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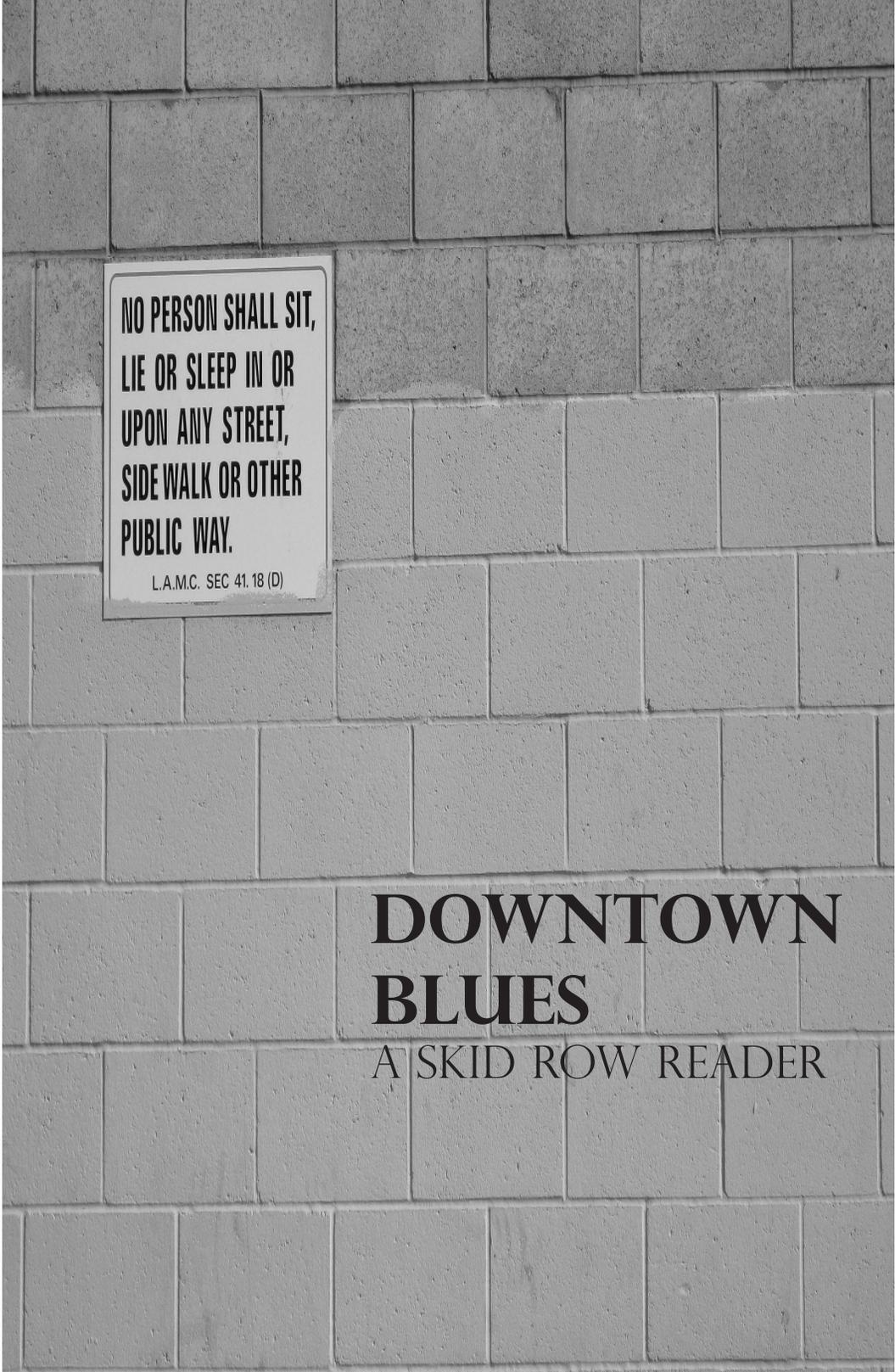
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DOWNTOWN BLUES

A SKID ROW READER

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DOWNTOWN BLUES: A SKID ROW READER



Photo Credit: LA CAN

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ALL EYES ON SKID ROW

CHRISTINA HEATHERTON

*But we know the lie was constructed over a century ago
We have been blamed before
Prosecuted and punished to the fullest extent of the law...
But there are no criminals here
Just people surviving against all odds*
— Jonathan D. Gomez, "There Are No Criminals Here" (2009)

WHY SKID ROW?

In September 2006 the Los Angeles Mayor's office launched the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI), a measure purportedly designed to "reign in crime" and expand housing and services for the poor and disproportionately Black population in downtown Los Angeles. Since then, Skid Row has become one of most militarized places on the planet. In the first three years about 36,000 citations were issued and over 27,000 arrests were made in a community of less than 15,000 people. Most citations were given for minor violations like jaywalking, an infraction punishable by a \$159 fine. Since many poor, elderly, and disabled Skid Row residents live on \$221 a month in General Relief, few can afford the fine. Consequently, many have been arrested and jailed. Other minor infractions like sitting or sleeping on the sidewalk, in violation of Municipal Code 41.18(D), have been heavily criminalized. One woman has been arrested 57 times, almost always for the same "crime" of being on the sidewalk at the same location, on the corner of 6th and Towne Streets.

Instead of fulfilling its promise to expand housing and services, SCI has diverted millions of dollars into policing. Why has Los Angeles decided to fund such costly policing measures, especially during a fiscal crisis? Why has the city enacted these measures in Skid Row, home to the densest concentration of poverty and homelessness in the city? Why has there been so little outcry? This reader represents a collective effort to answer these and other pressing questions.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT SKID ROW?

Much of the language we read in the newspaper or hear on TV about Skid Row are words like "no-go area," a "no man's land," a "wild frontier," a place of "lawlessness and danger," "a hell-hole," "a dead-zone," or "a dumping ground." To many observers, Skid Row is perceived as an abandoned area "infested" with violent criminals. At the same time Skid Row has increasingly been described as an "up-and-coming" urban development, home to new galleries, high-rise lofts, restaurants, tourist attractions and the popular

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recurring Art Walk event, a walking tour through a section of Skid Row recently renamed “Gallery Row.” These depictions are not disconnected. How has the language of violence and abandonment facilitated downtown redevelopment? How has it helped to legitimate the militarization of the area? In addition to addressing questions of urban policy, this reader examines language and culture in order to understand why and how poverty has been racialized and criminalized in the heart of one of the world’s wealthiest cities.

For over 10 years, some of the most intense and successful struggles for housing and civil rights have been waged and won by organized Skid Row residents themselves. For their victories, we should all turn our eyes to them. Leading the charge has been a grassroots organization called the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN). From running legal clinics, community watch programs, to organizing city-wide campaigns, coordinating statewide legal actions, and filing suits at a federal level, LA CAN has shown how to wage successful civil and human rights campaigns to challenge racialized state repression.

Throughout this reader you’ll hear the voices of Skid Row residents and activists as they define key concepts and struggles in Skid Row. **Deborah Burton, Joe Thomas, Linda Valverde, and Pete White** describe their lives and work

against police abuse and for social justice. In his article, **Robin D.G. Kelley** gives a brief history of the area and describes Skid Row as the *Ground Zero* of the new civil rights movement. Actor **LisaGay Hamilton** goes on a *Walking Tour* with Skid Row resident **General Dogon**, revisiting the location of *The Soloist*, the 2008 film in which she appeared as the sister of a homeless Skid Row musician. **Cedric J. Robinson** reviews *The Soloist* and situates it in a long history of Hollywood depictions of Black and poor people. In a related piece, **Damien Schnyder** and Skid Row residents **Jodie Ray** and **Walter** connect the media’s depictions of the area with the city’s brutal policing policies. In an exclusive interview, Civil Rights attorney **Gary Blasi** describes the formation of Skid Row and the abandonment of South Los Angeles as he reflects on over 30 years working on housing issues in Los Angeles. **Don Mitchell** offers a political and economic perspective of homeless policies in an excerpt from his forthcoming book *The Americanization of Homelessness*. **Clyde Woods** observes the intertwined historical processes that have spatially and economically trapped African American people in Skid Row and in Post-Katrina New Orleans. Finally, artist-activist **Art Hazelwood** illustrates these struggles in his powerful piece the “Four Freedoms.”

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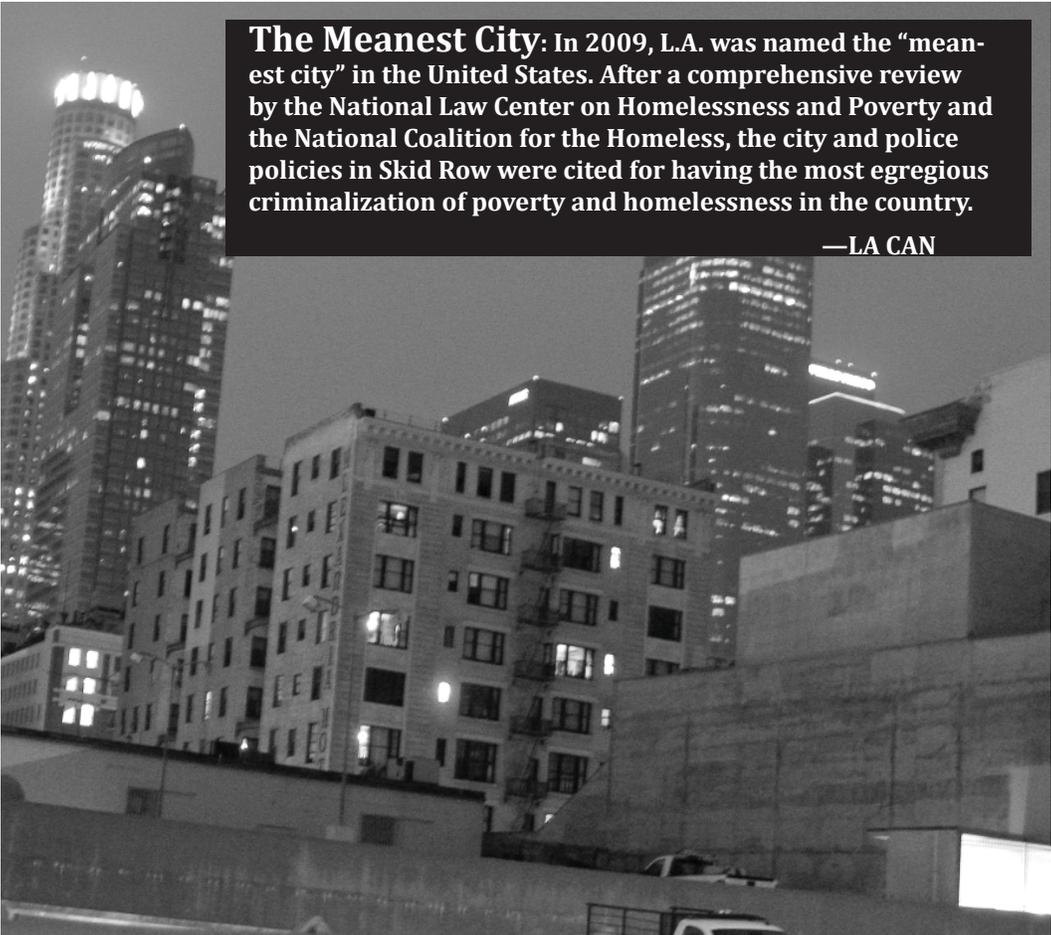
WHY DOWNTOWN BLUES?

As Clyde Woods discusses in his article, the term has a dual meaning, “the Blues is an encyclopedia of the multiple forms of traps experienced by African Americans over the course of generations and of how they challenged these practices.” This reader considers the Blues as part of an effort to understand the histories, language, policies, and rationale behind the repression of Skid Row. At the same time it foregrounds “how the people of Skid Row are fighting back” as Robin Kelley puts it, in a

new civil rights movement. By looking to Skid Row residents we find lessons in care and in courage from a community under siege. Learning from the histories of Skid Row, we gain new language to understand how race and class oppression has structured the situation. Turning to the collective struggles in Skid Row, we find that these conditions are not natural and accordingly, need not be tolerated. And so we begin:

All eyes on Skid Row.

Photo Credit: C. Heatherton



The Meanest City: In 2009, L.A. was named the “meanest city” in the United States. After a comprehensive review by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty and the National Coalition for the Homeless, the city and police policies in Skid Row were cited for having the most egregious criminalization of poverty and homelessness in the country.

—LA CAN

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LA CAN: 10 YEARS OF STRUGGLE



Photo Credit: Nicholas Dahmann

Community struggles around housing and civil rights have formed the two primary pillars of organizing work at LA CAN since our founding in 1999. The housing market and the criminal (in)justice system have emerged as distinct but often parallel state strategies for displacement and gentrification. Far from separate, however, struggles over housing and civil rights form a dialectic. As community resident and organizer Deborah Burton puts it, “If I can protect my housing, I can

protect my civil rights. If I can protect my civil rights, I can protect my housing.” Our decade long struggle has been against state-led gentrification and displacement from our community. Let us be clear, this is an ongoing racialized class struggle over land and resources.

—LA CAN

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GROUND ZERO

ROBIN D.G. KELLEY

Just the sight of Black folks walking down the street in handcuffs . . . They arrested old folks, people that were in wheelchairs, searched them, took them to jail. One senior citizen lady went to jail, she had a little dog, and they arrested her dog too. Her dog went to the dog pound. Just the sight of 50 people walking down the street in plastic handcuffs really brought back the image of how they used to load up the slave ships. You see the pictures, how they used to load up the slave ships. That was the same way they were loading up the pig station, everyone going the same way.

—General Dogon
recalling the first day of
the Safer Cities Initiative

*Kindness, courtesy, and respect.
I read that on a police car.*

—Nathaniel Anthony
Ayers, Jr. from *The Soloist*

On November 18, 2008, Skid Row residents and activists representing over a dozen organizations packed the Parker Center Auditorium to testify before a Police Commission hearing on the “Safer Cities Initiative” (SCI). Just forcing the LAPD to hold a hearing on SCI was a huge victory for the Los Angeles Community Action Network, a

social justice/civil rights organization comprised mainly of Skid Row residents. The meeting was contentious and supporters of SCI and the police, including Councilwoman Jan Perry, Deputy Mayor Arif Alikhan, and Chief Assistant City Attorney Jeff Isaacs, tried to dominate the proceedings, but LA CAN and its allies made their point: the initiative has been disastrous for the poor.

When Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa launched SCI in 2006 as part of a proposed ten-year plan to eradicate homelessness, he promised an enhancement of social services alongside the enforcement of law. What Skid Row residents got instead was the addition of fifty patrol officers, about 25-30 special narcotics officers, and additional mounted police assigned to a fifty square block area. Most of their work was concentrated in a 15-20 block area, thus earning L.A.’s Skid Row the distinction of having the highest sustained concentration of cops in the world outside of Baghdad. As SCI critics demonstrated that November evening, serious, violent crime was never a problem in Skid Row. Instead, the enhanced police presence—which cost the city some \$6.5 million per year—was part of an effort to make the predominantly poor, black population disappear in order to make the area suitable for gentrification. In

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Photo Credit: Nicholas Dahmann

the first year, the police dismantled nearly 2,800 encampments, confiscated hundreds of milk crates and shopping carts, made over 8,000 arrests, and issued some 13,000 tickets for jay-walking or “quality of life” offenses such as sitting or sleeping on the sidewalk, public urination, and dropping cigarette ashes on the sidewalk. In fact, Skid Row residents received almost half of the citations issued by the LAPD for the entire city. And those who could not pay the fine went to jail. Arrests and police beatings were rampant, and no one was immune—not the elderly, the wheelchair bound, the mentally ill, or children. Meanwhile, the city’s

entire budget for homeless services amounts to \$5.7 million.

In short, SCI did not make downtown safer, did not improve conditions for the housed and unhoused low-income residents, nor did it reduce homelessness. Instead, it criminalized the largely poor, African American community, forcing many residents to flee downtown for other parts of L.A. County. This has had a devastating impact on the homeless population since most of the services—rehabilitation centers, food banks, mental health services, childcare, missions—are concentrated downtown. Moreover, the

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Skid Row has very few “soloists”; on the contrary, members of LA CAN introduced us to a community with deep, abiding ties of friendship and mutual aid, men and women who watch out for one another.

city has done virtually nothing to provide adequate affordable housing or social services, and jobs that pay a living wage are practically non-existent for the thousands of employable homeless residents. (Indeed, the housing shortage is so severe that in 2006 the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that L.A.’s ordinance 41.18(D) prohibiting sitting or sleeping on streets or sidewalks, amounts to cruel and unusual punishment because the city simply does not have enough beds to accommodate its huge homeless population).

Before the Police Commission President Anthony Pacheco brought the hearing to an abrupt end, LA CAN organizers succeeded in calling for an immediate end to SCI enforcement strategies, including the discriminatory arrests and ticketing, the withdrawal of all additional officers, equal protection of human rights for all L.A. residents, and a serious investment in housing and human services.

Three weeks later and six miles away from the Parker Center, actor LisaGay Hamilton and I joined a very different crowd at the Arclight Cinema in Hollywood for a private screening of *The Soloist*. While neither Robert Downey, Jr., nor Jamie Foxx could make it, LisaGay (who plays Jennifer Ayers-Moore in the film), and most of the cast and crew showed up, along with director Joe Wright, as well as the real-life Steve Lopez and Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, Jr., upon whose lives the movie is based. Since this screening was under the radar, there was no red carpet, just a smattering of paparazzi, and the attire casual. Mixed in with the nearly all-white Hollywood crowd was about a dozen Skid Row residents, mostly black, whom Joe Wright had hired as “extras” in the film. For 109 minutes, we endured Hollywood’s interpretation of Steve Lopez’s interpretation of Nathaniel Ayers’s interpretation of life on L.A.’s Skid Row. While we appreciated the film’s efforts to at least question the city’s draconian raids on Skid Row residents in the name of “eradicating homeless,” we left the theater feeling dissatisfied with the film’s depiction of the people and the problem. We never learn about the conditions that created homelessness, the role real estate interests play in displacing the poor, why most of the unhoused folks are black, and most importantly, how the people of Skid Row are fighting back. Judging from the film, it is hard to imagine that the very

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people depicted in *The Soloist* could attend a hearing opposing SCI, use video cameras to document police abuse, and stand at the forefront of a new civil rights movement. Indeed, at one point in the film LisaGay whispered, “A lot of people are going to see this and think these folks don’t even deserve basic human rights, let alone capable of fighting for their rights.” Despite the film’s best efforts to represent L.A.’s homeless population as drug addicted, mentally unstable, violent, and predatory, the few Skid Row residents who earned brief speaking roles announced their humanity loud and clear. But we never find out whom these people are, where they came from, how they became locked in a vicious cycle of poverty and displacement.

Of course, we know that Hollywood is not known for producing truth. And despite the fact that LisaGay and other cast members shot scenes in Skid Row, the experience obscured as much as it revealed about the struggle between rich and poor in downtown Los Angeles. So thanks to Yusef Omowale and Christina Heatherton, we arranged for LisaGay to meet with members of LA CAN and tour of the area Mayor Villaraigosa famously deemed “ground zero” of homelessness (the record of the tour is reprinted below). We learned quite a bit about Skid Row’s 13,000 residents—that most are housed, living primarily in Single Resident Occupancy hotels (SROs). Most are black. While

many community members suffer from addiction, mental illness, and a variety of physical disabilities, the majority worked before becoming homeless. More importantly, Skid Row has very few “soloists”; on the contrary, members of LA CAN introduced us to a community with deep, abiding ties of friendship and mutual aid, men and women who watch out for one another.

Such deep community bonds should not surprise us because the very folks whom the city criminalizes and treats as human refuse can claim a much longer history of community and struggle. Many black residents have roots in Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, back when their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents flocked to California during the Second World War to take advantage of the booming federal defense industry. African Americans were shut out of the high-wage jobs, but they filled many of the semi-skilled and low-skilled jobs and made more money in L.A. than they could have made in the South. Most industrial workers could afford to buy a house, but racial segregation was maintained with restrictive covenants (an attachment to a deed prohibiting sales to a non-white person), and the collusion of real estate agents, lending institutions, and civic associations that threatened black families with violence if they attempted to move into white communities. During and immediately after the war, African American migrants

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were housed in overpriced single-family apartments at the edge of downtown—what is known as Little Tokyo. When the federal government placed Japanese-Americans in concentration camps, much of their real estate was seized, divided up into little “kitchenettes,” and rented out to black workers. Throughout the next decade, black Angelenos were mainly limited to the area south of downtown, along Central Avenue, and slightly to the West. Although restrictive covenants were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1948, white homeowners continued to use them over the next couple of decades. But it almost didn’t matter; California received massive federal subsidies to build freeways, which not only cut up black and brown communities in Los Angeles and reinforced racial segregation, but it offered industrial firms incentives to move away from core urban communities. Jobs declined, along with the tax base, schools, city services, and public transportation. To make matters worse, the Federal Housing Authority kept African Americans out of most FHA housing units and contributed to lowering property values in so-called “minority” communities. Its own Underwriting Manual stated that the FHA should not back home purchases in neighborhoods with “inharmonious racial or nationality groups . . . If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes.

A change in social or racial occupancy generally contributes to the instability and decline in property values.”

Thus black Angelenos were locked into crumbling neighborhoods with few economic opportunities but a huge influx of police. The communities of South Central and Watts experienced the LAPD as an occupying army. Incidents of brutality were rampant. No wonder Watts went up in flames in 1965, in response to yet another police shooting of an unarmed resident. The community never recovered. Los Angeles County’s economic boom during the 1960s and ‘70s seemed to have bypassed the area running from Compton and South Central to downtown. LA CAN founder Pete White calls this region the “poverty corridor,” and for good reason. From the aftermath of the Watts uprising until a few years ago, the area was ravaged by economic restructuring, high unemployment, and the influx of crack cocaine. Ironically, whereas most major cities lost manufacturing jobs in the 1970s and ‘80s, Los Angeles actually experienced a 15% increase in jobs. And yet, during this same period the poverty rate rose and income inequality grew substantially. Why? Because good-paying union jobs in industrial plants like Firestone, Bethlehem Steel, General Motors were replaced with very low-wage, non-union manufacturing jobs in sweatshops. In many instances, immigrant labor

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replaced black labor, and black unemployment skyrocketed. As good jobs disappear and unions become weaker, so goes the welfare state. The government safety net has virtually disappeared in favor of a free market philosophy. As a result, capitalism now runs rampant—generating sweatshops, outsourcing jobs, privatizing and gentrifying everything in its wake, and supporting an economy built on finance and speculation rather than production. As the number of poor people grows exponentially, traditional supports for the poor shrink. We call this neo-liberalism.

What is happening in Skid Row is a classic example of neo-liberalism at work. The city and county's \$50 million dollar plan to "transform downtown" has put public funds mainly in the hands of private developers to transform SRO's and other residential buildings into expensive condos, luxury apartments, art galleries, high end retail stores, and the like. Spending on social services for the poor is drying up as expenditures on policing and ultimately removing the poor continue to rise. Of course, there are other alternatives. Government and private capital can work together to create living wage jobs for the residents of Skid Row, provide safe, affordable housing for all, as well as adequate medical treatment and social services for those in need. But instead, the city wages war on the poor. It might have worked, but then a funny thing happened on the way to the downtown renaissance:

poor folks fought back.

The Los Angeles Community Action Network was founded in 1999 by Pete White and twenty-four Skid Row residents. From its inception, LA CAN has been a civil rights organization focused on protecting the rights of homeless and low-income residents. They have filed lawsuits against the City Center Redevelopment Plan, the wave of "quality of life" arrests, as well as residential hotels that treat tenants unfairly. One of their biggest ongoing challenges is the "twenty-eight day shuffle," or the practice of evicting occupants after twenty-eight days in order to deny legal tenancy. According to state law, one can establish legal tenancy after thirty days. Without legal tenancy, however, the renter essentially has no rights. LA CAN also runs the Community Food Project to improve access to healthy, affordable food; organizes clinics for residents; promotes voter registration and engagement; fights for progressive, community-oriented redevelopment policy; and have begun to address overall housing policy, economic development, land use, and women's issues through its "Share the Wealth" initiative and the Downtown Women's Action Coalition.

Perhaps their most critical initiative is the Community Watch campaign. Launched in November of 2005, it was created in response to a growing number of civil and human rights violations, not only

THE OFFICIAL NEWS ORGAN OF THE LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK

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THE VOICE, THE PULSE, OF OUR VILLAGE

The "Fear of a Black Planet"

Gentrification holds in its wake dire consequences for Black people living in downtown Los Angeles. Day in and day out we read stories in the mass media that are geared towards helping smooth the road for easy displacement of thousands. Media outlets often follow a familiar formula designed to gain moral high ground for the obliteration of an entire community, thereby removing any opposition if and when it happens.

Mass media has long been used to create fear: fear of the "other," fear of terrorists, fear of entire communities. It is now being used to create fear about Skid Row. For decades, spotty media coverage was mostly focused on celebrities serving Thanksgiving dinner and other "feel good" stories. Do we believe that the shift in message is just because people really care about what's going on with us here in Skid Row?

The LA Times has run more articles about Skid Row and homelessness in the past three months than we have seen in years - people being "dumped" in our community, increasing penalties for criminal offenses, the "helplessness" of those living downtown. The Downtown BLACK PLANET CONT. ON PAGE 7

Streets Going to the Highest Bidder

The Los Angeles Community Action Network has said "enough is enough!" already and is preparing to take direct action to end fast-growing patterns of abuse perpetuated against poor and homeless residents by downtown BID security guards. On Friday November 4th LA CAN launched its CommunityWatch at the doorstep of the Downtown Center Business Improvement District, led by President and CEO Carol Schatz, located at 8th and Hill Streets. CommunityWatch is an initiative to provide an alternative private security presence in the downtown community - one trained to ensure that civil rights violations by BID security guards and others are stopped.



"It is illegal for private citizens to act like police officers and for the police to embrace them and or simply turn a blind-eye. All residents have the same rights as the BID security guards and LA CAN members are organized and prepared to exercise those rights." —Steve Richardson, CommunityWatch leader

Over the past five years, LA CAN has taken many courses of action which, in most other communities, would have led to reasonable outcomes. However, the violations against predominately Black, low-income residents continue at an unprecedented pace. With little progress to date, we have concluded that unless we arm community residents with the tools need to defend themselves, we will be
STREETS CONT. ON PAGE 5

Nervousness Emerges From Central City Association?

In November, LA CAN received an interesting request from Steven W. Weston of Weston, Benahof, Rochefort, Rubalcava & MacCush, LLP. Mr. Weston requested that the Los Angeles Community Action Network supply him with tax exemption documents as well as recent Internal Revenue Service (IRS) filings. Non-profit organizations are required by law to furnish these documents within thirty days of the request or be subject to IRS intervention. LA CAN promptly furnished the documents within the thirty-day time frame, but, at the same time, began to investigate Mr. Weston and the potential reasons for his mysterious request.

LA CAN quickly revealed some interesting facts about Mr. Weston:

He is an attorney whose firm represents the interests of the business community. He is the Chair of the Executive Committee of the Central City Association (CCA), which is a membership organization of mostly the business community, many of whom are profiting from the "redevelopment" of downtown. His firm has represented business and government interests in several cases against environmental justice groups.

It is not surprising to LA CAN that representatives of the business community have an interest in our organization, since we have a broad body of work that has continued to threaten the CCA and others' vision of a "new downtown." LA CAN has effectively organized downtown residents to slow down the push to gentrify downtown Los Angeles for the past four years.

NERVOUSNESS CONT. ON PAGE 5



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by the LAPD but by the growing number of private security guards employed by the Business Improvement District (BID). Community Watch members skillfully use video cameras to document the daily arrests and harassment by law enforcement officials and roving security guards—some of the worst cases are recounted by LA CAN members on tour with LisaGay. Community Watch members represent the frontline of defense in the war on the poor. One of their many fact-finding missions determined that the city, as part of SCI, actually shortened the crossing time at the light on the intersection of Sixth and St. Julian in order to generate more jaywalking tickets! I can testify that it is impossible to cross the street before the light changes without running, so imagine how difficult it is for an elderly or disabled person?

By the end of the tour, we began to better understand the world *The Soloist* missed. What director Joe Wright and much of the audience at the Arlight theater saw in the streets of downtown L.A. were, at best, victims of drugs, mental illness, poor judgment, and a callous city policy. What we witnessed was the emergence of a new civil rights

movement, a struggle for social justice at the nexus where globalization and growing inequality has produced unprecedented pauperization, a police state, and a social policy that protects and enriches the urban elite while attempting to make a displaced, poor, mostly black working-class population disappear. But they are not going anywhere. And neither is capital.

For a minute I thought, *The Soloist* might at least convince viewers that the homeless are human beings possessing great unrealized potential and they should not be treated like animals. But then as we hit Main Street and turned right we caught a glimpse of the latest addition to the neighborhood: The Bark Avenue Hotel, Spa, and Play Care, “a Clean, Fun and Safe Environment for ALL Breeds.”

If only the residents of Skid Row could be so lucky. . . .



Photo Credit: C. Heatherton

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Safer Cities Initiative (SCI): The year 2006 marked the formal occupation of Skid Row by LAPD. In 2006 the people were winning - with several legal settlements and policies passed that halted the speculative dumping and selling of Residential Hotels. In effect, the strategy to remove the Skid Row community through the eviction and displacement from housing was halted. Just months after the victories to preserve our housing, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Police Chief William Bratton launched the “Safer Cities Initiative” (SCI) on our community. The Mayor claimed that SCI was a public safety program to increase law enforcement resources to target serious crime, focusing on the outside “criminal element” that “prey on the vulnerable” while not targeting homeless folks or residents. The reality has been the exact opposite with the community itself being criminalized.

What distinguishes SCI from previous policing efforts is the escalation, intensification and extended duration of the drastically increased police presence. In the first three years of SCI, the 110 additional police officers focused in just 15 to 50 square blocks of Skid Row issued 36,000 citations and made 27,000 arrests in our community of about 15,000 people. These record numbers of citations and arrests are mostly for so called “quality of life” crimes executed through the casting of a wide net, detaining, ticketing, searching and arresting homeless and other very poor people. Before the launch of SCI, Skid Row was one of the safest communities in Los Angeles according to LAPD’s statistics. Despite the incredible saturation of resources, SCI has not proportionally reduced crime more than elsewhere in the city. Instead, SCI has been effective at displacing residents to the criminal (in)justice system or other areas of the city.

—LA CAN

SKID ROW: A WALKING TOUR

LISAGAY HAMILTON AND GENERAL DOGON



Photo Credit: C. Heatherston

In 2008 acclaimed actor LisaGay Hamilton appeared in the film The Soloist as the sister of a gifted Skid Row musician. Shot on location in downtown Los Angeles, the film gave Hamilton an opportunity to visit Skid Row and meet some of the residents. After the film's release, resident and activist General Dogon offered to take LisaGay back to Skid Row and give her a guided tour of the area.

LISAGAY: Can I ask a really naive question? You have a combination of low-income housing and a combination of people who are homeless. So let's say I'm homeless.

And I am standing over here with my kid. I'm not doing anything. I'm just standing there. The cop, you're suggesting, can come arrest me and come harass me?

DOGON: If you're sitting down, yeah they can arrest you for violating 41.18(D).

LISAGAY: And what is that?

DOGON: 41.18(D). It's a city street ordinance that says you can't sleep or lie on the sidewalk. We went and proved that the shelters were all filled up. They had no room for people to go into the shelter beds. If you're homeless and you got no-

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where to go, at some point in time, your body is going to break down and you got to sit on the ground and rest or sleep. Then at that point, that's when the police would come and they would arrest you for violating 41.18(D). And actually, it's 5 days in jail. It was criminal. How do you criminalize the blind for being blind or the lame for being lame? If a man don't have nowhere to go, he don't have no job, and the city don't have nothing to offer him, you can't criminalize the man for that and this is what they were doing. The cold part about that is, on this street right here, Main Street, they were allowing the yuppies to sit on the sidewalk. That's the new in-crowd, and the city is supporting them. They're the ones getting everything.

LISAGAY: You could literally see them sitting on the streets?

DOGON: Well, they gave them benches. Let me tell you something. After we found out that they were arresting homeless folks for sitting on the ground, right, we went and we did outreach and we found out that there were no shelter beds. I did outreach for ACLU. They filed a lawsuit against the city for cruel and unusual punishment. It was a federal judge that ruled that it violated the Eighth Amendment, cruel and unusual punishment, for the city of Los Angeles to criminalize a homeless person for not having nowhere to go and sending them to jail. And so the city made them come up with some type of

resolution with the ACLU. And the resolution was they would allow folks to sleep on the sidewalks from 9 o'clock at night until 6 o'clock in the morning. But from 6 o'clock in the morning up until 9 o'clock at night, you can't sleep or lie on the sidewalk.

LISAGAY: And that's on the books?

DOGON: That's on the books right now and it's the law.

LISAGAY: And tell me, I'm actually quite curious about you. How has LA CAN has turned you into this community leader and activist? What has that journey been like for you?

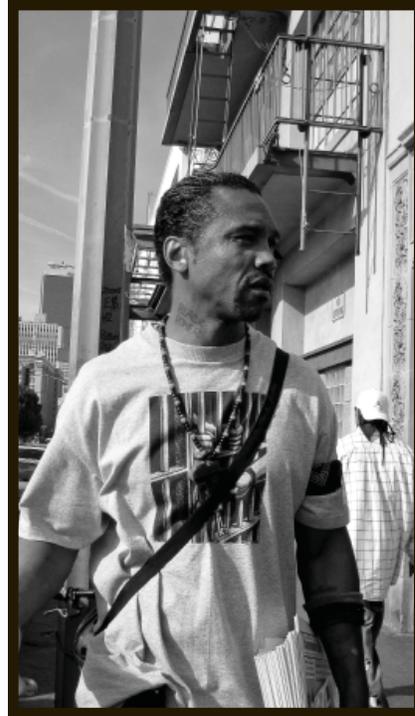


Photo Credit: C. Heatherton

DOWNTOWN BLUES...

DOGON: I went to prison. My story goes way back. I was an addict on Skid Row. I got into my addiction on Skid Row. My addiction landed me in front of a judge where I was sentenced to 18 years state prison. I ended up doing 10 years. While I was in prison, I got into other organizations. I was a member of the Black Guerilla family. I was one of George Jackson's comrades. So when I left my brothers in prison, I already had the heart. I did the Malcolm X thing. I re-educated myself and everything. So when I got out, I was looking for some work to do but I still had my addiction going. Because the California Department of Corrections, they don't rehabilitate; the only thing they do is incarcerate.

So when I got out, I had to go to a rehab program. I went to the Salvation Army and Harbor Light. I got clean and sober and then I went and got a job with LA CAN. So it's always been me, as far as trying to help another person. That's how I stay sober. That's how I keep myself going. I don't want to be the old me no more. I'm scared to be that old me. So this is what keeps me going. L.A CAN just really brought out the activist in me. I consider myself to be an organizer.

LISAGAY: And staying committed to that and to this community?

DOGON: Yeah, I was born and raised downtown so I remember what it was when I was a kid. I got my first job, 11 years old,

working over here on San Pedro, working in a big toy store. I used to cut up boxes and stuff like that. I remember back when I was a kid, you didn't see homeless. The only homeless folks you'd see were elderly white men down here that were drunkards. They had these big paddy wagons, you might remember that. They used to come down here and they used to arrest the winos and take them to the jail, take them to Parker Center. And that was about it. And then when the crack cocaine epidemic came in the '80s, that's when you seen a lot of the flux, flow, a lot of the people coming down here.

LISAGAY: What was that story you were telling about all of the people being stood up and walked to jail. They just picked up a whole entire block of people?



Photo Credit: C. Heatherton

DOWNTOWN BLUES...

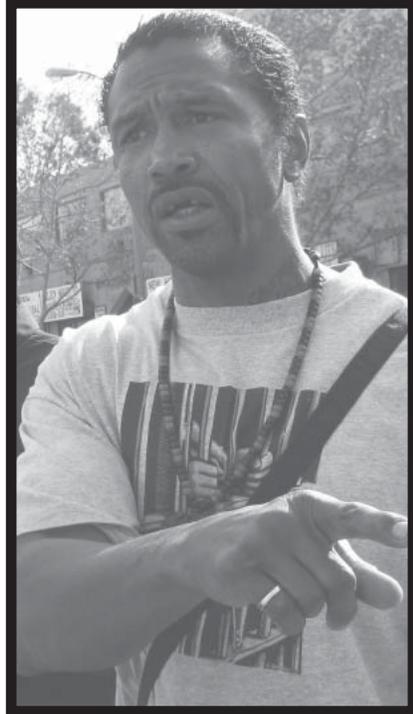


Photo Credit: C. Heatherston

DOGON: It was about 7 o'clock in the morning the first day of the Safer Cities. There were 50 rookie officers. They had on brand new shiny uniforms. They arrested about 100 people that day. They stopped 279 community residents. They removed 79 tenant encampments in one week and made 19,000 arrests [in the first two years of SCI]. There's a professor I do work with, Gary Blasi. We came down here to do a lot of outreach. He wrote a report about the statistics of Skid Row, the police. It was very interesting because it showed that really nothing changed. Like I was saying, the police want to take

credit here for moving people off here. But you really can't take credit for moving people off if you can't say where they went. The majority of the people moved out because the enforcement was so bad. People just didn't want to stay around.

LISAGAY: Where did they go?

DOGON: Some people moved out to MacArthur Park. More people moved to South Central. Some people moved to Hollywood. Some people moved to Venice.

LISAGAY: So they are on those streets?

DOGON: Yeah, people just spread out. The bad part about it is that people really can't get resources that they need because downtown is the biggest recovery community in the city, probably the state. This is the only place where a guy can get a shower. You can eat two or three times a day. You can get some clothes and stuff like that. When you move out, and you go out of the community, you're left to do work with churches and stuff like that, community centers. And they have people already in their area that they support and deal with. Their resources are limited. They can't afford a gang of people from Skid Row coming into their community and draining all their resources. This is what is happening.

DOWNTOWN BLUES...



Photo Credit: C. Heatherton



Photo Credit: C. Heatherton

DOGON: This light right here is very interesting, this corner right here, because this is where the majority of those 24,000 tickets [in the first two years of SCI] in the community were written, at Sixth and St. Julian. And what they did was, watch, you'll see how long this light is just staying on, how people are getting impatient, they're getting ready to walk out in the street. What happened was, the city of Los Angeles before the Safer Cities Initiative came out and they back-timed the lights on these streets right here.

LISAGAY: What does that mean?

DOGON: The light used to be 12-15

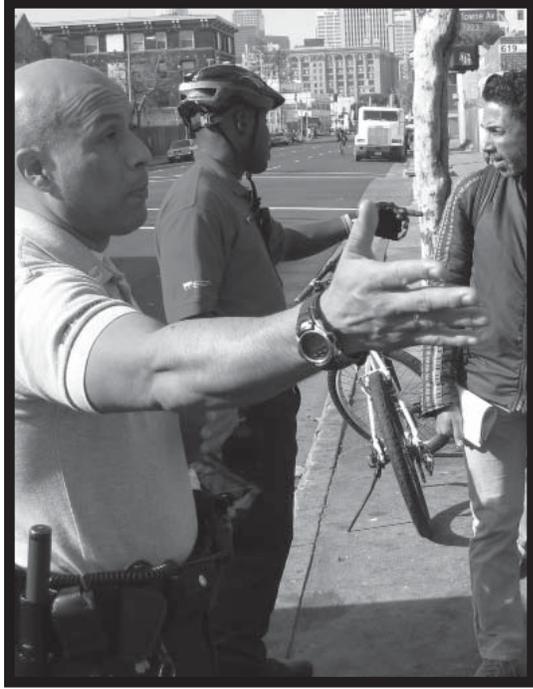
seconds and they back-timed it to make it to where ... watch, hit the button, by the time he gets in the middle of the street, it's going to start saying don't walk. By the time he gets all the way to the end, it's going to start turning yellow and then red. So the police officer comes and he'll write you a ticket for walking on the red sign. Carol Sobel has a lawsuit against the city of Los Angeles for this.

LISAGAY: So you can actually time the lights and see that there is a distinct difference?

DOGON: We went out and did it. And the lawyers came and did it.

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Photo Credit: C. Heatherton



a shopping cart. The red shirts come and tell him that his basket is illegal and they take his basket, make him give up his basket, and they give him another basket from the hippie kitchen. But the thing about it is: One, they're private security guards; they're not supposed to be policing citizens on public property. Two, the people who took the basket, they're not employed by them to take the basket. A lot of the baskets and stuff that the security guards take, they say they're returning them back to the stores, they never get there. We got video footage of them

LISAGAY: What is this?

LINDA: The BIDs are trying to confiscate his basket. That basket belongs to the hippie kitchen. The hippie kitchen gives them these baskets.

LISAGAY: So they're saying we can give you a red basket. You can't have this basket?

DOGON: They said the guy had an illegal basket.

LISAGAY: So there are legal baskets and there are illegal baskets?

DOGON: It is a citizen on public property, understand me, with

and LAPD, taking people's property, taking it down to the Sixth Street Bridge, and having other homeless folks unload the trucks and unload the baskets and then they get the property. They're not supposed to be doing that.



Photo Credit: C. Heatherton

DOWNTOWN BLUES...

Photo Credit: C. Heatherton



to criminalize those that are homeless, we're not coming to attack those that are suffering in their addiction, but we are coming to criminalize the people, the outside element.

LISAGAY: That sounds kind of good, right?

DOGON: Yeah, it did. But what happened, though, just like I was telling you, the first day, we saw these 50 officers come out and the first thing they did was attack homeless persons for sitting on the sidewalk.

LISAGAY: So the ordinance for sitting, and the timeframe, didn't come until after Villaraigosa came in?

LISAGAY: But was the idea that they're going to tear all this down and put up apartments?

DOGON: What they were supposed to have been doing, the Safer Cities Initiative is born out of another program called "Weed and Seed." "Weed and Seed" was a program, it's kind of like the broken window theory, where they come into a community and they are supposed to weed out the criminal elements and seed it with enhancements and services and resources that a community needs to grow. So when they were coming with SCI in 2006, Antonio Villaraigosa said, the first thing he said was, we're not coming

DOGON: Yeah, it came like months after. It was a big thing. We had to go to City Councils. It was a big old thing. You had a room full of people from the business district. "We don't want people using drugs in front of our business; we don't want people sitting on the ground." You had the yuppies coming up from the lofts. "We don't want this mess."

LISAGAY: So technically if a cop came by, he could harass her (indicating woman sitting on the street)?

DOGON: Yeah, he can arrest her.

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THE FOUR FREEDOMS

ART HAZELWOOD



DOWNTOWN BLUES...

I've been in civil rights a long time myself and to demoralize a community the way the city, the county and federal governments do, is beyond the 4th, 8th and 14th amendment, beyond the US Constitution. It's about human rights.

I don't want to sit up here and just be a part of something for a little amount of time. I don't want to be the sort of person who says I didn't do my duty, and I didn't pass the torch. Sometimes I feel like a soldier and I look at our future, I'm looking at the kids, the grandkids.

I'm a person that is saying, 'Hell no, we ain't having no extension. Black folks ain't going to be blocked out.' If you look at history from every war we've been through, we're still standing, we're still here. That's just my gut feeling. And until my last day, I'm going to always be here.

-Joe Thomas, LA CAN

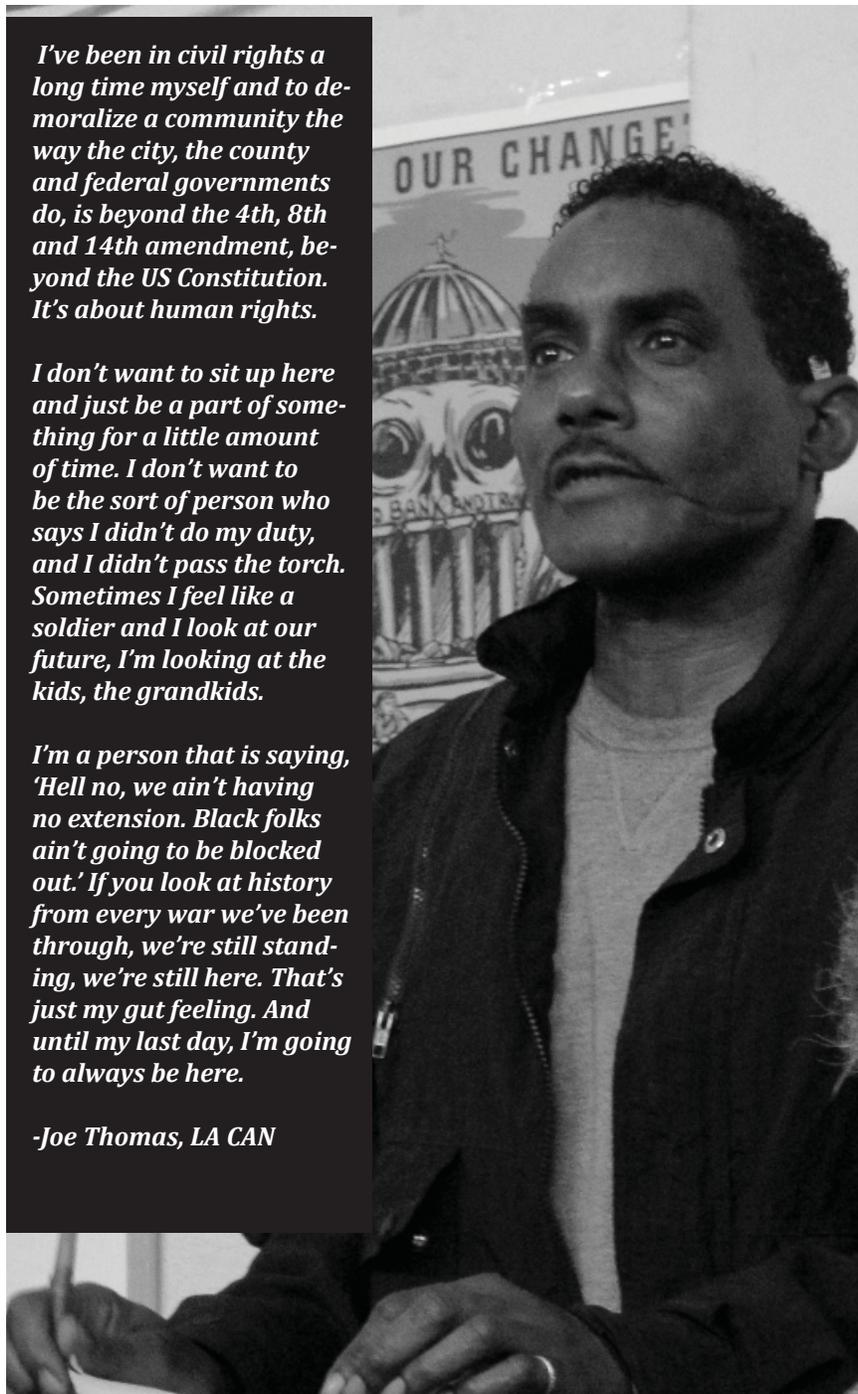
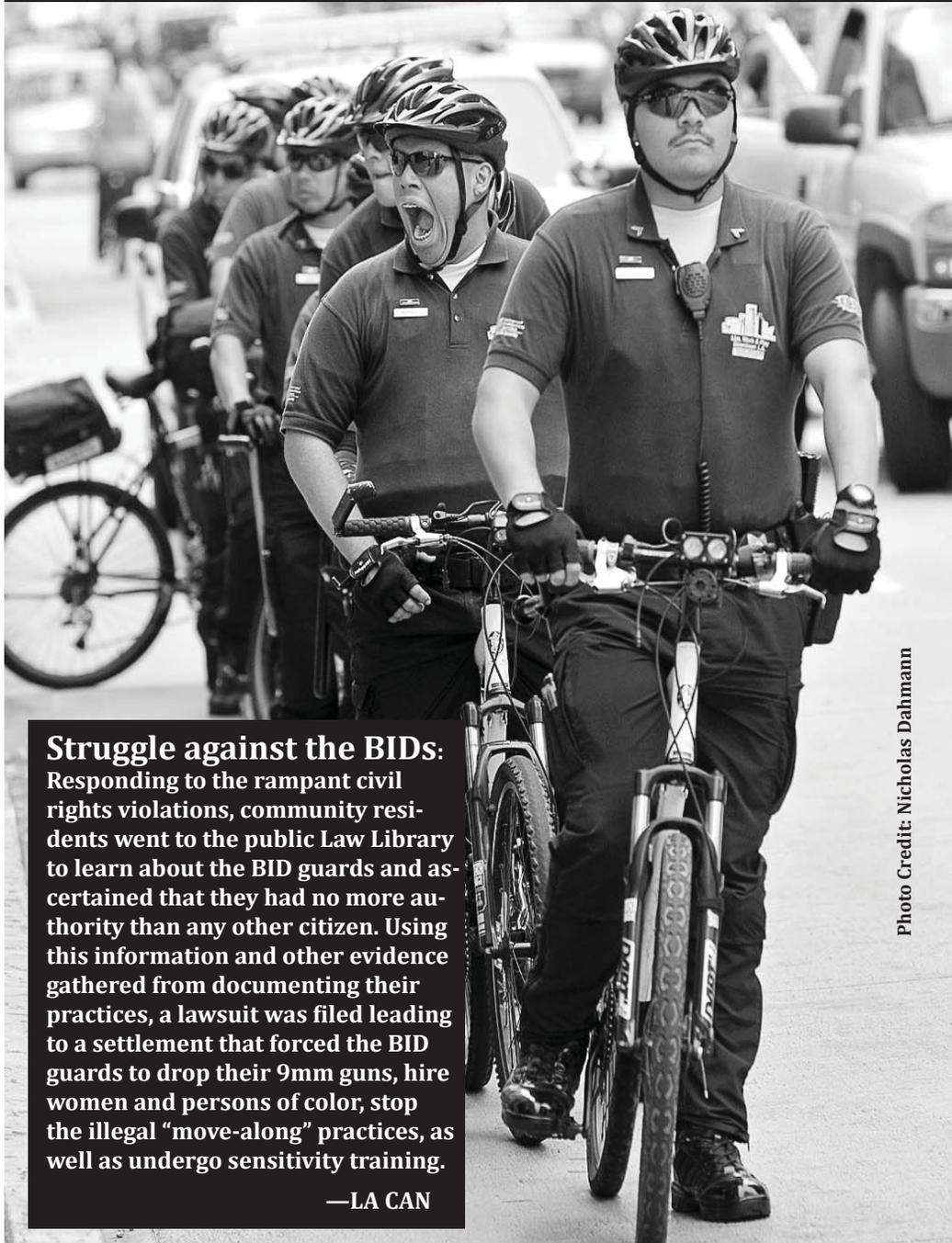


Photo Credit: C. Heatherston

BIDs: By the end of the 1990s, nearly every block in downtown was patrolled by private security guards controlled by Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). Known as “Red” or “Purple” shirts for their uniforms, these security guards act as “ambassadors” to tourists and upper-income residents, but harass and intimidate homeless individuals and residents through illegal searches, detentions and “move-alongs.” For the first several years, the BID guards were generally white males carrying 9mm guns.



Struggle against the BIDs: Responding to the rampant civil rights violations, community residents went to the public Law Library to learn about the BID guards and ascertained that they had no more authority than any other citizen. Using this information and other evidence gathered from documenting their practices, a lawsuit was filed leading to a settlement that forced the BID guards to drop their 9mm guns, hire women and persons of color, stop the illegal “move-along” practices, as well as undergo sensitivity training.

—LA CAN

Photo Credit: Nicholas Dahmann

A FILM REVIEW OF THE SOLOIST

CEDRIC J. ROBINSON

*In 2009 Dreamworks released The Soloist. Based on the book by the same name by LA Times columnist, Steve Lopez, the story follows Lopez's relationship with Nathaniel Ayers, a Juliard trained musician who lives on Skid Row. Eminent Black Studies Professor and film scholar, **Cedric J. Robinson** examines the representation of Skid Row within a longer history of racist Hollywood depictions.*

The Soloist (DreamWorks SKG, 2009) is a compelling film but not an important one. Its seductions are almost transparent and function to conceal its failures. One of these seductions is the revisiting of the jungle films which reached their height of popularity in the 1930s. Plots were secondary considerations when the central theme was the terrifying and exciting encounter between the white man (signifying the West) and the dark, anarchic savages (Africa, India, etc.). At the borders of the civilized world, the options for the West were starkly obvious. The West had to choose between creating itself as a fortified civilization or launch into the conquest of the savages. In *The Soloist*, the jungle is the urban wasteland of Los Angeles's Skid Row, and the savages are the poor, the homeless, the drug-contaminated and the mentally ill. They are denizens not citizens,

the wards abandoned by the state and civil society. As the white man in *The Soloist*, Steve Lopez (Robert Downey, Jr.) never quite measures up to Edgar Rice Burroughs's aristocratic *Tarzan* (1912). But we should expect that to some degree the West's arrogance has dissipated in the intervening one hundred years.

A second seduction of *The Soloist* is the appropriation of the buddy film genre. In the original, colonial context of the jungle setting, it is a match of unequals: Crusoe and Friday, Tarzan and Cheetah, (in the American Western, the Lone Ranger and Tonto), etc. In this film, the inferior is Nathaniel Ayers (Jamie Foxx). A schizophrenic and a musical savant, Ayers inhabits Skid Row, piling his wounded instruments, clothing, bedding, food and assorted collectibles onto a supermarket basket. The film, of course, is based on the newspaper accounts and the published recollections of the relationship between the actual Ayers and Lopez, the latter a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*. Consequently, as a superior, Lopez traipses through the chaos of Skid Row, his presence announced by shouts of "5-0," untouched by the violence and lawlessness repeatedly displayed in the film.

There is too the commanding authority of the film's music,

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employed both as a situating score and as Ayers's interior consciousness. Unlike with most American films with prominent Black characters, the music in *The Soloist* is neither rap, hip-hop, the Blues nor jazz. Ayers's speech is the disassociated language characteristic of his illness. Yet in his imaginary the symphonic majesty of Europe's most advanced composers in the 19th century is intact. And while the civil society that Lopez occupies is infested by corporate capitalism's compromising of journalism, rodent lawn pests, and a fracturing of romantic marriage, the music in the film plumbs the registers of the dominant culture and reassures the audience of the enduring brilliance of Western civilization. And for a while the film's editors utilize the score with intelligence and cunning. Unfortunately for them they expose their design about halfway into the film by inserting a psychedelic interlude of bizarre colors. Jolted by this cheaply produced rip off of a technique made famous in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (MGM, 1968), the manipulative impact of the score is diminished for the remainder of the film.

The several narrative stratagems of the filmmakers succeed in marginalizing what should have been the central subject of the film: Skid Row. With the jungle film savagery is a given, a self-generating existence (for an instance, the savages in Africa had no history to which the Atlantic Slave Trade might have contributed). Skid Row

similarly has no history. The de-industrialization of the city's economy, unemployment, the long legacy of residential segregation, the systematic degrading of public education, the racial protocols of law enforcement, the courts, the jails, and the county prisons are instilled as phantoms outside the purview of *The Soloist*. At best Skid Row is an epidemic, a thing of nature. And Ayers stands in for that epidemic. The film is disquietingly ambiguous about his illness: did it originate in childhood? At Julliard? Was its cause organic? Social? It may very well be that Ayers's disease—as exhibited in his disjointed language—is a symptom of his inability to come to terms with the magnificence of Western civilization. He had been overwhelmed by a culture too complex for him to assimilate. The film comes close to rehearsing quite precisely the diagnosis of racial dysfunction entertained by American anthropologists at the beginnings of that science as race-science in the mid-19th century.

Likewise the film implies an answer to the question of why people have come to inhabit Skid Row. Mental illness (and drugs) is the source of homelessness (and poverty). The portrayal of Ayers is complemented by the film's privileging of only one other resident of Skid Row with speech which is not terse or combative. A Black woman complains that she hates the lithium prescribed for her. It deprives her of the voices in her head which comfort her. For Ayers, the "voices" he refuses to mediate are Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or fragments of "Eroica."

VOICES OF THE COLLECTIVE

DAMIEN SCHNYDER

The Soloist was filmed on location in Skid Row with residents hired as extras. After a screening of the film, Skid Row residents, including many who had worked as extras, came together to discuss the movie's representations. Damien Snyder thinks alongside these residents about how and why an entire community had been depicted as disposable.

The Soloist is located within a trajectory of Western filmmaking that aims to uphold Black degenerative narratives of being. Ayers becomes the trapped savage unable to fully engage with the powerful force of Western culture. As depicted in the film, the sheer weight of Western culture prevents Ayers from joining the rank and file of proper citizens and as a result he must reside on the marginal fringes in order to cope with the magnanimity of the West and all of its glory. Framed within this cinematic context, anti-Black racism is not only tolerated, but it is essential in order to make common sense of the superiority of a Western mode of being. The power of the cinematic mapping of such an abhorrent Blackness is revealed in the omission of the material conditions of highly contested Black lives in downtown Los Angeles. In particular, the movie functions to preserve the violent displacement of thou-

sands of Black Angelinos in order to maintain the confluent political and economic interests of public officials, corporate property developers, and private business owners. The façade that props up *The Soloist's* fiction is realized through the voices of Skid Row residents who detail the connection of the film, as a fabrication of Western cinematography, to the historic and contemporary processes of Black marginalization. Given the extent to which the film negates the possibility of Black collectivity or state of being, two questions are brought to the fore: In light of the current struggle over housing and "development" in Skid Row, what is the function of the film with respect to the displacement of Black people? The second, but no less pertinent question is, how do the daily experiences and lives of Black people disrupt the problematic white supremacist narrative/project that is at the heart of *The Soloist*? As a means to analyze the tension between reality and cinematic fantasy, the voices of Black residents of Skid Row must be utilized as a reckoning ball to reveal a counter-reality and locate the ideological work that the film attempts to achieve.

The insight of these residents, more than any corporate journalists' rendering of Skid Row,

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brings to bear the fraught relationship between the white gaze and constructed tropes of overt/mandatory white benevolence, inherent savagery and omission/removal of resistance. Pete White, a long time Skid Row activist, claims that *The Soloist* has to be understood in the context of a white supremacist agenda that seeks to remove Black agency. White states, "the most important thing that I saw was the age-old race baiting/ race-play. They had Jamie Foxx in white face. They had Steve Lopez, the god. 'Oh, you my god, Steve Lopez. Ain't no god like you.' These age-old stereotypes that they continue to articulate make us believe that someone else has to be our savior."

Yet, it was Skid Row resident Jodie Ray's careful reading of *The Soloist* as part of a legacy of the Western narrative form that reveals the self-centered intentionality to white claims of benevolence:

you're not really helping the person if you're helping him selfishly. You're not taking the steps that you should to help the person. Just like he [Robert Downey Jr.'s character Steve] rushed him [Jamie Foxx's character, Nathaniel] indoors. If you've been outdoors for a long time your body just don't adjust that quick ... That's why Nathaniel [Ayers] didn't really get the help he should have been getting. Because the man wasn't

listening to him. He was just a stereotype.

To pull such a slight of hand with regards to intentionality of white benevolence, the creation of a savage wasteland is necessary. Relying upon the tropes of black dystopia, the creation of false representations is needed in order to legitimate the removal of Black people. Pete White deconstructs the wasteland mythology and asserts, "I'm with Jodie Ray in terms of how they depicted Skid Row. They had cars- they had abandoned cars- folks livin' in the cars. There's no cars in Skid Row. Folks aren't living in cars. And then they had all these exotic images and sounds as if we were in some alternate dimension. I totally don't agree with it. I've been downtown 15-16 years."

Instead of the created urban jungle, Skid Row residents assert that the film intentionally did not portray the integrity and humanity embodied by the people who call downtown Los Angeles home. Jodie Ray argues that the film had to construct Skid Row in such a chaotic fashion in order to provide justification for police violence,

It's really not that. People aren't congested like that and smoking ... they really just combined a lot of things and made it look like it's so full of traffic. And so depressing. There's much more laughter downtown than the way they projected it. And that

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*gives the police the reason ...
When you see it on the screen,
how the policemen came in and
did all that brutality - that's
true. They make you think that's
going on - so much congestion.
So that they have to come in
with beatings and stuff.*

Drawing from former Los Angeles Police Department Chief William Parker's creation of the "thin blue line" to protect white citizens from the "savage" black and brown abominations, the police function within *The Soloist* to shield the civilized world from the black brutes. While the police are the needed heavy hand of civilization, a fissure is created for the "white savior" in the form of the missionary, state official, schoolteacher, social worker, or journalist to reform the terror embodied by Black existence. Similar to the urban terrain in recent white benevolent films such as *Dangerous Minds* (1995) and *Freedom Writers* (2007), Skid Row has to be designed as a complete abomination, devoid of culture and pride in order to justify the treatment of Black residents as less than human. General Dogon, a long time Skid Row activist states, "[T]he movie is the same old ... Hollywood image: the great white hope coming down to save the lost black souls on Skid Row."

As articulated by White, Ray, and Dogon, *The Soloist* is much more than entertainment, for it functions as ideological manage-

ment and consensus building with regard to the need to dismantle Black life in order to protect "civil" society. It is within this space that public policy and legislation can be passed in order to satisfy the needs of an ever-hungry capitalist regime that, within the context of Los Angeles, has always sought to destroy Black infrastructure. In the case of Skid Row, the passage of the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI) in September of 2006 was promoted as a means to reduce crime in Downtown Los Angeles. Behind the rhetoric however, SCI provided the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) with expanded powers to arrest, harass and brutalize Black Skid Row residents, effectively intensifying the process of forced removal. Pete White explains, "It was very clear from the outset of Safer Cities that the use of the media was going to be important to create genocide and to whitewash our community."

Walter, a former Skid Row resident and Vietnam War veteran echoes White's sentiment:

*they have this shot like you're
going down a river like in
Apocalypse Now (1979) a whole
dream state ... I think it made
us look like we were just a bit
animalistic. That we needed all
the SCI [Safer Cities Initiative],
that we needed all the brutality
... They still have that age-old
Hollywood mentality. And that is
that, you know, that we're mon-
keys. That we should be trained.*

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We can't take care of ourselves.

Devoid of historical and social context, it appears that Black dysfunctionality and savagery arises from the inability/refusal to cope with Western civilization. The only cure is to submit to the enclosure offered by the West and thus acquiesce to the demands of racial subjugation. As with the Civil War film *Glory* (1989), the moment of transformation occurs when the savage, embodied by Denzel Washington's character Private Trip, fully denounces forms of resistance and embraces the social doctrine of the nation state. Like *Glory*, this process occurs within *The Soloist* as Ayers adorns the American flag in his embrace of the West as the only form of redemption. Yet, Walter argues that this scripted performance is merely a way to diminish resistance by neighborhoods that have been long-abused by the US nation state. He states,

I was homeless on Skid Row and I am a veteran. The last thing I felt was patriotic. As far as I was concerned my government AND Uncle Sam had fucked me! You know what I mean? So he had this guy, he's a black man painted up looking like Uncle Sam ... when he was putting down his bed -there was a [American] flag hanging on the pole. There's no flags hanging on the poles down here in Skid Row! So the images that they were showing us are the things that

are made to stick in our subconscious. They are the things you remember and these are the things that we, I can't speak for every person on Skid Row, but we are Americans at heart but I don't think for the most part we feel that sense of patriotism.

In contrast to the Western individualistic notion of human difference that is propagated throughout *The Soloist*, the residents of Skid Row argue that the film ignores the collective spirit that is at the heart of the Black experience in Downtown Los Angeles. Ayers, rather than in concert within a supportive community that is under siege by the police, policy makers and agents of financial capital, appears to be an outcast and rouge buffoon. General Dogon summarizes the general sentiment and overall conclusion toward the film within the Skid Row community:

People see that movie and have never been to Skid Row and have no information about Skid Row. First thing that comes to your mind is, 'My God! Those people are out of control down there!!' So they read the newspapers about the police doing this and the police doing that and they are like, 'Well, they need to do that!' It's a damn shame. I don't know how they can get away with making some crap like that. Personally, I feel personally disrespected being a Skid Rowian.

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Housing is what brought me to the community! When I first came to Los Angeles, my first stop was South Central. In the 1960s and '70s there was no issue of homelessness. And then, all of a sudden, in the 1980s and 1990s there was big issue of so many people, just like me, homeless. At the time before I came to the Skid Row community, I lost my job, like a lot of us do. And when you lose your job you lose your source of income, when you lose your source of income the first thing you lose is your housing.

In my community, I was a lucky one because of opportunities offered for me. Everyone is not lucky. When I first came to Skid Row I sought out temporary housing and I got it. I didn't have to wait; I didn't have to go on a waiting list. And then, when I later sought permanent housing, I didn't have to wait. Again, a lot of us do not get that opportunity. There are so many of us who have to be put on waiting lists for months and months or years. I do housing organizing because I cannot just think about myself; I do not live in this community by myself.

-Deborah Burton,
LA CAN

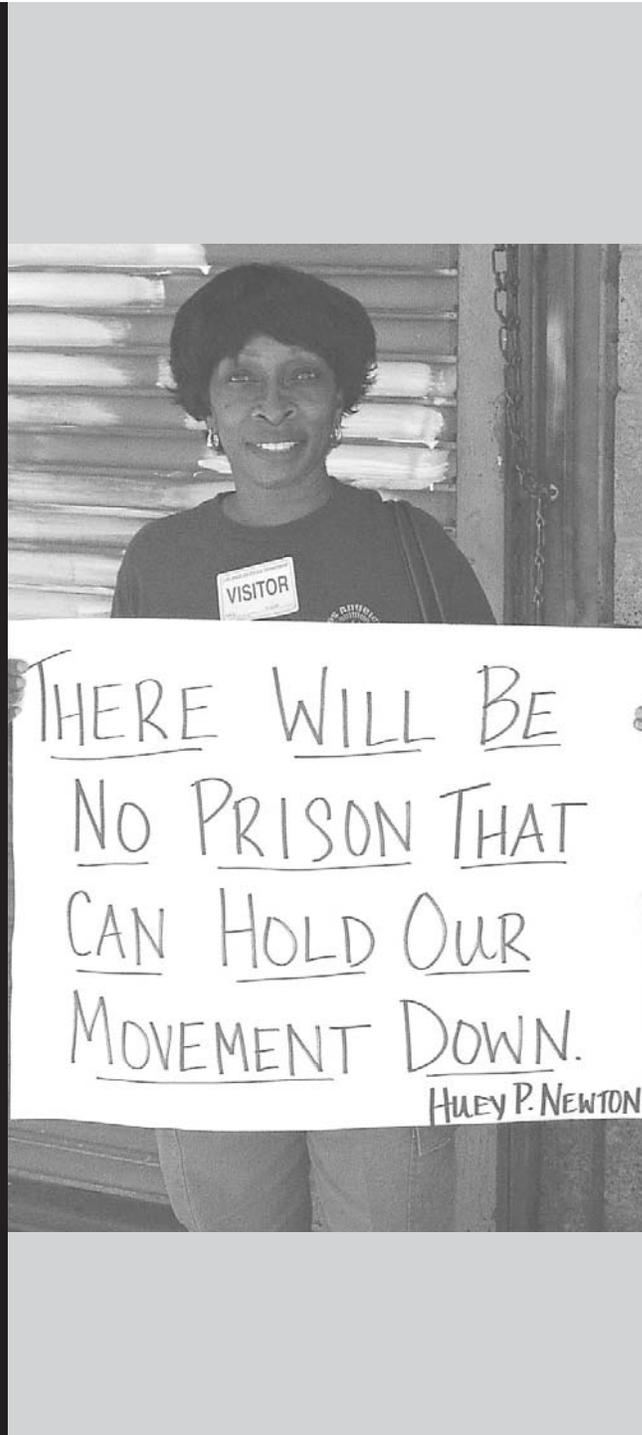


Photo Credit: LA CAN

SKID ROW IN TRANSITION: AN INTERVIEW WITH GARY BLASI

UCLA Professor of Law Gary Blasi has long been one of L.A.'s most stalwart advocates for social justice. At the height of arrests during the Safer Cities Initiative, Blasi and the UCLA School of Law Fact Investigation Clinic released a groundbreaking report, "Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness? The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row." It provides crucial information to advocates, activists, and scholars opposing the "Safer Cities Initiative." Blasi sat down with Christina Heatherton and Yusef Omowale to discuss his work in Skid Row and the changes he has witnessed over the past 30 years in local civil rights and housing struggles.

Christina and Yusef: How did you first get involved in your work?

Blasi: I became a lawyer sort of by accident. I was a community activist type person working in an orange juice factory. I dropped out of graduate school and someone asked me whether I was interested in being a lawyer and I said, "No, I'm not going back to school." And they said "It's California, you don't have to go to law school." So I ended up apprenticing to be a lawyer in a storefront office in Echo Park - and became a lawyer in 1976.

How did you begin handling housing issues?

At that time in Echo Park our local Legal Aid office didn't handle any eviction cases but a lot of people wandered into our office. I began to handle a lot of eviction cases and then tenant cases involving slum conditions and so on.

What happened to people who were evicted in the late '70s?

When we first started doing eviction work, if you lost a case, people would just migrate down the housing ladder. They'd go from a one-bedroom in Echo Park to a studio in South LA.

When did you realize your clients were winding up on the streets?

In the recession of the '80s we began to have a lot of clients who didn't have any place to go. They would come back to us looking for help. We set up a little ad-hoc group to try to pull together all the information we had. That quickly led to the realization that there was no place for people to go. All the places were full.

In which part of the city were people hit hardest?

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Our South L.A. office was really overwhelmed. We set up the Eviction Defense Center and took eviction cases from all over the place. We handled about 10,000 eviction cases a year. We discovered that being evicted was very traumatic for people because sometimes they were ending up on the streets. We pulled together this group to work on what at that point, began to be called homelessness. That term really wasn't used in L.A. until around 1983. Around that year there was a meeting in New York to address this issue. An *LA Times* reporter went to New York, came back and started talking about homelessness in relation to poor people as opposed to victims of natural disaster.

How did the media in Los Angeles deal with this new concept of homelessness?

In the winters of 1983-85, there were Tent Cities erected. For two weeks every winter there were big circus tents set up for homeless people. They had up to 1,000 people on cots, in the mud, across from the LA Times building. At that time, the issue was still new to L.A. It was dramatic to have around 1,000 guys, and some women in a big tent. Even if the media wanted to avoid the problem, it was hard to miss.

You mentioned the explosion of evictions in South Los Angeles and then the explosion of home-

lessness in Skid Row. Can you talk a little more about the connection between South L.A. and Skid Row as you observed it?

I don't think I ever really put the two things together at that point. In retrospect, it's really clear those two things were entirely connected. All of our clients from everywhere were experiencing these same issues but the number of clients coming from South L.A. in the Eviction Defense Center was really going up. Obviously there were a lot more evictions there and also just a lot more people desperate for food and other things. If you wanted to eat, you would go downtown because of the Hospitality Kitchen and other mission-related places that had been there for a long time. So, you could survive, though not very well, on Skid Row. But in South L.A., there was nothing. There wasn't a single shelter, a single food line, anything. And that was true of most poor areas of L.A. For the young men who basically fell out of the system, Skid Row was all there was.

What did Skid Row look like at that time?

The population not only changed, it really just exploded. By 1983-1984, it was just densely packed with people.

I remember taking someone from New York out for a walk at night. He was just amazed. He had never

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seen anything like it. It was more packed than any street in New York City. There were hundreds of people on the block. The main source of shelter at that time was the all-night movie theaters on Broadway, when there were still a few. You could see a movie and sit in a chair all night for \$3. Every night there were the same people, the same movie -some violent Western- and that's where people went to sleep.

Who was homeless in Skid Row then?

The face of Skid Row changed very dramatically. In the late 1970s, 21% of the population was black and 67% was white. What changed was a huge influx of younger, primarily African American men, almost all from South L.A. and other parts of L.A. This was not, as the mythology of the time had it, that people were coming to L.A. from other places looking for surf and sun. You'd meet a few people like that, but it was mostly just young people who fell out of the system here, people associated with deindustrialization, the loss of jobs for people who had nothing to sell but their muscle power. The recession just squeezed out the most vulnerable people at that point.

Maybe a third of the population at the time was made up of people with serious mental disabilities. This was associated with the collapse of the mental health system in California and the inability of poor

people to get any sort of help with mental health issues.

Why have there been so many single Black men on Skid Row?

The population turned quickly from mostly older, whiter, more alcoholic men and a few women—to a mostly younger, mostly African-American population. Mostly they were just unemployed, not alcoholics, not substance abusers, and not mentally ill, just single Black guys who could not get on welfare for a variety of reasons. They couldn't get on General Relief (GR) and they couldn't get on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) because they didn't have any children. And so they were basically just surplus human beings. They were not so much drawn to Skid Row as they were pushed out of where they came from because it was impossible to survive there.

People say that Skid Row is just full of folks who made bad decisions. What would you say to that?

Not at all. One of the critical lawyering decisions that we made was that rather than go into court with experts and service providers, we would go out in the street and we would take down declarations. We would go somewhere, typically a welfare office, stand up on a chair, and say, "We're from Legal Aid and we're going to sue the County. Anybody have a problem, we want

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to talk with you!”

We would sit down and people would line up to talk with us. We would write it all down. We filed hundreds of hundreds of declarations. This was illuminating as we really began to understand how diverse but also in many ways how similar people’s stories were.

How were they similar?

When you talk to hundreds of people you see patterns. One pattern was that the education system had completely failed these folks. A lot of people looked at the declarations and couldn’t read them. We knew that they had graduated from high school. It began to be clear that the reading level of the high school graduate population from South L.A. showing up in Skid Row was about at a second or third grade level. Whether they had learning disabilities or something else, they clearly had not received a basic education.

Were there other similarities?

Talking with people about their stories, you would begin to hear other patterns like having some family disaster, being placed in foster care and then being shuffled around from foster home to foster home.

There was one incredibly tragic and upsetting event that I witnessed dozens of times. I would be at the

welfare office, doing this work and occasionally a taxi cab would pull up. People on GR do not take taxi cabs. It was always the same: a young person with a suitcase typically on their 18th birthday. Since their foster family was no longer getting any money for them, that’s what the young person got for their birthday, cab fare to the welfare office. They were often sent to Skid Row because at that time, it was the office that handled homeless folks. The other offices weren’t really set up to handle it.

So would you say that people ended up on the streets after a number of systemic failures?

The education system, the foster care system, and the healthcare system. There were a fair number of older folks who had some health care disaster. Oftentimes they had been working, but hurt their back, ran through their disability payments, didn’t have any health insurance, and lost their jobs. So the health care system also precipitated a lot of what led people to the streets. The combination of those systemic failures being concentrated in South L.A. and the lack of resources sort of squeezed the most vulnerable people out into Skid Row.

What were the city’s responses to this explosive growth in Skid Row’s population?

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The city had a plan to basically get rid of Skid Row and relocate the 9,000 people who lived there to some unspecified place. The Catholic Worker, a lawyer from Legal Aid, and the L.A. Community Design Center, which was sort of a progressive planning institution at the time developed an alternative set of recommendations. Their plan was to preserve Skid Row, to move it a little bit east, and to basically relocate all the services. The policy recommendations of their report were eventually adopted by the city.

What was that report called?

It was the **“Skid Row Recommendations to the Citizens Advisory Committee on the Central Business District Plan for the City of Los Angeles.”** Part 4 is called “Physical Containment” and it’s basically a plan to draw borders around Skid Row and to have a buffer zone of basically a block or two, and to “encourage Skid Row men to stay in the immediate area.” Buffers between Skid Row and other land uses are supposed to result in a smaller row and a reduced area of influence. The report even came with charts showing the influence of Skid Row. It reminds me of those Cold War-era maps of the spreading Soviet Union. *This is Skid Row. This is where Skid Row people were wandering.* In particular, people were going to Pershing Square because, as the report points out, there was not a single bench in Skid Row. There were no toilets in Skid Row.

So if you wanted to sit down, lay on the grass, or go to the bathroom, Pershing Square was your closest bet.

In the late 1970s and early ‘80s in California, there were huge cutbacks in social services and dramatic increases on spending for policing and prisons. How did you see those forces at work in Skid Row?

Early on, the first few times I was in Skid Row, I was struck by how little attention the police paid to anything. When we were working on the conditions in the hotels, it was not uncommon to see a drug deal go down and to watch a cop watch the drug deal go down and not get out of his squad car or do anything about it. There was no law enforcement of any kind and certainly none in regards to housing or health code enforcement.

When did that attitude in the LAPD begin to change?

At some point, the Central City East Association was formed. There was an influx of toy importers, primarily from Hong Kong and China, who began to set up shops. Before that the only real businesses in Skid Row, were fish processors, which, if you can imagine the fish smell, is not a very attractive business to have as your neighbor. The toy wholesalers moved in because the rents were cheap. They began to organize together with some of the fish pro-

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cessors and they began to complain to the city about things like people urinating on the street. This wasn't terribly surprising given that there were zero toilets available for 10,000 people. So biology being what it is, people would relieve themselves where they could. That led eventually to a crackdown in about 1988-1989 when Chief Daryl Gates announced that he was going to start arresting homeless people.

How did policing in Skid Row change after Daryl Gates' announcement?

The LAPD started really harassing homeless people. Unannounced, the police would go down the street and trash people's stuff or carry it away using skiploaders. They also tried to arrest people for sleeping on the sidewalk using an ordinance that had been developed in the '60s to control hippies who were sitting on the sidewalk doing what hippies do.

It terms of serious law enforcement, arresting people for drugs or things like that, I never saw any evidence of that until the Safer Cities Initiative.

So how did we end up with the Safer Cities initiative?

Safer Cities began with a white paper issued by the Central City Association. They had had some success in creating some new housing in abandoned commer-

cial buildings, what was called the Adaptive Re-use Ordinance. They were converting old department stores into loft-style housing and then attracting people downtown. They decided that Skid Row was getting in the way of the loft conversions and also of some bigger plans. They wanted to go beyond adapting commercial buildings to actually remaking downtown and Skid Row. They wrote this white paper and basically called for the elimination of Skid Row.

How did the city get involved with this redevelopment project?

Around the same time, a paper was prepared for the Central Division Police Department hierarchy called, "Homeless Reduction Strategies." Three weeks later William Bratton came to town to become the LAPD's new chief of police. Bratton had allegedly "cleaned up" homelessness in Times Square as the New York Chief of Police. He promised to do the same thing in Los Angeles. The city agreed.

They hired George Kelling who had consulted with Chief Bratton in New York. Kelling was the co-author of this newspaper article called "The Broken Windows Theory." Over the course of the next couple years, the city paid him a half million dollars. He renamed the Homeless Reduction Strategies and designed the program we now know as the Safer Cities Initiative.

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Officials argue that measures like the Safer Cities Initiative are necessary because homeless people choose to be homeless – that sometimes they even enjoy it.

Do people choose to stay on the streets?

I never met anybody who had a real choice who chose to stay on the street. I've met lots of people who made a rational choice to stay on the street. Over the years, terms have been developed, like "shelter-resistant" or "service-resistant." It turns out people are sometimes shelter-resistant, depending on what the shelter is. If you spent time seeing what that shelter is, what is expected of people, and what the costs are, like having to give up your possessions, giving up a pet, or giving up a relationship in order to get off the street for a few hours, only then to get kicked out the next morning at 5 o'clock, you might not think it's so crazy to stay under a tarp somewhere.

An interesting example is Project 50. The County went around in Skid Row in the middle of the night and talked to people who had been on the streets the longest who also had some of the most serious disabilities. They found 50 people and offered them shelter. Almost invariably all the people said no. Once it was explained to them that they weren't being offered a night in the

mission but they were being offered a room with a key that would actually be more like ordinary housing, 50 out of 50 said yes.

So people are "shelter resistant," but that says more about the shelter than it says about the people. People are not housing resistant, just like they're not food resistant. I've never heard anybody say that people are "food-resistant." Yeah, there's some crap that people won't eat, but that doesn't mean they don't like food.

Finally, how does today's Skid Row compare to the Skid Row you encountered in the early 1980s?

Now the odds of your being homeless on any given night in the city of L.A. if you are white are 1 in 250. If you are Black they are 1 in 18. That's just a reflection of the fact that more than half of the homeless population of the city of L.A. is African American, but it's less than 10% of the population. And that's been true ever since the early '80s.

Residential Hotels/ SROs are the primary housing opportunity for the Skid Row community. While most people think of hotels as a place of temporary stay on a vacation, residential hotels are permanent housing and have been for decades. Residential hotels provide some of the last truly affordable housing in the city of Los Angeles for extremely low income residents, with more remaining units than public housing (19,000 vs. 7,000). With around 75% of our membership living in residential hotels, their conditions and tenancy rights have been central to LA CAN's organizing since our inception.



Photo Credit: C. Heatherton

28-day Shuffle: Named by a community resident and adopted by the press and city officials, the 28-day Shuffle is an illegal landlord tactic of denying a low income residents tenancy rights. Under California law, tenancy is established after 30 days continuous residency. By only allowing residents to pay rent for 28 days, landlords force residents to vacate their home for a number of days. This practice produces undue stress, creates homelessness and the image of transiency as well as depriving long term residents of their tenancy rights. Community organizing brought visibility to the 28-day shuffle and forced the Housing Department and City Attorney to enforce state laws prohibiting the practice further increasing penalties for its violation. Moreover, changes were made to the City's Rent Stabilization Ordinance to better enable the law's enforcement.

—LA CAN

HOMELESSNESS, AMERICAN STYLE

DON MITCHELL

Struggles in Skid Row are not just about homelessness but about housing, the distribution of public resources, employment, policing, and human rights. To explain how these trends have developed, geographer Don Mitchell gives a brief overview of the historical and geographical basis of these struggles in this excerpt from his forthcoming work.

To call homelessness in the United States a “crisis,” is to abuse language. Homelessness is a permanent and necessary part of the U.S. political economy, even if its specific form, its intensity, and the way it is managed, is historically and geographically variable.

Beginning in the late 1970s and accelerating in the 1980s, the nature of homelessness in the US altered significantly, leading to a more diverse, and much larger street population than in the previous decades. The seemingly-sudden explosion of street populations in the early Reagan years led to a great deal of activism, often in the face of a hostile national government, a rapid expansion of the emergency shelters, experiments in a “continuum-of-care” approach to housing the homeless, and eventually the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. With the deepening of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, however, the U.S. witnessed what many commentators

refer to as “compassion-fatigue.” The expansion of the shelter system and the various programs of the McKinney Act seemed to do little to lessen the presence of visible homeless people in cities. As cities were struggling to remake themselves as more “competitive” in the markets for footloose capital, tourists, suburban visitors, and gentrifiers, homeless people, and the facilities that served them (shelters, drop-in centers, half-way houses, etc.), were seen more and more as liabilities.

The response was a criminalization of homelessness in many cities. Laws were passed that outlawed everything from sleeping outdoors, to sitting on sidewalks, to free food giveaways. A traditional division between “deserving poor” (women, children, and those who behaved themselves in ways dominant society deemed sufficiently grateful to charity) and “undeserving poor” (men of working age, those who lived on the streets or who refused to enter shelters or rehabilitation programs) was reasserted – with a vengeance.

Anti-homeless laws were somewhat successful in pushing the most visible homeless out of the most prominent public spaces. And the boom-times of the Clinton era encouraged the sense that those

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who remained homeless were somehow themselves at fault. This turned attention away from a structural analyses of homelessness in America, giving many a sense that 1990s policies of “tough love” for the homeless and welfare rescission for the rest of the poor was successful. The current economic crisis has led once again to a rapid increase in the population of the new homeless, increased strain on the always inadequate emergency shelter and food systems, and a return of visible street homelessness in most cities. Despite a new ideology of “housing first” for homeless people (displacing the old continuum of care model that asserted that homeless people’s problems with drugs, alcohol, or mental illness had to be tackled before stable housing was offered), the public housing sector and broader low-income housing markets have been eviscerated by forty years of underinvestment, gentrification, and outright destruction, suggesting that possibilities quickly addressing the latest manifestation of homelessness in the United States are extremely limited.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES

It is customary, in both academic and policy circles in the United States, to base analyses of homelessness on the question, “Who are the homeless?” This question is answered at the aggregate level by seeking to determine the percentage of homeless people who are mentally or physically ill, addicted

to drugs or alcohol, have criminal records, or suffer from some other moral impairment or form of deviancy. Such analyses seek to parse the homeless population by race, gender, age, and other characteristics. Homelessness is understood in this discourse as a problem of “impaired capacity” and those who suffer from this malady are themselves often seen as the cause of “structural problems in the economy.” In other words, homelessness is argued to be a *characteristic* of persons, rather than a *condition* of the political economy.

THE REASSERTION OF STRUCTURE

Between 1979 and 1985, 10 million jobs were lost in the U.S. economy. Over one million jobs were wiped out in the manufacturing sector alone during the Reagan years. Those jobs that remained were radically restructured in the years that followed, as the assault on unions, wage guarantees, basic welfare entitlements and the public housing sector, continued unabated. The result was a “new” homelessness that could not so easily be ascribed merely to personal character faults. Estimates in the mid-1980s of the number of people who were homeless, either chronically or at some point during a year, ranged from between 250,000 and 3 million. What marked this new homelessness was its sudden visibility. Streets, especially streets in the Central Business District, were full of homeless people. They were young and old men, women,

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children, teens, and whole families. They were disproportionately Black. No longer confined to the old skid rows, the homeless littered the sidewalks and parks on the everyday paths of urban residents and suburban commuters alike. In some places – parks like San Francisco’s Golden Gate or New York’s Tompkins Square, empty lots like at the edge of Los Angeles’ historic Skid Row – large shanty towns and encampments developed, a sight not seen since the Depression. Shelters were overwhelmed. Homelessness *looked* like a crisis.

It was a crisis that clearly reflected massive transformations in the economy designed to restock the ranks of the reserve army of labor. By 1983, to take just one indicator, 15% of the U.S. population lived below the official poverty line. By 1985, one million fewer households were receiving federal housing assistance than before Reagan was elected. Arguments that individualized homelessness at the expense of structural accounts seemed to do a poor job of explaining this new homelessness. So too did the traditional division between deserving and undeserving poor blur, if not disappear altogether.

The 1980s crisis that so rapidly expanded the ranks of the homeless was a crisis *for* people made homeless, of course, but it was also a crisis *of* capital. The massive deindustrialization of the 1970s and 1980s, was accelerated, if not launched, by the multiple crises of

1973-1975: the oil embargo-induced global recession, the breaking down of the post-war “Bretton Woods” monetary agreements, and most of all, the increased falling rates of profit in the key industries of the “Fordist” era such as coal, steel, automobiles, etc. These crises expressed themselves in the United States as “a deliberate structural adjustment” that freed some capital to seek new places for investment.

THE GREAT IDEOLOGICAL U-TURN

If the singular achievement of the New Deal of the 1930s and the development of a rudimentary welfare state in the 1950s was to admit that some dysfunctionality in society was a structural and an inevitable part of the *normal* workings of capitalism, it took a generation for the courts to catch up. Vagrancy and other laws that punished the poor for a condition beyond their control remained on the books, and enforced, until the 1960s when courts engaged in what conservative law scholars called a “constitutional revolution.” Among other things (such as finding new protections against police abuse and for the rights of suspects), this revolution struck down what are known as “status crimes.” In the early 1960s, for example, the U.S Supreme Court found that jailing someone for being an addict was a violation of protections against cruel and unusual punishment. By 1973, after a number of lower courts had already similarly struck down vagrancy laws for punishing the status of being poor (and for violating the right to travel by im-

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posing an unfair means test on that right), the Supreme Court declared vagrancy laws to be overly vague and unenforceable. Such laws handed too much discretion to the police to “move along” those they did not like. Miscreants now had to be punished for what they did, not for who they were. In a sense this “constitutional revolution” sought to fashion a *legal regime* that better matched the post-war welfare state’s regime of accumulation and system of social regulation.

As the guarantees of that welfare state were wiped out in the 1980s and 1990s, and as ever-larger numbers of people ended up on the streets, conservative critics called for a reassertion of *order*. What was at stake, for them, was not status, but misbehavior. The new, revolutionized legal regime was inadequate to the problems of public order that faced cities. Leading the charge was the influential analysis, *A Nation in Denial* by Alice S. Baum and Donald W. Burnes, which argued forcefully that homelessness indeed was a problem of individuals, and especially of individuals who were addicted or mentally ill. Structural explanations of homelessness, they argued, did more harm than good to homeless people since they led towards inappropriate solutions (such as shelter, housing, and various other forms of welfare), rather than address the actual needs of addicted and ill people. While the intent of Baum and Burnes was

not to recriminalize homelessness, their analysis was latched onto by those – from pundits to policy makers – who did. Given that homelessness was a function of disordered individuals, some even suggested rounding them up and “quarantining” them on decommissions military bases. Others, not going quite so far, sought new laws that outlawed many of the things homeless people do (sleeping in public, sitting on sidewalks, begging for change, collecting recyclables) in the name of restoring order in the wake of the constitutional revolution. For them, the “freedom” hailed by the revolutionized legal regime of the 1960s had brought little more than “chaos” to the streets of American cities.

EXPERIMENTS IN REGULATION

To further manage the presence of homeless people, therefore, new laws were invented. These laws made it illegal to sleep or camp in public, to beg or beg aggressively (or in particular places), to cut across or loiter in parking lots, to wash motorists’ windscreens or provide other services, to hand out free food or sometimes even eat in public places, to drink alcohol or be drunk in public, to sit or lie on sidewalks. Such laws were supported by “quality of life” police campaigns, which focus on penalizing small infractions (such as jaywalking or urinating in public) on the theory that small acts of disorder inevitably led to more major crimes. They are further supported by the creation

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of Business Improvement Districts that levy businesses and property owners a special (and private) tax to provide “enhanced” levels of street cleaning and specialized private police forces empowered to “move along” homeless people in a way public police are often legally prevented from doing. To their defenders such laws and policing practices combat the growing “disorder” of the streets and enforce commonly accepted rules of “civility” thereby making urban public spaces attractive to everyone. To their critics, they are designed at best to make the “homeless invisible” as one shelter operator in San Diego put it; at worst they are designed to eliminate any place in the city for the homeless to “be” – to live. Such laws and policing practices legally “annihilate” the very spaces that homeless people must rely on for everyday life in the post-welfare world. For homeless advocates such policies produce “mean streets” without doing anything to address the causes of homelessness.

In the mid 1990s, the *most conservative* estimates held that there was a nationwide “bed shortage” of at least 425,000. That is, there were nearly a half million people who had no place to sleep except in streets and parks – no access to a shelter bed, no access to transitional housing, no possibility of doubling up with relatives, and certainly no hope of permanent subsidized housing. During the day, when many shelters are

closed, there were at minimum 700,000 people who had no choice but to wander about (or maybe spend the day dozing in a library, if they could get away with it). A decade later in 2006 – even before the current, deep economic crisis, which is very much a crisis of housing – the demand for emergency shelter increased nationwide by 9% over the previous year (which itself saw a large increase over the year before). 23% of all requests for emergency shelter went unmet; 29% of requests by families for emergency shelter could not be accommodated. By the most reliable estimates, some 3.5 million Americans experienced homelessness over the course of the year; there were at minimum 800,000 people who were literally homeless each night in 2006; countless more were illegally doubled up, living in substandard housing, or otherwise at risk of homelessness. In other words, whatever the claims for their efficacy in “restoring order” to American cities, and whatever the claims made on behalf of the greater efficiency of the shadow state in addressing homelessness, homeless policies in the United States over the past two decades have done nothing to lessen the problem, nothing to address the chronic shortage of low-income housing in the nation, and probably much to make the lives of homeless people more difficult. It has certainly exacerbated the “struggles between the propertied and unpropertied over the use of public space, fears

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about the growth of a propertyless proletariat, and anxieties about the loss of traditional social controls in America," that Todd DePastino identified as indicative of homelessness' formative years.

HOUSING FIRST

Housing policy for the past 40 years in the United States has consisted of underfunding and eliminating public housing, subsidizing middle- and upper-class homeownership through tax policy, and encouraging staggering debt, both credit card and mortgage, for lower income families as owner-occupied housing "filtered down" to them. Changes in banking laws, coupled with sloshing surpluses of finance capital looking for investment outlets in the built environment, led to a historic housing boom and bubble, a classic crisis of overaccumulation, leading now to a rapid, indeed uncontrollably spiraling, devaluation. This "destruction of value" is not only throwing workers out of their homes, as foreclosure rates hit historic highs, and especially as speculative investors in rental housing lose their shirts and their evicted tenants pay the costs, it is also, and inevitably, restocking the reserve army. The real unemployment rate – excluding all those warehoused in prisons – in the U.S. in winter 2009 was approaching 15%. And as David Harvey argues, "by throwing workers out of work capitalists in effect discard variable capital and thereby transform the endemic problem of crisis for the industrial reserve army into a

condition of chronic maladjustment and social breakdown." Housing, like the prison system, is designed to contain the inevitable social maladies that attend capitalism's contradictions – but, like laws banning the distribution of free food in public parks or increasing police power to enforce trespassing laws, it does nothing to address the structural production of homelessness in America.

HOMELESSNESS, AMERICAN STYLE

Contemporary homelessness in America has been shaped by its historical geography. It has a particular structure, a particular form. Its current features are easy to identify. There is a large, visible street population in most American cities. While its size has fluctuated since its massive explosion at the end of the 1970s, and while any number of efforts to push it into invisibility have been tried, it has not gone away. Like the poorly housed that Friedrich Engels famously wrote about, it has just been shifted from place to place by a bourgeoisie with no other solutions. This visible homelessness is a chronic, not a crisis or emergency condition; it is an inevitable feature of American-style capitalism, even if it might grow during times of economic downturn. Both the population of visible, street homeless, and the population of homeless people residing in public and private shelters, transitional housing, sleeping in cars, or doubling up with friends and relatives – sometimes "couch surfing" their

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way through their whole social network – are *structurally determined* by changes in labor markets, the minimal rise and thorough evisceration of the welfare state, and the destruction of low-cost and public housing through disinvestment, gentrification, and the neoliberal shift towards market “solutions” to low income housing problems.

Across its history, though occasionally waning as activists and advocates have struggled to change the dominant discourse, homelessness American style has been marked by a strong and consistent distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. In the immediate wake of a natural disaster, the homeless are often considered deserving (just as long as they quickly pull themselves up by their bootstraps), as are many children and occasionally women; men, the putatively employable, and people of color are rarely so. For the “deserving” poor, charity-based aid, and now especially faith-based charity aid, and the shadow state more generally, provide beds, addiction and job counseling, and not a little “tough love.” Such makeshift charity has replaced the aid-as-right that marked the welfare state (even the U.S.’s minimal one that lasted from the 1930s to 1970s). For the “undeserving” homeless, there is an increasingly punitive legal regime marked by anti-homeless laws, enhanced trespassing laws, limits on general assistance cash payments to homeless people,

and other measures targeted at homeless peoples’ ability *to be* in a particular locale.

Simultaneously, cities have used zoning laws, use-permit systems, and negotiations with NIMBY [not in my backyard] activists to confine the warehousing and containment of homeless people in specific areas of the city (often away from downtown), creating “service-dependent ghettos.” They have further encouraged the creation of Business Improvement Districts and “Clean and Safe” programs to clean out the homeless and clean up after them when they have gone. Cityscapes have been remade with “bum-proof benches,” spiky landscaping, randomized sprinklers, CCTV networks, and other environmental interventions designed to make it impossible for homeless people to linger.

Some, and perhaps all, of these dynamics (or ones like them) can be found in other national settings. These characteristics are most prominent in the United States, which, after all, hosted the weakest post-World War II welfare state, and which has gone the farthest in dismantling what little of it there was. With the neoliberalization of economies and states around the world, with the diffusion of what used to be called the “Washington Consensus” of market fundamentalism, with the “fast policy transfer” and sharing of so-called “best practices” on a global scale, to what

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degree has this American-style homelessness been globalized? Does the specific historical and geographical trajectory of homelessness in the United States make it unique? Are other nation-states

now recapitulating homelessness, American style, in whole or in part?



Community Watch teams are composed of four LA CAN members who patrol the neighborhood on foot daily, armed with clipboards and a video camera. Community Watch inverts the intentions of home owner associations' "Neighborhood Watch" or LAPD "community policing." Instead of monitoring and snitching on your neighbors, Community Watch practices policing the police. This shift focuses attention on those perpetrating violence against our community. Indeed, during the first year of the program, Community Watch was successful in reducing the abuses against community residents by the BID guards. The Community Watch Program has been formally recognized by *The Nation* magazine as one of the "Top Ten Things You Need to Know to Live on the Streets."

—LA CAN

Photo Credit: Nicholas Dahmann

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TRAPS, SKID ROW, AND KATRINA

CLYDE WOODS

Skid Row is a neighborhood whose residents are seeking ways to build a sustainable community. It is also a city-planned enclosure. Cities and institutions dumped unwanted human beings in the neighborhood for years before shifting to a policy of expulsion. To expel the homeless and low-income renters, a series of social traps were created. As discussed in several articles in this volume, a wide range of traps operate in the district. Walking too fast, walking too slow, eating, and standing have all been criminalized. Also, numerous public policies and private practices were designed to strip residents of their

assets: crates, shopping carts, beds, cash, sleep, possessions, shelters, apartments, safety, employment, childhood, children, friends, their health, their neighborhood, their civil rights, and their freedom. This city-made disaster is the foundation upon which the neighborhood is being remade. The residents forced to leave often find themselves subject to the same policies in other parts of the city. The current California crisis is defined by the extension of trap economics and the policy of asset stripping perfected on Skid Row to communities, families, and individuals throughout the state.



Photo Credit: LA CAN Community Watch

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The manufacture of destitution through social traps and asset stripping has come to define local state and federal policies during the last thirty years. Restrictions on welfare benefits, the elimination of employment programs, the demolition of public housing, mass incarceration, neighborhood abandonment, gentrification, and other policies have led to the destruction of families and neighborhoods from one end of the country to the other. Local business and political leaders have celebrated these social disasters as progress.

Yet this approach to social planning is very old. Throughout history, social-spatial enclosures have been used by dominant social movements to establish stable control over specific territories and their populations. This process typically involves the reorganization of property relations through the destruction of collectively held property or rights. Enclosures are maintained by physical boundaries, special forms of policing, and by social, political, and economic traps for those forced to live inside these boundaries. Culture has been used to justify and naturalize this form of social conflict. Examples of enclosure movements include: colonialism, slavery, Native American reservations, sharecropping, ghettoization, company towns, redlining, racially restricted suburbs, gated communities, and prison complexes. In addition to creating a militarized form of social control,

these enclosures enable the extraction of wealth through multiple mechanisms. Those who live within the boundaries of these zones are confronted with the daily stripping of their assets and freedoms. Territories, firms, and individuals outside these zones also profit from these social disasters.

In addition to being places where people are forced into, these enclosures became places where communities were built and where visions of social justice were imagined and brought into being. The Blues is an encyclopedia of the multiple forms of traps experienced by African Americans over the course of generations and of how they challenged these practices. I'm engaged in an effort to identify the Blues and Blues-based music created to document the traps Black Angelenos faced during the twentieth century. Part of this project looks at the ongoing relationship between Blacks in Los Angeles and Louisiana. This is an epic story with many triumphs, tragedies, and lessons.

There is a special relationship between the Skid Row enclosure and Black migrants from Louisiana. Between March and May of 1942, approximately 8,000 Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes and imprisoned in an enclosure, the concentration camp at Manzanar and other camps in California and the United States. The tragedy of the internment was

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soon compounded by new disasters. Sparked by the expulsion of families from rural areas, war-time employment discrimination, and job opportunities in the West, tens of thousands of African Americans fled from Louisiana to Los Angeles during the 1940s. War-time policies maintaining housing segregation forced many of the migrants into the Little Tokyo/ Skid Row district. Within a year, between 30,000 to 50,000 African Americans were living in the area then referred to as Brownsville. The ghettoization of the migrants in the district was defined by widespread human rights violations and by horrific housing and living conditions. While a panic fell over white residents and officials who feared increased Black migration, Blacks living downtown engaged in forcefully challenging segregation in all of its forms.

After World War II, Blacks were partially expelled from Little Tokyo/Skid Row. By the 1950s, the white supremacist massive resistance movement of the Louisiana Citizens' Councils used numerous laws and practices in order to disrupt the Civil Rights Movement and expel thousands of African American families from the state. Many arrived in Los Angeles. Some of the migrants who were provided free bus tickets by the Citizens' Council's "reverse freedom ride" program soon found themselves struggling on Skid Row.

In 1960, a violent school desegregation crisis erupted in New Orleans and, in 1963, the state took the unprecedented step of seizing the membership lists of the NAACP, effectively destroying the organization. Many leaders and residents soon left Louisiana and participated in the transformation of Los Angeles and California. By 1965 Los Angeles residents were transfixed by the community self-defense movement launched in Bogalusa and other parts of Louisiana by the Deacons for Defense. Black Los Angeles journalist Louis Lomax both covered and participated in the campaign against the terror sown by the Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. The concern Los Angeles natives had for their relatives in Louisiana equaled the concern Louisianans had for their relatives in Los Angeles who witnessed and participated in the Watts Rebellion of August 1965. Despite the tragedies and new movements that emerged from the then largest urban rebellion in U.S. history, the Afro-California familial and social networks were mobilized again to support the tens of thousands of New Orleans residents displaced by Hurricane Betsy which struck the city on September 9, 1965.

During the 1960s and 1970s, young men and women born in Louisiana helped to build numerous community organizations in California including the Black Panther Party. During the 1980s, both California and Louisiana were

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devastated by the impoverishment polices of President Reagan and the new era of homelessness, unemployment, and imprisonment they institutionalized. During this period Los Angeles and New Orleans competed for the title of being the homeless, imprisonment, and murder capitals of America. In 1991, Los Angeles residents watched, and assisted, their relatives in Louisiana as they mobilized to prevent former Klan leader Da-

vid Duke from becoming governor. The following year, their Louisiana relatives provided assistance after the South Central Rebellion of 1992. The well worn social, familial, and cultural highway between Afro-Louisiana and Afro-California was used by thousands of families displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. A year later, a massive displacement campaign was launched against the Central City East/Skid Row community.



Photo Credit: Jordan T. Camp

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As noted in other places in this volume, numerous traps were created to expel the Central City East/Skid Row community already plagued by multiple disasters. The same sorts of traps were operating in New Orleans despite the multiple tragedies the residents were facing after Hurricane Katrina. A 2008 news account documented human trapping in New Orleans:

A pack of Kool cigarettes, a can of Budweiser and a box of Boston Baked Beans sat on the dashboard of an unlocked car with the windows rolled down at 1732 Canal St. Somewhere nearby two New Orleans Police Department officers watched and waited for someone to reach into the bait car and snatch the items. They wouldn't have to wait long, as the police parked the car just one block away from a homeless encampment under the Claiborne Avenue overpass, where dozens of desperate, hungry and addicted people lived in a makeshift village of tents.

The first arrest was made at 12:25 p.m. June 10 when police say the initial suspect took the bait and stole a can of beer. The second arrest was made at 4:05 p.m. when police say a second suspect took the cigarettes, beer and candy. For stealing less than \$6 in items, the police charged the two homeless men with simple burglary, a felony

that can carry up to 12 years in prison. Neither suspect had any prior arrests in Orleans Parish. A month later, the men remain in Orleans Parish Prison awaiting court dates and the possibility they will spend the better part of the next decade in state prison...

[According to Marjorie Esmann, executive director of the ACLU Foundation of Louisiana] They're going after a certain class of people to encourage them to commit petty crimes in order to get those people out of the general population . . . What they're doing, essentially, is prosecuting people for being hungry, poor and homeless. But you can't arrest someone for being hungry, poor and homeless. So they said, 'We'll make them break the law.' You create temptation and then punish them for being tempted . . . It also could violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment by targeting a specific group of people . . . Judson Mitchell, pro bono coordinator for the Loyola Law Clinic and Center for Social Justice, called into question the legality of such a sting, claiming it could be classified as entrapment.

This brief summary does begin to fully capture the six decade long brutal history of those families whose roots are in Louisiana and California. Their journey from pillar

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to post is a story not yet told. Yet their experiences and social visions can give us insights into our society and the types of changes that must be made. Their experiences, social visions and determination are being relied upon by existing com-

munities and by organizations, such as LA CAN, to build a new society dedicated to replacing trap economics with sustainable communities built on the foundations of social and economic justice.



Photo Credit: C. Heatherston

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In 2005, we did a survey through the Downtown Women's Action Coalition and I was real surprised to talk to a lot of the women. They've been here in Skid Row 20 years or more. I looked at these women and I looked in their eyes and I thought how do you survive this? At that point, I felt I can survive this. I was meeting women, strong women, that have come through a lot. To see every day that you walk through the neighborhood, to see women being handcuffed and searched and watching the bulldozers come in and just sweep up all their personal belongings, their newly bought air mattress and pillow and all their personal belongings, that's all they have in the world, and see it scooped up and them begging the police not to take their stuff. I was raised in a little town in New Mexico. For me this was real heartbreaking to see this because where I was raised, you don't see homelessness. I always thought *how can you get recovery when you're in the midst of all this*. But you can. You can survive.

—Linda Valverde, LA CAN



Photo Credit: C. Heatherston

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Gary Blasi practices, teaches, conducts research and writes about advocacy on behalf of children in substandard schools, homeless families and individuals, low income tenants, low wage workers, and victims of discrimination. Professor Blasi became a lawyer without attending law school. He joined the UCLA faculty with a distinguished 20-year record of public interest practice. He is one of the founding and core faculty of the law school's unique David J. Epstein Program in Public Interest Law and Policy. He has also served as Director of the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, which supports research and education on issues critical to working people.

General Dogon was born in downtown LA and has lived here off and on for most of his life. He currently lives in a residential hotel on Main Street – which has become the front line of downtown gentrification. Dogon has been a longtime community activist and organizer and has worked with the Los Angeles Community Action Network for the past several years. He is a product of LA's criminal IN-justice system and now works night and day to ensure real justice for original downtown residents. General Dogon is an invaluable resource to the downtown community for many reasons, but especially in this time of increased policing and the unfair treatment that has resulted.

LisaGay Hamilton is a critically acclaimed actor who has performed in over two dozen films. She earned her degree in theatre from New York University and followed it up with a second BFA from Julliard. In 1993, she got her first break at the New York Shakespearean festival playing Isabella opposite Kevin Kline in "Measure for Measure." She went on to have a successful career in theater. In 1995-96, her portrayal of a South African singer in Athol Fugard's Valley Song garnered an Obie Award and the Clarence Derwent Award. More recently, Hamilton earned critical acclaim, her second Obie, and a Lucille Lortel Award nomination for her role as Suzanne Alexander in Adrienne Kennedy's, "The Ohio State Murders." Besides appearing in over two dozen films, Hamilton directed the documentary film *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks* in 2003. This film, about pioneering black actress Beah Richards, dealt with Hamilton seeking out Richards, an African-American actress who had broken ground making inroads for black actresses.

Art Hazelwood is an artist, impresario and instigator. He lives in San Francisco. His prints are in several public collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York Public Library, Library of Congress, RSDI Museum, Stanford Special Collections Library, and the Yale Special Collections Library. He created three large-scale book projects with print publisher East-side Editions in San Francisco. Most recently in 2009, he curated three

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major exhibitions: a three year traveling exhibition which examines artists' responses to homelessness from the New Deal to the present, a history of the relief print in Northern California, and an exhibition of nearly one hundred woodcuts, linocuts and wood engravings from over a one hundred year period.

Robin D.G. Kelley has been called the one of "the greatest living historians of our time" and has long been considered one of the leading scholars of African American history and culture. He is Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity and History at the University of Southern California, having previously taught at Columbia University, New York University, University of Michigan, Emory University, and Southeastern Massachusetts University. He is the author of *The Lonesome Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*; *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*; *Three Strikes: Miners, Musicians, Salesgirls, and the Fighting Spirit of Labor's Last Century* (with Dana Frank and Howard Zinn); *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*; *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*; *Into the Fire: African Americans Since 1970s*; *We Changed the World: African Americans, 1945-1970* (with Vincent Harding and Earl Lewis); and *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*. His writings have also appeared in numerous scholarly and popular

publications, including: *Color Lines*, *Utne Reader*, *The Nation*, *Journal of American History*, *Monthly Review*, *New York Times*, *New Labor Forum*, *Jazz Times* and *Crisis Magazine*, to name a few. Professor Kelley is currently completing *Going Home: Jazz and the Making of Modern Africa* (Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2011), and a general survey of African American history co-authored with Tera Hunter and Earl Lewis to be published by Norton.

Don Mitchell is one of the preeminent scholars examining cities, policing and privatizing public space, anti-homeless legislation, and labor issues. He is the author of three influential books: *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, *Cultural Geography*, and *The Lie of the Land: Migrant-Workers and the California Landscape*, as well as numerous articles on public space, homelessness, migratory workers, and culture. In 1998 Mitchell was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and in 2002 held a Fulbright Fellowship at the University of Oslo. His research has also been supported by the National Science Foundation. Mitchell is the founder and director of The People's Geography Project, which brings the insights of radical and critical contemporary geography to lay audiences, activists, and teachers. He is also a member of the Syracuse Hunger Project, a community-university consortium that examines and addresses the changing geography of hunger and

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food insecurity in the Syracuse area.

Cedric J. Robinson is one of the leading historians and social theorists in Black cultural studies writing today. He is Professor of Black Studies and Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He received a BA in social anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley and completed his graduate work at Stanford University in political theory. His fields of teaching and research are modern political thought, radical social theory in the African Diaspora, comparative politics, and media and politics. He is the author of *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*; *Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*; *Black Movements in America*; *The Anthropology of Marxism*; and *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theatre and Film*. He is a community activist in Santa Barbara where he hosts a TV news program entitled "Third World News Review."

Damien Schnyder is a University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara. He holds a M.A. in sociology and B.A. in African and African American Studies from Stanford University. He received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin. His manuscript

addresses the connections between the public education and prison systems.

Clyde Woods is one of the most prominent Black geographers in the country and among the most engaged public intellectuals working today. He is Professor of Black Studies and Director of the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Mississippi Delta*, a powerful examination of the political economy of the rural Mississippi Delta and blues tradition, and a highly anticipated forthcoming study of Black Los Angeles. He recently co-edited *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* with Katherine McKittrick, and is the editor of a collection entitled *In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions* from the John Hopkins University Press.



In addition to being places where people are forced into, these enclosures became places where communities were built and where visions of social justice were imagined and brought into being.

—Clyde Woods

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