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Freedom Now! Struggles for the Human Right to Housing in LA and Beyond

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The Los Angeles Community Action Network presents

FREEDOM NOW!



**Struggles
for the
Human
Right to
Housing
in LA
and
Beyond**

**Edited by
Jordan T. Camp &
Christina Heatherton**

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FREEDOM NOW!
STRUGGLES FOR THE
HUMAN RIGHT TO HOUSING IN
LOS ANGELES AND BEYOND

*Edited and Introduced by Jordan T. Camp & Christina Heatherton,
With a Foreword by Ruth Wilson Gilmore & Christina Heatherton*

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In memory of Dr. Clyde A. Woods.

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FIXING BROKEN WINDOWS WITHOUT BATONS

RUTH WILSON GILMORE &
CHRISTINA HEATHERTON

Downtown Los Angeles has become a laboratory for a policing philosophy known as the “broken windows theory.” The concept is deceptively simple: to stop major crimes you must first prevent small signs of “disorder” from proliferating, such as graffiti, litter, panhandling, public urination, etc. It proposes that the best way to prevent major crimes is for people to take responsibility for their neighborhoods and for the police to facilitate that process. While this model of policing purports to make communities safer, in practice, this strategy has been deployed to suppress housing and homeless struggles in the city. Like mass incarceration, broken windows policing is the state’s attempt to produce a geographical solution to mass racialized and gendered poverty.

Over the past twenty years, broken windows has had multiple testing grounds. The term was coined by conservative scholars, James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, in a 1982 magazine article. It came to fame in New York City during the 1990s when William Bratton, then transit Police Chief, targeted people who were jumping over subway turnstiles and sleeping on benches as signs of disorder. After issuing a

number of citations and increasing arrests, Bratton and conservative think-tank the Manhattan Institute declared the philosophy a success. Many media outlets followed suit. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (who was also working with the Manhattan Institute) appointed Bratton as Police Commissioner in 1994. Together they targeted panhandlers and “squeegee men” and were credited with “cleaning up” New York City. Amidst some of the highest levels of poverty, unemployment, and underemployment in city history, which disproportionately affected communities of color, the broken windows strategy successfully managed to scapegoat the racialized poor as the culprits of economic decline.

In Skid Row, Los Angeles, William Bratton found a new laboratory for broken windows. Appointed LA police chief in 2002, Bratton brought his strategy to the nation’s capital of homelessness. Skid Row in downtown LA is home to the city’s densest concentration of poverty and also the largest concentration of counseling, recovery and survival services. In 2006 Chief Bratton along with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa’s office unveiled the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI), a mea-

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sure that authorized \$6.5 million for additional police resources mostly concentrated in a 15 to 20 block Skid Row enforcement zone. This allocation exceeded the \$5.7 million budgeted for all homeless services city-wide. In doing so, the city turned its abandoned spaces and impoverished people into broken windows problems. Following New York's example, Los Angeles has chosen to fix its so-called broken windows with batons.

Since 2006 the LAPD has routinely cited and ticketed poor people for minor offenses such as jaywalking, loitering, and littering. Within the first three years of SCI, the LAPD issued citations at a rate of 69 times the rate of the rest of the city, and made over 28,000 arrests in a community with less than 15,000 people. After five years, the question facing Los Angeles is, has broken windows policing made downtown safer?

SCI was never intended to rebuild the local community. Rather, it has aided efforts to clear an impoverished area that had suddenly become attractive to real estate speculators. It was implemented not long after the construction of LA Live, a major entertainment complex of hotels, residences, bars, shops, restaurants, and nightclubs linked to the Staples Center stadium. Under Bratton, a portion of Skid Row became Gallery Row, home to new lofts, stylish apartments rebuilt from former low-income single room occupancy hotels, high scale bars, restaurants and boutique stores; developments made possible through the forced

displacement of the poor and people of color. The absence of former residents is ghoulishly marked in the landscape with coffee shops like "Lost Souls," a reference to the suicides in the previous location, and redeveloped hotels like the Alexandria which has turned its reputation as a haunted house into selling points for potential hipster residents.

The experience of SCI has exposed the major problems with broken windows policing. Its application in poor and working class communities of color has led to displacement, incarceration, and increased impoverishment. It has fractured the very social binds that it purports to strengthen. It has created spaces where police ultimately control people's life chances, access to resources, and quality of life. As James Q. Wilson has recently suggested, the idea of broken windows policing is better understood as a type of "broken windows government."¹

The spatial history of broken windows governance in Los Angeles is extremely significant. William Bratton and others have had profitable success exporting these strategies to other police departments and foreign governments throughout the world. After leaving his post as LAPD chief in 2009, Bratton has served in a number of positions, such as an international security consultant courted by the British government, the Vice Chairman of the Homeland Security Advisory Council; and the Chairman of

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Kroll, a major global risk and security solutions company which competes with groups DynCorp and Xe (formerly known as Blackwater) for U.S. military security funds and which has been hired by financial industry firms such as Bear Stearns and JP Morgan Chase. The more official rhetoric about broken windows presents it to be the success it has not been, the more that the features of American policing, mass arrest, prison expansion, criminalization of youth, profiling along lines of race, class, and gender nonconformity, and the militarization of public space will become global phenomena.

As *Freedom Now!* shows, there are alternatives to broken windows. Groups like Skid Row's Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) demonstrate that it is possible to rehabilitate communities through organizing and the development of local neighborhood ties. Their grassroots campaigns to contest SCI, protect public housing, ensure rent stabilization, prevent gentrification, contest criminalization and make national and global links have had major impacts on policy and redevelopment. Just as importantly, their actions have enabled new ways of thinking. They have defied the broken windows logic that communities can only achieve security through the police. They offer a radical redefinition of safe communities, one that draws on the legacies of civil rights and freedom struggles by demanding housing as a human right. Their work has shown that it is possible to fix broken windows without batons, a model every

city should learn to follow.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore is Professor of Geography at the City University of New York Graduate Center. She is the author of Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California. She works regularly with community groups and grassroots organizations.

Christina Heatherton is a Ph.D. Candidate in American Studies and Ethnicity at USC. She edited Downtown Blues: A Skid Row Reader, and is currently working on her dissertation entitled Linked Fates: Radical Internationalism and the Mexican Revolution.

NOTES

1. James Q. Wilson, "This Works: Crime Prevention and the Future of Broken Windows Policing," *Manhattan Institute Civic Bulletin* 36 (May 2004).

INTRODUCTION: BREAKING THE SILENCE

JORDAN T. CAMP & CHRISTINA HEATHERTON

In a speech he delivered on April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was determined to “break the silence” about wars both at home and abroad. Dr. King saw that the same “security” techniques developed for foreign wars were being deployed against poor people’s struggles for social justice at home. For him, breaking the silence meant directing resources away from militarism and towards the abolition of racism and poverty. Only by doing so, he argued, could the country heed the call of “freedom now.”

Four and a half decades later, as we live through the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, Dr. King’s call resonates louder than ever. We still see resources disproportionately being spent on war and prisons. We are still enduring attacks on the right to public housing, education, healthcare, and transportation won during the civil rights revolution. Struggles to preserve these rights are still met by hostile ideological forces as well as ruthless militarized urban police forces. In this moment, *Freedom Now! Struggles for the Human Right to Housing in Los Angeles and Beyond* reclaims the visions of freedom that have grown out of Black radical and working-class traditions. It follows the lead of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), a social justice organization located in

the heart of LA’s Skid Row that fights for housing, civil, and human rights. With the help of other grassroots activists, artists, and social analysts this reader is an effort to think about the housing crisis from Los Angeles to Durban in order to better understand why such an urgent global struggle has emerged demanding housing as a human right.

The following interviews and essays offer different dimensions of this struggle: In “We Refuse,” Rhonda Williams argues that we can better understand public housing as a social good for all people if we focus on the organizing work promoted by low-income Black women. She writes that the demand for housing rights, “honor[s] the legacies of low-income women’s struggle against urban inequality.” In this vein, Gaye Theresa Johnson reflects on her visit with community organizers in the Pueblo del Rio housing development in South Central. She suggests that their stories reveal the potential of Black and Brown community building as well as the challenges that housing rights activists face in mobilizing for social change. These Pueblo del Rio organizers, Alma Brown, Lilian Payan, Lucia Sanchez and others who asked not to be named, share their powerful stories of survival and organizing in discussion with Johnson. All are mothers and, as Lucia Sanchez states, all want,

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“asegudar un techo, cosas para mis niños, un hogar” (to secure a roof, things for my children, and a home). In their article, “Why the Silence?” David Wagner and Pete White argue that advocates, social scientists, and journalists need to break the silence around race and homelessness. This silence, they suggest, has obscured the crisis of homelessness that disproportionately affects deindustrialized Black workers. They compel us to recognize “the interplay between race, inequality, and the 30-year crisis of homelessness, if any change or progress is to be made on the issue.”

In “The Housing Question” Mike Davis describes Los Angeles’ thirty-year strategy of responding to homelessness with a policy of “containment” in Skid Row. Yet Davis observes that the introduction of Bratton-style intensive policing “is a cynical shell game” endorsed by the most “powerful geographical interests” to legitimate displacement, gentrification, and capital accumulation. He argues that housing struggles should be explicitly linked to struggles for jobs and draw inspiration from social movements of the early 1930s. J.R. Fleming of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign would agree. In “Human Rights Enforcers,” he describes how the strategies and tactics in housing rights campaigns have been influenced by movements like Chicago’s Unemployed Councils in the 1930s, the Chicago Black Panther Party in the 1960s, and the contemporary Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign. Fleming details how these social visions of housing rights include a unique combination of labor, civil, and human rights perspectives. In “Housing is a Human Right,” Daniel Martinez HoSang

describes the ways in which oppressive housing conditions have been endemic to Black and Brown communities in South Los Angeles for over forty years. If Californians had learned to listen to voices in the civil rights movement about solutions to the housing crisis in the early 1960s, he argues, “we would not be in this position today.”

Founder of Public Enemy and Hip Hop legend Chuck D tours Skid Row with Pete White and General Dogon of LA CAN. Their tour situates the struggle against gentrification and for the human right to housing amidst historical changes in Black Los Angeles. Chuck D raises the question of why this dramatic story is not better known given the concentration of media production in LA: “All I see here for miles is nothing but Black folks. How can you not tell this story?” In “Gentrification, Dispossession, and the Struggle for Dignity,” General Dogon also reflects on LA CAN’s role in contesting displacement from his experience as a longtime resident and community organizer. In recalling the gentrification of residential hotels, Dogon offers vivid examples of the violent expulsion and dispossession of poor communities of color that have enabled the accumulation of land and capital.

In “Learning from Los Angeles,” George Lipsitz demonstrates that the Safer Cities Initiative to criminalize the racialized poor in Skid Row represents a broader attack on civil rights and an investment in policing policies that “produce the very problems their presence purports to prevent.” He writes that while cities and states

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should produce housing for the poor, they have instead invested in the “safety” of gentrifiers, owners, and investors. Learning from Los Angeles, Lipsitz concludes, means that, “unless we overturn the Safer Cities Initiative and the broader social warrant of neoliberalism on which it depends, no one will be safer and ultimately all of us will be a lot sorer.” After all in “What You Need to Know about Special Order 11,” community organizer Hamid Khan explains downtown Skid Row residents have been test-subjects of new policing and surveillance measures by the LAPD that are being exported across the country. He shows how poor people facing and fighting eviction and homelessness have been targeted alongside undocumented immigrants, criminalized Black and Brown youth, and LGBTQI communities, people “whose daily life is considered a ‘suspicious’ activity.”

Freedom Now! engages the voices and tells the stories of community residents and organizers in Los Angeles as well as human rights activists nationally and internationally such as Rob Robinson from the Campaign to Restore National Housing Rights. It includes Skid Row resident-organizer Deborah Burton’s speech to the United Nations’ (UN) Universal Periodic Review in Geneva, Switzerland. Burton explains how her experiences reveal the failures of the U.S. government to honor the human right to housing. She also states that “thousands like me are fighting everyday to push our local, state, and federal government to acknowledge our rights to housing.” In “Fighting for Housing and the Right

to Return,” Mayday New Orleans cofounder Sam L. Jackson, Sr. recounts the campaigns of low-income public housing residents in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He explains how the Black working class has fought for the right to return and to rebuild their communities in face of racism, restructuring, and repression. In “The Human Right to Housing,” Sb’u Zikode, an organizer with Abahlali baseMjondolo, a movement of South African Shack dwellers, speaks with housing organizers from across Los Angeles. In this dynamic conversation about the human right to housing, Zikode observes, “Whether we are homeless, whether we are unemployed, we are all human beings. But our humanity becomes complete when we recognize the humanity of those around us.” This point is made clear in excerpts throughout the book as: Lydia Trejo, Steve Diaz, Bilal Ali, King Gerald, Wesley Walker, Karl Scott, James Porter, Soni Abdel, Al Sabo, and Pam Walls describe their links to Los Angeles, their histories of organizing and their transformative experiences that brought them to LA CAN. In a “Dialogue on Homelessness” by LA CAN members, Black Panther and longtime housing activist Bilal Ali links contemporary criminalization efforts to the repression of freedom struggles. He explains, “We are seeing a backlash because we dared to rise up, dared to struggle, and dared to put this country on notice about inequality.”

We are releasing *Freedom Now!* during the twentieth anniversary of the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion, the largest urban uprising in U.S. history. Twenty years ago,

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Los Angeles was experiencing the then worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. At that time, the city was facing historic levels of poverty and unemployment; students were attending underfunded public schools; resources were disproportionately going to jails, prisons and policing; and the racialized poor were living in squalid and combustible housing conditions. The state's response at that time: callous public policy, repression in place of relief, and rhetorical resentment against the poor and people of color, only fanned the flames of rage. Yet we should also remember that almost 45 years ago, we were facing similar conditions. In a 1968 letter, Dr. King wrote about the urban uprisings of his time, "it was obdurate government callousness to misery that first stoked the flames of misery and frustration." To call for the human right to housing is to make a revolutionary demand for the redistribution of wealth and a radical rejection of misery. In making these calls for housing, for education, for what is rightfully ours and against militarism and prisons, we find ourselves entwined in a deep history of liberation struggles whose visions are still to be realized.

Drawing on the legacy of the Freedom Movement, we hope *Freedom Now!* will play a part in the growing struggles against gentrification and the securitization of cities; complement the struggle for the human right to housing; and serve as a teaching and popular education tool for organizers, students, scholars, and teachers in Los Angeles and beyond. We see housing struggles during the current global economic crisis—and their connections to hu-

man rights struggles for education, healthcare, public transportation, employment, and prison abolition—as an opportune moment to renew the demand for freedom now. In this way, we also understand that the struggle for human rights is part of a struggle for a new society. We offer this book as one part the struggle. Housing is a human right!

Jordan T. Camp is a lecturer in Afro-American Studies at UCLA. His work appears in American Quarterly, Kal-fou, Race and Class, and In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina. He is currently working on a manuscript entitled Incarcerating the Crisis: Racialization and Securitization in the Wake of the Second Reconstruction.

Christina Heatherton is a Ph.D. Candidate in American Studies and Ethnicity at USC. She edited Downtown Blues: A Skid Row Reader and is currently working on her dissertation Linked Fates: Radical Internationalism and the Mexican Revolution.

CLYDE WOODS traveled to Haiti shortly after the 2010 earthquake. There in the rubble of the devastated country, this scholar-activist “saw the future.” While the Haitian people slowly tried to rebuild their homes and lives, media commentators told a story of a lawless mass in need of military control. Where people clamored for fresh water and repaired pipelines, they found themselves surrounded by armed guards and military flotillas. Where the maimed and injured required medical care, they found plans for new casinos and cruise line ports. When this population, reduced to living in tent cities, demanded permanent housing, they were met with guns and force. In repairing shattered communities, the Haitian people themselves were treated as broken windows in need of

sweeping and removal. As people’s dramatic suffering was met by criminalization and indifference, Professor Clyde Woods saw a sign of things to come.



Clyde Woods in Haiti, 2010

For Professor Woods the devastation of Haiti was the logical outgrowth of a cruel common sense, one that had incubated for decades in U.S. cities. He had seen it eviscerate his hometown of Baltimore, studied it in the modern plantation regimes of Mississippi, analyzed its callous reach in the abandonment of post-Katrina New Orleans, and documented its ruthlessness in the militarization of Los Angeles. It was no surprise that the victims of Haiti’s earthquake were treated as enemies. Professor Woods knew well how the poorest, especially the poorest communities of color in the U.S. were trapped in spaces of confinement (ghettos, prisons, jails, failing schools, and detention centers). In such enclosures, communities were strangled from wealth and resources and people were punished as a permanent class of internal enemies.

But Clyde Woods also dedicated his life and work to understanding the solutions developed by poor and working class communities themselves. He looked to the grassroots social movements that could best name the problems and mobilize around them. Through artists, rappers, poets and blues singers, he found alternative ways of thinking and being in the world. He understood how people could create new social visions to unthink the poisoned logic that condemned them. He advised students to look to strategies developed by besieged communities and to discover solutions in their disqualified knowledge.

This reader is dedicated to the memory of Clyde Woods. His influence is felt throughout this work, all the more so after his recent untimely passing. Professor Woods was acute and unrelenting in naming the problem of neoliberalism, a problem he refused to describe as new, but one fatally linked with the global legacies of racism, capitalism, colonialism, and slavery. He challenged us to make these histories visible to a world that refused to see them as anything but individual deficiencies. As he once wrote, "the whipsaw of social, cultural, and physical destruction seems invisible to all but the amputees."

We look to the work, actions, and alternate social visions of groups like LA CAN, because, as Clyde Woods wrote, they have "already prepared the ground for a new and more equitable future for the nation as a whole." With their interventions we can imagine a world of hope and possibility instead of one proliferated with prison bars and desperation. We dedicate this reader to the memory of Professor Clyde Woods, our teacher, mentor, and friend with the urgent hope of realizing a different future.



(Left) Clyde Woods in Haiti, 2010 (Right) Clockwise From Top: Damien Schnyder, Clyde Woods, Tomas Avila-Carrasco, Jordan T. Camp, Christina Heatherston, and Jonathan Gomez. "Let's Not Forget: Haiti, One Year Later," UC Santa Barbara, January 12, 2011.

PART I: RACE, CLASS, GENDER,
&
PUBLIC HOUSING

I believe things were in the air after Rodney King.
People were very much aware of this housing thing.
They felt, "I deserve this. I deserve better than this. I deserve housing.
I don't deserve people telling me I have to get out of my place."
It was like that. It was an attitude. They beat up another Black man.
And it was like, "No more!" That was an attitude.
"We're not taking this shit no more. No more."

A black and white portrait of Pam Walls, a Black woman with her hair pulled back, wearing large hoop earrings and a necklace. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a gentle expression. The background is a blurred office or community center setting with posters on the wall.

pam walls

It was the way people looked at you.
It was the way people put their arm on your shoulder and said,
"Hey, I'm with you Pam."
Now I saw that attitude in many.
But the ones who wanted to really fight and be bold,
there was only a handful. But that handful opened the door
for the people who did not want to open their doors.
I think it was a feeling in the air. I saw the numbers getting bigger.

“WE REFUSE”: PRIVATIZATION, HOUSING, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

RHONDA Y. WILLIAMS

In September 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the *Wall Street Journal* quoted Republican Congressman Richard Baker of Baton Rouge telling lobbyists: “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”¹ While Baker expressed what he regarded as an ordained cleansing of the city’s public housing (and it would seem its residents), the urban theorist, activist, and author of *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis, rendered a blistering critique of the earthly decisions that too often subjugate the public good to the market. Condemning “the predators of New Orleans” and their “catastrophic economics,” Davis stated: “It is no secret that its business elites and their allies in City Hall would like to push the poorest segment of the population, blamed for high crime rates, out of the city. Historic public-housing projects have been razed to make room for upper-income townhouses and a Wal-Mart ... The ultimate goal seems to be a tourist theme-park New Orleans, Las Vegas on the Mississippi, with chronic poverty hidden away in bayous, trailer parks and prisons outside the city limits.” Davis continued: “Not surprisingly, some advocates of a whiter, safer city see a divine plan in Katrina.”² Over a year later, New Orleans’ housing officials had announced the demolition of

4,500 government-owned apartments. The natural, or heavenly, intervention asserted by Baker benefited from extraordinary earthly aid.

Extremely concerned about residential displacement in the aftermath of Katrina and future access to affordable housing in the city, public housing residents in New Orleans raised their voices. They argued, as Davis had, that municipal officials did not want poor black people to move back to the city. Sharon Pierce Jackson, whose housing complex was slated for razing, declared: “The day you decide to destroy our homes, you will break a lot of hearts ... We are people. We are not animals.”³ The anti-demolition efforts continued in August 2007 when dozens of public housing resident-activists occupied housing authority offices. In response, the police and military surrounded the building. During this 21st century “sit-in,” a former resident of St. Bernard public housing complex, Sharon Sears Jasper proclaimed: “We are not going to stop. We refuse to let you tear our homes down and destroy our lives.” Referring to the upset of thousands of residents as a result of Katrina, Jasper continued: “The government, the president of the United States [George W. Bush], you all have failed

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us. Our people have been displaced too long. Our people are dying of stress, depression and broken families. We demand that you open all public housing. Bring our families home now.”⁴

The public debates, tenant protests, and the eventual tearing down of public housing complexes in New Orleans, including St. Bernard, exemplify a broader decades-long trend in federal housing policy, and starkly expose the nexus of race, economics, place, and power. For at least five decades, housing policies have privileged demolishing and privatizing low-income housing, presenting such approaches as models for progress. The 1950s and 1960s brought urban renewal and increased subsidization of private and commercial development. In the 1960s and 1970s, the reclamation of low-income housing for the private market accelerated with the moratorium on building family public housing and the initiation of the Section 8 program, which provides government vouchers for qualified low-income residents to rent in private, market-rate apartments. While offering varied housing opportunities, under this program, tenants are at the behest of the market and the whims of landlords who can opt out of the program.

The 1990s became renowned as the decade of displacement and reclamation of the city, often cast in the rhetoric of “HOPE.” Under the HOPE VI program, Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere, which sought

to develop mixed-income neighborhoods, demolishing public housing (without one-to-one replacement) represented a core component of the revitalization efforts, as did provision of vouchers for renting in the private market. Many tenants did not feel HOPE VI brought them hope, but dispersal leading to what Jasper conveyed as displacement and what psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove has termed “root shock.”⁵ Even as she acknowledged the maintenance and safety issues that troubled her family’s high-rise apartment building in Baltimore, Barbara “Bobby” McKinney anticipated the implosion of the Lexington Terrace in 1996 and equated it with the dismantling of community. She voiced a fear that numerous tenants continue to unwaveringly express now, despite their cities of residence: the lack of the right of return after the desired renaissance.⁶ In 2001, Baltimore became the first major city to gain the auspicious accolade of imploding all of its family high-rise complexes in the HOPE era. In the United States, 1.2 million families live in public housing. Since 1996, hundreds of thousands of private and public housing apartments have been removed from the affordable housing stock, even as waiting lists burgeon.

This trend toward privatization, alongside the reduction of traditional public housing continues, thereby further restricting the options of low-income and homeless people. One of the latest federal privatization proposals was the PETRA bill, or the “Preservation,

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Enhancement, and Transformation of Rental Assistance Act of 2010,” which proposed transforming public housing into market-rate Section 8 housing in order to attract private lenders to fund capital improvements. A petition campaign opposing the bill produced 2,500 signatures, which were entered into the Congressional Record. Susie Shannon, of the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, a grassroots advocacy group for homeless individuals and families, as well as low-income tenants, testified during a hearing on the bill on May 25, 2010: “Public Housing is the most stable affordable housing stock in America. We are concerned about the continued loss of public housing units and the precedent already set with the 100% disposition of public housing in the cities of San Diego and Atlanta. To date, not one study has been done on the impacts 100% disposition has had on low income communities in either one of these cities. It is presumptuous and reckless to move forward with PETRA legislation in the absence of any study.”⁷ Undoubtedly in an age of deindustrialization, globalization, rising unemployment, the increasing gap between rich and poor, foreclosures, the dearth of affordable housing, the demise of public housing and the market-driven mechanisms through which it is being achieved, raises other salient issues: That is, who has a right to cities? Is housing a human right, and to what degree ought it be provided to the most marginalized in our society?

Susie Shannon’s words

as well as the testimony of tenant rights groups at multiple PETRA hearings also raised another alarm. In the sixties, even as privatization efforts were underway, tenants’ rights movements emerged. In particular, public housing tenants, who had a landlord in “Uncle Sam,” asserted their rights to organize and to actively participate in the decisions structuring their lives. A former Baltimore public housing tenant leader who served on the citywide resident advisory board and as a regional National Tenants Organization (NTO) officer, Shirley Wise, shared how housing officials often labeled her a “troublemaker.” Insisted Wise: “But the same people utilizes their rights to deal with their beefs, you understand ... I don’t see no difference ... There’s a set of rules for everybody to operate under ... If you follow those rules, wouldn’t be no need for Shirley Wise, the Resident Advisory Board, tenant council, or none of that. But there’s a need, because somebody is not following the rules.”⁸

Like Shirley Wise, many tenants over the decades, including countless subsidy-reliant black women during the era of the black liberation struggle and afterward, agitated for their rights through local resident councils, citywide resident advisory boards, and the National Tenants Organization. HUD’s Rule 24 CFR Part 964 and Part 245 provide residents with the right to organize in public housing and multi-family housing respectively. Under the PETRA bill, tenant advocates argued that these very hard-

Injurious Perceptions

won rights such as the recognition of resident councils, the receipt of money to organize tenants, and anti-retaliatory eviction and grievance protections (won as a result of a lawsuit brought by public housing tenant Joyce Thorpe in 1967 against the housing authority in Durham, North Carolina) were threatened. Grassroots and political efforts challenging and halting PETRA – including the support of Rep. Maxine Waters who pronounced: “I am not about to be a part of privatizing public housing” – exemplify demands for preserving subsidized housing as a public good.⁹

Such demands, moreover, not only necessarily publicize contemporary efforts to protect the right to housing despite race, class, gender, and place of residence, but also appreciably honor the legacies of low-income women’s struggles against urban inequality – thereby contesting staid and dehumanizing depictions of low-income people. The grassroots campaigns and political statements of diverse women, such as Sharon Pierce Jackson, Susie Shannon, and Rep. Waters, in their resistance to the privatization of public housing and the erosion of tenant rights, also speaks to what remains at stake: the enduring battle for the valuation of residents’ life experiences, the recognition of residents’ voices, their vital input into public policy, and as a consequence, the dire and persistent need for citizen engagement.

What must it mean to have to rescue one’s humanity from injurious perceptions by having to vigorously assert, as Sharon Pierce Jackson felt it imperative to do, that “We are people. We are not animals.” The public rebukes and admonitions, which women similarly positioned as Jackson consistently confront, exemplify the dearth of understanding of the travails and lives of subsidy-reliant women and low-income people broadly. Jackson’s questions conjure up the witnessing life and words of Goldie Baker. A Baltimore resident, Goldie Baker moved into public housing in 1964 after separating from her husband and shouldering the awesome task of trying to support seven children. As a public housing tenant, Goldie Baker had to fight to get an old icebox removed from her apartment so that she could use a refrigerator that she owned before moving into public housing. Having to navigate the acerbic and condescending responses of the manager, Baker argued: “I am not nobody’s slave. I am not nobody’s slave, and he ain’t talking to no slave. Slavery is over ... I said, he don’t have no respect for me, he don’t need to be over there.”¹⁰ Described as a “legend” and a “dynamic leader,” Goldie Baker’s activist career extended over 40 years. Through her activism, as with her many compatriots, Baker struggled for what she called human rights, a key element of poor women’s political movement ideology. Protection from vilification and

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want, respect and dignity – these were due every human being despite their race, class, gender, income source, or place of residency. In 2008 the United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing affirmed this principle, asserting that “the human right to adequate housing is the right of every woman, man, youth and child to gain and sustain a safe and secure home and community in which to live in peace and dignity.”¹¹

Despite low-income women’s struggles, however, rarely are their efforts recognized historically or in contemporary times as reasonable and viable critiques of U.S. democracy, or as telling, oppositional expressions exposing women’s collective efforts to change social institutions, protect and assert their dignity, and expand the social safety net. The need for understanding people’s real lives and their daily existence (both the good and not so glamorous), and not only hearing, but also listening to their voices is ever imperative – whether it’s through the public media, community-based initiatives, or new research agendas. By focusing on the lives, structures, and hidden struggles of, in particular, low-income black women, some recent scholars have made critical interventions by exploring race, gender, and state power on the urban political terrain and complicating activist narratives that, overall, still ignore the historical experiences and political parlance of some of the most marginalized and publicly demonized citizens in the United States.

In fact, the demise of public housing as a public good has often been cut on the shoals of race, gender, and class, and low-income black women who became the demonized face of these public communities. Echoing this sentiment, Bill Quigley wrote for *Black Agenda Report* in 2007 regarding the displacement (without affordable alternatives) of mostly low-income women and their families in New Orleans to make way for the redevelopment of former public housing sites as mixed-income communities: “Race and class and gender are an unstated part of every justification for demolition.”¹²

Truth be told, black women and men and their lives, their relationships, and their actions – particularly those who live on the margins of the margin, those deemed deviant, disreputable, or otherwise disgraceful – are still often absent, invisible, and incompletely rendered. Or, as the black literary giant James Baldwin might term it from his essay “Many Thousands Gone” in *Notes of a Native Son*, “phantasmal.”¹³ In particular, the concerns of low-income black women for home and human dignity are too often dismissed. Regularly, low-income, subsidy-reliant women (whether that subsidy is low-income housing or income) are cast as animals – for instance, two Senators likened welfare recipients to alligators and wolves during the debate over passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (1996) – or they are castigated for their outspokenness. Consistently, for decades, low-income black women, particularly those seeking government

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assistance, have been positioned as unworthy seekers of handouts and burdens on the U.S. coffers. Such cultural representations not only undergird public policies, they facilitate the passage of policies that are injurious. In her book *Using Women*, which focuses specifically on drug policy and the marginalization of women, Nancy D. Campbell writes that “material factors ... are not so threatening without the governing mentalities that frame their meaning,” and maintains that an important part of social justice work is not only exposing such “governing mentalities that prevail in our political imaginary,” but also displacing their rule.¹⁴

Real People, Real Stories

A story: Martha Benton, Baltimore public housing resident. At twenty-three years old, the pregnant Martha Benton moved into Somerset Courts in 1964 with her husband and two children. And, at that moment, she felt shame. About two years later, she transferred to Douglass Homes for a bigger apartment. By then she was raising five children by herself. When I interviewed Martha Benton for the first time in 1996, she told me how she had experienced a profound contradiction. She had no other alternative but to seek government help in the form of public housing, but those closest to her including her mother, father, and husband frowned on public housing – the “projects.” Benton told me:

“They always thought the people there didn’t want nothing, didn’t care about nothing, wasn’t trying to achieve anything, and that it would take away any incentive that I might have ... to try to rise above the situation.”¹⁵ At the age of 36, after a number of unfortunate circumstances, including losing two children (one to death by a drunken driver, the other lured to the streets and murdered), after losing her job, taking sick and having to live on medical disability, Martha Benton knew that it would be tough to survive without subsidized housing. Shaped by the activism of other black women tenants in public housing, such as Goldie Baker, Martha Benton decided to become active in her community, especially around youth. In June 2010, at the age of 68, Mrs. Benton died and *Baltimore Sun* columnist Jacques Kelly wrote a story about her in the newspaper. The article described Mrs. Benton as articulate, empathetic, and according to Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake: “In her life’s work as a staunch advocate for city residents, she [Ms. Benton] set an example for other community leaders. She dedicated countless hours of her time and her amazing spirit to improve the quality of life of our most needy citizens.”¹⁶

Benton’s life experience – like the articulations of Sharon Pierce Jackson, Sharon Sears Jasper, Shirley Wise, and Goldie Baker – has revelatory power. All five women shed light on how race, economics, gender, and place intersect to make meaning and shape material reality.

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They illuminate what it means to experience marginalization and simultaneously strive for a decent life, when different opportunities exist for some and are foreclosed for others. These women's voices – from the margins of cities and urban history – expose the everyday travails of low-income people and the political realities shaping their lives and communities. They also reveal the shifting racial, political, and economic landscapes that shape citizens' disparate experiences of this thing we call U.S. democracy. Their voices – in comparison to the simplistic, egregious political-moralistic implications of God's cleansing away of refuse – unmask the divergent realities and change over time – thereby forcing us to think about the history of race and the intimate connections between the state, place, urban policies, structural inequality, and poor people's claims to human rights.

Temma Kaplan has identified such struggles in her book *Crazy for Democracy* as “an invisible revolution” in which women globally have asserted “collective rights,” made “broad claims about human needs,” and “linked social need to democracy.”¹⁷ Often, these invisible revolutions in post-World War II U.S. cities were responses to economic challenges; to spatial realities such as overcrowding, declining urban infrastructures, and crime; and to government urban policies, including housing and urban renewal programs and public housing regulations. Confronting the exclusions wrought by federal urban policies in local government programs and agencies, poor black women vigorously proclaimed that their poverty

did and does not trump their rights as citizens and as human beings deserving of help, equality, and dignity.

The stories of low-income African American women as community activists who fought for rights, respect, and representation for their families and neighbors living in public housing help us capture, challenge, reconsider, and complicate our understanding of the role of public housing and its broader significance in the history of race and place and importance as a social safety net for people in need. These stories also help us displace the ruling and uninterrogated, but often prevailing, images.

When I began working on *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (2004), a representative in one publishing house told me that no one would want to read about low-income black women and their travails, but I found supportive editors of a new series *Transgressing Boundaries* at Oxford University Press who believed not only in the book, but the worth of telling these stories. *The Politics of Public Housing* explores low-income black women's experiences, politicization, and relationships with the state and social-welfare programs by examining urban inequality and tenants' and welfare-rights struggles in Baltimore after the 1930s. Since 2004, several studies have emerged. Christina Greene, in *Our Separate Ways* (2005), focuses on the interracial and intraracial struggles of working-class and poor black women around housing, employment, and community in

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Durham, North Carolina. Annelise Orleck's *Storming Caesars Palace* (2005) charts the post-1940s migration of black women to Las Vegas and explores how that city's racial politics and the economic disfranchisement that low-income black mothers experienced in the hub of gaming wealth birthed an activist struggle that demanded welfare rights and used anti-poverty money to build child-care, health-care, and other community-based programs. Other historians, such as Lisa Levenstein in her book *A Movement without Marches*, are documenting poor black women's confrontations with public institutions—including housing, welfare, hospitals, schools, and the legal system. And Premilla Nadasen, in her 2005 national study of the National Welfare Rights movement, charts how low-income black women, whom many deemed apolitical and not very bright, became formidable "welfare warriors" in 1960s and 1970s America.¹⁸

While there has been a proliferation of research that examines African Americans' resistance and social movement experiences, only recently have historians begun to seriously consider, include, and critically engage the stories of low-income black women – not only on their own terms, but for what their citizenship struggles reveal about post-WWII urban residency, freedom struggles in cities, and the contours of the state and U.S. democracy. Moreover, the degree to which this research and the "real people" narratives, which complicate what we think we know, have made it into the public arena and into policy dis-

cussions is debatable, but crucial. By paying particular attention to the material conditions, seemingly mundane worries of life, and urban policies that often provided the exigencies for local and national struggles, the past and present experiences of low-income people, and particularly black women, fittingly and intelligibly historicize what political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock has described as the contemporary "politics of disgust," which has helped to legitimize the gutting of social-welfare policies, such as public housing and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.¹⁹ In the wake of public debates over government responsibility rife with the politics of race, gender, residence, and poverty in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and in the wake of privatization, demythologizing histories, narrative movements, and critical analyses of policies, their underlying purposes, and intended and unintended consequences are more vital now than ever – particularly as we continue to strive to provide adequate, safe, and affordable housing and, more broadly, achieve a humane standard of living and seek justice.

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Protest of Mayor's 2011-2012 Budget, Los Angeles, 2011.

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I was still in Houston when Katrina hit.
It was a trip, just to see a flood of people just come in.
I don't know how to explain it.
It was like a whole 'nother city moving into the city.
People were trying to find resources.
Everybody had a sad story and everybody was depressed.
I was trying to reach out.



karl scott

Photo by Everard Williams

I guess that's where I did feel community.
But I didn't realize I had community sense. It was unconscious then.
I took a couple of the people from New Orleans in
and let them live with me. I just felt sorry for them.
I had just met them and heard their story.
People in Houston felt compassion, they felt sorry for them.
They should have felt anger but they didn't.



Ocho Millones de Historias Tiene el Pueblo del Rio

**Gaye Theresa Johnson
Alma Brown
Lilian Payan
Lucia Sanchez**



Images by Steve Diaz
Translation by Daniel Olmos
Assistance from Deborah Burton

The day I visited Pueblo Del Rio, a public housing community in South Central, Los Angeles, two phrases from Ruben Blades' 1978 ballad of barrio life "Pedro Navaja" played on repeat in my mind: the intentionally ironic "I like to live in America..." and Blades' declaration that "Ocho millones de historias tiene la ciudad de Nueva York." After a day of talking with women residents at Pueblo del Rio, I imagined a West coast version of Blades' song, about the eight million stories within the walls of this urban community, many reflective in their own way of the distance between the projected affluence of Los Angeles and the challenges faced by its poor communities. More importantly, all of these stories, even those highlighting the tensions between residents and management, or between Black and Latino tenants, are registers of the problems and potentials of Black and Brown community building. The record of LA's racist housing and urban development policies is strongly reflected in Pueblo del Rio. It registers in its social structures, in the level of police surveillance, and in the lack of constructive spaces and activities relative to the number of residents. The women who shared their stories with us were impassioned about what they perceived as unfair practices by management, as well as the reality of Black-Brown-Cambodian tensions. Putatively race-neutral housing and spatial policies have generally excelled at their own obscurity, and sometimes residents have found it easier to identify each other as enemies rather than those that are explicitly committed to their exclusion. This is a crucial problem that housing rights organizers face as they work in Pueblo del Rio. But the women we spoke with were more eager to talk about solutions, even if couched in the language of individual grievances. Indeed, these grievances signaled the recognition that residents deserve better. Many became politicized and attuned to parallel oppressions through the housing rights struggle. One woman shared with us that through understanding that she had a right to fair housing for herself and her children, she came to understand her own and other women's rights to live free from abuse. Another woman who refused to speak on camera identified unemployment and the lack of youth programs as the biggest problems for Pueblo del Rio residents, but also believed deeply in residents' ability to make a difference through informal mentorship networks.

The women who spoke with us want the freedom to build meaningful futures, to have our histories validated, to create strong and functional social bonds that people can use to engage the challenges of collective living, and to exercise the "freedom dreams" made under terribly oppressive conditions. Against all prescriptions and predictions, many women have turned Pueblo del Rio into a locus of empowerment, using their experiences with domestic abuse, racism, and immigrant exclusion to empower others. It's the most complicated and demanding work we can do, but it remains a model of the strongest way through.

- *Gaye Theresa Johnson*

Gaye Theresa Johnson is Professor of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara. She is author of the forthcoming book The Future Has a Past: Politics, Music and Memory in Afro-Chicano Los Angeles.

Interview with Ms. Alma Brown

Gaye Johnson: Ms. Alma, how long have you been living here?

Alma Brown: Oh I've been here 45 years.

GJ: Wow. Ok then! When you came here, who was here?

AB: Mostly Black, mostly just Black and maybe a few whites.

GJ: Now it's Cambodian, it's Latino...

AB: It's a few Blacks. I can count the Blacks that's here now.

Gaye: How does that change living here?

AB: It's ok with me.

GJ: Have you been to some of the meetings with LA CAN?

AB: I was there last night

GJ: What drew you to it? Why did you start going?

AB: I have been going to Housing Authority meetings way before I met Debbie from LACAN. I like to hear what they have to say and what lies they tell. I just look at them and say to myself, y'all ain't doing nothing but hurting your own self. Some people will do anything just to be seen. It's okay if some people have to go and tell them what they think and what they feel. Another thing, you don't know the way they were raised or where they come from. It's so much to know what other people are dealing with. You know what you went through but you don't know what they went through. People may have to sleep outdoors on many a night to make it where they got to. But as my mom always told us, do the right thing.



**Interview with two Residents who asked not to be named:
Ms. X and Ms. Y.**

Ms. Y: There's no jobs for the youth. The kids are just wandering around doing whatever. If there were more jobs and more stuff to motivate the kids there wouldn't be so much crime. Instead of worrying about the rent and this and that, worry about helping the youth and showing them a better way.

GJ: Do you think that's the number one issue?

Ms. Y: That's the biggest problem. I think there's a lot of kids around here, a lot of youth that have nothing to do. It's a mess. I feel like the community should come together and protest that.

GJ: Are there people trying to organize and do that?

Ms. Y: I don't know.

Ms. X: Well, you know. A lot of people sit back.

GJ: So have you been trying to get folks to get together?

Ms. X: Yeah, but it's hard. It's hard. See people sit back ... Now the rent is due on the first but some people don't get their money on the first. So they sent out a note that if you don't have the rent then you have to vacate the premises. It's like they're just trying to get all the Black people out.

GJ: How is it with Black and Latino people here?

Ms. Y: They get along. My other neighbor she is a Spanish person and she's sweet. I think it's the manager that is trying to make problems, make conflict.

Ms. X: She [the manager] told me if had to pay \$1.79 for something I didn't owe. It kind of made me nervous at first. So I ran and I brought the check. She said, "We're closed, bring it tomorrow." The next month, she said I owed her \$40. So I kept the receipts to show that I had paid it.

GJ: It sounds like people see the manager and are scared.

Ms. X: It really scared me at first, I'm not going to lie. But then I started thinking. Ok, I'll pay this \$20. But then when she started pushing me and saying that I owed \$20, and I know I didn't owe \$20 I had proof to back me up cause I kept my copies. And I brought the copies over to the office. She never did call me. She didn't do nothing.

GJ: So you're not scared any more?

Ms. X: No.

GJ: Earlier you said, if you know you're right, you have that behind you. I was wondering, do you think people know their rights?

Ms. X: That's what it is. Maybe they're afraid to speak up for themselves. They might know but they're scared to speak up.

GJ: Why?

Ms. X: I don't know.

Ms. Y: No they don't know, 'cause if they knew, sister, you think they would sit back and let people do them like this? They don't know their rights, 'cause if they know their rights, believe me, she wouldn't be over there. If you were never taught and you don't know, they will do you wrong.

GJ: Because you just accept it?

Ms. Y: 'Cause you accept it. 'Cause they feel you don't have nowhere else to go. You're paying low rent so they're like, ok I'll do them any kind of way.

GJ: Is that why they're scared? Because they feel like they don't have anywhere else to go?

Ms. X: Probably.

GJ: How do we get people involved in a movement for housing rights?

Ms. X: Well, we have to come together. That's the only way we 'gonna make it. We can't just sit back and let them fight us.

Ms. Y: Black, Hispanic, Cambodian, they can all come together.

Interview with Ms. Lilian Payan

translated from Spanish

GJ: In this political climate a lot of people say that there's no discrimination and especially in housing. What do you think about that?

LP: Right now there is discrimination. They want to develop the apartments. Nothing is secure. People are timid and they don't want to talk about this stuff. I don't know why. It's probably because they're scared.

GJ: How's the environment for immigrants here at Pueblo del Rio?

LP: The immigrants here are saying that they're paying more because they don't have papers. They're afraid that they are going to get evicted. They don't go to a lot of big meetings because they're scared that they will get deported.

GJ: I read an article about protests over the living conditions in Pueblo del Rio in 1996. At that time, there were a lot of problems with the plumbing, windows that didn't open completely, and residents were having paying from their own pockets for repairs. How have things changed since then?

LP: In the last two weeks, they have not been charging us. But before, yes. In other projects they are charging for repairs. Just now I asked them to fix the electricity in the room. As of now they haven't sent me a bill. Yesterday at a meeting, the director said that they aren't charging anymore. But who knows?

GJ: Can you tell us about your organizing?

LP: I see my neighbors, I talk to them. I tell them that they shouldn't be afraid. If you're going to be displaced, we're all going to be displaced. I say, don't be afraid. Come to the meetings. The more people there are, the more results we'll get. That's what I tell them.

GJ: What advice do you give to people who want to get involved?

LP: I tell them that there's an organization, LA CAN, that needs them.



Interview with Ms. Lucia Sanchez

translated from Spanish

LS: For me, I have to continue doing everything possible to continue struggling because I don't want them to evict me. I used live in domestic violence, I used to live on the streets, in the Union Rescue Mission, and I know how it is. That's why I say we have to struggle because we all need a roof.

GJ: Given the history you have, how important is it for people involved in housing struggles to pay attention to domestic violence struggles? How do you feel the housing struggle responds to that?

LS: Not everyone goes through the same situation. Some have harder lives, others have easier lives. I know a lot of single mothers here. Just because they haven't gone through the same thing I've gone through doesn't mean we shouldn't congregate in support groups to continue struggling. As mothers we have necessities. We need a roof to raise our children under. We have the right to do that. We are low-income. There's no reason why we should be discriminated against just because we don't have documentation, for instance. They want to get rid of us. If one of the children doesn't have papers, they'll be affected. So I try to talk to the mothers and say let's go to the meetings so we can find out what's happening. It's important to know because where are you going to go if they evict you? That's the point. I know where we'd go because I have gone through it before. But there are mothers that don't know. They say, "well, if they evict us, they evict us." No, I won't go away that easily. It's painful. It hurts to be a mother and on the streets. You suffer. That's why I am in it every day, *en la piedra*, (on the ground) struggling. I don't get tired talking to the people. I go to door to door with bulletins. I give them my word. I know sometimes it goes in one ear and out the other but I continue. I've learned that life isn't a just a bunch of roses. We have to keep struggling for what we have. One has something today but tomorrow they may not. If you have it right now, take whatever instruments or tools, and struggle. Go forward. It takes work to have a home, to have a roof, so you have to go forward to struggle. If I have to continue going to meetings and protests, I will be there. I want to secure my roof, things for my children, a home.
Asegurar un techo, cosas para mis niños, un hogar.

GJ: What are some of the most important things organizers should be aware of? You've talked about women, facing domestic violence, people who don't have their papers, etc.

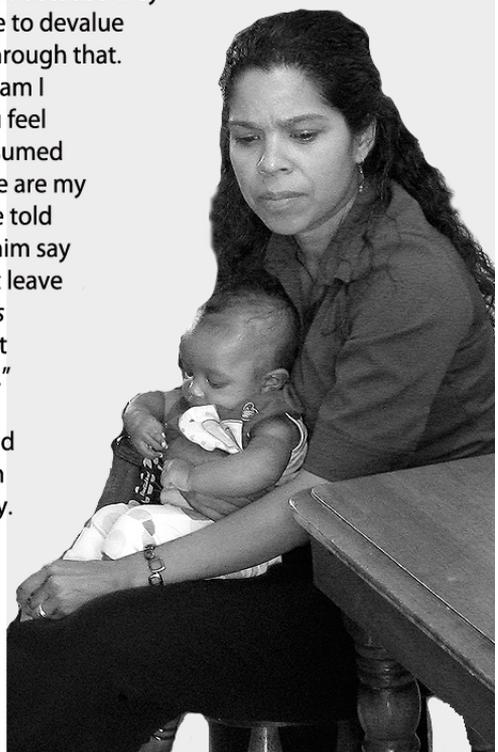


LS: I have experienced domestic violence. I have been in programs and taken classes. It's really hard to survive *desde abajo a la primera escala* (from the bottom to the first step) when you lose your home and you don't have anything. I would like there to be support for women who have been through domestic violence. I have seen women around here who have gone through domestic violence, but they enclose themselves. They don't look for support. It's sad for me to see them live that hard life. I would like there to be programs for women going through domestic violence.

Sometimes people ask themselves, "I have my kids, how am I going to leave him?" My parents are from Mexico. My father would say, "No matter what happens, you have to be with your husband." No. I opened my eyes for my children. I'm not going to continue living through domestic violence in a bad life with him. I don't want them to grow up alone or *amolado* (broken). I would like the doors to be open to women who are really looking for this kind of help and support. I have experienced it. If I had the vocabulary and the opportunity to study, I would like to go speak to women and tell them, it's never too late to reflect despite all the time the years. There's a verse that goes, "You should never let anyone step on you or put you below a man. You are a woman and you come from a woman." As humans we have the right to be respected.

GJ: What have been the biggest challenges for women who are just trying to survive and maintain a certain level of *sobreviviendo* (survival)? How can housing struggles contribute to a basic level of survival for the women we are talking about?

LS: As a woman, you are very valuable. You don't need to tolerate your partner's insults, beatings or disrespect just because they maintain you and your children. You don't have to devalue yourself. All of us are very valuable. I've gone through that. I've said to myself, "I have three children. What am I going to do?" I understand that sometimes you feel like you are being buried under the dirt or consumed by the sea, but you will be okay. I realized, these are my children and I will struggle. I've learned and I've told my friends, "Don't let him insult you. Don't let him say bad words to you because you're valuable. Just leave him." That's what I tell them. That's the *consejos* (advice) I give them. I say, "think about it, reflect on it. But you're not an animal, you're a human." My mother would tell me, "Think of yourself as *brillante* (something that shines, a diamond) and you'll shine." To a lot of people my life has been very hard and very sad. I have suffered, I can say. I know that God is with me and here I am. I'm here to continue taking care of my children and to help other women live tranquil and peaceful lives.



LEARNING FROM LOS ANGELES: PRODUCING ANARCHY IN THE NAME OF ORDER

GEORGE LIPSITZ

Every day one of the largest concentrations of police power anywhere in the world descends on a small part of downtown Los Angeles. Police officers assigned to the Skid Row section of the city routinely wreak havoc in the lives of the approximately fifteen thousand low-income and no-income people who inhabit this fifty block area that covers less than one square mile of territory. In an area where thousands of people are homeless, where nearly three quarters of the residents suffer from physical or mental disabilities, police officers issue citation after citation for jaywalking, sitting on sidewalks, sleeping in public, holding an open container of liquid, or for outstanding warrants and drug possession. In one instance, police officers cited a local resident for littering when the ash from his cigarette landed on the pavement. Until an injunction by a federal judge put an end to the practice, officers cruelly confiscated the meager private possessions of homeless people, claiming that their blankets and clothes had been abandoned or posed hazards to the public. Disabled people using wheelchairs, walkers, and canes are cited and arrested routinely for crosswalk violations when they do

not clear the street before the traffic signal changes. The fines assessed for these minor pedestrian violations range from \$159 to \$191 per offense, a huge burden for people on fixed incomes that average between \$221 and \$850 per month.¹ Among those who were homeless on Skid Row in 2010, surveys found that 89.3% reported being stopped and questioned by police officers, 82.8% said they received citations, and 82% claimed to have been arrested at least one time during the year. The homeless population has reason to fear law enforcement more than they fear crime, reporting more frequent instances of police harassment (37%) than assault (24%) or robbery (18%).²

The police officers who patrol Skid Row so zealously produce the very problems their presence purports to prevent. They do not really fight crime, but instead fabricate it. It is not criminal conduct by Skid Row residents that gets them arrested, but rather their subordinate status as people *with* problems but *without* property. People wind up on Skid Row because our society does not provide an adequate amount of affordable low-income housing, because private employers

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and landlords discriminate against people who need jobs and shelter, because government officials do not enforce civil rights laws, and because we spend too much on policing and prisons and not enough on education, health care, and drug treatment. An estimated 95% of the people on Skid Row have extremely limited incomes, more than one third of them are homeless, and nearly 75% are African American.³ The citations, arrests, and fines for minor offenses that Skid Row residents face create onerous collateral costs and consequences of poverty. Extra-judicial punishments kick in quickly because arrest records lead to people losing jobs, being denied access to social services, and being evicted from temporary and permanent housing. Presented falsely as a program to “clean up” the city, the Safer Cities Initiative and other programs like it actually aim to drive poor people out of Skid Row so that the area can become attractive to investors and developers. Increasing the misery of inner city residents, destroying their dignity, and making their everyday existence intolerable are the key components in these plans. In the name of restoring order, the city creates anarchy.⁴

The dispossession, displacement, and desired disappearance of Skid Row residents in Los Angeles forms only part of a broader pattern of accumulation by dispossession that affects us all. Punishing the poor and harassing the homeless helps produce a fragmented, de-linked, privatized, and devolved state dedicated to

protecting the propertied and the privileged but unwilling and increasingly unable to meet the needs of the majority of the population.⁵ Four decades of neoliberal cuts in social spending coupled with subsidies for expensive but ineffective privatization programs seriously harm the real wages and quality of life of a majority of the population. Punitive policies that criminalize poverty misallocate resources and impede economic growth. Yet these policies secure public support and legitimation by stoking racialized moral panics about crime, disorder, and welfare dependency. They encourage the public at large to fear public space and to shun their political responsibilities and obligations to the greater good. They evade the causes and consequences of the ever increasing economic inequality that characterizes our society by demonizing the poor. They promote what Robert Reich calls “the secession of the successful,” by which he means the hoarding of resources, revenues, amenities, and services in wealthy areas patrolled by private security guards coupled with the organized abandonment of less well off populations. The defensive localism and hostile privatism promoted by neoliberal political and economic restructuring requires endless rounds of blaming and shaming of allegedly non-normative people in order to absolve capitalism and capitalists of any accountability for the stagnation of real wages, the impoverishment of the public sector, the demise of social services, mass unemployment, and the enormous and ever expanding gap between

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the super-rich and everyone else.

Many of the people who are harmed the most by neoliberal policies wind up supporting them passionately because of racism. Moral panics about crime and poverty depend upon portraying expenditures on public education, transportation, housing, and health care as unearned entitlements channeled to Blacks and Latinos who do not deserve them. From this perspective, the state itself has been captured by non-whites. Racism provides an excuse and justification for unjust social relations. More than forty years ago, Congress passed the 1968 Fair Housing Act to increase access to decent shelter for all people. In that same year, Martin Luther King, Jr. encapsulated his egalitarian ideals in a speech to striking sanitation workers in Memphis, telling them that the man who has no house is as important as the man who went to Morehouse.⁶ In the same year, however, Congress approved the 1968 Omnibus Crime Control Act, a bill that started the nation on a new path to increase the criminalization of poverty. This eclipse of a civil rights victory by a repressive anti-crime measure followed a well-established pattern in U.S. history. Whenever the percentage of the population with access to rights has been meaningfully expanded, moral panics about crime have emerged immediately as mechanisms for reducing the numbers of people with rights. The mass incarceration of Blacks for petty “crimes” like vagrancy and loitering fueled a spectacular increase in the prison popu-

lation when slavery was abolished in the 1860s.⁷ Collective resistance to the Supreme Court’s mandate to desegregate schools enunciated in the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision took the form of arguments purporting to protect white children from exposure to Black culture with its allegedly high percentages of common law marriages, babies born out of wedlock, sexually transmitted diseases, and criminal behavior.⁸ In the wake of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act, a steady succession of anti-crime measures promoted moral panics about crime as a way of attributing poverty to the moral failings of individuals rather than to the intersectional outcomes of class exploitation, racial subordination, and gender stratification.⁹ Criminalization and demonization of the poor helped position programs designed to promote equal opportunity as wasteful subsidies to unworthy recipients. After four decades of these policies, we have arrived at policies like the Safer Cities Initiative that blame the poor for their own abandonment by the state and society. Under these conditions, as Kalamu ya Salaam notes, people who control nothing are blamed for everything, while people who control everything are blamed for nothing.

Since 1968, we have witnessed a sharp shift in allocating resources away from housing, health care, education, and employment training in order to increase expenditures on policing and punishment. The fifty additional police officers

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and the twenty-five additional narcotics officers assigned to Skid Row because of the Safer Cities Initiative cost taxpayers over six million dollars of funds that could be used to construct affordable housing units, staff drug treatment programs and provide services for the mentally ill. This misallocation of resources is not a local problem, but rather the local manifestation of a general pattern that prevails nearly everywhere in the nation. The United States now has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, somewhere between five to eight times greater than other industrialized nations. State spending on corrections tripled between 1980 and 2008 even though crime decreased steadily. Lawmakers at the state and federal level have compelled judges to mete out harsh penalties for minor offenses. These policies promote punishment rather than rehabilitation as the primary purpose of the penal system. Without housing, it is difficult to get a job. Without a job, it is hard to secure housing. Previously incarcerated individuals are more likely to be homeless than people without criminal convictions. In San Francisco and Los Angeles, ex-offenders comprise an estimated 30-50% of the homeless population.¹⁰ When government agencies reduce spending aimed at producing low-income and no-income housing, when they pass ordinances making it illegal to sit, sleep, lie down, and loiter on city streets, their actions re-criminalize ex-offenders and saddle them with new criminal convictions and collateral penalties. When landlords refuse

to rent dwellings to ex-offenders, when public housing agencies deny housing to anyone with even a single criminal conviction and prevent ex-offenders from living with or even visiting their families, they create anarchy in the lives of individuals already grappling with the cumulative vulnerabilities that come from decades and centuries of inequality, exploitation, racism, and sexism.

Michelle Alexander describes the moral panics about crime that permeate our society as “the new Jim Crow,” as a way of reproducing the social relations of segregation without explicit laws relegating different races to different places. As Malcolm X used to say, the names change but the game remains the same. The incarcerated population was 70% white and 30% non-white in 1950, but is now 70% non-white and 30% white. Yet there has been no change in the rates of criminality between the groups.¹¹ Politically inspired policing targets ghettos and barrios because their inhabitants can be incarcerated more easily than offenders in white suburban areas. Police officers routinely detain Blacks and Latinos more often than whites. For example, people of color make up slightly more than half the population in New York City, but 80% of police “stops” are of Blacks and Latinos. Only 8% of the whites in New York who wind up being stopped by police officers are frisked, but 85% of Blacks and Latinos are frisked.¹² Blacks and Latinos account for nearly three-fifths of the prison population. A

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survey conducted in 2001 found that 16.6% of Black males had experience with incarceration. Formerly incarcerated individuals make up a significant percentage of the homeless population. In California 10% of state's parolees are homeless – in urban areas like San Francisco and Los Angeles the rate reaches 30-50%.¹³ The standards of proof for parole violations are much lower than the standards needed for criminal convictions. Technical parole violations account for a significant percentage of returns to prison by ex-offenders: in California, nearly forty percent of prison returns stem from minor parole violations. Released to ghettos and barrios characterized by racial segregation and concentrated poverty, ex-offenders are forced to dwell in areas where they are more likely to have casual associations with other ex-offenders and more likely to be stopped and frisked by police officers. The resulting disproportionate representation of people of color in the criminal justice system then serves as justification for the continuation of housing discrimination. Enduring racial discrimination stands behind these practices. Housing segregation concentrates poverty. Concentrated poverty exacerbates the cumulative vulnerabilities that augment the likelihood of criminal charges, convictions, and incarcerations. Manufactured moral panics about the perceived law-breaking of poor people of color lead to the criminalization of poverty and the concentration of policing and prosecution in segregated neighborhoods.

Municipalities, cities, and

states need to produce more low-income and no-income housing, yet they spend money instead on policing and incarceration. These expenditures not only fail to solve social problems, they exacerbate and increase existing racist and sexist injuries and vulnerabilities. Housing insecurity is a greater problem for women than men and a greater problem for Black women than for white women. Government policies that provide subsidies to homeowners—but fail to fund low-income housing adequately—are part of a pattern that sustains segregation and exposes Black women to greater risks of housing discrimination, redlining, foreclosure, eviction, serial displacement, and homelessness. Economically vulnerable women are even punished by policies purportedly designed to protect them. For example, public housing agencies often punish reported acts of domestic violence by evicting the families in which the violence occurs. Given the shortage of housing available to low-income or no-income people of color, this means that women abused by partners in public housing projects have to choose between the physical dangers they face at home and the problems they would face from homelessness.¹⁴ Similarly, the women who make up a majority (56%) of Section 8 residents can be evicted from their housing because of violence *against* them. A leading cause of homelessness for women is gender-based violence.

Federal regulations that permit and even encourage local public housing agencies to bar residents from

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public housing because of a single criminal offense attach additional collateral consequences to minor crimes. In Annapolis, Maryland, the public housing authority has banned some five hundred people from residence, many of whom committed only minor crimes, who remain on the proscribed list even after having completed their sentences and probation terms. Others are barred from residence even though they have never been convicted or even charged with a crime. Offenses by a single member of a family are sufficient to bar the entire group from residence. Rules that prevent ex-offenders from even visiting relatives in housing projects inhibit the ability of families to assist the re-entry of returning ex-offenders and disrupt and sometimes even destroy family ties. Zero tolerance policies about crime in public housing mean that a single mother living in public housing whose romantic partner was charged (but never prosecuted or convicted) of drug possession as a juvenile has to raise her children alone or move out of one of the few housing units available to her. Women also confront collateral consequences at the intersections of employment and housing opportunities. Employment discrimination against women produces lower incomes. These incomes require female-headed households to spend 30% of income on their housing while male headed households pay 25%, and couples average 16%.¹⁵ Policies that promote the privatization of public housing punish Black women particularly because housing discrimination leaves them ac-

cess to only a constrained market.¹⁶ 75% of households in public housing are headed by women, 45% of them consist of women with children. Plans to privatize public housing do not announce themselves as racist and sexist, but their negative consequences fall directly on women of color. Women of color are the group most likely to receive sub-prime loans, while white men are the least likely. These problems add up, producing an intersectional array of obstacles and impediments to a decent and dignified life. As New Orleans activist Shana Griffin explains:

Those of us who are low-income or without income and who occupy marginal positions in society often face multiple and critical competing needs due to our lack of access to health care; safer, sanitary and adequate housing; safer reproductive health services and information; education opportunities and financial assistance.¹⁷

The police officers in Los Angeles who fan out across Skid Row each day to harass the homeless do not act as individuals. They are part of a national and international pattern of blaming and shaming that portrays people who *have* problems as people who *are* problems. All around the world, people are being locked up in jails and locked out of opportunities in order to preserve the locked-in advantages and privileges of the prosperous and the

powerful. The Safer Cities Initiative puts vulnerable people in constant danger to make Skid Row safer for investors and owners. The logics of defensive localism and hostile privatism place security at the center of discussions about public policy. People filled with fear consent to punitive policing because they think it is better to be safe than sorry. But the pattern of policing that prevails on Skid Row proves that the pursuit of safety for investors and owners creates unsafe conditions for the most vulnerable people in our society. Unless we overturn the Safer Cities Initiative and the broader social warrant of neoliberalism on which it depends, no one will be safer, and ultimately all of us will be a lot sorer.

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PART II: HOMELESSNESS IN LA

WHY THE SILENCE? HOMELESSNESS AND RACE

DAVID WAGNER AND PETE WHITE

In his 1963 letter from a Birmingham, Alabama jail, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "Our people are smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society." If communities were smothering in cages of poverty nearly fifty years ago, it is hard to imagine how Dr. King would describe the conditions engulfing poor communities of color now; especially the condition of homelessness. In cities across the U.S., millions of homeless people are suffocating in the open-air prison of city streets. Los Angeles currently holds the unfortunate title of the country's "homeless capital," with conservative estimates of 51,340 homeless people in LA County. African Americans are severely overrepresented in the ranks of Angelinos forced to live without housing. Almost half of homeless residents in the City of Los Angeles are African American even though they comprise only 8% of the city's overall population. The chance of a white person being homeless on any given night in Los Angeles is 1 in 272. By stark contrast, the chance that an African American is homeless in LA is 1 in 18. This extreme racial disparity should be a clarion call for more robust explanations about why race and homelessness are linked in U.S. cities.

Silence About Race

Current mass homelessness in the United States dates back to approximately 1979 and 1980 when advocates, reporters, social workers, and others began to notice a significant number of people with no place to live. Since then, a massive amount of media coverage and scholarly studies have been produced about the phenomenon. To this day, one important silence in the literature on homelessness remains: the subject of race. To better understand how race and ethnicity have been ignored in coverage of homelessness we examined newspapers through the National Newspaper Index. Over a period of nearly three decades only a few articles addressed racial disparities in homelessness. One suggestive article in the 1993 *Los Angeles Times* explained that charities were concerned about portraying homeless people as other than white, male, and older, finding that their contributions went down when other groups were used to portray the homeless.¹ Only two other articles addressed the issue: One entitled "Race and Homelessness" which was in, of all places, an editorial in the *Tulsa World*. Another appeared in *The Crisis* in 1995 entitled "Homelessness in Black America."²

Academic journals showed the same general pattern. While scholarly articles noted the issue of race in homelessness, few were wholly devoted to the issue—with the exception of the important work by Arthur Whaley and Bruce Link.³ Even studies about the housing and economic status of African Americans were silent on the issue of homelessness. The 2005 California Legislative Black Caucus report, *The State of Black California*, failed to even note the reality of homelessness. Its index on housing listed only two categories: homeowners and renters. Those without a home did not even appear as statistics in their study. Tellingly, another academic study found that when homeless populations were identified as being African-Americans they were more likely to be viewed as being dangerous.

Many media depictions craft images that homeless people “are just like you and me.” Indeed homelessness could happen to anyone, but representations such as the homeless professor in the 1980s movie *The Fisher King* or the homeless heart surgeon portrayed in the 1980s TV drama *Saint Elsewhere* are over the top. More recently Hollywood has produced a few stories about homeless African-Americans. They too are quite atypical examples such as the medical equipment salesman played by Will Smith in *The Pursuit of Happyness* or the Juilliard graduate played by Jamie Foxx in *The Soloist*. Those who have ever visited a homeless shelter or an area of town where homeless people congregate know that most homeless people come from working class and

poor communities.⁴ In many cultural depictions, homeless African Americans are commonly represented as the “drug addict,” “the mentally ill,” “the lazy,” “the just not trying hard enough Black guy,” “the welfare queen,” “the criminal,” and other degrading figures. These depictions do not explain the root causes of homelessness. Instead they reinforce structures of unequal access to resources and power along racial and class lines. Homelessness is one of many durable, race-based inequalities built through the accumulation of such representations.

Data About Homelessness and Race

Official homeless counts, including the U.S. Mayors Conference reports, the HUD Assessment reports, and the U.S. Census reports, show that race is a key factor in demographics of homeless populations.⁵ Alarminglly, the percentage of the African-American homeless population is 3.5 times the percentage of the general population. These studies also demonstrate a similar statistical overrepresentation of homeless Native Americans. Latinos are estimated to be about proportional to their percentage of the general population. Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders represent a smaller relative percentage of the homeless population. While white people constitute the majority of the nation’s population they actually represent a smaller

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relative amount of the homeless population. Of course, these numbers vary considerably by region with some regions having a majority of white homeless and some a majority of Latino homeless. Nevertheless the national numbers are quite striking in illustrating the overrepresentations of African-Americans in the homeless population. The following table shows the racial disparities in homelessness:

with relatives.⁶ While troubling, these official figures only give us a rough estimate and possibly an underestimate of the racial breakdown of homelessness in the U.S.

Race and Homelessness in Los Angeles

Lack of employment and/ or sufficient income is an obvious contributor to homelessness. In LA

Race/Ethnicity	Estimated % of nation's total population (from US Census Data, 1990, 2000 and 2009 estimates)	Estimated % of nation's homeless population (homeless counts/surveys between 1991 and 2009)
African-Americans	12-12.3%	40-56%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.9-4.4%	1-3%
Hispanic/Latino	9-15%	12-15%
Native American	0.8-1.2%	3-4%
White	59-71%	32-39%

Of course, official figures about homelessness warrant some skepticism since many homeless people systematically avoid being counted. Few homeless people jump up to greet census takers or other professionals to say, "We are here!" For this and other reasons, advocates have regularly challenged the United States Census tabulations. While official estimates are generally able to count the number of shelter users they severely undercount the number of people living under bridges, in cars, in abandoned housing or doubled up

the impacts of globalization and deindustrialization have hit the African American community like a ton of bricks, beginning primarily in the late 1970s. Blue-collar jobs in the rubber and steel plants provided career paths for many African Americans regardless of educational achievement and/ or the impacts of an inadequate, unequal school system. Once those plants shut down, so did the hopes and dreams of African Americans securing the "American dream."

After the departure of this primary work source for African

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American men, its replacement, the service sector, has proved to be inadequate and even unobtainable for many. Even in the supposed economic boom of the 1990s, African American workers did not fare as well as others. Economist Harry J. Holzer, wrote in a 2006 *New York Times* article, "If you look at the numbers, the 1990's was a bad decade for young black men, even though it had the best labor market in 30 years."

Today, it is easy to go an entire day in many parts of Los Angeles and not see a single African American working. Supermarkets, public works jobs, and construction projects are all too often all devoid of a significant Black workforce. Sadly, this very clear fact has not been seen as worthy of debate, as it is only brought up in "stump" speeches when politicians want the Black vote. Not surprisingly, data shows that Black workers have been hard by the current economic crisis. In a recent report entitled "Unemployment and Under-Employment—September 2011," the Economic Roundtable outlines alarming facts regarding the state of employment in Los Angeles County. It observes that during August 2011 the unemployment rate for African Americans residing in Los Angeles County hovered at 23.3% and the under-employment rate was 34.4%, compared to 10.3% and 19.5%, respectively, for whites and 13.8% and 25.2%, respectively, for Latinos. Rates of disconnection from the workforce were not specifically cited, but the report states that, "rates of disconnection from work

[among African Americans] have risen in 2011" indicating that the actual number of those un/underemployed is likely far higher than 34%.

The decline of a working-class infrastructure in Los Angeles, particularly for African Americans, has happened alongside processes of criminalization under the guise of the war on drugs. Millions of Americans have been swept into this so-called war, which has disproportionately targeted African American men and, more recently, women. African Americans have experienced what Clyde Woods called "asset-stripping." This process affects their employment potential and has also stripped away Black working class people's human right to housing. In turn, incarceration rates have skyrocketed, as well as rates of those sentenced to parole or probation. A 2009 Pew Charitable Trusts report estimated that a total of 2.3 million people were in prison or jail each day in the U.S. It goes on to note that an additional 5.1 million people are on parole or probation. Combining these figures gives us the astonishing statistic that 1 in 31 adults in the United States are under some form of correctional control. That said, the combined rate for African Americans is drastically elevated, with 1 in 11 Blacks overall under some form of correctional control. These rates are even higher in some inner-city neighborhoods. A 2010 survey of Skid Row residents in Downtown Los Angeles found that 81% of homeless respondents had been arrested in the past year.

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Given the increasing trend towards criminalizing homelessness, we can conclude that criminalization and correctional control has likely an even greater impact on African Americans who are homeless.

The decline of low-income housing beginning in the 1970s as well as cuts made in welfare have also disproportionately impacted African-Americans. When major cities became desirable for affluent baby boomers and also to the finance, insurance, and real estate industries, African Americans were disproportionately affected in the mass displacement that occurred. In a wave of displacement reminiscent of what was called “Negro removal” in the 1950s and 1960s, developers and real estate moguls found every bit of housing that could be converted to luxury housing and condominiums and co-ops to be a boom to their industry. Millions of people were evicted or otherwise persuaded to leave their apartments, only to find nowhere to go in the new economy of the 1980s. In the 1990s, the “end of welfare as we know it” radically changed the conditions of the poor, especially poor African American women, with millions eventually forced off the welfare rolls and pushed out into a supposedly friendly workplace. The economic landscape of Los Angeles today continues to be a cold and desolate place, with very few living wage jobs available, extremely limited affordable housing, and fewer and fewer protections for basic survival. In addition, discrimination against ex-offenders is actually *legal* in

the job and housing markets as well as in public benefit programs, with disproportionate impacts on African Americans due to racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

What are the combined impacts of de-industrialization, criminalization, gentrification, welfare reform, and African American underemployment and poverty rates in Los Angeles? Certainly the epidemic of homelessness among African Americans is one result.

Conclusion

A simple elementary game of connect the dots needs to be played by organizers, activists, and homeless and poor communities to create a vivid illustration of how a despised group has been systematically removed and forgotten; how runaway unemployment, underemployment and disconnection from the labor market is par for the course in the Black community; how rampant and often lifelong criminalization thoroughly strips individual and collective potential and erects barriers that can't be pole-vaulted over; how a so-called war on drugs in reality destroys families and eliminates cultural norms needed to build healthy communities; and how, if you look close enough, you will find someone or something benefiting from the misery of African Americans, an experience that has been repeated from generation to generation. The

dialogue and analysis must move from individual stories and personal blame to framing the issue of homelessness in a structural context by recognizing the interplay between race, inequality, and the 30-year crisis of homelessness, if any change or progress is to be made on the issue.

Lastly, there is a need for voices of Black outrage, but instead there is an eerie silence emanating from most of the Black community. As criminalization, unemployment, and the near elimination of the “safety net” continue to exacerbate the homeless crisis and otherwise define the lives of poor Black people, there has barely been a peep. It appears as if the Black community is literally drowning and afraid to yell for help. It is not too late to imagine a world where the human right to housing is realized and healthy outcomes are the norm. The time is now and responsible leadership must emerge from all sectors of our society.

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Pete White is the founder and co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network.

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3 Arthur Whaley and Bruce Link, “Racial Categorization and Stereotype-Based Judgments About Homeless People,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 28.3 (1998): 189-205.

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5 All studies have some problems with them. The United States Mayors Conference admits the 25 cities do not present a random sample of the country. Both the HUD Assessment data and the Census data are more likely to still present the sheltered homeless and the highly visible homeless than not. There could be an argument, though we believe it to be probably far-fetched, that undercounts in rural or suburban areas could mitigate some of the racial figures.

6 Counts used include HUD Annual Assessment data 2006-2010; United States Conference of Mayors, 1991, 1993, 1998, 2006, 2009; US Census, 2000; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2004.

BLACK PANTHER PARTY 10-POINT PROGRAM

4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.

LA CAN IS VERY IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT HAS AN ASSEMBLY OF PEOPLE DOWN HERE. THEY ARE TALKING TO PEOPLE AND GLEANING FROM THEM WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE AND PUTTING THAT INTO EFFECT. THEY ARE NOT DICTATING OR SAYING THIS IS WHAT YOU NEED TO DO BUT THEY'RE ACTUALLY GETTING IT FROM THE PEOPLE. A LOT OF IT IS SO

PARALLEL TO THE SURVIVAL PROGRAMS OF THE

BLACK PANTHERS.

HOUSING WAS A PART OF THE TEN-POINT PROGRAM, SO WAS POLICE ABUSE JUST LIKE THE WHOLE SAFER CITIES INITIATIVE. I MEAN THE PANTHERS WOULD BE ADDRESSING ALL OF THIS STUFF NOW IF THE PANTHERS WERE AROUND. THEY WOULD BE MOBILIZING AND ORGANIZING PEOPLE AROUND THESE SAME ISSUES.

**-BILAL ALI,
LA CAN MEMBER,
BLACK PANTHER**



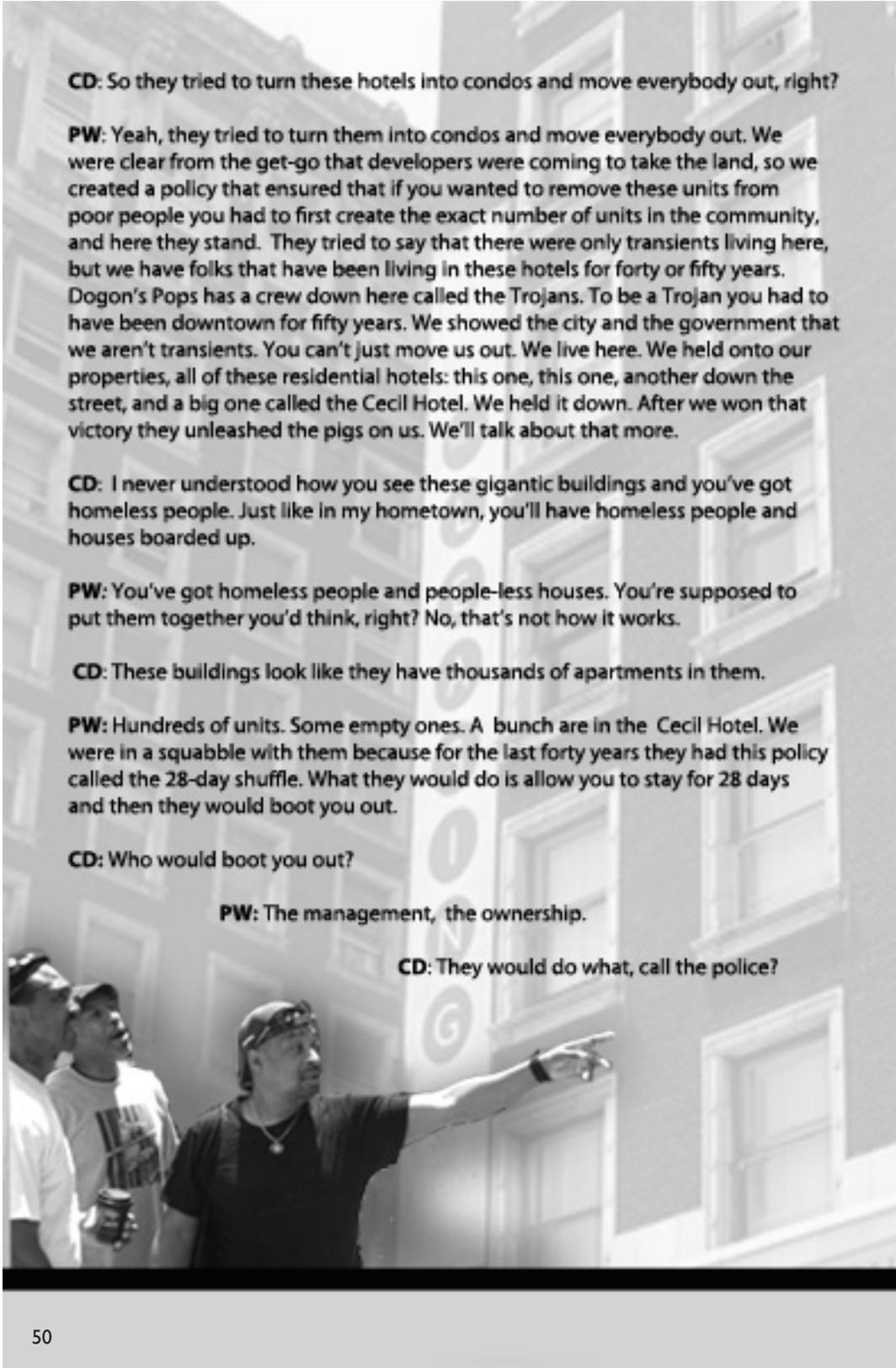
**STOP THE WAR
ON THE POOR!**



Chuck D's Tour of Skid Row

Chuck D, Pete White, and General Dogon

Images by Kai M. Green and Jordan T. Camp



CD: So they tried to turn these hotels into condos and move everybody out, right?

PW: Yeah, they tried to turn them into condos and move everybody out. We were clear from the get-go that developers were coming to take the land, so we created a policy that ensured that if you wanted to remove these units from poor people you had to first create the exact number of units in the community, and here they stand. They tried to say that there were only transients living here, but we have folks that have been living in these hotels for forty or fifty years. Dogon's Pops has a crew down here called the Trojans. To be a Trojan you had to have been downtown for fifty years. We showed the city and the government that we aren't transients. You can't just move us out. We live here. We held onto our properties, all of these residential hotels: this one, this one, another down the street, and a big one called the Cecil Hotel. We held it down. After we won that victory they unleashed the pigs on us. We'll talk about that more.

CD: I never understood how you see these gigantic buildings and you've got homeless people. Just like in my hometown, you'll have homeless people and houses boarded up.

PW: You've got homeless people and people-less houses. You're supposed to put them together you'd think, right? No, that's not how it works.

CD: These buildings look like they have thousands of apartments in them.

PW: Hundreds of units. Some empty ones. A bunch are in the Cecil Hotel. We were in a squabble with them because for the last forty years they had this policy called the 28-day shuffle. What they would do is allow you to stay for 28 days and then they would boot you out.

CD: Who would boot you out?

PW: The management, the ownership.

CD: They would do what, call the police?

PW: They would just lock the door. That was their business model. At thirty days by state law you become a tenant. They were not going to give people tenant protections so they'd kick them out at 28 days. The community was able to squabble and pass a new state law that stopped that practice. Then gentrification came and they tried to push predominantly Black folks out on the street. We sued the owner of this building with the City Attorney, the owner of a building around the corner, and now we're in a fight with the 600-unit Cecil Hotel.

CD: You see that banner there? That tells you right there *Black folks get out*.

PW: This side right here says the Rosslyn Lofts, right? When development first began, they opened this side for those two floors up top. All white people. High-speed elevator. The other side looked like Fort Knox, painted black, steel cage. Black folks went in one side, white folks went in the other side. So we are talking about Jim Crow policy, apartheid-type dynamics happening right here. We stopped that.

CD: So tell me about this. For the longest time downtown was off the radar, but I've been seeing everything happening here for the last ten years. What happened?

PW: It's been all about gentrification. They want to "Manhattanize" downtown Los Angeles. Folks that have been here since the 1940s are being told it is time to go.



CD: Explain to me something about back, back, back in the day. You know all my people were from the Carolinas and they moved - straight up - because Jim Crow moved them out. *Go North* was the story. All my people went from North Carolina up into the New York area for hopes of a better whatever. They stopped in Philly, D.C., and also New York. So the migration of Black folks out here was from Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. We used to hear that people moved out West during World War II to get jobs in the shipping plants and then they moved to Central Avenue area. What was that dynamic like?

PW: What's interesting is that downtown was the first destination. Clyde Woods writes about this spot called Brownsville. This was where the railroad came through. When Black folks migrated from northern Louisiana, they came to an area now known as Little Tokyo to take the service and railroad jobs. Also remember that LA was a big steel production spot, so World War II was good to folks here because we produced steel and rubber. Black folks worked in all those industries and those industries eventually left. When you go through South Central Los Angeles you'll see all of those steel and rubber plants that are now abandoned. But we followed the jobs. It started here, in Brownsville, downtown Los Angeles, which is now called Skid Row. People don't even know that history.

CD: So you are saying that this area Brownsville was definitely like Harlem?

PW: Absolutely. This is where people landed and then they moved out to the rest of the city. Watts and East Los Angeles were always popular for people of color because that's where the public housing sites were.



CD: What is the block radius of what they would call Skid Row?

GD: Fifty square blocks. Where we are at right now is called the Toy District. Basically this area right here separates the haves from the have-nots. At nighttime when this mall breaks down, you won't see anything but tents.

CD: It's a trip because whenever you hear about Black folks in Los Angeles you never, ever hear about downtown. Why do you think that story hasn't really ever been told? Because, look, straight up and down Pete, you have filmmakers, all the filmmakers here, artists making music galore, historians, documentarians. How long does it take for a Black story about LA to be told?

PW: You know what? It is never going to be told unless we tell it. The reason they don't want to tell the story is because it's not one story. That narrative would have to be about the migration of Black folks, about deindustrialization, it would have to talk about discrimination, housing discrimination, and employment discrimination too. They want to keep it easy. They aren't trying to talk about why and how, and they definitely aren't trying to talk about the whys and hows of homelessness. They want to make it a charity issue. They don't want to make it a justice issue. They don't want to talk about the systems and structures at play that create this situation. That's why they don't tell the story. That's why it is important for us to do tours like this because we need to tell that story. And we need to ask the question. This is a story worth telling.

CD: All you Black filmmakers, you need to tell this story, straight up. I mean, am I crazy? All I see here for miles here is nothing but Black folks. How can you not tell this story? Quote me on that because I am seeing Black folks until the eye goes dim. How can you be a person in the media and not tell this story?



PW: Exactly. They don't ever tell the story. The only time they try is during Thanksgiving and Christmas when they are giving away free food.

CD: The last time I heard stories come out of this area from the mass media it was about one of those clean-up jobs.

PW: Yeah, you know what they were doing? They were arresting everybody and shipping them out to the desert during the '84 Olympics.

CD: Well tell me about that.

PW: Skid Row has always been LA's dirty secret. LA is the homeless capital of the country. Skid Row has the most concentrated poverty in the country. When the Pope comes in and the television cameras come in, they don't want anybody to see that. So what they do is sweep the streets.

CD: What do they do when they sweep the streets? They just round everybody up?

PW: It's a round up. When they started the gentrification effort here five years ago, they were walking brothers to jail. They had coffle lines. Coffles! Like slaves. White folks on horses walking people to jail in lines. We've got that on tape. They couldn't even give us a ride to jail; they were walking us to jail. So that is the kind of thing they do. By any means necessary. If they can't arrest you enough, then they run you out.

CD: So Staples is right around the corner?

PW: Right around the corner.

CD: This reminds me of when I was in Chicago. Michael Jordan and the Bulls had won the championship and right around the corner of their stadium they were surrounded by projects. So what are the Lakers doing?

PW: Not a thing. And they are right around the corner.



CD: What are the city's plans for housing?

PW: Over the last ten years they've made 10,000 new units of luxury housing and only like 500 or 600 units of affordable and low-income housing in downtown Los Angeles. The short answer is that there is no plan. The plan is: build for the rich and to hell with the poor. There is no plan to house the people. There are more than enough resources, but there is not a plan. The plan is to send folks to the only recession proof place on the planet, that's prison. No matter how bad times are they still find money in California to build more prisons. So that's the plan. I'm going to give you another tour. In New York you all have a right to shelter law. In LA we haven't got that right.

CD: You got waiting lists?

PW: Come on, we haven't got any room. I'm about to show you the missions' answer. The folks who run the missions are retired white corporate cats doing their charitable work. Their average pay is about \$150,000 to house us. I'm going to show you where they've got people sleeping in this particular mission. They use the courtyard to house our people, man. People are laid up in this place like sardines at night. That's where they sleep, on the ground.

CD: Then they'll say people out here can't get in there?

PW: Everybody can't fit.

GD: They've got like 29 emergency beds that they give in the morning. That's it.

CD: So every morning it's 29 beds. Anything over that, you've got to go?

PW: The number of homeless people number of service beds, beds for is about 15,000. The numbers don't fit.

in the county is 70,000. The people across a range of services, it's getting worse.

GD: To police 50 square blocks here, the city spent \$6.2 million a year versus \$5.7 million city-wide on homeless services.



PW: So the priority is criminalization.

GD: The city's idea of permanent housing is in the county jail.

CD: The thing is there is very little ethnic diversity down here. Almost everyone I see is Black.

PW: Exactly.

GD: You know a mission is supposed to be, *come on in, have a seat, here's a plate of food. Need a bed? Go over there.* No more. Now they stop you at the door and ask, *do you got some cash? What you got in your wallet? Oh well, you are going to have bounce then.* They are now charging you to stay in the mission.

CD: I feel like the city and the state authorities think they can be a little lazier here too, because it's warm. In the East it gets pretty cold at night.

PW: But hear this. When they talk about our homeless population they say that they aren't from LA. They say they come from New York and Miami and other places for the reasons you said, because the weather there isn't acceptable for homelessness.

CD: Like, I'm gonna come 3,000 miles so I can stay in a shelter.

PW: Seventy-five percent of the homeless population here are from South Central. That's why they're Black.

CD: I'm seeing more Black people than I've ever seen in LA. I've been coming here thirty years, man.



GD: So this is the industrial district right here. This is basically where all the warehouses and manufacturers are. A lot of homeless folks choose to sleep at this end of downtown because there are businesses that only do shipping and receiving. Nobody's walking in or using the sidewalks down here. People put up their tents because it's a place where you can keep it up all day long. But in 2006 Mayor Antonio Villagarosa and then Chief William Bratton unleashed what they called the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI), which brought 110 extra police to Skid Row making it the most policed community in America. They were averaging over 750 arrests a month and writing over a thousand tickets. The first year of SCI policing they wrote over 12,000 tickets and arrested over 9,000 people in a community of only 13,000-15,000 residents.

PW: Think about that. 9,000 arrests in a year, and there's only 13,000-15,000 residents.

CD: What does an arrest do? An arrest just moves you from one place into the prison industrial complex.

GD: They were running a recycling program.

PW: But the other thing that an arrest does on Skid Row is that it moves you off the street. If they can arrest 9,000 of us and get us off the street developers will feel a little more comfortable about spending their money. Homelessness is about economics, it's about racism, it's about housing. So when we talk about homelessness we are talking about land, we are talking about housing, we are talking about justice.

CD: You are talking about all these simple things that can't be reached: I want a place to sleep and I want to be fed.

PW: Absolutely.

CD: Seems like there's a healthcare aspect. If you ain't got a place to stay and you can't get fed, your health is going to be the first to go.

PW: Absolutely.



PW: I was looking at some things from the 60s about employment, like Martin Luther King's guaranteed income strategy. That was some smart stuff he was saying right before he died. He was responding to the urban uprisings and the social revolutions at the time. You had Dr. King advocating for these policies in 1967 and 1968 and we still haven't got there. We need to figure it out now or else uprisings are going to continue to happen.

CD: It ain't getting better. The dollar that they praise is over. I don't know what the next alternative is going to be.



Chuck D is the founder of and lead vocalist for the legendary hip-hop group Public Enemy. He has also been a long time activist, lecturer, and producer.

Pete White is the founder and co-director of LA CAN.

General Dogon is a community organizer with LA CAN and lifelong resident of Skid Row.



soni abdel

**I'm angry because one of our comrades
was arrested on trumped up charges.
But instead of doing something ignorant,
I'm out here aching and hurting.
I'm honestly also out here for myself.
I don't want to be enslaved anymore.
I don't want to be enslaved like my great grandparents were.
I don't want to be told I can't walk on this side of the street
like my mother was told.
I don't want to be told you have to get up because we say so.
I don't want that, so that's why I'm here.**

PROBLEM

Residential hotels are home to about 18,000 of Los Angeles' lowest income households. State law allowed the City of Los Angeles to put restrictions on the demolition and conversion of these units, but LA had not done so – putting thousands at risk of displacement, especially in gentrifying communities like Downtown, Hollywood and Venice.

SOLUTION

LA CAN members organized and demanded that the City enact a residential hotel preservation ordinance. After a four-year campaign and a two-year temporary moratorium on demolition and conversion, a permanent ordinance was unanimously passed in 2008. The City's top housing executive at the time called it the strongest housing preservation ordinance in city history.



That's when I realized that
being homeless was very hard.
I realized that
people don't understand homelessness.
You know, it's tough.
People see you, you're dirty,
they think that you're nothing.
But you are somebody.

A black and white portrait of Lydia Trejo, a woman with short, dark, curly hair. She is wearing a dark t-shirt with the word "COMMUNITY" visible at the bottom. The background shows a whiteboard with some faint writing and a brick wall. The name "lydia trejo" is overlaid in bold black text on the left side of the image.

lydia trejo

I realized that I'd been scared
around homeless people
because I'd never gone through homelessness before.
Soon I realized that people will protect you.
I realized that the homeless are good people.
What's bad are the circumstances
that happened to them.

MYTHS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS & EXTREME POVERTY

- They are alcoholics
- They are “drug addicts”
- They are people who are “mentally ill”
- They are “lazy”
- They just want a handout
- They are from elsewhere than our hometown



A Dialogue on Homelessness

David Wagner and Pete White facilitated a dialogue about homelessness among members of LA CAN.

Pete: First off, why do people think homelessness exists?

Soni: Banks, they're the true rulers of the U.S.

Cynthia: Poverty.

Omar: Class warfare.

Bilal: Economic restructuring policy nationally and internationally involving a three prong attack on poor people: 1) de-industrialization sending manufacturing to other countries 2) deregulation 3) cutting of social services.

Wesley: Criminalizing and penalizing the poor.

Debbie: Government.

David Wagner presented a slideshow on the myths and causes of homelessness. Some myths about the root causes of homelessness he included were: drug abuse, mental illness, alcoholism, and laziness. He also listed the actual causes of homelessness as: deindustrialization, gentrification, deinstitutionalization and cuts in social programs. What follows are excerpts from the discussion that followed his presentation.

Cynthia: I'd like to elaborate on the point about drugs, crack cocaine and alcohol. The CIA played a role in that. People here did not pay money to bring those drugs over here into this country. There was a targeting of the less fortunate. That's when a lot of children were taken from poor women. It deprived poor whites, poor Blacks, poor Hispanics and others of their own children.



Omar: It's interesting that you're from New York State. In the 70s, New York City went through a recession and it pretty much shredded the city's infrastructure. We had the same thing here in the late 80s early 90s that devastated Los Angeles. When we go through recessions, these are the results: de-industrialization, cuts in social benefits, etc. All those categories explain where we are now. From the 1970s with the neoliberal economics and then Reagan, it all comes together.

Ray: I have been involved personally with deindustrialization. I'm enduring it right now. I've had to create jobs for myself.

Pete: I want you to go a little deeper, Ray. In the past, what was your skill?

Ray: I was a manager. I managed very well. The company I worked with is no longer there. It was a manufacturing company that manufactured air conditioners for cars. That company is no longer there. These companies are no longer here. The jobs, they're not there. Those jobs paid for homes, they paid for college, they paid for a lot of different things. And right now, the number one job in LA is service. We have service-oriented jobs.

Bilal: The analysis we just went over is very correct. However this kind of analysis sometimes obscures a basic fact. A lot of these policies were a backlash against people's struggles in this country, mainly against Black people coming out of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement and the civil disturbances or rebellions when people were rising up and getting organized. What we're seeing right now is a deliberate backlash. The backlash and draconian measures are to keep the people down that dared to rise up. Some of you are my age and remember that. We are seeing a backlash because we dared to rise up, dared to struggle and we dared to put this country on notice about the inequality. There was a mechanism that was set off to cause a lot of these things – deindustrialization, deregulation, cutbacks to make a permanent underclass.

Debbie: I want to talk about the backlash after the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill. They did not take into consideration what happens when you dump a lot of folks out of these institutions with no follow up. We need the support structure. With no structure, folks don't know what to do, especially if they have a mental disability. There is no follow up, no check in for those individuals. Instead they criminalize us and say that all we want to do is drink or do drugs. That's not true. They say that we don't want help. We want it. But what services are provided for those individuals who want them?

LaVeeta: We have first, second and third generations, and going on fourth generation families all living together. Now, they have to do that because they need financial support. They can't do it on their own anymore. But then we have the government dropping people off programs, off financial aid, off jobs. Then they tell you at the same time, you're lazy, you don't want to find work, etc. How can they say that when they have nothing for people to do? See what I'm saying? There are no resources there.

James: After the 70s, what people made in wages hasn't increased. So people either have to have their partners start working, they have to work more hours, or they have to go into debt and take out loans. But then if they get into an accident or they get sick, they get laid off, it's not a survivable situation.

Jose: I'm young and I feel like a lot of youth look to the past when we had so much energy in the Black movement in the 1970s. Now where do we go? We see so many people and their families that have been in homelessness for so long. They don't see the way out. So we need a way out and I feel like the way out is being taken away from us.



Pete: They have been very successful – “they” being the state – at convincing us that we’re broken and the system is healthy. They have been very, very successful in calling us rotten apples but not talking about the rotten orchards. That being the case, what are those other things that we would like to add that are broken in the structure?



Debbie: The war on drugs is wrong. They use all that money talking about a war on drugs. They know who is bringing in the drugs but they don’t go out and apprehend them. They just say we need more money, we need more money. That money could be used more productively. Even the government is thinking about it since it’s broke.

Dave: You’re saying take out that criminalization money and put it into services?

Debbie: Exactly.

Pete: What we haven’t talked about is race – poverty and race. Do we believe there is difference between races? What are those differences?

Omar: The U.S. is built on white power. The result from that is discrimination against people of color within white capitalism from the 18th century on.

Cynthia: According to the Constitution I was considered 3/5 of a person. I’m just saying.

Bilal: When we talk about poverty numerically speaking, there are more white people poverty than people of color simply because of the numbers.

But it affects us more because if you take the numbers of say African Americans or Brown people or Asian people and really Native American people, the percentage is higher. I was in Natchez, Mississippi 20 years ago where white people were taking baths outside. It’s not about claiming which



ethnicity is more in poverty. It's really a crime against humanity. We live in one of the richest countries in the world and people sleep on streets. I've been to Cuba and it is 1,000 times poorer than the U.S. because of the blockade. But there are no homeless people there because Cuba has a law that everyone who wants a dwelling is entitled to it. With the inequality divide in this country we are going to have to have a united front to struggle.



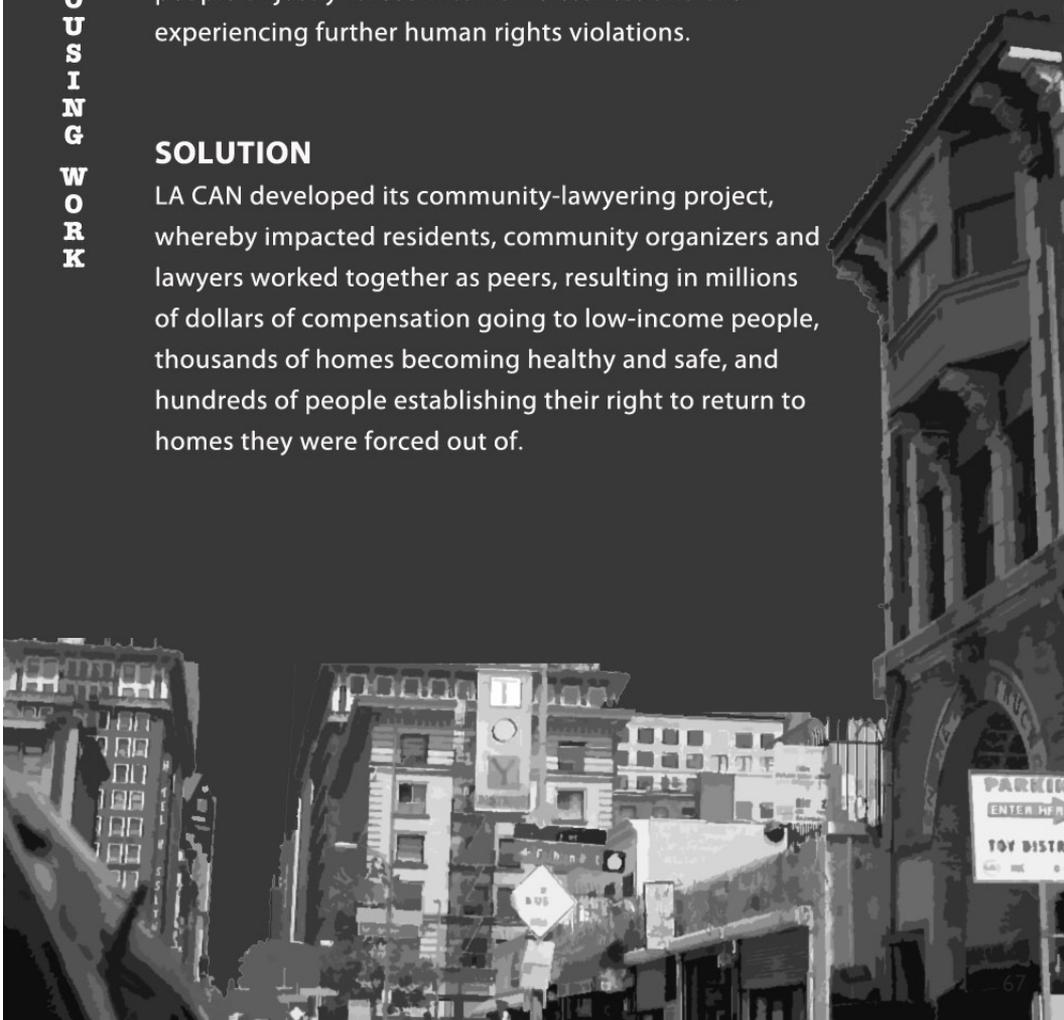
Pete: To paraphrase Frantz Fanon, the number the people facing the problem is equal to the number of people who possess the solution. What Fanon was telling us that we can solve the problems we have. It's up to us to organize and figure out how we are going to solve these problems.

PROBLEM

Homeless people and extremely low-income tenants had little or no access to legal representation, and most housing and civil rights attorneys generally did not work collaboratively with impacted residents to identify and solve problems. The results included illegal evictions going unchecked, slum conditions allowed to continue, people unjustly forced into homelessness and then experiencing further human rights violations.

SOLUTION

LA CAN developed its community-lawyering project, whereby impacted residents, community organizers and lawyers worked together as peers, resulting in millions of dollars of compensation going to low-income people, thousands of homes becoming healthy and safe, and hundreds of people establishing their right to return to homes they were forced out of.



I came back and my parents were still living in the Frontier Hotel. Things had changed. Now the Main Street side was closed off and there was this big wall erected in front. There was also this new security guard who would ask you for your key as you came and left. I had no idea what the hell was going on. All these things were changing. Apparently, the people who moved into 4th and Main didn't feel secure walking this way with their poodles and their lattes. They had done a bunch of organizing with the Council office and the LAPD and got the City Attorney's office to get a nuisance abatement drug injunction. The city came in and used that tool to place all these conditions on the property.



steve diaz

A little later LA CAN was in front of the Frontier handing out flyers for a big teach-in, "Come learn about your tenant rights. The City has filed an injunction against your property. Come find out what it was." That was one of the best attended LA CAN teach-ins that I can remember. 250 maybe 350 folks or more attended. All you saw were packed rows of people wondering what the hell was going on. That was my first LA CAN event. I found out that I actually had rights as a tenant. I found out that I could actually do something, file complaints with the Housing Department. I just found out so much information. After the meeting I said, "Hey man, I want to get involved. I want to learn some more cause I don't know what the hell is going on." They told me to come by the next day.

GENTRIFICATION, DISPOSSESSION, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DIGNITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH GENERAL DOGON

BY JORDAN T. CAMP

JC: What is it like for you to organize in Skid Row?

GD: It's a pride and a joy to serve and work on Skid Row. I was born and raised on Skid Row. I got my first job at twelve years old in the Toy District working in a toy store. I got into my addiction on Skid Row, I got recovered on Skid Row, and now I am living and working on Skid Row. It's an honor to do the work that I do. I take it personally because I know a lot of the people, I know the conditions that folks are in. The majority of them are my friends and neighbors.

JC: What was Skid Row like before?

GD: Ever since I was a kid, downtown was always the spot. People dressed up. They came from all around the city. At nighttime it would light up like Las Vegas. That's why I love downtown. When you look at some of the old stores on Broadway, even on Main Street, you'll see that they still have the old lights and everything. You had ballrooms, nightclubs, movie theatres. Everybody was grooving downtown.

JC: How do you feel that Skid

Row has changed because of gentrification?

GD: For many years Skid Row was not recognized as a community. Now that they've got these lofts and condos suddenly you hear the word "community" thrown around a whole lot. You have folks like my father living down here for the last fifty years, and his buddies too. You've got families here. So why wasn't there any "community" when we were here?

I don't know about these white folks that come down here today. They haven't been here two days and they change the name of the streets from Main Street to Gallery Row. I mean they've got their dogs shitting and pissing all over the damn place. You go to some of these blocks like Spring Street and it's doo-doo alley. The city is promoting this process because they feel that in order for developers to put money in the area, they've got to move Black and Brown folks out. They've got to move Ed the wino or Ted the panhandler out of the way.

JC: Residential hotels provide the largest housing stock in Skid Row. Who lives in them?

GD: Most folks living in the

FREEDOM NOW!

residential hotels are on subsidized income. If you are on SSI, Social Security, or if you've got a minimum wage job, plus if you don't have a housing subsidy paying some of your rent, you're not going to be able to survive on the little chump change that the government gives you. \$800 to \$900 a month is not enough to survive. It costs more than that for rent. In South Central one bedrooms start at \$800 or \$900 a month. The hotels downtown have always been between \$250 and \$500 a month. Folks can afford to pay rent and still have a couple hundred dollars left. Some folks sign up for Section 8 and once they get it they'll move out of the hotels. But most of the time folks will look at these hotels as their home.

JC: What has the struggle against displacement in these hotels been like?

GD: When gentrification came to town, places like the Bristol and the Frontier Hotel had signs out there saying \$75-\$125 a week. But then developers were coming in and taking these old buildings and restructuring them into housing units and even taking some of the old hotel rooms and putting in a sink, a toilet, a shower and calling it a loft and getting anywhere between \$1,500 and \$5,000 a unit. Then it was like, these other folks 'gotta go.

The owner at the Bristol saw an opportunity for cash and he had his hotel cleared in one hour. He brought in armed security guards and told people to get the hell out of his hotel. They rolled people out in their wheel chairs, people with

kids, people that were at work at the time found their property either on the sidewalk or still locked in their room. We found some people in Skid Row who started living in tents. The city wasn't doing anything about it. The police didn't do a damn thing about it. Council members didn't do a damn thing about it. We had to go out there and organize so the people could get justice.

It was the same thing with the owner of the Frontier Hotel. He decided to clear out the top three floors. He told everybody on those three floors they had to get the hell out. He turned the units into condos and lofts. While he was gentrifying the building, he created segregated parts of the building. He had the old folks, Black folks, and Brown folks that were living there coming through the Fifth street entrance, which looked like the front gates of Folsom with this big black gate and signs saying "no drinking, no loitering, no this, no that." Then on the other side, the Main Street side, it looked like the front entrance to the Bonaventure Hotel. They had a downstairs garage, big nice flowers, and an intercom. When you looked in the windows they had big fluffy couches. They had a doorman. So I'm like what the hell? This is some Jim Crow stuff here. Believe it or not the new loft folks never made contact with the old residents. It was straight separate entrances and everything. This is the kind of thing that was going on and the city allowed it. We had to go to the City Redevelopment Agency and file a complaint. We had to go to the Housing Department. We had to go to the City Council. They didn't

take it upon themselves to help us. Oh hell no. If it was up to them we would be in the middle of the river somewhere.

JC: What is your vision of social justice in Skid Row?

GD: I would have to say that when the smoke clears it would be me and Ed the wino sitting at the latte coffee shop [laughs].

General Dogon is a community organizer with LA CAN and lifelong resident of Skid Row.



PROBLEM

In 2002, the Community Redevelopment Agency released a plan for downtown Los Angeles, unanimously approved by the City Council, that called for the elimination of thousands of extremely low-income housing units, deemed long-term residents transients not eligible for certain benefits, and created no new services or economic options for low-income residents.

SOLUTION

LA CAN members sought legal counsel and sued the City to invalidate the plan. After years of organizing and legal work, the plan was reversed and redefined in 2006 to focus on extremely low-income housing preservation, housing for homeless residents, and local hiring obligations for developers. Out of this work, LA CAN's community lawyering model was formed.

We all realize within the area that there is a drug problem that does exist. No one will deny that. However, the systemic problem is caused by the policies of the police department under the guidance of the Safer Cities Initiative.



The additional police officers that are here aren't necessary. And I'm gonna tell you why:

You can't shoot or police yourself out of a drug situation.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SPECIAL ORDER 11: AN INTERVIEW WITH HAMID KHAN

BY JORDAN T. CAMP & CHRISTINA HEATHERTON

JC: Can you talk about the surveillance of housing and homeless activists in downtown LA?

HK: Downtown LA is where poverty and capital intersect. LA County has the largest homeless community anywhere in the United States. Downtown LA has the most concentrated homeless population in this county. This in itself creates what would be called “undesirables.” Surveillance historically has been a very active mechanism by the state to keep an eye on “undesirables,” along with municipal codes and various policies that get rid of them. That kind of thinking is how we got the “broken windows” policy.

CH: Can you tell us about Special Order 11?

HK: Special Order 11 was an order issued by the former Los Angeles police chief William Bratton in March 2008. It essentially legitimizes spying by local law enforcement, deems non-criminal behavior such as taking photographs to be “suspicious” activity (with the potential of being used by law enforcement as a pretext to investigate

individuals), and promotes racial and other types of profiling. Special Order 11 requires LAPD officers to file Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) on any observed or reported behaviors or activities that might have links to terrorism or crime. This special order has made Los Angeles a launching pad for the National Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative. Just to give you a little history: in 2004, Congress passed the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act. The Act was based on the theory that 9/11 happened because of a breakdown in information between various agencies. Congress then required Homeland Security and various other agencies to create what they called an “Information Sharing Environment” (ISE). This meant that all local law enforcement agencies would have to file Suspicious Activity Reports on observed activities and/or reported activities. This information would then be stored and sent to a central location called Fusion Centers (there are about 74 Fusion Centers in the country and one of the biggest is in Norwalk in LA County). Information in that Fusion Center would be accessible to all federal and local agencies, including the FBI,

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National Security Agency, and CIA. The next step would be determining what activities would be reported and how law enforcement would ascertain whether it was suspicious or not.

The LAPD took it upon itself to be the launching ground for this National Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative, resulting in the issuance of Special Order 11. This order lists about 40-plus “suspicious” behaviors. These include some criminal behaviors like possessing radiological material and illegal weapons. They also include quite a few non-criminal behaviors as well, such as: using cameras in public, shooting video, using binoculars, drawing diagrams, taking notes, walking into an office and asking for hours of operation, changing appearances, and evasive driving. The order makes the assumption that if you are shooting pictures or taking video in public then you are engaging in what is called “pre-operational surveillance.” The “suspicion” cast on such benign, daily behaviors opens the door for racial profiling and for such normal activities to be used as a pretext to open investigations on people who are just living their lives and abiding by the law.

CH: So right now we are filming you in public in front of an abandoned police station. Could this be considered pre-criminal activity?

HK: Absolutely. As per LAPD’s Special Order (SO) 11 we could be engaging in pre-operational surveillance, especially as we

participate in political free speech activity here by reclaiming the former Rampart police station. In 2010, the ACLU actually asked the LAPD to give them some records on SO 11. Remember, the LAPD has been the launching ground for this national initiative. They had to train all their approximately 10,000 officers. LAPD gave the ACLU a report covering the start of the program in March 2008 until July 2010. In those 28 months, the LAPD filed 2,743 Suspicious Activity Reports. When you do the math that comes to 3 reports a day.

So let’s say they reported you for filming in public. What happens is a report gets filed and goes to the watch commander. The watch commander sends it to the major crimes division. All of a sudden Christina’s name is in the major crimes division even though she’s never had a record because she’s out there shooting video in public. Once it is assessed, it is sent to the fusion center, and then from the fusion center someone makes a decision within 24 hours whether to launch a national security investigation against Christina. The concept is based on the assumption of criminality. It’s not that you are innocent until proven guilty; you’re assumed guilty until proven innocent. That is how this program runs. Right now as we speak this model has been adopted by various other metropolitan areas, including: Boston, Miami, New York, Chicago, Dallas, Seattle, and Houston. The goal is to have almost a million law enforcement personnel from all over the U.S., including: campus police, transit police, rural police,

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and sheriffs departments to be a part of this program.

JC: How does the surveillance of Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles compare with the other metropolitan areas?

HK: I think you can only make this connection by looking at the launch of the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI) in Los Angeles' Skid Row area in 2006. In that first year of SCI, which was based on the broken windows policy, thousands of jaywalking tickets and citations were given. Why was that? I think that's where we need to make a link, not just with surveillance but also with this larger concept that was introduced in Arizona's racist immigration law in 2010, SB 1070. The stated intent of SB 1070 is "attrition through enforcement," meaning that you make people's lives so miserable that they are forced to leave. In the case of undocumented immigrants, you deny them basic services, healthcare and emergency services, and it makes their lives miserable. You can equate that to downtown Skid Row residents: when you issue so many tickets and you enforce municipal codes which you might not otherwise enforce in Beverly Hills or the Westside, you cause that attrition. It is a result of constant surveillance.

This is why it was critical to launch this campaign to rescind SO 11 with the people who face police brutality and police abuse on a daily basis and who get surveilled on a daily basis as well. It is through this understanding that we are building this campaign informed by the

experiences of Skid Row residents. We need to go beyond the "usual suspects," meaning communities that have been targeted by the national security apparatus as potential suspects of terrorism, especially Muslims, South Asians, Arabs, or Middle Easterners, myself being of South Asian origin, born and raised in Pakistan.

Special Order 11 also targets many other groups as "undesirables." These are populations who are considered "suspicious" by virtue of who they are or the work they do. They include Black and Brown youth, many of whom have been jailed or are on probation, and are commonly described as "urban predators" and/or "domestic/street terrorists." For LGBT and queer transgender folks, SO 11 only adds to the multiple jeopardies they face since their daily life is considered a "suspicious" activity. Similarly SO 11 targets immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, women, low-wage workers, homeless and poor folks, political activists and social justice organizations.

CH: You said that downtown LA essentially became a laboratory for these new kinds of policing and surveillance methods used nationally and internationally. In that respect, can you talk about the significance of a campaign against Special Order 11 coming from Skid Row?

HK: How do we make these connections with people who feel safe and secure? The first challenge is to dismantle and deconstruct this whole concept that security comes

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at the price of freedom. Given the complete bankruptcy and failure of the capitalist system, the majority of the people in the U.S. are only a paycheck away, or one eviction away, from being homeless. I think that connection needs to be made. It's not just the lived experiences of the Skid Row community that needs to be shared, but a question of how we get information about police spying and surveillance out in the public? Special Order 11 creates the potential for everyone to be a suspect. It makes everyone more vulnerable and hence "undesirable." So you may be living in a posh locale and driving a fancy car, but once eviction happens, once you lose your job, or your house you are only so far away from being subjected to the same level of police torture, police brutality, and police surveillance as Skid Row residents face.

JC: Is there anything that we haven't asked that you'd like to add?

HK: One message I'd like to send is that there's a long history of LAPD spying and surveillance. You have to look at not only COINTELPRO (the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program), but the "Red Squads," the LAPD Public Disorder Intelligence Division, how the LAPD infiltrated social justice organizations, and how lives have been smeared. We have to look at how campaigns and movements get neutralized. The stated intent of COINTELPRO was to disrupt, dismantle, discredit and to neutralize movements. I think it is extremely critical for us to evaluate the long history of infiltration and understand how campaigns have

been disrupted and neutralized. So that's one thing.

Secondly, it's also really, really important that we look at the long term implications of Special Order 11. Unlike the previous covert and illegal operations of the LAPD and national security agencies, Special Order 11 legitimizes police spying. It's not covert or secretive anymore, it is the LAPD operating very much as a spy agency. We should look at it not as an issue of public safety but of great public insecurity. We're constantly being watched. We also need to look at how this opens up an incredible amount of data collection. In daily life your name and your data is only collected when you make some sort of contact. For example, you get a traffic ticket, a parking ticket, or commit a crime and then you may go into a felon database, a juvenile database, or a sex offender database, etc. But Special Order 11 is so unique that you don't need to be doing anything to be put into a criminal database. You don't need to violate the law. You could just be standing there minding your own business and taking a photograph. You can now go into a database just for being. We've seen the creation of gang databases to criminalize Black and Brown youth, but Special Order 11 casts a much wider net. I think that's really critical for us to understand.

Lastly, this Special Order introduces a language of "observed behavior" and "reasonable indication." Up until now, the cops could only stop and search you based on probable cause or a lower threshold than

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probable cause which is reasonable suspicion. Reasonable suspicion and probable cause requires some specific and articulable facts. The police have to have something to start a search and make an arrest. "Observed behavior" and "reasonable indication" are speculative and arbitrary concepts. There is no articulable fact. It's just based on a hunch that a cop sees you or a neighbor reports on you. Now we not only have to worry about the police because we are turning ourselves into a culture of snitches. These are unlimited powers, which are just ripe for abuse. We have a long history of police abuse and police corruption and we cannot romanticize or lament that history. We need to mobilize and we need to actively demand that the city rescind Special Order 11.

Hamid Khan is the founder and former director of the South Asian Network. He is currently a Soros Justice fellow working with the Los Angeles Community Action Network and other groups to expose police surveillance and spying that infringe upon privacy and civil liberties (<http://stoplapdspying.org/>).



STOP LAPD SPYING!

Image by: Jacinto Delapaz

PART III: THE HUMAN
RIGHT TO HOUSING

My parents, aunts, uncles and so forth, the generation before me migrated to the West coast to work. They came from the South - Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas, that whole migration. They came along with a lot of Black people who had come to work in the war industries. They built working class and middle class communities. You had the Ford Motor Plant out in Southgate. On Alameda you had Goodyear. You had Firestone and you had Bethlehem Steel. You had entry level jobs, for not highly skilled workers. A person could come out of high school, get a job, and they would get paid a very decent wage.



People had ties with their neighbors because they shared this migration experience. They didn't just have themselves when they got here. My mother began a social club called the Wrecking Crew and gave Johnny "Guitar" Watson his first start. They would put on events and shows and bring these blues singers. I don't know if you've ever heard of Johnny Otis. We actually lived across the street from him. I went to school with Shuggie Otis when we lived in Sugar Hill on Hobart off of Washington right down the street from Ray Charles' studio. It was a very integrated area at the time, mostly Japanese before they started moving southward. Johnny Otis had a juke joint out in Compton and my mom would go out there. And Esther Philips, Lil' Esther, would babysit me and my brother.

THE HOUSING QUESTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKE DAVIS

BY JORDAN T. CAMP & CHRISTINA HEATHERTON

JC: Los Angeles is what you call the “first world capital of homelessness.” Can you discuss the criminalization of homelessness in LA?

MD: Historically unemployed people in Los Angeles asserted the right to create temporary communities in open spaces. One famous site is where the Arroyo Seco meets the LA River at North Main Street in Lincoln Heights. Here the California contingent of Coxe’s Army of the unemployed camped out in the great depression of the 1890s; it was also the location of a famed “Hooverville” in the early 1930s. The 1980s were a turning point – the abolition of the commons as traditionally understood in America. One suburban community after another began to declare war on unhoused people. Even the “Peoples’ Republic of Santa Monica” eventually banned overnight camping in its parks and even feeding the homeless.

The Los Angeles City Council, meanwhile, had already adopted the strategy – and they actually used the term – of “containment.” Although one councilperson vigorously advocated the deportation of homeless people to camps in the Mojave Desert, the only politically acceptable solution was to concentrate and contain the city’s street people east of Broadway. Although merchants

on downtown’s eastside bitterly complained, the Council majority was determined to prevent any dispersal of homelessness into their districts. The continuing concentration of social services, missions and SROs in downtown was meant to tether people to the “Nickel” (Fifth Street) under a regime of intense policing.

The regulation of the outdoor population in Los Angeles is Kafkaesque: sleeping on the sidewalk is not per se a crime, but building any kind of shelter, even using a pup tent, is a violation. The several major attempts by homeless advocates like Ted Hayes to create self-governing encampments on vacant land that had been cleared by urban renewal were successful but ultimately shut down. The rise and fall of Occupy LA repeats this cycle of brief episodes of official tolerance and empathy punctually followed by repression.

CH: How have you personally witnessed these shifts in Los Angeles?

My first experience in downtown LA was in 1962. I was sixteen or seventeen when a carload of us drove up from El Cajon (near San Diego). Pershing Square and Main Street were still as described a few

years earlier in John Rechy's *City of the Night*: peep shows, hookers, runaway kids, chop suey joints, all-night movies, taxi dance halls, and hoardes of old people. It was reputedly the biggest Skid Row in the United States, but hardly the LA Auschwitz it became in the 1990s.

Six years later I was living near MacArthur Park and working at a leftwing bookstore at Seventh and Union. (The FBI headquarters was then a block away on Wilshire and agents would occasionally stop by to browse our subversive books and smirk.) Although the art schools and union headquarters had not yet fled the area around the lake, the district between Alvarado and the Harbor Freeway (now Latino) had become a dumping ground for the population, largely elderly, displaced by the clearance of Bunker Hill. The shadow people of LA Noir and John Fante novels, they were bulldozed west of freeway and left to cope with little or no compensation for their eviction. If you worked or lived in the area, you inadvertently watched them die. Old sick people collapsed in fetal positions on the sidewalk or covered by a sheet while a cop waited for an ambulance.

CH: How do we understand the development of homelessness?

The explosion in homelessness in Los Angeles in the 1980s is usually explained as the joint result of the statewide closure of residential mental health facilities and the Bunker Hill redevelopment (followed later by the clearance of Crown Hill on the west bank) which destroyed

thousands of cheap tenement and hotel rooms. But equally important was the decline of the casual labor economy serving downtown and the central industrial districts.

Let me give you a first hand example. Between 1969 and 1973 I was a heavy-duty truck driver for what was at the time the biggest toy distributor in the country. Operating out of an ultra-modern, partly automated warehouse in the City of Commerce, they still required casual labor for tasks like unloading boxcars. On these occasions a simple phone call to a labor agency would bring fifteen or twenty guys from Skid Row to spend a day or two in heavy, dirty work. Although much of the traditional downtown blue-collar job base - elevator operators, dishwashers, and so on - was long extinct, hundreds of nearby factories and warehouses still relied on temporary labor from Skid Row.

By the 1980s, however, the supply of young immigrant workers supplanted the need for this bachelor labor force of older men. The same story repeated itself almost everywhere in the country, especially in the cities like Seattle, San Francisco, LA and Chicago, where huge Skid Rows had arisen in the 1890s to accommodate winter populations of seasonal farm workers, lumberjacks, and track laborers. From their original role as reservoirs of unskilled labor, these districts became open-air prisons for the unemployed.

JC: According to Gary Blasi of the UCLA Law School, deindustrial-

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ization created a huge influx of unemployed Black workers from South LA in Skid Row. Can you describe the impacts of capital flight on workers of color in the city?

MD: Industrial LA's Indian summer was in the 1970s when Chicanos, Blacks and women finally gained some measure of justice through consent decrees that obliged unions and employers to affirmative action. Suddenly in the local auto industry (three major assembly plants were still operating), steel, aluminum, rubber, and trucking, minorities were making major breakthroughs in recruitment and promotion. Ford Pico Rivera became majority Latino, for example; while at GM South Gate, young Black Vietnam vets could hope for something more than lousy jobs in the paint department.

But the significance of fair employment was not just economic. The big factory-based union locals were immensely important bases for social and political action in east and southside communities. Despite continuing strife, industrial workers of color in this period made rapid, impressive gains in union elections and established crucial beachheads in labor and community politics. But winter came early with a deadly wave of plant closures and layoffs at the beginning of the Reagan presidency. Although non-union sweatshop manufacturing (garment, furniture, plastics, and so on) flourished through the 1980s and 1990s, the regional core of non-defense consumer-durable and heavy manufacturing, and thus

of industrial unionism, was utterly destroyed.

The impact on LA's African-American community was paradoxical. The unitary South Central "ghetto," of course, was always an illusion (except in terms of police brutality and residential segregation). More affluent, educated Black families gravitated to newer (1930s-50s) neighborhoods west of Western; while poorer Black families, including a huge migration from Texas and Louisiana in the 1950s, lived in the older (1890s-1920s) "eastside" district whose main street was Central Avenue until the early 1960s.

The collapse of the high-wage industrial employment corridor was particularly devastating to the eastside Black population most dependent upon private sector employment and manual labor. The arrival of the Bradley administration in 1973 inaugurated a new city government that allied Westside white liberals with African Americans and, very quickly, the downtown power elite. (Chicanos, despite Bradley's innumerable promises, were basically locked out of representation for almost a generation.)

The Bradley regime made little or no attempt to save the big plants on the eastside or along the Alameda corridor. On the other hand, Bradley followed the lead of a powerful county supervisor Kenneth Hahn (a liberal white first elected in 1952) in creating unprecedented public-sector job opportunities for the Black community. By the 1980s it would not have been inaccurate to describe Black prosperity in LA

as overwhelmingly based on public employment, especially in social services, transportation, and the postal service.

Black poverty, on the other hand, became more entrenched in older eastside neighborhoods. The late 1970s and early 1980s, in other words, witnessed a re-division economically of the Black community along existing geo-social lines, while at the same time Latino immigration was starting to transform the demographics of the eastside. Today, of course, what was “the ghetto” at the time of the 1965 rebellion is majority Latino, and there has been a dramatic emigration of Black families to the Inland Empire or even out of state.

CH: How have so many people ended up in Skid Row?

MD: I haven't lived in LA since 1998, so my perceptions may be long obsolete. In the 1990s, however, there were two dramatic changes in the ecology of homelessness in downtown LA. First, was the firestorm of crack cocaine addiction and the violence spawned by its sale. Secondly, there was a dramatic increase in the number of people recently released from prison. The California correctional system is ruthlessly synergetic with homelessness. Prisoners, of course, are now warehoused without pretense of “rehabilitation” and for the most part without education or vocational training; you might have just spent six years in isolation at Pelican Bay and then suddenly are released. Where are you going to go? What chance do you have of finding a job? Too often young people are simply paroled from a SHU cell to a

urine-stained sidewalk. On the other hand, it is no more cruel or insane than two generations of consigning people with mental and physical illness to an endless rotation between the street and county jail.

JC: *Ecology of Fear* examines the securitization of downtown in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992. This process has intensified in the last decade. In 2006 Los Angeles introduced the Safer Cities Initiative based on the broken windows style of concentrated policing. Can you talk about the relationship between securitization and gentrification?

MD: The broken windows strategy is a cynical shell game that concentrates police resources in some areas of highest value to elites and tourist businesses, like Time Square, or all of midtown Manhattan, at the expense of other neighborhoods. Huge amounts of police time are wasted on irrelevant status offenses and innocuous behavior, like loitering or littering; simply put, it became illegal for poor shabby people to be part of the Manhattan landscape.

It is ludicrous to claim that Bratton-style intensive policing is helping the city as a whole. Essentially the most powerful geographical interests are stealing public resources (law enforcement) and defending the policy with the absurd argument that persecuting squeegee guys will reduce rape and murder. In fact, as the war on drugs has demonstrated on innumerable occasions, these kinds of dragnets

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merely push major illegal activity somewhere else in the city where law enforcement has been correspondingly thinned. It's just another form of urban renewal using the general tax base to subsidize special interest projects under the pretense that they will eventually create jobs that otherwise would not exist.

If you really wanted to attack the "broken windows" syndrome – physical dereliction and neglect of the urban landscape – then you'd need to go after landlords not beggars; hire loads more food, health, building and labor inspectors; end the privileged welfare system for mortgage banks and mega-developers; decriminalize poor people's sicknesses and ordinary survival strategies, especially urban camping.

Young hip gentrifiers usually envision themselves as a third force between the developers and cops, on one hand, and the unhoused on the other. What loft or condo dweller on Spring Street, for example, doesn't have a favorite homeless person that they regularly talk to or brag about knowing? Yet at the same time hipsters are becoming another loud constituency for peripheralizing the homeless and their service institutions. As they add their voices to the traditional opponents of downtown "containment" – like the toy industry and flower market businesspeople – they make it more likely that some triage or reduction of tolerated homelessness will eventually occur. Poverty, as we know from the last census, is being rapidly suburbanized: in the Southern California case, especially

to the blue-collar areas of the Inland Empire.

CH: I have been researching the Unemployed Councils in the 1930s, a subject you have been writing about recently. Since we are living through the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, can you talk about the significance of these Depression-era social movements of the unemployed?

MD: Everybody thinks that Wall Street crashed and the next thing were headlines everyday about the Depression, but there weren't. Joblessness was kept almost invisible. Joblessness got on the front page because of the Unemployed Councils, because of the demonstrations, because of the horrific repression of them, which people knew would happen. But that made joblessness an issue; it made unemployment a revolutionary threat. It made it a priority. Audacity was required to make people's condition visible. The New Deal wouldn't have happened unless the Democratic Party and the upper classes were really scared about where it was leading. Roosevelt was elected on the economic platform of balancing the budget. The New Deal came later.

The thing to realize about the Communist Party at the beginning of the Depression is that this was an astonishingly conservative country. You had ten years of backlash after the Red raids, Eugene Debs was dead, the Socialist Party was forgotten, the IWW was all but crushed, radicalism was not anymore in favor

than it is now, the Democrats were many issues to the right of Republicans, but two things happened: You had an enormous number of children of the new immigrants beginning to come of age, and they were this huge transformative power. I know this was still in the Third Period and they were sectarian. But they were there for one reason, which was to catalyze and lead revolt. No, we didn't get a socialist America, but we got a New Deal out of the Democrats, which probably would not have happened without the revolt. That is what the Communist Party and other groups did in terms of unemployment at the beginning of the Depression. They mobilized anger and they also showed just an astonishing courage, in the same way that SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) did.

JC: What can we learn from these organizing efforts of the 1930s?

MD: The thing about the 1930s Left is that it was sociologically identical to the working class it was trying to organize. Yes, there were some intellectuals and Harvard types, but they were a small group. One of the big questions of the Left in my generation has been: how do you create a group that allows working class or poor people to join and survive in it? It has to be a survival network. It is one thing to do this when you are a student and being a bohemian. It is another thing to survive in it.

The person who devoted the most attention to this and was most successful in this, died about five or six years ago, was Michael Zinzun—who I worked with for about thirty years

and deeply loved. His whole thing was creating a living support, a kind of extended family system to allow poor kids to be activists and to gain experience.

If you go back and read Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?*, he is talking about how to erase the difference between intellectuals and workers, how to create an organic revolutionary intelligentsia out of manual workers, not to replace the social class by a substitute or to gain power in order to become a new ruling class, as so often has been the case. Even if you say Leninism is a dead end and it is time to throw all that stuff away you still have to come back to the question of how do you create an organization of organizers? How do you create the circumstances that allow for continuity of ideas and beliefs in periods of repression, and low periods that can launch audacious projects? The Bolshevik party is only one answer to it. I became very interested and involved with the history of anarchism in Barcelona, which is of course nothing like the history of anarchism in Portland. I mean this was working class libertarian communism, it had a different system of organizing but the point was the same: an organization of organizers, an organization that allowed people to fight for their own class.

CH: What possibilities do you see for the future in the present?

MD: If you look at this country today the future is everywhere, children of immigrants, kids of color, the recipients of this hatred, the generation whose future is being looted and

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destroyed in advance. The future everywhere is being downsized for them. Yet there is no reason to believe that people aren't going to be as militant as their great grandparents. I mean think about it, in LA you get a million people on an immigration demonstration—that is tremendous. It was the largest demonstration in the history of California. But still you can take fifteen people to a City Council meeting every night: small groups of people working consistently can achieve surprising things.

Mike Davis is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside. He is the author of several books including City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles and In Praise of Barbarians: Essays against Empire.

I've slept on the streets of Miami for two and a half years, but I've never seen anything like I've seen in Los Angeles. The city's formula for solving homelessness is to allow people to lay their heads on the streets from nine o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning. I don't think that solves the problem at all. This country signed off on a Declaration in 1948 and we have yet to realize the human right to housing. Article 25 guarantees us that right and we have yet to realize that right in this country.



I think that policies created in the United States are packaged and shipped around the world. For instance, there have been a lot of efforts in this country to bring down public housing. Since the 70s the government has stopped funding capital investments in public housing. Since then buildings have fallen into a state of disrepair. We see these very same policies being transported around the world. You see the same thing happening in the UK, the same thing in France, and on the other side of the globe in places like Budapest.

ROB ROBINSON

THE CAMPAIGN TO RESTORE NATIONAL HOUSING RIGHTS

PROBLEM

Landlords in downtown Los Angeles went largely unmonitored and got away with egregious tenant rights violations against very low-income tenants. One long standing practice was forcing tenants out of their units and into the streets for a couple of hours or a couple of days every 28 days, to ensure people couldn't establish their legal tenant rights that were triggered after 30 days.

SOLUTION

LA CAN members identified the practice, coined it the 28-day shuffle, and began organizing hundreds of tenants to file complaints about the practice. The practice was finally ended when both a State and City law were passed and tenants were educated about their rights. Several buildings were subject to lawsuits resulting in financial burdens to these slumlords.



Statement at the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review

by Deborah Burton
Geneva, Switzerland, 2010

My work and personal experiences are intertwined. I lived in public housing for many years. I raised my son there. I know first hand the dire need for the government to provide this housing directly. The U.S. has been backing away from this obligation for 25 years. I have also lived in rent-controlled apartments that I lost when I lost my job. I was homeless for more than a year, living in shelters. I was fortunate to get back into subsidized housing where I live now. Many other people are forced into homelessness for longer periods of time. I want to talk briefly about a few details of my work and experiences in LA which highlights the U.S.' failure to honor the human right to housing.

Homelessness in the United States has been at a crisis level for almost 3 decades. Los Angeles has by far the most homeless people of any city in the U.S. Between 50,000 to 80,000 people are homeless in Los Angeles. Instead of providing the solution to homelessness – which is housing – Los Angeles and other cities choose to use the police to harass, move, and incarcerate homeless people. Across the country, Black people by far are the most impacted by homelessness, highlighting the connections between housing rights and racial injustice. In Los Angeles, 1 in 18 Black residents are homeless compared to 1 in 270 white residents.

Fighting to preserve public and other affordable housing is also an uphill battle. Since the 1990s public housing has been demolished at record levels. Also, hundreds of thousands of subsidized units have been lost to the private market. The Obama Administration is continuing this pattern and so are local governments. In Los Angeles, our Housing Authority just introduced a plan to sell every public housing unit in the city and eventually lose these units as affordable.

I wanted to travel to Geneva as part of the UPR process to put a human face to the ongoing and massive violations of the human right to housing we face in the United States and in my home city. It is urgent that more people understand that the U.S. is not a model for the right to housing and that our government is doing everything it can to remove itself even more from its obligation. I also wanted people to know that thousands like me are fighting everyday to push our local, state, and federal government to acknowledge our rights to housing.

My organization, LA CAN, works in partnership with dozens of other organizations built and led by impacted residents. We are building power. We will make progress. We can win. But the task is huge and we need the international communities to join us in pressuring the U.S. government to do better within our country and throughout the world. Thank you.



Photo by Kate Caldwell

HOUSING IS A HUMAN RIGHT, CALIFORNIA'S FORTY-YEAR STRUGGLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL MARTINEZ HOSANG

BY JORDAN T. CAMP

JC: California is often imagined as a place of harmony, progress, and tolerance. In your book you talk about “genteel apartheid” instead. Can you explain the concept and why it is important for understanding California political culture?

DH: In 1960 Alexander Saxton, a noted historian of the nineteenth century, wrote an article for the Left-oriented *Frontier* magazine. He said that while the whole nation was training its attention on the struggle against Jim Crow in the South, here in California you had a union-employer apprenticeship program. It was a gateway to all of the high wage construction and public works jobs that were fueling the state's spectacular economic growth at that time and it was a virtual unapproachable island of segregation, almost 100% white. He talked about the difficulty in mounting an effective political response and critique to these forms of exclusion because Californians had so embraced this identity of being not like the South, of being beyond the kind of sorry history of discrimination and subordination that marked the South. The term he used was “genteel apartheid.” I thought

this was a really compelling way to frame a broader history of what I call “racial innocence,” the denying of culpability that racial domination plays such a large role in the state.

JC: You extend the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison to interrogate what you call political whiteness. Can you explain the relationship between political whiteness and California housing?

DH: I use the term political whiteness to describe the implicit ways in which whiteness, or perceptions about the forms of privilege and property that whiteness provides, to make political judgments and political decisions, and really to shape political identity. For example, beginning in the 1920s California realtors, backed by the power of the state, began to proliferate the use of racially restrictive covenants. These are provisions written into the deeds of houses that regulate occupancy or ownership on the basis of race. These are certainly not from the South and they are not some relic of the nineteenth century. They are modern and central to the development of California hous-

ing. The California State Supreme Court was the first in the nation to uphold their use. By the 1940s an estimated 75% of housing in LA, for example, was covered by these restrictive covenants. Restrictive covenants actually encumbered the seller's right to sell their property for the highest value. Essentially you had agreements among white homeowners to sell property for lower prices in order to maintain racial exclusion. I ask, what forms of self-interest would lead to this kind of decision? That is what I call political whiteness, the notion that preserving whiteness has broader forms of pay-off. Ultimately when realtors had to defend these practices, especially in the 1964 ballot measure that made racial discrimination a Constitutionally protected practice, they appealed to "right to discriminate" as a defense of political whiteness.

JC: Can you talk about how racialized ballot initiatives in California have shaped the housing crisis in Los Angeles?

DH: Sure. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned racially restrictive covenants in 1949 and 1953. However, all through California, especially within Southern California's suburban expansion in the 1950s and 1960s, racial exclusion and segregation was the rule rather than the exception. It was really the dominant form of organizing housing markets. The notion that property was made valuable by racial exclusion continued on as an informal but widespread practice well into 1970s and indeed the 1980s. By the 1990s you had hyper-segregated neighbor-

hoods and non-white neighborhoods that were credit-starved. When financiers were looking for new areas of return, you essentially had these islands of credit-starved communities that could be compelled into taking out loans with highly unfavorable terms. It is certainly not that California was the only state where this was happening, but it is very much the "ground zero" for the proliferation of these highly unstable financial products. Nor in the long run were they exclusive to communities of color; they eventually proliferated in white middle class communities and then of course contributed to the broader demise of the state.

JC: Here you are referring to the "subprime" and foreclosure crisis where, by 2009, over a half million Californians—whom were disproportionately people of color—lost their homes.

DH: That's right. It's absolutely disproportionately people of color. Remember in 2005 and 2006 when news was first spreading that people had taken out these very risky and precarious loans? The housing boom started in 2002, and that's when these subprime loans were made. 2005 was when we saw the first evidence that there was a growing set of homeowners that were going under water and suffering under these loans. But the broader response was to essentially blame the homeowners themselves, to say that they were not financially sophisticated, that they made mistakes in taking out the loans. It was not until this crisis spread, for example, you had homes in Orange

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County that were similarly under water, that it was recognized as a crisis. All of the racialized ballot measures that I wrote about in the book were really efforts to dismiss the broader contradictions in the state and to contain them within particular racial and class boundaries. It is only when those crises overflow—like the crisis in housing and certainly the crisis in education—that they are then recognized as a general crisis.

JC: The UN Special Rapporteur on Housing Raquel Rolnick visited multiple U.S. cities including LA and conducted a study on the housing crisis in the United States. She found that the foreclosure crisis and gentrification were the leading causes of a mass increase in homelessness. How does the history of racial segregation relate to the production of mass homelessness over the last three decades?

DH: If you look at the conditions that people are most fearful of now in housing across the state: declining home values, no access to credit, a mismatch between the demand of people needing a place to live and the availability of affordable housing, and the kind of rates that are available, you see that the crisis has been endemic to some communities, such as the Black community in South LA, since the late 1950s. These are the same conditions. There was an early indication in the 1950s and early 1960s of a market driven structure that ceded control of housing development policy to the real estate industry and financiers rather than generating alternative forms that seek to meet people's needs. But

because it was largely confined to practices in poor Black and Brown communities, it was not recognized as a generalizable crisis. Beginning in the last decade we have witnessed what happens when there is no regulation applied to these industries, when speculation can run rampant. Now it is recognized as a crisis. What confronts the state today is a crisis that is more than forty years old. It is the condition of political whiteness that has masked the recognition of this crisis.

JC: You discuss the term racial colorblindness. What is racial colorblindness? How does it relate to the unequal access to housing, education, healthcare, and other essential aspects of the social wage for poor people of color?

DH: Colorblindness means that race is not going to be taken into explicit account in making political, legal, economic decisions. I focus on it as a disavowal, a denial, and a refusal to come to terms with the profound ways that race structures opportunity and life possibility. This has had the most dramatic impact on people of color in LA and particularly in longstanding Black and Brown communities. Today that crisis absolutely exceeds those areas. Colorblindness allowed white middle and upper class Californians to essentially ignore the deep structural problems in the state for a certain period of time. But I think that the last ten years has proved that they will not, in spite of their best efforts, remain confined to poor communities alone and the state is now having to confront that.

JC: This is what James Baldwin would have called the “delusion of whiteness.”

DH: Absolutely. It is an idea that you can somehow insulate yourself; that your lives are not deeply connected to the people around you. I think that colorblindness is still very much at work. It is a kind of denial, an idea that we can address these crises on a broader level without attending to these fundamental forms of structural racism.

JC: How have people refused the logics of political whiteness, genteel apartheid, and colorblindness?

DH: I think that it is deeply ingrained into California political culture. You still see it today where people are using race as a proxy for the quality of housing, the quality of schools, the quality of education, and the broader quality of life. The notion that you can have a sustainable multiracial state where race still operates as such powerful shorthand for what’s stigmatized and what’s valued is a recipe for destruction. The biggest example of this is the prison crisis in the state. We’ve built up this monstrous prison system. Because of who is disposed and warehoused in it, the broader public lives with the fiction that prisons are a kind of sane or humane solution to any kind of social problem.

JC: How does prison expansion relate to the housing, education, and healthcare crisis?

DH: Let’s talk about the state edu-

cation system. In 1968 you had 22,000 Black and Brown students walking out, the East LA Blowouts. Students were saying: “we have no future, we have no control over the curriculum, we have inadequate funding, and there is a lack of student control.” These are the same complaints you will hear today from UC Berkeley students. The notion that somehow these students lives are separate and can be quarantined and are not going to effect the white middle class students who are aspiring to attend Berkeley is just a fiction. I think that what the last five years in particular have revealed is that white California can’t cordon itself off from these problems anymore.

JC: How can your research help us understand the contemporary struggle for the human right to housing?

DH: I think that we have strategies that are sustainable and effective for everyone. For housing, the same demands that civil rights groups were making in the early 1960s are every bit as relevant today: that the state has a responsibility to respond forcefully to the crisis, to the lack of real affordable housing opportunities, and also that banks and realtors should not be given the sole domain over housing decisions and policies. I think we have to link up our current efforts to reign in these unsavory banking practices and link them to the original struggles of civil rights groups forty years ago who were fighting for housing as a human right. All of the fair housing laws didn’t come out of some

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abstract dream for integration. They were passed because people did not have adequate places to live. That has absolutely exploded today. If we had listened to those voices in the early 1960s that said there is a housing crisis that we need to address together as a state, we would not be in this position today. Civil rights law was not just for a small set of people; it was a response to a crisis that affected the whole state.

JC: Is there anything I haven't asked that you would like to add?

DH: I think our challenge today in organizing is figuring out how to talk about racial justice and structural racism in a way that both makes visible the forms of violence, abandonment, and domination that poor people of color suffer especially around housing, education, and prisons, but also to link it to a general and broader crisis. I think we have a ways to go to be able to do that, to reclaim the language of universalism, of democracy, and of shared hopes without resorting to superficial colorblind or race-neutral language.

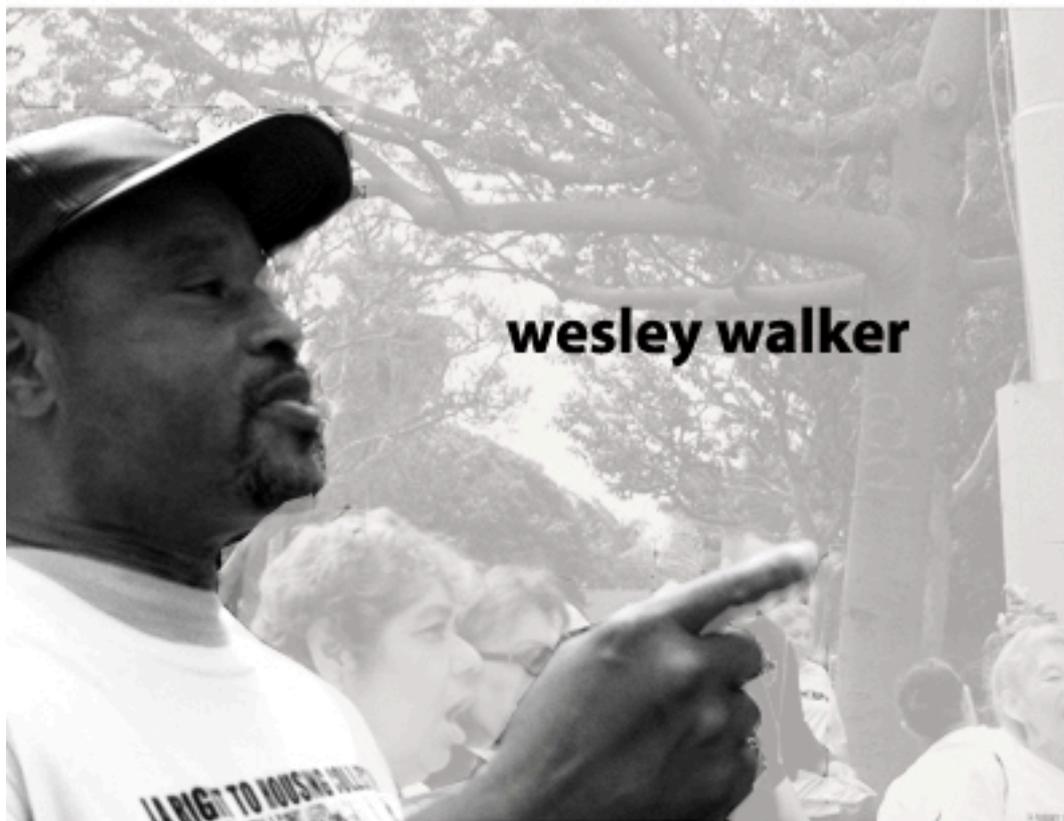
Daniel Martinez HoSang is Professor of Ethnic Studies and Political Science at the University of Oregon. He is the author of Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California. Before becoming a Professor, he worked as a community organizer for ten years with the Center for Third World Organizing.

My father once was a part of civil rights issues in the South.

As a matter of fact, because he wanted to help during the civil rights movement he lost his job.

He was helping to organize people in the county to vote, to realize that they had rights just the same as anyone else.

He would get dressed and go out to church organizations and try to help organize people to get out and vote during the 60s.



wesley walker

That's when Martin Luther King was down in the South and was getting everybody together to stand up for their rights.

Other than that my father was just a hard working person.

I've thought about that, thought all the way back to that time.

Probably someone or some organization could make a difference, just like my father.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF LA CAN'S HOUSING WORK

2001 - LA CAN identifies widespread practice of illegal displacement and coins term for this practice: the “28-day shuffle.” LA CAN members begin outreach and education to all impacted tenants, file mass complaints to the City’s Housing Department, and meet with officials about solving the problem. State and local ordinances are revised in 2004 and 2005, **creating new enforcement mechanisms to effectively end the 28-day shuffle.**

2002 - LA CAN members file lawsuit against CRA on behalf of all low-income residents of downtown LA. LA CAN begins organizing residents around **five core principles for fair redevelopment** -

No displacement; increase affordable housing, local hiring opportunities, wealth building opportunities, and increased park/green space.

2003 - LA CAN launches **community housing rights “teach-ins.”** LA CAN develops easily accessible tenant rights materials and helps tenants to access complaint and compliance processes - collectively targeting problematic buildings and landlords.

2001

2002

2003

2004

2005

2004 - LA CAN responds to 100 illegal evictions at the Bristol Hotel, which is emptied to make way for a proposed conversion to a “boutique” hotel. Organizers find that dozens of households have been forced to move with just a couple of days’ notice—some removed at gunpoint.

Tenants and LA CAN file a lawsuit against the owner for lack of proper notice and lack of relocation payments. **All tenants are compensated for relocation and damages, the CRA rejects the “boutique hotel” conversion,** and the building is re-opened as 102 units of very low-income housing in 2010.

2004 - LA CAN establishes a **weekly legal clinic in partnership with Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles** to respond to tenant rights violations, illegal evictions, and other growing displacement pressures. The clinic is staffed by trained LA CAN members, with ongoing cross-training between Legal Aid and LA CAN. The clinic helps define LA CAN’s community lawyering model.

Community lawyering = residents, organizers and lawyers working together as peers to address problems identified by low-income community members.

THIS GRAPHIC HIGHLIGHTS JUST SOME OF LA CAN'S MAJOR HOUSING CAMPAIGNS AND VICTORIES.

2006 - 2009 LA CAN organizes Alexandria Hotel tenants to preserve affordability and prevent displacement. After an initial victory in ensuring redevelopment funds would be used to preserve affordability, the building's conditions deteriorate with tenants often without hot water or elevator service in a 12-story building, and illegal management practices begin.

Tenants organize to hold the redevelopment agency accountable and file federal lawsuit, resulting in a 2009 settlement agreement **restoring healthy and safe conditions, compensation to harmed tenants, and the right to return for those illegally evicted.**

2008 - LA CAN's organizing battles to defend low-income residents' right to remain in a gentrifying downtown culminate with the **passage of the strongest housing preservation ordinance in Los Angeles' history.** On May 6, 2008, the City Council passed the "Residential Hotel Unit Conversion and Demolition Ordinance", which permanently preserves more than 15,000 homes for LA's lowest income tenants throughout the City. Almost 9,000 of those homes were in downtown Los Angeles, reversing plans to convert or remove thousands of units and cause mass displacement.

2006

2007

2008

2009

2010

2006 - LA CAN invalidates and **redefines downtown redevelopment plan**, creating a "no net loss" policy for all affordable housing, increasing funding for extremely low-income housing, establishing local hiring obligations for all CRA-funded projects, and strengthening tenant rights requirements.

2010 - LA CAN establishes a new public housing committee, organizing tenants to prevent privatization of public housing and improve the health and safety conditions in their homes. With LA Human Right to Housing Collective partners, 2010 and 2011 plans to privatize public housing were prevented.

2001 - 2011

- Reversed a unanimously-passed redevelopment plan, **preventing displacement for almost 9,000** low-income households in the heart of a gentrifying downtown
- Significantly **improved health and safety conditions** in more than 2,000 homes previously in slum conditions
- **Eliminated the guest fee practice** in more than 2,500 homes, saving tenants from an unjust fee to have family, friends and caregivers visit
- Organized community-lawyering projects that resulted in **2.84 million dollars going directly to low-income people** in compensation for illegal actions and establishing the right to return for more than 500 illegally displaced tenants

HUMAN RIGHTS ENFORCERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIE J.R. FLEMING

BY JORDAN T. CAMP & CHRISTINA HEATHERTON

JC: We first heard you speak at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit. You explained that you grew up in the Cabrini-Green public housing development in Chicago and that you are now a part of the struggle for the human right to housing. What brought you to the movement?

J.R.: As residents of Cabrini-Green we came from an organized community, so it wasn't about choice. There were a lot of great leaders over there fighting for the human right to housing. After getting in the fight I realized there were not enough young men of color. There were a lot of whites, a lot of elder Black women, and a lot of elder Black men but not particularly a lot of people from my generation who were getting themselves fully involved and engaged in making our community better. Through the Coalition to Protect Public Housing I became entrenched in the fight for the human right to housing.

CH: Around what year was this?

JR: Around, whoooa 2003! I'm so old.

CH: C'mon, it wasn't that long ago.

JR: It seems like that. I thought if we got in the fight, it wasn't going to be a long fight for the human right to

housing. I thought we would go to the United Nations, get them to say America's guilty, and we win. Wrong! Still here.

CH: When did you realize you were in for the long haul?

J.R.: Hurricane Katrina. The very first year. When I saw how this country actually perceived housing as a commodity and not as a public good. That's when I realized something was wrong.

JC: With the destruction of public housing?

J.R.: Right, out of all the things that survived Hurricane Katrina/Hurricane America, public housing was still standing. There was no rational explanation for why they would demolish this community other than profiteering. That's when I realized, we were in this for the long haul. Let New Orleans be our ground zero like 9/11 was for the government.

JC: Can you talk about how the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign came into being?

J.R.: Once again, I thought that after the United Nations had left, it was the end. Actually it was the beginning. We talked about

protecting the rights of residents. We talked about saving public housing. After the UN left, we were joined by some brothers from South Africa, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, Brother Ashroft Hasim. He did a tour of Cabrini. During that tour, a lot of community members were engaged because this brother from Africa was here. They were curious as to what he was doing at Cabrini-Green. He explained that he was trying to teach us how to elevate, that he wanted to learn from us. At the same time he hoped that we would learn from him. He started sharing stories of how they were fighting evictions. He bestowed upon us a responsibility to enforce human rights. He's like, "Everybody's out there fighting for human rights, but what would be the group of people that decides to enforce it?" When the community asked, "How do you enforce it?" he explained techniques, strategies and tactics around eviction blockades, and building up a community. This extended a conversation that we had had with Take Back the Land. We wanted to do something different than just protect public housing with the traditional ways of organizing. We wanted something more radical, something that engaged the people quicker. Something that had more activity and action. We asked if we could borrow the name "Anti-Eviction Campaign" because it had a catch to it. He said yes, as long we borrowed the principles: that it be led by the people at the bottom, that the leadership is reflective of that, and that no one leads us but us. From there we were joined in

by folks from across the city who decided to join the campaign and move it forward. It wasn't just about public housing, it was an opportunity to make a connection from public housing to renters and to home owners, all the sectors of housing that were facing imminent danger and were being directly impacted. Folks had been displaced and evicted through foreclosure and folks had been displaced and evicted in public housing. Now foreclosed families were seeing demolition just like folks in public housing had been. This was the perfect opportunity to bring all these people together, and really begin to enforce the human right to housing.

CH: We want to ask you about some of those strategies and tactics that the campaign has been using. You said the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign taught you tactics that were more radical and could connect with people more. More radical than what? What was going on and what was not connecting with people?

J.R.: I think the traditional fight around policy was not connecting with people. The traditional not-for-profit begging of politicians was old, looking for institutions that the banks had control over or that corporations had control over. We were always going to these folks, versus having those folks come to us. We wanted to do something that made them come to us by challenging the norm, as they did in the civil rights movement. Segregation didn't end until folks

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started doing boycotts and sit-ins.

JC: Can you talk about some of the tactics that have been successful in the campaign?

J.R.: I think the eviction-blockades have been successful. Court-support, when we've really packed a courtroom, we were successful like people had never seen before. Some judges, when the jury was excused, would actually say off the record to the people, "Does everybody understand where they are at? Do you know this is a civil proceeding not a criminal proceeding? Why are there so many people here in this courtroom for this young lady?" One of the judges said in his thirty-seven years on the bench he had never seen that many people in a courtroom for an eviction. I think changing the norm of how the system works, court support, and anti-eviction blockades have all been successful.

JC: Can you explain what an anti-eviction blockade is?

J.R.: An eviction blockade is when you put a mass number of people in front of a unit where someone is said to have been evicted and defy authority. People are willing to commit civil disobedience and go to jail for someone that they do not know, or have just come to know them over a short period of time, to say, "listen, we're not going to make evictions easy any more in our city, in our society, right? We're going to challenge you morally and we're going to challenge you physically." By putting ourselves in harm's

way, we try to create a cycle where you've got neighbors supporting neighbors, and hopefully can build up resistance, community by community. If necessary, when folks are evicted, they can move them back in. We will defy authority again by moving people back in, because a vacant, abandoned property does not benefit anyone.

CH: These tactics don't just impact the people involved, they impact everybody around. How do these eviction-blockades help build the movement?

J.R.: It definitely built up our organization and the movement as a whole because the court system had to respond. Not just the court system, but the sheriff's department. We were able to gain two successful temporary moratoriums around it.

Once we served the Sheriff with a 7-day eviction notice. We gave him 7 days to institute a moratorium, or we would begin a process of starting to evict him. Folks threatened to go to his house, one of his homes and take an arrest for breaking and entering, burglary or whatever the charge would be, to put him in a similar situation. You have two homes. You can't be at both of them at the same time. We were willing to go to his house and move his things out, to give him a personal experience, so that the next time he went to an eviction, he could share that experience of humiliation and degradation.

I think we challenged the system and the system responded. Politicians

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began to respond, judges became more friendly ... more resourceful. They started giving more resources to people going through evictions. They started granting more continuances. They started granting extended stays. They were less likely to issue an immediate order of possession.

One of the things we started doing was tying up the system—that was another tactic—by demanding that everyone who was going through an eviction select a jury trial. There were instances where courts alleged that we were jury tampering, intimidating jurors by having so many people in the room, staring at the jury and taking notes. Every time somebody said something, we were taking notes. Whenever the jury wrote, we took notes. They attempted to marginalize us by saying: it was “gang intimidation.” Well it’s kind of hard saying that about a European construction worker, a white senior citizen, a handicapped lady, and somebody from the LGBT community. We had a diversified movement. We were just common Americans helping each other fight and coming together as a whole. It was hard for the courts to deal with us on that level. It escalated to the point where the court didn’t want us wearing these shirts in the courtroom. They said it was a form of intimidation. People see forty to fifty shirts with “Anti-Eviction” on them and the jury is less likely to evict. These jury demands have been tying up the system, pushing the foreclosure evictions back, and pushing the public housing evictions back. We’ve been tying

up the system, to say, look, we’re not going to make it easy for you to make it hard for us.

JC: In addition to labeling people “gangsters,” have there been other kinds of state responses to prevent your organizing?

J.R.: Yeah, they would actually try to bar us from the courthouses saying that we were soliciting, things of that nature. We were not offering any type of service. All we were telling people was, “Don’t move. Don’t panic. Organize.” Simple messaging, right? Come together with other folks who are going through eviction with you. You’re better off fighting this as a whole, rather than as individuals. If we address this issue as a whole rather than as individuals, we’ll have much success.

We also had success with families fighting foreclosure. They united together and went after the perpetrators, the mortgage-lenders, the banks. We had a bunch of homeowners who Wells Fargo was foreclosing on all say, “Let’s march down on Wells Fargo! Let’s march down on Bank of America! Let’s go serve them notice.”

Previously, people were coming before a judge for an eviction and 85% to 90% of them didn’t have legal representation. Who does that benefit? The person doing the eviction. They will often misrepresent themselves as someone who is working in the tenant’s best interest and trick people into signing an order of possession. We were able to stop

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that process through some effective organizing with some legal folks. We exposed a law firm in Chicago by the name of Fisher and Shapiro who have fraudulently foreclosed on 1,700 homeowners.

JC: How does the history of liberation struggles in Chicago inform your organizing?

J.R.: Oh wow, it does, dating back to the Black Panther movement and even further to the 1930s and the Communist movement. There is a book called *Red Chicago* that talks about how tens of thousands of people on a weekly basis took to the streets to stop evictions. We studied our history and saw what got us where. We started having workshops and trainings around *Red Chicago*. What got us to this point? How did the WPA come to exist? It was the pressure of society on President Roosevelt that instituted these social protections. It was the pressure of society that forced President Roosevelt to go to the League of Nations to say, *look, we've got to create a United Nations and a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, because if this spreads across the world, corporations and capitalism are going to have a problem. We've got to give them some sense of security.* From that comes the WPA. Most folks don't talk about that. Most historians don't point to what the Communist Movement caused in that era. It was a depression. Folks came together to say, "Look, if we're going to change society, it has to come from the people."

Less than 4 days ago, Rep. Conyers

made that exact point about President Obama. People are going to have to protest in order for him to see that he has to do what Roosevelt did. I think we're at a unique point in time, like we were back in the 1930s. We were at war, homelessness was growing, there was a foreclosure crisis, unemployment was at an all time high, and then you look at today and we're facing a similar situation. So we ask ourselves, what can we do that they did back then to get the same result? Anti-eviction campaigns: win-win situations. Take Back the Land Movement: a win-win situation. Replicate, not reinvent the wheel, go back and look at what they did historically, and see what gains they got from what they did and apply it today. We have way more technology. We are able to create a movement way quicker than they did. What they had that we don't have today is way more people power, more folks willing to step up and say, "Hey, this is my neighbor." They had love for their neighbors back then. I always point to *Red Chicago* when folks ask, "How did we get to this point? How do we get back to what we had then?" *Red Chicago* shows us the Communist movement of the 1930s made Roosevelt enact these acts that gave us social protections.

CH: I remember reading that when a Chicago Unemployed Council was stopping the eviction of 72-year-old Diana Gross, and moving her furniture back in to her home, three of the Black organizers were killed by the Chicago police. Harry Haywood writes in his autobiography that

the procession was so long.

J.R.: There were thousands of people.

CH: In the parade, marchers held out sheets so that people leaning out of their windows in the buildings above could throw down coins to help pay for the funeral. It was huge and interracial and people were organizing around housing.

J.R.: It was a combination of housing and labor. I think we're in a unique position now. One of our partners is Jobs for Justice in Chicago. We've made a connection between labor and housing. Why? In the state of Illinois and in the Midwest right now, there's no respect for unions. People are being laid off from their jobs. If you have no job you can't pay rent. This leads to homelessness. What can we do? We have to connect the need for labor and the need for housing. If you don't have a home, you have no stability, right? If you don't have a job you can't pay rent. They are intertwined. Once again we point back historically to the civil rights movement, a combination of labor and civil rights. Back in the 1930s during the depression, it was a combination of housing activists and labor. We use a historical context to say look, if we replicate what they did, maybe we can have the same success that they had. So we're gradually growing towards that as the labor and the housing movements are coming together, not just in the Midwest but across the country.

CH: And globally too.

J.R.: And globally. One of the things we pointed out with the Take Back the Land is here are all these foreclosed and abandoned properties. Everyone's talking about increasing employment in America. Let's go back to the 1930s and see what Roosevelt did when he created the WPA.

Rebuilding housing offered an opportunity to put Americans back to work and stabilized our economy. We're in the same day and age where that can be used. All these abandoned and foreclosed properties can offer opportunities for some type of federal job program. It can offer opportunities for people to start investing in their own communities, putting them to work in their communities, and fixing up their communities. It gives them self worth, it gives them a sense of community, and it's also a vehicle for employment. That's why this fight is so important for us, around foreclosed and abandoned properties. The banks are not going to maintain them. They have no interest in them. If you don't want anyone to live in it and no homeowner to own it, then you have to rent it out to somebody. If you rent it out to somebody, you're going to put yourself in the situation where you can't win with us. We're going to hold you accountable for maintaining this property. In order to maintain it, the banks are going to have to hire some form of labor, to cut the grass, to make sure the plumbing is working, the electricity is working, and that the building and foundation is solid. No matter

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what happens, there will be a combination of labor and housing coming together to put America back on track.

JC.: Is there anything we haven't asked that you'd like to add about the human right to housing?

J.R.: Definitely. Why do we fight this way? Here you have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this doctrine that many governments across the world will claim to militarily enforce. This will be the reason why the world goes to war in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the continent of Africa. Governments always claim that people's human rights are being violated. We ought to ask Americans, are there any human rights violations going on in America? When you talk about Kosovo and the ethnic cleansing there, talk about Chicago and the economic cleansing. When you talk about Darfur and the displacement that happened there, talk about New Orleans and Skid Row in California where homeless people are being displaced. I'm raised from a generation that says before you go and talk about what's wrong with someone else's house, fix your's up. Heavy is the head that wears the crown. If you're going to wear the crown and say you're the world protector of human rights, make sure you're protecting human rights at home. That is why we fight for the human right to housing, and now it's no longer a fight. We're in an enforcement stage. We consider ourselves human rights enforcers.

Willie J.R. Fleming is co-founder and chairperson of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and a member of the steering committee for the Campaign to Restore National Housing Rights.

FIGHTING FOR HOUSING AND THE RIGHT TO RETURN: AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM L. JACKSON

BY JORDAN T. CAMP

JC: Mr. Jackson, the first time we saw you speak was in Detroit at the U.S. Social Forum. You talked about your participation in the struggle for the human right to housing, and the struggles that housing activists face in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Can you explain about how you came to the housing struggle?

SJ: My family and I were at home during Hurricane Katrina. I was one of many evacuees that left New Orleans after Katrina. I was stranded, I was not working, and I was one foot out from being homeless. After we were displaced I found a way to get back. We kept hearing the cries, “how are we going to get back home,” and “my family is still at home” from the low-income people who had been living in public housing in New Orleans.

We had to find ways to communicate what was going on in New Orleans after Katrina. We worked with the community, the residents in public housing, before we could become an organization of the community. We were fighting for the people’s right to return and for those whose human rights had been violated by our mayor. The mayor caused the displacement of the people by not

having a plan for the right to return. We already had the problem before Katrina, but it got worse during and after the storm. We fought for people’s rights to be allowed back in public housing.

The flood pushed a lot of people out of the city. We built Mayday New Orleans with the residents of public housing and the low-income community. We started organizing around housing rights. We found out what folks needed in the community, how they planned on coming back, what kind of schools, health care, and grocery stores that we needed, because all that was damaged during Katrina.

So we fought, fought, and fought. We built this organization to confront violations of the human right to housing by the federal government. Housing is a human right, but the federal government claimed that housing is not a human right. Nonsense. We should know that housing is a necessity that people need to live. People need food, but they also need a place to stay. We built this housing organization to make sure that we support the community.

JC: J.R. Fleming from The Chicago

FREEDOM NOW!

Anti-Eviction Campaign said that when he saw the destruction of undamaged public housing units in New Orleans after Katrina he understood that the city became ground zero for the struggle for the human right to housing. Can you talk about some of the campaigns to resist the destruction of public housing in New Orleans?

SJ: J.R. is part of our national organization, the Campaign to Restore National Housing Rights, and we are on the steering committee. We had folks conduct a fact-finding mission around what's happening in public housing. Some of the structures weren't damaged. In my development we only had maybe two or three feet of water. Some places were very, very thick, and some people drowned because they were on the first level, but some of the places could have been rehabilitated.

The federal government may say, "we don't need the low-income folks, they aren't generating anything. We aren't making any money off of them. Low-income folks always just want to have their hands out." But certainly many low-income folks in New Orleans had jobs. I raised five kids in the housing development and I sent two of them to college. It goes to show you what kind of people were there.

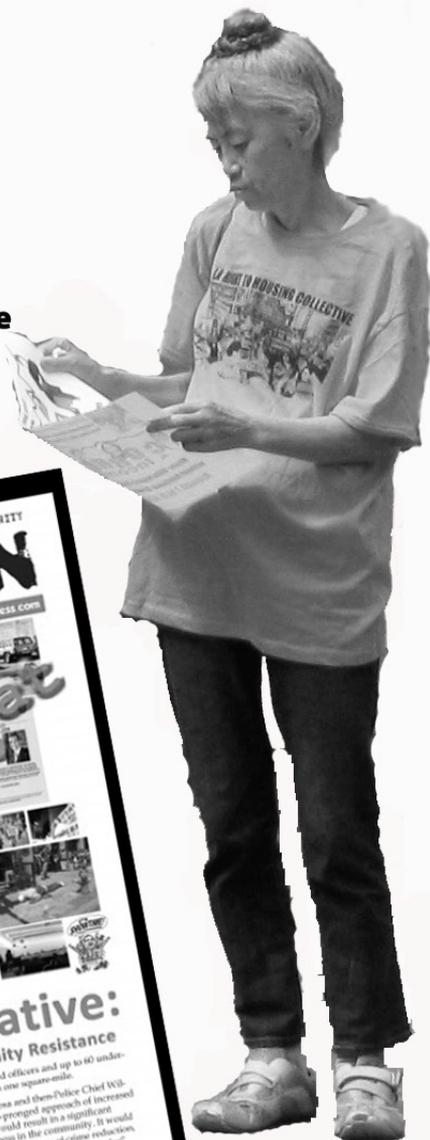
JC: Mr. Jackson, is there anything I haven't asked that you would like to add, or are there any messages you would like to send to activists, organizers, and people around the country about the human right to housing?

SJ: The message is that we need to continue collaborating, we need to continue building networks, not just in our own states—we need to do it locally, nationally, and internationally so we all can come together and fight. We ask everybody to continue participating and we will win this fight.

Sam L. Jackson, Sr. is the founder of Mayday New Orleans and a member of the Campaign to Restore National Housing Rights.

LA CAN

's newspaper
**The Community
Connection**
marks 5 years of
fighting against the
Safer Cities Initiative
and for the human
right to housing



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HOW FEATURING THE COMMUNITY CROSSWORD

SEID

The Safer Cities Initiative: Five years of Criminalization, Injustice, and Community Resistance

Five years of Criminalization, Injustice, and Community Resistance

"The Safer Cities Initiative is a critical component of our strategy to reduce homelessness in this City. We will be targeting the drug dealers and other criminals that prey on the homeless to reverse the culture of lawlessness on Skid Row, while leading those who need help to housing and services."

Shortly after this statement, made by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa on September 24, 2006, L.A.'s Skid Row became home to the largest concentration of police officers in the country. Since its inception five years ago, the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI) has ushered in an era of policing unseen before in Los Angeles - one that brought 50 additional uniformed officers and up to 60 undercover agents to an area smaller than one square-mile.

According to its creators, Villaraigosa and then-Police Chief Wilton Gray, SCI was to use a two-pronged approach of increased patrolling and social services that would result in a significant reduction in crime and homelessness in the community. It would also implement a "broken windows" strategy of crime reduction - which maintains that a reduction in "visible signs of disorder" - such as broken windows, trash on the streets, or jaywalking - eventually leads to a decrease in drug dealing, homicides, and other forms of serious crime.

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BE SURE TO CHECK OUT THE FIRST INSTALLMENT OF THE COMMUNITY CROSSWORD

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The Human Right to Housing: A Discussion with S’Bu Zikode

Photos by Pete White



S’Bu Zikode, a community scholar, is the chairperson and a founding member of Abahlali baseMjondolo (shack dwellers) Movement from South Africa. Abahlali believes in democratizing from the bottom up. It has successfully stopped the evictions of a number of settlements, stopped the industrial development of land promised to the Kennedy Road shack settlement, and demanded that elected government officials come down to the people. The organization has politicized access to healthcare, clean water, sanitation, road access, and electricity for shack settlements. It has also set up sewing collectives, gardens and supports people living with AIDS. Currently, Abahlali operates in 3 cities: Durban, Pietermaritzburgh and Cape Town.

Zikode spoke to housing organizers from across the country in November 2010. What follows are excerpts from his discussion with members of the LA Human Right to Housing Collective, a union of LA-based organizations dedicated to the idea of housing as a human right, which includes LA CAN.

The struggle for land and housing in our cities is a struggle for human rights. We all have our basic human rights: a right to a proper house, a right to health care, a right to education. When we attempt to achieve those rights, it is always a threat to those in power.

Whether we are homeless, whether we are unemployed, we are all human beings. But our humanity becomes complete when we recognize the humanity of those around us. If you have no love, no heart for anyone, your humanity is not complete.

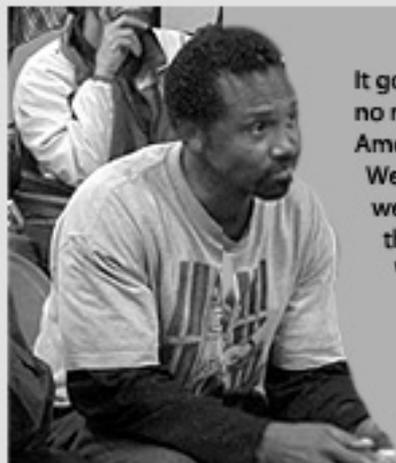
I am encouraging you to keep working together. Keep struggling together no matter what the difficulties are. Because the story that I have come to share is that our humanity will only be complete when we are always together. When you work together, your enemy will be frightened of you.

I want to discuss the view that because South Africa has mines of gold, of silver, of minerals it makes the country rich. It is the very same poor people who are sent down in the mines to dig the gold. The profits go out of the mines and then the hole falls onto them. They die once the profit is outside. That makes our country rich. The fact that some of us are working in the mines, that makes the country rich. That we are washing and cooking in the homes of the rich, it makes our country rich. The fact that we continue to live in those shantytowns continues to make our country rich.

The organization that I represent are the poorest of the poor. Because they are organized and mobilized, we realize our power. With that power we are stretching the organization and we are shaking the administration of the country. We have taken the government to the highest court in the land. We have won victories. Where the law is not on our side, the masses, our numbers are on our side. The power is on our side. So if you don't have money but you have all of you together, you have your power.

We as homeless people have power. We can isolate those who keep us apart. Those who make money at our expense. Those who exploit us. Those who don't see our humanity.

All the struggle that we are waging they intend to attain a few things: that all of us we deserve to be treated with respect and dignity irregardless of our color, our race, our gender, of our socio-economic background. Amandla! Amandla! Amandla! Thank you!



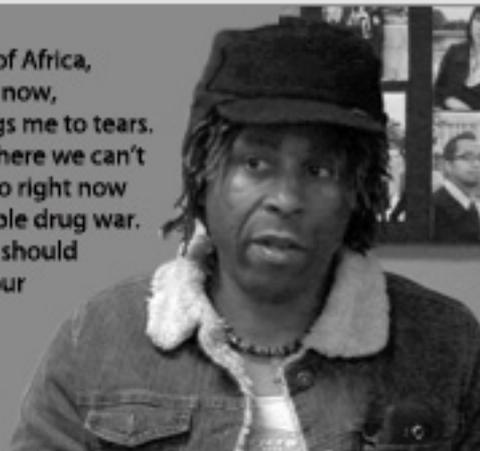
It goes to show you that politicians are liars no matter where you are. Whether you're in America or 10,000 miles away over in Africa. We can't depend on the politicians and we can't depend on folks who say they're going to do stuff for us. We got to depend on ourselves to get out there and make it happen.

The saddest part for me is that there were thousands of things promised to us and we were so happy. We expected a good response from the city and they treated us like animals. Several of us *compañeros*, we've been attacked, kicked, humiliated. They promise us, but they don't fulfill their promises.



Billions of dollars have been taken out of Africa. There should be no slums anywhere in Africa. This is an abomination.

When I look at the devastation of Africa, the devastation of Mexico right now, it hurts my heart. It almost brings me to tears. I realize that when we struggle here we can't forget the people over in Mexico right now that are suffering with this terrible drug war. That's why I say people of color should come together and not forget our friends across the border.



I am feeling overwhelmed today because of your humility, your integrity, your honesty. It inspires me to ball my fist even tighter, to stand even stronger and to fight longer and harder.



We are trying to finish the unfinished work of Nelson Mandela. The unfinished work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (crowd: Cesar Chavez!) and yes, of Cesar Chavez.



FREEDOM NOW!



FREEDOM NOW!

Around the world, organizers are fighting for the human right to housing amidst the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. *Freedom Now! Struggles for the Human Right to Housing in LA and Beyond* documents this dynamic social movement. A collaboration between organizers, scholars, artists and the grassroots housing and social justice organization, the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), *Freedom Now!* considers struggles against eviction, gentrification, homelessness and the privatization of public housing. Drawing on the legacy of the Freedom Movement, *Freedom Now!* argues that these human rights struggles have been and continue to be constitutive of the struggle for a new society.

Contributors include organizers such as Deborah Burton from LA CAN, J. R. Fleming of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, Sam Jackson from Mayday New Orleans, and S'bu Zikode an organizer with Abahlali baseMjondolo a movement of South African Shack dwellers, as well as artists such as Chuck D of Public Enemy, and scholar-activists like Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mike Davis, Rhonda Williams, George Lipsitz, Gaye Theresa Johnson and Daniel Martinez HoSang.

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