

Race-based attacks on Boyle Heights businesses prompt this L.A. councilman to take sides



Opponents of Weird Wave Coffee in Boyle Heights demonstrate along East Cesar Chavez Avenue in June. (Gary Coronado / Los Angeles Times)



By **Ruben Vives**

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Los Angeles City Councilman [Jose Huizar](#) spoke out Friday against the vandalism and race-based tactics being used against art galleries and a coffee shop in Boyle Heights amid gentrification concerns, saying the actions were “unacceptable” and would not be tolerated.

Huizar said he shared concerns about displacement and rising costs of housing in Boyle Heights, which activists say has been occurring because of gentrification in the heavily Latino Eastside neighborhood. But he said he but did not like the tactics some activists have been using to voice those concerns.

Huizar's statement comes after Weird Wave Coffee was [vandalized a second time](#). The coffee shop has been at the center of multiple anti-gentrification protests, similar to the ones held against art galleries in the neighborhood.

"We all have the right to express our 1st Amendment-protected opinions — that is not in dispute," Huizar wrote in a statement released Friday afternoon. "But when that turns into destroying property or violence of any kind, or targeting people solely based on race, that goes against everything Boyle Heights stands for."

"Boyle Heights' history as a diverse community has taught us valuable lessons: Violence is never the answer, and racism begets racism. We must reject it today, tomorrow and always," he added.

The Los Angeles Police Department is looking into both acts of vandalism.

Anti-gentrification groups — Defend Boyle Heights, Union de Vecinos and the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement — have long been fighting businesses in the neighborhood that they believe will draw new ventures, increase rents and push out local business owners and working families.

As part of that battle, they have relentlessly targeted art galleries that began cropping up in the neighborhood's industrial region over the last three years.

Early on in the battle against the galleries, protesters stormed into shows and threw detergent on patrons as well as the food they were being served, according to witnesses and news reports. The LAPD investigated the vandalism of one gallery that included graffiti with an expletive directed toward "white art."

When the owners of Weird Wave Coffee opened their shop last month, they were aware of the movement against gentrification. But they did not think they would be targeted like the art galleries. They were selling coffee, not pricey paintings.

Activists, however, spent weeks trolling the coffeehouse on Instagram before and after it opened. They held protest rallies outside, holding posters — including one with an expletive directed toward "white coffee" and another that read, "AmeriKKKano to go." They passed out fliers with a parody logo that read "White Wave."

Some Latino residents who defended Weird Wave Coffee said they were called "coconuts" by activists: Brown on the outside, white on the inside.

The Eastside has long been a center of Los Angeles' protest movements, whether it was residents marching against the Vietnam War in the 1970s or more recently demonstrating for immigrant rights.

In his statement to the community, Huizar reminded residents that in its early years, Boyle Heights was one of the city's first diverse communities by, in part, "rejecting racist covenants prevalent in other Los Angeles

neighborhoods that literally outlawed people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds from living together.”

“Instead of targeting business owners, particularly small business owners, we should instead focus our attention on tangible solutions to address the gentrification issues we face in Boyle Heights, and indeed throughout the entire city,” said Huizar, whose district includes the Eastside.

“There are real concerns about housing affordability in Boyle Heights and the city of Los Angeles. Even though more of the housing in Boyle Heights has protections under rent control than in other parts of the city, too many of our neighbors are still getting displaced due to rising rents and a shortage of affordable housing.”

Huizar said he is working with community organizations on several housing initiatives, including a door-to-door campaign to inform the more than 88% of renters in Boyle Heights who live in rent-controlled properties that they are protected from illegal rent increases and evictions.

“These are just a few things we can do together. Whether we’re expressing our free speech or working to create better policy, let’s not lose sight of who we are and what Boyle Heights is all about,” Huizar said. “Our history offers us another valuable lesson: When Boyle Heights works together toward one goal, we can do anything.”

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Are white hipsters hijacking an anti-gentrification fight in Los Angeles?

As the Latino neighbourhood of Boyle Heights combats soaring property prices, some condemn outsiders' involvement - but others welcome their input



'I'm afraid of feeding this racist idea that white people are at the centre of this movement,' said one activist. Photograph: Richard Vogel/AP

Rory Carroll in Los Angeles

Wednesday 18 October 2017 07.00 EDT

The Los Angeles neighbourhood of Boyle Heights has become a landmark battleground in the movement against gentrification, a contest widely seen as pitting working-class Latino activists against an influx of white-owned galleries.

The tactics - rallies, threats, boycotts, confrontations, smashed windows, graffiti saying "fuck white art" - are controversial and effective: one gallery has fled, others are nervous and have cancelled or moved events.

Chris Kraus, the film-maker and author of *I Love Dick*, recently cancelled a planned reading of her latest book at the 356 Mission gallery after activists threatened to disrupt the event.

A “climate of harassment and online trolling” made the event untenable, Hedi El Kholti, managing editor of Kraus’s publisher Semiotext(e), said. “Bullying and intimidation are opposed to the very values of the work we publish.”

Anti-gentrification activists in the United States and Europe have studied Boyle Heights, a cradle of the Chicano movement, as a potential model.

There is, however, an overlooked twist: some of the most radical members of the Boyle Heights resistance are white artists, most of whom do not appear to live in the neighborhood. Some of those appear to be using the banner of defending Boyle Heights to attack former friends and colleagues in LA’s arts community. Others have also targeted Latino artists and not-for-profit organisations from Boyle Heights, accusing them of being shills for invading capitalists.

These largely unreported battle lines skew the conventional anti-gentrification narrative and shine a light on a handful of mostly white artists and others perceived to be outsiders who have transferred political - and allegedly personal - agendas to local anti-gentrification groups.

“You have white guys telling a brown guy from the projects what to do in the community he grew up in,” said Joel Garcia, director of programs at Self Help Graphics and Art, a visual art space which promotes Latino and Chicano artists but has been accused of “collaboration” with the galleries.

Irene Peña, who helped run a community garden, said outsiders infiltrated and took over her project. They falsely claimed, she said, that grant money from the University of Southern California would lead to evictions. “Who are they? And why do they think that it’s their right to come into Boyle Heights and attack people and organisations that are serving the community?”

Steven Almazan, a former outreach chair of the Boyle Heights neighborhood council, said outsiders were vocal in a campaign against a hipster cafe which has twice been vandalised. “I found it kind of strange to hear people not from the neighbourhood speaking for the people of Boyle Heights.”

However, the sense of urgency over gentrification - families are being evicted; others are facing big rent hikes - muffles local criticism of some activists who have limited connections to the area, but are nonetheless seen as energetic and savvy.

“A lot of them have contradictions that we know about but [we] chose not to say anything,” said Rudy Espinoza, executive director of the Leadership for Urban Renewal Network, a not-for-profit group that also found itself in the activists’ crosshairs. The reason, Espinoza said, was to avoid division and not undermine their effectiveness in raising awareness about the housing crisis.

Boyle Heights is a hardscrabble, overwhelmingly Latino community which sits across the Los Angeles river from the lofts and skyscrapers of downtown. Surging property prices have

displaced Latino communities across east LA, prompting fear that Boyle Heights is next, with the arrival of about a dozen galleries potentially acting as a bridgehead for developers to swoop in. Mariachi musicians are already being priced out of homes around Mariachi Plaza.

Almost all stakeholders agree gentrification poses a threat to existing residents, especially renters.

The tactics and perceived motives of some activists, however, have raised the question of who speaks for Boyle Heights.

'A racist critique'



An exhibit at the Self Help Graphics & Art space in Boyle Heights, LA. Photograph: Rory Carroll for the Guardian

Angel Luna, a Latino activist who is from Boyle Heights, rejected any suggestion that outsiders had hijacked the resistance. “That’s a racist critique because it makes invisible the labour of people like myself. To assume we’re controlled by a group of white people is racist and offensive.”

The struggle was based on class, not race, he said, and Defend Boyle Heights, a coalition of radical groups, benefited from wide membership, including people not necessarily from the area: “The gentrifiers and alt-right agents are afraid of a diverse movement building.” Asked if some white artists brought their own baggage to the resistance, Luna said: “That’s a fair way to put it. But I’m afraid of feeding this racist idea that white people are at the centre of this movement.”

Several prominent protesters have or had personal ties to targeted gallery owners and artists.

Kean O’Brien, an artist who taught a course called Decolonization and Deconstruction at California State University, Long Beach, was a close friend of Jules Gimbrone and Barnett Cohen, who founded Pssst, a not-for-profit gallery. The friendship soured and O’Brien joined a campaign against the gallery.

“Those were my colleagues and friends who were making these big mistakes and causing displacement,” O’Brien said via email. “It is very unfortunate that I lost my friendships with Jules and Barnett ... however, I stand proudly in the position I have taken on artwashing and

will continue to challenge my colleagues, graduate school professors and friends as they participate in displacing people from their homes with their art careers. Our art careers are not worth more than people's rights to housing."

Gimbrone and Cohen closed Pssst in February, citing "constant attacks" and "highly personal" harassment, without identifying the sources. Gimbrone declined an interview request, saying only that he was "still processing all that happened".

Several artists and gallery owners, speaking anonymously, cited other cases of former friends and colleagues who now picketed their exhibitions and assailed them on social media. "It's all so weirdly interconnected. Most are people who have struggled in their own art career. It's about take-downs," said one.

Guadalupe Rosales, a successful Latina artist with roots in Boyle Heights who exhibited at Pssst, had her car vandalised. Trolls also criticised her on social media.

Rosales declined to comment on who targeted her, saying only in a joint statement with Matt Wolf, the director of a documentary about her, that the situation in Boyle Heights was "much more nuanced and complex" than the "community versus the galleries".

Gallery sources provided evidence of individuals who sought their patronage before turning against them via anonymous accounts on Instagram and other platforms. The Guardian put the allegations to two alleged trolls. One declined to respond, the other denied wrongdoing. The Guardian could not verify their role in online campaigns so is not naming them.

An anonymous Facebook page, Defend Boyle Heights from Defend Boyle Heights, has highlighted the role of Ultra-red, a small arts collective that advocates cultural and political struggle.

"It's people who are looking for a pressure point to bring about revolutionary change," said the Facebook poster, speaking on condition of anonymity, citing fear of retribution. He said he had attended Defend Boyle Heights meetings to help combat gentrification but recoiled at the influence of the Ultra-red "quartet".

It was a reference to Elizabeth Blaney, Dont Rhine and Walt Senterfitt, who are white, and Leonardo Vilchis, who is of Mexican heritage. The four are also prominent in Union de Vecinos, the LA Tenants Union and Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (Bhaad), groups which form part of the Defend Boyle Heights support base.

Rhine, a faculty co-chair at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, does not live in Boyle Heights. Senterfitt, an Aids researcher with a PhD from Yale, recently moved to Boyle Heights. Blaney and Vilchis have been active in Boyle Heights for decades.

The four give lectures and talks about gentrification, most recently at a Museum of Contemporary Art panel in June, which billed them as defenders of the public housing community.

Of the four, only Blaney was available for interview. She said the threat to Boyle Heights

justified robust tactics. “People’s basic need for shelter is being taken from them. That’s an act of violence. It’s a struggle of survival and self-defence. All different kinds of strategy are open. I’m not condoning smashing windows but I understand where it’s coming from.”

There is no suggestion Blaney or other members of Ultra-red are behind the vandalism.

Blaney played down the role of white activists. “It’s racist to imply that Latino members of the community can’t think for themselves and are brainwashed by a group of white people. It’s ludicrous and insulting to all they’re doing.” She said all those targeted by Defend Boyle Heights were gentrifiers or enablers.



Elizabeth Blaney, co-founder of Union de Vecinos, a community group in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles Photograph: Rory Carroll for the Guardian

Garcia, of Self Help Graphics and Art, denied that and accused the group of making false claims to boost its leaders’ profile and legitimacy.

“Our existence here threatens their validity to being social practice artists. We embody community arts practice. These artists are trying to usurp that. Attacking Self Help Graphics legitimises them - it has everything to do with their professional positioning.”

This article was amended on 20 October 2017. An earlier version said Union de Vecinos, the LA Tenants Union and Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (Bhaad) formed part of Defend Boyle Heights. This has been altered to say the groups form a part of Defend Boyle Heights’ support base.

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A protester rallies against a coffee shop that opened in June on Cesar Chavez Boulevard in Boyle Heights.

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Who's Winning and Losing in the Boyle Heights Gentrification War

JASON MCGAHAN | JULY 18, 2017 | 12:02PM

On a warm weekday afternoon in late June, a couple of young radicals with handmade protest signs were resting in the shade of the kiosk in Mariachi Plaza. They were coming from one anti-gentrification protest in Boyle Heights and would soon be heading to another

would soon be heading to another.

The young man was a ponytailed 21-year-old, serious and circumspect, who gave his name as "Anonymous." The woman, with a Bettie Page haircut and a septum piercing, was 18-year-old Marisol García.

García held up a square piece of cardboard and flipped it around. The words "No Coffee" were painted on one side and "People Over Profit" on the other. The first side was for picketing a hipster coffee shop that had opened the week before on Cesar Chavez Boulevard, the other for protesting the eviction of mariachis and other low-income tenants from an apartment building on Second Street.

García, who has lived in Boyle Heights all her life, says the issue underlying the protests is the same: gentrification. "We're being colonized," she says. "It's like we're supposed to adapt to what's becoming their neighborhood."

"It's urban colonialism," Anonymous added from his seat on the next step. "They move in, we move out because of the rising prices here in the local economy."

Words such as "colonist," "sellout," "scab," "collaborator" and even "coconut" (referring to someone who is "brown on the outside and white on the inside") are common currency among gentrification foes in Boyle Heights. They are words as a means of apportioning blame, and anyone who buys a cold-brewed iced coffee at Weird Wave on Cesar Chavez or attends an art opening on Anderson Street ("a hipster playground for future gentrifiers") is liable to hear them.

Many of the protesters wear masks at demonstrations, and according to *Newsweek* one breakaway group reportedly went into the new gallery district and [threw detergent on people attending an art opening](#); art was reportedly ruined as well. Protesters have driven one art gallery out of the neighborhood and recently forced another gallery to relocate its free concert venue outside the area. *La Opinión* has [compared the protesters to the Zapatistas](#).

García and Anonymous said they aren't with one of the headliner groups, ad hoc coalitions such as Boyle Heights Against Artwashing and Displacement, or

Defend Boyle Heights. They are part of a new group, they said, sounding almost shy. "We're a group of friends trying to inform the community the best we can," García said.

The eviction protest was about to start, and as they stood up to resume their protesting, Anonymous turned around the cardboard sign from the side that said "Gentrification Is Urban Colonialism" to the one that read "Boyle Heights *No Se Vende*" (Boyle Heights is not for sale).

They crossed First Street, where the Victorian-era Boyle Hotel rose before the downtown skyline, pretty as a postcard. They took a shortcut down an alley that connects First and Second, passing by a vacant lot on the corner that city officials recently awarded to a developer of affordable housing.

The strings and trumpet of a mariachi band sounded at their approach.

Boyle Heights has become the front line in the battle against the rising costs and threats of displacement caused by gentrification. Activists have railed against the "artwashing" of Boyle Heights, converging on the art galleries that populate the industrial district by the river and calling for supposed gentrifying businesses to withdraw from the neighborhood.

No other community in Los Angeles has resorted to such aggressive tactics to stop (or at least slow down) the approach of urban revitalization. Some real estate analysts say the guerrilla tactics are discouraging conflict-averse investors. "The negative response from the surrounding neighborhood is a downer," says Joseph Borda, a property manager for seven years in the neighborhood. "The land will be developed but probably slower than we expect because of it."

Or as David, the real estate agent responsible for the pink "We Buy Homes Cash" signs on the telephone poles (he declined to give his last name), puts it: "It's just the mentality, the culture of being in Boyle Heights – there are a lot of revolutionaries. It's going to push a few investors out. Some people just don't

want to deal with the neadacnes.

Dana Cuff, a professor of architecture/urban design and urban planning at UCLA, says what sets Boyle Heights apart from other gentrifying areas is that residents are speaking up before it is too late. "I think they are slowing things down there," Cuff says. "I think they're actually making their voices clear. And I think people, development interests and gentrifiers, have to listen."

"You can win some battles but you can't stop the whole thing. It'll be Echo Park here in 15 years." -Fernando Arevalos, owner of Boyle Heights Area Brand

Others, like Fernando Arevalos, a native son and owner of the T-shirt and accessory label Boyle Heights Area Brand, are more skeptical of the ability of protesters to slow gentrification. "You can win some battles but you can't stop the whole thing. It'll be Echo Park here in 15 years."

Perhaps never before in the up-and-down history of Boyle Heights has the neighborhood garnered so much interest from investors. Driven by rising property values elsewhere in the city, developers are eyeing what historically has been one of Los Angeles's most neglected neighborhoods.

"We've run out of room; it's just pure economics," Borda says. "You're seeing more yuppies, Caucasians coming in, and they're willing to pay the higher prices for rent. As a result, it's going to wreak havoc on the existing community."

Property values in Boyle Heights have been trending upward for years, aided by the area's timeless Victorian-era architecture and desirable location across the river from downtown's burgeoning Arts District. According to the real estate website Trulia, the median value of a single-family home in Boyle Heights has increased 35 percent over the past three years. That's a faster rate of increase than Silver Lake (28 percent), Echo Park (32 percent) and L.A. County as a whole (22 percent) though it's less than the city's poster child for gentrification

(42 percent), though it's less than the city's poster child for gentrification, Highland Park (41 percent).

The fact that the median sale price for a single-family home in Boyle Heights is \$216,000 less than the median value for all of L.A. County suggests the upward trend will continue.

Major developments in the neighborhood's more derelict south end will likely contribute to the continued rise: The Sears Building, a long-vacant art deco landmark on Olympic Boulevard, is being gut-renovated for 1,028 new units of market-rate housing and 99,000 square feet of ground-floor retail. A few blocks away on Olympic, the Depression-era Wyvernwood Garden Apartments could see 1,187 existing rent-controlled units on the property demolished and replaced with 4,400 condominiums and apartments with 300,000 square feet of retail and office space. The proposal is under review by the city.

In recent years, the city also has been making investments in Boyle Heights: The Metro Gold Line's Eastside extension in 2009 opened stations at Soto Street, Mariachi Plaza and Pico Aliso, and the planned \$500 million Sixth Street Viaduct will provide yet another connection for the neighborhood to downtown by 2020 (with a 12-acre park below). Even the concrete tangle of freeways that has long divided the landscape of Boyle Heights is a kind of selling point to more affluent new residents seeking proximity to the highway.

With the housing-cost crisis in L.A. showing no signs of abating and so much money at stake, how long will it be before Boyle Heights reaches a tipping point?

Carlos Esparza filled a glass with cold draft beer and put more popcorn in the bowl on the bar. Esparza, 45, earlier this year opened Pizza Beer and Wings on Soto Street, across from the Gold Line station. "People grow up here, they raise their children here, they stay here," he says of Boyle Heights. "There's a lot of pride in the neighborhood. It's tight-knit and family-oriented. Places like this need to be invested in."

According to historian Ricardo Romo, author of *East Los Angeles: History of a*

Barrio, the bonds of family and community in Eastside areas such as Boyle Heights are exceptional in Los Angeles, a city he calls the "fragmented metropolis par excellence." Romo pegged the emergence of the Mexican identity in the area to the 1930s, the result of a racially discriminatory policy that prohibited many Mexicans from owning or renting homes in other parts of the city and restricted them to areas "east of the river."

Once known as the Ellis Island of the West Coast, Boyle Heights was, in the 1930s and 40s, the heart of L.A.'s Jewish community and home to large numbers of Japanese, Russian and Serbian residents. After the construction of four freeways that expropriated 10 percent of the 6 square miles of the neighborhood, land values plummeted in the 50s, 60s and 70s – and the era of white flight began in earnest. In subsequent years, Boyle Heights transformed into the mostly low-income Mexican neighborhood it is today, a community made famous in films such as *Stand and Deliver*, *Born in East L.A.* and *American Me*, all of which were filmed there.

Of the 92,000 people who live in Boyle Heights today, 81 percent have Mexican ancestry and 94 percent are Latino, making it one of a handful of ethnically monolithic communities in L.A. County.

"There's a lot of history here," says Carlos Montes, a member of the Boyle Heights Neighborhood Council and a former Brown Beret. "In the '50s you have the fight against police brutality and the election of Edward Roybal, the first Latino congressperson from California in the 20th century. Then in the '60s you've got the East L.A. walkouts, the Chicano Moratorium against the war in Vietnam, the Chicano Power Decade, the Brown Berets."

Montes says the neighborhood activism of the past was focused on fighting a public policy of neglect. Community-led efforts blocked an above-ground pipeline that was supposed to carry oil from Santa Barbara to Long Beach through the heart of Boyle Heights in 1987, rolled back plans to install a hazardous-waste incinerator downwind from Boyle Heights in 1990 and stopped the construction of a state prison in nearby East L.A. in 1992.

Arevalos remembers the '90s as an era when Boyle Heights was marred by gang violence. "For four years we slept on the floor of the living room every night, because every night there were drive-bys," Arevalos says. "Gentrification is what will stop violence in the neighborhood."

One of the comforts of home for Kenny Sanchez is the view of the downtown skyline from the front porch of his house perched on the crest of a hill in Boyle Heights. From the window of his living room upstairs, he can watch the postgame fireworks at Dodger Stadium.

"I live in the good part of Boyle Heights," he says, which I learn is an inside joke. Everyone in Boyle Heights thinks the bad part of the neighborhood is somewhere else.

Sanchez has an interesting résumé. He was a jockey who raced thoroughbred horses for two decades. He lives in a part of Boyle Heights where several of the houses, including his own, are turn-of-the-century Victorians designated by the city as historic properties. Some of them look as though they haven't been painted in this century. "A lot of homes haven't been upgraded," he says. "They're falling apart."





Kenny Sanchez in front of his multifamily Boyle Heights home, which his mother bought in 1980

Ted Soqui

The condition of the houses does not discourage admirers. People stop their cars to gawk at the houses, which have what a real estate blurb might describe as good bones. Sometimes the admirers get out and take pictures. For most of the 20 years he has lived there, he says, Boyle Heights was more notorious than sought-after. He appreciates the attention.

As if given the signal from Sanchez, a tour guide on a bicycle leads a peloton of cyclists around the bend. Several of them scan the house as they pass by. Cyclists in Spandex riding gear used to be a novelty on Pleasant Avenue. Now he sees them all the time, more often than graffiti taggers.

Sanchez shows me the most recent flyer a real estate broker put in his mailbox. The headline is a screamer: "Prices of Properties Are Rising!!!"

It also says, "We have several buyers wanting to invest in property in your area. ... We have more buyers than properties for sale."

There are photos of a few houses in the neighborhood that sold recently and their sale price.

"A car wreck knocked that one off the foundation," Sanchez says, pointing at one of the photos. "Owner sold it for \$450,000 and they tore down the house. The duplex next to that sold for \$880,000."

Houses on Pleasant Avenue are flipping like flapjacks. Real estate records confirm what Sanchez senses all around him. According to the real estate database ProspectNow, 10 of his neighbors have sold since last March. That's nearly a quarter of the 43 residential properties in the three-block area – and more houses than have sold there in the previous 10 years combined.

"We knew it was going to change," Sanchez says, "but not this much."

The Victorian next door to Sanchez's is a historic home built in 1875, with a sagging roof and paint chipped off the wood paneling and trim. The owner, a furtive man in his 60s who declined to give his name, told me he inherited the house from an elderly aunt and that he sold it that week for \$430,000 (the median home price in the city is \$629,900). It all happened so quickly; he says the second visitor to the house offered the asking price. There wasn't even time to put a For Sale sign in the yard.

According to real estate brokers in Boyle Heights, many of the homes in the neighborhood are too far gone for their owners to afford repairs. Many take what they can get. Boyle Heights ranks in the bottom 10 percent of L.A. neighborhoods in terms of median household income.

Sanchez says he is holding on tight to his house.

Strips of wood molding rest on the porch behind him, and the buzz of an electric drill drifts up from one of the downstairs apartments. When Sanchez's mother bought the house in 1980, she divided it into four units. He and his mother live in separate units upstairs, and he is doing a gut renovation of the lower units and installing brand-new appliances. "Keeping up with the times," he says.

"We're not going anywhere," he says of himself and his mother, "even if someone throws money at us. I love it here."

Many commercial and residential buildings in Boyle Heights have belonged to the same families since as far back as the 1940s. Many owners have kept the rents low, which is why the mostly working-class residents can afford to live and run businesses there. The relationship between landlord and tenant can go back generations on both sides.

But market pressure from outside the neighborhood is building.

"The incidents of other East L.A. neighborhoods are getting mixed out," says

The [residents of] other East L.A. neighborhoods are getting priced out, says Nicole Deflorian, a commercial realtor who has worked to transform the York and Figueroa corridors of Highland Park. "Investors are looking to buy, and a lot of areas are overpriced."

She says of Boyle Heights: "That's the one area on the Eastside that's still decently priced as far as purchasing goes."

Jorge Tello, a tailor who has sewn mariachi suits or *charro* costumes for the likes of Anthony Quinn, Carlos Santana and Plácido Domingo, has run La Casa del Mariachi in Boyle Heights since 1982. But business isn't what it used to be, and he says that once a month a gaggle of white people in suits comes in to ask who owns the building.



Jorge Tello has operated a tailor shop on East First Street for 35 years.

Ted Soqui

Hardly any of the proprietors on First Street even has a lease, Tello says, and the owners can ask them to leave at a month's notice. The owner of Tello's building is 75-year-old Pedro Prieto, who operates the sporting goods store next door.

Prieto tells Tello he won't sell. "But if he gets a multimillion-dollar offer ... as we say in Spanish, *con dinero baila el perro*," Tello says.

Prieto is an former welterweight prizefighter from Mexico who moved to Boyle Heights at age 19 on a boxing visa. He says in-the-know people in the neighborhood have told him it's too early to sell. "Investors have come and offered to buy," he says, "but I don't need the money and I haven't sold."

Dr. Feliciano Serrano, a nephrologist from Huntington Park, paid \$4 million for the building next door. (He could not be reached for comment.) "We were given until January," says Guadalupe Barajas, co-owner of Yeya's, a Mexican kitchenette.

Sonny Rouel purchased four properties in Boyle Heights last year for just short of \$5 million. He drove me to see them in his Rolls-Royce.

He says of his real estate strategy: "I like to get in ahead of the path." Hollywood and Vine in 2002. Silver Lake in 2010. He went on a \$10 million shopping spree last year in Boyle Heights and Koreatown.

Boyle Heights reminds him of Hollywood and Vine, he says, "after the Red Line, before the W."

The recent purchase he likes best is the old bank building at Cesar Chavez and Soto. It's a red-brick historic landmark built in 1913 and covered on the Soto Street side with one of the neighborhood's largest and most prominent murals: *El Corrido de Boyle Heights*, painted in 1983. "Where I'm from in the Valley, you don't see architecture like that," he says. He paid \$2.68 million.

"Someone else tried to buy the building from me already," he says. "I've gotten offers on all of them, for considerably more than what I paid for them." He says 40 to 100 percent more, \$3 million more. He's looking to buy three more properties in Boyle Heights this year.





Sonny Rouel at his building on Soto Street and Cesar Chavez Avenue

Ted Soqui

Rouel says he isn't familiar with the protests in the neighborhood. "I don't know much about Boyle Heights," he says. "There was stuff for sale, it was relatively close to downtown, and the price – well, downtown is very expensive."

He doesn't care for the term gentrification ("for obvious reasons," he says) and has little patience for superlatives ("I don't know about the hottest market," he says, "but it's one of them").

He steers the Rolls onto Eighth Street and two women waiting for a bus at the corner lift their eyes. The next set of his holdings whizzes past the window: a family restaurant, a clinic, the apartments upstairs and the single-family home in the back. He paid \$2.1 million for two buildings.

"Everybody's getting priced out of downtown - residential and commercial buyers. You wouldn't believe the people coming into Boyle Heights." -real estate developer Sonny Rouel

He says he's keeping rents the same, keeping the tenants the same. He prefers stability. He waits – he plays the long game. Bigger buyers are coming in and sellers are raising the asking price.

The tipping point is coming, he says. He doesn't know when, but things in Boyle Heights are changing quickly. "It's already happening," he says. "I already see it just driving around. Everybody's getting priced out of downtown – residential and commercial buyers. You wouldn't believe the people coming into Boyle Heights."

Tenants of the apartment building at 1815 E. Second St. went on rent strike on June 28. The windows on one side of the apartment building are covered with handmade protest signs. "I got \$800 rent hike," says one sign. "The landlord BJ Turner doesn't care about us."

Frank "BJ" Turner is one example of what affordable-housing advocates say is a growing trend among new buyers of Boyle Heights apartment buildings. He bought the building earlier this year, and tenants say he put in central air conditioning and a washer-dryer, and at the entrance installed an accent wall and accent lighting, along with a privacy fence and a row of potted succulents. Tenants say their rents immediately increased between 60 and 80 percent, and they complain about problems not addressed by the improvements: water damage from a leaky roof, dark mold on a shower ceiling, rusted and filthy bedroom vents, a door partially devoured by termites.

"This is not an increase, it's an outrage," says a 62-year-old tenant named Pedro Zúñiga, who got a letter from Turner's property management firm in January informing him of a 60 percent rent increase, to \$1,495 from \$945, on the one-bedroom apartment he shares with his wife and teenage daughter.

Zúñiga is one of 10 mariachis who live in the building. Living a block from Mariachi Plaza is "extremely important" to his livelihood, he says. "It's where the

customers know they can find mariachis. It's where one mariachi comes to hire another mariachi to join him on a job. You won't get that work if you live far away."

The activists say that, adding insult to injury, they recently came across an advertisement for the building on Craigslist; it has been rebranded as "affordable luxury apartments" and rechristened in an online advertisement as "Mariachi Crossing."

The tenants, who are members of the Boyle Heights–based affordable-housing advocacy group Unión de Vecinos, say they have continued to pay rent in the previous amount while they attempt to meet with Turner to negotiate a more affordable rent increase. Turner has declined to meet with them, and in late June he filed in court to have them evicted. (Turner did not respond to a request for comment for this story. A representative from Turner's property manager, Crescent Canyon Management, said: "All I can tell you is that we have no comment at this time, but thank you for calling.")

According to real estate website Zillow, Boyle Heights ranked 11th in terms of rent increases among L.A. neighborhoods from January 2015 to May 2017. The median rent for an apartment in Boyle Heights has risen by more than 40 percent in the past three years.

The rise in rents is impressive considering that 88 percent of the renters in Boyle Heights are protected by city rent-control laws, according to City Councilmember José Huizar's office – meaning that by law landlords usually cannot raise the rent on those units any more than 3 percent a year.

According to Elizabeth Blaney, co-director of Unión de Vecinos, landlords are resorting to more aggressive means to pressure tenants to vacate. Blaney says landlords are known to offer "cash for keys" or two months rent-free to entice tenants to move out, as well as ignoring requests for repairs to rent-controlled units and in some cases even threatening to call U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and have tenants deported.

Larry Gross, founder of the L.A. tenants rights organization Coalition for Economic Survival, points out that rental units in L.A. built after 1978, including the mariachis' building, have no rent control – and so the landlord has the right to raise the rent without reason. "They're in a rowboat in rough seas without a lifesaver," he says. "Thus it becomes a straight political public pressure fight to get a landlord to back off without rent control."

The nonprofit L.A. Center for Community Law & Action is representing the mariachi building tenants in their eviction proceedings.

Led by a quintet of mariachis playing trumpet and guitars, a crowd of 50 affordable-housing supporters marched from Turner's building to a rally at Mariachi Plaza on June 28. A flyer made for the event said "Displacing Mariachis = Destroying the Culture of Boyle Heights."

"Gentrification is a process – it's not a single person," said one of the marchers, Melissa Castro, a recent graduate of Mills College who lives at her parents' home in the neighborhood. "How do we get our public officials to come out in person publicly and say they do not support what is happening?"

"We all want to see Boyle Heights become a more beautiful place," she continues. "The problem is they haven't done that for us in the last 50 years. So now we have to wonder who they're making it pretty for, and will we be here in five or 10 years to enjoy it."

Correction: *A previous version of this story incorrectly stated the redevelopment plan at Wyvernwood Garden Apartments was approved by the city; it is still under review.*

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Editorial Boyle Heights anti-gentrification activists hurt their cause by making it about race, rather than economics



John Schwarz, co-owner of Weird Wave Coffee, assesses damage caused by someone who may have thrown a rock at the glass door of the coffee shop on July 19. The business has been the target of anti-gentrification protests since it opened mid-June. (Los Angeles Times)

By **The Times Editorial Board**

JULY 20, 2017, 5:00 AM

Longtime residents of Boyle Heights have legitimate reasons to fear the market forces reshaping their neighborhood. Rents are already going up as more affluent people move in and property values increase. Tenant groups say landlords are evicting longtime residents and business in the hopes of making more money from new tenants. Demonstrations and activism are becoming more common — last month, 100 people rallied in support of mariachis and other tenants in danger of losing their homes — as neighborhood residents worry they may become outsiders in their own community.

This is not just a Boyle Heights problem. Communities all over Los Angeles are changing as young

professionals move eastward chasing affordable houses to buy — and looking for the next cool neighborhood. From Venice to Koreatown to Echo Park to Downtown Los Angeles, neighborhood grocery stores and panaderias have given way to hipster coffee houses, artisanal ice cream parlors and vinyl record outlets. Apartment buildings have turned luxury and low-income renters have found themselves priced out of their neighborhoods.

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Low-income people of all races — especially those who rent rather than own — are at risk when they live in a newly hot neighborhood.

In Boyle Heights, this tension has turned angry, leading to efforts to chase away businesses that may be the harbingers of gentrification — notably art galleries and coffee shops (though, curiously, not the local Starbucks). The demonstrations and online trolling have succeeded in at least one case: Earlier this year, the PSSST art gallery closed, citing the constant harassment. Now protesters have turned their attention to Weird Wave Coffee Brewers, a new business on Cesar Chavez Boulevard.

The demonstrators, to their credit, have focused attention on how gentrification benefits some people and crushes others, and, in so doing, have highlighted the feeble response from city officials to the threat residents face from displacement. But even as they have taken on some tough issues, the demonstrators have also showed signs of an intolerance that threatens to undermine their own arguments.

For instance, the demonstrators at the coffee shop have passed out fliers calling it “White Wave” Coffee Brewers (although one of the owners is Latino). Another sign at the demonstrations mentioned the Ku Klux Klan and others made derogatory (and obscene) use of the word “white.” The unfortunate decision to frame the gentrification debate in racial terms was made early on. A profanity about “white art” was scrawled on one of the art galleries targeted by the protesters. Latinos who defended the galleries or the coffee shop were derided as “coconuts.” (Brown on outside, white on the inside.)

No doubt many of the higher income people moving into this mostly Latino neighborhood are white. But at its core, gentrification is an economic force, not a racial one, and low-income people of all races — especially those who rent rather than own — are at risk when they live in a newly hot neighborhood. It’s also worth remembering that gentrification often comes with certain benefits; new residents bring in new businesses, which in turn can mean new jobs and other advantages for local residents.

Displacement due to gentrification is a serious issue. But activists would do more for their cause if they’d stop focusing on running new businesses out of town and alienating people with offensive racial comments,

and take their signs instead to City Hall to demand more policies that help protect longtime residents and businesses in Boyle Heights from being forced out of their neighborhood.

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