

Book Reviews – Reseñas de libro

Kelly Lytle Hernández. *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 301 pp.

City of Inmates charts the rise of mass incarceration in the modern metropolis of Los Angeles, which today boasts the largest population of imprisoned people found in any city across the United States. As Lytle Hernández argues, at the core of this history of incarceration, or what she calls “human caging,” is settler colonialism. A tool of conquest and colonization dating to the eighteenth century, settler colonialism focuses on eliminating or disappearing expendable racialized, or otherwise deviant, peoples from the landscape to make room for more deserving (read: white) colonists: “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” (197). Lytle Hernández claims that, with the land wiped clean of the human debris threatening to pollute Anglo Saxon racial purity, white settlers in Los Angeles worked feverishly to build their own city on a hill.

Composed of six chapters, *City of Inmates* traces the ways in which the process of settler colonialism—“the arc of an enduring conquest” (197)—impacted successive waves of Native and non-native racialized peoples across two hundred years. Chapter one opens the narrative by focusing on how Spanish invaders used violence, expulsion, spiritual conversion, and famine to purge Native Californians from the pueblo’s landscape in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Incarceration, however, did not flourish until after Mexican Independence in 1821 and especially after the U.S. American conquest in 1848, when the propertied settler class of the Spanish-Mexican *Californios*, as well as enterprising white U.S. American migrants, used imprisonment to control Indians and use

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them as a pliable and expendable labor force. In so doing, they effectively removed Natives from the land, denying them any claim to rightful possession. Chapter two explores the caging of white “tramps” or “hoboes” who proliferated at the end of the nineteenth century. Viewed as a threat to the white, middle class, settler order envisioned for the growing City of Angels in the early twentieth century, city leaders made great efforts to round up and imprison unregulated, unproductive, unattached, and immoral poor white males.

Chapter three pays close attention to the legal and extra-legal ways white settler society worked to strip the human rights of non-whites in Los Angeles, and the American West more broadly, particularly the Chinese. Indeed, as *City of Inmates* reveals, the Chinese experienced nothing short of a reign of terror as violence, race riots, murder, and incarceration were common occurrences in late nineteenth-century Los Angeles. The goal: their removal from California and the United States more generally. While unsuccessful, white settlers left an indelible mark in their efforts to achieve their goals for their fair city. Chapters four and five examine how and why Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and other Latinos, racialized as non-white, today constitute nearly half of the population found in the Los Angeles County jail system. The origin, she argues, was the fear that the Mexican Revolution of 1910 would cause radicals to spill into the United States, as well as increased immigration to *el norte*, stoked, in large part, by the vast inequality, political chaos, and violence of President Porfirio Díaz’s thirty-five year regime of “order and progress.” In a captivating analysis of the anarchist revolutionaries seeking to overthrow Díaz, chapter four demonstrates the real threat the Flores Magón brothers and their insurgent allies posed to the authorities in Mexico and the United States. To quell the transborder movement, U.S. authorities incarcerated the leadership, effectively dissolving, though not permanently removing from public memory, the revolutionary efforts.

Chapter five charts the rise of Mexican immigration alongside immigrant detention in the 1920s and 1930s, examining how U.S. restrictionists worked to exclude, detain, and deport unwanted migrants from Mexico. Imprisonment on public order charges, she finds, was a primary mechanism through which the city contained the population of Mexicans in Los Angeles (147–48). Settler anxieties of the early twentieth century, she argues, particularly about increased immigration from south of the border, “marked a major turning point in the history of race and imprisonment in Los Angeles” (157). In the last chapter, Lytle Hernández turns to those same anxieties as provoked by the growing Black community in Los Angeles in the early

twentieth century, showing how city police used violence, murder, and caging to regulate and impose “public order,” essentially creating a hierarchical racial order with whites on top and people of color at the bottom. Settler colonialism was most evident in the suburbs. Idealized as the bastion of white families, the suburbs excluded ethnic and racial minorities through restrictive racial covenants, essentially confining poor and middle class African Americans to Los Angeles’s Central District.

The disappeared, as Lytle Hernández demonstrates, have many ways of communicating with us, proving that they were not purged by conquest, colonization, violence, or, as in this case, settler colonialism. Rather, Native, Chinese, and Mexican-origin peoples, white hoboes, and African Americans used the courts, clandestine organizations, community newspapers, public protests, and rebellions, among many other tools of dissent, to upend the efforts to eradicate their voices and cage their bodies and minds. It is through these acts of resistance that *City of Inmates* builds its richly textured and nuanced “rebel archive,” testifying to the “words and deeds of dissidents” (4) in Los Angeles.

City of Inmates probes deeply and broadly, unearthing and retelling familiar stories in Los Angeles’s history of incarceration. Building on the most recent scholarship on Native Californians, the Spanish Borderlands, Chicana/o history, labor history, the multi-racial U.S. West, and criminal and juvenile justice, the book provides a richer and more complex understanding of incarceration in Los Angeles than previously known. Written in a smart and engaging style, Lytle Hernández successfully weaves together seemingly disparate episodes in the city’s past and links them using the thread of settler colonialism to explain the subsequent rise of mass incarceration in the City of Angels.

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