
Original Article

Community resistance and conditional patriotism in cold war Los Angeles: The battle for Chavez Ravine

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Abstract This article examines the resistance to displacement of residents of Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles, a community slated to be razed for a public housing project in the post-war era (1950–1953). Community women, mostly Mexican American, overtly identified themselves as patriotic wives and daughters of veterans who were entitled to keep their homes and live in peace. They declared that their patriotism was conditional, and that the seizure of their homes and destruction of their community threatened the basis of their patriotism; displacement, they suggested, might radicalize them. While their efforts to preserve the Chavez Ravine community were unsuccessful, they influenced local politics and became a lasting symbol of Chicano displacement and resistance.

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Introduction

On 8 May 1959, the City of Los Angeles evicted the Aréchiga family from their Chavez Ravine home of 36 years. Once the family had been removed, a bulldozer reduced the home to a pile of rubble. Eminent domain proceedings

had begun 8 years earlier, when the city planned to seize the land for a major public housing project. Long before the final evictions, however, the housing project had been canceled, and the Los Angeles City Council was in the process of transferring the land to the Los Angeles Dodgers, for the future site of Dodger Stadium. The 10-year debate over the use of the land leading up to the dramatic final evictions came to be known to the people of Los Angeles as the *Battle of Chavez Ravine* (Hines, 1982a).

This article examines the vocal, organized resistance of the people of Chavez Ravine to the destruction of their community, and the displacement of the residents for the construction of a public housing project that was never built. Largely women, they spoke out during public hearings, wrote letters, and made statements to the media in a gendered discourse of resistance to displacement. In a language of patriotic post-war motherhood, the women made direct references to husbands and sons in military service to underpin the moral legitimacy of their statements. And yet, they made it clear that their patriotism was conditional. They had worked hard, purchased property and sent their men to war despite the discrimination that they faced at home. If the Government could take their homes, the symbol of American belonging, it threatened the foundation upon which their patriotism was based, and suggested that the United States had failed to live up to its promise. The people of Chavez Ravine, moreover, challenged projects that were supported by the entire left, liberal, and labor community, projects that promised to help poor communities, including Mexican Americans, nationwide. In doing so, they opposed positions taken by Mexican American leaders, and allied themselves, if only briefly, with local conservatives.

Recently, significant new research on the history of Chavez Ravine has been published, but this work focuses on the role the residents played in the process, and the impact of these events on the residents of Chavez Ravine.¹ Early studies that explored the history of Chavez Ravine included Rodolfo F. Acuña's (1984) history of East Los Angeles in the post-war era and Thomas Hines (1982b) biography of modernist architect Richard Neutra. Most have focused on the protracted, citywide struggle to halt the public housing program and the sale of the Chavez Ravine land (for US\$1!) to the Los Angeles Dodgers. Several excellent recent studies have covered aspects of the story, including Eric Avila's *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (2004); and Robert Sherrill's *First Amendment Felon: The Story of Frank Wilkinson, his 132,000-page FBI File, and his Epic Fight for Civil Rights and Liberties* (2005). Undoubtedly, the most prolific author in this area is Don Parson, who wrote *Making A Better World: Public Housing, The Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (2005), and several excellent articles (1991, 1993, 1999, 2005). Additionally, Raúl Homero Villa (1998) and David Díaz (2005) have recently examined the Latino urban experience, including Chavez Ravine. Most recently, Tara J. Yosso and David G. García's (2007)

1 This article is based on several chapters of my 1999 dissertation: *The Battle for Chavez Ravine, Public Policy and Chicano Community Resistance in Post War Los Angeles, 1945–1962*, Department of History, University of California, Berkeley.



article “This is No Slum!” is exceptional. The story of Chavez Ravine has also inspired art, including a panel on the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* by artist Judy Baca, Don Normark’s *Chavez Ravine 1949, A Los Angeles Story* (1999), and the play *Chavez Ravine* by the group Culture Clash (2003).² The struggle of the residents of Chavez Ravine to defend their community has become part of the living cultural memory of many Southern Californians, and has inspired both scholarly and artistic works. This piece, in particular, analyzes the methods and strategies adopted by diverse residents of Chavez Ravine, especially the women of the community.

2 Baca, J. (1983); Normark, 1999; Culture Clash, 2003; and Cooder, R. 2005.

Historical Context of Chavez Ravine

In late 1949, the residents of Palo Verde, Bishop Canyon, and La Loma – collectively known as Chavez Ravine – learned of a planned public housing project that required the entire community to be displaced and relocated. Located in the hills immediately northeast of downtown Los Angeles, Chavez Ravine was home to over 1100 families, many who had lived there for several generations. Developed as a Mexican suburb early in the century, Chavez Ravine had become a healthy, multigenerational Mexican barrio by the end of World War II. Since at least that time, the residents had been working to improve their community. They had petitioned the city council to put in streetlights, pave streets and provide bus service to the area. Through their own efforts, they had been successful in decreasing juvenile delinquency and crime, and in increasing attendance at the local schools. After all these efforts, they were shocked to learn that their community had been declared “a blighted area,” and that they would have to move so that their homes and community could be destroyed, and public housing put up in its place (McWilliams, 1990, 203).³

The residents had good reason to defend their community. While Chavez Ravine had its share of social problems, it had the highest proportion of property owners and the highest social indicators of any Mexican American community in the Los Angeles area (Frank, 1949).⁴ Furthermore, a shortage of affordable housing, residential segregation, and the exclusion of Mexican Americans from new housing developments made the prospect of being displaced and finding new homes especially onerous. A public housing project in Chavez Ravine would thus turn a sizeable group of homeowners into renters. Those who moved out did not receive adequate compensation for their homes and land, and found that segregation and high prices excluded them from many areas.

By opposing the public housing project, the people of Chavez Ravine were rejecting a program supported by the entire Mexican American and liberal establishment, including Councilman Edward Roybal, the first Mexican

3 Chavez Ravine was only two-thirds Mexican and Mexican American, but was widely considered a “Mexican” neighborhood. A designation of *blight* meant that 20 per cent or more of the homes in an area had one or more “substandard” elements and could be subject to *slum*

clearance or redevelopment.

- 4 The term “Mexican American” is historically specific; see Tino Villanueva (1985) for an excellent analysis of the term.
- 5 Juan Gómez-Quiñones mentions that ANMA was “involved in campaigns against police brutality, housing discrimination ... deportation raids, and the media stereotyping of Mexicans and other Spanish-speaking people” (Gómez-Quiñones 1990, 51).

American elected to the City Council since the nineteenth century. Although he was one of the strongest and longstanding supporters of public housing, including the units planned for Chavez Ravine, Roybal steadfastly defended the residents’ rights to fair treatment and a fair price for their homes. The City Center District Improvement Association (CCDIA), a Chavez Ravine community organization, publicly rejected assistance from the leftist Asociación Nacional México-Americana, or ANMA, refusing aid from any organization that did not adhere to “American Principles” (Urrutia, 1984; García, 1989, 199–227; and Gómez-Quiñones, 1990, 51).⁵ Instead, the community allied itself with the conservative real estate lobby, which argued that public housing was “socialist,” and that adequate low cost housing could be attained by the enforcement of existing laws and building codes. That the residents allied themselves with the real estate interests is not surprising, since their traditional allies were unanimous in supporting public housing. And yet, they were reluctant to denounce public housing altogether, refusing to adopt the real estate lobby’s mantra that public housing was “socialist.”

Most importantly, the majority of those who spoke out and wrote letters were women – Mexican, Mexican American, white and Asian American – who lived in Chavez Ravine. They spoke and wrote in the language of conservative post-war patriotism, but it was a tentative, conditional patriotism. Their sons, brothers and husbands fought in World War II, and in Korea. Speaking in the gendered discourse of mothers and wives of veterans, they emphasized their contributions to the “war effort” of World War II as citizens who had earned the right to enjoy their homes in peace. Settlers of Chavez Ravine, they were pioneers who built their homes with their own hands, and raised their children to be patriotic citizens, just like earlier generations of Americans. They had worked to improve their community, and they rejected a project that proposed to benefit others at their expense. In doing so, Chavez Ravine residents challenged, head on, the City Council and the dozens of high profile civic leaders and “experts” that supported the public housing projects, denouncing what they saw as an unjustified plan. They walked a fine line, both defining themselves as exemplars of American patriotism and suggesting that if the City forcibly displaced them, they might be radicalized in the process (Lopez, 1999).

Los Angeles, with a city administration dominated by liberal social planners, was one of the first cities to take advantage of the passage of the 1949 Housing Act, applying for \$110,000,000 in Federal Funds to construct 10,000 units of low-rent public housing at 11 sites around the city. The housing plan was part of a coordinated citywide redevelopment program that would have linked freeway construction and urban redevelopment with slum clearance and public housing, while also addressing an ongoing housing shortage. In August 1949, the City Council unanimously approved the plan.

Two competing visions of Los Angeles’ urban redevelopment had emerged in the post-war era: the conservative vision, favoring the free play of the market,



and the liberal vision that included desegregation and an aggressive public housing program. Supporters of the liberal program included organizations such as the Citizens Housing Council, organized labor, veterans, religious organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Community Service Organization (CSO), and Mexican American civic leaders such as Councilman Edward Roybal and, publisher Ignacio López. Advocates for public housing, called “public housers”, argued that the infusion of federal money would provide jobs for workers, contracts for local businesses, housing for the needy, and would stimulate the local economy. They argued that slums and “blighted” conditions caused overcrowding and fostered delinquency and rat infestations that spread disease and endangered public health. A coordinated program of urban redevelopment, coupled with a racially integrated public housing program would address these ills.

The liberal program was backed by the Mayor, liberal Republican Fletcher Bowron, and the Director of the Los Angeles City Housing Authority (CHA) Howard Holtzendorff; but its most outspoken advocate was CHA Information Director Frank Wilkinson, who epitomized the social engineers who believed that razing the slums and building low-cost public housing would improve the living standards of the poor and reduce poverty, crime, delinquency, disease, and residential segregation citywide (Sherrill, 2005, 68).

Conservative interests, such as the real estate lobby that included the *Los Angeles Times*, and smaller groups like the Small Property Owners Association (SPOA) wanted slum clearance and urban redevelopment too, but argued that the need for housing was being met by private developers, and that public housing was socialism, or at least “creeping socialism.” They pressured the City Council on public housing, and almost immediately after approving the program, council members shifted, one by one, from unanimous support for public housing, to a slight majority against it. Two weeks after the passage of Proposition 10, which made future housing programs subject to the approval of voters, the City Council approved the selection of 11 sites for public housing projects, this time by a majority. Chavez Ravine was one of the approved sites (Parson, 2005, 104).

The public housing project planned for Chavez Ravine would have included almost one-third of the units planned for the city. To be called “Elysian Park Heights,” the project proposed a transformation of both architecture and geography. The mostly single family dwellings would be replaced with 163 two-story buildings and twenty four 13-story apartment towers. And, in an act of deliberate erasure, a name change would elevate the *Ravine* to the *Heights*. According to the citywide plan, Elysian Park Heights would be constructed first, providing relocation housing for people displaced by other slum clearance, redevelopment, and public housing projects. For their sacrifice, the displaced residents were promised, in writing, first choice of the new housing, without respect to race (Sherrill, 2005).⁶

6 The promise of priority on housing is one of the most widely quoted

aspects of the program, but non-citizens were ineligible for public housing, so the Housing Authority may have made a promise it could not keep. Later events rendered this complication moot.

The Residents' Fight to Stay

Despite these promises, the people of Chavez Ravine were shocked and angered; they had worked hard, built a thriving community, and many of them owned their own homes (Frank, 1949; Alexander and Bryant, 1951). Thus, building public housing there would destroy what was arguably the most successful barrio in the city, and would turn a sizable group of homeowners into renters. Along with the homeowners of a number of other areas, they refused to cooperate with the city's plans, and spoke out vigorously against the choice of their district at public hearings held before the Planning Commission and the City Council. Their resistance, although unsuccessful, was passionate and organized, and the rhetoric they employed and the alliances they forged ran counter to conventional expectations of Mexican American political behavior for that era (*Frontier*, 1957; Hines, 1982a).

Frank Wilkinson, accompanied by Ignacio "Nacho" López, walked door-to-door convincing Chavez Ravine residents to move (Urrutia, 1984; García, 1989). The CHA guaranteed them first priority on new housing, rent scaled to income, and no racial discrimination (Sherrill, 2005, 74). On the other hand, some residents reported being threatened with forcible eviction (Suazo, 1953), and were intimidated into selling their homes for a low price. Through guarantees of future rental housing, and through intimidation, a large number of residents reluctantly agreed to sell and left their homes (Roybal Papers *Torch Reporter*, 1959).

The CHA, the Planning Commission and the City Council held public hearings that were heavily attended by proponents and opponents of public housing. While it was later alleged that paid employees of the CHA were heavily represented among the supporters in attendance, the opponents included not only residents of "blighted" areas to be redeveloped, but also members of affluent communities adjoining proposed housing projects, as in the case of Rose Hills. Other opponents included members of the SPOA, a vocal opponent of public housing (Investigation of Public Housing Activities in Los Angeles, 1953).

The people of Chavez Ravine had been well organized as a community since at least the end of the war, long before the proposed project had been announced. In particular, the CCDIA represented a number of Chavez Ravine residents, and was a leading force in opposing the housing project even before final agreement between the City and the Federal Housing Authority (Frank, 1949, 34–35, 48, 52–54; Alexander and Bryant, 1951, 60).⁷ The CCDIA met with both City Councilman Ed Roybal, a supporter of public housing, and with the SPOA. Importantly, the people of Chavez Ravine made a very clear decision to organize their struggle according to the laws and principles of the United States, refusing assistance from the radical. Even the name of the organization – CCDIA – suggests that they wanted to distance themselves from any suggestion of foreignness or radicalism.

7 Information on the City Center District Improvement Association is limited, but sources indicate sustained community



This decision illustrates the complexity of Mexican American civic life in the post-war era. In the case of CCDIA, their militancy reflects the fact that they viewed themselves not as foreigners but as citizens entitled to all the rights of citizens, including the right to own homes and preserve their community. According to historian Mario T. Garcia, this was characteristic of the emergent militancy of the Mexican American generation,

Americans of Mexican decent ... like their middle class contemporaries, were now sufficiently acculturated to recognize and demand their rights as US citizens. Rather than leading to conformity, Americanization or acculturation gave rise to protests in pursuit of American principles of democracy. (García, 1989, 176)

At the same time, their protest was couched in the conservative language of post-war patriotism. Considering the political environment in Los Angeles at the time, this is no surprise: their traditional allies were all supporters of the public housing project. The people of Chavez Ravine were opposing a program that was supported by the entire Mexican American political establishment. Even City Councilman Ed Roybal, who steadfastly defended the residents' right to fair treatment and a fair price for their homes, supported the public housing project in Chavez Ravine. The community adopted the real estate lobby's position that affordable housing could be achieved by enforcement of existing building codes. Most white opponents of public housing argued that public housing was "creeping socialism," a position not enthusiastically embraced by the people of Chavez Ravine. They emphasized that their homes were not blighted. Many pointed out that their sons, brothers, and husbands had fought in World War II. Was this what they had fought and died for? Finally, many of the people who spoke out publicly were women – Mexican, Mexican American, white and Asian American – who lived in Chavez Ravine.

activism to improve conditions both by petitioning the city, and by individual and group community improvement activities.

The Gendered Discourse of Resistance: The Public Hearings

The women of Chavez Ravine spoke out forcefully against the destruction of their community for the construction of Elysian Park Heights during two sets of public hearings held in April 1951, and June 1951. Those who spoke out included both men and women, with the CCDIA clearly occupying leadership. While men occupied the nominal leadership of the organization in the role of President and lead counsel, women clearly occupied the vanguard of the discursive attack on the housing project, and especially, on their own displacement for the project in Chavez Ravine. Specifically, the arguments presented by the men directly responded to statements made by proponents of the projects, while the women articulated their objections in terms of their role as patriotic mothers

and wives of veterans, and spoke from a position of moral authority that the men on both sides of the issue could not.

The roles that Mexican American women play in Mexican American community politics have been explored by several authors, most notably Mary S. Pardo in *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (1998). Traditionally, Mexican American women were expected not to engage in political or other public activities without the knowledge, assent, and even guidance of family members, ideally fathers or husbands. When women did become active, however, their “activism originated in family concerns and community networks, then generated broader political concerns and networks” (Pardo, 1998, 228). Thus, activities that are extensions of women’s domestic roles, such as those involving the home, the Church, or the schools, were increasingly seen as acceptable or even appropriate areas for women’s activism. In speaking about such issues, women had a moral authority that men did not, and occupied visible leadership positions, even when men occupied nominal leadership roles. Speaking about the Mothers of East LA, Pardo says they “based their theories about grassroots activism in everyday life and in their work as wives and mothers. Rather than allow themselves to be constricted by them, they used traditional and social identities in community action” (ibid, 230). The outspoken testimony by Chavez Ravine women at public hearings in defense of their community was thus consistent with their “family and community relationships,” and obligations (ibid, 231).

The first set of hearings was held by the Planning Commission on the week of 26 April 1951. The hearings’ official purpose was to determine if the project sites should be approved, but in truth, the contract between the City of Los Angeles and the Federal Housing Authority had been made, and there was no going back. The first day of hearings, held on 26 April 1951, was an emotional affair attended by at least 500 persons. Opponents packed the hearing chambers and harangued the council, making it clear that they had no faith in the intentions of the CHA, shouting “Don’t believe them. They’re trying to take your land. They’ve never cared about you before. Why should they now?” (Hines, 1982a; *Frontier*, 1957) Many carried placards with slogans like “MacArthur was kicked out ... Are We Next?” and “Priests should Stick to Religion – and Not Meddle in Politics,” a reference to Monsignor Thomas J. O’Dwyer of the Citizens’ Housing Council (*Frontier*, 1957). On the one hand was an impressive pantheon of civic leaders speaking on behalf of the proposed project: the CHA, representatives of the Catholic Church, and labor unions. On the other hand, speaking against the project were representatives from Chavez Ravine and their lawyer, Mr G.G. Bauman (La Opinión, 1951; Parson, 2005, 168).

CHA Executive Director Howard Holtendorff opened the hearing, emphasizing that the Chavez Ravine project was “the keystone to the entire future of replanning downtown Los Angeles” (City Planning Commission,



1951, 1). Stanley Furman, Development Counsel for the CHA, noting that Chavez Ravine was a “large, partially vacant area” blighted by substandard housing, asserted that temporarily housed veterans would have first preference at the new housing, making no mention of the people of Chavez Ravine (*ibid.*). Others who spoke in favor of the project included Frank Wilkinson, CHA Director of Information, Architect Richard Neutra, Monsignor O’Dwyer of the Citizens’ Housing Committee, and others. An impressive cross-section of experts and community interests favored public housing, including most Mexican American organizations, such as the CSO (*ibid.*).

After the pro-public housing testimony, the community, represented by the CCDIA, declared their desire to keep their homes and preserve their community. Women played a critical role as spokespersons, and reflected the multiethnic nature of the community. The CCDIA, said Baumen, had for several years been trying to improve conditions in the area, but to no avail.

I represent a number of clients in this area who have for a number of years come to me and said “What can we do to get some improvement here? What about some street lights? Why can’t we get the Health Department to give us help ... to improve the conditions that exist here?” If the Health Department is concerned, as they contend they are now, about conditions in this area, it is within their power to enforce the provisions of the City Code and the Health Laws relating to these premises.

“In other words,” Baumen continued, “we can keep the property in the hands of private owners, we can build up the community, [and] we can keep it on the tax roll without building high cost housing for low rent” (*ibid.*, 12–13). That public housing would be a tax burden on the community became the most salient and compelling argument to the public, as the debate evolved from one specific site location to a national debate in which public housing was equated with socialism. Another issue, one that was dropped as time went on, was the immigrant and non-citizen status of many of the residents of Chavez Ravine. Baumen refuted earlier assertions that all current residents would be “given priority” for moving into Elysian Park Heights, noting that some of the people of Chavez Ravine were “of Mexican-Spanish descent, some Italians,” and that “Federal Law does not permit them [to live in public housing] unless they are citizens” (*ibid.*). Homeowners were also ineligible for public housing (Land Purchase Policies, ND).

Responding to pictures of run down conditions, Manuel Cerda displayed photos of well-maintained properties, stating, “If you call this a slum, I don’t know what would be a good house.” Cerda emphasized the existing facilities in the Ravine, saying, “We have plenty of facilities in there. We have gas, water, lights.” He also pointed to the city’s failure to maintain the area, noting that, “The streets are very poor – but that is due to the City

Engineer and Council. They have not done anything for us” (City Planning Commission, 1951, 13).

Mabel Hom, local Girl Scout troupe leader and an Asian American, did not mince words. Declaring, “I am an American Citizen,” Ms Hom spoke at length, saying “I don’t need all these fancy maps and charts to say what I have to say.” She denounced veteran support of public housing, saying,

I should think you know how it feels to go over to protect a piece of what you call your home We did not know the Veterans were against our purpose of keeping our homes and ... I think it is very undemocratic of people to place the preference of Roger Young [Village Housing] Veterans over our 1100 families in Chavez Ravine. We have just as much right to a home as they have. (ibid.)

Furthermore, Ms Hom noted, the property owners of Chavez Ravine were “forced” to live there, because “discrimination forced us to buy into this area” when it was considered unsuitable for development. “But now these Capitollists (*sic*) find we have a lovely place, located close to every facility there is, and you want it.” Additionally, rather than calling public housing “creeping socialism,” Ms Hom suggested that the evicted residents might themselves become un-American, saying,

If this plan goes through, I assure you there will be 1100 families that will not be as American, with attitudes that they should possess. I am sure if you label us ‘Reds’ from now on it will be the fault of the Housing Authority group which has no right to push people around, as they have been pushing 1100 families in Chavez Ravine. (ibid, 13–14)⁸

8 Ironically, Mabel Hom lived just outside the boundaries of the redevelopment area, and her testimony was refuted on this basis in a written rebuttal submitted after the hearing.

The pro-American tone of her statement, her defense of private property rights and her attack on both big government and big capital make her statement especially interesting. While she did not adopt the charge of “socialism,” Ms Hom’s perspective illustrates the intensity of the anti-public housing feeling that was felt by many, especially those who were threatened with losing their homes, that public housing as a conspiracy of powerful interests arrayed against them. Most importantly, Ms Hom suggested that displacing Chavez Ravine homeowners might radicalize them, make them less “American,” even make them into “reds.”

The final statement recorded in opposition was given by Agnes Cerda, the Secretary of the CCDIA, and the wife of Manuel Cerda. Speaking as a “taxpayer and American Citizen,” and speaking on behalf of “the Mexican people,” Mrs Cerda also spoke in language that was pro-American. She likened the early generations of Mexican American homeowners of Chavez Ravine to other generations of American pioneers who came to the United States in search



of liberty, who built their homes with their own hands. She also denounced the CHA as un-American for taking their homes, saying,

I represent all of ... the Mexican people ... they came out here to the land of liberty and justice for all. They started one by one to build to the best of their ability and, after all these years, the City Health Department never thought about coming in there to see that these homes were up-to-date and standard. Now, when they have them built, with the sweat of their brow ... The Housing Authority comes in now and tries to take their homes away from them. It is not justice and not American policy.

Mrs Cerda, emphasizing the Mexican people of the community, equated their experience with the American ideals of liberty and justice. Although she denounced the proposed public housing project in Chavez Ravine, Mrs Cerda, like Ms Hom, chose not to suggest that public housing was “socialistic,” emphasizing “I don’t say housing projects are not right. They might be all right for the people that want to live in them, but we, as property owners, we want to keep our homes.” She also expressed skepticism about the motives of the Planning Commission and City Council, saying, “Let them live in those housing projects and give us their homes if they want to do so much for us.” Finally, like Ms Hom, Mrs Cerda also warned the Commission about the disenchantment and anxiety that dispossession and dislocation would cause for the Mexicans and other people of the Ravine. Identifying herself as the mother of a combat veteran and an American citizen, she appealed to public sympathy for veterans and their families, saying,

Take our homes away from us and you are taking away our incentive to be good American Citizens, [that] ... we are trying to raise our children to be. I know, I had a boy in the Second World War. Thank God he was lucky to come back. I have another one that it won’t be very long, if this keeps on, he will have to go too and when he comes back, is he going to fight over there and have to come and fight over here for a home he hasn’t got? Would you put your mother out of your home to give it to the Housing Authority? You would not. (ibid, 15)

Mrs Cerda’s words convey the nuance with which the people of Chavez Ravine sought to defend their homes. The women positioned themselves at the center of America’s patriotic and pioneering spirit, building their own homes by “the sweat of their brow,” and articulating their patriotism by raising their children to be good American citizens, even soldiers in wartime. But it was these idealized American values and trust in government that were now endangered by the very actions of the City Council and the CHA, representatives of both big business and big government. The expression of conditional patriotism was

a warning – or was it a threat? – the idea that the people of Chavez Ravine would be radicalized by the process of dislocation and dispossession was clearly well-thought out, but it may also have been true.

Others also spoke: Louis J. Scott, John Lorenz, Bertha Withers, Samuel Fegestad, Alfonso Mirabal, Marie Stancil, Frank Sanchez, Richard Suazo, Mosher M. Meyer and Margaret C. Loya all spoke, but no written record remains. According to the Council recorder's note, "because their testimony was more or less reiteration of what previous speakers said it has been omitted." By omitting their statements from the formal record while including those of "experts" in favor of the project, the council recorder committed a deliberate act of erasure, similar to that planned for the residents of Chavez Ravine (ibid, 15–16).

Despite the thoughtful and strategic arguments of the residents, the policy-oriented arguments in favor of public housing prevailed. On 17 May, the City Planning Commission approved eight sites for public housing, including Elysian Park Heights. The *Los Angeles Times*, however, focused on the approval of the Rose Hills site, in the middle of a white middle-class suburb in a front-page blurb. Public housing would go forward, and it would be placed, among other places, in Chavez Ravine. The residents did not give up, but appealed the Planning Commission's approval of the Elysian Park Heights, Rose Hills and other sites. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the appellants argued that the projects were not properly located and that the CHA did not have legal standing to seize their properties (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951a, b, c, d). The City Council agreed to hear the appeals of the Elysian Park Heights and two other sites as a Special Order of Business on 21 June (Los Angeles City Archives, 1951a). Meanwhile, the Council meeting was preceded by a series of articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, which argued that Los Angeles did not need public housing or rent control, that public housing was "creeping socialism," that apartment vacancies and home construction were on the rise, that private home builders needed to be free of restrictions to meet the demand, and that rent control was both unnecessary and detrimental to the economy (*Los Angeles Times*, 13–26 May 1951).

On 21 June, the City Council began what turned out to be a week of raucous public hearings. Hundreds of people packed the Council chambers, "vociferously opposing or favoring the proposals" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951a, b, c, d, e). The Council agreed to hear groups from three proposed housing sites in one afternoon, granting each group 20 minutes to present their case. To further restrict the debate, the City Clerk asserted that the merits of public housing, having already been decided, were not an issue.

Speaking against the public housing project for the Chavez Ravine site were Manuel Cerda, Bertha Withers, John Lorenz, Marshall Stimson, Angie Villa and Lewis J. Scott. Speaking in favor of the Chavez Ravine site were 26 representatives of civic, veterans, minority, and labor organizations,



including CHA Director Holtzendorff, Monsignor Thomas J. O'Dwyer, and Trinidad Rodríguez of the Council of United Railroad Workers of America (Los Angeles City Archives, 1951a; *Los Angeles Times*, 1951a).⁹

Manuel Cerda, leader of the CCDIA, was the first speaker on behalf of Chavez Ravine property owners. Arguing that the will of the community was against the project, he asserted that, "The people of my district don't want to be renters. They want to be honest taxpayers. We don't want anybody else to have to pay our taxes." Finally, he said, "We don't want to be socialized" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951a). Additionally, Cerda argued that the district was dirty because of the ongoing failure of the city to make necessary improvements. Marshall Stimson "representing certain citizens of the area" argued, as he had at the Planning Commission, that the project was economically wrong, that the area could be improved by other means, and that the City Council was acting illegally. Angie Villa stated that she had lived in Chavez Ravine for 39 years, that she and her father wanted to keep their home, and that public housing had poor living conditions (Los Angeles City Archives, 1951a). Bertha Withers testified that the \$110,000,000 public housing "scheme" was the "biggest invitation to political graft that ever disgraced this community" (Los Angeles City Archives, 1951a).¹⁰

Speaking in defense of the projects, CHA chief Holtzendorff argued that if the \$110,000,000 were not used in Los Angeles, it would be used elsewhere, despite the fact that Los Angeles paid taxes to create the funds. He also declared that the real estate lobby was behind opposition to the projects. Others argued that the housing projects would provide better living and a healthy environment for youth, that private development had failed to provide adequate and affordable housing, that it was a community responsibility to provide low-rent housing, that the human rights of the many must prevail over the property rights of the few, and that the benefit to the community as a whole offset the damage to a few individuals. Trinidad Rodríguez of the Railroad Workers union argued that the project would help the Mexican community, since the location was close to downtown where many Mexicans worked (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951a).

The following day was an all-day session at which opponents of the Rose Hills site spoke. Only a few homes were to be lost for the Rose Hills development, while the Chavez Ravine homeowners were to be forced out completely. The Rose Hills site representatives argued, in classic "not-in-my-backyard" fashion, that public housing would lower their property values, and that there were better ways to address the housing problem, in the words of one speaker, than "this proposed socialized concentration camp." One asked,

Shall we light the match that spreads the conflagration which will destroy private homes and private enterprise in our city? Shall you gentlemen be the guards at the gate who tear it down to permit the entry of a Trojan

⁹ Organizations advocating public housing included the American Legion, the Veterans Organizations Coordinating Council, the Veterans Advisory Committee, the Los Angeles Central Labor Council of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the Citizens Housing Council, the Greater Los Angeles Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) Council, the League of Women Voters, the Los Angeles Urban League, the Los Angeles County District Council of Carpenters, the Council of United Railroad Workers of America, the Los Angeles Youth Project, the Watts Chamber of Commerce, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Regular Veterans Association, Americans for Democratic Action, the International Association of Machinists, the Los Angeles City Housing Council, the Catholic War Veterans and the American Council on Human Rights.

10 The testimony of Chavez Ravine appellants was paraphrased and truncated. Don Parson (2005) further discusses the role of Bertha Withers.

horse which will destroy our American ideal of American privately owned homes? (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951b; Los Angeles City Archives, 1951b)

In response, Councilman Ed Davenport, previously one of public housing's most aggressive advocates, said "This is the most forceful and convincing presentation I have listened to in my six years of sitting of (*sic*) the City Council" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951b). That the *Los Angeles Times* – and Davenport – should focus their sympathy so entirely on the white, middle-class Rose Hills residents, while stonewalling the mostly Mexican American residents of Chavez Ravine reveals the racism that permeated the era (Parson, 2005, 103–135).¹¹

11 See also Parson, 1999; I am deeply thankful to Mr Parson for sharing an advance copy of this article.

There were explicit examples of racial bias as well. Some letters to the City Council denounced the racial integration the public housing program proposed. For example, H. G. Tuthill, a Rose Hills property owner and author of several letters, said that he was one of those parents who,

... want their children to be free from the influence of a mass of negro, Mexican and a lot of others who have little regard for the better aspirations of American Citizenship ... we ... know it is hard enough to keep children out of trouble without moving them right into a nest of melting pot huddleums (*sic*) who care very little about what their children do or say How would you like to have your own little girls (if you had any) be left to play with a bunch of rough negro, and others no better, would you like it? (Tuthill, 1951)

Tuthill's racial invective was wrapped in the language of citizenship, much like the statements of Ms Hom, Mrs Villa and Mrs Cerda, but to different effect. While they shared an opposition to public housing developments in their communities, Rose Hills residents vociferously embraced the argument that public housing was creeping socialism, and that integration threatened the racial integrity of their white daughters. The people of Chavez Ravine, on the other hand, were defending their already integrated community from complete destruction on the basis of their exemplary upholding of American ideals, such as their military service in World War II. The public hearings continued through the following Tuesday, 26 June 1951. During the packed, day-long session, Mr Bauman argued that since the people in the last election had passed Proposition 10, the City Council should place the issue on the ballot as a public referendum (Los Angeles City Archives, 1951b; *Los Angeles Times*, 1951c).

That same day, the Council approved resolutions denying the appeals of Manuel Cerda and the other residents of Chavez Ravine, and granted the final approval to the CHA to proceed with public housing in Chavez Ravine and the other sites (Los Angeles City Archives, 1951c). The *Los Angeles Times*



editorialized that public housing had “expanded in significance beyond the expectations of proponents or opponents until it has reached the eminence of a city-wide issue,” and echoed Bauman’s demand that the Council place the issue on the ballot. Not surprisingly, the City Council took the *Los Angeles Times* more seriously than it took Mr Bauman, and a referendum on public housing was placed on the June 1952 ballot (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951d).

The Community Dwindles

After the approval of the Elysian Park Heights housing project, and with eminent domain looming, many Chavez Ravine residents gave up and sold their land to the CHA. Some held out, hoping for a reprieve, some stubbornly refused to leave, and some wrote, letters to the City Council, protesting their impending evictions. These women continued to express themselves in a discourse of conditionally patriotic mothers, such as Faustina Tele Ibarra, who wrote,

I do not see the necessity of my paying rent or to be burdened with a debt in buying a home when I already own one, and ask, why it is that we mothers of veterans do not have a right to own property and live in peace without being molested? (Ibarra, 1951)

At 66 years old and in poor health, Maria Longoria Esparza, caring for her 11 orphaned grandchildren, was no longer able to work. She wrote that she would not be able to buy a new home for the price offered for her house, which was paid in full;

I plead to be able to keep my home, I have struggled so much to finish paying so that my poor children could have a roof over their heads ... my home is in good condition ... I do not know how the Housing Authority can condemn the home I went through so many hardships, sometimes without food, to get enough for the monthly payments, and now that I thought it was mine at last they tell me I must go from it. (Esparza, 1951)

Mrs Esparza’s concerns were echoed by a neighbor, Margaret C. Ayala, who reiterated that many people would not be able to obtain new housing for what was offered. Reminiscent of the real estate lobby’s slogan; “Don’t Pay Someone Else’s Rent!” she suggests that people like Mrs Esparza might become wards of the state, saying,

Some homes are owned by older people who have very little income yet they have been too proud to ask for any assistance while they had a roof over their heads. With their homes about to be taken from them and at the

prices the Housing Authorities are quoting the acquisition of another house will be out of the question, then instead of taxpayers they would become burdens of the government. (Ayala, 1951)

Ms Ayala alludes to the same feeling expressed by Mabel Hom and Agnes Cerda, that the taking of their homes threatened their faith in the government, and undermined their incentive to be good citizens;

Our homes we thought were ours to have and to hold seem to be ours only as long as bureaucrats wish us to have them. What assurance can we have that we won't have to go through the same thing again[?]. The sense of security, the incentive, the pride that goes in owning your home is now for us a matter of "what's the use, where can we go?" (ibid.)

Finally, Ms Ayala tells the member of the City Council that she, and others, despite their fear of the courts, would resist, defend their homes, and that they had no faith in the CHA to give them a fair hearing. She hastens to add that she has "no alternative,"

As one of the more stubborn ones in this area I know that eventually I will be served with a Condemnation suit, I do not welcome such action ..., however, I have no alternative, threatened with the injustice and lack of consideration to the extent of losing our home we must make an effort to defend ourselves. Like me, there are people who ... have very little doubt but that these suits will in all probability be only mere formalities. (ibid.)

Ms Ayala's letter to the council was well written and very polite. Yet even here, Ms Ayala alerts the Council to layers of injustice involved in displacing poor and elderly residents from their homes. People like Mrs Esparza, sick and elderly, might not be able to resist, but Ms Ayala's letter said that she would put up a fight.

By August of 1951, two-thirds of the Chavez Ravine residents had packed up, sold their homes and land, and moved on. Those that remained refused to sell. Women such as Agnes Cerda, Angie Villa and Arana Aréchiga, who were leaders in the struggle to preserve Chavez Ravine from redevelopment, expressed resentment at their treatment by the City, and their determination to continue the fight to retain their homes (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951e; Roybal interview, 1990).

The concerns of the women mirrored those expressed months before at the public hearings. "If these are slums," queried Agnes Cerda, one of the guiding forces of the holdouts, "why did they not come to us 10 years ago and tell us they were slums. Then we might have been able to do something about them," adding that "We built our homes here, not the government Taking away our homes takes our incentive to be good American citizens." Avrana Aréchiga



concluded, adding that “I know nothing of slums. I only know this has been my home and it was my father’s home and I do not want to sell and move. I am too old to find a new home. Here is where I live. Here, in Chavez Ravine” (*Los Angeles Times*, 1951e).

Their desire to stay was reinforced by the negative experiences of those who had moved out before, only to suffer discrimination and hostility in their new neighborhoods. Mrs de León reported that “There are families that have moved into the City and they have come back to us and they have had tears in their eyes. And they say they are not accepted outside.” Angie Villa expressed her hope that the Court of Appeals would rule in their favor, but they all seemed sadly conscious that the departure of so many of their neighbors meant that the community that they had fought to defend no longer existed. “I swear I will never sell and others swear the same,” Villa said sadly, “But they see so many move away that they are afraid and they sell and go too.” By this time, less than a third of the original property owners remained (*ibid.*; Roybal interview).

Earlier in the year, the property owners had met with Los Angeles City Councilman Edward Roybal. A progressive Mexican American leader and a consistent supporter of public housing, he understood, from experience, the challenges faced by the residents of Chavez Ravine. During their meetings, he advised the property owners that they would only be fairly paid for their property if they remained united, collectively refused to sell their properties to the CHA, and demanded a higher price from the CHA. According to Roybal,

Those that sold [their property to the CHA] made a mistake in my opinion. I had meetings with them and I told them “Don’t sell; stick together and you’re going to win this.” They didn’t stick together. Because one of them sold one [property] here, the other one over there. They gave them a hundred dollars more in one place, another two hundred in the other. And pretty soon they divided the whole thing, and three-fourths of them sold [their property to the CHA]. (Roybal interview)

Roybal maintained that all of the homeowners of Chavez Ravine, but especially those who sold their homes first, “got gypped” (*ibid.*). While Roybal had encouraged the homeowners of Chavez Ravine to act together to secure higher prices, the SPOA had encouraged them to reject public housing altogether. The liberal magazine *Frontier* denounced the SPOA’s gall in spreading “the gospel of free enterprise to people who hadn’t known before how heavily their problems weighed on the business community” (*Frontier*, June 1957).

The residents of Chavez Ravine were supposedly offered “market prices” for their land. Some officials even argued that they were being offered more than their land was worth. Although the CHA was to provide relocation assistance in finding new living quarters, *Frontier* noted that “those residents of the area who had owned their own homes faced the typical difficulty of matching the sale

price of their old property with the purchase price of the new” (ibid.). Roybal also said that the people were not paid fairly, saying “Under the right of eminent domain they went in there and took their property.” The CHA “told them your house is worth ‘so much,’ and that’s all there was to it” (Roybal interview).

Many resisters, such as the Aréchigas, De Leons, Cerdas and Angie Villa, stayed on, fighting the evictions in the courts. During the Condemnation proceedings the Aréchigas were offered \$10,500 for three lots and two houses. Unsatisfied, the Aréchiga family hired a private appraiser, who appraised their properties at \$17,000. Challenging the condemnations in court, the Aréchigas lost and the courts set the price at \$10,050. When the Aréchigas refused to accept the money, the payment was placed in an account in their name and the sale declared consummated by the judge. Eviction proceedings began, but no actual eviction took place until 1959 (Roybal Papers; Aréchiga *et al*, 1953; *Lincoln Heights Bulletin News*, 7 June 1959). In all, the Aréchiga family resisted the City Council, police officers and the courts for 10 years.¹²

12 A dozen other households also refused to leave, and were similarly evicted. The Aréchigas, however, were the most public about their opposition, and the most willing to use the media to their advantage, including alerting the media to the day they expected the eviction.

Red Scare

On 3 June 1952, Los Angeles voters rejected the public housing program in a citywide referendum, but the vote was merely symbolic; the courts had ruled that the measure would have no effect, and that public housing in Los Angeles would continue. The property owners of Chavez Ravine had been unable to prevent the mass condemnation of their properties, and they had been unable to obtain satisfactory prices for their homes. Those who refused to accept the prices offered, like the Aréchigas, found that the CHA brought the matter to superior court, where their lands were condemned, prices set low and “sales” forced on unwilling landowners.

In late August 1952, Frank Wilkinson was testifying at a condemnation hearing for a Chavez Ravine property. Felix H. McGinnis, a lawyer for a Chavez Ravine landowner, had been given an FBI brief detailing Wilkinson’s communist party associations. After cross examining Wilkinson on blighted conditions, McGinnis abruptly changed the subject and asked Wilkinson “what organizations, ‘political or otherwise,’” he had been a member of since 1929? (Hines, 1982a, 139–140). Wilkinson described his professional associations, and his work experience, but when McGinnis pressed him to name his political associations, Wilkinson refused, saying that he was “compelled by matters of personal conscience” and that “to answer such a question might in some way incriminate me” (Hines, 1982a, 80; Parson, 2005, 118; Sherrill, 2005, 75). Wilkinson was immediately suspended.

Los Angeles exploded in a frenzy against “communist infiltration” in the CHA. While the enemies of public housing had always argued that public housing was socialistic, Wilkinson’s invoking of his Fifth Amendment right



against self-incrimination gave them all the ammunition they needed. Two months later, Wilkinson again refused to answer the question, this time before the California Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities. This time, for refusing to answer, Wilkinson and five other public housing officials were fired and blacklisted (Seventh Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, 1953; Sherrill, 2005, 135–141; Parson, 2005, Appendix A, 204).

With Wilkinson fired and the public housing program discredited, the *Los Angeles Times* drafted Congressman Norris Poulson, an undistinguished Republican, to challenge Mayor Fletcher Bowron in the 1953 mayoral election. The House Subcommittee on Government Operations, chaired by Poulson friend Clare Hoffman, held a Special Subcommittee on Public Housing in Los Angeles shortly before the June 1953 election, keeping the recent scandal alive in the minds of voters. Predictably, Bowron lost the election (Poulson, 1966, 155).

Within a week of taking office, the new Mayor suggested a compromise to end the controversy. CHA Director Holtzendorff would agree to renegotiate the contract between the Federal Housing Authority and the City of Los Angeles that would cancel the controversial Chavez Ravine and Rose Hills projects, and Poulson would leave the remaining public housing intact, and ask his allies in Congress and Los Angeles to end their attacks. Mayor Poulson, City Attorney Roger Arnebergh, Holtzendorff and others met with the Federal Housing Administrator in Washington DC. Not only were the Chavez Ravine and Rose Hills projects canceled, but the City of Los Angeles was given an option to buy the Chavez Ravine land owned by the CHA for its acquisition costs (ibid, 224; Assembly Interim Committee, 1958).

Behind the scenes, however, the City Attorney's office continued to condemn Chavez Ravine properties until the very minute they received word that public housing there was officially canceled. The Rose Hills properties were left untouched. The people of Chavez Ravine had their land seized under eminent domain for a purpose that no longer existed. Dispossessed of their land and forced to move, they were largely forgotten. Even the Spanish language daily *La Opinión* turned its attention to the hysteria over the discovery that "reds" had infiltrated the CHA.¹³ Los Angeles was able to buy the land in Chavez Ravine for a minimal sum, and a few years later succeeded in attracting the Brooklyn Dodgers to the city by offering them 315 acres of Chavez Ravine (*The Californian*, 13 September 1960; López II, 1999; Arnebergh, ND).¹⁴

There were still some of the old residents living there, however, who had to be forcibly evicted, including the Aréchigas, who were evicted in May 1959. The home was bulldozed moments after the eviction, and the family conducted a "sit-down strike," camping out for a week on the site. Aurora Vargas, a daughter of the Aréchigas and a war widow, hung her husband's dress uniform up in front of the wreckage of the house with a handwritten sign that declared;

13 *La Opinión*, the Spanish language daily newspaper of Los Angeles, was sometimes more extensive in its coverage, but it rarely diverged significantly from the politically powerful *Los Angeles Times*.

14 Efforts to interview Dodger officials were unsuccessful. I was told that Neil J. Sullivan, *The Dodgers Move West*, (1987) was their preferred version of events.

“My husband died in World War II to Protect Our Home” (Parson, 1993). The dramatic eviction and its aftermath quickly overshadowed the earlier struggle of the people to preserve their homes 8 years earlier. Although there were other evictions, it was the Aréchiga eviction, filmed by television reporters and covered in detail by the newspapers, that seared the fate of Chavez Ravine into the minds of Los Angeles residents.

Conclusion

The residents of Chavez Ravine fought to preserve their community against destruction by the intrusion of a public housing project during the years 1950–1952. They had good reason to do so, as Chavez Ravine was probably the nicest “blighted” area one could hope to live in at the time, especially if one were Mexican or Mexican American. With its spacious semi-rural environment, and a core of residents whose parents had moved there early in the century, Chavez Ravine had a strong sense of community pride. Decent, affordable housing was in short supply, and most new housing was too costly and restricted to “whites only.” There was more at stake than a few homes; what the CHA proposed was the displacement of the entire community. The people who spoke on behalf of Chavez Ravine used a variety of arguments, but were consistent in their expressed belief in American political principles and ideals, and their commitment to the democratic process. Largely women, they spoke in a highly gendered language, making unambiguous references to husbands and sons in military service to underpin their moral legitimacy. The women made it clear, however, that their patriotism was tentative and conditional; they had worked hard, purchased property and sent their men to war despite the discrimination they faced at home. If the Government could take their homes, the symbol of belonging in the American system, they argued, it threatened the very foundation upon which their patriotism was based. This subtle threat suggests a lingering distrust of government, a sense that the United States had yet to live up to its promise. The people of Chavez Ravine, moreover, were challenging projects that were supported by the entire left-liberal and labor community, projects that promised to help poor communities, especially Mexican Americans, and other minorities nationwide. They opposed the positions taken by the acknowledged Mexican American leaders of the day, and allied themselves, if only briefly, with local conservatives. While the story of Chavez Ravine continues to be explored by academics, journalists, and artists, few have acknowledged the centrality of the community’s militancy in delegitimizing public housing in Los Angeles.¹⁵ The residents rejected a sacred cow of liberal ideology of the era – that public housing was a greater good destined to help Mexican Americans, and other poor communities. Their protest challenged contemporary expectations of Chicano political behavior of

15 The exceptions are cited above; Baca, 1983, Normark, 1999,



the era: they were not simply poor, hapless slum-dwelling Mexicans, but politically astute Mexican Americans determined to defend their community. In the end, although their opposition to the redevelopment of Chavez Ravine was unsuccessful, the refusal of the landowners to willingly move away proved to be the opening salvos of a political conflict that would dominate Los Angeles politics for 10 years, and that would be resolved only by the physical evictions of the Aréchigas, and other families. Furthermore, the struggle to preserve Chavez Ravine became part of the popular memory of Los Angeles' Mexican American community. The residents of Chavez Ravine spoke out in defense of their homes, and their politically complex position impacted Los Angeles city politics. They rejected the liberal establishment's social engineering because, despite their desire to be fully included in the American body politic, it would be they, and not the liberal social planners, who would pay the price.

Culture Clash, 2003, Cooder, 2005; and Yosso and García, 2005.

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About the Author

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