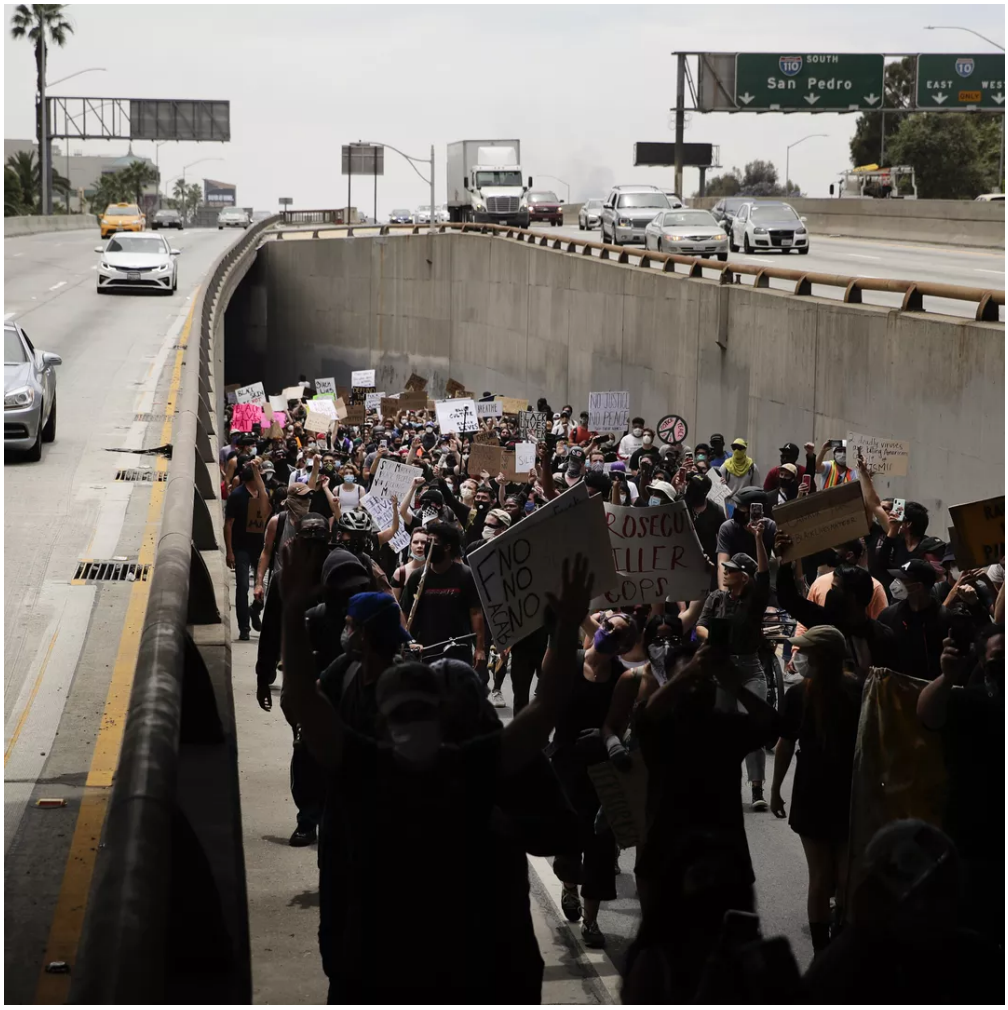
LOS ANGELES



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Why L.A.'s Freeways Are Symbolic Sites of Protest

The freeway system displaced generations of people of color.

By **Hadley Meares** | Jun 11, 2020, 9:35am PDT

When Angelenos gathered downtown to protest the murder of George Floyd, they started at City Hall and eventually made their way toward the 101. Pastor Stephen "Cue" Jn-Marie from the Row Church led the first group of protesters onto the freeway, which they occupied for roughly 30 minutes.

Ever since the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, uprisings protesting police brutality and racism have blocked freeways throughout America. The freeway and highway systems in the U.S. are part of "a long, long, long history of looting our communities, looting our lives," Pastor Cue explains.

Nowhere is this truer than in Los Angeles, where several generations of Angelenos, mainly people of color, have been displaced or trapped by the construction of freeways in the name of progress and ease of movement for white residents, many of whom moved outward to the suburbs of L.A. and Orange counties as the postwar era dawned.

"Communities of color, or black folks, were not permitted to live in the suburbs through land covenants made between white homeowners, through racism, through redlining," Pastor Cue says. "The whole narrative that black folks would bring down the value of the communities … that narrative is lingering in our society, even today."

Though racially restrictive land covenants were struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional in 1948, years of Jim Crow policies had already institutionalized racist housing practices that relegated black people and other people of color to certain neighborhoods — and labeled those neighborhoods as slums.

Those "slums" were the first places on the chopping block when freeways began to be routed across America in earnest in 1956, the year in which construction on 41,000 miles of interstate highways were authorized at a cost of $27 billion.

In 1957, one Urban Land Institute official celebrated that "inner belt expressways" would "inevitably slice through great areas of our nation's worst slums," writes UCLA professor Eric Avila, in *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*.

"Suddenly, they are flush with millions and millions of dollars to build freeways, and they look at these redlining maps and go, 'Hmm, where should we build freeways? What areas are in need of rehabilitation?' When looking at redlining maps, they can easily identify a community like Boyle Heights, which was redlined, and say, 'Okay, here's a slum that needs to be cleared. Let's put a highway here,'" Avila explained in an interview with Curbed LA.

Despite widespread multiracial protests and civic organizing by Boyle Heights residents, plans were approved for what is known as the East Los Angeles Interchange, which links the Pomona, Santa Monica, Santa Ana, and Golden State freeways. Two thousand homes were destroyed for construction of freeways in Boyle Heights.

Completed in the early 1960s, the interchange radically altered both the neighborhood's population and economic development. "Boyle Heights transitioned from a multi-racial, multi-ethnic working-class community to a monolithic concentration of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant poverty," Avila says.

The "slum" label was a pretext; the determining factor in whether a neighborhood was targeted was in fact its racial demographics, as the story of Sugar Hill makes clear. A flourishing historic neighborhood of prominent black Angelenos, including movie star Hattie McDaniel, singer Ethel Waters, and civic leaders John and Vada Somerville, Sugar Hill was the heart of cosmopolitan black life in L.A. during the 1940s and early 1950s. That did not stop city leaders from planning to tear the neighborhood in half to build the Santa Monica Freeway, that stretch of the 10 that runs from the east side of downtown west to the Pacific Ocean.

Residents protested, but in response, the Los Angeles *Times* reported, Frank B. Durkee, state director of public works and chairman of the highway commission, claimed only that the route through Sugar Hill would "affect fewer families and fewer businesses." In May 1954, the freeway route was officially adopted, sounding the death knell for Sugar Hill.

"The road could have been built without cutting through the so-called Sugar Hill section," the Los Angeles *Sentinel* later wrote. "However, in order to miss Sugar Hill, it was 'said' that the route would have to cut through fraternity and sorority row areas around USC. Sorority and fraternity row still stands and Sugar Hill doesn't, so you know who won out!"

The construction of the freeway would drastically change the layout of the neighborhood. Not only did it serve as a dislocating device, says Adam Janeiro at West Adams–based City Living Realty, but "rather than those parcels becoming green space or becoming a greater buffer, or maybe even parcels wherein displaced properties could have been moved, in many cases they became very shabbily built infill housing."

The freeway also became a physiological barrier for many (overwhelmingly white) Angelenos who, until the Great Recession, were unwilling to go south of the 10. "There have always been Maginot lines, and they've moved in time." Janeiro says. "'I won't go

south of Pico.' 'I won't go south of Venice.' 'I won't go south of Washington' ... One of the last Maginot lines was the 10 freeway."

Avila contrasts the fate of Sugar Hill with that of another exclusive L.A. enclave: Beverly Hills. Beverly Hills is a local rarity — a majority white city in the middle of Los Angeles, where white people make up only 28 percent of the population. In the 1960s, Beverly Hills residents protested the construction of what was known as the Beverly Hills Freeway. They used many of the same arguments as Sugar Hill residents — that their homes were historic, that their community was valuable.

"Beverly Hills won, Sugar Hill lost, and that gives you a very clear indication of who was able to fight freeways, and who was not. It wasn't necessarily poor versus rich," Avila says.

Residents of Sugar Hill — and anyone else who lost their houses due to freeway construction — were not entitled to assistance from the government in finding and moving to new homes. "When enacted into law in 1956, the interstate highway program did not impose even a nominal obligation on federal or state governments to assist those whose residences were being demolished," Richard Rothstein writes in *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. "In 1965, the federal government began to require that new housing be provided for those forced to relocate by future interstate highway construction, but by then the interstate system was nearly complete."

Those who were left behind in neighborhoods bisected by freeways faced economic, societal, and health inequalities that are still felt today. "Some found the means to move to the suburbs, while others, lacking similar opportunities, remained concentrated within communities that increasingly resembled ghettos and barrios," Avila writes in *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*. These communities were increasingly isolated and ethnically monolithic, watching economic progress literally pass them by.

"Freeways were the way that folks — white folks — could move into the suburbs and then they had access into the suburb and access into the city for commerce," Pastor Cue says. "We know that black folks, or people of color, are watching all those trucks pass by, and commerce is moving through the community on a regular basis. But our communities are not benefiting from that commerce."

The ruinous economic implications were immediately obvious. According to Avila in *Popular Culture*, Ninth District assemblyman Edward F. Elliott, who represented downtown L.A. stated that freeways were merely "speedways to carry the buying public through instead of into the central business area." He cited a study showing a 57 percent decline of retail sales in Los Angeles from 1950 to 1960 alone. Downtown, he said, "had become encircled, cut up and glutted with freeways."

Land values in neighborhoods blighted by freeways also went down, with generational consequences still reverberating today.

"Black folks inherited poverty while white children were able … to benefit from the equity from their parents' home," Pastor Cue says. "They're able to get these inheritances, and now, due to the reversal of white flight, they now gentrify the community by taking those same resources and coming back in the community and saying … 'We're going to jack up the prices of the homes simply by our presence.' Now those folks who used to live in that community can't afford to rent anything in those communities."

Another crippling legacy of freeways, pollution from tens of thousands of cars is a health hazard to the around 1.2 million Angelenos living within 500 feet of local freeways. In her paper "From Progression to Oppression: A look at the injustices associated with progressing Los Angeles' transportation system," Felisia Castañeda notes that freeway "pollution translates into significant decreased lung function in children between the ages of ten and eighteen, lower birth weights and higher rates of premature pregnancies."

Frustrated motorists speeding off the freeways and through neighborhoods also are a major threat. In *From Progression to Oppression*, Castañeda includes one heartbreaking remembrance from 10-year-old Librado Almanza, who lived next to a major L.A. freeway:

> In many urban cities, the streets are our playground. We play football, baseball, ride our bikes and many other things in the street … My friends and I were walking to the corner store. We have to cross a six-lane street to get there. That day a truck ran a red light and struck me as I was crossing the street. My leg and collar bone were broken. The inside of my mouth was busted and my chin was cut. I had massive abrasions throughout my body.

In recent years, conversations have opened up around remaking freeways and how to address the economic, societal, and environmental challenges they've brought to Los Angeles. Curbed's Alissa Walker even argues that getting rid of freeways altogether is a feasible possibility.

The increasing awareness of the damage freeways inflict on communities has slowed their construction in the past two decades. In 1999, after years of protest, a proposed portion of the 710 freeway that would have majorly impacted the Latinx enclave of El Sereno (as well as, to a lesser extent, South Pasadena and Pasadena) was halted by Judge Dean D. Pregerson of the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California. Talk of construction has been renewed over the years, but the project is stalled indefinitely.

However, the judge's order came too late for many homeowners whose residences had already been taken by the state through eminent domain. In March, Pastor Cue joined with the group Reclaiming Our Homes to move 13 families into state-owned houses that have sat empty for years in the midst of L.A.'s housing crisis. "We moved them in because we're saying, 'You have 150 homes that are sitting vacant while we have 60,000 people in the county of Los Angeles that are houseless,'" he explains.

These injustices have gone unseen by many Angelenos. "Moving through the city now on a freeway, you're essentially removed from any kind of contact with people, you're totally isolated in your car, and you're also isolated on the platform of the freeway, so you lose any kind of sense of where you're at, of what communities you're going through, and you lose a sense of the rich and full diversity of the city," Avila says.

By blocking commuters traversing the freeways, organizers hope to force meaningful change through high visibility. As protests continue all over the country, expect more protesters marching on freeways and fighting for a redrawing of the American road map. On May 31, Santa Monica police blocked the 10 freeway during protests, On June 1, protesters blocked the 405 at Wilshire Boulevard and the 101 in San Luis Obispo. On June 2, they shut down the 60 in Moreno Valley and interrupted traffic on the 1 in Monterey.

"They are protesting not just what happened to George Floyd, but they're protesting a system that continues to loot them," Pastor Cue says. "People are basically using the spark of George Floyd to say, 'We don't want this system anymore. This system is

violent.’ The violence that you see on property is minimal compared to the violence that the system has inflicted upon every marginalized group in this society.”

According to Avila, many of the young people protesting are the very people whose ancestral communities were destroyed by freeways a generation ago. “It’s a way of saying, ‘Hey, we’re going to take back this space in the same way that the freeway took our space,’” he explains. “The act of being on the freeway still seems to bother the press and a lot of people in the public the most. Well, that’s the intention. That’s exactly the intention.”

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