

“BUT NOT IN VAIN:” THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN SAN LUIS OBISPO,

CALIFORNIA 1947-1969

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Abstract:

“But Not in Vain:” The Civil Rights Movement in San Luis Obispo, California 1947-1969

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Civil rights have long been an important focus of historical scholarship. As the United States continues to grapple with issues of racism and the complicated legacy of the Civil Rights movement, it is imperative that a variety of perspectives are incorporated into scholarship on the subject. Traditional scholarship on the subject has focused on the large organizations, individuals, marches, and activities that have come to characterize the Civil Rights movement. This study seeks to integrate the perspectives of a case study population, African Americans in San Luis Obispo, California, to assess the ways in which African Americans away from large population centers were able to participate in the Civil Rights movement. This study draws primarily on contemporary newspapers, NAACP records, and government documents to assess the relationship between the local civil rights movement and its national counterpart. Civil rights activities at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo also reveal important instances of discrimination and exclusion on campus. Research has shown that, despite relative isolation and a miniscule population, African Americans in San Luis Obispo experienced similar discrimination, isolation, and economic exclusion as their urban and rural counterparts throughout the nation. They also attempted to bring attention to their plight using nationally established organizations and tactics. Though African Americans in San Luis Obispo met with limited success, their previously undocumented struggle has revealed a population determined to fight for their rights. The continuity between the experiences of African Americans throughout the country renders a more complete understanding of racism in the United States.

Keywords: Civil rights, African American, San Luis Obispo County, housing,

Cal Poly history

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Introduction

On April 5th, 1968, a concerned citizen wrote the *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune* lamenting the death of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The author expressed concern for the possibility of a violent summer following his assassination and called for equality for all citizens. He also indicted the small, California community of San Luis Obispo by charging: “discrimination does not stop at city limits of our metropolitan areas. It exists in small towns, It [sic] exists in rural areas. It exists in our social groups; it exists in our individual minds...It exists in San Luis Obispo, and until now precious little has been done to eliminate it.”¹

The author spoke to a pervasive problem with the common understanding of the Civil Rights Movement, both then and now. The Civil Rights era often evokes dramatic imagery of the hundreds of thousands gathered before Martin Luther King in Washington DC, or of outraged southerners attacking protesters with dogs and fire hoses. Rarely, if ever, does the public consider the civil rights movement in terms of its existence away from these events. The men and women who fought battles, less dramatic, though no less important throughout innumerable small towns across America also actively participated in the struggle for African American civil rights. At first glance, one would not think that the Civil Rights movement, or African-Americans more generally, made much of an impact on the history of one such community, San Luis Obispo, California. Situated almost exactly midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, the town is a small, bucolic community with a large state university, both of which have remained overwhelmingly white and politically conservative throughout their history.² But San Luis Obispo is important to this study precisely because of its small, though never isolated

¹ “But not in Vain.” *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*. [San Luis Obispo] 5 April, 1968. Section 2, Page 11.

² Krieger, Daniel. *Looking Backward Into the Middle Kingdom: San Luis Obispo County* 2nd ed. (San Luis Obispo, EZ Nature Books, 1988), 105.

population of permanent African-American residents and students who faced significant challenges in trying to make a life for themselves on California's central coast. Without secure economic foundations, well-established social organizations, or direct access to civil rights groups, African Americans living in such rural areas experienced the civil rights movement in different ways than their peers living in larger, urban communities.

This study will explore and analyze the challenges faced by African Americans who settled outside of large urban centers in California, to argue that African Americans in smaller communities depended on major events and on the presence and direction of large civil rights organizations to shape their struggle at the local level. This is not to say that local actors did not play a crucial role as agents of change, rather, as such a small and dependent community in many ways, African Americans residents of San Luis Obispo as well as the black student population, could not raise awareness or prompt action without the visibility afforded to their problems through national organizations and events. Using San Luis Obispo's African American community as a case study, it examines the motives and aspirations of those who settled away from larger, more established centers of community support. It also integrates the history of this rural African American community into larger historical trends such as westward migration, increased social activism, struggles for housing equality, and the increasingly aggressive character of the late 1960s civil rights movement, all of which shaped the lives of African Americans elsewhere, with emphasis on the era from World War II through 1969.

This period is important to both San Luis Obispo and the entire African American population, for it was during World War II that African Americans embarked on more direct civil rights activity that reached its height in the late 1960s. Mirroring other communities throughout the country during this period, black residents of San Luis Obispo established a

predominantly black church and a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Likewise, when black students began organizing on college campuses throughout the country in the 1960s, the black students at the local California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) also began to challenge the racial status quo. The activities of black students reveal an important and ongoing dialogue between the larger civil rights movements and their local counterparts. By looking at these local phenomena in the context of larger, national events and trends, this study will demonstrate how a small minority of African Americans attempted to express power and community without a broad base of support.

A small but significant body of material is available for such an analysis of the African American experience in San Luis Obispo. Data from the U.S. census is critical in understanding the demographic composition of the area. Newspapers, primarily early *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune* will be used to ascertain the activity of early African American communities and also offer an insight into evolving white attitudes towards blacks in the area. Again, this will provide an important point of comparison between San Luis Obispo and larger urban settlements. *The Mustang Daily*, published by Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, will also serve as an important source for ascertaining the role of the university in shaping the African American experience in San Luis Obispo. The record of the NAACP activities in San Luis Obispo will be critical in furthering our understanding of the relationship between the local population of blacks and whites, and the San Luis Obispo NAACP, with its counterparts elsewhere in the state and country. Finally, records of city activity relative to African American community will reveal the importance of bi-racial coalitions to such a small African American community. Though the actual record of the various organizations formed by the city could not be located, references to their existence and activity survive in various other sources, particularly local newspapers.

The examination of the African American experience at the local level during the civil rights movement is an important, and often neglected, part of the history of African Americans. The tendency has been to focus on events at the national level, which, according to historian J. Mill Thorton III, “emphasizes the desire of black leaders, through demonstrations, to influence federal policy.”³ Whereas a local perspective acknowledges the efforts at the grassroots to “overcom[e] the fear and indifference felt by many...blacks in the community.”⁴ Though discussing municipalities in the South, Thorton argues that an examination of local African American struggles reveals ambivalence toward Civil Rights among local white leadership, and a program based on communication of their concerns to municipal leaders.⁵ Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard have also argued for a focus on the efforts of local leaders, whose efforts “drove the Black Freedom movement: they organized it, imagined it, mobilized and cultivated it; they did the daily work that made the struggle possible, and endured the drudgery and retaliation, fear and anticipation, joy and comradeship that building a movement entails.”⁶

Other scholars have recognized a similar problem with the study of the Civil Rights Movement, arguing that the experience of African Americans in the South has “been rendered so normative as *the* paradigmatic postwar freedom struggle in the United States that historical surveys like the American Social History Project’s *Who Built America?* make little mention of the North and West...and offer no framework in which to understand...African American

³ J. Mills Thorton III, “Municipal Politics and the Course of the Movement” in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, ed. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan, 40 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991)

⁴ Thorton III, 40.

⁵ Thorton III, 44.

⁶ Theoharis, Jeanne and Komozi Woodard eds. *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1.

politics and social movements” outside of the South.⁷ This study seeks to expand our knowledge of civil rights movements in their varied local forms.

Just as civil rights historiography has excluded the West and North, the historiography of the American West initially excluded African Americans. Frederick Jackson Turner’s analysis of the importance of the West gave no consideration to the presence of blacks or their interaction with the frontier. According to Margaret Washington, historians such as Turner and Charles Beard only considered major events in African American history such as slavery and Reconstruction important because of their impact on white America.⁸ Early African American historians corrected this flawed vision of a monochromatic West, though their work did not enjoy wide circulation.⁹ For example, Deliliah Beasley published *Negro Trailblazers in California* in 1919. Her work documents the activity of prominent African Americans in California and exposed the existence of slavery in the antebellum West. Beasley and others have gained little attention until a revival of interest in subject in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰ The “recognition school” identified African Americans as historical actors in the westward expansion of the United States but did not move beyond their mere presence. Contemporary historians, most notably Quintard Taylor, have sought to move beyond the recognition school by analyzing the unique experience of blacks in the West. Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier* examines the role of blacks in the western half of the United States from their Spanish origins in the early 16th century through the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s, with a brief analysis of more recent events such as the Los Angeles riots of the early 1990s.

⁷ Robert O. Self, “Negro Leadership and Negro Money: African American Political Organizing in Oakland before the Panthers” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 93.

⁸ Margaret Washington, *African American History and the Frontier Thesis*. *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 13, no. 2, (Summer: 1993), 230.

⁹ Washington, *African American History and the Frontier Thesis*, 235.

¹⁰ Taylor, *In Search of The Racial Frontier*, 19.

Though Taylor and others have made an important contribution to African American history in the West, their studies have invariably focused on large population centers for, as Taylor argues, “the fate of the average twentieth-century black westerner would be determined on city streets.”¹¹ Which, as we shall see, is both true and false. True because demonstrations on city streets allowed for smaller populations to create movements of their own that could draw on the threat of actual violence as expressed on city streets, and use that as leverage to further their own causes; false, because the will of local actors was also crucial in forcing changes at the local level. Without the activism of African American citizens at the grassroots, efforts to change the situation of African Americans may have taken longer to appear.

Within California, historians Lawrence De Graff and Quintard Taylor have identified four major themes of African American history. First, the development of “separate communities,” deriving from the unique historical experiences of the black population is a significant piece of their history. The search for better economic opportunities, the quest for civil rights, and the “changing significance of race” due to the multiethnic composition of California are the other main historical themes of black history in California. Though multi-ethnic coalitions often appeared and were important to civil rights movements in larger cities, such as Seattle, such activity is difficult to evaluate in San Luis Obispo given the gaps in the historical record. The evidence of governmental bodies such as the Human Relations Commission and the San Luis Obispo County Council for Civic Unity, which engaged various ethnic groups, suggests that they did not possess significant power and were not able to effect change. This is likely due to the absence of significant numbers of minorities of any kind, let alone multiple, large populations able to collectively support each other’s efforts for economic and social equality through the use of political power. While the major African American population centers, black

¹¹. Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 222.

leaders, and newspapers were indeed located in urban areas, recent scholarship does not include an analysis of the relationship between the activities of African American communities away from the major population centers.¹²

Underwriting some of the urban history of African Americans in California is the belief that white racism increased as more African Americans entered cities.¹³ Settlement became more restrictive, racism more virulent, and distance between whites and blacks more pronounced. But the fact that similar problems existed in rural areas of California suggests that white racism and restrictive racial policies increased independently of a significant African American presence. That African Americans in San Luis Obispo County expressed discontent with racist housing practices, hostile white residents, and inequality in education throughout the period under review suggests that, as the author of the *Tribune* editorial argued, similar practices existed in small towns with few black residents. Part of this study will attempt to establish the historical development of white attitudes in San Luis Obispo County and how the small size of the African American community shaped their responses to discriminatory behavior.

The history of blacks in California began in the Spanish colonial period. A “large majority” of colonizers on the northern edge of New Spain were men of African heritage.¹⁴ These men represented the beginning of a trend that would continue into the twentieth century. African Americans sought freedom from the racial oppression they experienced on the frontier.¹⁵ African Americans in California have been a relevant part of general African American history

¹² Lawrence De Graaf and Quintard Taylor, *Introduction*, in De Graaf, Lawrence, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor eds. *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 3-4.

¹³ Flamming, *Douglas Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 45.

¹⁴ Jack D. Forbes, *The Early African Heritage of California*, in De Graaf, Lawrence, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor eds. *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001. Pg, 77.

¹⁵ Forbes, *The Early African Heritage of California*, 82

since the state's induction into the Union in 1850. California was admitted as a free state in the Compromise of 1850, which attempted to balance power between slaveholding and non-slaveholding states. Despite its status as a free state, however, hundreds of slaves lived in the state, laws against racial intermarriage were enacted, and discrimination was widely practiced.¹⁶

California, and the American West generally, came to symbolize freedom from the racism, disenfranchisement, and segregation of the American South. This dream of increased freedom and economic opportunity proved largely unattainable in the post-Civil War period, for as more blacks moved west whites introduced systems of racial control that restricted the rights of African Americans.¹⁷ Despite discriminatory behavior by whites, blacks established churches, social clubs, and fraternal organizations and eventually established small professional and middle-classes.¹⁸

Politically, African Americans in the last two decades of the 19th century began to withdraw support for the Republican Party and pursue power and patronage through the Democrats.¹⁹ A burgeoning black press, the Colored Conventions, public rallies, local meetings, church meetings, petitions, and celebration all shaped the political activities of the African American community in California.²⁰

Large numbers of African Americans settled in Los Angeles and in the San Francisco Bay area. In the first decades of the twentieth century a majority of African American migrants to California settled in the Los Angeles area. Attracted by available land and enabled by the completion of the Santa Fe railroad, the black population of Los Angeles constituted 43 percent

¹⁶ Forbes, "The Early African Heritage of California," 89.

¹⁷ Taylor, Quintard. "African American Men in the American West, 1528-1990." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 569 (May 2000): 102-11.

¹⁸ Taylor, "African American Men in the American West, 1528-1990," 102-12.

¹⁹ Fisher, *A History of the Political and Social Development*, 168.

²⁰ Fisher, *A History of the Political and Social Development*, 168.

of California's entire black population by 1910.²¹ While homeownership and relative freedom to live where one could afford a house characterized early African American settlement in the Los Angeles area, as their population grew, blacks faced increased restrictions on the availability of housing along strictly racial lines.²²

The small size of the African American population of San Luis Obispo County has limited the amount of political power it has expressed as a community and has been one of its enduring characteristics. Their small size precluded the publication of a local "race paper," and other important organizing factors for the African American community until 1947. The small population of San Luis Obispo, at least in the early years of African American settlement there, also served to militate against some of the more egregious experiences of African Americans elsewhere. Research has not produced any evidence of school segregation or legal disenfranchisement. Rather, informal racism shaped the relationship between the area's white and black residents in San Luis Obispo. While disenfranchisement has not been a problem in California, de facto segregation plagued many African American communities throughout the state. Early black settlers in the area do not seem to have experienced housing restrictions. However, by the early 20th century segregated housing patterns emerged throughout the state; and by the 1940s, de facto segregation had appeared in San Luis Obispo.²³

Employment and opportunity for upward mobility have historically been important factors in the migration of blacks to California. This has explained the significant movement West during World War II. It also explains the limited appeal of San Luis Obispo as a potential destination for African Americans seeking employment. Earlier in the century, the composition

²¹ Lawrence Brooks De Graaf, "Negro Migration to Los Angeles, 1930 to 1950: A Dissertation" (Ph.D. Diss., University of California Los Angeles, 1962), 9.

²² Flamming, 67.

²³ Flamming, 25.

of the migrants to the Los Angeles area, “middle class” and wealthier, contrasts with the sparse migration of primarily unskilled laborers to the San Luis Obispo area during the same period. Census data from 1910 reveals that a majority of African Americans in the San Luis Obispo Area were employed as unskilled labor; bootblacks, janitors, cooks, servants, washwomen, and day laborers. Preachers often represented the only African Americans engaged in non-manual labor.²⁴ The gains in industry brought by the labor shortage during World War II did not affect the San Luis Obispo area. Without the relocation or emergence of major industry in the area, San Luis Obispo African Americans did not experience the gains in economic status and employment rights that others in San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles had.

By 1958 the situation had changed little. Arthur Morrow, conducting his own census of the African American population in San Luis Obispo, found that a majority still found work in unskilled positions, with a large number acting as “laborers” for the Southern Pacific Railroad.²⁵ The inability of blacks to exercise economic power was directly related to their inability to find and maintain higher-paying jobs. The systematic exclusion of African Americans from various professions has been well documented. When blacks were able to find work it was overwhelmingly domestic service or unskilled manual labor.²⁶ World War II briefly afforded African Americans the opportunity to participate in the wartime industrial boom throughout California; however, such opportunity only came after a sustained campaign of protest, and the

²⁴ 1910 United States Federal Census, San Luis Obispo County, California. <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed May 5th, 2009).

²⁵ Morrow, Arthur *A census and directory of the Negro population of San Luis Obispo, California*, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 1958.

²⁶ Newman, Dorothy K., Nancy J. Amidei, Barbara L. Carter, Dawn Day, William J. Krivant, Jack S. Russel, *Protest, Politics, and Prosperity: Black Americans and White Institutions, 1940-1975* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 33.

threat of a march on Washington.²⁷ As Taylor and others have argued however, these gains were temporary in most areas.

World War II exacerbated the migration trends as wartime industry sought a large labor pool to meet the increasing demands of the military. However, blacks still faced barriers to employment during the first years of the war and continued settling in established African American communities.²⁸ In this “interlude” between the onset of the war and the inclusion of African Americans in the wartime industrial boom, blacks, primarily from the depressed agricultural economies of the South, continued to migrate in search of better employment as they faced widespread hiring discrimination and relegation to menial unskilled labor in southern wartime industry.²⁹ In 1942, historian Lawrence De Graaf notes an 800 percent increase in the African American population in the western United States initiated by eased restrictions in wartime industry as well as by continued economic plight in the South.³⁰ The increase in population was not distributed equally across the West. In California, San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles received a majority of African American migrants.³¹ In California’s wartime industry African Americans found economic opportunity as well as familiar racial boundaries. Blacks were employed as ship builders, painters, boilermakers, and soldiers. However skilled, blacks could not supervise whites and found themselves largely excluded from more technical positions such as ship repair.³²

In addition to dramatically changing the demographic composition of the West, this shift in population increased calls for civil rights legislation and “strengthened civil rights

²⁷ Newman et al., 33.

²⁸ De Graaf, *Negro Migration*, 102.

²⁹ De Graaf, *Negro Migration*, 105.

³⁰ De Graaf, *Negro Migration*, 134.

³¹ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the West 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1998), 254.

³² Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 258.

organization, such as the NAACP,” which aided the newcomers in struggles against employers and various other inequities.³³ Housing also became a pressing concern for the thousands of new California residents. Due to shortages and restrictive housing patterns multiple families crowded into homes or depended on public housing.³⁴ Robert C. Weaver, future director of Housing and Urban Development for President Johnson, described the public housing situation for blacks in terms of race and economics. He argued in 1940 that “[t]he problem, then, of providing decent, safe, and sanitary housing for Negro families is basically a problem of public housing conditioned by the variable factor of race.”³⁵ Furthermore, Weaver argued, African Americans social exclusion “superimposed upon economic limitations [also a function of racial exclusion] have artificially restricted the supply and increased the cost of housing.”³⁶ Recognizing the racialization of housing, the federal government established the United States Housing Authority in 1937. The first administrator, Nathan Strauss, believed that in areas with large African American communities, African Americans should be represented on the local Housing Authority boards and employed in various technical positions related to home-building.³⁷ Gunnar Myrdal, in his landmark study of African Americans conducted on behalf of the United States government, reached similar conclusions. He argued that poverty, “ethnic attachment,” and forced segregation were the three primary factors shaping housing patterns throughout the United States.³⁸ The crowded conditions in public housing projects created a close proximity of whites, blacks, and other ethnic groups that fueled racial tension in the 1940s. Several small

³³ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 252.

³⁴ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 270.

³⁵ Robert C. Weaver “Racial Policy in Public Housing” *Phylon (1940-1956)*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1940, pp. 149-161), 150. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/272518>

³⁶ Weaver “Racial Policy in Public Housing,” 150.

³⁷ Weaver, “Racial Policy in Public Housing,” 151.

³⁸ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 618.

confrontations took place in both civilian and military populations between whites and blacks, including a small altercation at Camp San Luis Obispo.³⁹

The legacy of World War II in the development of the African American community is ambiguous. Blacks enjoyed greater economic opportunity than in the South, however, they faced discriminatory housing, hiring, and workplace practices. As the war came to an end the lucrative defense industry positions quickly evaporated. With the notable exceptions of San Francisco and Seattle, black populations faced rising unemployment and persistent housing shortages.⁴⁰

Quintard Taylor has identified a “western version” of civil rights activity that developed in the post war period. Black westerners employed direct-action protests and legal challenges to combat “job discrimination, housing bias, and de facto school segregation.”⁴¹ It is clear that his studies are largely urban in their focus. Within the smaller population under review here, the challenges were similar, but the community did not support direct-action protest to secure progress in the areas identified by Taylor.

San Luis Obispo reflected many of the changes occurring in the state and nation in the late 1940s. African Americans have always constituted a modest percentage of the population of San Luis Obispo County. In 1850 California joined the Union with a “total free colored population” of 962. Of these 962 African Americans, one lived in San Luis Obispo. The African American population remained under thirty until 1890, when it increased to nearly five hundred black residents. The black population suffered a precipitous decline until the 1950s; whereas between 1950 and 1960 the total population of African Americans increased from 335 to 1431. As a percentage of the total population in the period from 1890 to 1960, blacks never represented more than 2.84 percent, peaking in 1890. Though blacks never reached the same proportion of

³⁹. Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 271.

⁴⁰. Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 275.

⁴¹. Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 278.

the total population as in other areas of California, by 1947 their increasing presence is clearly evidenced by the formation of a local NAACP and an African American church.

During the war itself, San Luis Obispo did not experience the same influx of African American residents that occurred elsewhere in California. The influx of troops and African Americans into California increased the black population of California nearly 800 percent. Industry also brought a number of African Americans to major metropolitan areas such as Oakland, San Diego, and Los Angeles. In San Luis Obispo, evidence suggests that outside of the actual presence of African American troops at Camp San Luis Obispo, little in the way of a massive migration took place. For example, in order to entertain the black troops at their segregated USO located downtown, or at the Negro Service Club on base, the African American sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha's UCLA chapter organized the transportation of a number of African American women from Los Angeles.⁴² This suggests that the community in San Luis Obispo lacked an adequate number of African Americans to participate in the events with the black troops.

The long-term effects of World War II on the demographics of the West Coast cannot be underestimated. While in the pre-war period African Americans certainly lived in San Luis Obispo, it was not until after World War II that they began to establish essential elements of an organized community. Approximately two years following the War, African Americans established the local NAACP and a church, suggesting that either some black troops and their families returned to the area, or other African Americans from other parts of California migrated to the area. Indeed, in 1940 the census recorded a total of twenty-six "negroes." By 1950, that figure had climbed to over 350 in San Luis Obispo County. The demographic shifts brought about by war, as it had in many other communities, gave rise to an organized African American

⁴² "Negroes bus in entertainment," *Shot 'n Shell*, Camp San Luis Obispo, CA, August 12, 1942.

community in the city of San Luis Obispo, which began its own quest for social and civic equality in the late 1940s.

Civil Rights In San Luis Obispo- The Beginning, 1947-1966

The issue of black civil rights in San Luis Obispo has been shaped by a number of historical factors. First, the small size of the town's African American population affected both the black community's ability to successfully organize and petition on behalf of Civil Rights, and their ability to sustain local chapters of national organizations so vital to successful movements elsewhere. The clearest manifestation of both the successes and failures of the Civil Rights movement can be seen in the struggle to establish a local branch of the National Organization for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Following a particularly brutal race riot in Springfield, Illinois in 1908, concerned members of the white and African American communities established the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.⁴³ From the beginning, the movement to establish the NAACP was important in two ways. First, it recognized the need for a bi-racial organization to lobby on behalf of and with the African American community.⁴⁴ Second, the movement "was not to be a Washington movement or a Du Bois movement...it was to be an aggressive organization, ready to strike hard blows for the rights of colored people."⁴⁵ As it was initially conceived, the NAACP would focus on ending disfranchisement in the South so that African Americans could end their "limitation to vocational education" and "curtailment of civil freedoms."⁴⁶ To this end, the founders envisioned various committees to investigate reports of civil rights violations as well as a legal department to address injustices against African Americans.⁴⁷ The legal branch of

⁴³ Charles Flint Kellogg, *NAACP, A History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 11.

⁴⁴ Kellogg, 19.

⁴⁵ Kellogg, 19.

⁴⁶ Kellogg, 20.

⁴⁷ Kellogg, 21.

the NAACP has been the most visible, and arguably most successful, component of the organization in combating discrimination against African Americans. The organization first used the law to challenge the death sentence handed down to Pink Franklin in 1910.⁴⁸ The case involved an African American sharecropper in South Carolina convicted of murdering a police officer. The NAACP, through consistent lobbying of the state governor, was able to secure the parole of the once condemned Franklin.⁴⁹ This action would result in the permanent establishment of a “legal redress department” within the NAACP.⁵⁰ The success of the legal campaign of the NAACP can be seen in the landmark *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas (1954)*, which ended legal school segregation. The organization did not always have a consistent strategy at the national level, however. At different times, responding to different historical circumstances, the NAACP adopted different visions for their movement.

In San Luis Obispo, the efforts to establish a branch began in 1947. In a letter to Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, a member of the local African American community, Arthur Glover, Jr., outlined the desire and need for a branch of the NAACP in San Luis Obispo. This would constitute the first of many efforts to establish the flagship civil rights organization in the San Luis Obispo area. Among the first things mentioned by Glover is the extremely small size of the African American community in the area. Glover wrote:

We are very desirous to establish a NAACP Chapter here in San Luis Obispo, California. There are from one hundred and fifty to two hundred Negroes living here of the total twelve thousand population of the city. Prior to the War there were possibly two or three Colored families here, and during the war there has been a great influx due to our troops being stationed in near by camps. The majority of us do not recognize

⁴⁸ Minnie Finch, *The NAACP: Its Fight For Justice* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 16.

⁴⁹ Finch, 17.

⁵⁰ Finch, 17.

our needs, nor realize our problems. I feel that there is a definite need for this organization both politically and civically, and that it would be the answer to some of our problems.⁵¹

Though assessing the size of the African American community at less than two percent of the town's total population Glover believed that a branch of the NAACP would be useful. As he explained to White, there already existed the San Luis Obispo County Council for Civic Unity which functioned "for the good of all minority groups, particularly for us [African Americans, but] I am of the opinion if we organized and affiliated with the NAACP we could make much greater progress, and would be of greater service to ourselves and the organization."⁵²

Interestingly, it seems that he sought a branch of the NAACP as a way of developing a community consciousness and explaining to the African American population their needs as a community. Typically, the NAACP functioned as way to address the needs of a community, rather than as a way to develop a community "civically."

In addition to Arthur Glover, another African American San Luis Obispo resident, Annabelle Jones, made inquiries the following year to the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a major West Coast African American newspaper, regarding the establishment of a San Luis Obispo Chapter of the NAACP. Leon Washington Jr., editor of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, contacted the West Coast Regional Secretary, N.W. Griffin, informing him of the letter from San Luis Obispo and relaying the description of "small [African American] communities within a radius of 20 or 25 miles" who "have had various racial problems."⁵³ The residents of San Luis Obispo successfully

⁵¹ Arthur Glover Jr., Correspondence, 1 April 1947. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Region I, records, 1942-1986 (bulk 1945-1977) Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obsipo, CA nd, 1947-1949

⁵² Arthur Glover Jr. Correspondence, 1 April 1947. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obsipo, CA nd, 1947-1949.

Though several references to this organization have appeared throughout my research, I was unable to locate the public records for the San Luis Obispo County Council for Civic Unity.

⁵³ Leon Washington Jr. Correspondence. 23 September, 1948. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obsipo, CA nd, 1947-1949.

acquired the required fifty members and established a branch of the NAACP at an event at the Madonna Inn on October 26th, 1948. The community seemed to embrace the establishment of the NAACP in the area, with Mayor Clell Welchell delivering the welcoming address to the multi-racial crowd of 170 guests.

Although the establishment of an NAACP branch in San Luis Obispo was a watershed event in the organization of the black community around civil rights, the Springfield Baptist Church also emerged as both a spiritual and political leader during the late 1940s. Established in 1947, the Church became, and would remain through the 1960s an important location for the African American community and for civil rights activity. The first president of the NAACP in San Luis Obispo was the Reverend Luther Taylor of the Springfield Baptist Church. Taylor advocated for a bi-racial approach to solving the issues of the African American community in San Luis Obispo. In response to questions regarding the date of a first meeting for the branch, Rev. Taylor responded “I have been in no hurry because I wanted to contact and get the membership of influential white people in the town, and we now have some three or four who are interested in our cause and are willing to work in an official capacity, which I think will give us more influence...”⁵⁴ Taylor, recognizing the practicality of enlisting the support of white people in a predominantly white area, adopted a pragmatic bi-racial agenda for the San Luis Obispo NAACP. In many ways, this early strategy would remain essential to the struggle for civil rights in the area. Reverend Taylor’s hopes that local whites would show interest in the NAACP were realized. At an early meeting in January of 1949, a white couple, having read about the activity of the organization, decided to join the local chapter. The Regional Secretary

⁵⁴ Reverend Luther Taylor, Correspondence, 16 November, 1948. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obsipo, CA nd, 1947-1949

interpreted this event as evidence of “the influence which the officers of our branch hold among the people...”⁵⁵

The “influence” exerted by the NAACP branch in San Luis Obispo is difficult to assess. That a white couple felt compelled to assist the NAACP, and felt safe that they could participate, suggests a more tolerant racial environment than in other places in the United States, particularly the South. The fact remains that in San Luis Obispo, in the late 1940s, white patronage, both through their physical presence and their financial contributions, was critical to the strategy of the local NAACP. In a community dominated by whites, a strategy of cooperation and alliance allowed an organization representing so few residents to succeed in establishing itself.

White participation in the activities of the NAACP was not unprecedented. In fact, as previously stated, from its inception the NAACP approached the “color line” with a strategy based on white membership, patronage, and leadership. By the late 1940s, however, larger NAACP branches began to question the participation of wealthy whites as they tried to appeal to African Americans of working and lower class origins. To a certain extent, the leadership of the NAACP had always disagreed on this point. In fact, W.E.B Du Bois resigned from the organization in 1933 following a dispute over these issues. Historian Beth Tompkins Bates, in her analysis of the Chicago NAACP in the late 1930s, has identified an “old guard” characterized by a conciliatory attitude toward whites and a continued commitment to peaceful agitation for African American rights; and a “new guard,” who began to adopt more confrontational tactics, particularly collective demands, to address concerns, particularly among working class blacks.⁵⁶ The moment came in 1930, when the director of the Chicago NAACP embraced “a boycott with

⁵⁵ N.W. Griffin, Correspondence, 13 January, 1949. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obispo, CA nd, 1947-1949

⁵⁶ Beth Tompkins Bates, “A New Guard Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941” *The American Historical Review* 102 no. 2 (Apr., 1997)

picketing, propaganda, and public meetings—rather than a strategy based on conciliation.”⁵⁷ A latter boycott attempted by the Chicago branch tested the national leaderships’ tolerance of public protest action against wealthy white donors. Attempting a nationwide boycott against Sears, Roebuck, and Co. for alleged discrimination, the Chicago NAACP quickly found that the national organization was steadfastly against any such action for fear of damaging the NAACP’s reputation and alienating white donors and members.⁵⁸

Critics such as Du Bois spoke out against this problem. In what would mirror a similar situation in the late 1960s, the NAACP found itself losing influence in the face of more militant organizations that were willing to apply direct-action protest tactics against racial injustice. In 1932, Du Bois asked in a speech at the national conference “What is Wrong with the NAACP?” He argued that the organization adopted positions that were too “defensive” and that “the association must go on the offensive with a larger ‘positive program’ for black advancement, using ‘a frontal attack on race prejudice.’”⁵⁹ Furthermore, blacks at the 1932 conference “called for an alliance between middle-class leaders and working-class black Americans and an end to reliance on white patronage.”⁶⁰ Bates argues that the militancy that arose during World War II and that continued through the 1960s began with this fracture in the early 1930s. This new understanding of protest within the African American community challenged the leadership of the NAACP and “reconfigured power relations within the black community.”⁶¹

The lack of financial and social support in San Luis Obispo probably mitigated these tensions that existed on the national level; left without much of a choice, white patronage was an attractive, and perhaps the only viable option, available to the NAACP in San Luis Obispo. The

⁵⁷ Bates, 349.

⁵⁸ Bates, 351.

⁵⁹ Bates, 351.

⁶⁰ Bates, 352.

⁶¹ Bates, 342.

activities of the NAACP in Chicago provide an interesting counterpoint to San Luis Obispo. First, the large population of African-American workers allowed for a healthier NAACP, and the emergence of several competing Civil Rights organizations led to the adoption of different strategies. Second, the issue of organized labor also promoted tension and progress within Civil Rights organizations; whereas in San Luis Obispo, the absence of both a large population, and the absence of an industrial work force determined the strategy of cooperation and conciliation in the 1940s to the late 1960s.

A large work force was clearly an advantage in terms of organizing and creating new directions in the Civil Rights Movement. Often, the sites of change were large population centers of African Americans, where a robust community allowed for experimentation and could support efforts that may or may not succeed. Sufficient numbers of African Americans and their money could support effective organizing, and the creating of new organizations to challenge old and ineffective ones. In smaller communities such progress could not have taken place. In a city where few African Americans seemed empowered enough to take action at the local level, such change or contributions at the national level hardly seemed possible. In Seattle for example, the small population of African Americans before World War II, and limited economic opportunity before the influx of defense related jobs, hindered the progress of the African American community.⁶² The war and the resulting economic and demographic shifts also increased the membership in the local NAACP from “a prewar high of 85 members to 1,550 in 1945.”⁶³ In addition to a large increase in membership, Seattle’s African American population “became increasingly vocal against injustices toward African Americans.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Oakland, a large

⁶² Quintard Taylor. *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle’s Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 170.

⁶³ Taylor, *Forging of a Black Community*, 170.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *Forging of a Black Community*, 170.

African American community since WWII, experienced a growth in population, which, by the 1940s supported local chapters of the Congress of Racial Equality, the NAACP, the California Federation of Labor, and the California Ministerial Alliance.⁶⁵

In more densely populated areas, African Americans were able to adopt a more militant strategy earlier, as their economic and social infrastructure supported this militant stance. By contrast, in San Luis Obispo in the late 1940s, a conciliatory attitude based on *education* and *communication* rather than on opposition to the all-white community predominated. In fact, the San Luis Obispo NAACP would never adopt a militant position on any issue relating to the civil rights movement or the improvement of African American situations. Even as the civil rights movement in general adopted a more militant and urgent attitude in the mid and late 1960s, the West Coast NAACP decried the influence of black nationalists and militants as anathema to their cause. By 1968 the Black Panther Party, and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, using more radical tactics, drew influence away from the conciliatory strategy of the NAACP on the West coast. In San Luis Obispo, NAACP leaders frequently participated in city government councils to address the pressing needs of African Americans, however, they seemed largely absent from the more radical youth movements centered on campus.

The lack of a strong economic base and social organizations constituted limiting factors that led the African American community in San Luis Obispo, and likely small communities elsewhere, to take their cues from larger organizations. In this case the direction being wholly from national to regional to local. There did however, exist opportunities for adapting the national strategy to local conditions. While this did not challenge the overall message of the national organization, it did require creativity and agency at the grassroots to implement reform.

⁶⁵ Self, 103.

Though tension within the organization, and its difficulty sustaining membership would ultimately weaken the organization in San Luis Obispo, it did not prevent the NAACP from pursuing various causes to further reform early in 1949. A report titled “Brief History of the San Luis Obispo Branch of the NAACP” detailed the actions of the organization through June of 1949. In January of 1949 the San Luis Obispo NAACP convened to discuss “areas in violation of Civil Rights.”⁶⁶ They found “violations” in barbershops, real estate, and a sewing machine shop and formed a committee to investigate each of these claims. The committee concluded that “education [was] the primary need of [the] community to broaden understanding and change viewpoints.”⁶⁷ Similar instances of discrimination in local restaurants prompted the formation of yet another committee in May to assess the extent of the alleged discrimination. To affect a change in public opinion the branch created and circulated “literature pertinent to our purposes on problems” on a monthly basis.⁶⁸

San Luis Obispo did not face the same set of circumstances as Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles or Oakland; racial discrimination did take place in areas other than housing that required the attention of the NAACP. While there were no documented cases of violence against blacks or political disenfranchisement, other forms of discrimination did take place. In 1949, the Secretary of the San Luis Obispo NAACP wrote the regional office inquiring about financial aid or other forms of legal assistance. At the time a local Union forbade its barbers from servicing African American customers. While the regional office did not offer financial assistance, they advised the San Luis Obispo officers that this was indeed a violation of state law and that a plaintiff

⁶⁶ Brief History of the San Luis Obispo Branch of the NAACP. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obispo, CA nd, 1947-1949

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

could sue for up to \$500; there is no evidence to suggest that the branch took any such action, however.⁶⁹

Despite what appeared to be early success on the part of the San Luis Obispo chapter in advocating for change in the community and bringing together African Americans and whites, the sudden withdrawal of the support of Reverend Taylor and the entire congregation of the Springfield Baptist Church in early 1949 seemed to undermine the effectiveness of the organization. According to the local secretary of the church, the Reverend's responsibilities to his congregation prompted his resignation from the NAACP. However, in a letter from Reverend Taylor to the Regional Secretary immediately following his resignation he wrote, "we are in the position to do a great work, but there is nothing to be done."⁷⁰ Although the Reverend argued that there were no challenges facing the African American community in San Luis Obispo it appears his resignation was prompted by a "disagreement" within the organization.⁷¹

The organization continued without the support of Reverend Taylor and his congregation and began efforts to draw in members and forge relationships with community members, including the university community. In February of 1949 members organized a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the NAACP. Members estimated attendance of one hundred and fifty people "representing all creeds, races, occupations, and social levels."⁷² The membership chairmen successfully raised membership in the San Luis Obispo chapter to one hundred and twenty five

⁶⁹ Vivien A. Landry, Correspondence, 6, Feb. 1949 BANC MSS 78/180. Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obispo, CA nd, 1947-1949

⁷⁰ Reverend Taylor, Correspondence, 7 March, 1949. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obispo, CA nd, 1947-1949

⁷¹ N.W. Griffin, Correspondence, 7 June, 1949. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obispo, CA nd, 1947-1949

⁷² Brief History of the San Luis Obispo Branch of the NAACP. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obispo, CA nd, 1947-1949

people from a “wide-cross section”⁷³ of the community. Again in May of 1949 a multi-racial contingent of San Luis Obispo citizens gathered at a barbecue demonstrating “cooperation of community and college organizations...”⁷⁴ The NAACP recognized the importance of creating a relationship with the growing college community, “especially those of ‘minority’ groups or [students] from foreign countries.”⁷⁵ Members also supported efforts of the NAACP elsewhere through financial support and letter writing campaigns.

The desire of the San Luis Obispo branch to educate the public on the African American community appeared to meet with little success. By the end of 1949 the secretary of the San Luis Obispo branch requested permission to forgo election rules due to the small number of active members and the infrequency of participation of occasional members. The branch seems to have closed for the next five years, only to be reactivated briefly in the early 1950s. There is no documentation of significant activity of the NAACP in the area, however, branch officers continued to be elected throughout the 1950s. The sudden decline in membership and activity at the San Luis Obispo branch supports three possible conclusions. First, that Rev. Taylor’s assessment of the racial situation of San Luis Obispo was correct and that there was little work to be done by a local NAACP. Or, that the monthly dues required of the NAACP were not sustainable by a large number of those interested in a NAACP. Finally, and perhaps more likely, the NAACP, an organization built primarily for large-scale legal challenges to discrimination in explicit violation of the law, was not the appropriate organization for a small town in which most discrimination was subtle and informal.

⁷³ A Brief History of the San Luis Obispo Branch of the NAACP. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obispo, CA nd, 1947-1949

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

The Branch would remain largely inactive until 1966, when it was briefly revived. Members of the NAACP participated in the Human Relations commission and other investigative bodies convened in the late 1960s, though by 1969 the regional director informed the San Luis Obispo president that their charter had been revoked and that all their materials needed to be returned to the regional office.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Leonard H. Carter (Regional Director), Correspondence, 20 May, 1969 BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 34. Branch Files San Luis Obsipo, CA 1966-1969, 1982, 198.

African American Housing in San Luis Obispo

Throughout its history in San Luis Obispo the NAACP confronted the issue of housing more than any other. In Arthur Glover's introductory letter to Walter White he alluded to the segregation in housing extant in San Luis Obispo at the time:

Right now we are working to acquire a playground so located that it will be for all the children in this community, and not predominately Colored, for ninety seven percent of us are huddled into a ghetto one block square. I cannot say that this has been deliberately done by the Citizens of the town, because there has been a terrific housing shortage here, and that the tendency during the war years was aggregation. This may be due to the fact that most of us are Southerners and prefer living in an all-colored neighborhood, or to the real estate agents who desire enormous prices for less desirable sections. I am inclined to believe it was both.⁷⁷

Glover's assessment of the racial situation is interesting as it suggests that the residential segregation in San Luis Obispo did not reflect racial bias. Rather, he believed it was either self-segregation on the part of the African American community based on their Southern roots, or a result of a housing shortage and the "enormous prices for less desirable sections."

The theme of unequal housing access in San Luis Obispo appeared in any discussion of race relations in the area from the late 1940s through the 1960s. In 1947, however, it is likely that both the low economic status of most African Americans in San Luis Obispo and the white population's desire to exclude blacks from their neighborhoods produced *de facto* segregation. Historian Andrew Wiese has identified similar patterns among lower and working class blacks in Cleveland in the late 1950s. Chagrin Falls Park, as the community was known, provided a place "shaped by the experience, aspirations, and the incomes of the black families who made them

⁷⁷ Arthur Glover Jr., Correspondence, 1 April 1947. BANC MSS 78/180Carton 94 Folder 32. Branch Files San Luis Obispo, CA nd, 1947-1949.

home.”⁷⁸ That African Americans lived in substandard conditions in both a city the size of Cleveland and a small town like San Luis Obispo was no doubt a reflection of difficult economic conditions as well as the legacy of formal discrimination and the continuation of informal discrimination that plagued all African American communities in the United States. Gunnar Myrdal, in his canonical work *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem in Modern Democracy*, argued that even though “poverty...ethnic attachment” and *forced segregation* were the three primary reasons for segregated housing, it is impossible to separate the three and the fact that “all statistically observed Negro housing concentration is, in essence, forced segregation, independent of the factors which have brought it about.”⁷⁹ In short, Glover’s assessment of local African American housing conditions was accurate, though incomplete. Noting both the social desire and the economic necessity of their living conditions, Glover failed to realize the informal social pressures based on racial exclusion that had rendered San Luis Obispo’s African Americans economically prostrate and socially excluded by the area’s white population. As later incidents will show, the informal nature of racial housing bias continually limited the freedom of African Americans to purchase homes in neighborhoods of their choosing.

Importantly, race, class, and the agency of the African American residents all shaped their suburban experience.⁸⁰ Race, while perhaps not the explicit reason for limiting African Americans in San Luis Obispo to “a ghetto one block square,” dictated their limited access to economic resources; creating an intersection of both race and class. This intersection’s ability to shape the living patterns of African Americans has been thoroughly documented. African

⁷⁸ Wiese Andrew, “The Other Suburbanites: African American Suburbanization in the North before 1950, in *“We Shall Independent Be” African American Place Making and the Struggle Claim Space in the United States*. Angel David Nieves, Leslie M. Alexander eds. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 224.

⁷⁹ Myrdal, 621.

⁸⁰ Wiese, 226.

American access to housing in San Luis Obispo also revealed what became characteristic of race relations in the area. Racism, though not explicit, dramatically limited the ability of African Americans to choose where they could live and how they could earn their living. By the 1950s, African Americans in larger areas with a more established black community and more economic opportunity, such as Los Angeles, began to settle in suburbs. In Los Angeles, early African American settlers often came with more money, which allowed them to more easily establish a community and begin purchasing homes.⁸¹ As previously noted, the presence of a larger community allowed for African Americans in places like Los Angeles and Chicago to organize and effectively challenge their limited access to housing.⁸² Though, According to Stephen Grant Meyer, the influx of African Americans in the post-war period prompted three responses in the North and West: civic reform in response to an increasingly diverse electorate, increasingly reactionary behavior by whites determined to exclude blacks, or total inaction.⁸³ In major urban areas with high concentration of African Americans progress and racial conflict came hand-in-hand.⁸⁴ In San Luis Obispo, a community that experienced a very small increase in African Americans in the post-war period, challenges to housing bias would come more slowly and without the violence or unrest associated with larger urban areas.

The disparity in both the economic condition of the migrants and in the total number of African Americans migrating to the area placed the black population at a disadvantage in San Luis Obispo. Without a solid community infrastructure prior to the establishment of the NAACP and Springfield Baptist Church in 1947, and with a small population, African Americans seemed

⁸¹ Flamming, Douglas *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 49.

⁸² Meyer, Stephen Grant. *As Long As They Don't Live Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000), 115.

⁸³ Meyer, 115.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 116.

to have little choice but live in the limited housing available to them. The establishment of a local chapter by Arthur Glover and his associates in the post-war period allowed African Americans in San Luis Obispo to challenge their limited access to housing and organize the community around other causes.

Housing was one of only two issues that appear to have raised the concern of the local NAACP during the 1950s. First, the Parks and Recreation department refused to grant the organization the right to use its facilities free of charge on the grounds that it was a political organization. After receiving advice to pay the regular fee from the regional office, the issue between the city and the NAACP was resolved.⁸⁵ Second, and perhaps more indicative of the status of African Americans in San Luis Obispo, the NAACP mobilized in response to the eviction of seven black families evicted from their homes.

In June of 1959, the San Luis Obispo County Board of Health condemned a series of homes in the southern part of town. As a result of the condemnation, several families were forced to move out of their homes as the utilities were severed in preparation for their destruction. The San Luis Obispo Ministerial Association sought to place the families in temporary homes while they attempted to locate permanent rentals. Of the families evicted, only the African American families could not find new rentals. According the *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, over fifty available rental units had been identified but the “remaining seven [African-American] families were refused admittance” despite the fact that all had been employed locally and had been long-time residents of San Luis Obispo.⁸⁶ It is interesting to note that in addition to being refused admittance to new homes, the African Americans were living in homes fit to be condemned. In

⁸⁵ This action was consistent with the NAACP’s strategy of non-confrontation with government policy. At the time, the rise of militant anti-communism, headed by Senator McCarthy, prompted the NAACP and other civil rights organizations to distance themselves from any actions that could have been seen as anti-American. This may explain the regional offices eagerness to dismiss the matter.

⁸⁶ “Negro Families Evicted From Condemned Homes” *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, June 22nd, 1959.

San Luis Obispo, as in Los Angeles and other metropolitan areas, these actions appeared to rest on more informal, rather than official or legal, means of enforcing segregated housing patterns.

In many ways, the San Luis Obispo population of African Americans confronted wholly different challenges when it came to community formation and to confronting problems of civil rights. In other areas the actions of the white community mirrored other, more diverse areas of the west coast. The imposition of racially restrictive covenants in larger urban and suburban areas, most notably Los Angeles, created a situation of *de jure* housing segregation. It served as a way whites could maintain cultural hegemony over and control their physical space by denying access to various out-groups. In 1948, in the case *Shelley v. Kraemer (1948)*, the Supreme Court ruled racially restrictive covenants unconstitutional. As Scott Kurashige has argued, the lack of a positive enforcement mechanism in the *Shelley* ruling resulted in “white homeowners and real estate interests develop[ing] new, informal methods to circumvent antidiscrimination measures.”⁸⁷ Myrdal also identified the same phenomenon. He argued, “probably the chief force maintaining residential segregation of Negroes has been *informal social pressures from whites* [emphasis added].”⁸⁸ In SLO, de facto housing segregation was certainly a problem facing the city. However, due to the small size of the African American community this did not translate into restrictive access to schools based on segregated housing patterns. As a result, there is no evidence, and indeed the NAACP in any years of its existence did not register a complaint against the city or state for segregated schools in the area, though frequent complaints and organized actions against limited access to housing did take place.

⁸⁷ Kurashige, Scott *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of a Multi-Ethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 234.

⁸⁸ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944) 622-23 as quoted in Stephen Grant Meyer *As Long As They Don't Live Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000), 1.

In San Luis Obispo, complaints against racially restrictive housing mirrored problems throughout the West; In the 1950s this problem drew increasing attention from the NAACP. In an article for *The New Leader* in 1954, increasing housing restrictions on the West Coast were identified. Author Frank Mankiewicz argued “today there are systematic attempts to force total residential segregation upon the Negro...there is evidence that, through covert agreements with banks and other lending agencies, areas are successfully “restricted” by virtue of the fact that Negroes cannot borrow money to finance purchases...”⁸⁹ Similar studies both conducted and followed by the NAACP revealed systematic housing bias throughout the region. The case of seven San Luis Obispo African American families being evicted from their homes in 1959 is particularly instructive, and reveals the depth of the problem in area.

Housing again became the primary concern for the local NAACP in 1966 when, responding to the possible sale of a home to an African American man and his family, residents of the Ann Arbor Estates, near Laguna Lake, picketed the realty offices of R.E. Macnamara. On the sign carried by the picketers was written “Sell Your Property to Macnamara and You Will Have Transgression [against your all white neighborhood.]”⁹⁰ One protestor did not want her “children exposed to this yet.”⁹¹ The incident, though seemingly isolated, generated an outpouring of opinions from the community. One commentator, in his article “Don’t kid yourself,” argued that the picketing incident had exposed to the public “a situation usually reserved for private comment in this city.”⁹² The author also quoted a letter from a resident of San Luis Obispo mailed to the *Telegram-Tribune* that laid bare the racial problems of the city: “It is very common in San Luis Obispo to hear people state that there is no race problem in our

⁸⁹ *Jim Crow Housing on the West Coast*. By Frank Mankiewicz. Reprinted from the May 3rd, 1954 Issue. *The New Leader*. BANC MSS 78/180. Carton 103, Folder19

⁹⁰ “Realty Office Picketed” *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, September 17th, 1966

⁹¹ “Realty Office Picketed” *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, September 17th, 1966

⁹² “Don’t kid yourself” *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, September 20th, 1966.

town. Apparently these people sincerely believe that a Negro is free to live and work where he chooses in this city...There is really nothing so new about the situation except its accompanying publicity.”⁹³ The author of the article also alludes to the sort of informal discrimination identified by many scholars. He wrote: “there have been reports of difficulty [sic] Negroes have had in finding housing and employment. There have been reports of a quiet ostracism of some Negro children in our schools-as ostracism practiced by students who reflect the prejudice of their parents.”⁹⁴ Again, as Myrdal pointed out of all of America, informal, extralegal racism appeared to permeate San Luis Obispo.

The 1966 annual report of the San Luis Obispo branch of the NAACP indicated, despite the incident at Macnamara realty, that “the housing conditions in San Luis Obispo are improving...”⁹⁵ The report also testified to an absence of de facto segregation in schools or housing, and in fact, argued that “considerable advantages are available,” though the report does not detail these “advantages.”⁹⁶ The report appeared at odds with the consensus of opinions expressed by both white and black residents. The report of an absence of de facto segregation was probably accurate, though the incident at the realty office and the widespread belief that African Americans were not free to live where they chose suggests significant barriers to equal access in housing.

More housing woes faced the community in the late 1960s as San Luis Obispo continued to grow. The debate shifted focus somewhat from previous debates. With the establishment of the Housing Authority of San Luis Obispo (HASLO) in 1968, determined efforts began to

⁹³ “Don’t kid yourself” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, September 20th, 1966.

⁹⁴ “Don’t kid yourself” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, September 20th, 1966.

⁹⁵ NAACP Annual Report, San Luis Obispo Branch, 1966. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 34. Branch Files San Luis Obsipo, CA 1966-1969, 1982, 1983

⁹⁶ NAACP Annual Report, San Luis Obispo Branch, 1966. BANC MSS 78/180 Carton 94 Folder 34. Branch Files San Luis Obsipo, CA 1966-1969, 1982, 1983

establish public housing in the area. Again the site of conflict was the Laguna Lake area, where HASLO wanted to build twenty low-cost rental units.⁹⁷ In August of 1969 an organization identified as the “Citizens Committee of Lakewood and Laguna Lake” claimed that residents of the area did not oppose public housing on racial grounds, rather they opposed “spot rezoning” of land in their neighborhood “simply for the convenience of a developer...”⁹⁸ Critics of the Laguna Lake Citizens Committee charged that race was the motivating factor behind their opposition to the public housing project. A young African American woman named Elizabeth Lewis, echoing charges from the Macnamara housing picket incident claimed: “nobody can rent in an R-1 district unless his skin is white.”⁹⁹ Furthermore, Lewis indicted the whole community saying “nobody will say he is prejudiced, but this whole community is. Negroes can’t buy a house; maybe they could rent an apartment.”¹⁰⁰

The battle for equal access to housing demonstrates the extent to which racism and economic displacement have reinforced one another. It is interesting that in an area with so few African Americans, similar patterns of social and economic exclusion have taken place. As Meyer has argued, one school of African American sociological thought, represented by Derick Bell, Howard Rabinowitz, and others, has argued that “differences in race relations in the North and South [and I would argue West] *constitute differences of degree not kind* [emphasis added].”¹⁰¹ It is clear that outside of the North South binary, similar forces operated, though less visibly, to affect African American lives. Meyer also argues that white resistance to residential integration operated on several levels. First, and this argument appears to ring true for the cases

⁹⁷ “Council Sets Precedent” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, September 16, 1969.

⁹⁸ “Advertisement-Spot Rezoning in San Luis Obispo” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, August 9th, 1969.

⁹⁹ “Housing racism charged” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, September 16th, 1969.

¹⁰⁰ “Housing racism charged” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, September 16th, 1969.

¹⁰¹ Stephen Grant Meyer. *As Long As They Don’t Live Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000), 5.

in San Luis Obispo, whites believed that property value would decline if African Americans moved into the neighborhood.¹⁰² Rather than arguing for race-restrictive zoning ordinances, which were illegal after 1948, whites in San Luis Obispo framed their argument primarily in terms of economic concerns. It is possible that this may have been their only concern, but the consternation of the African American community, and their frequent complaints of restrictions in their ability to live where they chose or secure loans, suggests that white lenders and homeowners participated in substantial, if informal, racist housing practices.

Throughout its history, the African American community in San Luis Obispo always grappled with the ambivalence of the broader community. Their attempts to articulate and address the needs of the African American community were limited by the small size of the community, the entrenched (though subtle) resistance in the white community to residential integration, and the apparent weakness of the NAACP in successfully organizing the African American community. The experiences of larger African American communities provided interesting examples of what was possible in situations with larger communities, stronger civil rights organizations, and a stronger economic base to challenge the status quo. Regardless of their location, size, or economic strength, African American communities in various locations throughout the United States all faced the specter of white racism in its varied forms and organized to meet the social exclusion, housing restrictions, and limited economic opportunity imposed by white communities.

¹⁰² Meyer, 8.

Civil Rights in San Luis Obispo- The City, Cal Poly, and the Civil Rights Movement 1966-1969

While in 1947, Glover could optimistically assess the situation of African Americans in non-racial terms, by the late 1960s the character and urgency of complaints were often framed in terms of racial bias. The ultimate failure of the NAACP of San Luis Obispo to successfully organize a movement did not signal an end to African American activism in the area. The organization's absence in the ideological struggles that took place on the campus of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly) further indicates that by the late 1960s the organization had continued to decline and was not relevant to the African American student body. Without a presence among students, the NAACP was replaced by growing student organizations, such as the Black Students Union, which adopted a more militant approach to secure the rights of African Americans. In the community, governmental organizations such as the Human Relations Commissions appear to have taken over as the leaders of the local struggle for equality. This section is focused on the activities of the African American student body at Cal Poly and the activities of community and civic organizations throughout the 1960s. Black students struggled to find a voice and a place on a campus in which they comprised fewer than two percent of the student body, and in a community where they were less than one percent of the county population. At the same time, the government and citizens, both white and black undertook a more critical examination of the racial conditions within the community. Remarkably, African Americans students succeeded in producing real change at Cal Poly. Though not all of their demands were met, a small contingent of minority students forced a largely white campus to adopt important changes occurring at the national and state level while

at the same time the community and government took a more active and visible role in addressing civil rights issues.

The clearest manifestation of this shift appeared at Cal Poly. In late 1968, Darryl Bandy, a Cal Poly student and member of the Black Student Alliance taught “Pride and Black Heritage,” a class designed by students to “give us (black students) a chance to know our history, something we are denied in a white man’s history book.”¹⁰³ Bandy also explained his belief that the term “Negro” operated as an instrument by which whites continued to deny African Americans access to their history and culture. He believed using Negro was “a polite way of calling us Niggers!”¹⁰⁴ Bandy believed that Pride and Black Heritage could educate African Americans who still self identified as Negroes, and help them connect with their history and heritage. Bandy’s attention to the self-identification of black Americans has long been a contentious debate within the African American community. Bandy’s rejection of the term “Negro” and his contention that it constituted a polite form of “nigger” had been a cause for rejection of the term since the Civil War.¹⁰⁵ An influential book, *The Name ‘Negro’: Its Origins and Evil Use*, was published in 1960 and argued that the origin of “Negro” in slavery demanded that blacks discontinue the use of the term.¹⁰⁶ Moore, the author of *The Name Negro*, formed a committee to spread his truth regarding the word. His work eventually influenced Civil Rights leader Stokely Carmichael and the powerful Nation of Islam to advocate for the adoption of alternative label.¹⁰⁷ That Bandy and the Black Student Alliance were participating in such a dialogue in the late 1960s is not surprising.

¹⁰³ Ray Morawski, “Are you Negro or Afro-American?” Mustang Daily, October 30th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁰⁴ Morawski, Ray. “Are you Negro or Afro-American?” Mustang Daily, October 30th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁰⁵ Randall Kennedy, “Finding a Proper Name to Call Black Americans.” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. No 46 (Winter 2004-2005) pp. 72-83. Pg, 75.

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy, 75.

¹⁰⁷ Kennedy, 76.

The reclamation of history, linked to the repudiation of the epithets Negro, nigger, and colored, became cornerstones of the more militant groups of the late 1960s.

The challenge of the Black Student Union and others involved in the Civil Rights struggle was significant. In 1968, 69 percent of African Americans supported the use of the name Negro; however, by the early 1970s, a majority preferred black.¹⁰⁸ “Afro-American” as the preferred self-identifier of African Americans never seemed to enjoy the popularity of “black” or “African American.” However, the power of “Afro-American” in the late 1960s came from the argument advanced by Bandy that it connected African Americans with their history in a way that “Negro” or “black” could not. Black nationalists preferred the term and were successful in connecting the term with the numerous “Afro-American Studies” departments established following the strike at San Francisco State University in 1968.¹⁰⁹

Bandy also believed that whites could benefit from his class by familiarizing themselves with elements of black history. Whites could “then return to their white racist friends and change their attitudes toward the black man.”¹¹⁰ The goals of Bandy’s course were consistent with the demands of the Black Student Union for increasing access to ethnic studies and black studies courses in order to provide a culturally relevant curriculum to black and minority students. The dissociation with the university suggests that the students had failed to persuade the administration to adopt these changes in 1968. The university however, recognizing the need for such courses did eventually embrace the changes wrought by the civil rights movement on the university. The student efforts at Cal Poly to pressure the university into adopting black studies involved highly visible and often confrontational tactics. These tactics were consistent with the

¹⁰⁸ Kennedy, 77.

¹⁰⁹ Kennedy, 81.

¹¹⁰ Morawski, Ray. “Are you Negro or Afro-American?” Mustang Daily, October 30th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

shift that had taken place within the civil rights movement at the national level. This shift, beginning during the New Deal, continued through World War II, and finally peaked in the late 1960s.

The 1960s represented a decade of both progress and profound disappointment. Promising legislation early in the decade renewed the hope that the federal government could intervene to ameliorate the appalling racial conditions throughout the United States, while Civil Rights activity gained both strength and momentum. President Lyndon Johnson, addressing a joint session of Congress in 1965, admonished America for the “long denial of equal rights to millions of Americans.”¹¹¹ Having been horrified by the protest events in Selma, Alabama, President Johnson urged the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The act sought to eliminate barriers that had prevented African Americans from voting in the South. By barring literacy tests and other means by which blacks had been prevented from voting, and placing into law the right of the federal government to intervene if the VRA was not followed, Johnson committed the federal government to the promises of the 15th amendment passed almost 100 years earlier.

President Johnson’s renewed pressure on Civil Rights from the top occurred simultaneously with the ascendancy of a more militant voice in the ranks of Civil Rights activists. Discontent began to spread throughout the Civil Rights movement as the excruciatingly slow pace of change continued throughout the 1960s. James Farmer, the National Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), believed in 1965 that “the major war now confronting us is aimed at harnessing the awesome political potential of the black community in order to effect basic social and economic changes for all Americans...this cannot be done for us by the

¹¹¹ Johnson, Lyndon, *The American Promise: Special Message to Congress*, March 15, 1965 in Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007), 215.

Government.”¹¹² He further argued that “CORE alone has the nationwide network of militant chapters required...” to affect change free from the ineffective federal government.¹¹³ In his visit to Cal Poly in 1966 Farmer emphasized these same points. He argued that a revolution occurred in the Civil Rights movement and that a new “militant Negro” had appeared.¹¹⁴

CORE was not alone in its rhetorical and tactical shift to a more militant position in the mid-1960s. The Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in 1960 as nonviolent Civil Rights organization, quickly transformed into the most radical and confrontational organization of the main Civil Rights organizations.¹¹⁵ The SNCC initially focused on voter registration drives as a way of politically empowering southern black communities. However, “owing to dissatisfaction with the pace of change” wrought by other Civil Rights activities, the SNCC embraced more “radical” methods; namely, the direct confrontation of racist policies in the South to “bring about sweeping changes in the region.”¹¹⁶ The SNCC’s willingness to embrace more radical tactics represented the ever-growing frustration of all Civil Rights organizations with the unsuccessful nature of nonviolence as the means to secure African American rights. Sociologist Herbert Haines argues that the shift in tactics in 1964, and the nature of the “post-Birmingham riots,” suggested a “crack in the nonviolent hegemony of the civil rights movement.”¹¹⁷

¹¹² Farmer, James L. *We Must Be in a Position of Power: Address before the CORE National Convention, July 1st, 1965* in Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007), 221

¹¹³ Farmer, 222.

¹¹⁴ Mustang Daily, “Farmer tell of changes in civil rights,” Tuesday, May 17th, 1966. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹¹⁵ Herbert H. Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1970* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 44.

¹¹⁶ Haines, 44.

¹¹⁷ Haines, 47.

The rhetoric and tactics of the Civil Rights movement had indeed changed. Farmers identification of “a new mood – the militant Negro”¹¹⁸ in 1966 echoed SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael’s articulation of “black power” in 1967. Farmer argued that the reclamation of African American history and increasing self respect had contributed to the rise of the “militant Negro,” while Carmichael called for “black people...to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of society.”¹¹⁹ CORE concepts of black power differed markedly from that of Carmichael and the SNCC, however. Where the SNCC advocated for distance and separation from the white community, James Farmer and CORE advocated for the insertion of blacks into the democratic system.¹²⁰ The disparate attitudes toward black power exhibited by two of the most prominent leaders of the Civil Rights movement manifested in the various demands made by African American students at universities. A third direction, advocated by “cultural nationalists” included the adoption of African names as well as allowing their hair to grow naturally and adopting African dress as a way to “recover a positive racial identity.”¹²¹ These changing characteristics of the Civil Rights movement, argues Haines, influenced the adoption of black studies programs throughout the country.¹²²

Increased militancy and social unrest did not go unrecognized by the federal government. A series of reports began the process of studying the violence and turmoil that grew in frequency and intensity during the 1960s. In September of 1970, William W. Scranton, Chairman of the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest, submitted his report to the White House. The memorandum introducing the report concluded that colleges and universities must accept change

¹¹⁸ Mustang Daily, “Farmer tell of changes in civil rights,” Tuesday, May 17th, 1966. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹¹⁹ Stokely Carmichael as quoted in Haines, 60.

¹²⁰ Haines, 62.

¹²¹ Haines, 64.

¹²² Ibid.

and reform both administrative procedures and instructional programs. The study, commissioned by Richard Nixon following the violent encounters at Kent State and Jackson State, focused on the nature of student protest in the 1960s.

The Commission concluded that university protest “focused on three major questions: racial injustice, war, and the university itself.”¹²³ At Cal Poly, the rhetoric of the African American and other minority student protestors suggests that racial injustice and the ongoing critique of the university system were bound together. Students denounced the absence of ethnic curricula and believed the adoption of such curricula an important step toward alleviating the racial problem in America. At a meeting between Cal Poly President Kennedy and BSU President Roger Jones, Jones emphasized the need for the university to adopt a black studies curriculum taught by black instructors.¹²⁴ The Report also notes a profound cultural shift that took place among university students during the 1960s. They argued that the new student culture was, in many ways, intolerant. Students became increasingly intolerant of the slow pace of change in a liberal democracy, which led to an increase in violence on campuses.¹²⁵ At the same time, the public became increasingly intolerant of impatient student activists; a bifurcation the Commission feared would ultimately undermine the nation.¹²⁶ As part of its recommendations to alleviate the escalating tensions on university campuses, the Commission suggested that universities to adapt to the new values of youth culture.¹²⁷ Though the Commission did not make any specific recommendations regarding the absence of African Americans from higher education, it did identify racism as a pervasive issue in America and on college campuses.

¹²³ *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest, Including Special Reports: The Killings at Jackson State, The Kent State Tragedy* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 3.

¹²⁴ Jackson, C. E. “BSU, administration discuss black issues” *Mustang Daily*, April 2nd 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹²⁵ *Commission on Campus Unrest*, 5.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

The Commission placed the rise of black student movements within the shifting context of youth culture during the 1960s. They noted that a “profound shift” had taken place within the Civil Rights movement. The shift came as a result of the presence of blacks in a “predominantly white society and is a driving force among black students and, to an increasingly larger extent, among Blacks who are not students.”¹²⁸ The demands of African American students for recognition of their presence, their history, and their status as equal citizens suggests that the tension created between a predominately white institution, the university, and a small minority, produced an urgent movement for rapid change. The Commission recognized the importance of the “discovery” by African Americans of their own culture, which could be identified as “Afro-American”¹²⁹ This “discovery” did lead to African American students taking responsibility for their own education while they advocated for the formal recognition of such scholarship by the university.

Changes within the civil rights movement were accelerated by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4th, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Though the new militant direction of the Civil Rights movement began well before the death of Dr. King, the assassination galvanized the African American community throughout the United States and began a period of heightened activity among African Americans in San Luis Obispo. Led largely by students but also accompanied by increasing activity at the city level, a concerted effort to expose and address the inequities in the community began in 1968. As part of this burgeoning movement, the white population also began an examination of their own prejudices relative to the black community both on campus and off.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 92.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

After what seems like near invisibility for their entire history at Cal Poly, African Americans suddenly appeared as a major political force on campus. Immediately following the assassination the Black Students Alliance, a precursor to the Black Student Union (BSU), organized a march of approximately forty students to grieve for Dr. King. Importantly, the members of the BSA adopted the attire of the Black Panther Party, donning black berets and black armbands.¹³⁰ The adoption of the berets and armbands represented to the black students both “pride in their organization” and a “move toward black power,”¹³¹ according to BSU member Preston Dixon. The group selected as their destination for their march the Springfield Baptist Church; which had been an important center of the black community since 1947. At the service for Dr. King some African American students lamented the loss of “the last hope” of a nonviolent African American leader, while others claimed, “it was white American that killed him, no assassins’ bullet.”¹³² The interpretation of the African American students at Cal Poly differed markedly from that of the administration. While vocal members of the black student population blamed racism, President Robert E. Kennedy, in a statement released from his office, identified “the warped mind of a single individual [who] initiated an action which ended the life of a man dedicated to a non-violent struggle to obtain freedom, justice, and equality for everyone – not just Negroes.”¹³³

The disconnect between the administration and the students also appeared in the construction of plans for a memorial for Dr. King. Preston Dixon, Chairman of the Black Students Alliance, sought a black nationalist speaker for memorial services; whereas the

¹³⁰ Murphy, Sharon. “King Loss Stuns Campus.” *Mustang Daily*. April 8th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Preston Dixon. As Quoted in “King loss stuns campus.” *Mustang Daily*, April 8th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹³³ *Mustang Daily*, Monday April 8th 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

administration enlisted Rev. Dr. Henson, preacher at the Zion Baptist Evangelistic Temple of Compton and Dr. King's West Coast representative, to deliver the keynote address at the school sponsored memorial services.¹³⁴ Dr. Henson reinforced the ideas of Martin Luther King, emphasizing that "Negroes and whites must work together in the spirit of non-violence...or face national disaster."¹³⁵ Remarks were also made by Preston Dixon who warned white America to "look out, we won't let another one of our people get snuffed out."¹³⁶

This rhetoric also appeared at the San Luis Obispo city services held on April 7th. San Luis Obispo religious leaders embraced the nonviolent approach of Dr. King, while BSU representative Darryl Bandy, speaking to the crowd of approximately 700, argued again that "white racist America killed Dr. King, decadent demoralized white racism that lives right here in San Luis Obispo."¹³⁷ Doyle McGhee, vice chairmen of the Black Students Alliance, also called for dramatic action to alter the status of African Americans. He observed "either we go up or this system comes down."¹³⁸ Defending the new militancy of the Black Student Alliance, McGhee argued that in spirit, the goals of the two movements were the same; however, the tactics adopted by the new brand of Civil Right activist would become increasingly aggressive.¹³⁹ In his speech at Cal Poly's memorial service Dixon argued that his organization was "non-violent as such...we will only be violent if anybody gets violent with us."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Riddell, Steve. "King Lauded at memorial service." *Mustang Daily*, Wednesday, April 10th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹³⁵ Riddell, Steve. "King Lauded at memorial service." *Mustang Daily*, Wednesday, April 10th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹³⁶ Riddell, Steve. "King Lauded at memorial service." *Mustang Daily*, Wednesday, April 10th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹³⁷ Gilbert Moore, "Call for deeds, not words." *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, 7 April, 1968

¹³⁸ Gilbert Moore, "Call for deeds, not words." *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, 7 April, 1968

¹³⁹ Gilbert Moore, "Call for deeds, not words." *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, 7 April, 1968

¹⁴⁰ Gilbert Moore, "Memorial for King: 2000 Attend Cal Poly service," *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, 9 April, 1968

While no violence actually took place in San Luis Obispo, rioting across the country inspired fear locally. This, in turn, allowed for African American students to affect change at the local level by insinuating similar conditions may spread to San Luis Obispo. In an interview with the Mustang Daily in 1969 BSU member Darryl Bandy “testified that [CPSU President] Kennedy was in fact scared to death that the BSU would resort to violence in securing its demands.”¹⁴¹ Other research has suggested that the diffusion of such tactics, and the fears they generated, shaped aspects of the civil rights movement. Brian Purnell, in his analysis of CORE’s 1964 “stall-in” in Brooklyn, has revealed that such disruptive tactics, regardless of their success, “inspired copycat protests by other local activists. Even more, it generated a citywide panic that reflected citizens’ and politicians’ fears and fantasies of protest groups that used tactics...to subvert the everyday normalcy of modern urban life in the fight to end racial discrimination.”¹⁴² Bandy, connecting the BSU’s struggle to other violent protests elsewhere, engaged this phenomenon as a tactic to secure changes at Cal Poly. Kennedy, in response to these accusations emphasized that he believed that “maintain[ing] open communication with minority groups will be recognized as the only way to solve problems which lack of understanding...bring about.” He added further that he supported adopting the changes proposed by the BSU that were relevant for Cal Poly.¹⁴³ According to the San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, the march staged by the Black Students Alliance to honor Dr. King “touch[ed] off even more rumors of trouble.”¹⁴⁴ Members of the Black Students Alliance reported purchasing weapons “for self protection only” and did “not

¹⁴¹ Thompson, Mel “Administration meets BSU, More meetings slated with off-campus group” Mustang Daily, February 10th, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁴² Brian Purnell, “Drive Awhile for Freedom: Brooklyn CORE’s 1964 Stall-In and Public Discourse on Protest Violence.” In *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* edited by Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 46.

¹⁴³ Thompson, Mel “Administration meets BSU, More meetings slated with off-campus group” Mustang Daily, February 10th, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁴⁴ “Rumors trigger jitters here after King murder,” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, April 9, 1968.

plan to take to the streets.”¹⁴⁵ The fear generated over riots in other cities led to “several gun purchases by whites” in the community and led the police to suppress rumors of “mass gun buying by Negroes.”¹⁴⁶ Rumors of potential violence prompted the Black Student Alliance as well as the city’s Human Relations Commission Chairmen, Dr. Bruce Tjaden, to call for open lines of communication to begin relieving tension within the community.

Tension existed within the black community as well. A Telegram-Tribune piece dedicated to the opinions of local African Americans focused on the growing generation gap between older African Americans and younger, more militant, blacks. This gap was most clearly manifested in the self-identification of the younger generation as “black” or “Afro-American,” while older blacks identified as “Negroes” or “colored people.”¹⁴⁷ Older African Americans also found themselves “frightened by the black-beret members of the Black Student Alliance.”¹⁴⁸ Like the Civil Rights movement generally, the two groups differed in tactics while sharing common goals. This “town and gown” phenomenon is by no means new, nor was exclusive to the civil rights era. As Alexander Deconde has argued, “similarities in background, outlook, and environment often build up a sense of community among students that placed a screen between them and the older non-student generation.”¹⁴⁹ Clearly, the African American students existed as apart from the African American residents of the town. In addition to placing “a screen” between generations, the students at the university benefited from their status as outsiders in the community. As outsiders to San Luis Obispo, African Americans could challenge the racial

¹⁴⁵ “Rumors trigger jitters here after King murder,” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, April 9, 1968

¹⁴⁶ “Rumors trigger jitters here after King murder,” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, April 9, 1968

¹⁴⁷ Gilbert Moore, “What Negroes here think: Militants frighten older generation.” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune April 11th, 1968

¹⁴⁸ Moore Gilbert, “What Negroes here think: Militants frighten older generation.” San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune April 11th, 1968.

¹⁴⁹ Alexander DeConde, ed., *Student Activism: Town and Gown in Historical Perspective* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971), 5.

status quo and not fear the possible consequences of upsetting long standing relationships within the community.

In addition to adopting attire to symbolize the move toward “black power,” African American students involved in the Black Student Union identified the positions within their organization with titles adopted from Black Nationalist organizations. Darryl Bandy, a member of the Black Student Union in 1969, and member of the Black Student Alliance in 1968, held the title of “information minister” within the organization. Preston Dixon also identified himself as the “chairmen” of the Black Students Alliance. In 1969, an article, reporting on ongoing discussions between the BSU and the administration described the walls of the off-campus headquarters of the BSU as being “lined with pictures of H. Rapp, Brown, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and other noted revolutionary black power leaders.”¹⁵⁰ The connection between the student movement at Cal Poly and the more radical elements of the Civil Rights movement is not surprising. The President’s Commission on Campus Unrest argued:

Black Pride, Black Identity, Black unity, Black power, Black self determination, and Black survival are not idealistic and romantic notions to black students. Rather, they are fundamentally existential expressions which give meaning, direction, purpose, and vitality to the contemporary Black struggle.

With the heightened consciousness and awareness of being black, students and others have also become increasingly aware of white racism and have begun to react more militantly against it.¹⁵¹

Certainly, the actions of the Black Student Union reflected these trends within the African American student movement. Bandy, Dixon, and others clearly represented a radical articulation of the civil rights movement.

Several factors likely influenced the adoption of radical rhetoric and symbolism among Cal Poly’s African American Civil Rights activists. First, and perhaps most importantly, the rise

¹⁵⁰ Jackson, C.E. “BSU administration discuss black issues.” Mustang Daily, Wednesday, April 2nd 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁵¹ *Commission on Campus Unrest*, 93.

of the visibility and influence of Black Nationalist organizations in the 1960s made them an attractive and powerful symbol for African American students at Cal Poly (and elsewhere) to which they could connect. The failure of mainstream Civil Rights to produce rapid and meaningful change reflected the “slow pace of liberal democracy” and similar frustrations with its failure to affect change. Though Bandy, Dixon, and others involved in the struggle for civil rights and equality at Cal Poly expressed the frustration of African Americans elsewhere, and embraced the symbolism of Black Nationalist organizations, in reality they sought to reform the university of which they found themselves a part. Ethnic Studies, or African American studies, offered a solution that allowed students to make meaning of their experience within the system. Importantly, Black Student leaders embraced the ideology of self-reliance within the African American community. They seemed to believe that the African American community should control the direction of their own organizations and shape their own solutions. One BSU Executive Committee member welcomed criticism of the BSU and its demands, as long as the opposition came from other black students.¹⁵² Darryl Bandy struck a similar tone while discussing his Afro-American history class. He believed that two types of white people had attended his classes; “[f]irst there are those who feel they are proving something to black people when they attend the meeting, and secondly, those who come as curiosity-seekers.”¹⁵³ Though he did not seek to exclude whites entirely, it is clear that Bandy did not want his class or his message to become a mere spectacle; rather, whites could participate as long as they sought awareness and wanted to act as allies to the BSU.

¹⁵² “BSU asks opposing views-from Blacks” Mustang Daily. Friday, April 18, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁵³ Morawski, Ray “Are you Negro or Afro-American.” Mustang Daily. Wednesday, October 30th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

Black Nationalist rhetoric and symbolism offered the most viable tactic for securing the demands of black students. In effect, the students, consciously or not, adopted the symbolism suffused with violence, socialism, and revolution; the most dramatic and frightening aspect of the black power ideological spectrum. However, the actual goals outlined by the Black Student Union represented a more moderate, or pluralist position, determined to change the system so it recognizes and addresses their needs.

The Black Student Union's California statewide program reflected the concerns of the African American in higher education and sought to reshape the system to suit their needs. In 1969 the Black Student Union focused their demands on "black instructors to teach black studies, special classes for attendance by black students only....a full time black studies curriculum...and separate dormitory space for black students."¹⁵⁴ The emphasis of the state BSU program, and indeed of the Cal Poly BSU program, was on creating an institution *within* the university to support their needs as a community. Rooks argues that the insistence on a full black studies program "aroused competing tensions, whereby Blackness could equal racial cooperation or militancy, but never both simultaneously."¹⁵⁵ Some proponents of black studies programs sought a solution wherein African American students would be successfully integrated into the campus community through a black studies curriculum, rather than alienated from it. Conversely, others argued that a separate program would benefit blacks and whites by "engendering Black equality within the university, if not the world at large."¹⁵⁶ At Cal Poly, the students articulated demands consistent with fostering racial cooperation. Though at times the BSU advocated for

¹⁵⁴ Mustang Daily, *BSU Administration Discuss Black Issues*, April 2nd, 1969 University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁵⁵ Rooks, 21.

¹⁵⁶ Rooks, 24.

separate classes within the institution, it is clear they sought to remake the university as a system that could accommodate African Americans as well as all other students.

More extreme rhetoric, or “Counter Communal[ism]” represented by such groups as the Black Panther Party actually “sought to replace the values, interests, institutions, and beliefs of the present system...”¹⁵⁷ It is likely that the BSU’s leaders adopted such a position in 1968 and 1969 given the nature of national events. As previously noted, the assassination of Dr. King completed the split between his peaceful tactics and the more violent and revolutionary tactics of other civil rights organizations. The famous incident at the 1968 Mexico City summer Olympics, where runners John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their black-gloved fists during the National Anthem, influenced black students at Cal Poly, who did the same during a football game in October of 1968. This action sparked an assessment of “Black Power” and its relationship to protest on campus. One student interviewed insisted that protests were going to continue, however the form “these protests take will depend on the results of past demonstrations...[he] personally embrace[d] any non-violent methods,” though he made clear that his commitment to non-violence depended on their success.¹⁵⁸ The author, though dramatically, accurately captured the tension within the African American community and the fear within the white community. He argued that America faced a choice between “[b]lack socks-black gloves-undirected glances? Or burning buildings, sniping, [and] premeditated violence.”¹⁵⁹ The choice, in the opinion of the author was between accepting the demands of African Americans before symbolism and

¹⁵⁷ John T. McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African American Political Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 118.

¹⁵⁸ Macias Ben, “Negro Students Show Power Symbol” Mustang Daily. Wednesday, October 30th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁵⁹ Macias Ben, “Negro Students Show Power Symbol” Mustang Daily. Wednesday, October 30th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

revolutionary rhetoric evolved into violence and the destruction characteristic of the various urban uprisings throughout the United States.

The examination of the racial situation in San Luis Obispo occurred at both the university and within the community. The student newspaper began to examine the bias of white students at Cal Poly, while the Telegram-Tribune investigated the demands of the local African American community. In an article titled “Most students open minded” the Mustang Daily explored the racial attitudes of Cal Poly students. Interestingly, the students interviewed almost unanimously voiced racially biased opinions. One student was quoted as saying “I don’t believe that God made separate races only to have humans destroy these races” while another admitted that he did “not date negroes but some of [his] best friends [were] negroes.”¹⁶⁰

The opposition to interracial marriage among students interviewed appeared nearly universal despite the author’s claim of open-mindedness. An African-American student interviewed for the piece perhaps more accurately identified the phenomenon by saying, “people may say they are for something or would do something, but when faced with it, it is another matter.”¹⁶¹ In a piece preceding the interracial marriage article, the author uses the survey conducted to conclude that there was, in fact, very little discrimination at Cal Poly. One student interview believed “the general consensus at Poly, I think, is that there is no racial problem here. Baloney- there are riots in the cities north and south of here and yet people still think there is no problem here. Something must be done to uncover the prejudice here so blacks and whites will come together.”¹⁶² Other students disputed this claim, arguing, “there doesn’t seem to be much

¹⁶⁰ Nina Zacuto, “Most students open minded.” Mustang Daily, January 13, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁶¹ Nina Zacuto, “Most students open minded.” Mustang Daily, Monday January 13, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁶² Nina Zacuto, “Technical students here more open-minded.” Mustang Daily, Friday, January 10th, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

racial prejudice on this campus.”¹⁶³ While the two articles make clear that no consensus seemed to exist among the majority white population of Cal Poly students, their attitudes toward interracial relationships do suggest a certain level of prejudice. The type of prejudice experienced by African Americans at Cal Poly, as opposed to racism experienced elsewhere, appeared to take place passively.

The activities of the African American student community warrant particular attention for several reasons. The form of black student protest at Cal Poly reflected both the presence of perceived injustice to blacks and the desire of a small, determined population to actively campaign to end these injustices. Student leaders at Cal Poly successfully linked their struggle in the San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly community to larger movements throughout the nation and state.

African American students, led by the Black Student Union, also demonstrated a profound ambivalence toward the various ideologies of the Civil Rights movement. At various times, students articulated tenets of black nationalism, while also demonstrating ideological connections with the California state-wide BSU, and promoting strong interracial efforts to address the oppression of African Americans on Cal Poly’s campus.

Immediately following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. the Black Student Union began a public effort to address institutional inequities at Cal Poly. In their endeavor, the African American student body engaged the administration at Cal Poly in an often contentious dialogue to shape solutions based on the needs of the African American community. University President Robert E. Kennedy and Dean of Students Everett Chandler personally engaged students in dialogue to try to address their needs, often to the dismay of their colleagues. Early

¹⁶³ Nina Zacuto, “Technical students here more open-minded.” Mustang Daily, Friday, January 10th, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

efforts jointly led by the Black Student Union and the administration included the search for African American instructors to diversify the faculty at Cal Poly and to teach culturally relevant curricula. The Mustang Daily identified three barriers to successfully recruiting African American instructors to Cal Poly. First, the small number of black professionals in the area limited the appeal of a teaching position in a community without a large African American community. Furthermore, potential African American professors would have had to accept a lower position if they relocated to Cal Poly. Finally, the deficiency in the population of African American instructors created a difficult environment for recruiting black faculty away from the historically black colleges.¹⁶⁴

By late 1968 a contentious relationship had developed between the Black Student Union¹⁶⁵ and the administration. Speaking on behalf of the Black Students' Alliance, student Darryl Bandy complained "we black students are fed up with some of the treatment we receive from the administration. Most important is the fact that we can never get straight-forward answers from the administration with questions and problems confronting us." Bandy also threatened that black students "intended to make some changes of [their] own" if the administration did not successfully address some of their concerns.¹⁶⁶ A similar tension also appeared between other students and the BSU. Responding to charges that the BSU clubhouse served students as a location for "blasts" and "hippie paint-ins," BSU member Richard Jenkins criticized the Mustang Daily's biased journalism and argued that their house actually facilitated important meetings between the BSU, Cal Poly's administration, and other student organizations.

¹⁶⁴, "BSU aids administration in recruitment," Mustang Daily April 9th, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁶⁵ In one MD article the author references the B.S.A. (Black Students Alliance). It is unclear whether this is different organization. Although Darryl Bandy, who was an officer in the Black Student Union also served as a spokesperson for the B.S.A.. It is reasonable to assume that the organizations are associated, if not the same.

¹⁶⁶ Mustang Daily, *BSU aids administration in recruitment*, April 9th, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

In February of 1969 the administration began an open dialogue with the leadership of the Black Students Union to ascertain the condition of black students and begin to address their needs. At these meetings the BSU began to articulate demands that would become clearer over time. They advocated for changes to the university curricula, better athletic relationships, and the recruitment of black faculty.¹⁶⁷ For the most part, University President Robert E. Kennedy and Dean of Students Everett Chandler supported the demands of the Black Student Union. Kennedy and Chandler emphasized the importance of “maintain[ing] open communications with all minority groups” which the administration believed would be “recognized by all as the only way to solve the problems which lack of communication bring about.”¹⁶⁸ Indeed, open communication and dialogue came to be a theme of the administration’s efforts to expose and address possible racial discrimination on campus. The Discrimination Committee encouraged communication of possible instances of racial bias, without which they could not move to make any change.

Of the many demands made by the Black Student Union, one in particular shaped much of the ongoing debate between the administration and African American student body, the adoption of Ethnic Studies. The persistent demand by African American students and other minority student groups for the adoption of an Ethnic Studies program, as well as culturally relevant curricula, and non-white professors can be seen as part of a growing national movement. Beginning first at Howard in 1968, university students began demanding the adoption of “black studies” and culturally relevant curricula. Students’ calls for black studies programs represented a “desire for ‘relevant’ education, an education that was capable of both helping to radicalize

¹⁶⁷ Mustang Daily, *Administration meets BSU*, February 10, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁶⁸ Mustang Daily, *Administration meets BSU*, February 10, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

students and of addressing and ending the racial inequities in the United States.”¹⁶⁹ Several characteristics of the student movements outlined by Rooks both mirror and diverge from the movement at Cal Poly. First, the interracial character of early protest reflected the union between white, black, and other non-white students to “critique” the exclusive nature of higher education in 1960s United States.¹⁷⁰ This is most clearly reflected in the shift in the debate from a program of black studies advocated exclusively by the BSU, to the demand for ethnic studies, made by the BSU, the Third World Liberation Front, and the United Mexican-American Students.¹⁷¹ The multi-racial character, and the shifting attitudes toward this alliance, was apparent in the movement at Cal Poly. Interestingly, many of the first universities to adopt black studies programs were predominantly white institutions, who faced a growing responsibility to a shifting demographic population. As a result of World War II, an increasingly diverse group of students entered the U.S. university system because of the G.I. Bills and the increasing availability of financial aid.¹⁷² This led to dramatic increases in the number of African American students on college campuses. However, in the late 1960s African American enrollment actually dropped due to an increase in the number of young men drafted into Vietnam.¹⁷³ In 1971, African American students constituted 8.4 percent of the American university population.¹⁷⁴ Cal Poly’s African American student population lagged far behind 8.4 percent. In 1967 blacks constituted only one percent of the student population, in 1969 .7 percent, and by 1970 1.2 percent.¹⁷⁵ The small

¹⁶⁹ Noliwe M. Rooks, *White Money Black Power, The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* Boston: Beacon Press, 2006. Pg. 3.

¹⁷⁰ Rooks, 4.

¹⁷¹ “Ethnic Studies discussed at confab” Mustang Daily, May 13, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁷² Rooks, 13.

¹⁷³ Rooks, 36.

¹⁷⁴ Rooks, 14.

¹⁷⁵ L.H Dunigan, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, CA. Report on Enrollment Trends and Institutional Characteristics. 1976.

constituency of African Americans did not prevent similar modes of protest, or similar engagements with nationwide racial discourse.

The development of the more radical student movements of 1967 and 1968 began early in the decade, however. Student protest, with its direct engagement with racist institutions, began with the student-led sit-ins at the Woolworth's lunch counter in 1960.¹⁷⁶ The early movement, characterized by nonviolent struggle and led by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, would eventually give way to more militant demands of Black Nationalism and Black Power. These powerful ideologies were shaped during the sixties, a decade plagued by assassinations of major Civil Rights leaders (Medger Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr.), a devastating war in Vietnam, and social unrest. The ascendancy of more radical elements of the Civil Rights movement "marked a rapid erosion of the commitment by Black and some white students...to nonviolence and to interracial political action and had significant consequences for campus protest."¹⁷⁷ The critique of the United States and its racist system increasingly shifted its focus to the university, which was accused of "perpetuat[ing] Black oppression" through exclusion and the absence of black instructors or curriculum.¹⁷⁸

The proximity of perhaps the most important strike of the movement for black studies, and the establishment of the first program at San Francisco State, no doubt galvanized the small African American student body at Cal Poly. The San Francisco State University strike and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. afforded the African American student body at Cal Poly power disproportionate to their numbers. A national moral imperative to redress the grievances of African Americans formed a movement and shaped a discourse into which the leaders of the

¹⁷⁶ Rooks, 15.

¹⁷⁷ Rooks, 17.

¹⁷⁸ Rooks, 18.

San Luis Obispo African American community could tap to strengthen their own claims on the university and the community.

A brief overview and analysis of the events at San Francisco State in 1968 will serve to expose some of the unique and borrowed elements of the student movement at Cal Poly. The strike that began in 1968 was preceded by a joint demand by The Black Student Union and the Third World Liberation Front for the adoption of Ethnic Studies and Black Studies programs.¹⁷⁹ A similar alliance formed between Cal Poly's BSU and Third World Liberation Front, which represented a union of both whites and students of color who advocated for the liberation of oppressed peoples.¹⁸⁰ Though at various times the Cal Poly BSU sought to create a movement exclusively for African American students, they found their goals and purposes to be similar to the Third World Liberation Front and other organizations representing minority students. The San Francisco State strike began quickly after the demands of the students were summarily rejected and continued until March of 1969.¹⁸¹ What began as a demand for an expanded curriculum and increased diversity quickly devolved into a "scene of violence 'unmatched in the history of American higher education.'"¹⁸² Though marred by violence, the students' efforts ultimately succeeded in forcing the administration to capitulate to many of their demands.¹⁸³ The extreme nature of the violence at San Francisco State undoubtedly increased fear at other college campuses throughout the state and nation. In several instances, dynamite, placed in buildings by students, exploded and injured staff and students.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Rooks, 32.

¹⁸⁰ Scott D. Thompson "A Perspective on Student Activism" *Theory Into Practice: What Do All Those People Want* Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct. 1969), 279-283.

¹⁸¹ Rooks, 34.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

The violent nature of the protest in San Francisco allowed leaders of the Cal Poly BSU to incorporate violent rhetoric into their own protests. Events in San Francisco created an atmosphere in which violence was possible, if not likely if student demands were not met. Administrators at Cal Poly, no doubt aware and effected by events in San Francisco, engaged directly with student leaders of the Black Student Union. In this way, the administration could proactively address the needs of African American community on campus and avoid the embarrassing possibility of violent or disruptive protests at Cal Poly. As mentioned before, both Kennedy and Chandler advocated clear lines of communication as a way to understand and address the needs of students, while avoiding any violence on campus.

The demographic composition of the student body would have consequences not only for the shape of the student protest, but for the solutions adopted by universities as well. According to Rooks “the precipitous decline in enrollment of black students partly explains the multiracial coalition of students who would join together in a student strike.”¹⁸⁵ Though Cal Poly never experienced a “precipitous decline,” the extraordinarily small number of African American students in San Luis Obispo created a situation in which multiple student groups, representing other minority groups and white students as well, collectively advocated for the adoption of ethnic studies and African American studies. At San Francisco State College, it was hoped that the adoption of black studies would “remedy...an American education system and culture bent on exclusion and hostile to economic and social integration.”¹⁸⁶

The administration addressed the demands set forth by the Cal Poly chapter of the Black Student Union. Demographic realities, violence at other universities, and the administrations unease with proposals such as segregated dorms, prompted an earnest effort on behalf of the

¹⁸⁵ Rooks, 37.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

institution to address the demands of African American students. Interestingly, the goals eventually achieved by the black student body came without dramatic protest. In large measure, this appeared to be the result of the pursuit of an open dialogue between African American students and the administration, led by Dean of Students Everett Chandler and University President Robert E. Kennedy and the simultaneous eruption of unrest at other college campuses throughout California and the nation. By late 1969, the University agreed to adopt an Ethnic Studies program for the 1969-1970 school year. As part of the Ethnic Studies program, President Robert Kennedy created a Campus-Wide Committee on Ethnic Studies to examine ethnic studies courses and to maintain contact with minority groups to ensure the needs of each group were being met.¹⁸⁷ The plan to adopt Ethnic Studies did not appear to satisfy students of minority groups. However, the Third World Liberation Front argued “the ethnic study program is a passification [sic] of the Third World and other minority groups. It will remain so until the curriculum of the ethnic studies department is made up through consultation with all Third World students on campus and the power of self-determination in curriculum is provided for them by the administration.”¹⁸⁸ The Third World Liberation Front and other groups wanted a larger role in shaping curriculum for their own needs, rather than fulfilling the needs of white students and the university.

To address ongoing concerns of racial bias within the university, in 1968 the administration reestablished a committee to study bias on the campus of Cal Poly that had originally been adopted in 1967. The Discrimination Committee, led by Everett Chandler, held public meetings to discuss various types of discrimination that may have been occurring.

¹⁸⁷ Daniels, Michael “Ethnic studies or ethnic observations?” Mustang Daily, Wednesday, May 7, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁸⁸ Daniels, Michael “Ethnic studies or ethnic observations?” Mustang Daily, Wednesday, May 7, 1969. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

Another important function of the committee was to hear grievances from students. Faculty, students, and administration composed the committee. In selecting the student members, the committee “attempt[ed] to get a representative from the women students, the foreign students, and the Afro-American students.”¹⁸⁹ The Mustang Daily reported that on a campus with a “growing number of students from minority groups, it is no wonder that this institution is taking steps to halt prejudice on campus and in the surrounding community.”¹⁹⁰ Although the article does not identify specific instances of racial bias on campus or in the community, the presence of the Discrimination Committee and the complaints of African American students indicate that some racially motivated strife affected the San Luis Obispo area. Everett Chandler addressed a similar point in 1968. He argued that “[t]he feeling of being discriminated against causes a student just as much unrest as if he had actually been discriminated against.”¹⁹¹ Chandler believed that by exposing prejudice, or demonstrating that there was no prejudice, the university could take swift action to correct racial problems.

The committee sought to address these, as noted, through public hearings and inquiries into specific complaints. Interestingly, the Committee also published the names and addresses of members in order to create system for students to directly contact members so as to anonymously address concerns.¹⁹² Despite the varied forums for students to express concerns, the Discrimination Committee had received few complaints by mid-October, 1968. Students and faculty on the Committee agreed that a lack of information among students likely resulted in the absence of any complaints. Importantly, no members seemed to believe that an absence of

¹⁸⁹ Mustang Daily, *Bias Panel Sets Student Hearing*, Friday, October 4th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

prejudice or discrimination shaped the success of the Committee.¹⁹³ The insight of several foreign students suggested that racial discrimination shaped their lives at Cal Poly as a result of their dark skin, which resulted in local residents mistaking them for “American negroes.”¹⁹⁴ One foreign student complained “[m]inorities are discriminated against in this country, especially in California, and we are grouped with them...” The students did not specify exactly how they experienced discrimination, though their statements supporting the presence of a discrimination committee clearly reflect encounters with racism.

In addition to the university sponsored Discrimination Committee, as part of a broader community effort to understand the condition of African Americans and racial prejudice, local businesses formed an investigative body to address the growing concern for racial injustice. Representatives from “the motel association, the city council, the restaurant association, and other areas of life that affect the life of the college student...in off-campus areas such as housing” prepared to engage complaints of students.¹⁹⁵

While the Mustang Daily surveyed the campus for racial opinions the San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune convened a panel of local African-Americans to discuss the various racial problems in San Luis Obispo. The Telegram-Tribune convened a “representative group of Negro leaders” including the pastor of the Springfield Baptist Church, NAACP officers, BSA* members, and African American volunteers from other organizations. The panel concluded that housing, education, and employment bias all affected the black community in San Luis

¹⁹³ “Committee on Bias Awaits Complaints” Mustang Daily October 14th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁹⁴ “Committee on Bias Awaits Complaints” Mustang Daily, October 14th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

¹⁹⁵ “*Bias Panel Sets Student Hearing*” Mustang Daily Friday, October 4th, 1968. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.

* This term appears to be used interchangeably in the BSU, it is my assumption that they are the same organization.

Obispo.¹⁹⁶ Consistent with racist lending practices throughout the United States, African Americans in San Luis Obispo claimed it was “difficult or impossible for financially qualified Negroes to buy or rent housing in many parts of San Luis Obispo.”¹⁹⁷ An investigation by the Human Relations Commission also found that “almost half of all-white better income neighborhoods do not want Negroes to buy or rent in their areas.”¹⁹⁸ Student representatives to the panel also claimed they had limited access to housing off campus as many homeowners refused to rent to African Americans.¹⁹⁹ Outside of housing, the panel believed that African Americans were underrepresented in various positions throughout the city, including teaching (there was only one African American school teacher), the fire department, and the police department.²⁰⁰

The passive nature of the racial prejudice identified by a panel of African Americans convened by the Telegram-Tribune resulted in measures seeking to study and understand the claims of discrimination within the city. In an attempt to “solve some of its long-standing, deep-rooted social problems” San Luis Obispo formed a committee specifically designed to find employment for African Americans, other minorities, and unemployed whites.²⁰¹ The issue of public housing for low-income renters also received new attention in the aftermath of King’s assassination. To this end, the city “intensified efforts” to pass a referendum for the construction of 120 new units.²⁰² Efforts to reach out to the African American community also expanded. An

¹⁹⁶ Gilbert Moore, “What Negroes here think: job, housing bias rankles.” April 10th, 1968.

¹⁹⁷ Gilbert Moore, “What Negroes here think: job, housing bias rankles.” April 10th, 1968.

¹⁹⁸ Gilbert Moore, “What Negroes here think: job, housing bias rankles.” April 10th, 1968.

¹⁹⁹ Gilbert Moore, “What Negroes here think: job, housing bias rankles.” April 10th, 1968.

²⁰⁰ Gilbert Moore, “What Negroes here think: job, housing bias rankles.” April 10th, 1968.

²⁰¹ Gilbert Moore, “City taking hard look at racial problem.” April 15th, 1968.

²⁰² Gilbert Moore, “City taking hard look at racial problem.” April 15th, 1968.

“informal employment committee” formed to investigate job openings and notify the African American community through the churches and the local NAACP.²⁰³

At the city level, it is unclear how successfully they were able to deal with problems confronting African Americans. However, important religious leaders and leaders from the NAACP participated in an active, interracial dialogue, to affect change for the black community. Investigative bodies, supported by white politicians and community members, integrated the leaders of the African American communities into a process of exposing and attempting to solve the racial problems in the area. Unfortunately, the record of organizations such as the Human Relations Commission and the San Luis Obispo County Council for Civic Unity are not available for the period under review. However, their presence suggests that San Luis Obispo’s efforts in the 1940s through the 1960s mirrored the efforts of African Americans in other communities throughout California. For example, Robert O. Self argues that between WWII and the 1960s “African Americans worked to extend racial liberalism into the industrial and residential communities that Californians produced in the postwar years.”²⁰⁴ However, Self argues that the key to success in areas such as Oakland was the large influx of African Americans to the area during WWII, giving blacks “political clout for the first time.”²⁰⁵ Despite the absence of such an influx, by 1964, the San Luis Obispo City Council recognized the need for a body, the Human Relations Commission, the concern of which “shall be inter-racial relations in greater San Luis Obispo, including housing, employment and other aspects of community life. It shall study and make recommendations on all racial matters to the City Council. It is recommended that the commission coordinate and cooperate with other community groups interested in race

²⁰³ Gilbert Moore, “City taking hard look at racial problem.” April 15th, 1968.

²⁰⁴ Self, 101.

²⁰⁵ Self, 101.

relations.”²⁰⁶ To this end the commission involved local civic leaders representing the NAACP, the Springfield Baptist Church, as well as representatives from law enforcement and real estate. Though it is not clear what the committee actually accomplished between 1964-1970, the existence of such a committee suggests both the presence of racial problems, and the desire at the city government level to address them.

²⁰⁶ San Luis Obispo City Council Records. January 6th, 1964.

Conclusion-

The historical record exposes an African American experience that is at once both unique and typical. African Americans in San Luis Obispo experienced racism, social exclusion, limited access to economic opportunity, and limited access to housing just as other African Americans had throughout the United States. Though in San Luis Obispo, due in large measure to their limited size, the degree and visibility of the injustice were limited compared to larger urban areas. It is clear that regardless of the size of the African American population, a thorough, yet informal, system of racial exclusion had permeated the San Luis Obispo area. Evidenced most clearly through the constant struggle for equal access to housing, this informal system of discrimination also shaped the social, economic, and educational lives of African Americans in the area. Moreover, the informal system of discrimination both shaped and limited the effectiveness of the African American response in the period from 1947-1969. The NAACP, most effective for legal challenges to discriminatory practices and laws, found few explicit targets for an organizational response. As a result, the local chapter often struggled to define its purpose and retain a significant membership. At the university, similar forces shaped the student response to the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. As less than one percent of the student body African American students challenged the racial status quo at Cal Poly by linking their struggle with larger, more violent, protests elsewhere throughout the state. In this way, black students were afforded power disproportionate to their actual numbers on campus. By pressuring the administration through a highly visible rhetorical campaign against the racism and under representation at the university, students were able to secure their demands for an ethnic studies program as well as prompt the administration to investigate instances of discriminatory behavior on campus.

The efforts at the university and within the city of San Luis Obispo support two conclusions. First, despite the small size of the African American community in San Luis Obispo and at Cal Poly, clear cases of bias, institutional and personal, passive and active, shaped the experience of African Americans within the area. Like other areas throughout the United States, informal discrimination, characterized by racist lending practices, discriminatory hiring practices, and unequal access to education, came to shape the lives of African Americans. Second, without the dramatic and tragic events that galvanized the entire African American population throughout the country, leading to a more militant brand of Civil Rights activism, the population in San Luis Obispo would not have been able to reshape the racial relationships in a community where they were underrepresented socially, economically, and politically. The context of the student movements at other universities was also critical for the success of a cause championed by a vocal group represented approximately one percent of the student population.

Fear of violence and disruption at Cal Poly and in San Luis Obispo, coupled with the increased national attention to the injustices of racism gave the local African American community the language, symbolism, and strategy to articulate their own suffering and shape solutions within a largely white context. That is not to say the African Americans locally were not an important factor in shaping their own movement. The activism on the part of the student population clearly produced tangible and long-lasting results. Prior to 1969, ethnic studies did not exist on the campus of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, just as it had been absent from most universities in the United States. Beginning in 1969, due in large measure to the activism of the African American student population, the university adopted ethnic studies as a legitimate course of study; ostensibly recognizing the needs and demands of the minority community on campus.

The African American experience in San Luis Obispo both mirrored and diverged from larger centers of black populations in the period from 1947-1970. From the late formation of a disorganized and ineffective local NAACP, to the tame, though bold, confrontation of institutional discrimination and inequity in the late 1960s, African Americans in San Luis Obispo participated in important trends in African American history. Their experience also reflected the difficulty of organizing and effectively using such a small population to advocate for change for the African American community. Yet, by the late 1960s a small group of students, led by the Black Student Union utilized national trends and events to pressure for positive change in the community. The passion and urgency of the students, and later the community, exposed the latent nature of racism in San Luis Obispo. There were no large urban ghettos, but limited access to affordable housing. There was no segregation, yet African Americans consistently found themselves unable to access employment and housing at the same level and quality as their white counterparts. So then, the difference between the African American experience in San Luis Obispo and other larger urban centers is indeed one of degree rather than kind. In Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other centers of African American life, strong support networks, characterized by social organizations, black newspapers, black churches, and a strong black middle-class, allowed for effective advocacy and eventually change. San Luis Obispo did have a black church, a small NAACP, and an active black student population; however, their actions as organizations relative to Civil Rights were shaped by action elsewhere. Violence, for example, the last resort of a movement desperate for change, broke out in large cities, among the desperately poor concentrated in impoverished ghettos, not in rural communities with few African Americans. It is still important to recognize however, that once cues had been taken from larger events, it appears that the need for change was just as important to African

Americans in San Luis Obispo as it was elsewhere. Black leaders in the area clearly describe a lack of housing, employment, and opportunity in the area.

On a more fundamental level, it is also important to recognize that this history does, in fact, exist. In the concentration on large populations, so often the site of major change, the focus on smaller communities, whose lives have been shaped by these larger movements, but who have also actively engaged their local communities to reshape their lives, have been often overlooked. As we still seek to understand how to address the concerns and needs of minority populations in the United States, it is important to recognize the diversity of experience among them. For forces that have shaped the lives of African Americans in various places are, in their broadest contours, similar. However, at the local level, the ways in which populations have acted against forces such as discrimination, racism, and social exclusion, have been the product of local actor and local condition. Though these struggles have not always produced lasting changes, they were not in vain.

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