

Opinion A calm before the storm of gentrification on Crenshaw



Construction has begun near the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza, in the empty stretch of land behind Marlon Square. (Nijla Mu'min)

By **Nijla Mu'min**

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I meet Nitro on the corner of Buckingham Road and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, an area straddling the border of the Baldwin Hills/Crenshaw and Leimert Park neighborhoods of South Los Angeles. He sits in front of a large, abandoned building with boarded windows, cracked paint and sprayed-on warnings not to trespass onto “private property.” An 84-year-old former musician, he tells me about the various black-owned clubs in the area where he performed over the years, including the nearby Flying Fox bar, which closed down in January.

I ask him a question that’s been on my mind whenever I visit this community — if he objects to the migration of white residents into the area because of redevelopment? “No, because they’re already here,” he says.

I ask him what he means. “Many of the black businesses [rent from them](#),” he replies. “They own Los Angeles.”

There may be some truth to his statement, but his casual dismissal can’t hide the fact that a tide of change is currently swamping the neighborhoods surrounding Crenshaw Boulevard.

Redevelopment is underway along the still-under-construction Crenshaw/ LAX light-rail line, which will include stops in Leimert Park, Inglewood and Los Angeles International Airport, and will be finalized in 2019. Capri Partners Investment group, which completed an earlier renovation of the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza -- adding Chipotle, Buffalo Wild Wings and Post & Beam restaurants, and Rave Cinemas -- will add to it 2 million square feet of new hotel and retail space, offices, condos and apartments. Odds are that empty spaces in the neighborhood, like the Flying Fox, probably won’t be that way for long.

The Crenshaw corridor is officially “up and coming.”

I learned about Leimert Park and the surrounding Crenshaw communities through stories. During my junior year at UC Berkeley in 2006, my friend Amena Jefferson-Mebane told stories of her mother, [L.A. Rebellion](#) filmmaker [Melvonna Ballenger](#), who organized free film workshops for youths in the area while her father played chess into the wee hours of the morning at [5th Street Dick’s](#), a historic black cafe. She spoke of poetry readings at the [World Stage](#), jazz and African drums wafting through her windows and the enduring presence of black art.

I wanted to experience this place -- a self-sustaining black community, something very different than the diverse Bay Area cities I’d grown up in.

My wish came true two years later during a visit to L.A. It didn’t disappoint.

I remember eating fried catfish and creamy yams in Leimert Park at M&M Soul Food (which has since closed and become R&G Soul food -- handwritten signs for chitterlings in the windows). Afterward, I walked over to Degnan Boulevard and found Melvonna Ballenger’s name memorialized on the Sankofa Walk. I bought a novel at the black-owned bookstore Eso Won Books.

It was obvious Leimert Park was a special place.

When I was accepted as an MFA student in film and writing at CalArts in 2010, I decided to live there, braving the hour-plus commute to Valencia each day. I often went to bed and woke up to the

sound of someone playing a trumpet or saxophone next door to me. When I'd go to the Albertsons on Crenshaw, many people knew each other by name and they'd catch up in line, informing each other of the latest news, job promotions and celebrations with deep, throaty laughter and a familial closeness. I was captivated by this sense of community. I came to know this as black L.A.

And unlike many other urban communities of color across America, overrun with gentrification, black L.A. was thriving.

Numa Perrier, a visual artist and co-founder of the popular [Black and Sexy TV](#), moved to Leimert Park with her partner and daughter around the time I did.

"When we first moved here there wasn't a whole lot going on publicly," she says, "but we knew this was once a home to some of [our most revered underground filmmakers](#) and artists, and we felt a resurgence beginning to happen. We wanted to contribute."

Perrier began to use the neighborhood as the backdrop for her TV series -- and watched as other black artists began to use Leimert Park as their canvas.

"There are now monthly art walks, two of our friends have galleries: [Papillion](#) in Leimert and [On The Ground Floor](#) in View Park. Then there's Mark Bradford's art space [Art + Practice](#). None of that existed five years ago, but it was quietly in the works."

As of late though, it feels like that artistic resurgence has been met with conditions that make it difficult for residents and artists to live. As Perrier puts it: "Rents have increased. Businesses are closing left and right. We never get too used to a new place, because we know a few months later, it would be gone."

These changes have already started to affect the area's racial makeup. I spoke with Hayley Roberts, 31, a nonprofit consultant who was raised in the nearby View Park/Windsor Hills area, known for its black, middle-class affluence. She says she's already witnessed the ramping up of developers buying and flipping houses.

"To say it plainly: there is a definite increase in the number of white people I see walking around," she tells me. "L.A. is an extremely segregated city. When I was growing up, it would be rare for me to see a white person grocery shopping at the Ralphs in the Ladera Center or grabbing a smoothie from [Simply Wholesome](#). Now it's rare for me not to see a white person in these types of places."

There isn't anything wrong with different people beginning to appreciate all that this area has to offer. However, the dangers of the changing racial demographics were recently hammered home by a

segment on KCRW's local news show "[Which Way, L.A.](#)," in which a young white woman vented her frustration over her family's inability to afford housing even in "transitional" neighborhoods like Windsor Hills.

Roberts heard that interview and it gave her pause.

"Transitioning from what? This area has been home to stable individuals and families for generations," she said. "Did she mean it's transitional just because the majority of the families living there happen to be a different color?"

To those of us who have lived there, the neighborhoods surrounding Crenshaw Boulevard are more than just real estate investment opportunities. Where else can you find this large concentration of black elders, black artists, black youths and black business owners? It isn't rare to find the third or fourth generation of a black family living in a house or apartment along Crenshaw. Roberts says that new residents spurred by gentrification might not understand this when they move in:

"I worry that the new development may encourage people from outside the black community to indulge their prejudices without acknowledging the rich history and assets that already exist here," she said.

How will Leimert Park's long-celebrated black artistic presence merge with the commerce-oriented structures that will border it? Will the black, artistic legacy that drew me to the community fade away, or will the newcomers provide much-needed patronage to keep these new art spaces and businesses thriving? Some in the community seem to echo Nitro's ambivalence about these questions, because 2019 is years away and exactly what will happen with the Crenshaw Plaza redevelopment is an unknown to many — including some local business owners and residents who've grown accustomed to the vacant lots and the empty storefronts along Crenshaw Boulevard.

For the time being, the area gives the false impression of neglect. The weeds around the now boarded-up [Marlton Square](#) have grown taller, and the Flying Fox is just empty space. The large lot behind it is set to house a new addition of a [Kaiser Permanente hospital](#), a project years in the making. A construction crane lurks on the empty land, while local residents park cars and big rigs along its outskirts.

My hope is that I don't look back at the desolation of these lots and buildings and remember them fondly -- as a welcome placeholder to the gentrification that will follow. A rare calm before the storm.

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FOR THE RECORD

A previous version of this story incorrectly said the Flying Fox closed in 2010 because of health code violations.

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