



Towards justice: A communiqué from Los Angeles

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the crisis that is racial capitalism. But it is precisely from amidst this crisis that social movements and community organizations are advancing a praxis of care, survival, and justice.

A commonplace saying amidst the COVID-19 crisis is ‘we’re all in this together’. From city mayors to university administrators, the saying is mobilized to provide comfort and solicit sacrifice. We are not all in this together. As data trickles in about the steady swell of deaths in the United States, the racial disparities through which social reproduction is constituted become once again visible. Black death, a persistent feature of this slaveholder state, is prominent. The necropolitical load of ‘essential work’ on working-class, rent-burdened neighborhoods, a persistent feature of this settler-capitalist state, is amplified. We are not all in this together.

At the [Institute on Inequality and Democracy](http://www.instituteoninequalityanddemocracy.org), a small research center established in 2016 to study and challenge dispossession and displacement in Los Angeles as well as in

other cities elsewhere in the world, we strive to be attentive to the present moment and what it demands of radical scholarship. All around the world, COVID-19 has exposed and deepened lived inequalities, demonstrating that the taking of human life is neither natural nor inevitable, but rather an outcome of political decisions that have ravaged social protections and hollowed out infrastructures of care. It is also evident that the prolonged disaster that will follow the immediacy of the public health emergency will be devastating for communities that have long experienced the everyday crisis that is racial capitalism. What such a moment demands of us is not the naïve comfort of ‘we’re all in this together’ but rather enraged collective action towards justice.

With this in mind, in this communiqué, we foreground the work of some of our movement partners — more appropriately understood as movement teachers — organizations that are on the frontlines of struggle against disposability and death in Los Angeles and beyond. They demonstrate the necessity of building a new common sense about relations of property and personhood, debt and wealth, reparation and redistribution. In the blink of an eye, public policy decisions are making possible the seemingly impossible — from decarceration to moratoria on evictions to basic income payments to student debt forgiveness. Let us be clear: these have always been possible. And these, in their present form, are nowhere close to being enough. Quoting, Monsignor Romero, Leonardo Vilchis, co-founder of [Union de Vecinos](#) and [UCLA Activist-in-Residence](#) notes in a [19 March, 2020 tweet](#), ‘As "help" begins to arrive remember: “It is a caricature of love when you want to give in charity what you owe for justice.”’ The help being advanced to working-class, poor, and unhoused communities is a trickle compared to the vast flow of public resources directed to the wealthy and powerful. Indeed, structures of global capitalism and liberal democracy are being quickly renewed in order to govern the continued extraction and surveillance of labor and life. Our movement teachers remind us to keep organizing. Fiercely and fearlessly.

The university in this time must also be a space of organizing. From its inception in 2016, the Institute on Inequality and Democracy at UCLA Luskin has drawn on abolitionist and decolonial traditions to build spaces of collective inquiry. We thus support the refusal of academic normalcy, knowing that remote instruction, differentiated grading, and calls for productivity threaten to reproduce the hierarchies of academic labor and existing divides in student learning and expand the already vast gap between elite universities and their neighboring communities. More than ever before, it is necessary to challenge the settler logics and austerity protocols of our universities. more than ever before, it is necessary to transform academia into a space of mutual aid and solidarity politics.

Challenging state neglect of street-connected communities

The COVID-19 crisis threatens the lives and livelihoods of street-connected communities around the world. In Los Angeles, from a ban on street vending to the lack of safe housing and public services for the unhoused, state neglect is starkly evident. We borrow the phrase ‘street-connected’ communities from faculty researcher, [Amy Ritterbusch](#), whose radical model of participatory action research challenges state violence and state silence

towards such communities in Colombia and Uganda. But also evident in Los Angeles, and elsewhere, is the activation of infrastructures of mutual aid that rest on systems of direct outreach and coalitions of power that movements have built over time. Here is one example. Located in the heart of Skid Row, the LA Community Action Network (LA CAN), has designed and provided handwashing stations for unhoused communities, a life-saving service amidst the present crisis.

Figure 1

Handwashing stations built on Skid Row by the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN).

Source: LA CAN, 2020



But LA CAN also reminds us that the violence of ‘organized abandonment’, a phrase we borrow from abolitionist scholar, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, cannot be mitigated through grassroots innovation. As the COVID-19 crisis accelerated in Los Angeles, LA CAN, along with LA Catholic Worker, took legal action against the City of Los Angeles to draw attention to the pressing needs of unhoused Angelenos and to call for an end to the various mechanisms of dispossession and displacement targeted at them. We share the lawsuit here because it outlines urgent needs and priorities relevant to all unhoused communities. It is important to note that this specific legal action is an intervention in a lawsuit filed against the City of Los Angeles by the LA Alliance for Human Rights, a group of downtown residents and property owners pressing for action against homeless encampments, including in the form of shelters. As has become evident in many U.S. cities, the warehousing of the poor in crowded shelters, the state’s main response to the crisis of COVID-19 and houselessness, will perpetuate disposability and death. Movement leaders such as co-founder of Ktown for All and UCLA Activist-in-Residence, Jane Nguyen, are thus calling for rent suspension as well as the utilization of vacant properties and hotel/motel rooms as housing for the unhoused.

Demanding housing justice

At the launch of the [Housing Justice in Unequal Cities Network](#) last year, Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal of the [LA Tenants Union](#), noted that what is at hand is not a housing crisis but rather a tenants' rights crisis. In a piece titled [101 Notes on the LA Tenants Union \(You Can't Do Politics Alone\)](#), (2019) she argues that 'a tenant is anyone who doesn't control their own housing.' The COVID-19 crisis brings into sharp view the precarity of rent-burdened households who, in many cases, are a paycheck away from eviction. [This map by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#) shows where emergency tenant protections have been put into place. Click on the map to learn more about each measure.

Figure 2

Elizabeth Blaney, Activist-in-Residence at the Institute on Inequality and Democracy and community organizer with Union de Vecinos, Eastside Local of the LA Tenants Union, advocating for #FoodNotRent at the Rent Strike launch.

Source: Noticias 62 Los Angeles - EstrellaTV, 2020.



But in many parts of the United States, protections are being strengthened for homeowners and bypassing tenants. [In a 20 March, 2020, letter to California Governor Newsom](#), numerous housing justice and advocacy organizations called for an immediate moratorium on rent increases, evictions, utility shut-offs as well as a rent suspension for the duration of the crisis. The measures taken by the California Governor, and subsequently, the LA City Council, are woefully inadequate and prop up landlord interests. [In a 24 March, 2020 tweet](#), the LA Tenants Union thus asks these pressing questions and calls for a rent strike: 'Can you pay rent on April 1st? What about May? How will you pay for food, medications, necessities? What about your neighbors, your family, your friends? How long will this crisis last? LA, choose food. Choose medications. Choose your future. Keep your rent. #FoodNotRent'. [Take a look at the demands put forward by the LA Tenants Union](#) for housed and unhoused tenants as well as universal forms of support.

As ongoing mobilization by various movements including the LA Tenants Union, [Chinatown Community for Equitable Development \(CCED\)](#), [Moms4Housing](#), and [Reclaim LA](#) demonstrate, tenant protections require actions on many fronts. People's Action network, the coalition of housing justice organizations that issued the Homes Guarantee last fall, [has released an urgent set of demands that calls for immediate federal action](#). Their recommendations range from a national eviction moratorium, which would halt all new and pending evictions to a 'just, green transition post-pandemic' society whereby Congress would address hazardous public housing conditions by providing funding for immediate repairs.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, these movements pushed for the inhabitation of vacant homes and the use of eminent domain to extend affordable housing covenants. Inspired by Moms4Housing in Oakland, California, a collective of housing insecure and unhoused residents of Los Angeles began moving into vacant properties owned by the state of California. Caltrans, the statewide transportation agency, purchased several hundred homes in Northeast Los Angeles with the intention of demolishing them for freeway construction, but the houses sat empty after the plans fell apart. The newly housed residents and their supporters have named their campaign Reclaiming Our Homes to call attention to the injustice of publicly-owned properties sitting vacant in a city whose public is increasingly unhoused. ‘They say it is a crime to occupy these houses, but it is not a crime’, declared Benito Flores, one of the Reclaimers. ‘This is justice.’ Days after the Reclaimers began moving into their new homes, the Governor of California issued a statewide stay-at-home order. As the editorial board of the *Los Angeles Times* (21 March, 2020) noted of the vacant homes owned by public agencies such as Caltrans: ‘It was bad enough that the state allowed houses to sit vacant for years during a growing homelessness and housing affordability crisis. Now, in the middle of a public health emergency, it’s unconscionable to allow so many empty, decaying homes to sit idle.’

Household debt and the future of finance

Whether it is rent, fines and fees in the criminal punishment system, student loans, or medical bills, the COVID-19 crisis lays bare what activists have long known: racial capitalism is the pandemic, and deep household debt is one of its signal symptoms. It is racial capitalism that renders us unevenly vulnerable, forcing us to debt finance medical care and education and even our own incarceration. It is racial capitalism that splinters ‘shelter-in-place’ directives: for some, head to your second home; for others, stay in your small apartment and wonder how you’ll pay rent; for still others, continue to deliver packages or stock grocery shelves, or lose your livelihood as a domestic worker. In this moment, movements are shifting racial capitalism from pandemic to uprising, from solitude to strike. Sanitation workers and Instacart workers and Amazon workers are organizing for labor strikes, and households are organizing for debt strikes.

On March 30th, the Debt Free Justice California Coalition won a suspension of debt collection in the criminal punishment system, including the juvenile and superior courts. Four years ago, the Debt Collective piloted the nation’s first student debtors’ union, which to date has won \$1.5 billion in debt abolition for people who attended for profit colleges. That strike is now growing to encompass anyone with student debt. As of this writing, the U.S. federal government has implemented a program, albeit flawed, in which student debtors can stop payments for six months with no penalty and no interest accrual. This means everyone can and should be on strike, and the Debt Collective is now organizing to change that temporary payment moratorium into full debt abolition. As people’s incomes dry up, and we are forced to choose between rent or food, the Debt Collective and allies say, Can’t Pay, Won’t Pay! Collectivize mass indebtedness into mass power, into debtors’ unions. But to what end?

Figure 3

The Debt Collective organizes to transform individual financial struggles into a source of collective power. Source: **The Debt Collective**, 2020.



If COVID-19 lays bare something that long predates it, we cannot return to business as usual once the masks are off. Housing for all. Healthcare for all. College for all. Incarceration for none. If debtors' unions give us the power to refuse predatory financialization, we cannot stop at debt abolition, but must bring into being the worlds we need. At the Institute's February event, Financial Futures: Higher Education and Reparative Public Goods, economist Stephanie Kelton gestured to the potential of Modern Monetary theory to bring those worlds into being. As she recently wrote in the *New York Times* (21 March 2020), 'when called upon, the same computer that [injects bailout money into Wall Street] is there for Main Street as well. But the Federal Reserve needs specific instructions before typing up dollars for the rest of us. Those instructions come in the form of legislation: When a bill becomes a law, the government is, in essence, telling the Fed how many dollars it is ordering up to cover health care expenses, child care costs or replace lost wages.' In other words, we can stop asking, *how will we pay for medicare for all, housing for all, college for all*, and start building the political power to write that legislation. In Denmark and the Netherlands governments are covering 75 to 90 percent of all worker salaries, provided that companies refrain from layoffs. U.S. currency sovereignty means that it is only political will keeping this country from doing the same.

But a transnational pandemic – racial capitalism and COVID-19 – also demands transnational thinking around the future of finance. U.S. currency sovereignty has long solidified U.S. imperial projects and massively indebted an archipelago of empire – from Puerto Rico, to Greece, to much of the global south. The radical frontier of financial futures must be transnational infrastructures of plentitude and care.

Vigilance against the stalker state

Carcerality is not a side-show to racial capitalism but rather a prominent institution. In the United States, the COVID-19 crisis has drawn new attention to the normalized condition of mass incarceration as well as of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detention

and deportation. But less evident and equally alarming is the expansion of the stalker state through new practices of surveillance and tracking. We borrow the phrase ‘stalker state’ from the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition which provides critical analysis of the expansive police powers of the modern state, situating such powers in the long history of the policing of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Poor bodies (Khan, 2019). The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition reminds us that such forms of policing are entangled with the racialization of disease and the reproduction of racist stereotypes such as ‘the savage Native, criminal Black, illegal Latino, terrorist Muslim, and manipulative Asian.’ The stalker state can also be understood as what Michael Sorkin, urban theorist and architectural critic whose life was recently lost to COVID-19, has termed the ‘national insecurity state (2008). Writing in the aftermath of 9/11, Sorkin drew attention to geographies of paranoia manifested in a ‘web of institutions and practices’ that are ‘profoundly coercive.’

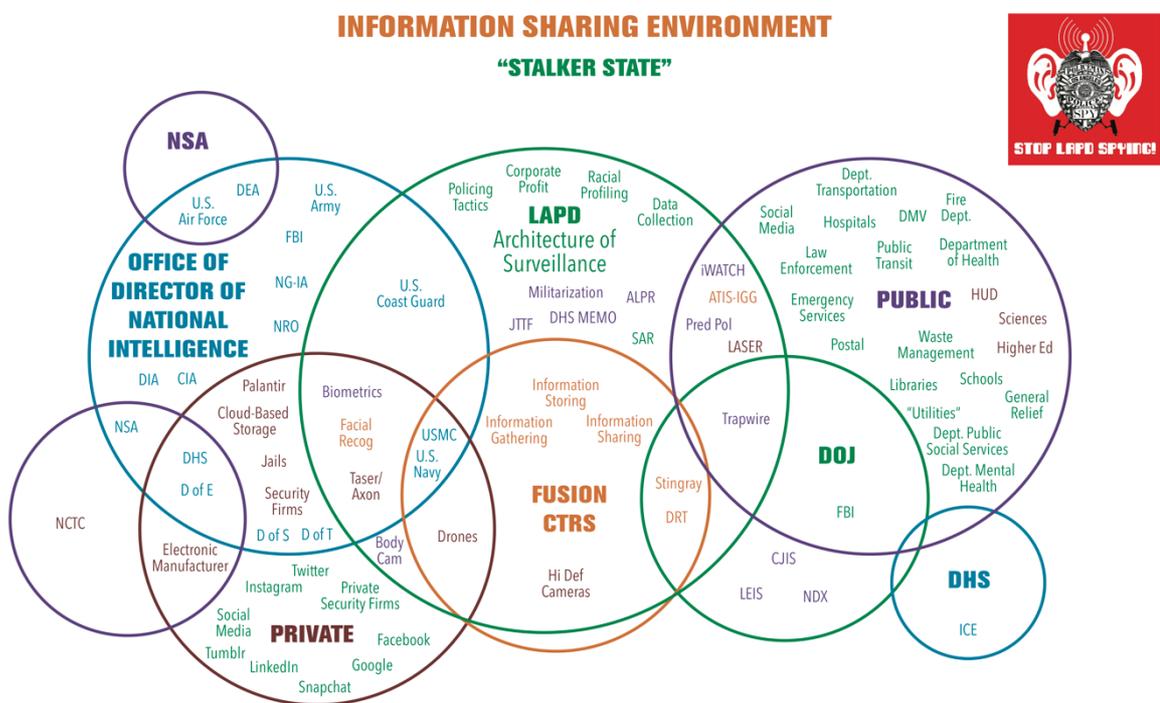


Figure 4

Local geographies of policing are analyzed in this diagram by the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition. Source: Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, 2020.

The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition calls us on all to stand vigilant against the use of facial recognition, location tracking, surveillance drones, limitless detention, automated profiling, and mass data harvesting in the time of crisis. For years, communities targeted by policing have fought such practices; now it is likely that such state measures will be normalized and consolidated under the sign of public health and national security.

It is also important to note that the entanglement of data capitalism and state surveillance goes hand in hand with various forms of institutionalized lies and evasions, as has now become evident in the scandals over the Tokyo Olympics. Well before the COVID-

19 pandemic, the Institute on Inequality and Democracy partnered with NOLympics LA, an organizing coalition, to bring activists from Tokyo Olympic watchdog groups, HanGorin No Kai and Okotowalink, to Los Angeles to learn about the forms of displacement and dispossession entailed in this unique brand of disaster capitalism. Their call is simple: abolish the Olympics.

The public university in a time of crisis

For a while now, the public university has been governed by crisis, notably that of the neoliberal restructuring of higher education. The shift to remote instruction necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis threatens to fuel speculative investment in online learning. It lays bare the vast digital divide that runs through our mass of students. It revives bitter discussion of meritocracy and the measures thereof, such as grades. As UCLA Law professor and faculty researcher at the Institute on Inequality and Democracy, Noah Zatz, argues in this essay, *Grading in a Time of Crisis*, under these circumstances, academic integrity requires the suspension of academic normalcy. Professor Zatz writes: ‘It is a fool’s errand to pretend otherwise and try to patch together the shards that remain and treat that as preserving what might have been. Any attempt to apply differentiating grades is going to very substantially measure differential impact of this crisis. That is totally unacceptable. Not only morally, but making a mockery of their purported function of measuring academic performance.’

Figure 5

Students rally at UCLA in support of a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA).

Source: Jintak Han/Daily Bruin senior staff, 2020.



Likewise, graduate students across the University of California system have developed their own forceful critique of academic normalcy through the COLA4ALL campaign. As severely rent-burdened residents of a state with an affordable housing crisis, graduate students at UC Santa Cruz began calling for the university to make a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) to raise their wages enough to live where they worked. As of this writing, 84 students at UCSC were fired for withholding their labor, but the wildcat strike has grown as graduate student workers at all 10 campuses held teaching strikes, grading

strikes, and rallies. Robin D.G. Kelley, UCLA History professor and founding member of the Faculty Advisory Board of the Institute on Inequality and Democracy, gave the following remarks in support of the striking students: “This is bigger than a cost of living adjustment. You are on the frontlines of a broader struggle against a new university order that entails the casualization of labor; rising tuitions; the financialization of higher education resulting in unsustainable student debt and corporate profit; not to mention investments in institutions that violate human rights and hasten the planet’s demise. You are fighting for a different future, and as faculty who want a university that practices equity and ethical behavior, that can reverse its neoliberal trend, we have no choice but to stand in solidarity and to stand up.

The refusal of academic normalcy is not a halt of the university. Rather, as the past few weeks have demonstrated, it must be the effort to redirect the material resources of the university to students, faculty, workers, and communities that are in dire need; it must be the effort to teach with love and compassion such that learning together can be a form of building power; it must be the effort to recognize care-giving as an essential component of human living and to make space for it in the bureaucracies of academic assessment. At the Institute on Inequality and Democracy, we repeatedly turn to *The Undercommons*, (2013) Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s radical vision of ‘fugitive planning.’ We do so again now, in this time of crisis, to insist upon the making of new forms of accounting, COVID accounting if you will, covert accounting if so needed, to build an undercommons of sustenance and support amidst and against what Lee and Ahtone (2020) have termed the ‘land-grab university.’ It is worth considering the unexpended material resources at our disposal – in departments, research centers, extramural grants – such as conference, event, and travel budgets. It is worth considering how they can be redirected to students through emergency grants and fellowships, to movement leaders through virtual residencies with stipends, to community advocates through webinars with speaking fees. Such forms of accounting are not acts of humanitarian generosity but rather relationships of accountability embedded in what we imagine to be ‘reparative public goods,’ the shared social futures that higher education, especially the public university, has the potential to make real.

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