

Indefensible Spaces
Chapter 1 - Up from Down Below
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“No longer will there be unannounced compliance checks. No longer will seven or 10 sheriff’s deputies show up at a Section 8 residence, armed and ready to invade the home. That is now finished.”¹ This is how V. Jessie Smith, speaking to *Our Weekly* in 2015, described the significance of the legal victory that the social movement he was a part of had achieved in the Antelope Valley. The settlement Smith praised was coming at the end of nearly five years of litigation. The case began in 2011, when three tenants, Jaquinn Davis, Sheila Williams, and Michelle Ross sued the cities of the Antelope Valley, Lancaster and Palmdale, as well as the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department for racially discriminatory policing and eviction of tenants in the nation’s largest rental assistance program, Housing Choice Vouchers. The policing program worked to reverse Black movement to the Antelope Valley, and to immiserate those voucher renters who remained. Defeating that program, as Smith described, would make a marked difference in the lives of tenants across the valley, and create a model of organizing for tenants across the nation.

This book is about the social forces that have pushed Black residents to move to the Antelope Valley in the 2000s, and that have resisted their presence and claims to the valley. Whereas a post-World War II wave of Black migration to the valley was resisted through traditional means of racial segregation, in the decades after the Fair Housing Act, those seeking to conserve the valley’s racial hierarchies grasped for new ways of maintaining white neighborhoods. What they found, and used upon a new wave of Black migrants in the early 2000s, was policing. The book’s central contribution, therefore, is to show how policing – both by law enforcement and as it has been devolved into the hands of everyday people – is an important mechanism of racial segregation. That premise has prismatic repercussions. This book will show how the policing of housing informs our understanding of home, privacy rights, race, gender, sexuality, and social movements.

Michelle Ross was perhaps the most high profile of the case’s litigants, and her experiences illustrate the broad dynamics and consequences of using policing to evict voucher tenants. She had moved to Palmdale in 2008, and about a year later a city investigator named Gary Brody knocked on her door. He was accompanied by fifteen sheriff’s deputies with their guns drawn. They searched her home for violations of her lease or other grounds upon which she might be evicted or punished. Appearing not to have found anything, they left. Investigators returned in November 2009, for a “compliance check.” This time they seemed interested in her children, but again nothing happened.

¹ <https://ourweekly.com/news/2015/07/31/activists-respond-doj-settlement/>

The other shoe finally dropped in February 2010, when Ross was told that her lease was being terminated – she was being evicted – on the grounds that she had not informed the Housing Authority of her children’s juvenile records.

It turned out, however, that the termination was not valid. Juvenile records are not permissible grounds to terminate a voucher contract, and the records never should have been made available to the housing authority in the first place. So the Ross family stayed in their home. But the compliance checks soon resumed, happening again in June and then November of 2010. Ross, like thousands of other tenants in the voucher program, had little recourse and virtually no opportunity to move elsewhere.

During the November 2010 search, Inspector Brody and 20 deputies visited the house when Ross was not home. When her son answered the door, “deputies ran into the home.” Inspector Brody went into her garage to photograph two sport utility vehicles that she had allowed a friend to park in her garage. One explanation for the search is that the investigators might have suspected that she was committing voucher fraud: if she could afford to own two SUVs, perhaps she was too well off for the voucher program. Brody made her son call his mother, and asked her about the vehicles. Ross believed that the Housing Authority subsequently confirmed that the vehicles belonged to her friend, not her.

The failed searches were accomplishing other punitive ends. The surprise inspections functioned as a source of intimidation, and an opportunity to assert power over and degrade voucher renting families. And they signaled to Ross’ neighbors that she was a voucher tenant, a suspicious other, a latent criminal. Having her voucher status exposed and self defined in this manner by repeated public spectacles paved the way for her neighbors to begin harassing her even when the police, city, and Housing Authority did not. People stalked her home. Her name, address, and a photo of her home with the garage door open and the SUVs inside were published on an “I Hate Section 8” Facebook page. A commenter threatened to burn down her house. Her children were harassed at school, with language that laced anti-Black racism with anti-voucher sentiments. Not long after the Facebook post, her home was vandalized. A window had been broken and “I hate Section 8 n*****s” was spray-painted on the garage.

The sheriff’s department, once so concerned about law breaking at her address, provided no help when called, instead suggesting that her children had broken the window. Not long after, a group of young people drove by her house and threw “what appeared to be urine” at her children, while calling them “Section 8 n*****s.” Ross and her children, fearing for their safety, stopped sleeping at their home and searched for a new place to live close enough that her children would not have to change schools. In 2011 they moved to Lancaster, another Antelope Valley city just north of Palmdale.

Ross and the other plaintiffs named in the case were by no means alone; what they were experiencing was the result of policies implemented widely across the valley. The Antelope Valley had developed a system of policing that affected thousands of tenants like her. The policing regime was made up of two broad components. First, the cities of the valley entered into a partnership with the housing authority, county Board of Supervisors, and Sheriff's department to share data and hire staff to target voucher tenants for inspections. They encouraged the public to file complaints about voucher tenants through the housing authority's fraud hotline, and then aggressively pursued those complaints using the multi-agency powers described above. Second, the cities joined a nationwide trend by passing crime free and nuisance housing ordinances that allowed neighbors to complain and ultimately evict their neighbors – once a property had a sufficient number of complaints, the property owner would be fined until he or she evicted their tenants.

The result was that, in 2008-2009, the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale, then home to 3,642 voucher households (about 11,000 people in total), received 434 calls to its fraud hotline complaining about tenants like Michelle – more than the number of calls made about tenants in all of the rest of Los Angeles County combined that year. As a result, the authority conducted 405 investigations and proposed lease terminations in 194 cases, again more than the number of terminations proposed in the rest of Los Angeles County. Tenants were spied on, had their homes invaded at all hours, and had their lives turned inside out by officials seeking to evict them from the valley. One in every 12 voucher tenants in Palmdale and one in every 22 in Lancaster had their leases terminated. The evictions primarily removed Black tenants from the once-majority white valley, illustrating the usefulness of policing as a tool of racial segregation.

What this amounted to was a system by which policing could reproduce racial segregation, or inhibit racial integration. The policies in the valley are relatively new – crime free and nuisance housing ordinances arose in late 1980s and early 1990s as the war on crime seeped into the governance of public housing and then into the private housing market. But the use of policing – both law enforcement activity and the actions of private individuals or groups – to regulate and prevent Black mobility across the country has a long lineage.

A brief historical review illustrates the ever-presence of policing in the question of racial segregation. During the slavery period, states like Oregon and Illinois enacted constitutional bans on Black migration, enforceable by police. Meanwhile, the Fugitive Slave Act aimed to counter slave escapes by empowering whites to act as vigilantes, capturing Black individuals in the North and accusing them of being fugitive slaves. During the Jim Crow era, whites petitioned courts for the power to use nuisance law to prevent their neighbors from renting or selling property to Black renters and purchasers. Meanwhile, Sundown towns across the country promised Black people that they would be killed should they remain in the town after dark. Throughout

the 1900s, police effectively endorsed riots aimed at maintaining racial segregation. During the Great Depression, states like California tried to restrict the entry of poor families migrating westward in reaction to the Dust Bowl. In the early decades of the Aid to Families With Dependent Children Program, states tried to prevent poor families receiving AFDC support from migrating into their jurisdictions by stripping them of AFDC benefits once they entered the state. And in response to the Great Migration, jurisdictions in the north responded to Black migration by increasing police spending and incarceration. After the Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968, whites reacted to Black residents moving into predominantly white neighborhoods through vandalism, harassment, verbal threats, cross burnings, arson, physical attacks, shootings, and homicide. Today, as the power to police neighbors has been placed into the hands of private residents, participation in policing has become not just a means to re-segregate neighborhoods but also a form of citizenship that reanimates the lost hierarchy of a more starkly segregated past.

In this way, the Antelope Valley's use of policing is not historically unique. Neither is the place itself. Traveling to East St. Louis in the wake of the 1917 white riot there, Du Bois described a category of places into which the valley fits. He described East St. Louis as the product of St. Louis. In St. Louis, "the forces of evil have had some curbing from those who have seen the vision and panted for life." And so, as industry is squeezed out of St. Louis, it moves to East St. Louis, creating "a paradise for high and frequent dividends and for the piling up of wealth to be spent in St. Louis and Chicago and New York." East St. Louis thus became a place where "industry triumphs over thought and products overwhelm men." These conditions were the backdrop to a white rail workers' strike in 1917. Rail bosses fought the strike by hiring replacements from the masses of Black workers leaving the deep south during the Great Migration. The threat of Black entry into white employment could not be abided. Whites got retribution through a campaign of mass violence and killing, leaving the city with "flame swept walls" and "streets almost wet with blood." In East St. Louis, the forces of evil had no curbing. Du Bois reflected on the riot as a harbinger, writing that, "Eastward from St. Louis lie great centers, like Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, and New York...In every one of these centers what happened in East St. Louis has been attempted, with more or less success."

The Antelope Valley's relationship to Los Angeles looks much the same. The Antelope Valley is 60 miles north of Los Angeles, over the Angeles National Forest and at the western edge of the Mojave Desert. Between its time as an agricultural area and its present as a de-industrialized region in crisis, it was a glittering hub of aerospace testing and construction. From this memory its residents continue to refer to Los Angeles as "down below," a reference to its geographic position, elevation, and social status. Los Angeles, on the other hand, if it thinks of the Antelope Valley at all, calls it a suburb. But the term is simply insufficient to capture the valley's place in the region. The Antelope Valley is both the consequence and cause of Los Angeles. Its modern career is

as a solution to Los Angeles' crises, but as it solves the metropolis' problems it only causes them to fester.

Its first history is as home to the Kitanemuk and Maara'yam Indian bands, but accounts of their activity suggest that the focus of their settlement was on the western and southeastern edges of the valley, respectively. Forced removals by the Spanish in the 1700s were followed by mass killings by California militias in the mid-1800s, setting the stage for the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad and a period of more intense westward movement into Southern California in the late 1800s.

Among those who arrived in the valley was its first Black resident, Charles Graves. Graves had been born into slavery in Kentucky in 1856, but after his father was killed during the Civil War, he decided to move west. He traveled mostly by rail until he reached the Antelope Valley region, settling in Rosamond, one of the northern cities of the valley. Graves stuck it out through the years-long drought that collapsed several valley colonies, building a cattle ranch, becoming the city's postmaster, and striking gold in two of the region's many small mines. His success allowed him to build Rosamond's first school in 1908, which he did with his wife, school teacher Cordia Anita Roberts. Graves died in Lancaster thirty years later, but sites across Rosamond – including a public school in the same location as his first one-room attempt – still bear his name, and his family remained a strong presence in Rosamond for generations.²

Charles Graves and Cordia Anita Roberts' lives are irreconcilable with the way the Antelope Valley's white polity understands itself and its geography. When I talked to private renters and homeowners in the valley about the voucher program, a constant theme arose – the valley was being invaded by outsiders who didn't belong. Things were better before, the sometimes spoken implication being, when the valley was all white. That rhetoric was shared by public officials and the media as well.

This basic idea, that the valley is a white place, without a Black or any other history, is the false but vitally necessary mantra required to frame the present day continuity of demographic change as a unique threat. Charles Mills described it as “an ignorance that fights back.”³ But the reality was that, in facing down incoming voucher tenants, the valley was trying to prevent something that had already happened. Black residency predated white development in the valley, and between Graves and Ross is an unbroken line of Black presence. But the false memory of the region as an all-white paradise serves as permission to terrorize and dispossess the region's Black community as forever newcomers.

² See <http://www.rosamondca.us/history/Graves.htm> for more history related to Charles Graves.

³ See Mueller, Jennifer C. 2022. “‘Imagine an Ignorance That Fights Back’: Honoring Charles Mills, Our Inheritance and Charge.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 8 (4): 443–50.

This book, then, traces the struggle for the Antelope Valley over two periods of Black migration from the late 1930s to the early 2000s. Like East St. Louis, the valley became useful to Los Angeles County as a solution to its crisis of military overaccumulation. Threatened with the loss of those investments as the military sought to disperse construction across the western region, the county managed to capture that dispersal by offering the valley as an industrial base for aerospace testing and manufacturing. The result was a steady stream of federal dollars, coming as lucrative defense contracts, subsidized housing construction and financing, and infrastructure investment. The result was a white middle class utopia – more perfectly racially segregated than Los Angeles itself. Service jobs were filled by Black workers forced to drive in from the city, who were barred from buying or renting in Lancaster and Palmdale.

Their solution was to build their own town, Sun Village, on the outskirts of the valley. Sun Village became both the accomplishment of Black struggle and a platform for civil rights and fair housing organizing in the valley. The success of this organizing, particularly around fair housing, put the valley's white polity on the backfoot, searching for decades for ways to reassert its old way of life. But when aerospace investment declined at the end of the Cold War, the valley was left neither rich nor segregated.

Rather than mark the end of the desert community, the economic collapse of the Antelope Valley once again turned it into a solution for Los Angeles. Angelenos being priced out of Los Angeles found the valley a reasonable solution – trading the hour-plus commute times for housing they could afford. Among those who looked to the valley were tenants participating in the Housing Choice Voucher program.

The product of a bipartisan turning away from the New Deal, vouchers replace public housing and embed rental assistance to poor families in the private market. Landlords get a fair market reimbursement from the government in exchange for renting to a voucher tenant. Because fair market rent was calculated over entire counties, landlords in struggling neighborhoods saw the fair market reimbursement rate as more than they would receive on the private market, while landlords in wealthier areas saw it as much less. In Los Angeles, these realities mean that vouchers have concentrated in the city's south central corridor and in the county's economically lagging fringes, like the Antelope Valley. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley more than tripled, from 5,101 to 15,853. In this manner the valley represented a solution to Los Angeles' crisis of gentrification and displacement, relieving the city of tenants who could not afford its rising rents.

This process is a microcosm of the larger transformation of Los Angeles as Black residents are pushed out of the city and into its peripheries. Between 1980 and 2015 the Black population in the Antelope Valley climbed from just 3% to 20%. Although the rise of voucher usage was a small part of the valley's

long demographic change, the people and leaders of the Antelope Valley treated it like an invasion. City leaders declared war on the voucher program, demanded that their staff find ways to reduce the voucher tenant population by half, and tried a myriad of techniques to accomplish it. Finally, the valley turned to policing to re-assert racial segregation, passing crime free and nuisance housing ordinances, and creating a voucher policing program designed to empower private residents to spy on and report the infractions of their voucher renting neighbors, reports that would accumulate to eviction notices and the decline of voucher tenancy. Participation in policing allowed for homeowners to empower themselves through the denigration of those they surveilled and reported to police, city, and housing authority regulators. In so doing, white homeowners and their allies redeemed their status in the valley one dispossession at a time.

Most voucher tenants in the valley are Black, and a majority of households are headed by women raising children. The surveillance of their lives and the raids of their homes are reminiscent of the history of policing welfare. In the 1950s and 1960s, welfare agencies and public housing authorities collaborated to spy on, raid, and withdraw benefits and housing from women in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program if evidence was found that they were romantically involved with any man. These “man in the house” rules, enforced through the draconian midnight raids, were presumed to have been ended by the 1968 *King v. Smith* ruling, but the experiences of tenants today show their persistence.

But with the help of local organizations like The Community Action League (TCAL), lawyers in Los Angeles like Gary Blasi, Public Counsel, and Neighborhood Legal Services, Ross, along with two other named plaintiffs, sued the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale, accusing them of discriminatory enforcement of housing rules against voucher tenants, which had contributed to a public climate of racist harassment and intimidation. The legal claim, *The Community Action League et al. v. City of Lancaster and City of Palmdale* (henceforth *TCAL v. Cities*), was resolved in her favor in 2012 along with subsequent agreements in 2015 that ended a program that paired investigators with police to selectively investigate voucher tenants. The result was a remarkable, if incomplete, victory against the policing of subsidized housing, against policing as a mechanism of re-asserting racial segregation in the valley, against the growing vigilante power of private homeowners, and, perhaps most importantly, for the privacy, autonomy, and community of tenants.

In the following chapters, I attempt to tell this story in full. My findings are based on nearly 100 interviews with Black voucher tenants, local residents, community leaders, activists, civil rights lawyers, landlords, and city officials, as well as public records, NAACP archives, local newspaper records, and court filings. They reveal how policing has emerged as the new frontier of fair housing law and serves as a common thread linking the governance of housing assistance programs like vouchers to the criminalization of welfare

more broadly, and has become a vital part of efforts across the nation to secure housing justice.

In Chapter 2, I trace the first wave of Black movement to the Antelope Valley, which followed its ascent into an aerospace construction and testing hub for the military during and after World War 2. I focus on one family, the Prioleaus, who across multiple generations show the forces that compelled Black workers to consider leaving Los Angeles for its peripheries, and illustrate the ways that civil rights organizing in those peripheries is vital to a full understanding of Black Los Angeles. The chapter focuses on Sun Village, one of several all-Black communities along Los Angeles' peripheries. Sun Village thrived in the 1950s and 60s, establishing the nation's first public park named in honor of Jackie Robinson, and participating in local and national NAACP organizing. To illustrate the sinews connecting Sun Village to Los Angeles, I trace nearly fifty years of civil rights organizing by the Prioleau family: their establishment of the Bethel A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles, their struggle against eviction from Bruce's Beach, their desegregation of the City of Los Angeles' swimming pools, and finally, their youngest daughter Lois Patton's role in founding the Sun Village NAACP and breaking the wall of residential segregation that had once defined the Antelope Valley.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the valley's counter-revolution against fair housing, or what the right commonly referred to as the right to discriminate. Despite overwhelming public backing, California's conservative establishment could not successfully prevent fair housing law from taking hold. How its constituents reacted to this failure is a critical question in urban and political history. In the valley, these events seemed to validate the outsider approach of the white power movement, spearheaded in Los Angeles by preacher Wesley Swift. Swift exerted a tremendous influence on white supremacist politics across the country by recording and disseminating taped lectures developing the ideas of what would come to be known as the Christian Identity Movement. His career served as a bridge between the American Nazism of the 1930s and the white power movement of the 1970s.

Through examining both the formalized efforts of white institutions like the California Real Estate Association and the informal tactics of Swift and his progeny, this chapter offers an answer to the question of how white homeowners managed to restore the right to discriminate in housing, and more broadly the social superiority that had come with segregation. The valley spent the 1970s, 80s, and 90s casting about for ways to undo the growing Black presence in the valley. Groups in the valley variously tried violence, nazism, erecting confederate symbols, and racist practices in schools, jobs, and housing. But none of it was enough.

I offer policing as the mechanism by which white homeowners reinvigorated their property rights – and illustrate how the war on crime's extension into housing has created new powers for property owners through a thicket of civil, criminal, and administrative rules that turn the homes of poor renters

into surveilled, quasi-carceral spaces. I argue that through policies that allow governments and individuals to police housing and evict neighbors, property owners have regained the right to discriminate in housing.

Chapter 4 asks what policing means for private renters and homeowners. While policing has become a tool that can reassert segregation, that doesn't necessarily explain why people participate in policing. I believe they do so because participation in policing restores the social hierarchy weakened over the second half of the twentieth century. To show how this occurs, I focus on the city of Lancaster, where Mayor R. Rex Parris tried a variety of tactics to criminalize, remove, and prevent voucher renters from entering the city. Seeing most of them fail, Parris and other city leaders settled on a participatory policing regime. In this system, private renters and homeowners are empowered to surveil their neighbors and file complaints against them to the city, housing authority, or police. Enough calls, regardless of their merit, could result in a voucher tenant being evicted by their landlord, losing their voucher, or simply leaving in frustration.

The core of the chapter features interviews with private renters and homeowners engaged in surveilling and policing their neighbors. From my conversations with them, I theorize that the reasons people participate in policing go beyond attitudes of anti-Blackness or opposition to welfare programs. Participation in policing offers status and other benefits that are of value to participants. In this way, building from the work of Cheryl Harris, policing is cognizable as a form of property. Policing as property illustrates the stakes that private property owners and renters have in policing Black residents. To be able to police while others cannot, to degrade through policing, and to acquire a superior social status through policing – these are lucrative rewards not just in the Antelope Valley but in neighborhoods across the country.

Chapter 5 focuses on the targets of this policing. 40 interviews with tenants in the voucher program show the extent and wide ranging consequences of the surveillance and policing being conducted by neighbors, the city, police, and housing officials. Casting social and family relationships as evidence that tenants were harboring “unauthorized tenants,” neighbors and the local housing authority have brought broken windows policing into the home. They launched roughly a thousand inspections of voucher tenants between 2007 and 2011, evicting hundreds each year.

Paired with one-strike eviction policies based on drug and criminal charges, tenants faced a complex miasma of ways they could be evicted. The most practical way to avoid this is to stay unknown and out of the public eye. This involves curtailing a range of fully legal behaviors, like inviting guests over, supporting family, and allowing children to play in the yard. In other words, the effect of the valley's policing regime was to turn family and social bonds into eviction liabilities. Tenants bear these conditions because the protection of housing is of highest importance, finding alternate housing through the voucher program is extremely difficult, and being evicted or pushed out would

also be disruptive to the lives and education of their children. Not only does this reality illustrate the long life of welfare's "man in the house" rules and midnight raids, but it adds another case to the broad scholarship illustrating how social services have become venues of criminalization, surveillance, policing, and family separation.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I use interviews with local activists, public officials, civil rights attorneys, and tenants to review the ways that Black residents in the Antelope Valley overturned some of the region's worst policing practices. This mobilization represents a second battle against segregation, much like the first struggle waged by Sun Village in the 1960s. I focus on the activism of one local group, The Community Action League (TCAL), who responded to a wave of reports about voucher evictions through mobilization on two registers: on one, they mobilized sustained community opposition to voucher policing and on the other they filed litigation on behalf of evicted voucher tenants. I interview members of TCAL who worked on this campaign and lawyers who worked on the case about their strategies. I follow the case's settlement and examine how residents interpret its outcomes today. And I ask what implications this mobilization might have for similar cases in municipalities around the country.

Ultimately, the fight against policing subsidized tenants in the Antelope Valley was many things: a fight for civil rights, for tenant rights, against eviction, and for family and community. But to the extent that policing became a white property right in the late 20th century, it was also a fight against property itself.

By eliminating policing programs that empowered white residents to police subsidized housing tenants, activists and their legal allies reduced the scope of policing in the Antelope Valley, as well as the powers afforded to private homeowners and renters. Their work should be weaved into the full scope of our understanding of contemporary housing justice struggles in Los Angeles. And their efforts represent a model for other struggles around crime free and nuisance housing cases around the country to build upon.

The conclusion considers Sun Village alongside two sites that border it; one, the remains of the socialist colony Llano Del Rio, and the other a so-called museum of native artifacts from the valley. The public memory of these three places can be summarized roughly as follows: indigenous peoples were not legitimate inhabitants of this place, the socialist colony failed, and the Black town never existed. These narratives have narrowed the Antelope Valley's range of possibilities to capitalist development and racial hierarchy – a path that has left it among the deadliest, most policed, and most unequal places in Los Angeles. In this light, Black struggle in Sun Village and across the valley facilitates a reconsideration of the region's core premises and narrow futures.

To suggest the Antelope Valley that could be, I argue for an agenda of de-policing housing – a framework that makes novel contributions to both urban sociology and carceral studies. Cutting down the thicket of HUD

regulations that weaken privacy rights and increase eviction risks would make voucher tenants' homes more private and stable as opposed to surveilled and precarious. More broadly, I argue for seeing crime free and nuisance housing ordinances as contemporary segregation practices, and making their elimination a key part of fair housing work. Zooming out to the national level, I show that this agenda is already well at work, and that the Antelope Valley's legacy can be seen in efforts to challenge the policing of housing in states such as Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, and elsewhere in California.