of labor:

20 California Eagle. September 27, 1919

21 California Eagle. September 10, 1921

22 He should not be confused with his son, Adam Powell, Jr., who was much more famous.

23 California Eagle. September 20, 1919

24 According to the September 10, 1921 issue of the California Eagle, the First AME edifice located at 8th and Towne had its reopening after some reconstruction had to be done. I could not find out why.
Mayor M. P. Snyder; Councilman Fred C. Wheeler; Ralph Criswell; S. P. Johnson, Esq.; Supervisor J. H. Beane and Reverend A. P. Shaw.

Committee Arrangements: William Qualls; C. E. Johnson; J. A. Warren; J. A. Jackson; J. B. Loving; G. W. Wickliffe; Jas. Irvin; John S. Montgomery; Milton W. Lewis; Alex Pierson.

This meeting is under the auspices of Wesley M. E. Church and the Republican and Patriotic League. All laboring people should attend this meeting. Everybody invited.

Reverend A. P. Shaw, Pastor
C. Olivier, Chairman of Executive Committee, Republican Patriotic League

The Methodist Episcopalian churches gained a new member to its family. There were only two such churches during the 1910’s, Wesley ME and Hamilton ME, located down the street from People’s Independent at 18th and Naomi street. Farther south, A young man named Reverend Stout helped to form Watts Methodist Episcopal Mission. In autumn of 1922, they advertised their first meeting in the Eagle, and even invited members from Wesley and Hamilton to attend.

The only Negro Episcopal church in Los Angeles during this period, St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, was rarely discussed in the Eagle. In fact, the only article to appear during this entire period was an announcement for a “Kiddie’s Minstrel” show.

Towards the later end of the 1920’s, Baptist ministers in Los Angeles decided to create an organization that would bring them closer together. The Los Angeles Baptist Ministers Union was a group consisting of every Baptist pastor that would meet every Monday at 1 PM. Usually, the group met at Metropolitan Baptist Church, located at 37th and Paloma streets, with Reverend N. H. Jones presiding. The group would have various speakers discuss relevant topics such as “Early Baptist Ministers and their Ministry,” “Promotion of Goodwill between Ordained and Un-

25 It may be possible that he is related to Reverend S. M. Beane of Hamilton Methodist Episcopal church. I have not been able to find out.

26 California Eagle. September 27, 1919

27 California Eagle. October 28, 1922

28 California Eagle. October 28, 1922
ordained Baptist Ministers,” and “Baptist Ministry, How to Best Secure and Maintain It.” Each meeting would end with a hearty dinner.29

### Total Number of Negro Churches in California in Each Denomination (1906)

![Chart showing total number of Negro churches in California by denomination in 1906](chart.png)

This time period saw the empowerment of larger hrhs uha elyM,Scn ats,adFrAE Te eoemr oiiia yiivtn elkonfgrst pa o hi ogeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaations. However, smaller “store-front” churches began to pop-up around the city as well. There was an influx of southerners from states such as Texas, Louisiana, and Georgia that were more comfortable attending smaller churches. As these immigrants arrived, they became members of and created smaller churches. The larger churches tended to keep the same older congregations.30

29 These particular topics were found in the April 10, 1931 edition of the *California Eagle*. I could not find when the Union began, but it is mentioned in every issue of the *Eagle* for the early part of the 1930’s.

30 The numbers come from the 1916 U. S. Census Supplemental Report, *Religious Bodies*, volumes I and II.
There were definite changes in the religious make-up of California, because the African Methodist Episcopal churches decreased in number. Many of these members joined other smaller churches. Even those immigrants who did not want to join larger churches joined the People’s Independent Church, Lincoln Memorial Congregational Church, and Christian churches such as Birch Street. The Independent church was so popular that in less than ten years the population grew to 3,000. The Roman Catholic church catered to immigrants mostly from Louisiana.
The Next Great Influx: 1930 to 1940

Before the second Great Migration of the Depression, there were relatively few Negro churches in Los Angeles. However, after blacks migrated to California during early 1930’s, many churches mushroomed. J. Max Bond determined that there were 66 Negro institutions in the city in 1934.31

There were 31 Baptist churches, which included Beth-Eden, First Baptist, First Missionary, Macedonia, Metropolitan, Mt. Olive, Mt. Zion, New Hope, Olivet, Pilgrim, Progressive, Salem, Second Baptist, Southern Baptist, St. John Missionary, St. Paul Institutional, and Trinity.

There was a considerable smaller number of Methodist Episcopalian congregations. There were four African Methodist Episcopal churches, which included First AME, Second AME, and West Side Mission. There were three African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches, which included AME Zion and First AME Zion. There were two Colored Methodist Episcopal

31 J. Max Bond, Black Los Angeles. page 207
churches; Phillips Chapel was one. There were three Methodist Episcopal churches; they were Hamilton, Watts Mission, and Wesley.\textsuperscript{32}

There were only a handful of other denominations. The congregational church Lincoln Memorial had 269 members. The Episcopal church St. Philip’s had 225 members. However, the People’s Independent Church began to thrive; it had over 3,000 members.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{Total Number of Negro Churches in Los Angeles in Each Denomination (1934)}

The AME church became more popular during this period, and the Baptist churches became smaller. The average size of the AME churches increased, and the number of Negro Baptists in the city grew, but the average size of each Baptist church grew smaller. Immigrants from southern states began to influence Los Angeles more; they brought their religious beliefs with them, when more members joined AME churches, as well as created more Baptist churches.

\textsuperscript{32} Bond states that there are only two Methodist Episcopal churches. He did not include Watts Mission as part of his survey because he researched the Central District.

\textsuperscript{33} The data in this section comes from J. Max Bond, \textit{Black Los Angeles}. page 207
Smaller churches began to die out, probably because of the Great Depression. Many churches were in debt before the Depression began, and small membership brought less income. Members had no choice but to attend non-denominational churches, such as Lincoln Memorial Congregational or the People’s Independent Church.

**Total Number of Members in Each Denomination for Negro Churches in Los Angeles (1934)**

In the southern section of the Central District, St. Paul Institutional Baptist Church was going through some interesting changes. This small Baptist church, located on the corner of 21st and Naomi streets, just blocks from the Hamilton Methodist Episcopal church, changed pastors in early 1930. Reverend R. N. Holt, DD, stepped down, and the young Reverend Samuel A. Williams took over. He wanted to make the church more structured, so he formed a 30 member official board to run the church like a small “government.” Not more than a year later, several church members, against the general wishes of the church body, became upset with Reverend Williams’ seizure of power, and sought a restraining order against the official board. However, a judge voted the motion down, and felt the church had a right to continue conducting its business as usual. That following Sunday, the church rejoiced as it never had before; Reverend Williams
could relax now that his actions were justified, and be thankful as he married Olive Luoville after the service.34

### Average Number of Members in Each Church for Negro Churches in Los Angeles (1934)

National Negro Health Week became an integral part of the Negro community in Los Angeles during the 1930’s. Although it was celebrated back in the 1920’s, it did not gain prominence until this decade.35 The event was sponsored every year by the Golden State Guarantee Fund Insurance Company, of which George Beaver was Vice-President. Several forums were held at different churches across the city. For example, in 1931, the opening ceremonies were held on Sunday, April 5 at Olivet Baptist Church, with speeches given on Monday (“Medical Day”) at Wesley Chapel, and closing ceremonies on Sunday, April 12 at the People’s Independent Church.

34 California Eagle. April 3, 1931

35 I never saw any mention of this event during the 1920’s, but it is mentioned several times during the 1930’s. The April 10, 1931 issue of the California Eagle had several articles about the week.
In 1931, the community held a Vocational Opportunity Week just two weeks later. On Sunday, April 19, opening ceremonies included a discussion at the People’s Independent Church for young adults entitled “Make Your Plans for the Future.” It was sponsored by Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. That same day, there was a discussion on “The Industrial Future of the Negro in Los Angeles” held at Beth-Eden Baptist Temple. It was sponsored by the Industrial Council. The next Sunday, April 26, closing ceremonies sponsored by the Citizen’s Committee were held at Second Baptist Church.36

Second Baptist continued to make the news when Dr. Griffith brought Langston Hughes into town. He gave a poetry reading in 1932, during a Thursday night.37 The event was well advertised, as it appeared in the California Eagle for several weeks prior.

Conclusion

The church has always been an institution for the Negro community to hold weddings, receptions, recitals, lectures, discussions, and fund-raising rallies. Many members find they can increase their business by making friends with pastors, or get a start in life by acquiring a loan through the church. However, “the church” is not as homogeneous as we might choose to believe; migrants from the South found this out as soon as they entered the city.

There seems to be a dilemma when it comes to migrants deciding which church to call a home. Larger churches can provide the resources for immigrants to establish themselves, but they may be intimidating for those who have never been in a foreign state, or a congregation where they do not know every member on a first-name basis. However, smaller churches will not be able to provide the resources, and will ask the migrant to give more as an offering. He will feel more comfortable with this size of congregation, but embarrassed when he cannot afford to give his tithe.

This problem intensified during the Second Great Migration of the Depression. Blacks came from southern states, where they were used to small congregations, but had very little money to give. Negro churches became very indebted, and often closed. It has been quoted that

36 Many of these events were found in the April 10, 1931 and April 17, 1931 issues of the California Eagle. I could not find if this were held in previous or future years.

37 Hughes spoke at Second Baptist on April 21, 1932. The California Eagle began advertising the event in its April 1, 1932 issue, but I did not find an article about the reading in the April 22 or April 29 issues.
the total indebtedness for Negro churches exceeded $500 thousand in the 1930’s. As a result, small churches were like ephemeral mushrooms; they existed for as little as months or weeks, then passed away with little recognition.

The larger churches may have controlled more of the political scene in Los Angeles, because larger congregations gave politicians a forum in which to sway a larger mass of people. With this, a rift appeared. Larger congregations usually had a wealthier and more established membership, while smaller congregations had more unemployed and newer immigrants. Often, smaller church members resented larger church-goers, very much as blue-collar laborers distrust white-collar workers. In fact, larger congregations supported more “well-to-do” organizations such as the NAACP, while smaller congregations supported more “for the people” movements such as the UNIA.

The religious community in Los Angeles was a spectrum of economic and political differences, although the black community was small enough to be ignored by other city residents. This variety reflects the thought that in the macroscopic community of Southern California, there is a microcosmic culture that is as diverse as any other.

38 J. Max Bond. *Black Los Angeles*. page 218