State-sanctioned racial violence has helped produce the Los Angeles landscape, which in turn acts malevolently upon Angelenos today. This map reveals how ethnic communities, who in past times faced persecution and even lynch mobs in Los Angeles, suffer today from disproportionate exposure to toxic chemicals. The environmental justice movement seeks to distribute hazardous sites more equally among ethnic groups, but until such an outcome can be achieved, Los Angeles’s landscape will continue to channel old patterns of racial prejudice into a more subtle form of violence against Hispanics and other minorities.

Landscapes of Racial Violence
Laura Pulido

Violence begets violence, while nonviolence begets nonviolence.
—Echo Parenting & Education

In 2008 I moved to north Pasadena. Although a native Angeleno, I was unaware that such beautiful and relatively affordable residential areas existed in Los Angeles. I began taking regular walks, and, being a geographer, naturally studied the landscape. I spent the first couple of years figuring out the trees, the San Gabriel Mountains, the architecture, residential landscaping, and commercial land uses. Once I understood the landscape, I began to ponder its history. For example, my house was built in 1930, but when was the land parceled and sold as a housing tract? How did it transition from someone’s estate to a neighborhood? What rancho was here? In the 1770s it became part of the San Gabriel Mission; before that, it was Tongva land. Was there a village nearby?

My curiosity opened a window onto larger issues of land, power, and conquest. After doing some reading, I realized that the western San Gabriel Valley is key to Los Angeles’s history of conquest and dispossession. It turns out there were numerous Tongva villages in the area. Starting in the late 1700s the Spanish established missions, pueblos, and presidios as a way of claiming California and its
population. After Mexico won independence from Spain and secularized the missions, the land that was intended for the natives was instead divided into large ranchos and granted primarily to Mexican men. How did a relatively small number of Spaniards manage to assume this land? How did Euro-Americans acquire it from the Mexicans in later years?

A close study of these questions will reveal that Los Angeles’s soil is soaked with blood. Peoples’ lands were forcibly taken from them—the Tongva’s by the Spanish, the Californios’ by the Americans. Conquerors asserted control by kidnapping, coercion, rape, assault, murder, cultural destruction, forced labor, and incarceration.

Conquest is a process, not an event. Taking land is not simply a matter of signing a treaty or conducting a massacre. Elaborate ideologies and attendant practices are required before, during, and after. Throughout the Americas white supremacy was the racial ideology that enabled conquest: The original occupants were considered distinct and inferior. Indeed, the language of conquest is infused with this thinking. For example, the Spanish term to distinguish Europeans from indigenous people, *gente de razón*, separates people of reason and those without. Those “without” must be subjugated to ensure that the will of the conquerors became manifest. In turn, indigenous people’s inferior status was used to justify their domination.

There is ample evidence of violence in early Los Angeles. According to one nineteenth-century source, “[D]uring the year 1854 the average of violent deaths in Los Angeles City, was not less than one a day, for the most part Mexicans and Indians, but not infrequently persons in the higher walks of life.” This violence is typically explained as “frontier justice,” which suggests a degree of randomness, perhaps stemming from problematic individuals or a weak or nonexistent judicial system. However, Ken Gonzales-Day demonstrates in *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935*, that the violence was both racially motivated and largely *systemic*. “Frontier justice” as a narrative thus obscures the larger racial dynamics that actively shaped the region.
State-sanctioned racial violence refers to violence that embodies a racial logic and is at least partly systemic—in other words, the violence was executed by the state or the state knew about it and did not stop it. These actions form patterns and collectively illustrate the will of the state. It was *through the state* (whether Spain, Mexico, or the US), that land was acquired and that people of color were killed, kidnapped, coerced into working, mutilated, and incarcerated—*not*, as we’d like to believe, through “bad” people operating in a supposedly aracial world.

In exploring the history of a place, artist Judy Baca considers the “spirit nature” of the land: All living things that pass through a landscape leave a trace—an energy, if you will—that inhabits the land. Just as individual trauma rests in the body, collective trauma rests in the land, even when it’s rarely visible in the everyday landscape, due to our heavy investment in denial.

It is one thing to know the general history of a place, but visiting particular sites and becoming familiar with them offers a more visceral form of knowledge that connects us to our past. There are powerful resonances between the violence of the past and that of the present, and Los Angeles cannot break from its culture of racial violence or reconcile with its native people until we seriously engage with this history.

**Mission San Gabriel and Sexual Violence**

**428 S Mission Drive, San Gabriel**

If there is a ground zero for racial violence in Los Angeles, it is the San Gabriel Mission, established in 1771. Located twelve miles east of downtown, the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel was part of Spain's mission system in Alta California and was the primary vehicle through which Spain captured and converted Indians and coerced them into working. The mission system was a joint undertaking by state and church, involving soldiers as well as priests. Soldiers accompanied the priests to assist in the colonization process, but consistently undermined the church’s efforts by engaging in sexual violence against the native women. Junípero Serra, overseer of the mission system, wrote, “this mission [San Gabriel] gives me the greatest cause
for anxiety; the secular arm down there was guilty of the most heinous crimes, killing the men to take their wives.” In October 1771, for example, a group of Indians attacked soldiers working on the mission. Father Francisco Palóu attributed the attack to “a soldier [who] had raped an Indian girl from the rancheria.” In some villages women were hidden, but soldiers would beat the men to force them to reveal their whereabouts. The Tongva required the raped women to undergo a purification process and any resulting offspring were strangled and buried. Eventually the priests discovered the infanticide and added yet another layer of violence to this escalating cycle. The mission administrator, Padre Salvadea, did not distinguish between miscarriages and infanticide, and, according to Hugo Reid, an early Angeleno who researched the Tongva, he imposed the following punishment on all women with dead babies: “The penalty inflicted was, shaving the head, flogging for fifteen subsequent days, iron on the feet for three months, and having to appear every Sunday in church...with a hideous painted wooden child in her arms!”

Rape was not the official policy of either the Spanish crown or the Catholic Church. Mission priests understood that sexual violence was a major impediment to conversion; it made Indians abhor the soldiers and avoid the missions. Indeed, priests pressured government officials to control the behavior of the soldiers. According to Sherburne Cook, “[D]isciplinary measures were taken in 1777 [against]...‘those who go by night to the nearby villages for the purpose of raping the native women.’” Laws were passed, policies adopted, but the sexual violence continued.

Feminist scholars such as Andrea Smith and Antonia Castañeda argue that rape is a fundamental part of the colonization process, as it powerfully subjugates entire communities. The Spanish believed that Indian women, particularly non-Christians, were racially inferior, which facilitated the justification of the assaults. The original mission was relocated approximately five miles west in 1775. Portions of the mission complex still stand, as both a tourist destination and a functioning parish. Outside the church there is a sign inviting tourists to the gift shop. What exactly are we commemorating? In addition to the rapes, Indians were beaten, forced to work, and 6,000 are buried here (most died from disease). Such a
casual approach to tourism is only possible by overlooking the past. We choose to remember this history by way of a bucolic landscape—eroding buildings, palm trees, a statue of Junípero Serra courtesy of the Daughters of the American Revolution—but where are the voices of the women and babies that haunt this place?

**La Zanja Madre and Unfree Labor**

**125 Paseo de la Plaza, Los Angeles**

As an undergraduate I learned that California Indians died out after conquest because they were not accustomed to regimented work. What such a narrative flagrantly overlooked, however, is the fact that Indians built Los Angeles’s early infrastructure, including the missions, ranchos, and public spaces. One early writer explained their involvement in the building of the mission: “A sufficient number of neophytes having been secured[,] active work was commenced. Ground was cleared...adobes made; timber cut and hauled; and the mission buildings erected.”

Although Indians toiled primarily in the fields, they did all manner of work, including domestic service, crafts, ranching, and message-running. Chattel slavery did not exist in Alta California, although the life of the Mission Indians has been described as a form of serfdom or de facto slavery. In 1834 the missions were secularized and church lands were transferred to individuals. Indian labor remained essential: “These same Indians built all the houses in the country, and planted all the fields and vineyards.”

Why were the Indians willing to do such work? Some were eventually driven by hunger when their traditional hunting-gathering lifestyle was rendered impossible by the usurpation of their land by Spain and Mexico. Others were coerced into working—through physical force and even by law. Indeed, the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians (1850) codified the numerous ways in which Spanish, Mexicans, and Euro-Americans sought to produce an unwilling workforce in California, what is often called, “unfree labor.” For instance, as historians Michael Magliari and Stacey Smith have shown, both Mexicans and Euro-Americans “adopted” Indian children and compelled them to work. They kidnapped adults and
children. They took prisoners of war. They claimed the rights of debt-peonage. They “leased” convicts. Often, they simply did not pay their workers. In Hugo Reid’s household, for example, “most of the servants assumed that they would stay with the Reids all their lives, working without wages.”

The Zanja Madre in Olvera Street illustrates the practice of convict leasing. Zanjas, or water ditches, were a key part of Los Angeles’s early infrastructure. The Zanja Madre, the main ditch, distributed water to smaller ditches, which then delivered it to individuals for irrigation and domestic use. Such water systems were a hallmark of Hispanic settlements throughout the southwestern US, and, requiring continuous labor, were communally maintained.

Over time, wealthy residents began sending Indians and poor workers to fulfill their maintenance obligations. In 1836, the ayuntamiento (city council) had the city constable “arrest all drunken Indians and compel them to work on [the] zanja.” This practice illustrates how racialized violence works. The state actively produces criminals by rendering illegal certain behaviors, such as loitering, vagrancy, or drunkenness—of course, these behaviors are in part responses to the destruction of the Tongva way of life and homeland. Once these laws are established, local policies are adopted to produce an unpaid, powerless workforce.

Today, a remnant of the Zanja Madre is located in heavily touristed Olvera Street. It is paved with bricks and presented as charming and quaint, but one does not have to dig too deep to understand the purpose and significance of the zanja. Water is the lifeblood of a semi-arid environment and tremendous effort went into securing and dispersing it. The zanja system lasted late into the 1800s, and while many people contributed to it, we cannot overlook the fact that it was built and maintained in part by people who were forced to work often against their will and without fair compensation.

This scenario should not be unfamiliar to Angelenos. The most undesirable work in Los Angeles is still done by nonwhite people with limited legal rights.


**Grand Park and Lynchings**

**Intersection of N Hill Street and northern boundary of Grand Park, Los Angeles**

Los Angeles’s racial hierarchy changed dramatically after the Mexican-American War (1846–48). There was a great deal of chaos in its aftermath, as one set of legal, economic, and cultural systems unevenly replaced another. As part of conquest, Euro-Americans racialized Mexicans as inferior, depicting them as dirty, lazy, racial mongrels. Indeed, the term “greaser” was introduced at this time. In keeping with Manifest Destiny, many whites saw the US takeover as inevitable and just: They reasoned that they were better equipped to make the land productive. Not surprisingly, Mexicans resented and resisted the new racial order, and tremendous violence ensued, including the lynching of Mexicans.

Gonzales-Day found that out of 352 lynchings in California from 1850–1935, 210 (59.6 percent) of the victims were people of color. Forty-five took place in Los Angeles of which 36 were nonwhite (80 percent). Of these 36 lynchings, 19 were Mexicans, 15 were Chinese, and 2 were Indians. The Chinese lynchings all occurred during the Chinese Massacre of 1871. While anti-Chinese sentiment was intense, violence was not an ongoing pattern: It culminated in a single, horrific event. By contrast, the lynching of Mexicans was a more common feature of Los Angeles life.

Upon the conclusion of the war banditry was widespread. Among Mexicans, this was partly a response to rapid impoverishment, but banditry also functioned as a form of resistance. Numerous Mexican lynchings involved cases where the public employed “popular justice” against Mexican bandits without a trial. That this happened overwhelmingly to Mexicans was not accidental, but represents general attitudes towards Mexicans and the state’s inability/refusal to ensure due process for them.

This particular site was the city’s first jail, established in 1853. In November 1858, Pancho Daniel was lynched on a beam in the jailyard. Daniel had been a leader, along with Juan Flores, of a group of bandits who killed a sheriff in San Juan Capistrano in 1857. The murder triggered a massive hunt for Flores and Daniel. Fifty-two Latino men were arrested, and numerous Mexicans, some with no
connection to the crime, were lynched. Daniel eluded the authorities for some time but was eventually caught and imprisoned. A change of venue to Santa Barbara was granted, but a group of residents opposed due process. They demanded the keys from the jailer, took the prisoner out, and hanged him. The inquest concluded that the “deceased came to his death from strangulation, by a crowd of persons to the jury unknown.”

While there is no trace of the jail today, the presence of the justice system can still be seen and felt. Decades ago the area was concretized and today it is surrounded by a metro stop, and numerous public buildings. In 2012 the city built Grand Park over the former site of the jail itself. Although urbanization powerfully erases previous land uses, it has not eliminated the past: Among the public buildings found in proximity to the site are the Los Angeles Superior Court and the Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office, contemporary embodiments of the justice system and prosecutorial power.

Men’s Central Jail and Mass Incarceration

441 Bauchet Street, Los Angeles

Welcome to the largest jail on earth. Men’s Central Jail is run by the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department and detains men who have been arrested but not yet convicted. The jail is a key site in the geography of the prison-industrial complex (PIC), a constellation of institutions, policies, and relations that are committed to “solving” social problems via incarceration. Thousands of mostly poor Black and Brown men are placed in cages here, with devastating consequences for their communities.

The jail is known for its severe overcrowding, violence, and illnesses. It was constructed in 1963 and initially designed to house 3,323 inmates. Because of the massive criminalization of the late twentieth century, the facility was expanded and now houses close to 5,000 souls. In Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California, Ruth Wilson Gilmore identifies four “surpluses” that emerged in the 1970s and led to the extraordinary growth of California’s prison
system: A surplus of capital that needed to generate a return; a surplus of rural land that need to be put to “productive” use; a surplus of labor due to economic restructuring; and surplus state capacity, which was generated by neoliberal ideology intent on shrinking the state. The problem of these surpluses was resolved by building a massive prison system. Repeating historic patterns, nonwhite poor people were targeted by a series of new laws accompanied by a cultural and policy shift from rehabilitation to revenge. Collectively, these shifts resulted in mass incarceration.

Mass incarceration is not an inevitable response to social transgressions. Many steps were required to get here: The public had to be convinced that it was not safe, that a certain class of people was preying on it, and that incarceration was our only hope. Because the criminal is not envisioned as white, racism plays a key role in the growth of the PIC. Criminalization is the process of making acts, ways of being, and relationships illegal that were not previously so (recall the drunken Indians). Examples include Proposition 184 (1994), the “three-strikes” law; Proposition 21 (2000), that treats youthful offenders as adults; enhanced sentences for certain offenses; and an entirely new body of law aimed at immigrants since 9/11.

This criminalization disproportionately targets people of color. African American men, who constitute approximately 3 percent of the state’s population, comprise 44 percent of those convicted under “three strikes.” Likewise, Latinas/os, through the criminalization of immigration, are now the single largest ethnic group in federal prisons, despite constituting only 15 percent of the national population. At the same time these new laws and propositions were being adopted, Proposition 209 (1996) was passed, ending affirmative action in California. As paths to the middle class were blocked on the outside, ever more people were locked up in the inside.

The work of abolitionists, the recession of 2008, and California’s budget crisis have all illuminated how expensive—socially and economically—the PIC is. We desperately need to find new ways of addressing social transgressions.

Standing outside the building, you realize that there are thousands of people locked up on the inside; while on the outside, life goes on. All that separates us are
thick walls—and race and class. How many of those who pass the building daily are aware of it and consider the lives of those on the other side of the wall?

**Racial Violence Past, Present, and Future**

The eugenics movement; the Japanese American internment; Repatriation; the Zoot-Suit Riots; the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial; Chief Parker; Watts 1965; Rodney King; MacArthur Park 2006; the Rampart scandal; mass deportations post 9/11—these are all examples of Los Angeles’s history of state-sanctioned racial violence. The city is built on exceptional and everyday human rights violations.

History is essential to recovering this past, but geography provides crucial insights. We begin by conceiving of these sites as *landscapes*—not only in the sense of how a place looks, but also how it is produced. The geographer Don Mitchell has argued that part of landscape’s power is its ability to obscure. Landscapes are deeply layered places encompassing generations of power relations. They are acts of creation, as it takes tremendous power to rearrange the earth. Consider what it took to build the San Gabriel Mission: Each structure and field required enormous will and capacity on the part of the church, state, and workers. Imagine Indians carting the materials needed for bricks *twelve miles* from a quarry in what is now West Covina.

Landscapes are expressions of power, but they are also personal and sensory. They invite us to reformulate our relationship to place and time in intimate ways. We must incorporate sites of state-sanctioned racial violence into a remapping of Los Angeles and consider how these landscapes have changed, remained the same, reverberate in the present, and how we may be connected to them. I am hopeful this intimacy will compel us to reflect on our status as “settlers” who have not only benefitted from racial violence but are also burdened by it in multiple ways, including the violence of today.

It is easy to condemn eighteenth-century Franciscans and believe that we have morally evolved. But a closer look at Men’s Central Jail challenges this assumption: Few of us actually pay attention to what happens in the jail and the way that life is parceled along racial and class lines there. How do we not *see* a building
that occupies an entire block in downtown LA? Part of the answer is the architecture and landscaping, but equally important is the degree to which we distance ourselves ideologically and emotionally from the jail. Because criminalization is racialized and classed, most of us are oblivious to it unless we have an incarcerated loved one. The jail is as emotionally distant and physically invisible as the sites of nineteenth-century lynchings. The fact that we are able to overlook the racial violence that occurs in our front yard suggests that we have not evolved so far.

Where do we go from here? A starting point is becoming aware and intimate with these places. Equally important is to support local efforts seeking to break the cycle of violence in Los Angeles. One example is Echo Parenting & Education, located in Echo Park. Formerly known as the Center for Nonviolent Education and Parenting, Echo, as it is known, encourages people to parent consciously. Simply put, without consciousness we will replicate the parenting of previous generations, which has been all too quick to embrace violence. Echo defines violence broadly as “anything that hurts the heart, mind or body of a child and leads to disconnection and distrust.” Echo’s philosophy is to parent with respect—for oneself and for one’s children. Echo changed its name to reflect its geographical location, but also to build on the metaphor of “echo”: “[W]hen we are kind, that kindness echoes long after we are gone.” And so it is with our children. By raising nonviolent children, we will hopefully provide them with the tools and awareness to address problems through nonviolent means and thus create a new Los Angeles and a new relationship to our history.