

By DIANE R. PAYLOR • Photos by ANNE FISHBEIN



# POETIC INJUSTICE

*This Los Angeles reparations activist is leading the movement to reclaim stolen Black-owned land in the Golden State and beyond.*

*My hand will continue to choke pen and force it to bleed until I am deceased or until this country pays me for all they have stolen from me and for the black keloid scars they've left on humanity.*

—an excerpt from the poem “Reparations,” by KAVON WARD

## THE TAKING

On July 15, 1958, five of the seven members of Santa Monica’s city council assembled in their second-floor chambers in City Hall, where floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked a landscaped courtyard. A city official initiated the proceedings with the Pledge of Allegiance: “...one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

The council members began working through the reading and adoption of nearly 20 resolutions. Included on the list was Resolution 1987, which declared eminent domain over five lots on Ocean Avenue to make way for a parking lot for the new civic center. A run-down three-story building remained on one of them, referred to as Lot 6. Vacant since 1944, it was the former clubhouse for an Elks Lodge. Silas White, a Black businessman, was converting the property into a posh resort for Black beachgoers to be called the Ebony Beach Club.

Resolution 1987 passed 4 to 1, ensuring that White’s club would never see the light of day.

But he was not about to let the city derail his plans. His daughter, Constance, or Connie to her family and friends, was in her early 20s when she learned the council had dealt her father’s dream a fatal blow. Today, more than 65 years later, Connie still remembers his anger. The Black community in Santa Monica had been brewing with excitement

about the club, Connie says over a Zoom call from her home in Hayward. But there was no one more enthusiastic than her father. “He was up and down the neighborhood telling everybody about it,” Connie recalls. “Nat King Cole had agreed to become the first honorary member.” Permits had been secured, and building renovation was underway. White had taken

out ads in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a Black newspaper, and printed brochures with an architect’s renderings to help promote the club and sell memberships.

Connie believes, as she says her father did, that the city council’s end goal was to shut him down, not build a parking lot. “The civic center

was two or three blocks away,” she says. A parking lot “didn’t make sense.” The council had also stopped other Black business endeavors.

In 1922, two Black entrepreneurs had had a similar plan to open a Black beach resort in Santa Monica where the hotel Shutters on the Beach stands today. But a coalition of white homeowners and businesspeople calling themselves the Santa Monica Bay Protective League shut the project down with the help of the city council, unabashed about their opposition to “negroes encroaching upon the city.” Throughout the 1950s, under the guise of urban renewal, the city used eminent domain to destroy several Black neighborhoods, most notably the Belmar Triangle.

Connie describes her father as a hardworking, community-focused man who sold real estate and owned several businesses, including a laundromat near Santa Monica College and a popular hamburger stand in West Adams. His Ebony Beach Club would have been a short walk from Bay Street Beach. It was the only beach Black Angelenos could frequent, and local white residents derisively called it “the Inkwell.” But there were no facilities where Black beachgoers could dry off, change clothes, or grab a bite to eat. “His vision was to have someplace for Black people to go for enjoyment and relaxation,” Connie says.

White secured the property in a lease-to-purchase agreement with the building’s white owner, real estate investor Bennett Dorsey. (Racial covenants against Black people buying real estate, along with discrimination in bank lending policies, hindered an all-out purchase.) After the eminent domain vote, White added a sign to the building that was a declaration of war. It read in part: “S.M. City officials used eminent domain condemnation for racial discrimination. We bow our heads to the greatest public good...but NEVER to official confiscation!”

The city was unwilling to acknowledge White’s lease-to-own agreement—despite such validation as an August 1958 *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* article that outlined Dorsey’s position: “He considers White’s option to buy as good as his already owning the property and that White will call the shots on fighting condemnation.” With Dorsey’s support and encouragement, White filed a \$125,000 suit alleging that certain members of the city council had “entered into a scheme, plan and conspiracy with property owners in the vicinity to...discriminate against persons of Negro origin.” The suit also claimed that the council was engaging in “fraud, bad faith and abuse of discretion.” Ultimately, the Los Angeles County Superior Court rendered a decision that White had no right, title, interest, or estate in or to the property. The courts subsequently awarded Dorsey \$74,000 for the condemnation of Lot 6.

White was devastated. “First it was a lot of crying, and then it turned into anger,” Connie says. “And then it turned into silence.” White was later diagnosed with cancer, but his spirits had already been broken. “He stopped taking care of himself. He gave up and became very ill.” White lived long enough to see the city tear down the Elks Lodge in 1960. He died two years later, at 56.

## INTO THE FRAY

Connie White first learned of Bruce’s Beach resort in 2022. She realized how similar Charles and Willa Bruce’s story was to her father’s. The Bruces were a Black Manhattan Beach couple who ran a popular Black beach resort until their property was taken in a racially motivated use of eminent domain in 1924.

Connie started wondering whether justice for her father could be attained, since the County of Los Angeles had agreed, in a landmark case that made headlines two years ago, to deed the land the Bruces had owned to their closest living descendants. “We had a model of success that showed that [justice] was possible...that it could be a reality,” Connie says. She reached out to the activist whose name and organization were closely associated with the Bruce’s Beach story: Kavon Ward, founder and CEO of Where Is My Land.

As a reparations and reparative justice activist, Ward sees restoring



Kavon Ward at the Viceroy Santa Monica. The luxury beachfront hotel stands on land that the Santa Monica City Council seized via eminent domain in 1958.

land stolen from Black people as mission critical. Through her advocacy organization, she assists Black victims of land theft resulting from discriminatory practices and policies like eminent domain that largely target communities of color. (Ward calls this work the Black land back movement, so as not to confuse it with the land back movement of Indigenous people.) It’s this accepted form of theft, she says, that has robbed so many Black families of creating generational wealth through inheritance. Ward hadn’t heard of Silas White or the Ebony Beach Club, but during her initial meeting with Connie two years ago over Zoom, she, too, was struck by the similarities of these Black entrepreneurs’ experiences in the West. “Both tried to make space for Black people to experience Black joy and community,” Ward says, “and both families had their property taken by eminent domain by their local government.”

Staffed by a small team, Where Is My Land helps its clients tell their stories, advocate for restitution, and, in some instances, secure legal representation. Most of the time, Ward trusts her instincts and executes the ideas that come to her during her daily morning meditation. “The strategy is not to create a strategy, because every situation is different,” she says. “Amplifying things digitally, using the media and my connections, plays a huge part, getting people together and building communities so that they can activate on our behalf in ways that we need them to.”

Ward, who is 42, was raised in Harlem by her drug-addicted mother and abusive stepfather. She learned early to advocate for herself and her siblings. Often denied food and beaten, she says, “I remember what it felt like to not have anybody in my home to stand up for me.” Despite her brutal youth and home life, the love and encouragement of a family friend ensured that she would become the first in her family to graduate from high school and attend college, at State University of New York Oneonta.

After graduation, Ward worked in sales for Coca-Cola while earning her master’s in public administration. She’d always dreamed of becoming a lawyer, but she didn’t do well on the LSAT and wasn’t admitted into law school. “I know now that’s because I wasn’t supposed to be there—at least not at that point,” she says.

Ward headed to Washington, D.C., where she worked as a public policy lobbyist for a national nonprofit. She turned to writing poetry as a way to cope with workplace struggles. She was inspired to use her poetry in a more powerful way and decided to take her pieces to the stage. She wrote a poem about Trayvon Martin after he was killed, the first piece that she felt compelled to perform, she says: “That’s where I started poetic activism.” In 2012, she won the Paul Robeson Spoken Word Contest; in 2014, she won the infamous Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater in her old neighborhood of Harlem. The poetic activism was opening up new opportunities, so she relocated to Southern California, enrolled in acting classes, and began auditioning.

But her life would shift again. She had a child in 2017. Three years later, she watched another Black man tragically lose his life. “George Floyd’s murder hit me hard,” Ward says. “And I wasn’t even in a space where I wanted to write poetry. I was just angry. I started venting in these mom groups on social media.” Some of the moms came together to form an anti-racist group called ARMS (Anti-Racist Movements). Around the South Bay to “allow for Black people—Black moms especially—to have a voice, to be able to vent and not be shut down when they say ‘Black lives matter.’”

In 2020, Ward first learned about the plight of Charles and Willa Bruce through a blog post. “It built on the anger that I was feeling,” she says. “I wanted to do something.” Justice for Bruce’s Beach, the grassroots movement she founded, inspired California’s Senate Bill 796, which authorized the return of Bruce’s Beach. During the bill’s public signing

**1,873,253**  
**SQUARE MILES**

The U.S. Census Bureau defines the West Region as 13 states: Alaska, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, California, and Hawaii. Together, they constitute 1,873,253 square miles of land, roughly 3 percent of the land area of the planet.





SANTA MONICA HISTORY MUSEUM

The Ebony Beach Club before it was demolished in 1960. Below: The Viceroy Santa Monica. An 82-year agreement signed in 1966 enabled a first-class hotel to be built on land that the Ebony Beach Club partly occupied.



ceremony, Governor Gavin Newsom acknowledged that there was “no one more impactful” in the decision to repair the injustice than Ward.

Looking regal in a red, ankle-length Ankara print dress, Ward closed her speech at the signing with a fierce declaration. “I was born and raised in Harlem, so audacious courage resides within me, and it’s extremely necessary as I move forward and aid other Black families across this country,” she said. “Through Where Is My Land, the fight for restorative and reparative justice continues nationally.” She paused for a moment, then continued. “Cleveland Clinic, we know what you did to Winston Willis, and we’re coming for you!” And then, “No justice...,” she began, in the tradition of a Black church call-and-response, and the audience answered in kind: “...No peace!”

Now, her inbox is full of inquiries from families around the country who are hoping she can replicate the success she had with Bruce’s Beach. The decision to add Connie to her client list was easy: like the Bruces’ case, White’s involved apparent fraud. “How is it that someone can take the land through eminent domain, say that it’s for a public purpose, not pay someone fair market value, and then when that land is no longer needed or not used for a public service, they’re able to sell it and make money?” Ward asks. “That’s not OK.”

## THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENED

Steps from the Pacific Ocean, the Viceroy Santa Monica is a five-star blend of modern style and classic elegance. Poolside cabanas, yoga classes on the beach—the hotel is a coastal refuge for those willing to invest in luxury: higher-end suites range from \$700 to \$1,500 a night. The Viceroy sits on the five lots the Santa Monica City Council condemned by eminent domain in 1958. After the Elks Lodge was demolished in 1960, Santa Monica did nothing with the land until 1966, when the city entered into an 82-year ground lease agreement to develop a first-class hotel on the property. In a lucrative deal that has since been extended to 2065, Santa Monica, as the owner of the land, receives a portion of profits from room rentals, the hotel bar, the restaurant, and miscellaneous receipts.

On February 27 of this year, Santa Monica’s seven city council members gathered in their chambers in City Hall. A remodel completed in 2020 had converted the 1950s room into a high-tech haven with state-of-the-art audiovisual equipment.

Despite calls to the city council from Where Is My Land and supporters of Connie’s cause to take up the Ebony Beach Club matter, only two council members were in favor of adding the matter to the agenda. Ward stepped to the mic and reprimanded the council for its ambivalence, making Mayor Phil Brock the target of much of her ire.

“You, of all people, should be in support of returning that stolen land back to the White family and compensating them for over 60 years of lost wealth,” Ward said, her voice laced with frustration and defiance. “Instead, you make excuses like the City of Santa Monica can’t afford to pay reparations and will go bankrupt.... You can afford to pay out \$228 million in settlement for sexual abuse claims, and you can afford for the Viceroy to pay you little to nothing to rent the land they stand on, even though they make millions of dollars a year off of the land stolen from Silas White.”

Ward closed with an avowal of what was to come: “We can’t afford it’ is no longer an excuse. What you can’t afford is another lawsuit, because taking land via eminent domain means that it should be taken for public use, and the Viceroy hotel is not a public entity.”

One more council member came on board, and Item 16L was added to the meeting agenda for March 19. Item 16L would give the Santa Monica city manager and city attorney 90 business days to review the historical records—including documentation of the property’s ownership and articles or correspondence that demonstrated the city’s actions were racially motivated—and recommend to the council potential remedies for the harm caused.

On March 19, more than 80 people filed into the chambers to offer public comment. Ward held her cell phone to the microphone, and Connie White’s voice filled the room: “Many years ago, my dad and I had a long discussion about justice and what it meant then and what it would mean 60 years or so later. He told me to closely observe the changes and/or lack of changes and how justice functioned for Black people. He wanted me to act on his behalf when I believed that justice would serve us all in a fair manner by doing what is right.”

Connie’s remarks ended with a request that the council vote yes on the agenda item. The vote was unanimous.

Ninety business days later, the Ebony Beach Club was not on the city council’s agenda. Mayor Brock called the July 23 meeting to order. Assistant City Manager Susan Cline led the chamber in the pledge: “...one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” City Manager David White followed with a statement that his office and the city attorney’s were still doing “due diligence to enrich our understanding of the history of the property and the White family’s experiences.”

For Ward, justice delayed is justice denied: “We’ve seen it before with Tulsa. Governing bodies have engaged in a pattern of practice that includes waiting out Black people to prevent them from obtaining justice.” In a video shared on Where Is My Land’s social media accounts, a saddened Connie weighed in. “I think it’s wrong to try to wait somebody out,” she said. “Even if I weren’t here, there’s others to continue the battle. It’s not going to end.” ■

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