

Cultivating Roots: A Community's Story of Resistance

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Introduction

My educational journey here at Occidental has many layers; each layer transformed and contributed to the understanding my purpose in a larger socio-political context. It was at Occidental, where I committed my studies to becoming more involved in social and political justice work, using the many resources and opportunities available on campus. This transformation started to blossom last fall of 2007 in my Black Activism & the Archive course with Dr. Gabrielle Foreman. It was in this class where, for the first time, I was learning the real and hidden history of my people in the United States from enslavement and throughout the 19th century. Coupled with this class was an internship with the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), with a friend in the course, Siobhan Heard. I had never felt such a sense of responsibility and being rooted before this class. Balancing the classroom readings and discussions with the work at LA CAN became a powerful and revealing process. What I learned in the classroom from the slave narratives, researching slave revolts and the activism that took place in 19th century, troubled me because I had never learned any of this in my 16 years of schooling. It was through this realization I recognized the importance of archiving, as well as understanding the cycle of disremembrance and its role in the histories of people of color.

The connections made from the early history of my people in this country to the economic, political and social environments that we have experienced and are currently in, awakened me to see how little things have changed. I put the conditions of the skid row community into a historical context, pulling together stories from slave narratives while listening to residents speak of their experience in Downtown. I saw LA CAN's work mirroring those of enslaved blacks who engaged in revolts, black activists in the 19th century organized against lynching, the civil rights movement and the Black Panther Party. There has been a constant movement of black resistance

that has been “disremembered” and altered. I use “disremembered” because the issue is not the memory loss by community members, but rather the leaving out of a peoples’ history on behalf of government officials and dominant institutions. Disremembrance shifts the agency to how and who misrepresents the history of a community. There have been many banished communities of color that people are unaware of because that history has been left out or misrepresented.

My father grew up near downtown, on Central Ave, a black community that was also an entertainment center and home to many blacks throughout Los Angeles. Stories about the vibrancy of the community and neighboring Downtown seem an illusion to me when looking at how neglected and abandoned these areas are now, due to many social and government forces. Similarly, many residents of skid row grew up in and around Downtown, so they have witnessed and experienced the changes that have been taking place for many years. As a Los Angeles native, I have heard stories of what south and central Los Angeles used to be, but what I have experienced is totally different. Understanding the history of my home is important to me, but even more so is learning ways to preserve that history and document movements of resistance from these communities that otherwise would be left out. I have become rooted in my history and felt inspired to become involved in this larger historical movement, and to change both the accessibility and truth telling of black archives for future generations that will come after me. I feel my senior comprehensive project served as an opportunity to share this educational and personal journey as well as contribute to the archiving of real peoples movement.

Acknowledging the lack of accessible and truthful archives, I knew I had to create a documentary film. My film explores the collective resistance of a community that has been under siege since the beginnings of gentrification in the area called Central City East, also known as skid row.

The skid row community is one of the last communities in Los Angeles, where blacks or African Americans are the majority; in skid row, the black population makes up 60%. The community is currently fighting gentrification, which for black communities and other communities of color has historically meant displacement. One realization I had during my research and interviews is that the skid row community is not seen as a community. Central City East, or skid row, has long been a community, home to families, neighbors and friends. The skid row community is being threatened and compromised by government officials, the business community, and the police. Examining the current attempt to displace the skid row community, my film focuses on the affects of the Safer Cities initiative, an initiative put forth in partnership with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's office and the Los Angeles Police Department. The film brings together testimonies from community residents, LA CAN staff, a lawyer, a past representative from the Mayor's office and a former member of the Black Panther Party. The purpose of this paper is to compliment the documentary "Cultivating Roots: A Community's Story of Resistance." The documentary invites you to listen and reflect on a community's response to gentrification and their resistance to displacement from their neighborhood.

Methodology

I chose my subjects based on their work and ties to the downtown community. The organizers at LA CAN are also residents of the community, so the decision to include them in this project was clear. I chose Torie Osborn because through my research I found that she was the Mayor's senior advisor on homelessness and poverty. She was in office during most to all of the implementation of Safer Cities Initiative. Gary Blasi is a UCLA Law Professor, who headed an investigation into the Safer Cities Initiative and its effects on policing the community. Phyllis Jackson is a former member of the Black Panther Party and is now a professor at Pomona—a part of the Claremont collection of college campuses. She teaches black studies as well as art history. Because of her background and experiences, I wanted Phyllis to narrate the story of the downtown community in a historical context. Her voice would underline the progression of the community's story, narrating different experiences, such as racism, black communities' relationship with the police and what pushes a community to take control. I had originally planned to interview Andrew Smith, then Captain of the Central Division and Don Spivak of the city's Redevelopment Agency, but time and individual schedules became an issue and I could not fit them in scheduling for filming. Cara DiMassa of the Los Angeles Times and councilmember Jan Perry were also contacted for interviews. DiMassa could not find the time, and the councilmember's Chief of Staff, Kathy Godfrey declined to participate.

Because of my relationship with the Los Angeles Community Action Network, it was not difficult to set up interviews with staff members or residents. I built relationships with LA CAN staff and most of the residents during my work with the organization. For the other subjects, I emailed each individually, explaining my project and why their contribution was necessary. For those individuals who accepted my invitation, I set up separate interviews. I conducted a total of

18 interviews. Along with these interviews, I collected footage from LA CAN's archive library as well as filmed community events, like meetings and rallies. I ended with around 15 hours of footage.

In between completing my interviews, I began to edit and build the documentary. The majority of my time was spent in the editing lab. For each tape and/or interview, I had to find clips that I wanted in use in the documentary. I would watch the full tape and write down time codes that corresponded to the clips I favored. Once I had the time codes for each tape, I needed to "log and capture" each clip onto my project in Final Cut Pro. Log and capture is essentially saving these individual clips into my project. After saving the clips from each tape and/or interview, I could then begin to edit and pull the story together. Editing includes eliminating blurbs or mistakes from the clip. The clips need to be as concise as possible. All clips are arranged into a story format; it is important that the documentary flows and is clear. Some of the tapes I did not use for talking points-or rather, I am not using the audio that comes with the clips. I used these clips as b-roll or images that will play over the audio of the interviewees. After the clips are connected, I level out the audio, which means making sure the audio throughout the interview documentary is balanced (not too low, not too high, but consistent). Next, title cards are added to each clip. Title cards include, Name, Position/Occupation for each interviewee, or the name and date of the event being shown (for example, SCI Anniversary Protest, October 11, 2007). Other additions to the documentary that made it complete is the song inclusion and credits. It took over two weeks to complete the editing process and produce a final draft of the documentary, "Cultivating Roots: A Community's Story of Resistance."

The Central City East or Skid Row Community

The demographics and conditions for residents of Central City East, or skid row reflect the governmental neglect it has undergone. It also highlights the mistreatment of residents suffering from mental illness, addiction or both. The demographics of the population bring to light the disproportionate burden people of color carry with prejudice social and political institutions. The neglect of this community is bound with historical events, such as “white flight”, the cutting of federal funds for public housing, and the crack epidemic in south Los Angeles. “Comprising about 0.85 square miles, Skid Row contains about 0.18% of the land area in the City but about 7.6% of the homeless population, a density 42 times the citywide average.”¹

Although there is not a sufficient amount of services in the area, there is a concentration of services and shelters on skid row. The community is in need of more services to accommodate the dense population. In counting residents in need of treatment, LAPD officials found that “some 60% of this population to be mentally impaired and 80% to be substance abusers.”² The skid row community has a strong recovery population.

As mentioned earlier, the black population on skid row is over half (60%). In fact, “across the City of Los Angeles, African Americans are overrepresented among the homeless population... comprising nearly half the homeless population but only a tenth of the total.”³ There is a larger struggle going on, on the streets of skid row. The ideas of “separate but equal” are still in play today through substandard education, either neighborhood neglect and militarization, and a general lack of opportunities for growth and progress among communities

¹ Gary Blasi & the UCLA School of Law Fact Investigation Clinic. “Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness?: The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row”. September 24, 2007. p. 9-10.

² Gary Blasi & the UCLA School of Law Fact Investigation Clinic. “Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness?: The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row”. September 24, 2007. p.10.

³ Gary Blasi & the UCLA School of Law Fact Investigation Clinic. “Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness?: The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row”. September 24, 2007. p. 12

of color. America failed young black children and other children of color long before the creation of skid row; the institutional structures and patterns were a cause of the community.

The Safer Cities Initiative

On September 24, 2006, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced the implementation of a program intended to end crime on skid row and direct people to the services in the area. This program is called the Safer Cities Initiative. It is a partnership between the Mayor's office and the Los Angeles Police Department. The "Streets or Services", SOS, portion of Safer Cities is meant to guide willing community members to housing or treatment in the area. The Safer Cities Initiative is supported by the "broken windows theory", written by George L. Kelling. The broken windows theory suggests that by going after misdemeanor crimes in a neighborhood, the cycle of "lawlessness" will be broken. The theory suggests that crime exist because of the proposed tolerance of crime, even the smallest.

The enforcement of the Safer Cities Initiative on the skid row community has been devastating. The Initiative has been celebrated throughout city government and even the Los Angeles Times as having reduced crime in the area, but what it has done is reduced the population through arrests and police occupation of the community. Gary Blasi, a professor at UCLA School of Law did a policy analysis of the Safer Cities Initiative, on its one year anniversary September 24, 2007. His findings and statistics of SCI point to racist policing and a lack of housing and services in the community. SCI takes officers from surrounding areas in the city and moves them to the 52-block area of skid row. These special officers are known as the SCI Task Force. They started with adding 50 officers to skid row, but the number of officers has increased close to 120 officers. The concentration of police officers in the small area of skid row

has meant around-the-clock harassment for the residents. The Safer Cities Initiative materialized in almost 12,000 citations for jaywalking or other quality of life crimes.⁴ When one cannot afford to pay the fine of these activities, a warrant for arrest is issued, and that individual could be sent to state prison.

These arrests and harassment taking place under the Safer Cities Initiative is seen nowhere else in the city but on skid row, where efforts for gentrification and displacement are most aggressive. For example, “pedestrian citations are 48 to 69 times more frequent in skid row than elsewhere in Los Angeles.”⁵ Most of the arrests by the SCI Task Force have been for drug offenses; however, “of those arrests for drug sales or possession for sale of drugs other than marijuana, the median weight of drugs involved was 2.58 grams (0.09 ounces).”⁶ Safer Cities Initiative along with other changes in city management and how crime is prosecuted on skid row brings to surface patterns of the prison industrial complex, militarization and the displacement of an entire community. What gives the residents of skid row motivation to overcome this struggle is the empowerment and attention of the Los Angeles Community Action Network.

The Los Angeles Community Action Network

The Los Angeles Community Action Network began January 2, 1999, by a group of community residents who recognized the conditions and problems in their community and took a commitment to address problems and organize other residents to respond. The mission of the Los Angeles Community Action Network is as reads:

⁴ Gary Blasi & the UCLA School of Law Fact Investigation Clinic. “Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness?: The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row”. September 24, 2007. p. 32.

⁵ Gary Blasi & the UCLA School of Law Fact Investigation Clinic. “Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness?: The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row”. September 24, 2007. p. 33

⁶ Gary Blasi & the UCLA School of Law Fact Investigation Clinic. “Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness?: The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row”. September 24, 2007. p. 39

The mission of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) is to help people dealing with poverty create & discover opportunities, while serving as a vehicle to ensure they have voice, power & opinion in the decisions that are directly affecting them.⁷

As mentioned earlier, I started my work with LA CAN fall of 2007. Spending time in the downtown community, known as skid row, and with LA CAN, I learned that the two are not separate. LA CAN preaches that anyone living in the downtown community or on the streets of skid row is LA CAN. The organization does not try to separate themselves from the community because they are the community. LA CAN does direct community organizing and everyone on staff either currently lives in the downtown area or has grown up here. The same time I was interning with LA CAN, I was learning the history of black activism since enslavement. I immediately started to draw historical connections between the individuals and groups I learned in class with LA CAN. What makes LA CAN more unique than other organizations is that they also build off of the history of the blacks in the U.S and abroad. Speaking with Pete White, the founder of LA CAN, he tells a narrative of when he recognized the conditions on skid row and the overwhelming representation of blacks or African Americans on the streets. He talks about having an epiphany that things must change. In beginning LA CAN, the founders, which includes Pete and other downtown residents, recognized a lack of empowerment and resident inclusion in decisions making from city hall.

The energy and passion of the community inspired and further grounded me my race's long history of resistance in this country. In area almost completely dominated by business interests and politics catered to the business community, LA CAN is determined not to be moved. In an area whose redevelopment is quicken by illegal evictions, militarization and weak political will to do right by long term residents, LA CAN stands defiantly saying "we will not be

⁷ The Los Angeles Community Action Network website: www.cangress.org.

moved”. In a time where racism continues to permeate throughout city institutions and city policies clearly state the removal of an entire community, LA CAN organizes and empowers residents to fight and say “no more”. I chose LA CAN and the skid row community as case studies for this project because it is a real people’s movement; they hold the courage and determination to fight against some of the most powerful institutions in downtown, while also cultivating the community’s roots, well-being and esteem.

The goals of LA CAN are to: organize and empower community residents to work collectively to change the relationships of power that affect our community; create an organization and organizing model that eradicate the race, class, gender barriers that are used to prevent communities from building true power, and eliminate the multiple forms of violence used against and within our community to maintain status quo.⁸ The organization achieves these goals through the campaigns and organizing in which they engage. The organization is one of the few if only resident-driven organizations in Los Angeles. The key leadership of LA CAN is comprised of 7 staff and 30 core members, 95 percent of who are current or former residents of the Central City East community.⁹

Main Speakers in Film

Linda Valverde was introduced to LA CAN and its work through her daughter, who lived downtown and volunteered with LA CAN. She is an organizer with LA CAN, working on the Violence Prevention campaign, as well as with LA CAN’s Downtown Women’s Action Coalition (DWAC). Deborah Burton is also an organizer. She got involved with LA CAN through their organizing efforts in the residential hotel she lived in. She works with DWAC and

⁸ The Los Angeles Community Action Network website: www.cangress.org.

⁹ The Los Angeles Community Action Network website: www.cangress.org.

the Violence Prevention campaign as well. Steve Diaz is an organizer at LA CAN. He was first introduced to LA CAN through their organizing residents in his hotel building. He first started helping out by spreading the word about LA CAN's community and organizing meetings. He now works on staff at LA CAN, specializing in housing preservation and tenant rights. General Dogon is an intern at LA CAN, and he was directed to LA CAN after he had witnessed the assault of woman by LAPD officers. He is head of the civil rights campaign and community watch. Veronica Doleman is a core member of the LA CAN. Her specialty is in nutrition/nutritional programming and bringing awareness to residents around the federal Food Stamp Program. Each staff member interviewed brought their specialty to the film, which helped in understanding the prolific work of LA CAN.

Becky Dennison is a co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network. She has worked in the downtown community for the last 10 years, working at other organizations before coming to LA CAN. She was the leader in creating the Downtown Women's Action Coalition (DWAC), and shares executive responsibilities with the other co-director. Pete White is founder and the co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network. He is a Los Angeles native and grew up around downtown. Pete articulates the heart of the organization and the community very poetically. He understands the different forces that are at play in the community and has committed his time and energy to empowering residents to take control of the community and demand that they be heard. He carries the voices and needs of the skid row community.

Gary Blasi is a professor at the UCLA School of Law. He has a background in researching and conducting studies on slum housing, education, and homelessness as well as other disadvantaged populations. It was important to include him in the documentary because of

his work around the Safer Cities Initiative. He and others produced a document called “Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness: The First Year of Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row”. This investigation included statistical facts on the affects of SCI on the community. He also worked with LA CAN and residents to gather testimonies and facts for the report. He brought great political insight to the film, giving explanations for city politics and the decision-making.

Torie Osborn used to be senior advisor on homelessness and poverty to Mayor Villaraigosa. Although she was not in office once the Initiative was announced, she was there throughout its implementation. I wanted to include her voice in the film because she was close to Mayor. I hoped that she would bring insight into how decisions are made. Also I wanted to get an idea of government officials’ presence on the streets of skid row, to measure their understanding of the core problems of homelessness.

Phyllis Jackson is a professor in Black Studies and Art History, at Pomona. She is also a former member of the Black Panther Party. I included her in my documentary to narrate the historical shifts and patterns of black communities and police occupation as well as black communities and displacement. Her poetic presentation of social “isms” and other factors contributing to the marginalization of black communities, and in this case, a black homeless community, to guide the viewer and listener through a historical timeline.

Final Thoughts

My intention for this project was to document a community’s story. As told in my introduction, I felt that histories of displaced black communities in Los Angeles, but the country more broadly, were being distorted and lost. I knew that I needed my audience to see images and hear stories, so that the myths about gentrification are corrected and through this truth-telling, reclamation of history is established. The courage of the Central City East community of

downtown and the Los Angeles Community Action network encouraged and inspired me through the production of the documentary.

We are experiencing economic, political and social changes today. What was most interesting in putting together this story of a community's resistance to gentrification, is putting it in a larger socio-political context. Reflecting on my studies and research in urban, national and international politics, I had shocking realizations of the increase of suppression and resistance throughout the globe, and particularly here in the U.S—right in downtown Los Angeles. The militarization and displacement of communities of color, speaking in terms of Los Angeles, include communities such as Central Ave, Chavez Revine, South and East Los Angeles. Putting these communities' stories in a historical context and connecting them with those lost to lynching in the 19th century, the Great Exodus of black families from the south to the West and North and gentrification, I wanted to give respect and record them as archive.

Witnessing the implementation and effects of city policies, I feel the gateway to change is through resistance. The Central City East community and their struggles with government and law enforcement is an example for effective organizing for resistance-working for a change in these dominant institutions. Looking back at the Mayor's 2008 State of City address, Los Angeles is turning into a police state more and more. Jobs, education and social service budgets are being cut in the name of hiring more cops. These current policies and budget allocations do not address the root problems that are found in these communities of color. Any change that has come forth in this country has taken place because of resistance from the target population. We have seen these success in the civil rights movement, the environmental justice movement, etc. I believe it takes community organizing to build and implement fair and just policies for our communities. I would love to have hope in government and institutions that are responsible for

community sustainability and safety; however, the track record of these officials prove differently. If there was an honest opportunity to link government policy implementation and the writing of these policies, with community-based organizations & individuals, then that would be my recommendation. For now, I see organizing and networking between communities as the solution to interruption these devastating cycles of displacement.