In 2002, the Japanese American National Museum hosted an exhibit called Boyle Heights: The Power of Place, which told the story of a multiracial Boyle Heights, today a mostly Latino neighborhood on the Eastside of Los Angeles. I was drawn to participating in the creation of this museum exhibition project in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, when the rest of Los Angeles erupted in the wake of the Rodney King beating and the acquittal of four police officers. At the time it seemed as if many social commentators thought that the sheer existence of racial diversity in South Los Angeles and other communities in L.A. inevitably led to social conflict. This only further reinforced the common perception that L.A.’s history is entirely one of intense segregation with distinct ghettos, barrios, and lily-white suburbs, despite the many instances of working-class and middle-class neighborhoods where ethnic and racial groups were brought together. Thus I became interested in finding one particular area in Los Angeles where I could trace the changing levels of interaction—both positive and negative—over time among multiracial residents and could unearth what historical factors played into these relationships. My experiences as a Los Angeles native after the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, as well as my path as a historical researcher concerned with racial politics, brought me to Boyle Heights as a way to understand Los Angeles and the roots of its urban diversity.

Luckily for me, various organizations in Los Angeles had the same motivation at about the same time, and I ended up doing research for the Power of Place exhibition on the Boyle Heights neighborhood with a collective of four organizations. The lead organization was the Japanese American National Museum, where the exhibition opened ten years after the L.A. Riots. Other members of the collective were the Jewish Historical Society of
Southern California, Self-Help Graphics (a Chicano arts collective), and the International Institute, a social service organization that has served Boyle Heights for over 100 years. The organizing collective also held a variety of community forums, which brought together different generations of Boyle Heights residents that had rarely met before: today’s largely recent Latino immigrants and an older group of white, Jewish, African American, Asian American, and Latino citizens who had first entered Boyle Heights in the mid-twentieth century but who no longer lived in the community.

In anticipation of one of these forums, Mollie Wilson Murphy looked into the back corner of her closet where she stored letters that she had held onto “for too long,” as she later told us in one of the interviews conducted for the museum. In this back corner she had safeguarded her correspondence with friends to whom she had written every day once they were taken away from Boyle Heights to internment camps during World War II. What she had carefully protected