

Rustbelt Abolition Radio Co-producers a María and Alejo Stark caught up with Dr. Kelly Lytle Hernández at a public lecture at the University of Michigan for Hispanic Heritage month, and spoke with her afterwards about her newly released book, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965*.

City of Inmates tells the story of how the City of Angels (Los Angeles) became the territory with the largest incarcerated population in the world—from the Spanish colonization of the territories in the Tongva basin in the 1700’s up until the Watts rebellion of 1965.

Professor Lytle Hernández traces the long arc of conquest and elimination that first begins with the criminalization and attempted genocide of native peoples in the Tongva basin in the late 18 century, passing through the incarceration of white “tramps” and “hobos” in the late 19th century, the detention and deportation of Chinese and then Mexican immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, the persecution and incarceration of revolutionaries such as Ricardo Flores Magón in the midst of the 1910 mexican revolution, and the systematic segregation, policing, and attempted expulsion of black migrants since emancipation.

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# Settler Colonialism & the Struggle for Abolition

*an interview with Kelly Lytle Hernández*



As Chinese immigration surges into the settler west, they also become targets. That becomes a little bit distinct however, because you have the emergence of the federal system of immigration control, that is really created to control Chinese immigration into the United States. Deportation was invented as a tactic and technique of expelling Chinese immigrants from the United States. And that's the story that I tell. As Mexican immigration rises into the settler west, they too become targets of immigration. Again you have the use of immigration control as a means of managing Mexican labor in the region, and exporting Mexican people out of the region.

And of course, as African Americans moved west, there was no vision for African American settlement in the American West. And when blacks push west against the vision of manifest destiny, we, too, became the targets of a brutal carceral campaign. Not just to lock us up, but to remove us from the region. And I would argue that you still see that happen today in the city, in the battles that are happening in Skid Row, the blackest community in all of LA. The settler state is doing its best to purge poor black folks from the city by aggressively policing Skid Row.

**a María:** Are there ways in which you want to appeal to movements to embrace this lens, through which you're looking at incarceration as part of the settler colonial project, when it comes to the question of abolition and the abolitionist horizon?

**Kelly Lytle Hernández:** I think I want us to continue to think seriously within the movement about land and occupation, not just of urban communities – the police force as an occupying force, as James Baldwin told us – but from the origins of that in the occupation of indigenous community's lands that remain occupied to this day. And what does that mean for how we pursue our liberation projects? I just want us to continue that conversation – I don't know what the answer is. But we need to be in open and honest conversation with our indigenous brothers and sisters about our shared destiny in this place.

the land, and tracking it over time that not only is indigenous community removal about land expropriation but it's about occupation and that it's on-going and constant and that it remains today. So that as you have the rise of racial capitalism within the carceral state you also have the dynamics of an on-going occupation that shape the tensions and the objectives of policing and incarceration. Labor exploitation is always at play. So too, is the settler fantasy of eradicating and removing, i.e. eliminating, indigenous and racialized communities.

**a María:** Can you give an overview of the constant threat of criminalization, whether wielded against native landholders or poor white men in homosocial groups of hobos and tramps, up through black families coming after Emancipation – often as you describe, on foot – to California, where they encounter sudden panic in the urgency to draw what W.E.B. Du Bois calls “the color line”; and the codes that are perpetually being written to define and contain each of these groups who defy the reproductive white settler ideal of what Los Angeles is supposed to be?

**Kelly Lytle Hernández:** Well, I think you just outlined it very well, but we can do it together. So what this book does is it traces the major trends in incarceration in Los Angeles – really between the 1840s, 1850s and the 1950s, 1960s. And those trends change over time according to who was regarded as the threat to the settler city. So in the beginning, the principal threat to the settler city are indigenous communities, who are asserting their sovereignty, which they had maintained for thousands of years. And here come these new colonists. And so they were the principal targets of criminalization, largely through public order charges, vagrancy, public drunkenness, disorderly conduct – those kinds of charges. Really loose charges.

That changes, however, by the turn of the 20th century, when you have the rise of corporate capitalism and land consolidation that dislocates large numbers of white men, who begin to migrate across the country. They go to Chicago, they go to New York. Many of them come to the American West, who work in the seasonal and extractive industries. Well the American West is a region of the country that was claimed in the name of white, heterosexual, settler men. And when you had large numbers of white men who were migrating constantly throughout the region, who were engaging in homosocial and homosexual relations, and who simply refused to settle down and buy native land, and comply with the settler ideal, they were the new settler state. And so they became the targets of criminalization and incarceration, again through these very vague vagrancy codes in particular.

This zine is a transcript of an episode from the podcast Rustbelt Abolition Radio. Rustbelt Abolition Radio is an abolitionist media and movement-building project based in Detroit, MI. Each episode broadcasts the voices of those impacted by incarceration and explores ongoing work in the movement to abolish the carceral state (that is, prisons, police, courts as well as racial domination and capitalist exploitation).

The show seeks to strengthen community collaboration and undermine the common sense that putting people in cages and shackling them with electronic devices solves the problems produced by racial capitalism. As such, we aim to expand our ability to struggle against the ways in which the carceral state impacts our daily lives and to create a space where we can both imagine and remake our world anew.

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Cover Image: John Gast ‘American Progress’ 1872. In her book “City Of Inmates,” Hernández writes: “John Gast’s iconic painting ‘American Progress’ powerfully visualized nineteenth-century notions of Manifest Destiny and Anglo-American conquest in the post-1848 western United States. In 1992, Autry Museum of the American West, located in Los Angeles, purchased the original painting, making ‘American Progress’ a centerpiece of its permanent collection.”

## Lecture

Tonight I'm going to be talking about my book *City of Inmates*, but because the thematic of our meeting here is about Latino studies in particular, I really want to hammer home the Latino studies dimensions of this book. By thinking about how when activists and scholars talk about crisis of mass incarceration, we often use the term "black and brown," right? So black and brown communities, black, brown, and native communities are disparately impacted by policing and incarceration. However, historically speaking, we know a lot less about the brown dimension of mass incarceration. And so in many ways what this new book *City of Inmates* is doing is lifting up some of the particularities of how Latinos, namely Mexicans and Mexican Americans, became the targets of policing and incarceration in the United States. And putting that into a conversation with anti-black policing and anti-native policing as well.

Now, I do this by really breaking with the trends and the historiography of mass incarceration, which tend to be black-white, north-south by taking a Western look at the rise of mass incarceration in the United States. And I focused that analysis on Los Angeles in particular, using that as a sort of "Western lens" on the story. Now, why did I choose Los Angeles as the place to tell the story of mass incarceration? Well there's a lot of reasons why, but many of you may know that Los Angeles today has the largest imprisoned population in the United States, and some research shows that it has the largest jail population in the world. So, Los Angeles, "The City of Angels" is in fact the city of inmates. The nation's carceral core. I think for us to understand the dynamics of mass incarceration, it's critically important for us to go deep into the nation's carceral core, i.e. Los Angeles.

Now one of the issues that I ran into, when I first began researching this book about LA, is that the institutions responsible for managing the jail system in LA, namely the Los Angeles Police Department, and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, have destroyed the vast majority of their historical records. So the people who are responsible for cultivating the rise of incarceration in Los Angeles have left us very few traces to tell the story.

But I also quickly learned as I was looking around at all the archives, that the people who fought the rise of incarceration in Los Angeles, stashed more than two centuries of evidence around the city, the country, and in fact the world. I call their records, I quote, "Rebel Archive." They're comprised mostly of broken locks, of secret codes, of handbills, and of love songs. But this rebel archive

boundaries of settler community but refused to perform its social and its sexual reproduction. And these rebels kept a record of it all documenting how settlers fueled the rise of incarceration in Los Angeles, the City of Inmates, the nation's carceral core.

## Interview

**Kelly Lytle Hernández:** My name is Kelly Lytle Hernández and I'm Professor of History and African American studies at UCLA. And I research issues of immigration, race, and the carceral state in the United States. I am also a prison abolitionist. I believe firmly that we can build a world in which we do not punish or suppress one another via carceral systems.

**Alejo Stark:** You just sketched out the centrality of the settler colonial state in the incarceration boom in Los Angeles, which you call *The City of Inmates*, in a very concise way.. One of the key ways certain people within the abolitionist movement have thought about the incarceration boom in the mid-to-late 20th century, is with the framework of racial capitalism. Can you tell us about what racial capitalism means for you in relation to the construction of the City of Inmates, and the ways in which the framework of settler colonialism and its project of elimination shifts –or not– how we think about abolition and carcerality in the United States?

**Kelly Lytle Hernández:** Well, of course, when we talk about racial capitalism, for me, we are talking about Cedric Robinson and his extraordinary work about how capitalism and white supremacy were born and raised together and constitute one another. That you cannot have a capitalist state without a state of racial repression. That that's how profit and exploitation are created.

For me in this book, I want to put the theory of settler colonialism into conversation with what we know about racial capitalism and the rise of mass incarceration. So we have a long and deep literature now documenting, making it indisputably clear that racial capitalism is at play in our jails and our prison systems.

This is best exemplified in the American South in the post-Emancipation period when African-Americans were targeted for incarceration and then put onto chain gangs or leased out to private employers. What I am doing in this book is putting that history into conversation with the dynamics of removing an indigenous community from a land base to get access to the basis of capital accumulation,

for caging, for expelling, mauling, and outright murdering black citizens of the city.

And amid all of this between the caging up of Tongva/Gabrielino communities and the killing of black citizens, the Magonistas, a band of political dissidents from Mexico crossed the U.S. Mexico border, threatening to oust Mexico's president Porfirio Diaz, to end white supremacy and to restore both native and communal land holdings. If these rebels, the Magonistas, were to have succeeded in their uprising, their revolution would not have only upended U.S. capital investments in Mexico, but quite possibly rippled North wreaking havoc for white supremacy and the enduring but always precarious colonial occupation of indigenous lands across the North American continent.

So U.S. and Mexican authorities including the LAPD and the LA sheriff's department hunted these rebels down. They hunted them across the United States, into Canada, into Europe and they found them in Los Angeles. In August of 1907, they kicked in the door of a shanty in the edge of town and arrested the rebellion's leaders. Although sent to solitary in a LA county jail the rebels smuggled out letters and manifestos and plans to raid Mexico. All of this organizing from solitary confinement in the LA county jail helped to prod the outbreak in the Mexican revolution of 1910.

So, in the end what these six stories helped me to see was that the making and meaning of incarceration in the nation's carceral core has always revolved around a project of elimination and disappearance. From the very first days of U.S. rule in the Tongva basin since incarceration has persistently operated has a means of purging, removing, caging, containing, erasing, disappearing, and otherwise eliminating indigenous communities and racially targeted populations.

However, these stories also teach us that those who have been targeted for removal have never disappeared. The criminalized, the policed, the caged, and the kin of the killed have always fought back upending elimination in a variety of ways. Therefore, as much as *City Of Inmates* is about the threat of elimination that winds through the jails, the prisons, the detention centers of Los Angeles. It is also a chronicle of resilience and of unbroken rebellion, with acts of survivance more diverse more resourceful, more allusive than the settlers variegated projects of elimination, indigenous people of the Tongva basin survived carceral elimination and much much more.

Race rebels and unlawful border crossers also constantly upended disappearance as do the many so called queers and deviants who live within the formal racial

survived police destruction by hiding in obscure boxes and in small corners. It also thrives in plain sight, when we know how to look for it. It thunders in testimony before the United States Congress, it's heard in rulings made by the United States Supreme Court, and it steps in two of the most significant uprisings to strike the North American continent in the 20th century. The 1910 Mexican Revolution, and the 1965 Watts Uprising. So I collected every song, every ruling, and really every ember that I could find. And in the end, this rebel archive held more than enough evidence for me to tell six stories, that span two centuries of time about the long rise of incarceration in Los Angeles.

Now the first story in *City of Inmates* documents the birth of imprisonment in Los Angeles, and chronicles the rise of the city's first carceral trend. That is the imprisonment of the region's indigenous communities, which are today variously known as Tongva, Gabrielino, and Kizh nations. Native imprisonment, largely on vagrancy charges and public drunkenness charges, drove the story of incarceration in Los Angeles between the Spanish colonial period and early decades of U.S. rule. Now by 1880, three decades into U.S. rule in Los Angeles, native imprisonment had declined and a second carceral trend began. And this is the most surprising one that I found.

In these years, the imprisonment of poor, white men dominated the story of policing and incarceration in Los Angeles. In fact, between 1880 and 1910, white men comprised nearly 100% of the imprisoned population in the local jail system. So that's the second story that I tell.

The third story that the rebel archive held for me is about the invention of immigrant detention, as a new form of human caging within the U.S. carceral landscape. Created amid the anti-Chinese movement of the 1890s, immigrant detention was then an obscure and contested practice, of indisputably white supremacist origins. It is now one of the most dynamic centers of the U.S. carceral landscape. So that's the third story I tell about where immigrant detention comes from.

The fourth story traces how the imprisonment of Mexicans in the United States first surged in the era of the Mexican Revolution, in particular the six years leading up to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution.

The fifth story that I tell is also largely about Mexican imprisonment in the United States, documenting when, why, how, and with what consequence entering the United States without documentation became a federal crime in the year 1929. And this is a story about how keeping Mexicans out of the United States led to

the rise of Mexican imprisonment within the United States.

Now, the final story that I tell about inmates documents how black incarceration shot up from politically irrelevant and slightly disproportionate in the year 1900, to politically dominant, stunningly disproportionate, and chronically lethal by the 1920s and the 1930s. And it has remained so ever since. So this final story lifts up the relationship between police brutality in black communities, and the rise of incarceration in black communities in particular. Now you may be thinking, how the hell do all of these stories fit together? And that is certainly what I thought when I pulled them from the archives.

These stories, they range from the Spanish colonial period, to the outbreak of the 1965 Watts Rebellion. They address issues from vagrancy laws, to immigration control, to police brutality. And they churn through a variety of different kinds of communities, at different moments in time. But as I pulled one story, and then another and then another from the rebel archive, I slowly began to see how they align on the arc of conquest. In particular, settler colonialism in the American West.

So the United States is a settler state. Settler colonialism is a strain of colonization that is not organized around resource extraction or labor exploitation, resource extraction such as mining and labor exploitation such as chattel slavery, absolutely do occur within settler colonial context and are critical to settler colonial societies. But the principle objective of settler colonial projects is land. On that land, colonists envisioned building a new permanent reproductive and racially exclusive settler society. Indeed, settlers invade in order to stay and reproduce while working to remove, dominate, and ultimately replace indigenous communities— with a racially homogeneous and a sexually reproductive society. In other words, eliminating indigenous peoples and disappearing racialized outsiders as well as non-reproductive sexual deviants, is the basic thrust of social relations and institutional practices in settler societies such as the United States.

Now, the settler variant of conquest and colonization runs particularly strong in the American West. This racial fantasy of Anglo-American men leading nuclear families in an unending enterprise of settling, procreating, and dominating land, life, and society drove the claiming and the development of the region. Now, to do all this the settlers wage war with indigenous communities, adopted anti-miscegenation laws, attempted to ban black migration into the West as well as Chinese and Mexican immigration into the region, and more. And, what I found in the research is that they also invested in incarceration, spurring a phenomenal carceral boom, by broadly caging a caste of native land holders and racialized

outsiders. Various criminalized, policed, and caged as vagrants, as drunks, as hobos, as rebels, as illegal immigrants, and as illegitimate residents trespassing through a white settler society.

By the opening of the 20th century in fact the U.S. West was per-capita the epicenter of incarceration in the United States, and Los Angeles, where settlers were held bent on building what historian Kevin Starr calls “The Aryan City of the Sun”. The settlers slowly built one of the largest systems of human caging that we have ever known. Now, this system of human caging began by criminalizing and caging up the indigenous peoples of the region. In particular, U.S. settlers criminalized native landlessness and leisure, locking up anyone found with liquor and without work. It was an extraordinary project that not only removed native men from the streets and shackled them within an infested jail, but also branded native people as so called “drunks” and vagrants in a region their families had inhabited for millennia. When settlers sovereignty seemed secure, local jailing practices changed.

Beginning in the 1880’s as settlers criminalized and caged thousands upon thousands of poor white men, but especially the white men dislocated from land and work after the U.S. civil war amid the rise of corporate capitalism. These men were as widely disparaged as so called tramps and hobos for migrating constantly, for living in homosocial communities, all male communities, and for loving in homosexual ways. These men either could not, or would not abide by Anglo-American settler norms, such as heading nuclear families, acquiring native land, and permanently setting down. So in Los Angeles and across the American West, authorities caged them up, again making the U.S. West the epicenter of incarceration in the United States.

Then with passage of a series of carcally inflected immigration laws, settlers in LA and across the West and the United States Congress attempted to deny Chinese immigrants the right to enter the settler claimed territory, while later allowing Mexicans to enter the territory to work but not to settle permanently north of the border. Both the invention of immigrant detention in 1896, I should say on the same day that the U.S. supreme court invented Jim Crow through its Plessy vs Ferguson decision, and the criminalization of unlawful entry in 1929. These are both unambiguous attempts to stop humans defined as non-white from making homes in the United States.

At the opening of the 20th century, when large numbers of African Americans citizens defied this vision of manifest destiny by migrating West, the response was swift and brutal as city authorities created the conditions for criminalizing,