

City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles

(1771-1965)

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Adapted as a zine



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***“Mass incarceration is mass elimination.
That is the punch line of this book.”***

In 1781, when the Spanish Crown dispatched a small group to establish a colony on Native Tongva-Gabrielino lands that became Los Angeles, one of the very first structures they built was a jail.



An early but undated image of the Los Angeles County sheriff's office and jail.

Today, Los Angeles is the carceral capital of the United States and therefore the world. Los Angeles is a hub of incarceration, imprisoning more people than any other city in the United States, which incarcerates more people than any other nation on earth. Each night, nearly 17,000 men, women, and youth are locked somewhere in Los Angeles County's \$1 billion system of jails and detention centers, as well as one penal farm. There are also eighty-eight other municipal jails, more than twenty juvenile detention halls and camps, and two federal facilities sited within the county.

And just over the mountains lining the northeastern edge of Los Angeles County, Geo Group, a private prison company, operates a large immigrant detention center that contracts

with the federal government to hold the spillover of deportees from the city. Los Angeles, the City of Angels, is in fact the City of Inmates.

The history of Los Angeles tells us that incarceration and prisons are a form of elimination -- a way of containing, surveilling, and ultimately hastening the premature death of Black and Indigenous peoples in order to reproduce a white settler society. The system of mass incarceration and criminalization in the U.S. is the product not only of white supremacy and racial capitalism but also of **settler colonialism**.

Settler colonialism differs from other forms of colonization because it is not focused on extracting labor or resources (although colonial forms of labor and resource extraction can occur in settler societies). **Rather, settler colonial societies are focused on eliminating Native peoples in order to acquire and populate land for the purposes of permanently reproducing their own racially exclusive society.**

In Los Angeles, incarceration began as a white European(-descended) settler project to conquer the region and disappear Natives. Contemporary incarceration in the city carries on and intensifies this white settler legacy of elimination, **which seeks to disappear not only Indigenous communities but anyone who threatens the sovereignty of white, settler, patriarchal, able-bodied, heterosexual, cissexual supremacy.**

Logic of elimination

The logic of elimination refers to the central system underlying settler colonial processes and politics: the desire to disappear and destroy the Indigenous people who live on the land that settlers wish to occupy and dominate.

“Settler colonialism destroys to replace.”
—Patrick Wolfe, author of *Settler Colonialism*

The effort to eliminate Indigenous populations does not happen all of a sudden; instead, it is an ongoing effort, perpetually and violently reasserted. In other words, it is a **“structure rather than an event.”** We can see settler colonialism’s endurance today, for example, when energy companies propose to build pipelines on sacred Indigenous land and then sic militarized police on the Indigenous people who attempt to block these violative and environmentally harmful projects. It looks like Indigenous people lacking access to running water and electricity while coal from their lands is directed to power plants and water from their rivers to golf courses and other settler institutions. It looks like Indigenous people contracting and dying from COVID-19 at disproportionate rates due to government neglect, and the government obscuring their complicity by blaming “pre-existing conditions.” It looks like Native people facing heightened white settler vigilante terror and police violence, Native men being incarcerated at four times the rate of white men, and Native women incarcerated at six times the rate of white women. It looks like the reservation system, where Native people forcibly removed from their homelands have been placed — a system in which Native children have been and continue to be abducted into state custody as a tactic to eliminate Native people through forced assimilation and dislocation.

To review: Settler colonialism is premised on settlers destroying and disappearing Indigenous people. It is a persistent process, where settlers constantly reassert the violence of their occupation, both through concrete expressions of force and through softer, but no less lethal, proclamations of “truths” and norms that appear to justify settler claims on Indigenous lands.

In the US, settler colonialism also entails the forced labor and subjugation of African people through chattel slavery and its many afterlives in criminalization, imprisonment, and other forms of racialized state violence. Once white settlers violently dispossessed and evacuated Indigenous people from their lands, they accumulated massive profits and expanded their imperial power through the enslavement, exploitation, and criminalization of Black people violently removed from African homelands through the transatlantic slave trade. **The logic of elimination, and settler colonialism more broadly, is tightly intertwined with this history of anti-Blackness and racial capitalism in the United States, constituting what some people have called a *settler-native-slave triad*.** No theorization of race, imperialism, and criminalization in the United States is complete without acknowledgement of these interconnections.

Importantly, the logic of elimination affects Native and Black populations in ways related to their communities’ different historical and political relationship to white settler society, which is also not static over time. During slavery, for example, white settlers sought to exploit Black labor, making their wholesale and targeted elimination undesirable to settlers. In other periods, such as during our current moment of advanced global racial capitalism where corporations largely outsource their labor exploitation to the Global South, Black people have been rendered surplus, leading the U.S. settler regime to use their repertoire of eliminatory practices on Black people, such as through mass imprisonment and gentrification.

By the same token, the U.S. settler colonial regime has involved periods of subjugating and enslaving Indigenous people so that settlers could extract Native knowledge and labor about the land they wished to exclusively occupy. But the purposes of Native enslavement or forced labor differ from the purposes of Black enslavement. In the US, while African slaves were “racialized to increase” — meaning that their children were born enslaved and expanded the wealth of slaveowners and white capitalists in the North — Native people’s integration into the U.S. system of racial capitalism operated to compromise, over time, their claims on Native ancestry and thus their claims on land (often by producing “half-breeds” and subjecting Native people to “blood-quantum” regulations that challenged land entitlements) which white settlers sought to access and steal from Indigenous people.

Once way that the settler colonial impulse to “destroy and replace” rears its ugly head today is through gentrification. With gentrification, elite politicians, city planners, developers, and financiers work to redevelop and transform structurally undervalued land in usually Black and brown working class neighborhoods for the purposes of replacing them with white and upper class residents, who then provide landowners and developers with exorbitant windfall profits. The result is the mass displacement and uprooting of Black and brown urban residents to suburban areas that lack good jobs, public transit, easy access to life-giving services, and community ties, and that often place Black and brown residents into dangerous proximity to racist suburban law enforcement. In a cruel irony, many of the displaced residents had lived in these urban neighborhoods for generations due to racialized housing discrimination and white supremacist urban policymaking that devalued urban land associated with Black and brown communities. Now, however, white political and corporate elites seek to clear out these neighborhoods — to eliminate residents’ presence entirely from the urban geography — in

search of cheap land that they can transform into luxury buildings that will attract white and wealthy residents and earn developers handsome profits. Gentrification is thus a vestige of the settler colonial logic of elimination: capitalist and often white settlers once again seeking to permanently remove racially marginalized residents who, while not Indigenous to the land, have long called these regions home, for the purposes of accumulating profit and political dominance.

Doctrine of discovery

The “doctrine of discovery” is the ideology that “justifies” U.S. settler colonial practices in the eyes of the settler. The doctrine willfully denies and ignores the fact of Native presence and entitlement to land and instead purports that U.S. settler colonists were the original discoverers of the land, which in turn grants them dominion over the territory without conquest. The doctrine relies on a naked rejection of Native people’s humanity, suggesting that their centuries of prior settlement in a region are invalid under colonial law.

The doctrine of discovery originally derives from a 15th century papal bull (a communication from the Pope) known as the “Doctrine of Christian Discovery,” which claimed that non-Christian nations (and thus, Indigenous peoples) were “savages” in need of the “gift” of European civilization. Although originally written to authorize the Portuguese monarchy to colonize West Africa, other European nations used the doctrine to justify their own colonial projects, seeing the doctrine as a foundational legal instrument that legitimized their right to colonize “non-Christian” peoples.

In the US, the doctrine of discovery was codified into law in a 1823 Supreme Court ruling called *Johnson v. M'Intosh*. In the ruling, Chief Justice John Marshall drew upon the doctrine of

discovery to establish that European settlers in the U.S. were the “discoverers” of the land and thus had exclusive property rights. In the eyes of the U.S. Supreme court, then, Indigenous nations’ claims to land simply did not exist, thus clearing the way for white settlers’ expansion Westward. Indigenous people were considered “politically non-existent, partially or entirely.” The doctrine of discovery authorizes Indigenous dispossession and elimination; it is a technique of colonial state violence.

*“In the establishment of these relations, the rights of the original inhabitants were, in no instance, entirely disregarded; but were necessarily, to a considerable extent, impaired. They were admitted to be the rightful occupants of the soil, with a legal as well as just claim to retain possession of it, and to use it according to their own discretion; **but their rights to complete sovereignty, as independent nations, were necessarily diminished, and their power to dispose of the soil at their own will, to whomsoever they pleased, was denied by the original fundamental principle, that discovery gave exclusive title to those who made it.**”*

While the different nations of Europe respected the right of the natives, as occupants, they asserted the ultimate dominion to be in themselves; and claimed and exercised, as a consequence of this ultimate dominion, a power to grant the soil, while yet in possession of the natives. These grants have been understood by all, to convey a title to the grantees, subject only to the Indian right of occupancy.”

—Johnson v. M’Intosh opinion

We can feel the imprint of the doctrine of discovery in contemporary processes of gentrification. Today, developers and planners often claim to “discover” neighborhoods that have actually long been occupied by Black and brown working class communities. They do so for the purposes of staking their claim upon this land and to attract white and wealthy settlement that will transform these neighborhoods into valuable sites of capital accumulation. Once these areas are “discovered,” the violent process of clearing out Black and brown communities through the raising of rents, home foreclosures, and targeted police harassment is politically authorized, even framed as “renewal” or “progress” by politicians and urban boosters who seek to benefit from this process of destruction and replacement.

“What the rebel archive guided me upriver to see was how currents of elimination flow through the nation’s carceral core. The swells of imprisonment and the attending realities of poverty, deportation, illness, and premature death, punctuated by all the police killings that surge through Native, black, and brown communities, are, **in settler colonial terms, acts of elimination.** From this perspective, disrupting the roots of mass incarceration in the United States will require addressing the structure of conquest, its eliminatory logic, and what it means for all of us, but especially for the Native peoples and racialized communities targeted to ‘progressively disappear in a variety of ways.’”

—Kelly Lytle Hernández

The process of elimination looks different for different racialized or “othered” groups in different historical periods.

For Indigenous people, elimination has meant white settler genocide, stolen land, and broken treaties. For example, in January 1769, the Spanish, in the form of a Franciscan order hoping to find new converts to the Catholic faith, arrived with the intention to establish permanent presence in the Tongva Basin, a region occupied by Indigenous communities where today’s Los Angeles is located. The Indigenous Tongva people fought against Spanish soldiers, but were unable to fully repel them. Many Tongva communities left the area entirely to establish new villages, and those who stayed faced heightened threats from the Spanish, whose soldiers roamed the basin raping women and snatching children and trampled and devoured the Tongva’s edible landscape.

Out of hunger, hundreds of Tongva villages were incorporated into the Spanish Mission San Gabriel. There, the Tongva were forced to assimilate to Spanish customs or face punitive sanction, such as whippings, starvation, or being tied to a post.

For racialized others of African descent, the process of elimination began with Africans being stripped of land, kin, and indigeneity. Once displaced from their homelands, they continued to be subjected to racialized state-sanctioned violence and coercion. Although there were not many Africans in California before the early 20th century, anti-Blackness has always been central to the Anglo-American settler vision of the West, and those who were brought to the colonized Tongva Basin were heavily criminalized, abused, and disenfranchised.

In the early 20th century, however, Black people escaping white supremacist terror in the Jim Crow South began to come to the city in search of jobs and a better life, drastically increasing the region's Black population. As that population grew, white settlers bristled and quickly implemented new ways to encage, stifle, and criminalize Black life. The Los Angeles Police Department was key to white settlers' efforts to repress and socially control Black Angelenos. In 1927, as part of a liquor raid -- a common technique used by LAPD to terrorize Black neighborhoods -- LAPD killed an unarmed Samuel Faulkner in his sister Clara Harris's home. The police murder triggered a wave of protest from Black Angelenos, who demanded the indictment of the officers and an easing of the public order charges used to justify anti-Black police violence. While Black residents' campaign ultimately failed, Black Angelenos gathered enough evidence to categorically describe police violence as a tactical assault on Black life in the city and set the stage for the Watts Rebellion of 1965.

For houseless, sometimes non-normatively gendered and politically subversive white male “tramps” and “hoboes,” the process of elimination included repressive policing and frequent sweeps that placed dozens of so-called “itinerant white men” in Los Angeles jails. The product of a late 19th- and early 20th-century emergent corporate capitalism that pushed many white men out of agricultural and artisan work and left them landless and jobless, these white men lived transient, migratory lives and were constantly looking for casual, seasonal work. Their rootlessness made them politically “dead” and thus unable to vote, which led many to radical and anarchist politics. This primarily-male community performed and built non-normative gender identities and kin and sexual relationships. As a result, tramps were seen by white settler elites as a threat to the precious core of white settler society: the white, male, heterosexual, employed, and homeownership citizen who served as the head of a patriarchal nuclear family. Seen as irredeemable “degenerates,” tramps constituted a new racial threat because they threatened the gender, labor, and sexual structure that legitimized United States settler colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism. LA’s crackdown on tramps served as the direct impetus to expand the city’s jail facilities. By 1908, the city’s jail had gone from a small 40-person facility to a city jail and stockade that could house more than 400 people.

For non-Black racialized immigrants, such as immigrants of Chinese and Mexican descent, the process of elimination meant exploited labor, racist criminalization, and deportation by U.S. immigration control. The late 1900s featured a series of explicitly anti-Chinese laws that tethered immigration control to crime and punishment in historically unprecedented and constitutionally questionable ways and led to the creation of immigration detention as a strange new sector of human confinement that made up the carceral landscape of Los Angeles and beyond. The 1892 Geary Act, for example, required all Chinese laborers living in the U.S. to

register with the federal government or face arrest and imprisonment for up to one year with hard labor followed by deportation. These acts paved the way for the 1924 National Origins Act, which sought to keep nonwhite immigrants out of the country by requiring immigrants to submit to inspection at the border and prove they could pass a literacy test, health exam, and pay \$18 in head taxes and visa fees before entering the country — all requirements that the designers of the Act believed could only be passed by white western Europeans. An explicit piece of white supremacist legislation, the Act also implemented national, ultimately racial quotas that limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country each year. 96% of all quota slots were reserved for European immigrants.

While on its own an abhorrent law meant to hasten the criminalization of racialized immigrants, the National Origins Act was tweaked by white businessmen to exempt the transitory Mexican immigrant labor force they exploited in search of ever greater windfall profits. So long as they met the requirements of legal entry, unlimited numbers of Mexican migrants could enter the US. To be clear, the U.S. immigration apparatus moved to exempt Mexican migrants from repressive immigration laws not because of settlers' desire to include them, in stark contrast to the white "tramps" who white settlers wished to discipline into becoming "proper" white citizens. Rather, Mexican migrants were exempted because they served as a disposable and cheap labor force who could be coerced and disciplined through the threat of expulsion. The allowance of unlimited "legal" entry of Mexicans for employment under western agribusinessmen, however, helped shift white supremacist politicians' energies towards criminalizing "unauthorized" or "illegal" Mexican immigration.

By the end of the 1930s, thousands upon thousands of Mexicans had been arrested, charged, and prosecuted for illegal entry to the United States. Although the law was written

to include any immigrant who unlawfully entered the country, the majority of those imprisoned were Mexican -- in the early 1930s, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons reported that Mexicans never made up less than 84.6% of all imprisoned immigrants. The new law prompted the U.S. government to build new, special jails for detaining criminalized immigrants as they overfilled existing prison space. Since Los Angeles was a common destination for Mexican migrants, Anglo-American Angelenos quickly worked to criminalize and banish the growing Mexican population from the city through heightened policing and mass imprisonment. The result was an increasingly brown incarcerated population, a phenomena that persists in Los Angeles's carceral system today, where Mexicans and Mexican Americans make up a major if not majority share of the region's incarcerated population.

Resistance and the Rebel Archive

There has always been resistance to incarceration led not only by incarcerated people but also musicians, migrants, mothers, journalists, and many others.

Evidence of this resistance amounts to a **“rebel archive”**: the documents, stories, handbills, artwork, testimonies, love songs, and other materials created by those who fought back against racist and settler colonial repression. Imprisoned people and their accomplices engaged in rebellion and struggle are constantly creating rebel archives -- it’s up to all of us to seek them out and amplify them.

Creating, collecting, and sharing rebel archives is essential not only to documenting histories of Black, brown, and Indigenous resistance to the carceral state, but also to countering the settler colonial state’s persistent lies about its true function and the populations it cages and terrorizes. Agents of racialized state violence often destroy or heavily restrict official records of their actions. The LAPD destroyed all but four boxes of their records, and the California Public Records Act exempts state police forces from archiving most of their records.

Discussion questions:

1. How does viewing the United States prison industrial complex through the lens of settler colonialism change our understanding of the carceral state? What is useful about this framing, and what is still confusing or challenging?
2. How are police and prisons “eliminatorary”? Is this framework useful?
3. How are settler colonialism and racial capitalism related? How do you think they are related, or see them related, in your own life or experience?
4. How does integrating settler colonialism and border imperialism into our analysis of the PIC inform abolitionist movements? How can we better incorporate this lens in our organizing, strategizing, and coalition-building? What challenges might arise as we do this work, and how we can try to work through them?

Scorpion's Tale

In 1904, Ricardo Flores Magón and his brother Enrique entered the U.S. from Mexico to incite and organize a revolution against Mexican president Porfirio Díaz.

Díaz was president between 1876 and 1911, and introduced massive social and economic changes across Mexico after decades of sinking debt, military coups, foreign invasions, and Indigenous uprisings. Díaz promised to bring what he called “Order and Progress” to Mexico. He achieved “Order” by centralizing power in his office, rigging elections, controlling the judicial system, and punishing dissent. He achieved “Progress” by courting foreign capital, especially British and Anglo-American investors, to buy up land and transform a rural, subsistence economy into a site of extraction and production in a global industrial economy.

President Díaz dispatched spies and hired U.S. and Mexican authorities to crush the uprising of the magonistas (as Magón’s supporters were popularly known). Incarceration was one of the main tactics deployed by Díaz’s agents. Magón would spend the rest of his life in the United States, half of it in prison. By the time of his release in August 1910, Magón had spent three years behind bars in the United States, while thousands of magonistas had also served time, mostly in the borderlands. But incarceration failed to break the movement. In fact, it fueled it.

Magonista incarceration was meant to stop a rebellion in Mexico, not purge a population from within the United States, as had been intended with Natives, “tramps,” and Chinese immigrants in previous waves of caging. But in the history of incarceration as a pillar in the structure of conquest in the U.S., the magonista tale is important for **three reasons**.

First, the magonista movement was a rebellion bred by U.S. imperialism. Díaz's courting of outside investors to privatized land dispossessed rural farming families, campesinos (farmers), and Indigenous peoples of their landholding. By the turn of the 20th century, 5 million campesinos had been pushed from interdependence in a subsistence economy to wage labor and debt servitude in a global one.

Second, the magonista tale is key because among the many demands they made, land redistribution was first and foremost. Rebels promised a revolution that would seize and return that land to dispossessed Indigenous and campesino communities, who had used communal plots interdependently. Investors consolidated these plots and locked people into debt servitude or forced them to migrate in search of work. When these communities protested, Díaz sent armed officers known as rurales to crush opposition.

And finally, it is important because it provides a rare, detailed look at how incarcerated people and their allies turned power on its head. Incarceration did not crush the magonista rebellion. It revived it. After having lived on the run for almost a year, Magón's arrest in 1907 unwittingly opened one of the most dynamic periods of the magonista uprising. During their nineteen months in the Los Angeles County Jail, Magón and his comrades communicated through dropped notes, whispered alleyway conversations, and smuggled letters. The documents of resistance that have survived constitute part of the "rebel archive" which testifies to the ongoing struggle for freedom and self-determination, even in the state's most repressive spaces.

El Scorpio

Born in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 1873, Ricardo Flores Magón came of age in Díaz's Mexico. By 1901, he had left law school and started a radical newspaper, *Regeneración*. Calling Díaz a "tyrant" and "dictator" under his pen name, "the Scorpion," Magón and his brothers incurred the president's wrath, and police raided their offices and destroyed their printing press.

They were incarcerated multiple times in Mexico City before crossing the U.S. border in 1904, following the paths of the tens of thousands of Mexicans who crossed the border each year at the turn of the century. There, from Laredo, then San Antonio, and eventually St. Louis, they relaunched *Regeneración* and had over 30,000 subscribers in the U.S. and Mexico by 1906.

In 1905, Magón became president of a newly-formed political party, the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM). Magón became further radicalized through anarchists such as Emma Goldman and the Industrial Workers of the World, and the PLM manifesto called for massive redistribution of land and the restoration of Indigenous land rights. Although too radical for many Mexicans, the PLM attracted tens of thousands of supporters. According to rumor, even uttering the word "Magón" could get you arrested in Mexico at the time.

To crush the PLM revolution, President Díaz appointed Enrique Creel, the Governor of Chihuahua, Mexico, to lead a counterinsurgency campaign in the U.S. Creel hired private detectives, paid bribes, and worked with U.S. and Mexican officials to arrest magonistas and capture Magón. Since Creel's operatives closely monitored rebel correspondence, magonistas devised systems of communication like using a pseudonym and writing in secret code to conceal information. All letters passed through five couriers before reaching their destination.

Finally, in 1907, Creel's detectives and the LAPD successfully captured Magón. But his incarceration in Los Angeles offered the magonistas an unexpected platform to rebuild and expand their movement. Magón spoke with supporters who gathered in the alley below his cell, and he dropped notes to comrades. His wife, María Talavera Broussé, and adopted daughter, Lucía Norman, also played crucial roles in rekindling the magonista rebellion.

To keep costs low, the sheriff required people incarcerated long-term to do their own laundry. They could wash their dirty clothes on the third floor of the jail and have family members pick up their dirty clothes once a week and drop off clean ones. Each week, Norman or Broussé picked up Magón's dirty clothes, in which he meticulously crammed manifestos, military orders, and love letters on rolled slivers of paper. They emptied the correspondence, washed the clothes, and sewed their own messages into the empty folds.



Ricardo Flores Magón and María Talavera Broussé

By the time Magón and his comrades were released in August 1910, their networks were more extensive and entrenched than before their capture. Incarceration, in other words, had neither pushed the PLM rebels into oblivion nor crushed their uprising. Rather, incarceration in Los Angeles brought the magonistas a new beginning at a moment when Creel's operatives were chasing their movement into decline.

Still, Magón never emerged as a military or political leader. He lacked the skills needed to transition from stinging broadsides to organized revolution. In fact, Magón's military philosophy was to conduct isolated raids and hope that the Mexican public would follow. It did not work. By 1910, Magón was an avowed anarchist whose vision for a decolonized, anticapitalist, and democratic Mexico conflicted with the more liberal agenda of the revolution's military and political leaders. Instead, he remained with Broussé on a communal farm in the small community of Edendale, CA. When World War I began, U.S. authorities raided their communal plot and arrested him for publishing articles that discouraged workers from registering for the draft. He was convicted and sentenced to a twenty-year term in Leavenworth Prison, where he died in his cell in 1922 under mysterious circumstances.

Magón's body was returned to Mexico City for a massive state funeral in his honor. At the time, more Mexicans were residing north of the border than ever. By 1930, 10 percent of the population of Mexico -- nearly 1.5 million people -- lived in the United States. During the 1920s and 1930s, Mexicans made more than 1 million border crossings.

Discussion questions:

1. What are some examples of the rebel archive in this chapter? What are materials in your own life that you produce which might constitute a rebel archive?
2. How is the magonista struggle in Mexico related to U.S. settler colonialism?
3. How was policing and incarceration used to maintain the status quo by both the U.S. and Mexican governments?
4. What feels familiar and unfamiliar in this chapter with our current moment? What do we think about these changes over time?