



It's Now Time to Ask if Gentrification is a Fourth Wave of Jim Crow Policy

Black and immigrant communities in Los Angeles have been denied justice for decades. Gentrification may be the last straw.



J.T. The L.A. Storyteller

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A defaced mural in Echo Park, one of L.A.'s hippest, newly whitewashed neighborhoods; Mitch O'Farrell's district, December 2020 (Photo: J.T. The L.A. Storyteller)

(This post originally appeared in The Jimbo Times.)

Just shy of 200 years after President Andrew Jackson signed into law and enforced his long-coveted **Indian Removal Act of 1830**, ignoring the U.S. Supreme Court's 1832 recognition in *Worcester v. Georgia* that forcibly pushing the Cherokee nation west of the Mississippi river **erecting** hastily-drafted genocidal state laws would be an illegal violation of the Cherokees' sovereignty, today Black, non-white immigrant, and Indian families in cities across the U.S. increasingly comprise the overwhelming majority of makeshift "homeless" encampments underneath American "freeways."

At the same time, for a growing number of pockets in Los Angeles such as **Boyle Heights, Little Tokyo, East Hollywood, Leimert Park** and more, where Black, Asian, and Latinx spaces have historically been segregated due to zoning laws, racial covenants, and more, gentrification now acts as an additional, entirely legal form of their exclusion. The process of taking land in these areas, once considered subpar for its "racial elements," then remaking it to fit wealthier, whiter city-goers, almost uniformly prices non-whites out of them, despite the fact that they've called them home for generations. Moreover, being now so widespread throughout L.A., gentrification has driven non-whites out of the city and towards less developed vestiges of the South-land such as the Inland Empire or Palmdale, where "older" white racism still controls most policy-making, including policies like denying apartments to those formerly convicted of a crime, which disproportionately affects Black & Latinx renters priced out of Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, L.A. and California's gentrification overall have been noted to drive non-whites entirely out of California in a mass exodus which scholars have identified as "reverse-migration," particularly for Black families in Los Angeles, to the historic U.S. south where legacies of the official Jim Crow still fester. To borrow a definition for the historic term from **Ferris State University's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia**:

"Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. Jim Crow represented the legitimization of anti-black racism."

What is also now widely recognized as the “second” Jim Crow, starting roughly in the fifties and becoming more pronounced over the 1960s, was racialized credit access, or denying loans to non-whites in the United States, particularly for Black people, which placed white home-owners ahead of non-whites by several generations and continues to this day. The “third” Jim Crow, as documented by Michelle Alexander, was the rise of what is now known as the prison industrial complex, or the policy of investing in the incarceration of Blacks and other non-whites, fueled overwhelmingly by the “war on drugs” initiated by President Nixon in the early 1970s; as recently as the last ten years in the U.S., non-white communities accounted for more than two-thirds of the approximately 2.3 million people now still incarcerated within the states, despite accounting for approximately just two-fifths of the population.

Today, in the “post-recession” era following the predatory lending crisis of the final years of President W. Bush’s second term in office — and through the initial years of President Obama’s first term—a new wave of disenfranchisement by way of gentrification, combined with city budgets dedicated to luxury developments, tourist hotels, and policing, is pushing more non-white communities out of major cities in the U.S. towards lesser-resourced areas; the phenomenon is becoming so pronounced that it merits a reassessment of gentrification as a set of exclusionary policies given L.A.’s historic forms of disenfranchisement for non-white communities.

A century of civil rights violations can go by very quickly, though not without excruciating details, often also accompanied by different forms of resistance. The Cherokee nation knew this 200 years ago when they adopted the English concepts of “sovereignty” to make their case before an ultimately unreliable U.S. Supreme Court, and—while they’re still owed land and restitution—continue to herald sovereignty as an inalienable right of all aboriginal tribes in the United States, as indicated by their support earlier this decade of the **Standing Rock Sioux resistance** to the North Dakota Access Pipeline. And so, in order to build “a more perfect” *resistance* to evictions, displacement, banishment, and other forms of erasing Black & Immigrant communities in gentrifying Los Angeles, let’s first consider a few instances in L.A.’s development over the 20th century, when non-white communities here abundantly faced, but also resisted reduction of their way of life and second-class citizenship at the hands of racist policies and their proselytizers.

I. Anti-Black Policies & Resistance in Los Angeles



Black beach-goers in Santa Monica circa 1925, from the Tessa collection at the L.A. Public Library

In 1925, when racial covenants, along with the Klu Klux Klan and the LAPD attacked Black homeowners and beach-goers who preceded white residences in the cities of Santa Monica, Manhattan Beach, and Bruce Beach, to try and scare them away from these areas, Black communities there **organized and fought back**, even if only to come away with very partial victories against the white power structures formed against them:

“[Black-developed] Bru Beach met its demise at the hands of the Manhattan Beach city council, which deployed eminent domain to dispossess Black property owners of their homes in the mid 1920s. Though it took years of litigation, the court eventually awarded the Bruces \$14,500 in compensation...When in 1927 the city tried to formally segregate the space, the NAACP held a

wade in protest and forced the city to revoke any sort of overt racial separation, though the lot remained barren and largely unused for decades.” — “Fighting for Leisure: African Americans, Beaches, and Civil Rights in Early 20th Century L.A.,” Reft, KCET

Black organizing against white supremacy in Los Angeles would re-surge again in the 40s, 50s and 60s, and a century after the outset of the “roaring 20s,” Black Lives Matter organizers in Los Angeles and across the U.S. have entirely shifted the political dialogue from white narratives on the health crisis posed by this year, to the much older conversation of racial inequality in this country. BLM-LA also continues to fire up the electorate in Los Angeles even post-election.



Melina Abdullah, co-founder of Black Lives Matter — Los Angeles, June 2020; Photo by [Brett Morrison/Flickr](#)

II. Anti Japanese American Policies & Resistance in Los Angeles



Japanese Americans herded at Union Station to be sent to Concentration Camps, February 1942; Tessa collections at L.A. Public Library

In February 1942, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt authorized the rounding up of Japanese Americans to be placed in concentration camps, high-profile opponents of the ill-advised and racist campaign were few and far in between. But some did make their voices heard, including the Reverend Emery Andrews, a Baptist minister and former emissary to Japan, who wrote in 1943 that:

“[F]uture historians will record this evacuation—this violation of citizenship rights—as one of the blackest blots on American history; as the time that democracy came the nearest of being wrecked.” — Andrews, “An Interpretation”

Student leaders at the time also made their voices heard against the Concentration Camps. At Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights, student newspaper editor, Elizabeth Ginsburg, voiced her opposition to rounding up Japanese Americans for “relocation camps”—as they were called at the time—in an op-ed, and also visited one of her best friends, Susie Hattori, when she and her family were held at the **Santa Anita-racetracks** in the San Gabriel Valley, to show her solidarity with them.

“It was shocking: They were in horse stalls,” Ginsburg recalled. “We felt was a terrible injustice.” — “Boyle Heights celebrates its ethnic diversity,” L.A. Times

While at least 100,000 Japanese Americans would overwhelmingly peaceably accept their relegation to concentration camps together with later generations in Los Angeles, they would also help form one of the current city’s most persistent organizations advocating for the preservation of L.A.’s racialized past in the Japanese American National Museum. In 1980, Japanese American activists also went on to form the Little Tokyo Services Center, which to this day deploys an array of senior services in Little Tokyo and downtown L.A., and which even develops low-income housing for working-class communities across Los Angeles.



Little Tokyo Service Center Founders, circa 1980

III. Anti Mexican American Policies & Resistance in Los Angeles



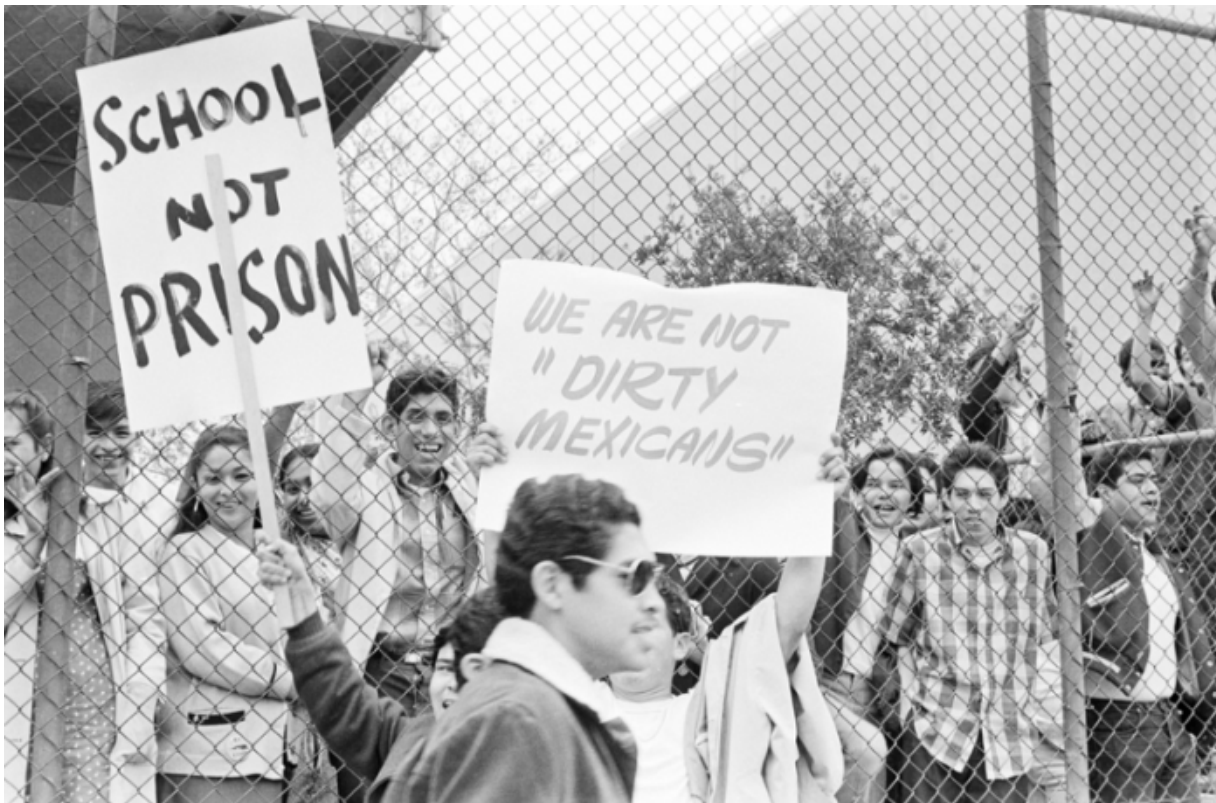
Mexican American youth beaten and stripped of pants in downtown Los Angeles, June 1943; Courtesy of Tessa

In early 1943, with the Japanese out of the way, anxious white hysteria in Los Angeles led to increased targeting and attacks against Mexican Americans in the city culminating with the arrest of 17 Chicano youth alleged to be members of the 38th street “gang,” based on weak evidence accusing them of murdering a fellow Mexican American youth at “Sleepy Lagoon.” In a quickly concluded trial, the openly racist Judge Fricke convicted every last one of the Mexican American youth with sentences ranging from a year to life in prison.

But writers and activists, including the legendary historian Carey McWilliams, rallied and formed the “**Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee**.” By 1944, the committee successfully argued for each conviction to be overturned, based on the fact that racial prejudice during the trials was the only evidence for which there was a case to be made during the entire debacle. As professor **Frank P. Barajas** points out about overturning these convictions at the time:

“This was no small achievement considering the enormous influence of the Hearst press and the L.A. Times and their harping on the gangster theme.” — Barajas, *The Defense Committees of the Sleepy Lagoon*

Just a single generation after the humiliating trials of the zoot suit rampage overseen by the white establishment, in 1968 the **Chicano “Blowouts,”** otherwise known as the East L.A. walkouts, inspired a wave of organizing, ultimately leading to the creation of such critical spaces as Black, Brown, and Asian ethnic studies departments.



Students protest during a walkout at Roosevelt High School, Devra Weber, 1968; from the La Raza Photograph Collection, courtesy of the photographer and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, ©Devra Weber

And just this past August, activists— some of whose early years of organizing were informed by those same walkouts, not to mention by student organizing in 1994 opposing **Governor Pete Wilson's Prop 187**—watched Governor Newsom sign **Assembly Bill 1460**, making ethnic studies courses a requirement for graduation at the CSU. Timing could hardly have been better. For the fall semester this year, the University of California admitted its **largest Latino class** in the UC's history.

IV. White Gentrification & Multi-ethnic Resistance in Los Angeles in 2020





Cancel Rent, Los Angeles Tenants Union, July 2020

Today, a new civil rights era, most recently in response to police violence, but also as the result of years' worth of work by organizers, is increasingly bringing together Black, Latinx, Asian and working-class Jewish and white communities across the U.S.

In Los Angeles, this is probably no better demonstrated than by the **L.A. Tenants Union**, a multi-ethnic, horizontally led coalition of activists fighting- **and winning-**for renters. The organization is quickly growing in chapters and membership in L.A., but make no mistake about it: The L.A.T.U. was not founded by a narrow analysis of renter's rights, but by a larger lens studying the historic role gentrification plays in making the city less accessible to its historically working-class communities. In the words of L.A.T.U co-founder Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal:

“Gentrification is displacement and replacement of the poor for profit. Gentrification is not a natural or inevitable process. Gentrification is human-made, and often aided in large part by government policy.” — Rosenthal, “101 Notes on the LA Tenants Union,” Commune

But while the L.A. Tenants Union has placed gentrification at the center of its work in resistance, up to now most scholarship on the issue has largely studied it as a “buzz-word.” A recent book authored by three scholars titled *Gentrifier* (2017) only goes as far as to define gentrification as “the reinvestment of real estate investment money or capital into dis-invested, devalued, centrally-located neighborhoods, which fosters a new infrastructure for middle and high-income residents.”

Left out of that very definition is what actually happens to the working-class poor within such areas or neighborhoods, who are overwhelmingly people of color. But in a post-Trump environment, it's important to reconsider the way gentrification has *intermingled* with a larger “white backlash” which has shown no signs of slowing down over the next decade. Nestled in a larger context of what leftists would more readily identify as U.S. imperialism, or policies backed by armed forces whose revered “founders” were slave-holders at the same time that they advocated for **total annihilation of Indians** from their native lands, gentrification strikes at the core of what it has historically meant—and what it increasingly means—to be a non-white working-class person of color in the U.S.: to watch, almost in “*real-time*,” how institutionalized racism *continues to remove and dispossess non-white culture of space* in major cities like Los Angeles, reminiscent of U.S. removal policies advocated by such legends as Thomas Jefferson in the first decades of the colonies, as well as the policies in the official Jim Crow South which sparked the historic Civil Rights movement of the 1960s:

“This unfortunate race, whom we had been taking so much pains to save and to civilize, have by their unexpected desertion and ferocious barbarities justified extermination and now await our decision on their fate.” — Jefferson, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, December 29, 1813

V. An extended look back at White Supremacy in Los Angeles since 1920, and then some



"Japs keep moving - This is a White Man's Neighborhood," "Japs Keep Out," and "Members Hollywood Protective Association" in Los Angeles circa 1920; courtesy of the National Japanese American Historical Society

In the 1920s, when white supremacists in Los Angeles used racial covenants, police badges, and renowned newspapers and film studios to demonize Black and Immigrant people as “undesirables” who drove down “property values,” their tactics foretold of a legacy of white exclusion of non-white people in the form of **redlining maps 20 years later**.

Redlining maps would separate wealthier white communities from working-class Black, Asian and Latinx communities, as well as from working-class white and Jewish neighbors nearby, and for decades, the California Realtors Association would persistently use media to maintain the “separate but equal” doctrine inherent in redlining, and also to discredit any effort challenging their maintenance of segregated

housing as a “*de facto*” condition of life, or something that, ‘just happened.’

CAL. NEGROES CAN NOW LIVE ANYWHERE, SAYS HIGH COURT

Homes Like These No Longer 'Out of Bounds'



FREED FROM RESTRICTIONS.—Pictured above are two of the many homes in Los Angeles which have figured prominently in race restrictive covenant cases and which, by virtue of Monday's U.S. Supreme Court decision, are no longer 'out of bounds' to Negroes. Both of these houses are in the city's wealthy 'Beverly Hills' area, and are involved which have been pending action by the California Supreme Court for nearly two years. The cases will now undoubtedly be dismissed. At the left is the home of the late Ben Carter, well-known comedian and motion picture actor, who was teamed with Mantan Moreland for television shows at the time of his death. At the right is shown Home McDaniels' home. Her right to live there was challenged on racial grounds despite the fact that she has attained top rank in motion pictures and is currently giving a 15-minute, nightly program, the "Soulful Show," over radio station KFI.

Front page of the May 6, 1948 edition of the Los Angeles Sentinel after *Shelley v. Kraemer*, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down racially restrictive housing covenants as a violation of the U.S. Constitution.

But it must be made clear that redlining and the restriction of housing for whites only were not just tasteless, staid government and municipal policies supported by private groups such as the California Realtors Association. They also actively *disrupted and sabotaged* peaceable integrations of white and non-white people in working class neighborhoods. This is because **redlining was not only** assigned to communities where Black and Immigrant workers made up the majority of residences, but also wherever they made up even only a portion of them; in other words, redlined neighborhoods included Black, Immigrant, Jewish, and also white, working-class people and laborers.

It's the inherent ideology of whiteness in federal redlining policies, then, advanced and abetted by lower municipal or city officials, that also must be studied more closely for its reverberations even into the present moment. Because even if —its language of “racial elements” aside — redlining didn't explicitly encourage racism against non-whites in Los Angeles, it certainly made room for it, as historian of the Library of Congress, **Ryan Reft**, has noted about the number of white hate crimes against Black home-ownership and neighborhoods in Los Angeles following the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which outlawed those racial covenants that were harassing and displacing Black beach-goers in L.A. back in the 20s:

“During the 1950s, six bombings and four incidents of arson against black homeowners were recorded in Los Angeles County by the County Commission on Human Rights. During the same period, out of 95 “racial ‘housing incidents’” nearly 75 percent were against African Americans with the rest divided between Japanese and Mexican Californians.” — Reft, “How Prop 14 Shaped California’s Racial Covenants,” KCET

Enter 1965 in Los Angeles. Less than nine months after the predominantly white electorate in California **voted against** Fair Housing in the state, that is, *against* banning racist discrimination in home-sales—which the California Supreme Court would **deem unconstitutional** two years later anyway—by summer of the mid-1960s, the over-policed and largely unemployed Black families of Watts and South Central Los Angeles under Mayor Yorty had survived twenty-plus years of a uniquely Californian, L.A. brand of redline and racial-covenant inspired racism. When LAPD’s 77th street division **still couldn’t keep their hands off Black bodies there**, then, a generation of resentment pushed back. But Los Angeles’s political leadership had actually been warned about such tensions repeatedly, as far back as twenty years prior.

In a June 24, 1943 article on the *L.A. Times* regarding a commission studying the “underlying causes” for racial unrest in L.A.—that is, after **white U.S. Navy sailors attacked Mexican Americans in downtown Los Angeles** “for wearing zoot suits,” a Black community leader is reported to have informed city and state officials that conditions were ripe for more discord if the city did nothing to curtail its racist policies, particularly regarding derelict housing conditions for L.A.’s Black communities:

“[Williams] told the jury about the increased housing problems facing the Negro districts as a result of the recent influx of more than 30,000 Negroes who have come to Los Angeles to take good-paying defense jobs. Williams said that the present housing facilities of the Negro district are entirely inadequate and reported that he told the jurors a good deal of the gang problems could be traced to this source.” — “Negroes Testify at Hearing on Zoot Suit Riots,” L.A. Times

Tragically, in 1968, three years after the LAPD and National Guard swarmed the people of Watts, the U.S. Kerner Commission would really only so much as echo Williams’ notes on L.A.’s and other major cities’ inadequate responses to the needs of their non-white communities, particularly in terms of housing and employment opportunities:

“[C]ondemned by segregation and poverty to live in the decaying slums of our central cities, the goal of a decent home and suitable environment is as far distant as ever.” — Kerner Commission, 1968

And yet, even with this information at hand, by the 1970s neither federal, nor state or municipal officials in Los Angeles would move considerably to develop decent, discrimination-free housing for the Black, Brown and Asian communities that came to the rescue over the course of World War II when L.A. desperately needed them as *essential workers* for the city’s — and California’s — manufacturing and agriculture economies.

Rather, a generation after the war to end all wars, federal and city resources from the 1960s through the 1970s were devoted to another war abroad in Vietnam, as well as to the suppression of Black communities with programs such as **COINTELPRO**, which **litigated and destroyed** anti-racist coalitions such as the Black Panthers.

Moreover, like racial covenants in the 20s, and redlining in the 40s, unrest over the Vietnam war, and the concurrent Civil Rights movement in the 60s inspired “back-lash” not just from state and city officials, but also from civilians, who once again organized to wage anti-Black and Immigrant policies in major cities across the U.S.

In Los Angeles, for example, predominantly white homeowners from the San Fernando Valley led efforts against integration with Proposition 1 (1979), which cancelled plans to bus segregated Black students stranded in schools within South Central (including Watts) to better-funded, whiter schools in the San Fernando Valley. As noted in Daniel HoSang’s Racial Propositions (2010):

“[In 1979,] In Los Angeles...a mass of white parents voted by a margin of 73% to put an end to school busing in the city, which was only instituted in 1977 and thus not even off the ground yet.” — “Racial Propositions,” J.T. The L.A. Storyteller

Let’s also not forget another major citizen’s led back-lash against non-whites in Los Angeles and California during the seventies, **Howard Jarvis’s Prop 13 in 1978**, which reduced massive amounts in revenue from property taxes for the state for funding and maintaining public parks, schools, libraries, and more spaces where non-white communities were increasing in number.

A barrage of ads and newspaper editorials from the 60s to the 70s showing white homeowners “rebell[ing]” against such taxes, which implicitly meant “fighting back” against the growing diversity of California, also inspired less “noble” causes than those of Jarvis and L.A.’s SFV area parents, such as the Nazi party in Los Angeles showing up to anti-war marches to, let’s say, show their “support for the troops.”



Nazi supporters in Los Angeles at Wilshire boulevard, 1968; Courtesy of Tessa Collections at L.A. Public Library

VI. Gentrification, the Ellis Act, and a Looming Eviction “Crisis” of Staggering Proportions

After 52 years since the 1968 Kerner report, and two generations since four LAPD officers who beat Rodney King to within an inch of his life were acquitted on national television in 1992, in 2020 still too few Black and Latino youth, as well as AAPI and Indigenous youth, in South Central, East or Central Los Angeles and beyond, have been given much reason to believe they’ll fare substantially better as adults than their predecessors from prior decades; a growing number of the places that constitute their neighborhoods are being torn down, at the same time that new generations of “homeless” encampments are going up, showing how the historic wealth and opportunity gaps between white and non-white futures that began in the early twentieth century in Los Angeles are only roaring into the twenty-first.

A hundred years after 1920, while the non-white groups among the county's 9 million residents today have certainly made some gains in spite of white covenants, concentration camps, hostile courtrooms, the firebombing of their homes, police harassment, incarceration, dis-invested schools, and more, these groups *still* predominantly constitute the most dispossessed communities in Los Angeles.

There is no question that Black people in Los Angeles, and in California overall, have suffered the worst discrimination over the course of the modern state's 170 years in business, but Indigenous and non-white immigrant communities, especially Latinx and Asian ones, have also been left behind by city and state governments they've historically worked hard to maintain and support. It will also come as little surprise, then, that the same disproportions of wealth and access to space in Los Angeles and California are trends nationally; according to a report by the *National Alliance to End Homelessness*:

African Americans make up 13 percent of the general population, but more than 40 percent of the homeless population. Similarly, American Indians/Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, and people who identify as two or more races make up a disproportionate share of the homeless population. — “Racial Inequalities in Homelessness, by the numbers”

Moreover, the health crisis in 2020 has only exacerbated historic policies of discrimination in housing and access to space for non-white communities in Los Angeles. Earlier this year, the UCLA Luskin Institute estimated that as a result of the failed federal response, up to 449,000 people in L.A. County who suddenly lost their jobs amid shutdowns this year—overwhelmingly workers of color—are now at risk of being evicted from an estimated 365,000 housing units once Governor Newsom's emergency order is lifted sometime in 2021.

This eviction tidal wave is also apart from the damage already done to ethnic, working-class neighborhoods by **Ellis Act evictions**, which destroy rent-stabilized housing, and which have only accelerated over the past two decades, including this year despite the health crisis and emergency order. In other words, the possibility of hundreds of thousands of more encampments, erected by non-white families in particular, along sidewalks and freeway overpasses in L.A. is pounding incessantly at the door.



Encampments along the 101 Freeway in East Hollywood; Mitch O'Farrell's District; December 2020

Thus, the policy of enabling posh, white gentrifiers to remake space and thoroughfares in historically ethnic neighborhoods at this time is not only hostile to people of color for the obscene way it whitewashes former “slums” in L.A. that couldn’t have survived in Los Angeles if not for resilient Black, Latinx and Asian labor for more than a century, but also for how it entirely disrupts the fact that 100 years since racial zoning laws in Los Angeles were innovated to delineate communities for their Black, Latinx, Asian or Jewish “undesirables,” there has still been no official recourse from either the federal, state or local government to correct for an almost total betrayal of their duty to ensure fair housing and equal opportunity for these communities regardless of their skin color, surnames, or pocket sizes.

Moreover, gentrification in cities like Los Angeles has not been just an “inevitable” development either, but a planned series of events that have required city-approval by L.A. City Council members and their staff at each turn. Yet to date, there is no bylaw, or provision at L.A. City Hall’s Planning and Land Use committee, which is where all proposed building or “make-over” projects in L.A. go before they’re approved, requiring city officials to consider cultural and socioeconomic factors in zoning and business permit decisions along with community participation.



The site of the former Super Pan Bakery that operated for 20 years along Virgil avenue, which this year changed ownership to become “Courage Bagels”



The site of the former Super Pan Bakery that operated for 20 years along Virgil avenue, which this year changed ownership to become “Courage Bagels”

As a result, dispossession of the “older” L.A. which gentrification drives is not just an aesthetic issue, but an anxiety-producing, psychological pitfall that can feel like an attack on non-white residents for how the process normalizes—relatively quickly and matter-of-factly—erasure of their culture in neighborhoods they were once only segregated in, but which they’ve since called home and “kept alive” with very little, if any federal, state or local support.

At the same time, another storm brewing over L.A.’s most vulnerable communities is also on the rise; even before the mass of evictions estimated by UCLA, eviction attempts this year have already ramped up in Los Angeles, as recent tensions at the **College Hotel in East Hollywood** showed, when a manager tried to scare out an elderly Latina woman whose husband—and co-renter—recently passed away, by calling the police on her. It is considered illegal for LAPD to respond to eviction attempts under the temporary stay-at-home order which is supposed to protect renters until January 2021, but LAPD is still being called to oversee removal of tenants, who are overwhelmingly Black and Immigrant working-class people in Los Angeles.



Protestors outside College Hotel on Santa Monica Blvd, recent site of attempted evictions by building ownership; December 2020

Aggression against vulnerable renters this year has also correlated with another “back-lash” in the form of increased clean-up “sweeps” of the unhoused — 34 percent of whom are disproportionately Black people — on L.A.’s sidewalks due to L.A. City Hall ordinance. Clean-up sweeps include destroying unhoused people’s belongings, as well as their arrest, even despite this being the year of the “shelter-in-place” order.

In 2017, even the United Nations deemed such actions of hubris or slap-dash removal of L.A.’s unsheltered communities without providing comprehensive access to transitional housing and services as totally inadequate responses from our elected officials. Fortunately, as during previous instances of inhumane policies towards L.A.’s more vulnerable communities, tenants unions and other organized residents in the city have sprung up to largely fill the role that’s supposed to be the city, state and federal governments’, amassing protective “squads” of the unhoused in the face of surprise clean-up sweeps overseen by LAPD, and protesting as well as advocating for L.A.’s unhoused residents with social-media hashtags highlighting the need for “services not sweeps,” and “homes not zones,” from L.A.’s elected officials.



L.A. City Council officials discussing the legality of homeless “sweeps” in Los Angeles, September 2020

As seen in previous decades of blatant discrimination in Los Angeles, compounding these issues is the fact that, like racial covenants in the 1920s, and redlining in the 1940s, gentrification and other forms of city-sanctioned removal and reduction of space for L.A.’s ethnic, working-class communities are also not simply staid and tasteless policies. Recall that similarly to the days following *Shelley vs Kraemer (1948)*, when random fire-bombings of Black homes in the 50s saw a major uptick, the process of dispossessing non-white groups of their homes and cultural hallmarks today, not to mention a few feet on the sidewalk, in a city which has historically left them to fend for themselves, just reinforces racist doctrines and beliefs. Such policies ultimately inspire less sophisticated, but equally offensive and sometimes even more harmful forms of “back-lash.”

Take the recently defaced “Map of the Motherland” mural by LA_Steetz in Echo Park, for example, where in a community that over the last two decades has been whitewashed of its Black, Latinx and Asian roots, the crossing out of the indigenous person’s face and disparagement feels like something right out of a post-card from the mid-western-bred L.A. Chamber of Commerce over a century ago, which eagerly invisibilized California’s non-white and indigenous roots in order to entice whites from the mid-west to *get on over here*.



A defaced mural in Echo Park, one of L.A.'s hippest, newly whitewashed neighborhoods; Mitch O'Farrell's district, December 2020

As a result, amid the racialized eviction “crisis” looming over the next few years, as well as the destruction of rent-stabilized housing for predominantly non-white communities through landlord tools such as the Ellis Act, growing clean-up “sweeps” of L.A.’s Black and Immigrant unhoused, and more, gentrification must now be reassessed for what it increasingly implies about any effort to build equity between Los Angeles’s white and non-white communities in the 21st century; that there is no equity, but only acceptance of inequality as a ‘de facto’ condition of “evolving” cities.

It’s therefore incumbent on scholars and analysts to begin to question whether gentrification is ringing a new wave, or merely supporting prior forms of L.A.’s ‘unofficial’ Jim Crow or race-based exclusionary policies. Because if studying Los Angeles as a historic set of institutions and policies over a few decades suggests anything, it’s that business and home-making in the city has never been a neutral affair—nor uninformed by racial doctrines and ideologies—and that it’s still not today.

Gentrification and other forms of reducing space for ethnic working-class or the “poor” in L.A. may actually just be revitalized policies of racial dispossession, constituting a “fourth” wave of Jim Crow segregation, and therefore, a ‘new’ civil rights issue around which to organize. Surely there may be push-back against such an argument, but that should be welcomed; in order to improve theories for movements of resistance against policies of dispossession going forward, all options for the terms by which to identify such policies should be on the table.

After all, in 1960, before the onset of the historic Civil Rights movement, when the “**Greensboro Four**,” or four Black college students in North Carolina sat for a cup of coffee at their local Woolworth restaurant, they did so not driven by a demand for uprising, but by a basic desire to be included in a city they saw themselves as no less in. Today, while gentrification of ethnic neighborhoods in Los Angeles may not entail “WHITES ONLY” signs being posted on posh, new storefronts, **white wealth** — developed, but also kept from Black, Immigrant and Indigenous people here for centuries — increasingly acts as a buffer just the same, separating the city’s non-white communities from the places they call home, and recalling L.A.’s history of unofficial Jim Crow over the last century. It is time for the exclusionary policy to be reexamined.

J.T.

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Gentrification

Jim Crow

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Homeless

Analysis