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SundayReview | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Viva Gentrification!

Héctor Tobar MARCH 21, 2015

LOS ANGELES — FOR years, our family journeys have taken us from our hillside home, in the multiethnic Mount Washington district of northeast Los Angeles, into the flatlands of the Latino barrios that surround it.

My wife, Virginia Espino, who is Mexican-American, knows these neighborhoods well, especially the community called Highland Park. She grew up there in the 1960s and 1970s, when it was still integrated, before "white flight" was complete. In the decades that followed, Spanish-language ads took over the billboards, and the complexions of the locals became almost exclusively cinnamon and café con leche.

The barrio has its charms. And also its pockets of highly visible urban dysfunction, including a brick tenement where groups of young men gather. Police cruisers aggressively patrol against alleged neighborhood ne'er-do-wells, who are often arrested in full public view.

But today in Highland Park there are more open houses than street vendors. There's a vegan restaurant, alongside a very un-vegan fleet of taco trucks. The local bodega sells not just homemade salsa and cards for cheap phone calls to Guatemala,

but also espressos and overpriced Pinot Noir in bottles that have corks instead of twist-off caps.

"I saw them all move out," my wife said one day, referring to the neighborhood's white residents. "And now I'm watching them move back in."

In Highland Park, as in other Latino barrios of Los Angeles, gentrification has produced an undeniable but little appreciated side effect: the end of decades of de facto racial segregation. It's possible to imagine a future in which "the hood" passes into memory. Racial integration is on the upswing; for that, a cry of "Viva gentrification!" is in order.

The point was driven home to me the other day, when I stepped into that same bodega and saw a fair-skinned child of about 6 wandering past the stack of tortillas. It's one thing to see a 20-something white dude walking with freshly picked organic lettuce in his backpack. But the presence of this girl in that small retail space, filled with Spanish chatter, pork rinds and other symbols of Mexican-ness, bespoke a deeper shift.

I imagined the stentorian baritone of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the loudspeaker above us: "I have a dream that one day, in the shadow of Stone Mountain of Georgia, and in the barrios of Los Angeles on the Pacific, little white girls and little brown girls ..."

Yes, gentrification is something we smart and cultured people are supposed to denounce as an insidious force. To see working- and middle-class families driven from their homes by real estate speculators is to witness a kind of cultural murder. I'm down with the 95-year-old poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, for instance, when he denounces the "corporate monoculture" and skyrocketing rents that are turning San Francisco into "an artistic theme park without artists."

But there is no similar Twitter rage, nor Facebook fury, over the deepening of racial segregation in American cities with large Latino populations.

In 2008, with help from a number-crunching colleague at The Los Angeles Times, I reported that about one million people in Los Angeles County lived in

communities that were 90 percent or more Latino. East Los Angeles was 98 percent Latino — the most ethnically homogeneous community in Southern California. The 2010 census confirmed that Los Angeles was the country's most segregated major metropolitan area, in the distribution of whites and Latinos.

For all the fortitude and pride you'll find in Latino barrios, no one wants to live in a racially segregated community or attend a racially segregated school. The impact of segregation on the self-image of the segregated has been amply documented, most famously by the psychologists who helped persuade the United States Supreme Court to rule for the plaintiffs in Brown v. Board of Education.

Black and Latino segregated communities have more potholes and fewer reliable services, and their schools offer less opportunity. "California has had an extremely dramatic increase in the segregation of Latinos, who on average attended schools that were 54 percent white in 1970, but now attend schools that are 84 percent nonwhite," a study by the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, found last year.

I grew up in communities like Montebello and South Whittier that were integrated when my Guatemalan family moved in, but lost nearly all their white residents in the years that followed. You can get a sense of what both my wife and I lost by looking at our high-school yearbooks. At Franklin High in Highland Park, my wife grew up alongside Asian kids, and blond kids with feathered haircuts and names like Koch and McDowell.

The new integration in Highland Park isn't like the old. New arrivals are not working-class whites and Asians, but bohemian and upper middle class. These "young trendsetters in skinny jeans, flannel shirts and Converse high tops," as The New York Timesdescribed them, patronize stores around York Boulevard.

After a walk on York one night, my wife nearly burst into tears. The vibe and ethos of her old neighborhood had shifted before her eyes: from a place where Latino people scraped by and took pride in doing so, to one where newcomers practiced conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. Our local panadería underwent a major renovation, and jacked up the price of the Mexican sweet bread. A beloved

mural with kitschy Latino themes was painted over to make way for a French restaurant.

In the neighborhoods beyond York, longtime residents are losing their homes. Tenant groups have protested rising rents, and last year The Los Angeles Times detailed how property-flipping investors targeted renters not covered by the city's rent-control ordinance.

The prescription to limit the damage caused by gentrification is fairly straightforward: Strengthen rent control laws, and develop new ways to fund housing for poor and middle-income people.

"We need to make it so that it's not just people with six-figure salaries moving in," said Rick Coca, a spokesman for City Councilman José Huizar, who represents part of the area.

But the demographics of greater Los Angeles much — Latinos are a plurality in both the city and the county — that it's impossible for gentrification to erase Latino culture in Highland Park. The new non-Latino minority will live, for the foreseeable future, in a majority-Latino community.

For now, the influx of newcomers with disposable incomes benefits all sorts of Latino people. A few blocks from the bodega where I first saw that little girl, there's a gallery run by Latinos where the openings draw an ethnically diverse crowd. Three nearby cafes started by Latino entrepreneurs do, too. The newest, Tierra Mía, serves a drink whose name reflects the new hipster-meets-mexicano feel of this and many other California neighborhoods: "horchata frappé."

In Highland Park's integrated present, the old insult of "white flight" stings a bit less every day. Now that she's gotten over her initial shock, even my wife is starting to warm to the changes.

"This isn't an ethnic enclave anymore," she said recently as we drove down a thoroughfare that's home to both a lavandería and a newly thriving synagogue. "It's Main Street."

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