

# Hobos in Heaven: Race, Incarceration, and the Rise of Los Angeles, 1880–1910

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*Between 1880 and 1910, the U.S. West was, per capita, the nation's leading site of incarceration. Across the region, poor white men comprised the vast majority of prisoners who lost all civil rights and often were sentenced to chain gangs, rock piles, and road crews building public infrastructure. Focused on Los Angeles, where local elites built one of the nation's largest jail systems, this article excavates a nearly forgotten history of poor white men targeted for incarceration, stripped of civil rights, subjected to forced labor, and systematically marginalized in the U.S. West. It also chronicles how the effort to build an idyllic white settler society drove the phenomenal rise of white male imprisonment at the turn of the twentieth century. In turn, this article unearths a uniquely western tale within the history of race and imprisonment in the United States.*

**Key words:** *Los Angeles, imprisonment, tramps, urban infrastructure, labor, race, class*

In October 1908, Lt. Charles Dixon of the Los Angeles Police Department stood before a clutch of journalists on the yard of the city's newest jail. "Now let the hoboes come; we're ready for them," he bellowed.<sup>1</sup> It was late fall, after all, and the local press had begun publishing warnings that the winter "swarming" would soon begin.<sup>2</sup> Within weeks, thousands of unemployed men would rush into the city when the extractive industries of the U.S. West—mining, agriculture, and logging—reduced operations.<sup>3</sup> In California alone,

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1. "Hobos' Home Awaits Them," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 25, 1908.

2. "A Tramp's Insolence: Shall Vags be Permitted to Take the Town," in *ibid.*, Sept. 16, 1882; "An Influx of Vagrants: Insufferable Insolence and Persistency of the Guild," in *ibid.*, Sept. 30, 1882.

3. For discussions of itinerant labor in the West, see Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Sexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, 2003), 1–86; Melvin Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago, 1969), 1–25; Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblers: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the U.S. West, 1905–1930* (Corvallis, Ore., 2001); Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley, 2011), 53–89; Clark C. Spence,

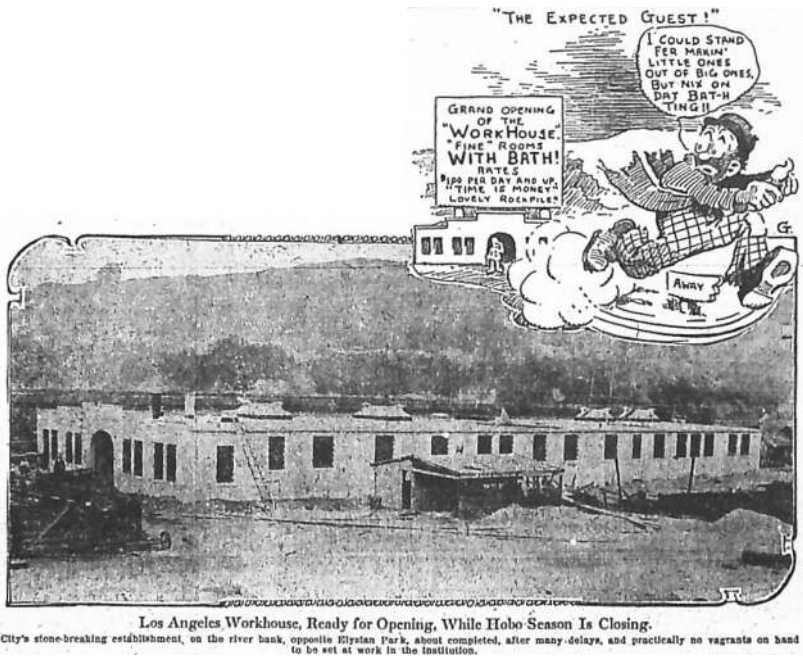


Figure 1. "Stockade Ready, No Occupants," *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1908.

100,000 of the state's 150,000 itinerant workers would be let go for the winter. Along with the tens of thousands of the region's other seasonally unemployed, California's itinerant workers would soon head to towns and cities across the West for a term of rest before the hard work of spring returned. Sunny Southern California—Los Angeles, in particular—was a favorite destination of the West's so-called "winter tourists." From November to March, they comprised more than 7 percent of the total city population. Cramping into the streets, parks, bars, brothels, and cheap rooming houses of the city's central core, many among the region's young itinerant lumbermen liked to joke

"Knights of the Tie and Rail—Tramps and Hoboes in the West," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 11 (1971), 5–19; Richard Steven Street, *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769–1913* (Palo Alto, Calif., 2004), 161–234; Gregory Woiro, *In the Floating Army: F. C. Mills on Itinerant Life in California, 1914* (Urbana, Ill., 1992); Woiro, "Men on the Road: Early Twentieth-Century Surveys of Itinerant Labor in California," *California History*, 70 (1991), 192–205; and Mark Wyman, *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* (New York, 2010).

that they would spend their winters investing in “houses and lots”—houses of prostitution and lots of whiskey.<sup>4</sup>

In Los Angeles, a city aggressively promoted as an idyllic settlement of middle-class white families, the winter lifestyle of these men upset local elites and city authorities. In part, the arrival of the West’s multiracial and multiethnic workforce enlarged the city’s small Native, Mexican, Asian, and African American populations. To limit and manage the time that non-white itinerants spent in the city, authorities marshaled social controls ranging from federal immigration restrictions to local patterns of racial segregation.<sup>5</sup> However, between 1880 and 1910, white men—native-born Anglo Americans or Western European immigrants—comprised a substantial share of the region’s itinerant workforce.<sup>6</sup> As itinerant laborers, they too were marginal members of the West’s emerging industrial economy, but, as white men in the U.S. West, they migrated in a region claimed in their name by Manifest Destiny and wars of conquest.<sup>7</sup> If they did not work, attend school, go to church, or get

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4. Carleton Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (Seattle, 1972), 80–81. For more on winter cultures of itinerant workers in the West, see Richard Steven Street, “Tattered Shirts and Ragged Pants: Accommodation, Protest, and the Coarse Culture of California Wheat Harvesters and Threshers, 1866–1900,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 67 (1998), 573–608.

5. Rick Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898–1946* (New York, 2011); Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Berkeley, 1986); Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley, 2005); Roberta Greenwood, *Down by the Station: Los Angeles Chinatown, 1880–1933* (Los Angeles, 1996); Richard Griswold de Castillo, *Los Angeles Barrio, 1850–1890: A Social History* (Berkeley, 1979); Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley, 1998); William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley, 2005); Phoebe Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley, 2006); Stephanie Lewthwaite, *Race, Place and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles* (Tucson, 2009); Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Berkeley, 2006); George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1993).

6. Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London, 2001); Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880–1930* (Chicago, 2003); Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down and Out, on the Road: The Homeless in American History* (New York, 2001); Eric Monkkonen, *Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790–1935* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1984); Todd de Pastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago, 2003); Richard Wormser, *Hoboes: Wandering in America, 1870–1940* (New York, 1994).

7. Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, 1994); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and*

married, which they did not, there were relatively few social tools available to manage such men in Los Angeles. Therefore, elites and authorities in Los Angeles invested in imprisonment, building one of the nation's largest jail systems at the turn of the twentieth century and filling it beyond capacity with poor white men during the winter months. As convicts, the men labored on the chain gang. This article explores how white men came to fill the jails of Los Angeles and, as convicts, pave the streets of the city.

The rise of white male imprisonment and convict labor in Los Angeles was fueled by the "tramp panic" that raged across the country between the 1870s and 1910s, when the emergence of national markets and corporate capitalism displaced hundreds of thousands of white men from farm life and artisan careers. In search of work, underemployed white men migrated across the urbanizing North and industrializing West, providing a key source of casual labor for seasonal industries. But in an era when many white social leaders fiercely believed that the bedrock of U.S. society was the enfranchised white male citizen who held a steady job, owned a home, and headed a nuclear family, white male itinerancy prompted a shock wave of panic.<sup>8</sup> Their begging on the streets smacked of dependency, undermining the free labor ideal in post-Civil War America, while their homo-social and homosexual activities, lack of shelter, and estrangement from family life trampled on treasured notions of home, community, and gender in the industrial era. Further, as migrants, white male itinerants were rarely able to fulfill various state and county residency requirements to vote. "Politically we are nonentities . . . legally we are dead," explained an out-of-work itinerant hanging about the streets of San Francisco.<sup>9</sup>

Worried about the future of Anglo America, some of the nation's earliest sociologists, working in the emerging field of "trampology,"

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*Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1990); "Who are Vagrants? And shall they be Permitted to Take Possession of the Town?" *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 13, 1885.

8. For discussions of tramping as a social threat, see Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 1–20; Kusmer, *Down and Out, on the Road*; Paul T. Ringenbach, *Tramps and Reformers, 1873–1916: The Discovery of Unemployment in New York* (Westport, Conn., 1973), 4–5, 16–81; Amy Dru Stanley, "Beggars Can't Be Choosers: Compulsion and Contract in Postbellum America," *Journal of American History*, 78 (1992), 1265–1293.

9. P. A. Speek, "Report on the Interviews with Unemployed Migratory Workers in the Streets and Public Parks of San Francisco," Oct. 4, 1914, in Reel 4, *U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, 1912–1915*.

harshly criticized white male itinerants. They disparaged them as “vicious tramps” and “worthless hobos” for their failure to find social stability and economic security in the industrializing economy.<sup>10</sup> But, asked the trampologists, did the rise of mass white male itinerancy indicate the emergence of something much more troubling than individual failings? Did tramping perhaps reveal the development of a “degenerate,” “incorrigible,” “irreclaimable,” and “utterly depraved” strain of Anglo American men unfit to thrive in industrial America? Stoking a national discourse that cast itinerant white men as a racial threat to the nation’s progress and vigor, trampologists warned that, if left uncontained, “the tramp menace” could unhinge Anglo America from within.<sup>11</sup> As Francis Wayland III, the dean of the Yale Law School, famously advised the nation’s social welfare workers, tramping was an “evil . . . of enormous magnitude, and unless speedily arrested, threatens the very life of society.”<sup>12</sup>

In Los Angeles, city elites and authorities provided no quarter for the nation’s scorned “tramps” and “hobos.” The strident Anglo settler ethos that drove the rise of the city forbade concession to the surge of white men without work, women, or homes within the city’s central core each winter. Using incarceration to literally cage the seasonal “tramp menace,” the city’s commercial and civic elite steered one of the nation’s most dramatic booms in incarceration at the turn of the twentieth century. White men arrested mostly on misdemeanor charges of public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy during winter campaigns comprised more than 90 percent of inmates in Los Angeles.<sup>13</sup> Not every white man arrested on

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10. For studies of trampologists and the rise of trampology, see Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, and Woirol, *In the Floating Army*. A selection of trampologist publications include, Josiah Flynt, *Tramping with the Tramps: Sketches and Studies of Vagabond Life* (New York, 1899); Parker, *The Casual Laborer*; Walter Wykoff, *The Workers: An Experiment in Reality, the West* (New York, 1898).

11. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad* (New York, 2001). For studies focused on whiteness and white supremacy in California, see Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*; Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?*; Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971); and Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley, 2005).

12. Francis Wayland, “The Tramp Question,” *Conference of Board of Public Charities* (1877).

13. These three charges—public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy—consistently dominated jail commitments at the turn of the twentieth century. Of course

public order charges was an itinerant. Underemployed city residents were also caught in the seasonal sweeps, but the tramp panic framed their encounters with the jails of Los Angeles. Upon conviction, local judges punitively sentenced them to hard labor. Under the supervision of overseers and armed guards, convict laborers in Los Angeles cut key thoroughfares, macadamized roads, raised sidewalks, picked up rubbish, dug holes, filled holes, fixed bridges, and beautified parks. By 1910, Los Angeles was incarcerating more people each year than any other community of its size in the country and convict labor was inscribed in the landscape of the city.<sup>14</sup>

The phenomenal rise of white male incarceration and convict labor in Los Angeles is an untold story. Historians of Los Angeles have danced around its edges when examining the city's "wildly high" rate of drunk arrests and chronicling the police department's unapologetic attacks upon workers in the city's central core, but their stories halt at the jail door.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, labor historians have often noted the frequent arrest and chain gang convictions of migrant workers throughout the U.S. West—particularly of those with radical political views—and chronicled other unfree labor systems in the region, but they too have stopped short of offering focused analyses of incarceration.<sup>16</sup> Scholars of the U.S. West have

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some cities aggressively policed public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy while others were more lenient. Therefore, the object of study to be lifted from incarceration rates is not a measure of criminal activity but rather a reflection of law enforcement practices and priorities.

14. Bureau of the Census, Table 1, "Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents," in *Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents, Bulletin 121* (Washington, D.C., 1913), 8–113. Comparison cities are drawn from U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Population of the Largest 100 Urban Places: 1910."

15. Eric Monkkonen, "Toward an Understanding of Urbanization: Drunk Arrests in Los Angeles," *Pacific Historical Review*, 50 (1981), 234–244; AnneMarie Kooistra, "Angels for Sale: The History of Prostitution in Los Angeles, 1880–1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 2003); Errol Wayne Stevens, *Radical L.A.: From Coxey's Army to the Watts Riots, 1894–1965* (Norman, Okla., 2009); Grace H. Stimson, *The Rise of the Labor Movement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 1955); Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 2007); Gerald Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles: Reform and Professionalization* (New York, 1993).

16. See Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 171–180; Hall, *Harvest Wobblies*; Gerald F. W. Ronning, "I Belong in this World: Native Americanisms and the Western Industrial Workers of the World, 1905–1917" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, 2002); Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*; and Robert L. Tyler, *Rebel of the Woods: The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene, Ore., 1967), 131. For discussions of unfree labor in the U.S. West, see Howard Lamar, "From Bondage to Contract: Ethnic Labor in the U.S. West, 1600–1890," in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the*

**TABLE 1. Total Number of Commitments and Rates of Incarceration for Cities of Relative Size to Los Angeles (1910)**

<i>City</i>	<i>Total City Population</i>	<i>Total Committed</i>	<i>Total Male Committed</i>	<i>Total Female Committed</i>	<i>Total White Committed</i>	<i>Total Colored Committed</i>	<i>Rate of Incarceration per 100,000 population</i>
San Francisco	416,912	1,782	1,488	294	1,706	76	427.3
Milwaukee, Wisc.	373,857	2,999	2,832	167	2,912	87	801.9
Cincinnati City, Ohio	363,591	2,991	2,337	654	2,158	833	821.7
Newark City, N.J.	347,469	1,576	1,318	258	1,407	169	454.2
New Orleans	339,075	1,996	1,804	192	672	1,324	588.8
Washington, D.C.	331,069	1,250	1,135	115	216	1,034	377.6
<b>Los Angeles</b>	<b>319,198</b>	<b>5,434</b>	<b>5,332</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>5,422</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1703.4</b>
Minneapolis	301,408	4,260	4,011	249	4,122	138	1415.3
Jersey City, N.J.	267,779	739	612	127	708	31	275.7
Kansas City, Mo.	248,381	3,620	2,998	562	2,212	1,408	1459.7

*Table 1.* "Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents," in Bureau of the Census, *Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents, Bulletin 121* (Washington, D.C., 1913), 8-113. Comparison cities are drawn from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population of the Largest 100 Urban Places: 1910." Data for each city include a combined total for all commitments made at both city and county jails. Not included in table is the Washington Asylum because most inmates were indigent patients rather than convicted misdemeanants. Note that total number of commitments to Los Angeles City Jail reported to the U.S. Census by the Los Angeles Police Department is significantly lower than total arrests reported in the Los Angeles Police Department's Annual Report. The arrest rate in Los Angeles, in other words, is significantly higher than what was reported to the census.

closely examined the region's varied regimes of legal exclusion, political marginalization, and spatial gatekeeping, especially along the axes of race, gender, ethnicity, and immigration status. Although incarceration constitutes a legal regime that strips individuals of civil and political rights, limits their mobility, and exposes convicted persons to the only legal form of forced labor in post-Civil War America, it remains a minor topic of exclusion in western history.<sup>17</sup> Although historians of incarceration would logically be the ones to pick up where western, local, and labor historians have left off, the U.S. West largely remains an untapped frontier for historians of crime and punishment.<sup>18</sup>

Without a substantive body of work exploring the history of imprisonment in the U.S. West, the region's own unique experiences

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*Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), 293–324; Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930* (New York, 2000); Michael Magliari, “Free Soil, Unfree Labor: Cave Courts and the Binding of Indian Workers in California, 1850–1867,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 73 (2004), 349–389; Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 39–59, 89–134; Stacey L. Smith, “Remaking Slavery in a Free State: Masters and Slaves in Gold Rush California,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 80 (2011), 28–63; and Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle Over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2013).

17. For discussions of racial regimes in the U.S. West, see Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J., 2003); Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003); Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*; Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the West, 1528–1990* (New York, 1998); and Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941–1978* (Berkeley, 2010).

18. Most historical work on incarceration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focuses on New York and Pennsylvania or the U.S. South, namely Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana. Work on prisons in the U.S. West prior to World War II includes Ethan Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression: Everyday Life in Texas and California State Prisons* (New York, 2012); Shelley Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness: The California State Prison System, 1851–1944* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1991); Anne M. Butler, “Still in Chains: Black Women in Western Prisons, 1865–1910,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 20 (1989), 18–35; Butler, *Gendered Justice in the U.S. West: Women Prisoners in Men's Penitentiaries* (Urbana, Ill., 1999); Miroslava Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System* (Berkeley, 2012); Judith R. Johnson, *The Penitentiaries in Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah from 1900 to 1980* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1997); and Elinor Myers McGinn, *At Hard Labor: Inmate Labor at the Colorado State Penitentiary, 1871–1940* (New York, 1993). Works addressing incarceration in the postwar West include Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1994); Volker Janssen, “When the ‘Jungle’ Met the Forest: Public Work, Civil Defense, and Prison Camps in Postwar California,” *Journal of American History*, 96 (2009), 702–726; and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, 2007).



with and contributions to the rise of incarceration as a story of race and inequity is often overshadowed by narratives of the northern and southern states. In particular, as Khalil Muhammad has argued, historians tend to hold the U.S. South as the analytical model for the rise of imprisonment as a site of racial inequity in the post-Civil War era.<sup>19</sup> There, as regional elites and authorities reinvented the political economy of capitalism and white supremacy, black incarceration rose from the ashes of emancipation. As inmates, African Americans were forced to labor within the shadows of the Thirteenth Amendment, which prohibited involuntary servitude “except as a punishment for crime.” Further, in many states, convicted felons were legally defined as “civilly dead,” denied all rights of contract, property, and franchise.<sup>20</sup> Civil death, explains Rebecca McLennan, constructed felons as a “juridical class separate and unequal to other citizens.”<sup>21</sup> As such, with the emergence of African American incarceration in the postwar South, the peculiar provisions of criminal justice in the United States gutted key dimensions of emancipation and citizenship for African American men and women across the region.<sup>22</sup> To be clear, as

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19. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, “Where Did All the White Criminals Go?: Reconfiguring Race and Crime on the Road to Mass Incarceration,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 13 (2011), 75–76. Exceptions include works that focus on the urban North such as Kali Gross, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910* (Durham, N.C., 2006); Cheryl Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: Urban Reform, Criminal Justice, and African American Women in New York, 1890–1935* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010); and Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

20. “Civil Death: Capacity of a Convict to Contract,” *California Law Review*, 2 (1914), 401–402. “Civil Status of Convicts,” *Columbia Law Review*, 14 (1914), 592–594; Nathaniel Cantor, “The Prisoner and the Law,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 157 (Sept. 1931), 23–32; Alec Ewald, “‘Civil Death’: The Ideological Paradox of Criminal Disenfranchisement Law in the United States,” *Wisconsin Law Review*, 5 (2002), 1045–1138; M. W. S., “Constitutional Rights of Prisoners: The Developing Law,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 110 (1962), 985–1008; Pippa Holloway, *Living in Infamy: Felon Disenfranchisement and the History of American Citizenship* (New York, 2014); and Harry David Saunders, “Civil Death—A New Look at an Ancient Doctrine,” *William and Mary Law Review*, 11 (1970), 988–1003.

21. Rebecca McLennan, “The Convict’s Two Lives: Civil and Natural Death in the American Prison,” in David Garland, Randall McGowen, and Michael Meranze, eds., *America’s Death Penalty: Between Past and Present* (New York, 2011), 191–219.

22. Examples of this important scholarship include Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York, 2008); Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and Their World: Alabama, 1865–1900* (Charlottesville, Va., 2000); Sarah Haley, “Engendering Captivity: Black Women and Convict Labor in Georgia, 1865–1938” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2010); Talitha LeFlouria, “The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Cuts Cordwood: Exploring Black Women’s

TABLE 2. Incarceration Rates per 1,000,000 Population by Region

REGION	1880	1890	1904	1910
North Atlantic	1,169	1,624	3,380	6,150
South Atlantic	1,043	1,288	960	7,720
North Central	862	888	1,380	4,090
South Central	1,250	1,466	660	3,720
Western	2,199	2,221	3,110	9,920

Table 2. For 1880 and 1890, see incarceration rates per 1,000,000 population provided in Frederick H. Wines, "Report on Crime, Pauperism, and Benevolence in the United States," *Eleventh Census of the United States* (1890), 4 (Washington, D.C., 1896), 127. For 1904, see incarceration rates per 100,000 population provided in Bureau of the Census, Table XIII—"Number and Ratio of Prisoners Committed during 1904, classified by sex, for states and territories," in *Report on Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents in Institutions: 1904* (Washington, D.C. 1907), 29; for the sake of consistency, these are now expressed per 1,000,000. For 1910 ratios calculated by author per 1,000,000 population, see Table 1 above. See Table 3 for note on 1910 data.

The regions are defined as follows: NORTH ATLANTIC: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania; SOUTH ATLANTIC: Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida; NORTH CENTRAL: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas; SOUTH CENTRAL: Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Indian Territory, Oklahoma, Arkansas; WESTERN: Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California.

histories of brutality and misery, there is no good comparison to be made between tramp incarceration in the U.S. West and what Douglas Blackmon has recently described as "slavery by another name" in the U.S. South. But the U.S. West has its own story to tell.

The U.S. West was, per capita, the nation's leading site of incarceration between 1880 and 1910. In these years, Arizona, Nevada, Montana, and California often maintained higher rates of incarceration than New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, where anti-tramp campaigns also raged, and more than the southern states of

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Lives in Georgia's Convict Camps, 1865–1917," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 8 (2011), 47–63; Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York, 1996); Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866–1928* (Columbia, S.C., 1996); David Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York, 1996); Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire* (New York, 2010); Karin Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion: The Battle against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871–1896* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998).

**TABLE 3. Incarceration Rate per 1,000,000 Population by State in 1880, 1890, 1904, and 1910**

1880		1890	
<i>State</i>	<i>Incarceration Rate</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Incarceration Rate</i>
Wyoming	3,560	Arizona	4,193
Nevada	3,196	Nevada	3,322
California	3,061	Montana	3,269
District of Columbia	2,145	California	2,813
Massachusetts	2,006	Massachusetts	2,335
Alabama	1,972	Colorado	2,188
Texas	1,967	District of Columbia	2,153
Colorado	1,955	Texas	2,123
Montana	1,941	New York	1,912
Idaho	1,857	Idaho	1,778
New York	1,717	Florida	1,704
Arizona	1,657	New Jersey	1,699
New Jersey	1,391	Alabama	1,664
Tennessee	1,362	Rhode Island	1,621
Maryland	1,347	Georgia	1,599
Oregon	1,333	Maryland	1,441

*Table 3.* Incarceration rates for 1910 are much higher than previous years because that year the U.S. Census Bureau included those incarcerated for failure or inability to pay fines for misdemeanor offenses within the total number of persons committed to jails and prisons. As the Bureau explained, 62 percent of all jail commitments made during 1910 were for non-payment of fines. Commitments for non-payment of fines had not been included in previous years' data, which resulted in significantly lower incarceration rates across the country between 1880 and 1904. See Census Bureau, *Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents: 1910*, 41. For the extraordinarily high rate of incarceration in Arizona in 1910, 95 percent of the commitments were made to city and county jails, mostly along the Mexican border.

Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana, where the incarceration of African Americans was unfolding rapidly.

The per capita inmate bulge in western states reflected the rise of white male incarceration. In 1880, native-born or foreign-born whites comprised no less than 80 percent of inmates across the U.S.

Table 3. Continued

1904		1910*	
State	Incarceration Rate	State	Incarceration Rate
Nevada	5,390	Arizona	34,935
California	5,230	District of Columbia	17,021
Massachusetts	4,820	Florida	13,128
New Jersey	4,200	Nevada	11,413
New York	3,830	Montana	10,866
Arizona	3,500	Delaware	10,190
Montana	3,230	Washington	9,826
Rhode Island	2,800	Oregon	9,706
Utah	2,670	Massachusetts	9,496
Maine	2,550	Connecticut	7,796
Michigan	2,450	Maryland	7,345
New Hampshire	2,400	Maine	7,204
Pennsylvania	2,180	Pennsylvania	7,122
Iowa	2,140	California	7,042
Washington	2,130	Colorado	6,361
Ohio	1,800	Kentucky	6,285

*Table 3, continued.* For 1880 and 1890, see incarceration rates per 1,000,000 population provided in Frederick H. Wines, "Report on Crime, Pauperism, and Benevolence in the United States," *Eleventh Census of the United States (1890)* (15 vols., Washington, D.C., 1896), 4: 127. For 1904, see incarceration rates per 100,000 population provided in Bureau of the Census, Table XIII—"Number and Ratio of Prisoners Committed during 1904, classified by sex, for states and territories," in *Report on Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents in Institutions: 1904* (Washington, D.C., 1907), 29. 1910 incarceration rate per 1,000,000 population calculated by author.

West.<sup>23</sup> By 1890, 88 percent of all inmates in the West were white, most of whom were common laborers and approximately one-half of whom were unemployed at the time of arrest. Although the rate

23. "Table CXV, The Prisoners of the United States, 1850–1880, by States and Territories, Etc . . . Also Ratio of Prisoners to 1,000,000 of Population at Each Census," in *1880 Report on the Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes of the United States as Returned at the Tenth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1888), 480–483.

of white incarceration in the West generally lingered below the region's total white population (95 percent), white male incarceration was on the rise.<sup>24</sup> By 1904, white men made up 92 percent of all inmates in the West.<sup>25</sup> In 1910, a year when white men comprised 62 percent of all inmates across the country, 80 percent of inmates in the mid-Atlantic states of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, and less than 35 percent of inmates in southern states, white men comprised 89 percent of all inmates across the West.<sup>26</sup> The U.S. West, in other words, was both a leading site of incarceration in the United States and home to one of the nation's most racially concentrated inmate populations.

As prisoners, the West's largely white male inmate population was subject to the structural exclusions of imprisonment. California, for example, was a civil death and convict labor state. Convicted misdemeanants occupied a less severely marginal political status than felons did, but they too were marked as civil outsiders by the penalty of forced labor embedded within the Thirteenth Amendment. Further, convicts lost all civil rights during their term of incarceration.<sup>27</sup> Imprisonment, therefore, constituted a unique system capable of marginalizing white men in the U.S. West as the project of Anglo American settlement swept across the region at the turn of the century.

Despite the West's infamous gunfighter culture and high homicide rate, the rise of white male incarceration in the region did not

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24. Frederick H. Wines, "Report on Crime, Pauperism, and Benevolence in the United States," *Eleventh Census of the United States (1890)* (15 vols., Washington, D.C., 1896), 4: 129. For data on employment status, see *ibid.*, 183. For total white population in the western region, see *1890 Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census* (Washington, D.C., 1895), xc.

25. For the regional ratios of prisoners, see Table II: Number and Ratio of Prisoners Enumerated on State of Census for States and Territories: 1904 and 1890, "Report on Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents in Institutions: 1904," in *Special Report: Bureau of the Census* (Washington, D.C., 1907), 14. For male arrest rates by state and region in 1904, see Table XIII: Number and Ratio of Prisoners Committed during 1904, classified by sex, for states and territories, in "Report on Delinquents in Institutions: 1904," in *Special Report: Bureau of the Census* (Washington, D.C., 1907), 29. For percentage of white inmates committed during 1904, see Table XIX: Distribution by Sex, Color, Race, and Nativity of Prisoners Committed during 1904, for main Geographic Divisions, "Report on Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents in Institutions: 1904," 38.

26. Data compiled from Wm. J. Harris, "Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents: 1910," in *Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents, Bulletin 121*, 113–115.

27. Sec. 1613/1614, California Penal Code (1872). See also Sec. 673, in *ibid.*, as amended 1905.

reflect felony prosecutions for violent crime but rather the phenomenon of imprisonment on public order misdemeanor charges.<sup>28</sup> The prevalence of this type of incarceration was not unique to the West. Across the country, arrests on public order charges, led by public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy, created the majority of prisoners at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1904, for example, these three charges constituted nearly 60 percent of all commitments to the nation's city and county jails.<sup>29</sup>

With public order charges driving arrests, the overwhelming majority of prisoners spent their term of incarceration in a local jail rather than state or federal prison.<sup>30</sup> In 1910, for example, when the U.S. Census Bureau took an unusually comprehensive tally of the total number of persons committed to U.S. prisons, jails, and workhouses, 94.2 percent of all commitments were made to local jails and workhouses; just 4.6 percent were made to state and federal prisons.<sup>31</sup>

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28. For discussions of western violence and gunfighter culture, see Richard Slotkin, *Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, Okla., 1998); Eric H. Monkkonen, "Homicide in Los Angeles, 1827–2002," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 36 (2005), 167–183; and Monkkonen, "Western Homicide: The Case of Los Angeles, 1830–1870," *Pacific Historical Review*, 74 (2005), 603–617. For discussions of tramping, vagrancy acts, and misdemeanor enforcement in the West in particular, see Lawrence Friedman and Robert V. Percival, *The Roots of Justice: Crime and Punishment in Alameda County, California, 1870–1910* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1981), 80–104; Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 53–89; Ahmed White, "A Different Kind of Labor Law: Vagrancy Law and the Regulation of Harvest Labor, 1913–1924," *University of Colorado Law Review*, 75 (2004), 668–743; Wyman, *Hoboes*, 37–41. For additional discussions of tramping and local law enforcement, see Jeffrey S. Adler, "A Historical Analysis of the Law of Vagrancy," *Criminology*, 27 (1989), 209–229; Sidney L. Harring, "Class Conflict and the Suppression of Tramps in Buffalo, 1892–1894," *Law and Society Review*, 11 (1977), 873–911; Eric Monkkonen, *The Dangerous Class: Crime and Poverty in Columbus, Ohio, 1860–1885* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); Stanley, "Beggars Can't Be Choosers"; Lynne M. Adrian and Joan E. Crowley, "Hoboes and Homeboys: The Demography of Misdemeanor Convictions in the Allegheny County Jail, 1892–1923," *Journal of Social History*, 25 (1991), 345–371.

29. "Report on Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents in Institutions (1904)," 31.

30. Whereas prisons are state and federal institutions that hold convicted offenders, namely those sentenced to serve more than one year on felony offenses, jails are local institutions that both hold persons for trial on felony and misdemeanor charges and detain convicted misdemeanants for sentences of one year or less.

31. "Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents: 1910, General the Tables," 12–14. What is unique about the 1910 prisoner census is that it includes the total number of persons committed for non-payment of fine, the majority of whom served time for failure to pay for charges of drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy. "Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents," *Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents, Bulletin 121*, 22.

The predominance of jails within the nation's archipelago of incarceration positions community studies as a crucial framework for exploring the rise of imprisonment in the United States.<sup>32</sup> Focused on Los Angeles, this article lifts up a little-known tale of race, incarceration, and inequity in the U.S. West. Promoting Los Angeles as a white, middle-class paradise, city elites and local authorities unleashed annual campaigns against the "tramp menace" that threatened to unhinge Los Angeles from within at the turn of the century. Heaping the exclusionary possibilities of imprisonment upon "tramps" and "hobos," they crammed poor white men into overcrowded jail cells and marched them through the streets in chains to build the infrastructure of the city. In the process, city leaders in Los Angeles transformed itinerant white men from a social threat wintering in the city's core into the civil outsiders and convict laborers of their white settler enclave. The rise of a white settler community in the U.S. West made imprisonment into a site of racial exclusion at the turn of the twentieth century.

### "Eden of the Saxon Homeseeker"

When the transcontinental railroad first thundered into Southern California in September 1876, Los Angeles hardly registered as a pin-mark on the map of Anglo American conquest in the West. A severe drought had recently scorched the region, leaving Los Angeles as a declining cow town. Unpaved roads, adobe homes, and a Mexican American majority dominated the landscape. The few Anglo Americans arriving in the town struggled to make U.S. conquest a reality in everyday life, sparking a "long race war" that stripped many Mexican Americans of their land and many California Indians of their lives.<sup>33</sup> Despite drought and violence, an enterprising cohort of Anglo American settlers and speculators saw nothing but promise in Los Angeles. As city boosters, they vowed to leverage the city's cheap land and eternal sunshine to transform the conquered Mexican town into a model Anglo American metropolis.

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32. Friedman and Percival, *The Roots of Justice*. See also "Prisoners and Juvenile Delinquents (1910)," 18–19.

33. Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*. See also Robert Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

Led by the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, city boosters invested in a campaign that made Los Angeles the most promoted city in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Across the country, but especially throughout the Midwest, people could hardly escape reports of a little town with an angelic name perched at the edge of the Pacific Ocean. There, according to detailed tourbooks and fast-talking immigration recruiters, an ideal Mediterranean climate could cure any ailment and grow any seed. By the 1890s, the city's boosters had honed their narrative of paradise into an explicitly racial project. In particular, the boosters sold Los Angeles as the "Eden of the Saxon Homeseeker," with "homeseeker" operating as a very particular late nineteenth-century term signifying middle-class, midwestern, Anglo American families moving further west to acquire the land recently opened by the end to the brutal wars with indigenous peoples on the plains and southwestern territories claimed by the United States.<sup>35</sup> The boosters recruited such families with assurances that Los Angeles was where the Anglo Saxon push into the West would halt to build the ideal Anglo American community. Their promise, explains Kevin Starr, was to build the "Aryan City of the Sun." More than a gimmick, the narrative of racial promise and paradise penetrated deep into the psyche of the city's boosters and settlers. It was the boosters' primary strategy and ideology of community development.<sup>36</sup>

Built upon a homeseeker fantasy, Los Angeles grew robustly and rapidly. Soon after the railroad arrived, thousands of middle-class, midwestern families began alighting from railroad cars with promotional pamphlets in their hands. They rushed into the city ready to fulfill their dreams of living lives of plenty in the sun. By 1880, the city's population was majority Anglo American. By the turn of the century, homeseeker settlement had given Los Angeles one of the highest rates of population growth in the country, and native-born Anglo American migrants, along with immigrants from

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34. *Ibid.*, 70.

35. "Eden of the Saxon Homeseeker," *Land of Sunshine*, 2 (Jan. 1895), 34. See also Charles Nordhoff, *California: For Health, Pleasure and Residence, A Book for Travelers and Settlers* (New York, 1873). For a discussion of the homeseeker promotion campaign, see Kimberly Lynn Hernandez, "Homeseekers' Paradise: Railroad Promotion, the Low-cost Housing Industry, and the Expansion of Working-Class Los Angeles, 1896–1913" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2011).

36. Stephen V. Ward, *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities, 1850–2000* (New York, 1998), 3. See also, Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?*, 19.



Northern and Western Europe, comprised over 90 percent of the local population.<sup>37</sup>

Homeseekers arriving in Los Angeles eagerly grasped at the promise that pulled them to the city. In a nearly unbroken residential boom between the 1880s and 1920s, homeseekers snatched up single-family homes and began investing in agriculture, establishing new businesses, and making increasing demands of the city's service sector, construction industry, and manufacturing operations. By the turn of the century, Romanesque buildings that were in fashion back east had shot up throughout the city's dense downtown sector, and an extensive electric rail system crisscrossed the city.<sup>38</sup> Southern California's citrus farms, as the boosters had promised, had become a multi-million dollar industry.<sup>39</sup> The homeseekers also vigorously implemented their midwestern, middle-class Protestant mores in a hefty number of city ordinances. Public drunkenness, sleeping in public, the use of whistles and trumpets on the streets, and to "sing, shout, or make any loud noise" without a permit were all prohibited in the city. The homeseekers set curfews for youth, established sensible dress codes for women on the beach, closed saloons on Sundays, and prohibited gambling, saloons, and manufacturing from expanding into the suburbs.<sup>40</sup>

Everything seemed to be falling into place for the homeseeker project in Los Angeles. An Anglo American populace, the profits of

37. Fogelson, *Fragmented Metropolis*, 63–84.

38. Steven P. Erie, "How the Urban West Was Won: The Local State and Economic Growth in Los Angeles, 1880–1932," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 27 (1992), 519–554; Todd Douglas Gish, "Building Los Angeles: Urban Housing in the Suburban Metropolis, 1900–1936" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 2007); Mary P. Ryan, "A Durable Centre of Urban Space: The Los Angeles Plaza," *Urban History*, 33 (2006), 457–483.

39. Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001), 23; Douglas Cazaux Sackman, *Orange Empire: California and the Fruits of Empire* (Berkeley, 2007), 20–42.

40. For compilations of Los Angeles Ordinances, see W. W. Robinson, comp. and ed., *Compiled Ordinances and Resolutions of the City of Los Angeles*, (Los Angeles, 1884); Edgar W. Camp and Meyer Lissner, comps., *Penal Ordinances of the City of Los Angeles, California* (Los Angeles, 1900); *Penal Ordinances of the city of Los Angeles, Oct., 1900 to April, 1904*, compiled and indexed by H. J. Lelande, City Clerk (Los Angeles, 1904); Ordinance No. 58: An Ordinance to amend an ordinance entitled, "An Ordinance to prohibit houses of ill-fame and prostitution in certain parts of the City of Los Angeles," approved May 25, 1874; amended Sept. 26, 1882, in Robinson, comp. and ed., *Compiled Ordinances and Resolutions of the City of Los Angeles*, 180–181; Ordinance No. 2: An ordinance prohibiting the sales at auction, on the public streets of the City of Los Angeles. Approved January 24, 1879; published Feb. 18, 1879, in *ibid.*, 9.

industrial agriculture, and the conservative Protestant values implemented as the law of the city were everything the local boosters had imagined. Between the boosters, the homeseekers, and their imagined Anglo American paradise, however, stood the everyday reality of life in the city's central core. The phenomenal rise of Los Angeles at the turn of the century required a small army of low-wage and casual laborers. The multi-ethnic and multiracial working class of Los Angeles lived, worked, and played in the city's central core, where life departed in almost every way from the promoted ideal of the homeseekers' paradise. Unemployment ran high. When work was to be had, wages were too low and work too unsteady to buy the single-family homes so aggressively promoted by the city's boosters. Instead, the city's low-wage workers rented rooms by the week in cheap lodging houses, built ramshackled shanties from the refuse of industrialization, and lived in the subdivided and dilapidated homes abandoned by upwardly mobile homeseekers escaping to the suburbs. Scattered throughout the central core was a thriving vice district full of gambling dens, saloons, pool halls, bawdy theaters, and houses of "ill repute."<sup>41</sup> "An unfortunate residence district" was all that one homeseeker could muster when asked about residential life in the central core of the city in the early twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> When labor demands across the West slumped each winter, unemployed men poured into Los Angeles, swelling the city's "unfortunate" core.

The West's itinerants were a diverse lot. Among the many men making winter homes in Los Angeles were California Indians and Chinese, Italian, and Spanish immigrants. In the early 1900s, Japanese and Filipino immigrants and African Americans also arrived in increasing numbers. Immigration from Mexico, in particular, surged as local employers eagerly recruited Mexican workers to perform low-wage work. Whereas fewer than 500 Mexican immigrants lived

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41. Quoted on page 115 in Robert Alan Phelps, "Dangerous Class on the Plains of the Id: Ideology and Homeownership in Southern California, 1880–1920" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1996). For discussions of life and work in the central core of Los Angeles at the turn of the twentieth century, see William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin, Tex., 2008); Daniel Jon Johnson, "A Serpent in the Garden: Institutions, Ideology, and Class in Los Angeles Politics, 1901–1911" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1996); Phelps, "Dangerous Class," 92–172; Jeffrey Stansbury, "Organized Workers and the Making of Los Angeles, 1890–1915" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008); Wild, *Street Meeting*.

42. Phelps, "Dangerous Class," quoted on p. 115.

in Los Angeles in 1890, an estimated 25,000 Mexican immigrants lived in the city by 1910.<sup>43</sup> But many among the West's itinerant workforce were the white men disparaged as tramps and hobos. These, the trampologists warned, could unravel Anglo American society from within if left uncontained. Yearning to build the Eden of the Saxon homeseeker, Los Angeles elites unleashed a vigorous campaign against the tramp threat within their promised racial paradise.

### The war on tramps

Beginning in the early 1880s, city leaders raged against the "miserable" tramps who loitered in Los Angeles each winter.<sup>44</sup> The *Los Angeles Times*, which labor historian Grace Stimson described as the "ideological spokesman" of the city's booster elite, provided both spark and fuel to the local tramp panic.<sup>45</sup> In 1882, the influential owner and operator of the *Times*, Harrison Gray Otis, declared Los Angeles to be "infested with vagrants." "They stop you at night on every block of the city asking for money" and "insult ladies on the streets," he ranted in the pages of the *Times*.<sup>46</sup> "Shall the Vags be Permitted to Take the Town?" he asked while the editorials warned that, if residents wanted to build the city of their dreams, they would have to end the annual "tramp invasion" and turn back the "Ishmaels of Civilization" found "swarming" in the city's central core each winter. Every winter into the twentieth century, Otis and the city's various English-language newspapers chronicled the "menace of this annual pilgrimage."<sup>47</sup>

To understand the rise of white male itinerancy, Otis and local elites relied upon the work of Josiah Flynt, one of the nation's leading trampologists.<sup>48</sup> Flynt sharply criticized tramps as "human parasites" and members of an "outcast world." To purge the parasites, Flynt advised that "the evils in low life are contagious, and to be treated

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43. Fogelson, *Fragmented Metropolis*, 76, Table 3.

44. "A Tramp's Insolence."

45. Quoted in Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, N.J., 2008), 17.

46. "About Town," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 1, 1882.

47. "A Tramp's Insolence"; "An Influx of Vagrants: Insufferable Insolence and Persistency of the Guild," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 30, 1882; "Dangerous Tramps Menace the City," in *ibid.*, Nov. 29, 1902; "Five Hundred Hoboes Come," in *ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1904; "Danger: Hobo Horde Headed West," in *ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1908.

48. "Rock Piles are Coming: Supervisors Determined to Start Tramp Mills," in *ibid.*, March 25, 1903.

scientifically they must be quarantined and prevented from spreading.”<sup>49</sup> He recommended incarceration as a form of social segregation. Hence, each year when winter approached, Otis, the local press, and social leaders across the city launched an aggressive campaign to contain the large number of poor white men drifting into the city. “It is infinitely better to take tramps and vagrants into custody on minor charges, than to permit them to roam about the city unmolested,” explained the *Los Angeles Herald* in 1902.<sup>50</sup>

As early as 1880, Los Angeles was already reporting a high arrest rate. That year the eleven police officers working in the town of 11,183 residents reported arresting 719 persons. One would have had to travel to the American South, to places like Vicksburg, Mississippi (2,012 arrests) or Dallas, Texas (1,668 arrests), where the majority of inmates were African American men, before finding a city of relative size with larger numbers of annual arrests that year.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, in 1882, amid Otis’s early rumblings on the “tramp nuisance,” the Los Angeles City Council instructed the city’s police department to intensify its arrests of vagrants in the city’s central core.<sup>52</sup> Armed with the California Anti-Vagrancy Act (1872) and the city’s own various public order ordinances, police officers monitored the rail station and principal streets, arresting men perceived to be drunk or idle. Drunks were easy to come by near the more than seventy saloons scattered throughout the city’s central core, but the police also arrested men for sleeping on the sidewalks and put others in jail on suspicion of being tramps.<sup>53</sup> By the end of the year, arrests in the city had increased nearly 40 percent from the year before, and the *Los Angeles Times* was cheering the Los Angeles Police Department for “running them [tramps] in, as they are a menace to the town and live by begging and stealing.”<sup>54</sup> The next year, the Los Angeles City Council

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49. Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps*, ix, 3, 90.

50. “Good Police Work,” *Los Angeles Herald*, Jan. 11, 1902.

51. “Report on the Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes,” 569.

52. “Police chief and department charged by City Attorney and Chain Gang Activity,” June 24, 1882, in Los Angeles City Council Minutes (hereafter City Council Minutes), Los Angeles City Archive (hereafter City Archives), vol. 15, pp. 452–453; “Chief ordered to remove obstructions,” Aug. 19, 1882, in *ibid.*, pp. 548–549. For *Los Angeles Times* quote, see “The Tramp Nuisance,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 14, 1882, and “Dots,” in *ibid.*, Dec. 2, 1883.

53. “Report on the Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes,” 569; “Local Brevities,” *Los Angeles Herald*, Nov. 3, 7, 8, 10, 24, 1882.

54. “The Tramp Nuisance”; “Dots.”

passed Ordinance 68, which stiffened the penalty for vagrancy with a fine of up to \$90 and/or up to ninety days in jail.<sup>55</sup> Arrests increased another 36 percent that year, with charges of vagrancy, drunkenness, and disorderly conduct soaring toward becoming the majority of arrests in the city.<sup>56</sup> By the mid-1880s, as the city experienced its first major population boom of the boosters' making, the Los Angeles Police Department was arresting more than 5,000 persons annually.<sup>57</sup> With the city jail densely overcrowded, the *Times* delightedly declared that the local authorities had unleashed a "war on the [tramp] order."<sup>58</sup>

This "war" was a seasonal program. Each November, as employers across the region slowed their operations and the local press began to report that a "hobo horde [is] headed west," the local police swept through the city arresting men from streetcorners and parks and raiding the "tramp camps" along the riverbed by tracking the twinkle of nightly campfires.<sup>59</sup> The sheriff's deputies also intercepted white male itinerant workers on their way into town and stormed into tent settlements better known as "tramp jungles" on the outskirts of the city. The clustering of tramp arrests in the winter months clearly registered in the number of meals served in the city jail, a number that spiked between November and March each year.<sup>60</sup>

Winter arrests routinely overcrowded the local jails and spurred the expansion of the Los Angeles jail system. Built in 1881, the Los Angeles City Jail had a maximum occupancy of forty prisoners but, as Anglo American Los Angeles grew during the 1880s, it often held upwards of several hundred prisoners.<sup>61</sup> When the national economy

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55. Ordinance No. 68: An Ordinance defining vagrancy and providing for the punishment thereof, Approved this 26th day of Feb., A.D. 1883, in Robinson, comp. and ed., *Compiled Ordinances and Resolutions of the City of Los Angeles*. See also "Who are Vagrants? And shall they be permitted to Take Possession of the Town?," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 13, 188, and "The Law as to Vagrants," in *ibid.*, April 25, 1885.

56. Table D, *Annual Report of the Los Angeles Police Department* (1887). For notes on the police force, see "City Guardians: Some Notes Concerning the Local Police Force," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 19, 1883.

57. *Annual Report of the Los Angeles Police Department* (1887).

58. "Rough on Tramps," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 28, 1885.

59. "Danger: Hobo Horde Headed West."

60. "Report of the Jail Department," *Annual Report of the Los Angeles Police Department*, (1891, 1893–1906).

61. "At the City Hall: Must Have More Jail Room," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 4, 1895. See also *Annual Reports of the Los Angeles Police Department* (1894–1899). Glen S. Dumke, *The Boom of the Eighties in Southern California* (San Marino, Calif., 1944), 224–225.

TABLE 4. Total Arrests by Los Angeles Police Department, 1887–1906

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Arrests</i>	<i>Drunk</i>	<i>Vagrancy</i>	<i>Disorderly Conduct</i>	<i>Public Order Charges as Percent of Total Arrests made by LAPD*</i>
1887	5,194	489	199	1,220	37.00%
1888	5,994	1,734	397	319	41.00%
1889	3,407	912	337	364	47.00%
1890	3,292	815	214	310	41.00%
1891	2,530	980	162	281	56.00%
1892	2,303	940	102	258	56.00%
1893	3,077	1,075	389	321	58.00%
1894	4,022	1,139	740	467	58.00%
1895	4,862	1,784	901	347	62.00%
1896	4,818	1,805	565	558	61.00%
1897	4,649	1,883	309	439	57.00%
1898	4,369	1,967	316	426	62.00%
1899	3,878	1,680	335	521	65.00%
1900	3,961	1,773	283	411	62.00%
1901	5,898	3,006	471	555	68.00%
1902	7,613	4,056	502	461	66.00%
1903	9,320	5,417	528	585	70.00%
1904	8,968	4,659	490	527	63.00%
1905	9,904	5,519	610	547	67.00%
1906	12,649	7,758	422	712	70.00%

*Table 4.* Data gathered from arrests table, *Los Angeles Police Department Annual Reports*, 1887–1906. No data are available for 1880–1886, 1907–1910. Not all arrests resulted in conviction. The wide variations among these categories of arrest most likely reflect shifts in policing strategies and priorities taken toward public order charges.

\*Only vagrancy, drunkenness, and disorderly conduct are included within this calculation.

spiraled into a deep recession during the 1890s, itinerancy, unemployment, and the city's jail population all spiked.<sup>62</sup> Worried that the

62. Stimson, *The Rise of the Labor Movement in Los Angeles*, 154–160.

nation's army of the unemployed was heading west for the winter and opting to be homeless in the sunshine rather than in the snow, the chief of police warned the city council that Los Angeles was "being overrun with the 'hobo' fraternity."<sup>63</sup> If the city did not increase its capacity to incarcerate tramps and hobos, he warned, the local police would no longer be able to "keep Los Angeles one of the most sober, moral, law-abiding, and safe and desirable places of residence in the world."<sup>64</sup>

In 1896 the Los Angeles City Council approved the construction of a new city jail on First Street. The First Street jail doubled the city's jail bed space to a total of eighty-eight, but, during its first winter in operation, the new city jail was filled beyond capacity with men arrested on charges of vagrancy, begging, and drunkenness. The city jailer crammed additional cots and hammocks into the cells to increase sleeping capacity to 125 but, by the turn of the century, the jail routinely held over 300 inmates during the winter.<sup>65</sup> By 1903, the chief of police was once again requesting a new jail, warning the city council that "We have utilized all available spaces in the city jail. . . . This is the limit."<sup>66</sup> This time the penny-pinching city council denied his requests; the jailer just kept packing more and more men into the cells.

During these years, the Los Angeles County Jail also suffered from severe overcrowding during the winter months. The county jail, a crumbling one-room adobe building first built in 1853, was overcrowded and in disrepair by the early 1880s. In 1886, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors invested in a new jail with a capacity of 160 inmates but, by the 1890s, it was overcrowded again. Inmates were corralled ten apiece in cells that measured 6.5 by 9 feet.<sup>67</sup> In November 1904, the county board of supervisors closed the 1886 jail and opened a larger facility. The new jail had a total

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63. "At the City Hall: Must Have More Jail Room."

64. *Annual Report for the Los Angeles Police Department* (1896), 6.

65. "Must Now Work: Five Weary Willies get Appointments on the Chain Gang," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 17, 1897; "Surprising Number of Prisoners," *Los Angeles Herald*, Dec. 26, 1902; "Tax the Jail Accommodations," in *ibid.*, Dec. 27, 1901.

66. *Annual Report of the Los Angeles Police Department* (1903), 4.

67. "The Grand Jury," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1882; "City Dots," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 18, 1883; "A Bold Attempt at a Jail Delivery Frustrate," in *ibid.*, Oct. 10, 1885; "Thompson's Troubadours," in *ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1886; "County Jail Sketches—No. 2, In the Tanks," in *ibid.*, March 5, 1899; "County Jail Sketches—No. 3, The Hobo," in *ibid.*, March 12, 1899; and "Fifty Hobos will be Released Today," in *ibid.*, Feb. 16, 1903.

capacity of 228 and, during its first few weeks of operation, the inmates had “ample accommodations.”<sup>68</sup> Yet, as the winter wore on, the “knights of the bumper and brake beam [were] pouring into Los Angeles in carload lots.” With the sheriff’s deputies making sweeps of the tramp jungles in the riverbed, the new jail was “full to overflowing” by Christmas.<sup>69</sup> Just three months later, in March 1905, the County Grand Jury condemned the new county jail as too small for the county’s needs and recommended a massive expansion.<sup>70</sup> A sheriff’s deputy squeezed an additional 30 percent capacity out of the jail by stacking the cots three deep vertically along the cell walls. Still, as argued by the county grand jury, the county jail could not service the county’s needs for another year if not expanded before the tramps returned the following winter. The next year, the county board of supervisors approved funds to add two tank-style cells to the county jail, increasing its total capacity to 304 prisoners. “With some crowding during the winter months,” the board’s jail committee hoped that the new tanks would “probably give sufficient jail room for the next five years.”<sup>71</sup>

The war on tramps that drove the expansion of the Los Angeles jail system dramatically shifted the demographics of incarceration in the city. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, Mexican Americans and California Indians had comprised the majority of inmates in Los Angeles. Among post-conquest projects to secure Anglo American dominance in the region, both the California state legislature and the Los Angeles Common Council (an early iteration of the city council) passed harsh vagrancy acts and drunk codes that targeted California Indians and landless Mexican Americans. The state’s 1855 Anti-Vagrancy Act, popularly known as the Greaser Act, defined a vagrant as any person “commonly known as ‘Greaser,’ or the issue of Spanish or Indian blood . . . who go armed and are not peaceable and quiet persons.”<sup>72</sup> Further, an 1860 city ordinance that

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68. Chairman, Jail Committee, Los Angeles Board of Supervisors to Los Angeles Board of Supervisors, July 21, 1905, Old Documents (hereafter OD) 71G, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Records (hereafter Board of Supervisors Records).

69. “Hobos Flocking in City: Regiments of them Reported Heading in this Direction,” *Los Angeles Express*, Dec. 21, 1903.

70. “County Jail too Small?,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1904.

71. Chairman of Jail Committee to the Honorable Board of Supervisors, July 29, 1905, OD71G, Board of Supervisors Records.

72. Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 57; Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1850–1935* (Durham, N.C., 2006), 24.





Figure 2. Overcrowding at the East Side Stockade (Lincoln Heights Jail), shown in “Men Sleeping in Bunks,” GPF 5664, Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

closely resembled the state’s 1850 and 1860 Acts for the Government and Protection of Indians declared that “[a]ny Indian” who was “found loitering and strolling or frequenting public places where liquors are sold, vagging or leading an immoral or profligate course of life, who shall be found drunk or making a noise or disturbance, shall be liable to be arrested.”<sup>73</sup> Aggressive enforcement of such legislation kept the jails of Los Angeles crowded with California Indians and poor Mexican Americans.

But the story of race and incarceration in Los Angeles began to change by 1880. Disease, military posts, reservations, and genocide

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73. Section 18, Article IV, *Revised Ordinances of the City of Los Angeles, passed and approved May 29, 1860* (Los Angeles, 1860), 17. See also George Harwood Phillips, “Indians in Los Angeles, 1781–1875: Economic Integration, Social Disintegration,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 49 (1980), 427–451; Phillips, *Vineyards and Vaqueros: Indian Labor and the Economic Expansion of Southern California, 1771–1877* (Norman, Okla., 2010); Benjamin Madley, “‘Unholy Traffic in Human Blood and Souls’: California Indian Servitude Under United States Rule,” forthcoming, *Pacific Historical Review*, Magliari, “Free Soil, Unfree Labor”; and Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 35–160.

had pushed the California Indian population toward critical lows in towns and cities across the state at the same time that the mass immigration of Anglo American settlers had tipped the population of Los Angeles from majority Mexican American to majority Anglo American. With conquest seeming assured, local elites turned their attention to city development. Amid promises that Los Angeles would rise upon a bedrock of middle-class Anglo American families, ridding the city of tramps and hobos emerged as a priority of local law enforcement efforts. When the U.S. census taker arrived at the Los Angeles County Jail in June 1880, he recorded eleven male inmates, six European Americans, four Mexicans, and one Chinese, and two women, one black and one white.<sup>74</sup> From a slim majority in June 1880, white male inmates in the city jail had risen to nearly 90 percent of the total annual number of inmates during the recession of the 1890s. The ratio of white men crammed into Los Angeles jail cells peaked in 1905, when white men comprised 98 percent of all prisoners held in the city jail.

As always in the West, parsing the story of race from statistics requires attention to the region's complicated schemes of racial categorization. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans were formally classified as white between the U.S.-Mexican War (1846–1848) and the start of the Great Depression. In 1904, however, census administrators attempted to decipher the immigrant origins of the large number of white inmates crowded into jails and prisons across the West and North. According to the 1904 census survey, persons of Mexican origin comprised only 8.5 percent of the white immigrant inmates convicted of minor offenses in the western states. They were far outnumbered by immigrants from Ireland (29.9 percent), England and Wales (10.4 percent), and Germany (11.3 percent).<sup>75</sup> Mexicans, in other words, did not constitute the majority immigrant group among inmates classified as white by the U.S. Census Bureau in western states.

Until 1912, the Los Angeles Police Department also included Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in the white racial category in all of its statistical tables and annual reports, but jail

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74. Los Angeles City, Los Angeles County. Supervisor's District No. 4, Enumeration District 22, 1880 Census of the United States, 168.

75. *Report on Delinquents in Institutions: 1904*, Table XXIII, 42.

**TABLE 5. Arrests, by race and gender, for the Los Angeles City Jail, 1894–1906**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Arrests</i>	<i>Women held in city jail during the year</i>	<i>African Americans held in city jail during the year</i>	<i>Asians held in city jail during the year</i>	<i>White men held in city jail as percentage of total arrests</i>
1894	4,022	174	179	112	88.50%
1895	4,862	240	185	93	89%
1896	4,818	252	165	225	87%
1897	4,649	246	157	276	85%
1898	4,369	252	105	94	90%
1899	3,878	256	184	118	86%
1900	3,961	164	144	71	91.50%
1901	5,898	220	172	71	92.10%
1902	7,613	224	151	41	95%
1903	9,320	317	267	67	93%
1904	8,968	345	149	59	94%
1905	9,904	108	82	8	98%
1906	12,649	550	490	54	91.40%

*Table 5.* Data gathered from arrests tables and jail department reports in the Los Angeles Police Department Annual Reports, 1894–1906. No corresponding data are available for 1881–1893 or 1907–1910.

registers do provide for a more nuanced analysis of Mexican incarceration. Available for 1906 to 1908, registers for the Los Angeles City Jail provide the names given by every person formally booked at the city jail.<sup>76</sup> In the month of December 1906, 1,574 people were booked at the city jail. Of them, 166, or 10.5 percent, provided Spanish surnames to the booking officer. While the jail registers do suggest that Spanish-surnamed persons were incarcerated at roughly twice the rate of the city’s Mexicano population, Spanish-surnamed persons comprised the minority of inmates booked at the Los Angeles City Jail. Rather, as painstakingly detailed in decennial interviews taken by census enumerators with inmates regarding their

76. Los Angeles City Jail Registers (1906–1908), City Archives.

birthplace and that of their parents, it was native-born Anglo Americans and European immigrant men who filled the jails of Los Angeles. Police officers and sheriff's deputies arrested them at a "wildly high" rate during the winter months as city elites fretted about the tramp nuisance on the streets of Los Angeles.

### Convict labor and the rise of Los Angeles

Convict labor was widely practiced in the jails and prisons of the U.S. West at the turn of the twentieth century. In Arizona, inmates labored on public projects. In Nevada, they broke rock and made shoes. In New Mexico, they dug ditches and were leased to a quarry operation. In Oregon, inmates built stoves and bricks, and in California, they built streets, broke rock, and manufactured furniture and jute bags.<sup>77</sup> Upon conviction for committing a misdemeanor within Los Angeles County, all convicts in the jails of Los Angeles were subject to forced labor. Dating back to the early months of statehood, the Los Angeles Common Council had made provisions for a local system of convict labor by establishing a county chain gang to work in "the streets, alleys and other places, either public or private, in the city as he [the mayor] shall deem proper." The county chain gang was supervised by a city overseer authorized to use "chains, balls, or other means as he shall deem necessary for the security of all prisoners under his charge, and to prescribe or administer, or cause to be administered, such punishment as shall be necessary to keep good order among the prisoners, and to compel them to work."<sup>78</sup>

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the Mexican Americans and California Indians who filled the jails of post-conquest Los Angeles also filled the city chain gang. In this era of making conquest a palpable reality in the fabric of everyday life, incarceration and convict labor in Los Angeles were, most of all, a tale of Mexican Americans and California Indians captured in a broad net of public order charges. Subject to forced labor and stripped of civil rights during their term of incarceration, convicted misdemeanants in Los Angeles were neither civilly dead nor socially alive. Rather, they were

77. "Convict Labor," Table I—General Tables, *Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor* (1886), 8–31.

78. Article X, Section 2 in *Revised Ordinances of the City of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, 1855); Article X, Section 4, in *ibid.*

convicts, forcibly removed from everyday life in the city on charges of public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy, in a regime that even now systematically penalizes the underemployed and poorly sheltered, who live much more of their lives in public spaces than homeowners, business owners, and the regularly employed. Arrests on such public order charges, as the work of Don Mitchell suggests, strip the poor and poorly housed of the “right to be” in the city.<sup>79</sup>

Using such charges, police officers and sheriff’s deputies thus denied Mexican Americans and California Indians any right of belonging in the post-conquest city. As convicts, they were subject to some of the deepest exclusions from citizenship and civil rights that Anglo American law allowed, and they returned to the streets as civil outsiders and unfree laborers. In the decades following the U.S.-Mexican War, Mexican Americans and California Indians occupied the jails of Los Angeles, inhabited the marginalizations tucked within convict status, and filled the city’s chain gang. But the war on tramps dramatically remade the story of incarceration in Los Angeles. Between the 1880s and early 1910s, it was white men who were crammed into the jails of Los Angeles, denied the right to the city, transformed into civil outsiders, and forced to labor on city and county projects.

On chain gangs, road crews, and rock piles, inmate laborers in turn-of-the-century Los Angeles made crucial contributions to the rise of the modern city. Until 1881, only one street was paved in downtown Los Angeles. Pedestrians and the city’s fledging trolley service bumped over unpaved and uneven dirt streets. With the goal of transforming Los Angeles into a modern city, the streets needed to become a place where vendors, consumers, and merchants could easily move themselves and their goods.<sup>80</sup>

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79. Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York, 2003), 27. See also Leonard Feldman, *Citizens Without Shelter: Homelessness, Democracy, and Political Exclusion* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004).

80. Renia Ehrenfeucht and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, “Constructing the Sidewalks: Municipal Government and the Production of Public Space in Los Angeles, California, 1880–1920,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, 33 (2007), 104–124. See also John William Crandell, “Visions of Forgotten Angels: The Evolution of Downtown Los Angeles, 1830–1910” (M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1990), chapter 6; Renia Ehrenfeucht, “Constructing the Public in Urban Space: Streets, Sidewalks and Municipal Regulation in Los Angeles, 1880–1940” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006); Ryan, “A Durable Centre of Urban Space,” 457–483.

When William Workman began his term as mayor in January 1887, he embarked on a major road construction project. In addition to leveraging tax receipts, Workman marshaled the manpower of inmates in the overcrowded city jail. During his first day as mayor, Workman, who also served as a police judge on misdemeanor cases, sentenced a beggar to sixty days in jail, a drunk to fifty days, and an assortment of other misdemeanants to eight to fifteen days apiece in the city jail.<sup>81</sup> All such convicts were assigned to the chain gang, placed in leg chains, and forced to work under the direction of the city overseer.<sup>82</sup> On the chain gang, they graded the intersection of First and Flower streets.<sup>83</sup> They filled in the western approach to the bridge on Buena Vista Street. They graded the intersection of Flower and Courthouse streets.<sup>84</sup> By December 1887, the city council was rejecting bids from private contractors and instead deploying the chain gang to build roads and fix bridges.<sup>85</sup> At the end of Workman's term in January 1888, the city chain gang had participated in the paving of eighty-seven miles of city streets in Los Angeles.

By the early twentieth century, the city chain gang operated as a wing of the city streets department. Los Angeles was the nation's fastest-growing city, and homeseekers rushing into the city submitted an "avalanche" of petitions for street improvements and extensions. With the chain gang at his disposal, the streets superintendent significantly increased the number of street workers in the city. Compared to the streets department full-time staff of six asphalt workers and an unrecorded number of day laborers, the city chain gang, supervised by an overseer and ten permanent guards, typically worked several dozen inmates on the streets of Los Angeles each day.<sup>86</sup> The chain gang tore up streets, macadamized roads, dug holes, hauled debris, and generally supplemented the work of day laborers, mostly Mexican immigrant workers.

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81. "After 'Em," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 4, 1887.

82. Street Supt. to grade intersection with Chain Gang, April 18, 1887, Minutes, vol. 23, pp. 43–44. City Council Minutes, City Archives.

83. "Briefs," *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1887.

84. "City Council," in *ibid.*, May 3, April 19, 1887.

85. Bids rejected in favor of Chain Gang labor, Dec. 12, 1887, Minutes, vol. 24, pp. 651–653, City Council Minutes, City Council Report, City Archives. See also "City Council," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 8, 1882, April 18, 1887, in *ibid.*

86. "Numerous Street Improvements," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 28, 1902; *1903 Annual Report of the Street Superintendent*, 5–6; Minutes, Civil Service Commission, Feb. 25, 1903, to Jan. 26, 1905, vol. 1, City Archives.

Few records remain that detail the work completed by the city chain gang. Most of the city overseer's monthly reports no longer exist, but those from 1901 to 1903 are boxed up and stashed in the Los Angeles City Archives.<sup>87</sup> This two-year window into the monthly work of the chain gang reveals the deep imprint of convict labor on the making of modern Los Angeles.

The chain gang began 1901 by cleaning up mud and debris along Bellevue Avenue and Hope, Court, and Flower streets. Then they moved to grade Boyle Avenue, macadamize Western Avenue, cut and grade Figueroa, and construct a bypass for the city's new outfall sewer in addition to the constant work of cleaning the Public Market every Saturday morning and sweeping downtown streets when needed. The chain gang welcomed 1902 by finishing a cut on Avenue 62 and cutting and filling Sunset Boulevard. Then they "roaded up" Slauson Avenue, dug a ditch on French Street, and filled a washout on the Ninth Street hill. By the end of 1902, the chain gang had also built a gutter along Burlington Avenue between Temple and Bellevue avenues. The year 1903 unfolded much the same for prisoners on the chain gang. In the early part of the year, they worked in Hollenbeck Park, then cut the downgrade and filled Boyle Avenue and Seventh Street near the Los Angeles River, and filled washouts on Bishop Street and 39<sup>th</sup> Street. Finally, they headed to the suburban developments near the University of Southern California to downgrade, fill, and gravel streets.

At a time when Mexican immigrants were emerging as the city's main source of casual labor, white male inmates on the chain gang clanged through the streets supplementing the similarly unskilled work of Mexicans in the construction of modern Los Angeles. From principal streets in the city's expanding downtown sector to its suburban developments, the chain gang moved through the city building up the streets of Los Angeles and even cutting and pounding the now-iconic Sunset Boulevard into being. Local authorities also approved numerous requests to assign the chain gang to projects in the local parks. In February 1903, for example, the parks superintendent visited the city council to request that the chain gang be assigned for "about three days at Hollenbeck Park to cut 6th

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87. "Captain of Chain Gang," 1901–1903, Box #B-2022, City Council Minutes, City Archives.

St. down to grade at the East End of Bridge.” The council approved the request.<sup>88</sup>

In 1906, the parks commissioner thanked the city council and the city overseer for authorizing the city chain gang to haul “several thousand loads” of material that were needed to give the flat landscapes in Sunset, Echo, and Griffith parks an “undulating contour.”<sup>89</sup> To fulfill the aspirations of local elites to make Los Angeles “among the first to realize the world’s dream of the City Beautiful,” chain gang labor helped shape the development and beautification of the city’s parks.<sup>90</sup> Inmate labor thus helped to build the infrastructure and landscape of modern Los Angeles. In the process, incarceration and convict labor forged a new place for tramps and hobos in Los Angeles. Swept from the streets and the dry riverbed, the menacing threat of white male itinerancy loitering in the heart of the city was transformed into a story of convicts—civil outsiders formally denied any right to be in Los Angeles, and unfree street workers impressed into performing what had formerly been largely Mexican labor in the rapidly growing Anglo American metropolis. Incarceration and convict labor, in other words, consolidated and amplified the exclusion of itinerant white men from the Aryan City of the Sun while incorporating their marginalization into the making of the modern city.

The County of Los Angeles also maintained a chain gang. During the fiscal crisis of the 1890s, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors had defunded its county chain gang. Maintaining a county chain gang was a particularly expensive project, entailing enormous transportation costs to move inmates from the county jail in the city’s central core to worksites beyond the city limits. But city elites strongly disapproved of the supervisors’ decision to end the county chain gang and aggressively lobbied the board to revamp its convict labor program early in the twentieth century. Under enormous pressure from the city’s leading employers, boosters, and

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88. Superintendent of Parks asks for chain gang labor for Hollenbeck Park, Feb. 24, 1903, Minutes, vol. 66, p. 550, in *ibid.*

89. “Board of Park Commissioners, 1906,” Dec. 1, 1906, Box #B-1053, City Council Minutes, City Archives. See also *1901 Annual Report of the Park Department*, B-2294, City Archives.

90. Dana Bartlett, *The Better City: A Sociological Study of a Modern City* (Los Angeles, 1907), 31. For a discussion of the City Beautiful Movement in Los Angeles, see Christopher Davis, “Lost Garden Spot of Creation: Los Angeles and the Failure of a City Beautiful, 1907–1930” (M.A. thesis, California State University, Los Angeles, 1999).



opinion makers, but hoping to reduce the cost of transporting inmates to far-flung worksites, the county board of supervisors considered purchasing southern-style “jails on wheels [to] take the hoboes through the county where there was work to do.”<sup>91</sup> The board still regarded the expense of the wagons as too great. After determining that it was financially “[un]feasible to transport the hoboes out to work,” county authorities considered establishing a branch jail near a rock quarry.<sup>92</sup> They deemed this too expensive as well, since it would require constructing a “building of substantial proportions for security’s sake; also because of the large number of hoboes.”<sup>93</sup>

Still, the Municipal League, the local press, and the Chamber of Commerce all pressed the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to develop “some plan by which the many vagrants confined in our County Jail during the winter may be put to work.”<sup>94</sup> In September 1903, the county board of supervisors reconstituted the county chain gang by ordering the sheriff to hire an overseer to supervise inmates in cutting and grading a 1,000-foot road in front of the county hospital, not far from the county jail. By early 1904, there were over 110 inmates on the county chain gang.<sup>95</sup>

After the establishment of the county chain gang, local elites were almost satisfied with the broad scope of convict labor in Los Angeles. Together, both the city and county worked several hundred inmates on the streets each day but Sunday. But the constant expense of maintaining chain gangs soon forced both the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and the City Council to consider terminating the county and city chain gangs. The guards, wagons, horses, and implements all cost money. After deducting the many costs of maintaining the chain gangs, city and county authorities wondered if they “gained nothing financially by working the hoboes.” While acknowledging that the expenses of maintaining a chain gang were outstripping its financial benefits, city elites still pressed local authorities to

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91. “Demand for Rock Piles,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 30, 1903. See also “The Hobo Problem: Only Temporary Alleviation,” in *ibid.*, March 1, 1904; “Rock Piles are Coming.”

92. “Demand for Rock Piles.”

93. *Ibid.*

94. Municipal League to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Sept. 15, 1903. OD55J, Board of Supervisors Records.

95. “Merger on Plan to Work Hobos,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 24, 1903; “The Hobo Problem,” in *ibid.*, Feb. 24, 1904; “Trolley for Hoboes,” in *ibid.*, Jan. 22, 1904; “Chain-Gang Train,” in *ibid.*, June 25, 1904.

stay the course.<sup>96</sup> “If it [forced labor] diminishes the annual influx of vicious tramps to Southern California it will be cheap at any price,” explained the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>97</sup> Incarceration and convict labor, after all, were a means of grappling with the tramp threat by punishing white male itinerants for wintering in Los Angeles, reframing their presence in the city, and discouraging their return. Despite the expense, city elites pressured local authorities to invest in incarceration and convict labor as a social project, the value of which registered not in dollars and cents but in preserving the Anglo settler fantasy at the heart of the city’s development.

By the close of the 1904 winter season, both city and county authorities had affirmed their commitment to maintaining convict labor despite the expense. The county even built a rock pile in the alley behind the county jail where inmates could crush rock to macadamize county roads.<sup>98</sup> With the expansion of city and county convict labor systems in the early years of the twentieth century, local elites anticipated that fewer itinerant men would winter in Los Angeles. Josiah Flynt and other trampologists had promised that forced labor was an “antidote” to tramping. However, unemployed itinerant workers continued to return when the West’s extractive industries slowed down for the winter. They crowded into the city, filling its cheap hotels and begging on streetcorners. “The first of the annual hobo tourists arrived yesterday. . . . The old hobo corner was filled with them, vicious, filthy brutes. . . . The rock pile, of which so much was expected, has not succeeded in deterring the influx,” the *Los Angeles Times* deplored in October 1904.<sup>99</sup> Once again, the city and county jails were stretched far beyond capacity with white men arrested during the winter months.

By 1907, the chief of police, the mayor, and a wide range of city elites were again clamoring for a larger city jail.<sup>100</sup> The city council

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96. “The Hobo Problem,” in *ibid.*, March 1, 1901. See also “Five Hundred Hoboes Come”; “Trolley for Hoboes.”

97. “Rock Lot is Hard to Get,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1904. See also Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, Sept. 3, 1903, p. 173, in Chamber of Commerce Records, Regional History Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

98. “At the City Hall,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1903. See also Municipal League to Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Sept. 15, 1903 cited above.

99. “Hobo Tourists,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 28, 1904.

100. “Stockade Ready, No Occupants,” in *ibid.*, June 14, 1908. “Jail Jam Condemned, Workhouse Urged,” in *ibid.*, Aug. 7, 1907.

had insufficient funds to allocate for a new jail and instead approved the establishment of a cheaper stockade where convicted vagrants would be sent to work on the chain gang or crush rock.<sup>101</sup> Completed in 1908, the new stockade was a low-slung “rambling” facility located on city-owned property just beneath the steep hills of Elysian Park where the chain gang often worked. The city council had wanted to purchase a lot closer to the city center, not more than five blocks from the “tramp hangout” of the intersection at First and Main streets, but it was unable to find a suitable and affordable lot.<sup>102</sup> Constructed entirely (except for the plumbing) by inmates on the city chain gang, the new stockade was ready in June 1908 but stood empty throughout the summer.<sup>103</sup> At the opening of the hobo season, police Lt. Charles Dixon showcased the so-called “tramp stockade” for local reporters. Standing in the mid-day sun, Dixon confidently shoved his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and promised that the city’s new 200-bed penal facility with a fully equipped rock pile was designed for “handling tramps.” As Dixon spoke, the city’s famed “hobo trapper” was already hard at work. He asked labor contractors to hire Mexicans and take them out of town so he could focus on arresting tramps and hobos. One hopeful journalist reported in the next morning’s paper that Los Angeles had long been a “heaven spot for the hobo,” but, with the most recent expansion in incarceration and convict labor, their city of the sun would be “anything but a place of paradise [for tramps] from now on.”<sup>104</sup> By December 1908, the new stockade was full.

With the completion of the “tramp stockade,” the city’s jail capacity had grown tenfold from a small 40-person jail in 1881 to two large facilities, the Los Angeles City Jail and the stockade, with a combined capacity of more than 400 persons. In these same years, the county’s inmate capacity grew from 20 to more than 300 at the Los Angeles County Jail. Into these three facilities, the city police and sheriff’s deputies annually committed tens of thousands of inmates,

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101. “Mayor recommends site for new City Jail,” May 25, 1908, Minutes, vol. 76, p. 26, City Council Minutes, City Archives.

102. “Advertising for bids (new jail site); idea to use church for jail overflow,” July 8, 1907, in *ibid.*, vol. 74, p. 141.

103. “Find Site for Workhouse,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 6, 1908. See also “Keeps ‘Em Out Instead of In,” in *ibid.*, Sept. 24, 1908.

104. “Danger: Hobo Horde Headed West”; “Hobos’ Home Awaits Them,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 25, 1908.

the majority of whom were white men. By 1910, more persons were incarcerated in the jails of Los Angeles than in any other city of similar size throughout the country. Still, in 1912, the county grand jury noted that the city's jails were again tipping beyond capacity and called upon the city council to further increase the city's capacity to incarcerate. The city council funded an expansion of the stockade and rearranged the cells in the city jail to increase occupancy once again.<sup>105</sup>

### Conclusion

After the U.S.-Mexican War, California Indians and Mexican Americans filled the jails and chain gangs of Los Angeles. But, as the years of conquest came to an end and city leaders orchestrated the rise of Los Angeles as an Anglo American enclave, local elites remade the story of race and incarceration. Invested in building an idyllic white settler society, they scorned the seasonal arrival of the West's unemployed workforce. For white male itinerants in particular, city elites and authorities marshaled the exclusionary possibilities of imprisonment. Making "tramps" and "hobos" civil outsiders and convict laborers formally marginalized within their homeseekers' settlement, they denied white male itinerants any right to the city. This story of young white men hauled off the streets by "hobo trappers," crammed into jail cells, and punitively forced to labor on public projects in Los Angeles offers a western intervention into the history of race, incarceration, and inequity in the United States. In short, this story details how the rise of a white settler community in the U.S. West framed imprisonment as a site of racial exclusion at the turn of the twentieth century.

But the war on tramps slowed during the 1910s. Fewer white male itinerants arrived in the city each winter as mobilization for World War I pulled young underemployed white men into factories and uniforms. After years of wandering the West, Charles Crane Knaack, for example, took a job at the Ford factory building Model T cars in Detroit, Michigan. At the same time, the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) pushed tens of thousands of Mexicans to seek work north of the border. Los Angeles soon emerged as a principal site of Mexican settlement in the United States. Without

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105. *Annual Report of the Los Angeles Police Department* (1912), 13.

entirely disappearing, the tramp panic in Los Angeles lost traction in the shifting trends of labor and migration to the city while new concerns developed among the city elite. In particular, the resurgence of Mexican Los Angeles troubled many social leaders who hoped to keep the Mexican presence in Los Angeles marginal, monitored, and managed. In 1912, the Los Angeles Police Department began to separate Mexicans from whites in all statistical reports, indicating a deeper interest in tracking and policing Mexicans in the city.<sup>106</sup> Further, after the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building in 1910, the panics regarding white workingmen in Los Angeles dramatically shifted to arresting organized workers and labor radicals. By the time that the United States entered World War I, socialists, wobblies, and Mexicans increasingly filled the jails of Los Angeles, but the infrastructure for their incarceration—the jails, stockades, rock piles, road crews, and chain gangs—had first been built to during the tramp era.

The imprint of this nearly forgotten chapter in the history of race and incarceration in the U.S. West can still be lifted from the landscape of the city. The tramp stockade, expanded in 1931 to become the Lincoln Heights Jail, still stands just north of downtown. It sits along the riverbed below the Elysian Hills where Dodger Stadium now perches. Long ago abandoned as a jail, the tramp stockade now houses a theater troupe and a boxing gym, and it provides gritty backgrounds for television and movie productions. Further, from Sunset Boulevard to the downtown core, the city's millions of motorists rush along streets first cut and paved by the chain gang. And Los Angeles remains a leading city in the story of race, incarceration, and inequity.

Today, no city in the world incarcerates more people than Los Angeles. Each night nearly 20,000 people in the city are locked in a massive complex of facilities consisting of one farm and fifteen jails scattered across the county.<sup>107</sup> It is a billion-dollar system of mass incarceration, unmatched anywhere in the world in size and scope.

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106. Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*; Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?*; Monroy, *Rebirth*. On Mexican arrests in Los Angeles, see Edward Escobar, *Race, Police and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900–1945* (Berkeley, 1999). For an analysis of the overall decline of white male incarceration across the country and a call for more regional breadth and comparative analysis in the study of incarceration during the twentieth century, see Muhammad, “Where Did All the White Criminals Go?”

107. This count includes city lockups, county jails, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centers. See James Austin, “Evaluation of the Current and Future

One key distinction of incarceration in Los Angeles today is that nearly 80 percent of the men and women crammed into the local jails are African Americans and Latinos, mostly Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants.

The rise of African American incarceration, in particular, drives an emerging field of scholarship that defines our contemporary era of race and imprisonment as the “New Jim Crow.”<sup>108</sup> This scholarship deftly examines how the penal system, now more than ever, strips inmates and formerly incarcerated persons of civil and political rights, social benefits, and economic power. In much of this work, scholars loosely cast an unbroken line between the system of racial organization that prevailed in the U.S. South and today’s penal system. The southernization of the U.S. West during the twentieth century certainly shaped many social, cultural, and political developments in the region.<sup>109</sup> Incarceration and increasingly aggressive and articulate anti-black politics are no exception. However, the rise of mass incarceration as a regime of racial inequity in the U.S. West did not derive solely from southern roots. In Los Angeles, a western city that has long led the nation’s story of race and imprisonment, conquest followed by efforts to build an idyllic white settler society lay deep within the inequities of the New Jim Crow.

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Los Angeles County Jail Population,” *The JFA Institute* (April 2012), 15; available online at [www.jfaassociates.com/publications/ppsm/Los%20Angeles%20Jail%20Projections.pdf](http://www.jfaassociates.com/publications/ppsm/Los%20Angeles%20Jail%20Projections.pdf).

108. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Era of Colorblindness* (New York, 2010). For a recent historical study emphasizing the southern roots of contemporary mass incarceration, see Perkinson, *Texas Tough*.

109. Examples of literature discussing the impact of southern migration to California include Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, 2012); James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, 1991); Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007); and Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010).