



Figure 1. Parading portraits of Walk the Talk recipients, 2012. Photo: Avishay Artsy/ KCRW, Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

# Walking the Talk: Art, History, and the Politics of Public Participatory Memory in L.A.'s Skid Row

by Catherine Gudis 

For three afternoons on Memorial Day weekend in 2012, a ragtag group, including me, led by the Paradigm Brass Band, and accompanied by shopping carts filled with acoustic equipment and three dozen signs bearing street-style portraits, paraded through downtown Los Angeles (Figure 1). 'It's a parade! It's a performance! It's visual art dancing down the street! It's YOU!' declared the newsprint program and route map that Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) members and volunteers in bright yellow t-shirts handed out to participants and bystanders of *Walk the Talk*, an 'epic history of Skid Row!'<sup>1</sup> The enthusiastic exclamation points following each declaration pushed back against presumptions held by many, including me, about where I stood: the corner of Sixth and Stanford, near the center of downtown Los Angeles's Skid Row. This is where, year after year since 1984, Los Angeles has won the statistical badge of inhumanity as 'homeless capital of America' and 'meanest city in the nation' for its density of unsheltered people, their living conditions, and their rate of incarceration.<sup>2</sup> Worse

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than a refugee camp and with fewer toilets, declared a 2017 U.N. Special Rapporteur for Human Rights. This in a state with the fifth largest economy on the planet, and a city with a bigger GDP than all but the ten wealthiest countries in the world.<sup>3</sup> Tent dwellers and those in makeshift lean-tos shared the sidewalks around me, alongside which people had hung their belongings on the chain link fence enclosing lots where cars are granted more designated spaces than people.

When I arrived outside UCEPP (United Coalition East Prevention Project) on the blazing hot morning of the first day of the three-day May 2012 parade, someone handed me a sign. Microphones crackled. The band seemed to be warming up. A few minutes later, their raucous syncopated sounds – loud! – carried us singing and dancing, gathering a thousand people strong, through downtown streets that had been blocked off by none other than the *other* LAPD, the blue-suited ones of the Los Angeles Police Department, known more typically for clearing the same people from the same streets.

For me, such conceptual ironies and performative embodiments are part of the power and subversive activism of *Walk the Talk*, a public artwork that takes history and politics seriously while also deploying sly humor to do so. Los Angeles Poverty Department is, after all, the group that in 1985 named itself LAPD in ironic reference to ‘the often *de facto* governmental body engaged in “homeless services”, the Los Angeles Police Department, while no less ironically establishing the governmental department the city forgot to set up, the poverty department’.<sup>4</sup> Yet the joy at the core of *Walk the Talk* derives from its spirit of celebration of real people and real places in Skid Row – a community usually excluded from the rituals and traditions of civic pride historically enacted by city boosters in parades of yore, as exemplified by Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parades and little American flags waved from sidewalks during Independence and Veterans’ Day parades.

Like others who turned out for *Walk the Talk* or just happened by, I had become part of a Skid Row-LA version of a Second Line. The Second Line describes funeral and anniversary parades organized by typically Black and working-class social clubs and benevolent associations in New Orleans. Including stylized, strutting steps derived from West African dance traditions, Second Lines traverse a ceremonial landscape by making stops at the homes of the deceased’s friends and family members, bars, and other places.<sup>5</sup> LAPD might also be described as a social club of sorts, comprised as it is of people who live and work in Skid Row, many of whom are long timers, and who as a group reflect the disproportionately Black demographics of the neighborhood. (African Americans make up nine per cent of the LA County population, but represent 40 per cent of people experiencing homelessness, and nearly 49 per cent of the Skid Row neighborhood.<sup>6</sup>) As in New Orleans, this parade also marked a ceremonial landscape, mapping sites of significance, though with a twist. True to where we stood in Skid Row, where the span of life on the streets is shortened by harsh conditions, some parade honorees had passed away. Many others being commemorated still lived or worked in the neighborhood, and even joined the parade. Those being honoured had the turning points in their autobiographies

documented first through one to two-hour long oral histories LAPDers had conducted as a group and public program, and then again through the scripts the group created from those histories. These roughly ten to fifteen-minute skits were performed along the parade route at locations significant to the honorees, where LAPD reenacted the real-life stories of their subject and the people they had touched. After being performed, the honorees themselves or their friends and family also testified – elaborating on, agreeing with, or enacting again elements of the story, offering up a sermon or song, for instance – while audiences validated their remarks with more cheering, hand clapping, and an ‘amen’ thrown in here and there.

LA Poverty Department, their *Walk the Talk* biennial parade-performance, and the online and physical archive documenting these events and the related materials repurpose central devices of civic commemoration and cultural patrimony, crafting a model of public participatory memory (my words, not theirs) that those of us working in the fields of history and public history can take important lessons from. The civic devices of commemoration they deploy, including parades, festivals, historical reenactment, and the formation of a museum and archive, are the traditional tools of nation-state formation, used to bolster and herald the achievements of the dominant, propertied classes.

Parades and festivals of course also have history as popular forms of expression and camaraderie, in which the carnivalesque, as literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin described, and scholars in the 1980s and 1990s debated, allows participants to temporarily transgress or break from normative social constraints, destabilize traditional power structures, and gain a sense of possibility – what anthropologist Victor Turner called liminality, ‘betwixt and between the normal day-to-day cultural and social states’. Turner also describes the collective experience of liminality as generating feelings of belonging or ‘communitas,’ beyond, for instance, hierarchies of race and class.<sup>7</sup> But liminality and communitas can nevertheless serve to maintain social order as structured by dominant groups. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, according to scholar David Torres-Rouff, fiestas in Los Angeles created ‘a seemingly inclusive, elaborate public party that worked to both smooth over and reproduce racialized relations’. He describes La Fiesta parades as ‘defusing social tensions while reinforcing the very hierarchies that created such tensions in the first place’.<sup>8</sup> Or, to take a contemporary example, consider the commodification of gay pride parades in big cities of the U.S. and western Europe, exemplifying what Jasbir Puar calls ‘homonationalism’ in which the seeming acceptance or tolerance of gay and lesbian subjects is used to sanction the intolerance of the state in other arenas, promoting homogeneity, hegemony, and a neoliberal, nationalist agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Other modes of civic commemoration embody similar contradictions. For instance, those who are poor, Black, or other people of color and those whose experiences are marked by homelessness and severe health problems have historically been left out of mainstream archives, museums, and monuments. When such typically excluded groups are put back into the record, they do not always maintain control over their own narratives, which can be commoditized or

deployed to serve institutional purposes (and neoliberal, nationalist agendas) rather than grassroots empowerment. LA Poverty Department's approach takes these concerns to heart, turning the civic traditions of the dominant culture on their side to critique commercialism, institutional power, and nationalism, and to create counter-monuments instead. The group acknowledges that for some people, including the most underserved among us, even a temporary feeling of possibility and connection can be productive and therapeutic.<sup>10</sup> Their parades thus fortify community and attest to the self-determination of those who live and work in Skid Row, putting them on a metaphorical pedestal and re-inscribing a people's history of the neighborhood that also bolsters the claims to space of working and very low- to no-income people of all races. In doing so, the group pushes back against forces of displacement and gentrification, using art and history as expressive and political tools of advocacy and as means to inform public policy and public opinion.

In what follows, I take as my central example LAPD's *Walk the Talk*, the biennial parade-performance which in 2020 also became an online archive.<sup>11</sup> I use it to explore the ways history can be deployed as a political and commemorative tool of social activism, and to address how, as historians and public historians, we might reflect on our own process, modes of civic engagement, and cross-disciplinary partnerships. Since the rise of 'new' social history in the 1960s, historians have sought to understand the experiences of non-elite people. We have validated oral history, developed strategies for 'shared authority' with community narrators, and, lately, sought to relinquish authority.<sup>12</sup> Yet we still often abide by disciplinary categories, reinforced by both the academy and practitioners, of history, art, planning, and politics, each exerting its own clout. LAPD crosses all such lines, and recalibrates notions of authority.

My interests as a public historian are in the ways the group centers and celebrates cultural heritage as an activist tool of social justice, and in so doing critiques dominant cultural values of individualism and prosperity as hallmarks of progress and success. In this discussion, then, I consider *Walk the Talk* in terms of how LAPD confuses categories of art, activism, history, performance, and so on, and uses their particular modes of artistic and historical engagement to instantiate community, reclaim public space, and valorize daily deeds that often hold scant market value.

While I'm not offering a 'how to' for artists, community members, historians, or public historians, there are multiple generalizable lessons we can learn. These include, among other things, patience and perseverance, or what activists describe as moving at the speed of trust; the liberatory possibilities of memory work; and the importance of uplifting the voices of ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances, as means to counteract their symbolic annihilation (through misrepresentation and omission) and physical displacement (through policing, criminalization, and gentrification).<sup>13</sup> I also hope that LA Poverty Department's work inspires other public historians to similarly 'walk the talk' – to act on what we often claim to be important regarding civic and community engagement and deploying the arts and humanities for social justice. The three sections that follow

– on LA Poverty Department, Skid Row, and *Walk the Talk* – are geographically specific to downtown Los Angeles and temporally focused on the last forty or fifty years. But they also get at broader issues related to the constructions of place, the role of history and memory, and the power of embodied and performative actions to assert the rights to the city of even its most marginalized populations.<sup>14</sup>

#### ‘THE REAL DEAL’

LAPD was founded in Skid Row in 1985 by John Malpede, who remains its director, joined in 2000 by associate director (and wife) Henriëtte Brouwers. As the first theatre company of unhoused individuals in the U.S., LAPD’s goal has been to create work ‘that connects lived experience to the social forces that have helped shape the lives and communities of people living in poverty’.<sup>15</sup> They have done this by taking the forces of systemic poverty, institutionalized racism, the drug wars, inadequacies in the mental health care system, and criminal injustice as their subject, and by collecting evidentiary material, in the form of personal stories and a range of historical and legal documents, as fundamental to their artistic process.<sup>16</sup> Their archive of documents and their repertoire of performance enact individual and collective histories and represent often-traumatic memories, giving voice to the actual people whose lives have been in poverty and out of it.

The group, whose members change and number from a dozen to twenty, has continued to be based in Skid Row and comprised largely of people who have lived in the area, in and out of homelessness and recovery. Their work has grown to encompass site-based performances, theatrical productions, annual arts festivals, exhibitions, community workshops, activist organizing, and oral history collection. In 2015, they opened the Skid Row History Museum & Archive (SRHM&A) as a gathering space, political and artistic tool of community empowerment, and place to share and add to their expanding archives. Volunteers and student interns have always been a staple, along with part-timers (grants writers, program assistants, archivists) who take on a multitude of tasks, in terms of the work they do; many of them, like the members of the board (LAPD is a nonprofit), which includes me, remain affiliated with LAPD for decades – in some cases, cycling in and out over their lifetimes.<sup>17</sup>

The formalization of the grandiose-sounding Skid Row History Museum & Archive as a brick-and-mortar facility marks the first space that LA Poverty Department has ever populated and curated; prior to this, the group had no formal rehearsal or presentation space, and used UCEPP, churches, and community rooms for public programs. Early on, street corners, vacant lots, and residential hotels were among the venues for LA Poverty Department performances (Figure 2). Even the first iterations of the Skid Row History Museum were temporary installations, as with the exhibition installed at the Box Gallery in downtown LA’s Chinatown in 2008, which was intended as a planning phase for a ‘permanent “museum” in the form of a series of public artworks that would acknowledge the cultural contributions to the city of people who have lived and worked in Skid Row LA and recognize the history and shifting contours of the



**Figure 2.** Los Angeles Poverty Department, ‘Talent Show on “Thieves Corner,”’ 1985. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.



**Figure 3.** The author hosting public conversation on the envisioned installation of a Skid Row Walk of Fame, at Skid Row History Museum installation, Box Gallery, Los Angeles, July 2008. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

area'.<sup>18</sup> This is where elements of *Walk the Talk* were first brainstormed and crowdsourced by audiences and public program participants (Figure 3).

The *Walk the Talk* biennial parade-performance is the tip of the iceberg for the wide-ranging and multidisciplinary projects of LA Poverty Department, which fall under the group's de facto mission: 'to get the real deal of Skid Row out to Normalville', as Malpede has put it, and to produce counter-narratives and a counter-archive that revise the given representational landscape of Skid Row, as created by the mass media's 'drive-by' views of tents and transients.<sup>19</sup> Malpede's 'real deal' is akin to what social scientists also assert: that the social fabric of Skid Row is composed of interlaced community networks.<sup>20</sup> There is more to this place than the newsworthy photos of dense urban encampments showing tents and tarp-covered heaps of belongings and overloaded boxes and carts sprawled across sidewalks. I take this to be Malpede's reference to a drive-by view: a mobile gaze through windshields and camera lens, across television and movie screens, that too easily draws exclusionary lines, between us and them, the object and the normative. It flattens trauma and state violence to the two-dimensional. It renders human bodies akin to environmental waste, visually begging for removal, as if the bodies were already in bags and the matter need only be turned over to sanitation trucks and high-powered hoses. Such two-dimensional images can be taken to mean that the easy fix is in restoring an iconography of order and civility, as if removal and clean up are all that is needed to set this stratum of society aright. Repeatedly, this is also what politicians, property owners, and police have attempted, enacting strategies of removal and clean up without addressing the underlying issues (of poverty, lack of affordable housing, and poor mental and physical healthcare). In other words, image and action interrelate, and narratives matter.

Since their start, Malpede and LAPD have pursued an artistic strategy that implicitly critiques and counters these mass media depictions, sidestepping packaged analyses of homelessness and poverty as part of their larger effort to hold the front lines against gentrification and displacement, and to engage people with place. Gentrification battles are often waged on representational terrain, based on what downtowns *should* look like, with little attention paid to human rights in the image-based design and rehabilitation of the urban environment. Idealized notions of the urban in the post-suburban age are more often aimed to police street life in order to maintain design guidelines and normative notions of middle-class civility and order, as is characteristic of homogenous, planned suburban developments.<sup>21</sup> Within this symbolic arena, LAPD offers real-life embodiment and reenactment as a critical mode of unmasking social relations, and fleshing out, quite literally, the historical and structural forces at play (including the role of art) in the shaping of the downtown urban arena. As scholar Marina Peterson puts it, LAPD thus 'sustains the use of the arts as a critical tool' and 'mode of civic engagement. ... Not art in the service of economic development, but rather a use of art for addressing and engaging with social and human issues'.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, LAPD and those of us carried along with it persistently seek to complicate the representational terrain on which front-line battles over



gentrification and displacement are waged, converting the symbolic economy of both art and redevelopment to their/our own use. They blur the categories of art, activism, and the theatre of everyday life lived within the contours of political economy.

### LOCATING SKID ROW

In 2014, the art group Winston Death Squad and community members, organized by Skid Row activist General Jeff Page, painted a mural in the middle of Skid Row (Sixth Street and San Julian) that proudly branded the neighborhood, mimicking the graphics for honorific City of L.A. heritage designations, demarcating the neighborhood boundaries, and including a source citation to the 2006 legal case of *Jones v. City of Los Angeles* (Figure 4). The Jones case challenged L.A. Municipal Code 41.18d, which stated ‘No person shall sit, lie or sleep in or upon any street, sidewalk or other public way’, unless they are attending a parade. The case made it illegal for the city to ticket and arrest people for sleeping on sidewalks if an insufficient number of beds is available to shelter them.<sup>23</sup> By highlighting the case and branding these fifty-four blocks as Skid Row, the mural claimed space on maps that have more typically promoted economic development through newly created place name designations made official through city signage. Signage surrounding Skid Row includes, for instance, the Downtown Arts District of historic industrial buildings turned into lofts (though artists were displaced by the time the name stuck), and the twelve blocks of prewar buildings to the northeast of the Toy District, so named in the 1990s for the distribution of toys from Asia, which handily provided a buffer zone between missions on one side and City Hall and the historic Little Tokyo district on the other.<sup>24</sup> While General Jeff promoted an activist branding to subvert the official designations of city space, and many among LA Poverty Department thought it was a means of asserting their rightful place, others more cautiously saw it backfiring. They envisioned it as just more fodder for the promotion of urban authenticity by downtown developers, who thus far have been focused on their own renaming of the place, more innocuously, as Central City East.<sup>25</sup> The mural has been widely reproduced by mass media news outlets that use it to announce Skid Row as a problem to be fixed, to point towards the horror of the slum amidst the wealth of the larger city. Rarely does the messaging lead with what grassroots activists and Skid Row community members proclaim: that Skid Row is a neighborhood, and a historic one at that, which should be acknowledged as a place deserving of support rather than removal.

Groups on both sides of the branding question agree that history is fundamental to their claims to space. By the 1880s the area – close to a railroad terminus – served low-income and itinerant laborers who occupied the residential hotels that sprang up to serve them. Maps from the first decades of the 1900s show the railroads, links to industry, distribution, and lots and lots of housing.<sup>26</sup> The story here is like that of many city centers in the United States. Starting in the 1920s, and then more quickly after World War II, the automobile and insured mortgages and home-lending policies sponsored by the Federal government opened up single-family suburban areas for homes, shopping, and leisure – at least for





Figure 4. Skid Row City Limits mural by Winston Death Squad, 2014. Photo by Stephen Zeigler. CC By-SA 4.0.

some people, especially those who were white and middle class. The traditional downtown and its adjacent neighborhoods were left to honky-tonk entertainment and ‘flophouses’, and to the poor and Black and other people of colour, with a fair number of seasonal laborers still in the mix.<sup>27</sup> (With variations in their circumstances and shape, the same things happened in Denver, San Francisco, Seattle, and parts of New York and Chicago, among others.) The market for residential hotels and rooming houses, especially for single men and women and the elderly, those with limited means and mobility, still flourished.<sup>28</sup> Then forces of capital – and the politicians and business interests behind them – rediscovered the old center and wondered if this seemingly forgotten and underutilized place was where L.A. as a new global city would be born.<sup>29</sup> And so they called whatever didn’t fit that vision a slum, got federal and local funding to remove the ‘blight,’ built gleaming new modernist commercial buildings, and, sometimes, wondered what to do with the poor people who were displaced.<sup>30</sup> In part because they still wondered, and because they simply could not figure out how to ship the poor people someplace else (surely not to the suburbs), Skid Row was not cleared out wholesale, even as the shiny new towers rose tall on adjacent downtown streets, part of a frenzy to occupy air space recently liberated with the lifting of the city’s restrictions on building height in 1957.<sup>31</sup>

City officials, urged on by downtown business leaders and the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) – whose paradoxical charge was housing rehabilitation *and* the promotion of business investment – used federal slum clearance funds elsewhere, as in the nearby Bunker Hill neighborhood, where former mansions and tenements housed a diverse group of the elderly and poor (including Latinos and Filipinos recently displaced from other neighborhoods,

Native Americans who had arrived through urban relocation programs, and a robust gay and lesbian population).<sup>32</sup> Skid Row was ‘cleaned up’ but not razed, as City Building Code enforcement and ‘anti-blight’ campaigns and a ‘rehabilitation program’ condemned some buildings and led owners of others to demolish instead of investing in repairs through the 1950s and 1960s. Within a few years, it became apparent that because there had been no resettlement plan for those displaced by the removal of Skid Row housing, the problem had just spread elsewhere, creating ‘satellite’ skid rows.<sup>33</sup>

In 1976, after decades of private interests being served through the funnelling of public monies into urban renewal plans that aimed to remove ‘slums’ and ‘blight’,<sup>34</sup> what might properly be declared the City’s first use of community planning was enacted. It aimed to save the housing stock of Skid Row (largely Single Room Occupancy hotels) and ‘stabilize’ the area, recognizing it as a community of networks and services, concentrated largely in one area. Their idea was expressed through a poorly entitled ‘containment plan’. Containment aimed to preserve the existing housing and services, to continue to provide for people in need and those who had been long-term residents, but to limit the geographical area within which they would be served. Missions were moved east into the demarcated area, so the poor and those seen as non-normative (including vagrants, addicts, unhoused people, and impoverished trans and queer people) wouldn’t stray too far.<sup>35</sup> The containment plan was sold to city leaders as a way to address what many business and civic leaders saw as a social problem – the presence of poor people where they hoped the new commercial center for L.A., as a global city, would rise.

Containment was a purposeful plan crafted in part by the primary constituents and social providers of Skid Row. They made the deal with the City of L.A. and the Community Redevelopment Agency, putting the word ‘community’ back in place and endowing the agency better known for its demolition strategies with the means to reinstate and reinforce community. The grassroots representatives of Skid Row created and supported the containment plan as a way to save what they saw as *their neighborhood*. Rather than housing for the poor being razed and removed, they worked to retain it. Today, this containment plan is what defines the fifty-four blocks of Skid Row and sets L.A.’s Skid Row off from others, like the Bowery in New York, which has long since been turned into an upscale neighborhood of designer boutiques and explosively high-end housing.

In L.A., this core maintained its concentration of single-room occupancy hotels, tenement buildings, and services for the poor. It was largely abandoned by developers for years, and quickly became a magnet for impoverished people throughout the county. Unhoused, mentally ill, and recently paroled people from other cities throughout the region were assisted in their migrations to Skid Row by hospitals and police, who routinely rounded them up or dropped them off on downtown L.A. streets – within this very containment zone. This became among the few places of concentrated social services, as such services were progressively disinvested in and dismantled elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> The city, county, and a myriad of agencies treated Skid Row as if the people within were surplus, disposable, the

so-called undeserving poor. Yet from the point of view of Skid Row residents – among them the unhoused, formerly homeless, and long-time residents of some of the sole surviving and most dense low-income housing in the region – even when the neighborhood was a place of last resort it was also a location of services, community, cultural networks, and recovery. It was the ‘Biggest Recovery Community Anywhere’, as LA Poverty Department has declared and created programming to exemplify.

When commercial interests – with the help of the City’s 1999 Adaptive Reuse ordinance – became reawakened to downtown, this time to its historic and nostalgic draw, it was a shock wave to long-timers. The ‘old’ downtown was renamed the ‘Historic Core’. Commercial structures long emptied of either their upper-story tenants, or of any uses at all, became ‘adaptively reused’ for market-rate loft housing, adding more than 12,000 units to the downtown central business district in a little over ten years – none of it very low income.<sup>37</sup> At first, this hardly seemed to matter, as it added housing without displacing those already in place. Then, taking on a pattern common to gentrification around the world, land value and rents also grew, as did the numbers of poor and unhoused people living on the streets, and their criminalization by police installed in great numbers to uphold the property rights of those now moving in. In short order, as the city poured more money into policing than to addressing homelessness in the 2000s, Skid Row became the most highly policed community in the U.S., mostly through the enforcement of so-called ‘quality of life’ complaints (jaywalking, panhandling, public urination, littering, and so forth).<sup>38</sup>

#### ‘IT’S A PARADE! IT’S A PERFORMANCE! IT’S YOU!’

*Walk the Talk* emerged as a counter-strategy to serial efforts, led by capital interests, to defame and dispossess long-time residents of Skid Row, and it worked by deploying the tools of their chamber of commerce opponents: a large-scale, civic marketing campaign. Originally, Malpede conceived *Walk the Talk* as a ‘skid row alternative to the Hollywood Walk of Fame’ (the popular tourist attraction nearly twelve kilometres to the west), with permanent plaques to be installed on the sidewalks of downtown’s Skid Row. In grant applications in 2007, Malpede describes it as an outdoor ‘Skid Row History Museum’.<sup>39</sup> Towards this, LAPD commissioned the street artist Mr. Brainwash to design a series of 36 ‘portraits’ to be installed as social signage, thus investing the streetscape with the capital of representation, analogous to the recognition commonly given movie stars, wealthy founders, former elected officials, and the like (Figure 5). In selecting honorees, the group ruminated on whose stories, lives, and memory should be publicly honored, asking the core question of what constitutes a life of dignity, respect, and service to others, particularly within the context of neoliberalism.<sup>40</sup>

The Skid Row portraits aimed to represent people of significance to the community over time, who have made a difference to those with limited means, and whose actions offer a microhistory of the neighborhood and the forces of political economy affecting it. Intended to be installed adjacent to the particular



**Figure 5. Street artist Mr. Brainwash designed the signs for the first Walk the Talk 2012, including these portraits of Harry Rogers, Flo Hawkins, Robert Chambers, and Adam Bennion, carried by Jose Vandenberg, Norman Fritsch, Ronnie Walker, and others. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.**



**Figure 6. Walk the Talk 2012 honoree Dr. Dennis Bleakley with KevinMichael Key and other LAPDers at the JWH Clinic at the Weingart Center. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.**

places where honorees had spent time, the portraits were to map the changing geographical boundaries of Skid Row, while commemorating a longer history of place and people rather than just architectural icons (see Figure 6). At each turn, as LAPD sought permits and approvals for these permanent, in-situ public art installations, the project hit roadblocks, particularly among public officials who had long sought to 'disappear' Skid Row. Neither the downtown City Council member representing the neighborhood at that time nor the business associations wished to see the history of Skid Row inscribed in public spaces or recognized at all. They also were not keen on the idea of having to pass portraits of their political foes – the people who fought for the rights of the poor and disenfranchised in downtown.<sup>41</sup>

In response, LAPD organized *Walk the Talk* as a parade-performance, with the portraits originally meant to be sidewalk signage instead held aloft as banners. The group purposely scheduled the events on the Memorial Day holiday weekend. For the first iteration in 2012, over the course of three days, LAPD and its audience-participants paraded through downtown Los Angeles, stopping at thirty-six sites, where performances were held. Since then, *Walk the Talk* has become a biennial event held on one day in May to commemorate between six and eight honorees each, including a 2020 version held via Zoom, and a 2022 version where the group played on masking, both as a preventative public health tool related to COVID-19 and in order to reinforce the sense of the carnivalesque enacted by the parade.

The 2020 performances were held online on May 30, just days after the police murder of George Floyd and while global protests erupted. As monuments to colonial powers, slave traders, and Confederates were being toppled around the world, we sat in our Zoom room to watch and talk about the *Walk the Talk* 2020 performances and the unveiling of a new online archive of past oral histories and presentations. In this global context, it became clear that *Walk the Talk* was Skid Row's challenge to traditionally heroized figures cast in stone, steel, and concrete.<sup>42</sup> We were concretizing the collective memory of the individuals in Skid Row, who, in spite of all the obstacles and hurdles, have created more of a community than most of us have ever experienced anywhere else.<sup>43</sup>

As a longtime audience-participant in LAPD events and a scholar-in-residence at the Skid Row History Museum & Archive, I can testify to the historic offerings of *Walk the Talk* – as a series of 'epic' events, a 'people's history' of Skid Row that you can't and won't find anywhere else, and as a counter-monument and counter-narrative to the civic boosterism of most cities, including L.A. I am white, middle-aged, and have never experienced homelessness. Yet I, too, play a role in this form of community building – as an academic who brings a certain kind of institutional legitimacy to the group's historical projects through her credentials, as a volunteer (since I have a day job at the university), in grant writing, and as an interlocutor, to help bring the histories of Skid Row to 'Normalville'. This doesn't fit neatly within the academy's valorization of solo or even collaborative 'authorship' of research or public history projects. Removing oneself from a primary or leadership position in a collaborative project, and valuing process as

well as end products that can serve multiple publics, does not quite fit into the typical category of ‘research and scholarship’ by which we as academics are evaluated; it is also beyond mere administration or ‘service,’ which is the other category (after teaching) according to which American academics are assessed.<sup>44</sup> But it is a way to *walk the talk* in regards to what many of us typically proclaim as significant to public history – civic engagement, amplifying voices that we don’t usually get to hear, sharing university resources, finding relevancies, and engaging pressing social issues with an eye towards justice, through varied constructions and interpretations of history.

By helping to record and preserve for posterity the stories of Skid Row people and places, all of the various community members involved in LA Poverty Department as well as staff, interns, volunteers, students, and other faculty participate in reclaiming historical space and resisting the erasure and symbolic annihilation that comes from misrepresentation and outright omission from the public record. Such misrepresentations and omissions serve only to keep us ignorant as a people, less able to understand the past or to apply our understanding to issues facing us today. Remembering and representation intertwine here with resistance and resiliency, as people who live and work in Skid Row attest and as the parade, as a living monument, instantiates. LA Poverty Department, in other words, does not merely engage community, it helps create it, converting disaffiliated and unaffiliated individuals who are already on the street or who show up, including me, into a political possibility, a public sphere.<sup>45</sup>

*Walk the Talk*’s emergence as (counter) monumental and its ability to embrace a diversity of participant-audience members also derives from its mode of bearing witness to the fragments of difficult pasts, to memories that – reanimated in the present – shape a collective that might not have existed otherwise. So while memorials supposedly look to the past, they are also productive of realities in the present.<sup>46</sup> Or, as Pierre Nora writes in ‘Between Memory and History’, ‘memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present’.<sup>47</sup> In narrating community members’ experiences, in re-enactment, and in *performance* LAPD helps to materialize experience, produce a memorial space, vie for representation in the public sphere, and resist the ‘dominant narratives of American ownership, legitimacy, belonging, and control’ as articulated through property and commemorated in stone and steel.<sup>48</sup> What anthropologist Helen Regis writes of New Orleans’ second line rings true for *Walk the Talk*, too: ‘Those who may not own the real estate in the neighborhoods through which they parade nonetheless come to claim specific paths through the city in the name of their moral community.’<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, *Walk the Talk* also animates and enables new forms of spatial entitlement, humanized through portraiture, narrative, and reenactment.

For many of us with a history in L.A. *Walk the Talk* is especially personal, marking fragments of our own memory-scape. I have worked downtown on and off for many decades. The first sign I was handed that first day of the 2012 parade featured Clyde Casey, who had created Another Planet on an empty lot at the corner of Wall and Boyd, beside a stretch of low-rise brick industrial buildings



that had been converted to office use in the 1970s. I remember going by that vacant lot when I worked on Boyd Street in the mid 1980s, where the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) had temporary offices and Boyd Street Theater operated nearby (where LAPD's first performances were held, too). Casey's Another Planet was there at the corner, and had poetry slams, a piano, jam sessions, television, and a ping pong table, open air, open to the public. He even had storage space for unhoused people to stash their stuff. Casey and community participants were using culture as an act of restoration, a 'people's museum' and a means of engaging the community who already lived there, downtown. Another Planet stood in clear contrast to MOCA, which was about to open a fancy facility on Bunker Hill (the most iconic of urban renewal sites in Los Angeles, renowned for its displacement of thousands of affordable housing units), and which aimed to bring people to downtown from other parts of the city, to assert a center for the city that ignored those already there in favour of the moneyed classes who had fled long before.

LAPD's audience-participants include many of the same people who visit MOCA, bringing together the stereotypical art crowd, including both an older generation of whiter, wealthier audiences and the younger multiracial/multi-class cast of downtown residents (including other artists) who themselves fear displacement or are already displaced. They join those who live and work in Skid Row. *Walk the Talk* honorees also include those who have chosen to engage creative genius that often goes unrecognized among poor and especially unhoused people. In 2018, for instance, Los Angeles Philharmonic prodigy violinist and Macarthur 'Genius' Award winner Vijay Gupta was honoured in *Walk the Talk*, and his story performed outside the Midnight Mission, where the organization he co-founded, Street Symphony (comprised of classically trained concert musicians and Skid Row residents), has brought classical music out of the concert hall and into re-entry programs (which seek to acclimatize formerly imprisoned people to their new lives), homeless shelters, and the streets. During the same parade, and on a different street corner, Pastor Jean Marie Cue was honored for his Church without Walls, where, since 2007, he has preached every Friday night, in the open air, rain or shine. Like Gupta, Pastor Cue, a rapper with Virgin records who turned to evangelism in 1994, performed his response to LAPD's performance of his biography; Cue's was part spiritual rap, part excoriation of anti-Blackness in the U.S. Though Pastor Cue, Gupta, and other honorees hold different subject positions, all bring *Walk the Talk* audience members together in a way rarely realized in either a cathedral or a concert hall. Longtime low-to-no-income residents and artists along with people who work in Skid Row were commonly enraptured. It was a reminder, too, that we all play multiple roles as both presenters and audience-participants.

In each case, we also served as witnesses to parables of the street, origin stories, and founding acts defining the community, retold to collectively memorialize and sanctify the space. Audience-participants – all of us – ensure that the lessons to be learned from the living are publicly transcribed, not left to the vicissitudes of shaky memory and indifferent archives, nor to the wilful acts of





**Figure 7.** Cast of LA Poverty Department's Walk the Talk, 2014. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

capital and politicians seeking to persistently erase, displace, and enshroud the presence of impoverished people in L.A. We join with the performers to testify, and to ensure that the cadre of people for whom we speak – including both the dead and those who have experienced a form of ‘social death’<sup>50</sup> through state efforts, such as persistent disenfranchisement and the marginalization that accompanies poverty, addiction, incarceration, and homelessness – will not be forgotten or dissolved into the oblivion of anonymous statistics and sterile numbers.<sup>51</sup> By remembering stories of survival, resilience, and joy, LAPD (and all of us who join them) re-centers the voices of people historically cast out as surplus so that they might speak for themselves, and do so from the legitimizing perspective of history (see Figure 7).

*Walk the Talk* emerges as an example of what scholar Clyde Woods calls a blues epistemology and a blues aesthetic, to reference a radical Black tradition of social change, intertwining political economy and culture, geographical knowledge and lived experience. It provides alternative visions to resist narratives of economic development in which diasporic Black bodies and the ‘underclass’ have no political standing. Ultimately the parade-performances mobilize history for practical purposes and as a way to bridge, as activist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, the divides *created* by capitalism’s necessity for inequality and *enshrined* by racism.<sup>52</sup>

As we trace people’s deeds through *Walk the Talk*, we traverse different themes and histories of downtown. The 2012 performance of Mike Neely, for

instance, was gestural, poetic in its performance of places mapped through people he knew who had creatively engineered spaces of downtown and taken it upon themselves to find alternative means to house the homeless. LAPDers took turns acting out Neely's adventures, planting their feet in the direction of Love Camp, Justiceville, Urban Camp Ground (by City Hall), and then an imagined conversation with now-deceased honoree Harry Rodgers, who led the Homeless Organizing Team in the mid 1980s, to fight for welfare reforms and focus civic attention to the homeless crisis. Neely, as performed, explains, 'That brotha came out of prison and really truly did a lot in terms of bringing to the forefront the issue of homelessness. He got killed, right down here. Right in the alley, in the alley right behind, by Para los Niños.'<sup>53</sup> Neely's performance charts our path to the next stop on the parade, Para los Niños, locating it spatially and temporally, from when he was still on the streets, his drug addictions causing him to lose his job in the aerospace industry, after a University of Chicago education under Milton Friedman. His recovery, like that of many others, was on Skid Row. Afterwards, he gave back to the community, going to city officials and the CRA to advocate for funding, housing, and principles of self-governance for unhoused people that he had seen as successful during his time on the streets. The Homeless Outreach Program, which Neely founded, recruited 'formerly homeless people to help their brethren find their way through the bureaucratic maze of social service programs they're entitled to.'<sup>54</sup> When Neely responded to the performance of his performance over the years, there was a lot of back clapping; he knew virtually everyone who had gathered, a good thing for them and for him, since at the time he was a commissioner of the LA Homeless Services Authority.<sup>55</sup>

All of the honorees – Neely, Harry Rodgers, Adam Bennion, who organized the commune-type living arrangements of Love Camp, and women like Flo Hawkins, a muralist, and Darlene Berry, who managed two Skid Row Parks – were celebrated for their small and large acts of resistance and survival.<sup>56</sup> *Walk the Talk* provided space for reflection and representation, political, visual, and phenomenological. It also gave space for the 'articulation of local subjectivities, particularly for those most affected by the violence of contemporary life,' a critical factor in the 'ongoing struggle over the future of the city.'<sup>57</sup>

More than anything, the future of the Skid Row community is related to its past, both its century of affordable housing for laborers and the poor, and its current access to community-run services such as the Refresh Spot (a 24/7 hygiene station with toilets, showers, phone charging, access to case managers, and more) and transitional, supportive, and permanent housing, a message repeated through *Walk the Talk*. Stops were related to such heroic figures as the former Catholic nun turned Episcopal priest, Alice Callaghan, a tireless crusader and activist for the homeless, who first founded Las Familias del Pueblo, a storefront school and center, then started relocating the families who were crammed into SROs to places off the Row (Figure 8).<sup>58</sup> She founded the nonprofit Skid Row Housing Trust, figuring that if the Trust could buy up all 65 of the hotels and hold onto them in perpetuity, then it didn't matter what developers came in. 'As long as you own the housing', she said, 'the



Figure 8. Walk the Talk celebrates Alice Callaghan, whose portrait is held aloft by LAPDer Anthony Taylor, 2012. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

neighborhood is not at risk.' 'The idea', she continued, 'was to stake out the borders and then my real plan had always been to get the Rosslyn, figuring if you own the Rosslyn you sort of check mate 'em. Then nothing else on that block would be of value to anybody else.'<sup>59</sup> It didn't work all the way – they never got all the large residential hotels that for decades had housed impoverished people. The Alexandria and Cecil Hotels, and a portion of the Rosslyn, for instance, were lost to private for-profit ownership.

In fall 2011, Alice Callaghan quit the board of her own Skid Row Housing Trust when they decided to develop, with the backing of downtown politicians and businesses, commercial uses on the ground floor of one of the first properties that the nonprofit had purchased: the Pershing Hotel at Fifth and Main Street, the symbolic gateway to Skid Row.<sup>60</sup> The 1889 Victorian building, one of the last remaining in downtown, has since then been refurbished to accommodate mixed income and have retail and commerce on the ground floor. It also includes medical staff, mental health professionals, and case managers to help transition homeless and formerly homeless residents.<sup>61</sup> For Skid Row housing advocates like Callaghan, though, the concern is that the units will never go to the very low income again after being refurbished.<sup>62</sup>

In the video footage of LAPDers interviewing Alice Callaghan in preparation for *Walk the Talk* in 2012, members of LAPD had a difference in opinion with Callaghan. LAPDers liked the mix of loft dwellers and SRO residents currently downtown. She saw something else, that 'the 100% losers will be the poor and there is no example anybody can show in any such neighborhood where [development] has encroached and the neighbors continued to co-exist'.<sup>63</sup>

Callaghan's words ring true nearly a decade later for LAPDers and others, including me, who participate in a group called Skid Row Now and 2040. Formed with the specific goal of bringing Skid Row perspectives to bear on the City's reconfiguration of its primary land-use and planning document, the *DTLA 2040 Community Plan*, the group brings back into view the historic struggles to retain existing low-income housing, and advocates for zoning that enables and incentivizes more to be built within the historical boundaries of Skid Row. The oral histories of *Walk the Talk* (and other LA Poverty Department exhibitions and performances) have fueled this conversation with city planners, commissioners, and political representatives, informed public commentaries and advocacy materials, and served as primary sources for informational videos and for a White Paper that I have written with other members of Skid Row Now and 2040. In these conversations and documents, we can cite the work of General Jeff, who passed in 2021, and was honoured in *Walk the Talk* 2014; he tried for years to establish a neighborhood council – an effort towards Skid Row self-representation that is now supported by the City Council office. We can pull up the 2016 oral history and parade-performance of KevinMichael Key (1950–2017), whose own recovery from addiction took place in Skid Row, where he also advocated for policy to support the neighborhood as a recovery community. Key worked at UCEPP with honorees from *Walk the Talk* 2014 and 2020, Zelenne Cardenas, Charles Porter, and Leslie Croom (who died in 2019), whose advocacy for homeless children and prevention programs and decades-long pressure on planners and city council members to limit liquor and marijuana stores in the neighborhood have positively affected the ways that Skid Row is represented in *DTLA 2040*. This city planning document envisions the IX1 zone, a special zoning designation where only affordable housing with extremely low and deeply low-income housing levels can be built in Skid Row, as well as urban amenities creatively envisioned over the years by Skid Row residents, documented in the *Walk the Talk* archive as well as Skid Row Now and 2040's vision plans.<sup>64</sup>

### CONCLUSION

*Walk the Talk* is one among other projects by LA Poverty Department that self-consciously consider the planning history of Skid Row, and draw attention to *both* temporal and spatial dynamics to look at the fundamental ways in which cities are designed: through people and their movement; through forces of poverty and gentrification; through police action and inaction; through incarceration and deinstitutionalization; through configurations of brick and mortar whose shape might have been guided by architects and owners but whose meanings over time have been influenced by use and a whole range of other social actors. They do so through historical fact finding, and the representation of life stories that serve as object lessons in social justice work – also told through theatrical performance, presented in place, as a form of spatial embodiment, and as an appropriation of the nation-state's commemorative devices.

Commercial and political forces contribute to the shape of the urban environment for sure, as they physically and violently push disenfranchised people back from the view of moneyed classes. These forces also influence the very definition of citizenship and attempt to limit that preferred status of rights to those who can buy or rent property. That definition of citizenship based on capital investment leaves people without resources essentially stripped of the general rights of citizenship, and more specifically the constitutional right of assembly and community.

We might think, then, about how performative art, physical and gestural occupation of city streets – marching, dancing, and singing (parading) – and mapping commemorative sites in and about Skid Row serve to frame and widen public space in a participatory enactment of citizenship by the propertyless, and render visible people who are more commonly pushed out of view. Such renderings are essential to any representation, whether political or artistic, and serve also to push back against the forces of displacement. Public participatory memory work, as a form of political and spatial representation, also has potential to effect change by challenging notions of objectivity. Blurring the lines between art and real life, fact and fiction, and relishing the confusion is a hallmark of LA Poverty Department's creative work. As Malpede puts it, 'Art is about messing up the categories so you can catch people by surprise and expand their awareness.'<sup>65</sup> I also think such disruptions of everyday experiences and expectations can help repair the schisms rending the city between 'haves' and 'have nots'. And it can take a first step in 'truth and reconciliation' by reclaiming more complex human narratives about the city and its inhabitants.

To be clear, I am not so naïve as to think we can realize the 'reconciliation' and repair merely through public memory work, especially not within communities as deeply affected by generations of structural racism, disinvestment, broken healthcare systems, and crises around sustainable employment opportunities, affordable housing, and livable wages as in Skid Row. However, as part of our public practices as historians we can join others to try. We can serve as witness. We can create spaces for commemoration and documentation that acknowledge both the joy and creative genius of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances and the harms that need redress. We can invest our cultural capital, adding it to the community's own to contribute to, uplift, and document a revisionist history: revising, for instance, narratives of Skid Row as a place solely populated by addicts, 'deadbeats,' and criminals. Such faulty narratives reinforce 'the sense that the "homeless" [a]re "not like us".'<sup>66</sup> Many of us 'Normies' can step into that gap, and serve as interlocutors to help bridge it. We can even help shift cognitive authority to those with lived experiences.<sup>67</sup>

The deeply personal and interactive stories that comprise the counter-narratives and counter-monuments of *Walk the Talk* offer up proof, and we (again, I speak as a parade participant and a public historian) help create a civic body that is not whole without a variety of subject positions, inclusive of those who are among the affected communities and racial groups (in the case of Skid Row, a Black majority). As part of the body politic instantiated during the parade we can also affirm the real heroes and heroines of the street, who are enmeshed in a larger

community that disputes the reputation of the 'down and out'. In other words, as historians we can echo the 'amens' and hand clapping after each biographical sketch is performed, as at *Walk the Talk*, without the risk to our objectivity and analysis that might come through our celebration.

The celebratory aspects of this can build common ground and sidestep internal politics and racial and religious differences. LAPD's Henriëtte Brouwers, for instance, is allergic to organized religion, but can bow her head in spiritual regard with company members like Footie, who wears a clerical collar, and Lorraine Morley, who gathers us in a circle to pray before the parade. Suzette Shaw, a 2022 *Walk the Talk* honoree, is outspoken in naming what is in front of us in Skid Row – the densest population of Black people in the city, acts of genocide against them, and multigenerational trauma at the hands of white people. She gives voice to the especially traumatizing experiences of Black women living on the streets, for whom sexual violence and related threats are persistent. Now housed, Shaw amplifies these hard truths for women in Skid Row through her art (mostly spoken word) and her activism, including her participation on boards and committees for community providers, the County's Department of Mental Health, and Downtown Women's Center (see Figure 9). What all of these particular participants share is not one genre of artmaking, a singular mode of expression, or set of experiences. Rather, they commonly invest in what mental health worker, LAPD archivist, and Studio 526 volunteer Clancey Cornell describes as 'a culture of radical acceptance, where folks can be heard and seen'.<sup>68</sup> *Walk the Talk* fosters this culture, of radical acceptance, and re-appropriates the commemorative tools of the parade in order to forge an alternative civic identity that legitimizes Skid Row community members, not as temporary but as a prioritized part of the social order that they have a hand in establishing.

A point I am trying to make about public participatory memory through *Walk the Talk* and other LA Poverty Department programs is that it offers a model that we can all learn from in terms of community *building* rather than just engagement. Their projects assert that the poor, the homeless, and the formerly homeless are the citizens and long-term residents of downtown Los Angeles. Nothing about their poverty, health status, or personal demons erases the legitimacy of their human and civil rights. Yet the legitimacy of their presence and experiences has been erased by market-driven concepts of citizenship, residency, and authority that are blind to any definition of rights not substantiated by capital investment. But to Malpede, LA Poverty Department, and organizations that fight for the rights of Skid Row citizens (the roster of which includes UCEPP, LA Community Action Network, Las Familias del Pueblo, Inner City Law, Catholic Worker, Studio 526, Sidewalk Project, and others), *human* investment in Skid Row is quite enough to justify their rights to place and community. *Whose* heritage, after all, is represented at Main and Fifth Streets, and in a large part of downtown's Skid Row? How do history and memory, continuous use and cultural participation – cultural heritage – allow people to lay claim to an area, and to hold firm to rights of inhabitation and circulation, especially when they have no place





**Figure 9.** Group of Walk the Talk 2022 honorees and their portraits in Gladys Park. Front: Kate Richards-Geller, Suzette Shaw, Henriëtte Brouwers; second row: John Malpede, Mr. Pancake, Alisa Orduna, back (right): Crushow Herring, Ray Lewis. At the end of the parade, Brouwers and Malpede were honored in a surprise skit about them by community members. Photo: Catherine Gudis. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

else to go? These are the kinds of questions we all should pose, and seek to answer, no matter where we are geographically, racially, or economically.

*Walk the Talk's* parading, performances, public conversations, and archiving serve as historical recounting and reckoning. They ask a question all public historians ought to regularly pose: whose perspective is heard, what constitutes civic dialogue, the rites of citizenship, and the locations or requirements for how to participate? *Walk the Talk* memorializes in time and space, reclaiming both history and the rights to the city. The issues raised in the archived narratives also beg this question: If you don't own or rent property or you are mentally or



physically incapacitated, do you lose your rights to citizenship? Surely not. Yet the idea that rich and poor can coexist, and that both can retain their rights in doing so seems problematic when it gets to City Hall, where for eighty years or more competing interests have jostled, in a show-down between stabilizing low-cost housing and increasing property values and capital gains.

It seems to me that the relational, dialogic, and performative modes of public participatory engagements – in short, liberatory memory work – are essential ways to give voice and visibility, and maybe let a ripple of thought permeate the hard edifice of capital interest. This is how Malpede characterizes the import of LAPD's work; he calls it 'floating ideas that ripple through space'.<sup>69</sup> This, of course, is the real work for any of us involved in cultural heritage, as these human ripples are what actually give spaces and structures any meaning at all.

By remembering and recording the historical actors, forces, and changing contours of Skid Row – and inscribing this onto urban space, through the traces of *performing* memory – LAPD reclaims, *appropriates* downtown streets as *public* space and as a site for civic engagement. It suggests that performance, art, and place-based interpretations of history and memory that are public and participatory can serve the political functions of identifying alternative views of community, activating audiences, and engendering support and a civic sense among those who otherwise threaten to be our most disenfranchised urban denizens: not just the homeless and the impoverished but all of *us*. 'We' are not separate from 'them'.<sup>70</sup>

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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7 On Mikhail Bakhtin and the carnivalesque, see his *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, IN, 1941; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, NY, 1986; Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film*, Baltimore, MD, 1989; Terry Eagleton, 'Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera', *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, Manchester and New York, 1989. On liminality, see Victor Turner, 'Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, December 1979, pp. 465, 463–572; Victor Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas,' in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago, 1969, pp. 94–113, 125–30.

8 David Torres-Rouff, *Before L.A.: Race, Space, and Municipal Power in Los Angeles, 1781–1894*, New Haven, CT, 2013, p. 265.

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10 One such example is narrated by Doug Jessop, a Skid Row resident who joined LA Poverty Department as a performer for the 2020 *Walk the Talk*. Jessop tells a perhaps apocryphal story, retold by John Malpede, of the day 'he was lying in Gladys Park [in the center of Skid Row], having been released from prison after overturning a wrongful conviction. He says he was contemplating suicide and asking god why he should go on. Suddenly a marching band came into the park, people were chanting "You are enough" – a line they'd just heard in the performance. He joined the parade. He says it was a miracle that saved his life.' LA Poverty Department application for National Endowment for the Humanities Public Programs Grant, 11 May 2020, in the collection of the author.

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15 John Malpede, 'Introduction', *Agents and Assets: Witnessing the War on Drugs and on Communities*, New York, 2014, p. 7.

16 The website [www.lapoverty.org](http://www.lapoverty.org) has many layers of documentation of the group's work.

17 LA Poverty Department has always operated on a shoe-string budget, derived mostly through arts funding from foundations and government grants; in recent years, funding for community-based archives and museums has supplemented that.

18 See exhibition information, available at <https://www.lapovertydept.org/projects/skid-row-history-museum-2/>.

19 *The Real Deal* video documentary, produced by Halo Group, directed by Tom Jones, and written by Tom Jones and John Malpede (2006); *Agents and Assets*, pp. 96–7; Sarah Kanouse, 'Marking and Missing: memory-performance and the radical present', paper delivered at American Association of Geographers Conference, 2007, [http://www.readysubjects.org/writing/markingsmissing\\_conferencefinal.pdf](http://www.readysubjects.org/writing/markingsmissing_conferencefinal.pdf).

20 Geographers Michael Dear and Jennifer Wolch, whose work on homelessness in Los Angeles remains the most astute and comprehensive, describe the perspectives of the homeless, whose 'richly textured fabric for survival' on the 'outside' is characterized by interlocking and sometimes informal support networks. To those on the 'inside' who see the homeless congregated on streets and other public spaces, Skid Row 'may not resemble a community in the traditional sense; nevertheless, they are'. Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear, *Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American City*, San Francisco, 1993, pp. xix; Maria Rosario Jackson and John Malpede, 'Making the Case for Skid Row Culture: Findings from a Collaborative Inquiry by the Los Angeles Poverty Department and the Urban Institute', an Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative of Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, 2008, <http://animatingdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/LAPD.pdf>.

21 Mike Davis, 'Fortress L.A.', *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*, London and New York, 1990, pp. 154–80; Marina Peterson, 'Utopia/Dystopia: Art and Downtown Development in Los Angeles', *Global Downtowns*, ed. Marina Peterson and Gary W. McDonogh, Philadelphia, 2012, pp. 210, 215.

22 Peterson, 'Utopia/Dystopia', p. 226.

23 See the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles database, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/skid-row-city-limits-mural-winston-death-squad/uAHanoE2tWN1Yg>. On Jones v. City of Los Angeles see, for instance, Terry Skolnik, 'Homelessness and the Impossibility to Obey the Law', *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 43:3, 2016, pp. 741–87, 753.

24 Joel Kotkin, 'How Toys Cleaned Up Urban Blight', *New York Times*, 29 November 1998, sec. 3, p. 6.

25 During a discussion at '30 Years of Organizing on Skid Row' that was part of the series of public programs affiliated with *Walk the Talk*, James Wood Community Center, April 18, 2012, this issue of naming came up. It was addressed again at the gallery walk through of the Queens Museum retrospective exhibition of LAPD, *Do you want the cosmetic version or do you want the real deal? Los Angeles Poverty Department, 1985-2014*, Queens Museum of Art, Corona, New York, 2 February 2014.

26 See *Map of Los Angeles*, Los Angeles, 1909, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g43641.pn011040/>.

27 See Los Angeles Community Design Center, *Conceptual Analysis*, part I of *Skid Row: Recommendations to Citizens Advisory Committee on the Central Business District Plan for the City of Los Angeles*, Los Angeles, 1976, p. 3; Hamilton, Rabinovitz & Altschuler, Inc., 'The Size and Demography of the Population', vol. 1 of *The Changing Face of Misery: Los Angeles' Skid Row Area in Transition*, Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, July 1987, pp. iii, 12; Nicolas Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*, Durham, NC, 2012, p. 129.

28 Paul Groth makes this point in his detailed study of rooming houses and hotels in San Francisco, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*, Los Angeles, 1994, p. 267.

29 See Mike Davis, 'The Infinite Game: Redeveloping Downtown L.A.', in *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, ed. Diane Ghirardo, Seattle, 1991, pp. 77–113.

30 Groth, *Living Downtown*, pp. 274–86.

- 31 'Suburbia 19??: It'll Stretch in All Directions', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 January 1958, p. A1.
- 32 Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Gail Sainsbury, 'Lost Streets of Bunker Hill', *California History* 74, Winter 1996, pp. 394–407; Davis, *City of Quartz*, pp. 72–74, 230–32; ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archive, *Cruising the Archives: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945–1980*, Los Angeles, 2012.
- 33 'Skid Row Has Its Own Place', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 June 1956, p. 38.
- 34 Central City Committee and City Planning Office, *Centropolis: The Plan for Central City, Los Angeles*, Los Angeles, 1964; 'Renewed Effort Set for Cleanup of L.A. Skid Row', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 1966; Davis, 'Infinite Game', pp. 84–88.
- 35 Los Angeles Community Design Center, *Physical Containment*, Part IV of *Skid Row: Recommendations to Citizens Advisory Committee on the Central Business District Plan for the City of Los Angeles*, pp. 1, 3, 7. Also see Donald Spivak, Community Redevelopment Agency, 'History of Skid Row', Paper 1, 15 September 1998, p. 4.
- 36 Cara Mia DiMassa and Richard Winton, "'Dumping" of Patients Investigated', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 November 2005; Winton, 'Skid Row Dumping Suit Settled', *Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 2008; DiMassa and Winton, 'Woman Stomped to Death on Skid Row; Parolee is Held. Case Highlights Risk Posed by Concentration of Freed Felons, Officials Say', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 2006.
- 37 Imani Brown, 'Adaptive Reuse as Economic Development in Downtown Los Angeles: A Resource Guide', PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2009, pp. 25–27, 64; Central City Association, *Adaptive Reuse White Paper*, Los Angeles, 2021, pp. 7, 10. [http://www.ccala.org/clientuploads/directory/whitepapers/CCA\\_Adaptive\\_Reuse\\_White\\_Paper\\_FINAL\\_.pdf](http://www.ccala.org/clientuploads/directory/whitepapers/CCA_Adaptive_Reuse_White_Paper_FINAL_.pdf).
- 38 Alex Vitale, 'The Safer Cities Initiative and the Removal of the Homeless: Reducing Crime or Promoting Gentrification on Los Angeles' Skid Row', *Criminology and Public Policy* 9:4, 2010, pp. 867–73; Forrest Stuart, *Down, Out and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row*, Chicago and London, 2016, pp. 37–77; Deshonay Dozier, 'Contested Development: Homeless Property, Police Reform, and Resistance in Skid Row, LA', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2019, pp. 186–87; Ruth Gilmore and Christina Heatherton, in Los Angeles Community Action Network, *Freedom Now! Struggles for the Human Right to Housing in LA and Beyond*, Los Angeles, 2012, p. 2.
- 39 Los Angeles Poverty Department, application for funds from the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), September 2007, unprocessed CRA files, Skid Row History Museum and Archive.
- 40 Regis, 'Blackness and the Politics of Memory', p. 770. Regis poses these questions in regard to Second Line in New Orleans.
- 41 See John Malpede, 'Opening Remarks', in Los Angeles Poverty Department, *Walk the Talk 2020*, Los Angeles, 2021, pp. 5–8.
- 42 The online archive is: <https://app.reduct.video/lapd/walk-the-talk/>.
- 43 As one anonymous comment in the chat of the 30 May 2020 LAPD *Walk the Talk* Zoom said: 'This day has been very negative and hectic for a lot of people in LA. I am absolutely amazed at the vibe in this "room". Everyone here is not only standing against injustice, but creating something new, sustainable and meaningful. This has lifted my spirits 1,000,00%. THANK YOU'. The book *Walk the Talk 2020* was produced in order to further concretize the otherwise virtual events.
- 44 Most universities in the United States assess tenure-track professors according to three categories: research and scholarship; teaching; and service, which includes administration. At research universities, the first category is what matters most.
- 45 The story of Doug Jessup's conversion, described in note 8, is a case in point. On public space and the public sphere, see Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text* 25/26, 1990, pp. 56–80, 67.
- 46 Sarah Kanouse addresses 'the role of performance and gesturality in not only marking but actively producing memorial space' (Kanouse, 'Marking and Missing', unpag.) as does Regis, 'Blackness and the Politics of Memory', p. 763.
- 47 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, 26, Spring 1989, pp. 7–24, 8–9.
- 48 Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, Chicago, 2010, p. 316.
- 49 Regis, 'Blackness and the Politics of Memory', p. 763.
- 50 Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, New York, 2012.

51 Testifying, as part of a larger religious discourse, also suggests the attainability of a state of grace. One could say that *Walk the Talk*, which effected a transfiguration through language and movement, follows the same logic as a conversion ritual. One lawyer who worked with disabled and homeless populations on legal cases described the ways in which testifying, at preparatory meetings and in the courts, was a powerful means of galvanizing a sense of community, which entailed 'a movement from weakness and isolation to connection and grace. While they were within the spell of this experience, the silencing culture of bureaucracy and legalism was temporarily held at bay, and their own thoughts and passions. . . could begin to emerge.' Lucie E. White, 'Mobilization on the Margins of the Lawsuit: Making Space for Clients to Speak', *N.Y.U. Review of Law and Social Change*, 16, 1987–1988, pp. 552–53.

52 See Ruth W. Gilmore, 'Race and Globalization', in *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World*, ed. R. J. Johnston, Peter J. Taylor, and Michael Watts, second ed., Malden, 2002, p. 261; Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested* and 'Introduction' by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, second ed., London, 2017.

53 *Walk the Talk* newsprint program, 2012, unpag. [3]. Mike Neely, *Walk the Talk* performance, 2012, at [https://app.reduct.video/lapd/walk-the-talk/#/i/cf970362-Mike\\_Neely](https://app.reduct.video/lapd/walk-the-talk/#/i/cf970362-Mike_Neely).

54 Mike Neely, *Walk the Talk* biography, 2012, at [https://app.reduct.video/lapd/walk-the-talk/#/i/cf970362-Mike\\_Neely/bio](https://app.reduct.video/lapd/walk-the-talk/#/i/cf970362-Mike_Neely/bio).

55 Neely performance, 2012.

56 The parade gave opportunity for communal admiration and respect for the men and women who had 'successfully negotiated lives of integrity in a highly inequitable society and who have demonstrated social leadership in inner-city communities that have been described as lacking role models'; Regis, 'Blackness and the Politics of Memory', p. 765.

57 Regis, 'Blackness and the Politics of Memory', p. 758.

58 Alice Callaghan, *Walk the Talk* interview, 2011, at [https://app.reduct.video/lapd/walk-the-talk/#/i/de8f9bb8-Alice\\_Callaghan](https://app.reduct.video/lapd/walk-the-talk/#/i/de8f9bb8-Alice_Callaghan).

59 Callaghan, *Walk the Talk* interview, 2011.

60 When the Skid Row Housing Trust refurbished the building and opened it to residents in 1989, the Pershing was one of the first buildings to infuse private investment into a low-income housing project downtown. Donna Evans, 'At New Pershing Apartments, the Past is Part of the Future', *LA Downtown News*, 18 September 2013.

61 Omar Shamout, 'Pershing Hotel Highlights New Problem Associated with End of Redevelopment', KPCC/Southern California Public Radio, July 12, 2012.

62 For preservationists, the removal of all but the façade of the Pershing is also a loss. Though the building was determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1988, it was never designated, nor was it declared a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument. Brigham Yen, '1889 Victorian Pershing Hotel Begins Construction on 69 Affordable Units in Downtown LA', *DTLA Rising*, 13 May 2013.

63 Callaghan, *Walk the Talk* interview, 2011.

64 See documents, videos, and vision plan at <https://www.lapovertydept.org/skid-row-now-and-2040/>.

65 John Malpede quoted in Sasha Anawalt, 'His spotlight illuminates lives of the homeless', *Los Angeles Times*, 27 August 2003.

66 John Malpede quoted in Nicole Kristal, 'L.A. Poverty Department Stages "Utopia," Backstage', 30 November 2007, <http://www.backstage.com/news/la-poverty-department-stages-utopia/>; Don Mitchell, *Mean Streets: Homelessness, Public Space, and the Limits of Capitalism*, Athens, Georgia, 2020, p. 23.

67 Henry Michael Apodaca, LA Poverty Department's media archivist, describes the goals of the Skid Row Museum and Archive as helping shift cognitive authority. The concept offers a welcomed revision of 'shared authority' popularized among public historians. See Robert Farrow and Rolin Moe, 'Rethinking the Role of the Academy: Cognitive Authority in the Age of Post-Truth', *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives* 24:3, 2019, pp. 272–82.

68 Clancey Cornell, 'Investing in a Culture of Radical Acceptance', *Women's Voices Now*, 9 August 2018, <https://medium.com/the-wvoice/art-in-many-cases-is-the-first-step-to-a-house-the-first-step-to-mental-health-and-the-first-d6b30ad8f8b8>.

69 Malpede quotes in part a Robert F. Kennedy speech from 1966 that reads: 'Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and

daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.' Lynda Frye Burnham, 'When Kennedy Came to Kentucky', *American Theatre*, July/August 2004, p. 33.

70 Deborah Wong, 'Listening to Local Practices: Performance and Identity Politics in Riverside, California', in *Decomposition: Post-Disciplinary Performance*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2000, pp. 19–20.