

# Los Angeles Times

## **Op-Ed: A cycle of class and privilege comes full circle**

By Judy Belk  
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I didn't want to buy the house in the first place. In fact, I didn't even want to move to Los Angeles from my beloved Bay Area, and certainly not to a newly constructed tract house in a gated community.

But the house was close to my daughter's new school, and my husband loved it, so I finally gave in. As attached as I was to the 75-year-old home we left in Oakland, it might be fun to finally live in a house where everything was new and in working condition.

Of course, that was also the problem. I worried that it was too new, too orderly, too pretentious. As an African American, I'd spent my entire life trying to break down barriers. Was I really ready to plant myself on the other side of one?

My fears were allayed momentarily by the first person we met in the neighborhood, an elderly black woman, Bessie, who approached us from next door.

"I'm sure glad to see y'all. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you looking at the house. The folks who lived here before weren't very neighborly at all, and it's nice to have some company in the neighborhood, if you know what I mean." We did.

A black family living next door. Not bad, I thought. We didn't even have that in Oakland, where the black population, percentage-wise, was much larger.

But as Bessie continued talking, we realized that while she did live next door, it was as the live-in nanny to the “real” neighbors, a young white couple with two toddlers. Bessie had been with the mother's family for almost 50 years, she told us. She had helped raised our neighbor and her sisters and was called out of retirement when the neighbor's first child was born.

How had I come to live in a gated community next door to a black nanny named Bessie who had been passed down through generations in a white family? It was both funny and painful, unleashing a flood of memories.

I grew up in Virginia in the late 1950s and early '60s, and a central force in my life was my Grandma Ada Casey. She was tough, loving, wise — and an amazing cook. Her home was the hub for most of our family life, especially on Sunday afternoons when everyone gathered around her table after church for a massive dinner. She was the respected matriarch not only of our family but of our church and the entire close-knit black community.

Although my grandmother was a property owner and savvy businesswoman, she also worked, like most black women in the neighborhood, as a domestic. She put in long hours cleaning houses and taking in laundry. Mainly, she worked for Col. Taylor and his family — serving as their primary housekeeper and taking care of his two daughters, who were a few years older than I.

I never met them, but I knew all about them: their favorite colors, their clothing preferences, even their literary tastes. My sister and I were often the grateful recipients of their high-quality hand-me-downs and discarded books. Thanks to them, I read the full series of “The Boxcar Children” and the Nancy Drew mysteries. I even found myself getting annoyed when one of them took too long to finish a sequel.

What I didn't like was seeing my tough grandmother turned into a submissive yes-ma'am, no-ma'am servant every time she had to interact with one of her white families. When she was expecting a laundry drop-off, she would shoo me off to get her wig, and I would watch her do her shuffling, smiling domestic routine. As soon as the people left, off would come the wig and I would have my real grandmother back, complaining as she spray-starched and steam-

ironed some white man's boxer shorts, "This man's behind gets bigger every week."

When I was 12, Grandma was doing a special Saturday house cleaning, and I begged her to take me along. She made it clear that if I came, I was going to be put to work, reminding me that her employer this day, a woman I think was known as Miss Bates, could be mean and particular.

We barely made it onto the porch before Miss Bates began barking orders and Grandma went into her submissive act, assuring Miss Bates that I was a good worker. The inside of the house was a disappointment. Yes, it was huge, but it smelled funny and was decorated with gaudy ornate furniture and cluttered with knickknacks, all of which had to be dusted.

While Grandma started in the parlor, Miss Bates took me to an upstairs bathroom, where she handed me a bucket, rags and three toothbrushes, which she said were for cleaning hair out of her bathtub drain. It was the longest and most tiring day of my life.

On the way home, Grandma noticed I was quieter than usual and dragging behind. "Well, I guess you won't be asking to come with me to Miss Bates anymore, will you?" she asked, keeping her eyes fixed on the road in front of her.

I shook my head.

"Good," she said. "Maybe if you tend to your studies and keep reading those books from Miss Taylor's girls, you won't grow up and have to clean another person's bathroom."

She was right. These days I don't clean bathrooms, including my own. I pay Maria from El Salvador to do that, much as Miss Bates hired Grandma. And like Miss Taylor, I also paid someone else to help me raise my children. This last week we were invited by our neighbors to attend a farewell celebration in Bessie's honor. As our neighbor rose to toast her for her 50 years of service to the family, tears rolled down Bessie's cheeks. She was going home, but she was also leaving a family she loved.

I teared up too, thinking about Grandma Ada and how for me, the uneasy cycle of class and privilege has come full cycle.

Judy Belk lives in Los Angeles and has written about race and family issues for many outlets, including the New York Times, the Washington Post and National Public Radio.