

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

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."

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

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

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.

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 testimoni

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.