Op-Ed

Whites are moving back to Inglewood.

There goes our neighborhood.

http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-kaplan-inglewood-gentrification-20171126-story.html

Construction workers put the finishing touches on the new Hollywood Park Casino off Century Boulevard in Inglewood, California on July 5, 2016.
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Several years ago, a woman who lives around the corner in Inglewood told me a story common to black people who were among the first to move into once-white cities. She and her husband bought their house in 1967. Every day that summer, she said, her next-door neighbor came out on his porch, glaring. Whenever he saw her, this white man shouted not a greeting, but a question: *Why are you here?* In a few months, he was gone, along with pretty much every other white family on the block.

I grew up in and around Inglewood and have lived here for the last 13 years. Walking home with my dogs three weeks ago, I was approached by a young white woman who, like me, is an animal lover. Turns out she and her husband had moved into the neighborhood recently. “We like it so far,” she said brightly. Like it? I felt a rush of resentment at a remark that to her, I’m sure, was perfectly innocent. All I could think was: White folks abandoned Inglewood, and now they’re coming back with no memory or acknowledgment of all that, expecting neighborliness?

Gentrification is big news all over L.A., and working-class and lower-income people across the county stand to lose a lot from its advance. They already have. But black people in particular will feel the sting. We will be out not just apartments and homes we can afford to rent or pay the mortgage on. We will lose our space, our place.

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“Space” and “place” encompass something complex — community, which is our capital and always has been. In lieu of economic wealth, we lay down roots, we build social cohesion out of the vacuum created by white flight, avoidance and indifference. Our neighborhoods are our strength, our visibility. Leimert Park — a flashpoint of gentrification now — put Afrocentric culture on the map, literally, and has long been a hub of black civic and political organization. Inglewood isn’t Leimert Park, but it’s a significantly black city and distinct simply for that reason. Such a base is the source of our forward motion, especially in L.A., where black enclaves were never very numerous. At most, blacks have made up only 20% of the population.

The pattern of shrinking black space is hardly new, by the way: Over the years, immigration and Latino growth remade traditionally black areas like South Central and Compton and Inglewood too. But today’s white influx feels particularly ominous, like the worst of our bad history looping back on itself. Once again our places are tethered to what white people want, what they decide is acceptable, valuable.

It’s an enduring American truth: Whatever black people have can be taken away. History is rife with ugly examples, from the burning down of the black business district in Tulsa, Okla., in 1921, to the violent ousting of black leadership in Wilmington, N.C., in 1898 — considered the first and only coup on American soil. Indeed, most race riots before the 1960s involved angry white people running black people out of spaces they didn’t want them to occupy.

The angry white man on my neighbor’s porch in the 1960s was a vestige of that. His daily question was a declaration of his right to dictate living conditions because he was white. He represented a widely held belief in real estate, one that’s still in place: Whites improve and stabilize a neighborhood, blacks do the opposite.

That truism is what I read into my new neighbor’s blithe remark that she likes it here. She thought she was being friendly by bestowing her approval. My own thoughts about where we live felt irrelevant.

A confession: My late husband moved with me to Inglewood in 2004. He was white, Jewish to be exact. But he was an outlier, a guy who grew up in the working-class Valley whose racial politics were radical enough to make moving into a black, thoroughly ungentrified neighborhood not a big deal. It wasn’t an act of rebellion or an attempt to improve or upgrade things with his presence. He made himself part of a black space, serving on Inglewood’s police oversight commission, befriending youngsters (he was a teacher), pitching in to decorate trees on our block at Christmas. For lack of a better term, he *integrated*.

Fifty years ago, Inglewood’s white residents saw black newcomers not as neighbors but invaders, existential threats to their property values and to an ironclad social order. They could not, would not, live where we lived. The fact that whites are coming back to this once very contested space is not, I fear, evidence of the meaningful integration that has long eluded us. It’s a warning that my black community is, once again, irretrievably at risk.