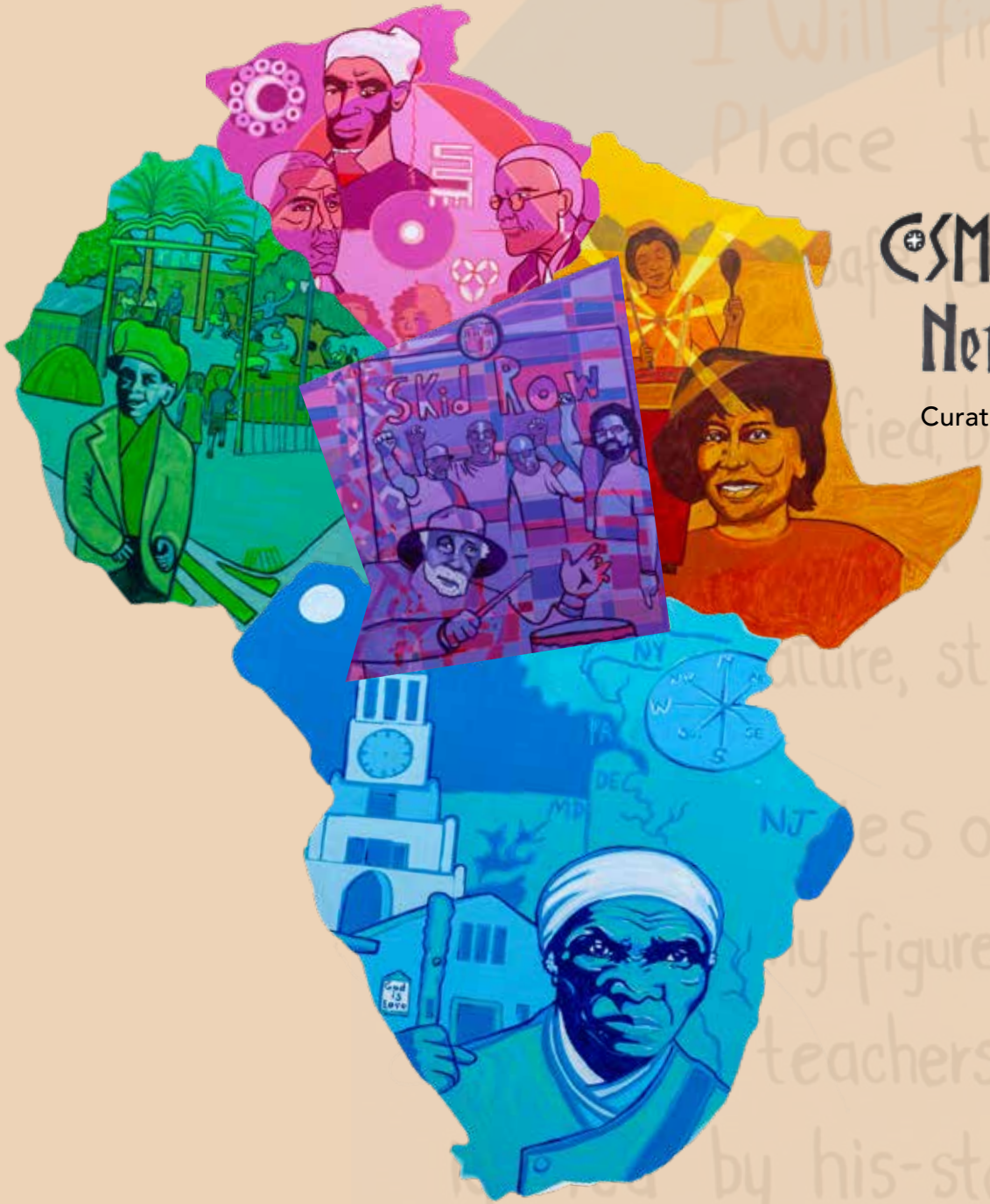

COSMOLOGY AND COMMUNITY
Networks of Liberation

Curated by Charles Porter, Community Curator

A project of Los Angeles Poverty Department
and the Skid Row History Museum & Archive

COSMOLOGY AND COMMUNITY
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Exhibition curated by

Charles Porter, Community Curator

February 18 – August 28, 2023

Skid Row History Museum & Archive

Los Angeles Poverty Department

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Introduction

Community Curator Project

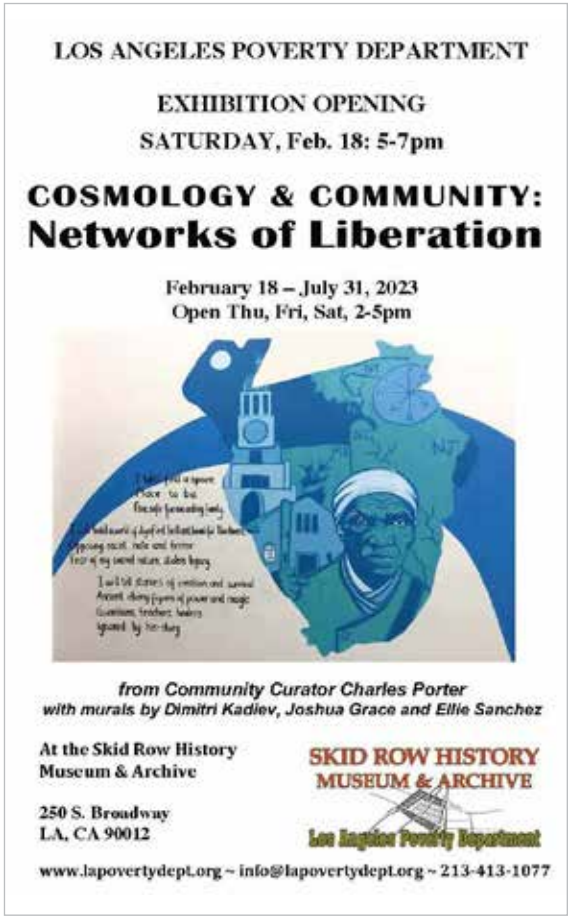
This book is a result of the Skid Row History Museum & Archive's first community curator project. The idea is to invite someone who has done profound work in the Skid Row neighborhood and give them the opportunity and support to realize their ideas, concerns, and practices as an exhibition.

Charles Porter, the curator of this exhibition, *Cosmology & Community: Networks of Liberation*, has brought to bear the passion, knowledge, and experience that he characteristically brings to his work as a community organizer, poet, musician, and scholar of the African Diaspora, in envisioning and realizing this exhibition. We invited muralists Dimitri Kadiev, Joshua Grace, and Ellie Sanchez, who listened to and dialogued with Charles, and used images and symbols he'd identified as important, to create a mural that references and links the five sections of Charles' conceptual framework for the exhibition. As you'll see in photos of the exhibition, Charles created each of the five thematic sections as a research station, with video content and a bookshelf.

This book includes Part 1: Stations of the Exhibition, which is Charles's walk-through description of the exhibition that he presented at the exhibition's opening. Part 2 is edited transcripts of the community conversations Charles organized with colleagues, mentors, collaborators and community members to explore some of the central themes of the exhibition. Long-time Skid Row artist and arts organizer Hayk Makhmuryan has contributed drawings of the panel participants, and in an age of photos, I find this a profoundly human gesture. Additional thanks are due to Los Angeles Poverty Department staff whose work contributed mightily to the project: Sara Fetherolf, who moved the project to completion, Henriëtte Brouwers, Pamela Miller, Zachary Rutland, and volunteer Aiden Starbird.

As Charles says, "the exhibition has layers." The murals and poems tell the story, but for each station of the exhibition Charles curated additional materials—objects, books, written materials compiled in notebooks, and video materials on tablets. The layers are a testament to the seriousness and care Charles devoted to curating the exhibition. And it leaves us looking forward to the next community curator project. Great thanks to Charles and all participants in the project.

John Malpede
Director, Skid Row History Museum & Archive



I Will find a space.
Place to be,
Free, safe for me and my family.

I will build a world of dignified, brilliant, beautiful Blackness,
Opposing racist hate and terror
Fear of my sacred nature, stolen legacy.

I will tell stories of creation and survival
Ancient ebony figures of power and magic
Guardians, teachers, healers
ignored by his-story

Part 1
Stations of the Exhibition

Station 1: *Ipilese* ("foundation" in Yoruba)

PROVERB:

The river that forgets its source will dry up.

I will find a space.
Place to be,
Free, safe for me and my family.

I will build a world of dignified, brilliant beautiful Blackness.
Opposing racist hate and terror
Fear of my sacred nature, stolen legacy.

I will tell stories of creation and survival
Ancient ebony figures of power and magic
Guardians, teachers, healers
ignored by his-story

Charles Porter: This station is at the river. This is the origin. You've got to know your origin. You got to have an origin story, your family. My family has been in New Jersey since the 1700s. My concept also is trying to look at my experience and then the work that I do in the Skid Row community. I've been working in Skid Row since 1999 and part of what I bring to the community is this rich cultural heritage.

I've been fortunate and blessed to always have mentors in my life, and my mentors help me to understand the value of learning and the value of challenging the stereotypes that the world places upon you. Each station includes somebody that helped me to move through those areas, and I'm going to talk a little bit about each section. At the same time, I want to show how everything is interconnected. There is overlap, some things just flow together.

Books: *African Twilight 1 & 2; Soul of Africa; Vodun; Vaudou/Voodoo/Vudù; Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley; Turn up the Volume! A Celebration of African Music; Astonishment and Power; The Birth of Art in Africa; Middle Egyptian; The Bone and Sinew of the Land; Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad; African Presence in Early America; Stories of Slavery in New Jersey; African Presence in Early Asia*

Everything is not linear, everything doesn't fit into a box, but the concept was to create puzzle pieces.

Each section is a piece of a puzzle, each poem is a piece of a puzzle, and it all ties together. At each station there's a notebook that has a concept on the cover, and there's also a proverb. There's layers, it's complex. You can go as deep as you want to go. If you just want the surface, look at the mural and read the poem. That would be sufficient. But if you want to go deeper, flip through the book. Also, there are video clips at each station, where you can sit down and listen and travel.

The notebook at the first station has a little proverb and a saying. There's a word in the Yoruba language that means "foundation." You have to have a foundation, and the foundation for me was growing up in Portertown, NJ. The area was named after my family.

Charles's parents, Charles and Essa Porter

Remembering I
Was there before I
Forgot to be.

Journey back home
to order... through chaos
Finding self... health... wealth... power
Layers... levels... guides lead me on

Limitless learning
Boundless potentia
Moving with the r
One with the All.

Station 2: *Awo* ("esoteric knowledge" in Yoruba)

PROVERB:

A stranger who asks the way will not get lost.

Remembering I
Was there before I
Forgot to be.

Journey back home
To order … through chaos
Finding self…health…wealth… power
Layers…levels…guides lead me on

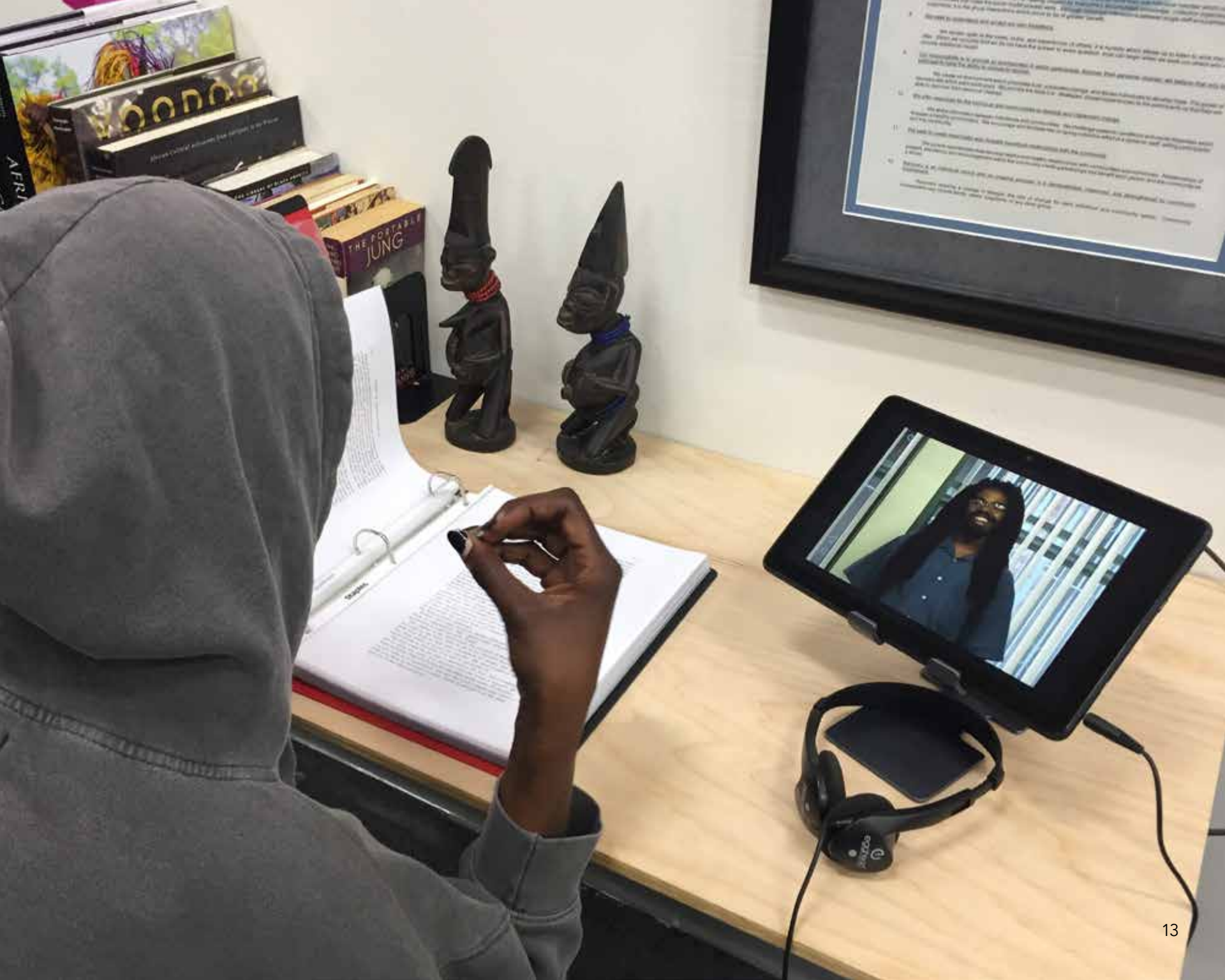
Limitless learning
Boundless potential
Moving with the rhythm
One with the All.

Charles Porter: Section 2 is called "Awo." "Awo" means mystery. "Awo" means the hidden, esoteric knowledge. What happens when you leave the place that you're from and you go to a whole new place? You gotta figure out what's happening here. It makes you question who you are, what you believe in. You have to find out the beliefs of the people that are there. So, this is my story: working in Skid Row, working for Social Model Recovery Systems. I do prevention work, I do community organizing, but our parent organization is a treatment organization. And it's grounded in the 12 steps. My company, Social Model Recovery Systems has some principles that are influenced by 12 steps, which I've included here in the exhibition.

This station also addresses my understanding of the important relationship between your worldview, your belief system, your spirituality and wellness, healing and recovery. So, in this image you have Bill W. who started the 12 steps, and Carl Jung, the psychologist famous for talking about archetypes and getting into ancient metaphysical principles.

Books: *African Ceremonies 1 & 2; The Egyptian Book of the Dead; Voodoo; Aesthetic of the Cool; The Dances of Africa; 90 Degrees of Shade; African Cosmos; Nothing but the Blues; Yoruba Proverbs; Freedom's Journey; From the Platform: Subway Graffiti, 1983-1989; From the Platform 2: More NYC Subway Graffiti, 1983-1989; Hoodoo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts; Developmental Psychology of the Black Child; The Destruction of Black Civilization; Ethno-Botany of the Black Americans; Jung*

Carl Jung influenced Bill W. who started the first 12-step program, Alcoholics Anonymous. 12-step programs are designed to get people clean and sober and off drugs, and according to 12-step programs, to get clean and sober, you have to have a spiritual experience, you have to have a spiritual connection. It's a journey, and you have to go on this journey to understand the world and your place in it. At the top of this image you see a sky watcher, an African sage. There are many people you've never heard of, whose names are not known, legions of people who were the wisdom keepers.


THE PORTABLE
JUNG


Ancestral voices sing songs reaching through time and space
Healers that fight, teach, and laugh in battle.
Soldiers, survivors, sages.
Conjuring worlds of wonder
Reclaiming roles of power
Restoring broken bonds
The wholeness of We

Station 3: *Asa* ("culture" in Yoruba)

PROVERB:

Culture gives birth to religion. Religion gives birth to taboo.

Ancestral voices sing songs reaching through time and space

Healers that fight, teach, and laugh in battle.

Soldiers, survivors, sages.

Conjuring worlds of wonder

Reclaiming roles of power

Restoring broken bonds

The wholeness of We

Charles Porter: Zora Neale Hurston is in mural station 3. She went to Howard University, and so did I. She named the Howard University newspaper *The Hilltop*. She was a pioneer. She wasn't just a writer and a storyteller. She was an anthropologist as well. She loved her culture. She loved her heritage and she immersed herself in it. She went through different initiations to find out how people viewed the world and how to best convey that. And so, in this section we talk about culture.

The notebook cover for this section says "Asa." "Asa" is the Yoruba word for culture. This section talks about the significance of culture. Knowing your culture keeps you well. It keeps you grounded. It gives you the ability to navigate the world. Zora Neale Hurston traveled to Haiti, she traveled to Jamaica and other places to study African culture. And she wrote about hoodoo and voodoo.

And Hurston talked about how people demonize things that were just Black religion. This is Black culture. This is Black spirituality. You put these negative labels on it because you didn't understand it. You didn't take the time to ask, "What does this mean?" "Why do you do these things?" Some of the books I brought for this exhibition talk about that. This is African culture. And we have to be careful because a lot of folks, when they hear the word "voodoo," they think devil worship. And that's not what it is. Or they think that's something negative. And I hear other Black people say, "Oh, that's voodoo. I don't mess with that."


3.

Necessity called forth solutions,
answers abundant and bold
Listen!
We did this
The voice to be seen
The rhythm to be heard
The power to help, support, and protect
Our family
Our people
Our community

Station 4: *Egbe* ("community" in Yoruba)

PROVERB:

A good head will positively affect 200 others.

Necessity called forth solutions,

answers abundant and bold.

Listen!

We did this

The voice to be seen

The rhythm to be heard

The power to help, support, and protect

Our family

Our people

Our community

Charles: Station 4 talks about how I've integrated culture into the prevention work I do with Social Model. Today, we had our Black History Month celebration. When I started working here, I was passionate about doing a Black History Month celebration. So today was our 23rd annual Black History Month celebration. In this section of the mural, there's an image of my grandfather when he was a boy.

When UCEPP first started, we weren't working with young people. But they started coming to our office asking, "Who are you? What do you do?" So, we started developing activities for Skid Row youth. It's a story of creating a space to acknowledge the people that are there. It's just like the Black History Month celebration. The young people were telling us they didn't have places to go. So, we started to engage them, and we created a youth program. They started telling us crazy stories.

"They won't let us in the park."

"When we go to school, they send us home because we got dirty uniforms."

"Or if we're late for school, they send us home."

"Police are giving us tickets for playing in the street, but we can't go in the park."

And me and my co-workers thought, "why would they do that? That don't make no sense." And it was all happening—everything the youth said. So we documented it, and we partnered with them to make changes. And we succeeded. We made some changes within LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District]. When we started, LAUSD had one full-time staff in their homeless education program to help the thousands of homeless students in LAUSD. The Skid Row youth advocacy resulted in LAUSD passing a resolution, called the Access for All Resolution, and a robust expansion of the homeless education program, to address the needs of the thousands of homeless students. This is what we need. It's an example of the community responding to community need.

Charles Porter's grandfather, which inspired the mural image for Station 4


Children Left Behind
4.

We exist...resisting denial and erasure
Systems designed to break and harm
We fight back and tell tales of epic battles
You do not...cannot...speak for us
We rise
We think
We gather
We move
You will not write us out

Station 5: *Ase* ("command" in Yoruba)

PROVERB:

It is in the presence of witnesses that one challenges the person who caused one's injury.

We exist…resisting denial and erasure.

Systems designed to break and harm

We fight back and tell tales of epic battles

You do not … cannot… speak for us.

We rise

We think

We gather

We move

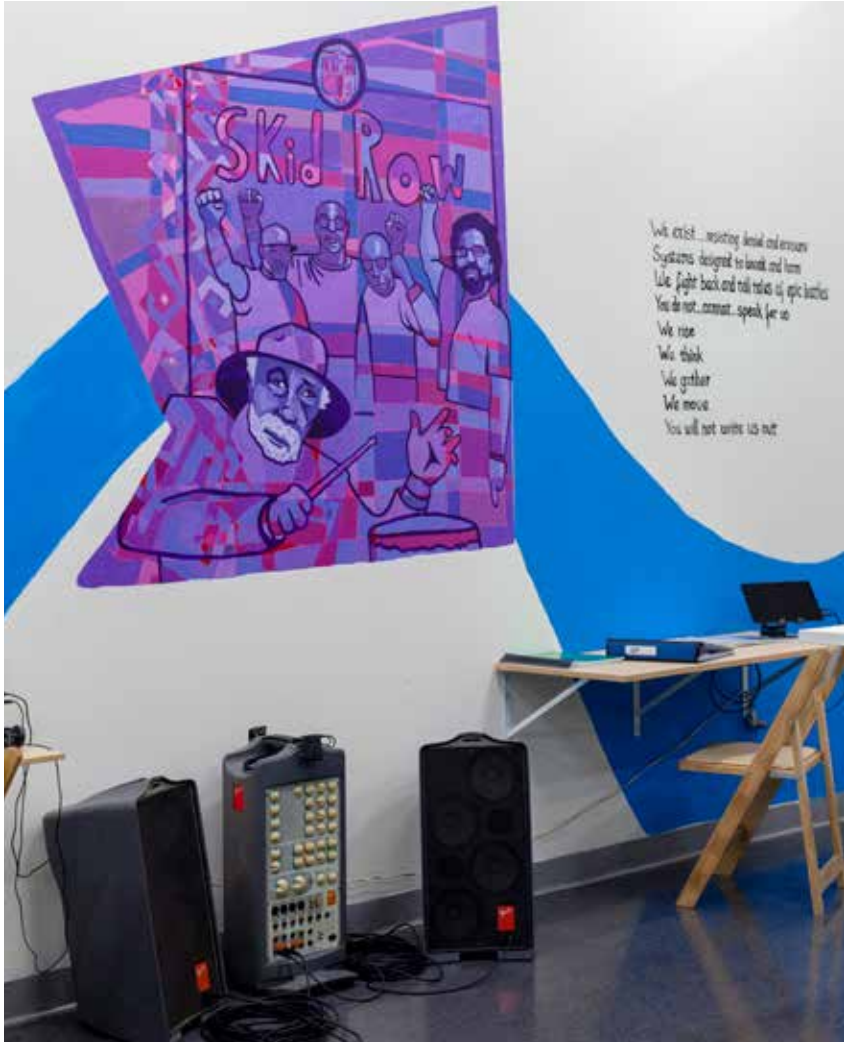
You will not write us out

The last section of the mural is about what we are continuing to fight for. We continue to fight to have Skid Row acknowledged as a community and to have the new downtown community plan be reflective of that.

The city is creating the DTLA 2040 Plan. They're planning what's going to happen, zoning- and development-wise, in the next 20-plus years. And we don't want erasure. We don't want Skid Row to not be on the map. We want to make sure that these spaces are defined and represented. And this last section of the mural includes an image of me and Pete White, Tony Anthony, and Pastor Cue standing in front of the "Skid Row City Limits" mural that General Jeff created. It shows some of the leadership in the community. We still struggle for representation, for the establishment of a Skid Row Neighborhood Council. This section also includes an image of Baba Felipé, one of my mentors. He was in the park earlier today. He's a renowned drummer. He's 90-plus. I introduced him today saying, "Felipé is about to turn 92." And he corrected me. He said, "No, I'm about to turn 94."

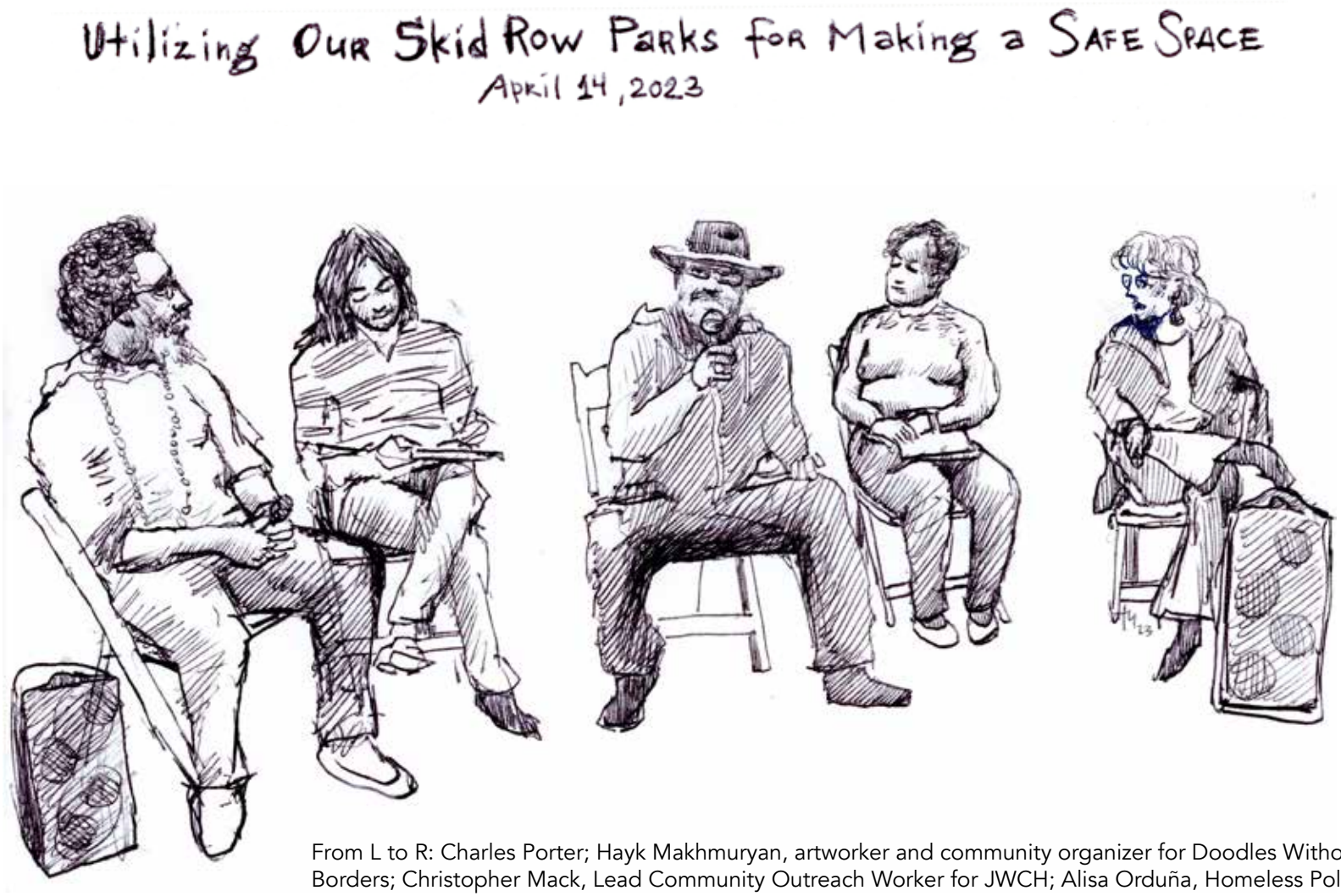
I want to highlight the fact that a lot of the successes that we see were achieved despite efforts to destroy everything about Black people: where they are, who they are, what they can do. To combat these efforts of suppression and erasure, we create networks of liberation. We create spaces that are off the grid of what exists, even here in Skid Row.

This leads to my last point, reparations. There's a movement in the State of California around reparations, and in the City of Los Angeles. These are serious conversations about what can be done to repair harms done in the past. But part of the dilemma in these discussions is we continue to be harmed by the system. So, what can be done to protect us from the harms, but also make sure that the harms are acknowledged in the first place?




COMING OF AGE
IN THE MOUTH
OF MADNESS
THE KIDS OF SKID ROW

Part 2
Panel Discussions



From L to R: Charles Porter; Hayk Makhmuryan, artworker and community organizer for Doodles Without Borders; Christopher Mack, Lead Community Outreach Worker for JWCH; Alisa Orduña, Homeless Policy Director for Mayor Garcetti; and Henriëtte Brouwers, Associate Director of Los Angeles Poverty Department

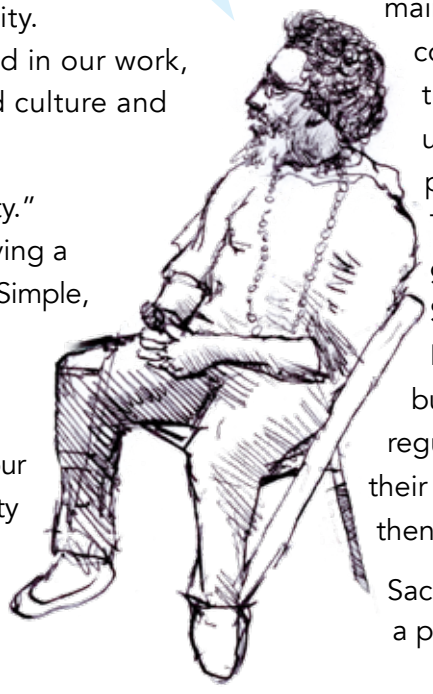
Panel 1: Utilizing Our Skid Row Parks for Making a Safe Space

APRIL 14, 2023

Charles: Today we're uplifting the importance of our parks in Skid Row. We want to talk about how we use our parks in Skid Row to support health and wellness and of the amazing things that happen in our parks. There's so much misinformation about Skid Row, that when people talk about Skid Row parks, they just assume those are places you should never go to. I want to start this discussion by talking about what the parks mean to the community and what they mean to me.

I mentioned that I started working in Skid Row in '99, so I'm sure there were people before me that were doing work. I don't claim to have discovered the parks. The prevention work that we do in the parks uplifts community. Connection as the opposite of addiction. And in our work, we believe that connection and wellness and culture and heritage are intertwined.

The exhibit is called "Cosmology & Community." Cosmology is a big fancy word that means having a deeper understanding of everything that exists. Simple, just understanding everything that exists. What that means is that everything that you see has another layer, has another meaning, has another representation. And we find those out through our collective experiences. The wisdom of community is hearing stories of your experience and being able to share your personal experience. And that interchange is very powerful.



I was thinking from a traditional African perspective—what a park would signify, what a park would represent. Traditional African culture has a concept of the Sacred Grove. It's essential to a lot of traditional ceremonies and rituals. Everyone has to go to the Sacred Grove at some point in time during their life as part of your rite of passage. As you go from being a boy to a man or a girl to a woman, you have to go to the Sacred Grove.

The Sacred Grove is a secret place. No one talks about what happens in the grove, but when you come back from the grove, you're a different person. So, the Sacred Grove really represents a space of transformation. And they maintain these Sacred Groves to preserve a strong connection to nature. And they believe there's transformative energy there. As people became urbanized, they had to preserve these spaces for people to connect and to re-imagine who they are. There are stories of older people who go to the grove, they transform when they're there as well. So, it's not just the young people, the new initiates. For the people who are first timers, it's life changing, but it's also life changing for people who go there regularly. They have revelations about who they are and their place in the world. You leave the Sacred Grove and then you come back to the community.

Sacred Groves are related to our idea of parks. Parks are a place to preserve nature, for people to connect with

a deeper sense of who they are, their connection to the world, their purpose and place, and to have transformative experience. And another purpose of parks is—this is my interpretation—is that parks serve as a space to display publicly what you experience. You're not gonna tell people everything that happened in the grove, but when you come out of the grove, there's a festival, there's a celebration. You celebrate the new initiates, and everyone has an opportunity to see who passed these trials, who went from boy to man or girl to woman, who did that.

Parks are a place of performance. They're a place where, as a community, you reinforce what it means to be part of the community. You're validated and acknowledged as someone who has achieved something, and someone whose existence has value. So, parks play a dual function, as spaces for internal reflection and transformation, but it's also a space where you display who you are and what you have accomplished. And as a community, you get to highlight what is valuable to the community.

So, those spaces are places where you have ceremonies, where people come and drum and sing and dance. They're spaces of renewal. Periodically, there are festivals that are really designed to recharge the community, to cleanse the community, to reinvigorate the community. So, for me, the park is a space to learn, to experience. It's a refuge. It's a safe space to connect with the people, to connect with the land, to connect with nature, and it's a place to display and show the world who you are.

I started a park timeline. I started working in Skid Row in '99, so the timeline is from my personal experience. SRO Housing Corporation used to manage the parks. The ownership of the parks transferred over to Rec and Parks when SRO lost funding. When the CRA dissolved in 2012, the funding that went to SRO

Black History Month celebration at San Julian Park

to maintain the parks disappeared. And their operation went to the city's Department of Recreation and Parks. But Recreation and Parks didn't have the institutional experience of what we do in the parks, and who's who, and who uses the parks. Originally, when we wanted to do events in the park, we had to go through SRO. We had to put in a park use request and we had to beg them, "Please can we use the park?" But we had a good relationship with SRO, and they knew we weren't gonna do anything crazy in the park, so it was fine with them. But we did have to get their approval to do events in the park. When SRO transferred operation of the park to the city's Department of Recreation and Parks, we were concerned because we wanted to continue to have events and activities and we didn't want some of the drug activity to get out of control. So, we started organizing the Skid Row Parks Committee.

The Skid Row parks are very valuable spaces because people don't have public spaces to come together and just be themselves. You have folks that are in these little SRO [single room occupancy] units, and they don't have communal space. So, parks are very important and there are a lot of people competing for the use of the park space.

We wanted to fill those spaces with folks that were focused on doing positive things that uplift the community, that support health and wellness. And we wanted to make sure we advocated for increasing programming and organization. We started a parks committee and we advocated to support what was happening in both parks.

One person that I really have to give a shout out to, rest in peace, is Leslie Croom. Leslie Croom worked with UCEPP. She first started working at the Volunteers of America, the Drop-In Center. She was a powerful advocate for community, for recovery, for wellness, for empowerment. Leslie was a strong personality, a strong voice. If you know her, you'll never forget Leslie. Leslie was the first person that I saw advocating for resources for our parks.

Leslie believed that our parks should be getting more resources than they were getting. They didn't have dedicated funding. We had many ideas for park activities and improvements, but there was no funding for it. Leslie asked why don't we have a dedicated funding source? She was the person that got us talking to the Board of Commissioners for Recreation and Parks.

People go to the parks for various reasons, but part of it is just so they can be themselves. And so, we don't want to impose upon them. So, we've had to say, "We're coming here once

Drummers in the park. L to R, back row: Ptah Ahochi Tehuti Eil (formerly known as Raymond Lewis), Charles Porter, Ifayoriju. Middle row: Sadiki Bakari and children, Delicia, Rob Phillips, Kaniah Chapman. Front row: Walter Fears, Donald Reese, and another drummer.

a week. We just want to play music with y'all, share some messages. We have some young folks here. We're just uplifting the parks as positive spaces, and we hope you enjoy it." And so, we would play music and start doing our thing.

And after a while, they started to embrace it, but we came in respectfully. We didn't come in and say, "We got a park full of people. We're going to tell you what we want you to hear, and we're going to take over."

I want folks to keep that in mind because that's very important. We talk about being trauma-informed and that we have to be responsive. When you know these are the few spaces that people gather, you don't come in there and take it over. If you want to come in there, partner with the people that are there.

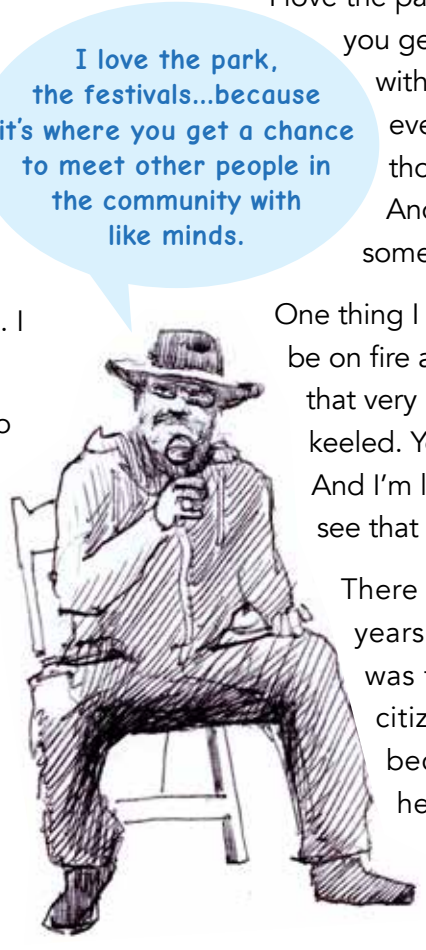
And so, we would play music, and people would come up and bring songs. They helped develop some of the playlists that we had. It was all interactive. And I always make jokes. There were a few folks that were, at first, "Turn the music down. We can't hear the cops coming." It was this whole negotiation. "We only want to be here for two hours." "Okay, two hours, that's cool. You good, you good."

We use our parks to support events, festivals, movies, health fairs. The Park Advisory Board I mentioned is historic. General Jeff played a major role in advocating for the Skid Row Park Advisory Board to be officially recognized by the city. It may be one of the only Skid Row institutions recognized by an official political body. It started in 2020. I'm one of the members of the Park Advisory Board. I encourage folks to participate, get involved.

So, now let's hear from our panel. I'm going to turn the mic over to Christopher Mack.

Christopher Mack: I first got down here February 3rd, 2003, a couple of years later I became a community outreach worker for Wesley Health Clinic, and I was working on an HIV survey. I had a questionnaire to find out who you were having sex with. I'd go to a park and ask a guy who's big and buff, "Sir, I'd like to ask you, are you having sex with men and women?" That was really edgy. But then I met Charles Porter and KevinMichael Key. And so, they would always say, "Hey, Chris, come here, let's go to this thing," and then they'd have another idea to go to something else. I'd end up where KevinMichael Key and Charles Porter were and that was often in the parks. We were fighting against a narrative that Skid Row is a containment zone. Every time we showed up, we showed up understanding and knowing that it was a community.

I love the park, the festivals, I love those things because it's where you get a chance to meet other people in the community with like minds. And let me tell you something, you don't even have to talk to those people, you just be around those people and there is something that happens. And that's the magic of connection. Because you have something that you share together.



One thing I have to say about Charles Porter, is the building can be on fire and falling down around him and stuff and he just has that very pleasant smile. And I've never seen nobody so even keeled. You know who else do that kind of stuff? Hayk. Hayk! And I'm like, wait, they have that big smile. Damn, don't they see that the sky is falling? Don't they see that?

There is an emancipation circle that Charles did a few years back. And in that emancipation circle, there was this notion to defy the lie. I'm not a second-class citizen and neither are you. I love this community because it gives me meaning and purpose and it helps me to evolve and develop spiritually. It always sends me running to the internal Christopher that I have to always nurture and care for.

Hayk Makhmuryan: My name is Hayk Makhmuryan. I have been doing things in Skid Row since 2008 and I am 39, about to be 40, which means for half of my conscious life. I'm a first-generation immigrant. I came to the United States from Armenia, from southwest Asia, also known by the colonial name Middle East, and so more than half of my time in this country, I've been doing something in Skid Row. When I'm doing projects in hyperlocal places like Skid Row or in a community in Armenia, I'm interested in the hyperlocal and global, and how those relate to each other and our identities.

I do want to jump right into the parks. When I was younger, I thought it was so simple: just a revolutionary socialist movement with commitment to anti-racism and anti-sexism and anti-imperialism. That's all we need, you know. But now, I understand that it's still that, but how we get there is a journey. It's not a straight line.

I still am often very frustrated: why doesn't everyone understand the revolutionary socialist movement. And because of that frustration, it's important for me to be able to focus on what may seem like small things that I think are fundamental parts of who we are as human beings and how community gets born. And one of those things, for me, is one hour or two hours of artmaking together. It can seem like a little thing, but when you add consistency and some level of like thinking, it connects to a little larger community and a larger community and a larger community. All of a sudden, that one or two hours can be a lot more than just one or two hours.

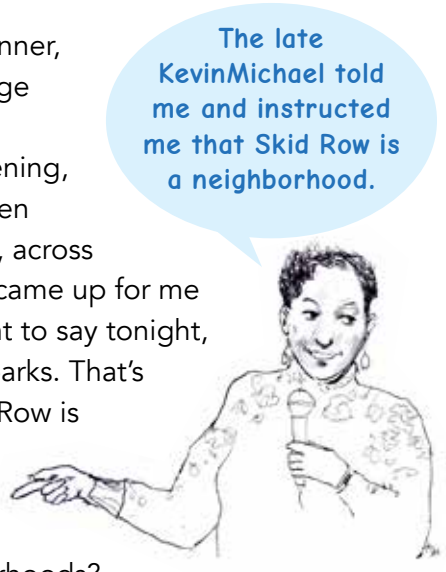
It's important for me to be able to focus on what may seem like small things that...are fundamental parts of who we are as human beings and how community gets born.

I did things in the park for years when I was running Studio 526. Probably my first interaction with the parks was collaborating with John, Henriëtte, and Charles and a bunch of other people with the annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists.

When I left Studio 526 it was important for me to maintain contact with people in the neighborhood. That was one of the impetuses for the Doodles Without Borders workshops. And Doodles Without Borders exists now in Gladys, soon to be renamed General Jeff Park. I'm gonna be there at the Doodles Without Borders art table every Thursday from 3 to 4:30 pm. I'm going to be there on a consistent basis. And being there weekly means that it's easy to for everyone to remember when it's happening.

The way that the Doodles Without Borders art table operates is that there's always some sort of collaborative artmaking happening, and there's always materials for people to do things individually as well. That's been awesome. We have a portfolio of collectively created banners now. And it's awesome to put out one or two of them, every time we're there. We have two banners that are tied specifically to Skid Row's Black History Month celebration. So, we're claiming our power creating these banners while the Black History Month Celebration is taking place.

Alisa Orduña: I really like the banner, "Skid Row Celebrates the Heritage of the Black Diaspora." Because Brother Charles, during your opening, you made the connection between Skid Row and the Black tradition, across time and space, and that's what came up for me when I thought about what I want to say tonight, about the importance of urban parks. That's something the advocacy in Skid Row is really trying to do, to raise the question, how come our parks aren't supported the way that other parks are in other neighborhoods?



Parks are important to all our lifestyles. They are important in reducing health costs, strengthening local economies, creating jobs, making cities more resilient, increasing community engagement and reducing crime, cleaning the air and improving public health, and tools for cities to achieve their equity goals.

I want to read a quick quote from the late bell hooks. She's one of my mentors. And she talks about this concept of a "homeplace." What is that? You're in one, here at the Skid Row History Museum. These kind of semi-public homeplaces where people can gather in their sites of resistance. bell hooks said, "Those who dominate and oppress us benefit when we have nothing to give our own. When they have so taken from us our dignity, our humanness, that we have nothing left. No homeplace where we can recover ourselves." So, she says, historically, African American people believe that the construction of homeplace, however fragile and tenuous, had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, the domination, one's homeplace was the site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist.

And, I want to share this photo. It's a photo from Congo Square in New Orleans. Congo Square started as a gathering place for the American Indians who were indigenous to this community. And then during the period of enslavement, it was a place on Sunday where Black people could gather. And there are many different Congo Squares across the country. It was a marketplace where you could find out the local news, sell your goods, check in on people, ask about your family if you didn't know where they are. And it was a place with a lot of drumming and dancing.

For me growing up in L.A., Exposition Park was my Congo Square—the place for birthday parties and all, where you can go for free. And I always felt wow, we have such a beautiful rose garden in our backyard. So, I've always had great appreciation for the public parks.

When I came to Skid Row, as the mayor's liaison, the late KevinMichael told me and instructed me that Skid Row is a neighborhood. And I always appreciated that orientation, because so many people, especially coming from government, often think of Skid Row only in the context of homeless services or encampments. No, this is an actual neighborhood. So, the question is how would you design and allocate resources in any other neighborhood?

Charles: I appreciate that. I'm gonna pass the mic to Henriëtte. We know this space is the Skid Row History Museum & Archive, so everything you want to know about what we're talking about

Crushow Herring performing at the Los Angeles Poverty Department's Festival for All Skid Row Artists, 2022

is somewhere here, it's in one of these folders, there's a video, there's some documents, there's photos, it's here. So, shout out to that and bless it, for us to be able to tell our history. Because people outside of Skid Row don't know any of this history, they don't even know how things came to be.

We need to all be able to celebrate what we've done, and the advocacy, and let folks know this is a neighborhood, this is a community that continues to fight. So, shout out to that, but the Skid Row Artist Festival is really something I take a lot of pride in when I talk about Skid Row. And because we have such a vibrant community, I'm like, "Do you know it's a two-day festival that's been occurring for years? There's a two-day festival in Skid Row?" So, Henriëtte, if you could tell us about the festival and whatever we need to know, your reflections and your engagement in the park. No pressure.

Henriëtte Brouwers: Yes, and I say two days is not enough, because we could keep going and going. And this year was the 14th Festival for All Skid Row Artists.

In 2008, we were asked by Americans for the Arts to write a report about us, how LAPD is serving the community. And we said, we don't want to write about us, we want to write about the artists there are in the community and find out who they are, where they make their art, and write about that. And so that's how it started. We had five community convenings in different places, because we didn't have our own space. We did it in five different places with a lot of input from different community members.

And then John wrote the report with Maria Rosario Jackson, who's currently the Director of the National Endowment for the Arts. Maria was at The Urban Institute at that time. And, what we found out is that it's a community that is rich with culture, and people make it where they are. It comes from the ground up. It's not something that is facilitated. People do it because that is their need, and that's how things grow in Skid Row. And then, the researchers said, the next step is to validate what the community people told you by hiring a geographer to do a big research and get the data. And we were like, how are we going to get the data?

We are not going to walk around with computers and write it all down. John had a brilliant idea. He said, let's do a festival. Everybody who is an artist, just come and show us your art. Just do it. Let's create a space for it. And so, one of the things that we knew, and our focus groups had confirmed, was that there were no spaces to create art.

At that time, Studio 526 was still called the LAMP [Arts Program], but it wasn't open to the whole community. The art that was being made and facilitated within the missions, but it was only for the people who live in the missions. Los Angeles Poverty Department was the only place where it was open, where anybody could come in and participate. Skid Row artists made their work in their rooms, in the parks, and on the streets. And Walter Fears was one of the people who really spoke out and said, "We are the drummers, and Lead Officer Dion Joseph keeps taking away our drums. We have no space to drum—not even in the streets."

Doodles Without Borders workshop at the Festival for All Skid Row Artists

People were being harassed by the police wherever they made their art. So, we said, we're going to make a festival. We had two Dutch interns at the time, and they and KevinMichael all connected. And we all said, okay, we're going to do it next month on a Saturday. We're going to do it in Gladys Park. And everybody started running around Skid Row and saying, "Hey, you want to come and perform?" Or "Do you have something to show?" And that's how it started.

Our approach was that anybody who identified as an artist is an artist, and they can do what they do, and people supported each other, and people appreciated each other, and it was just beautiful! And then we decided to do it the next year. That first year it was just one day, and then the next year we expanded it to Saturday and Sunday.

We didn't want to do something "for the community," like, "Let's bring in a big band and then everybody can enjoy the music." No, it was really the people from the community who were the artists: the idea for the festival was by the community, with the community, for the community. And that's how we did it.

And, when we started the festival, we felt that we needed to interview the artists to document who the people are. So, from the beginning we made a space where we interviewed the artists to learn a little bit more about their art and how they made it. So, we have now this huge archive of interviews with all these people.

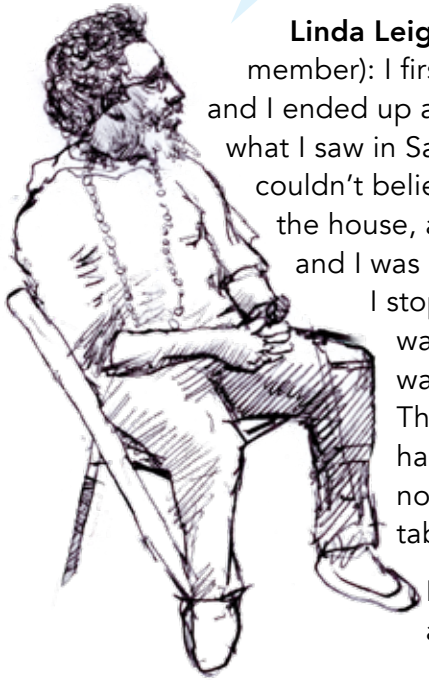
And a lot of people come back, from one year to the next. So, you can hear the stories of people through the years. It's pretty amazing. And since the community comes out and everybody is there, it's a place where we always have a spot for community issues. So, Skid Row Now and 2040 has a space there. And we invited the Department of City Planning to talk about the Community Plan, which is now going to the Planning and Land Use Committee. We gave them a spot at the festival, and City Planning spent all day talking with community members and hearing what they wanted for their community. Our ongoing engagement with City Planning led to big changes in their plan, including more green space, accountability for the community members, having a say in what is happening in our community, and the IX1 zone, which we created, which means no market rate housing in that zone—the first such zone in Los Angeles.

We have to advocate for the community, for Skid Row. And we've been doing that at the festival. So, the festival is, in many ways, sort of a special place for the community to come together, to support each other, to enjoy each other, but also to organize. That's all I'm going to say.

Charles: The last point I wanna make before I open it up for questions and comments is how we use our parks to celebrate life. Celebrate life. I think that's something I don't wanna minimize.

I know there have been at least two marriages in Skid Row parks. There have been birthday parties. But we also use the parks to acknowledge people who pass away. And so I think that's important to show that parks really are spaces to acknowledge people's humanity and the things that they experience. I wanna uplift that because, even when we're not formally doing things, people are setting up memorials when people pass away in the park. It's just something that is part of community.

Parks really are spaces to acknowledge people's humanity and the things that they experience.



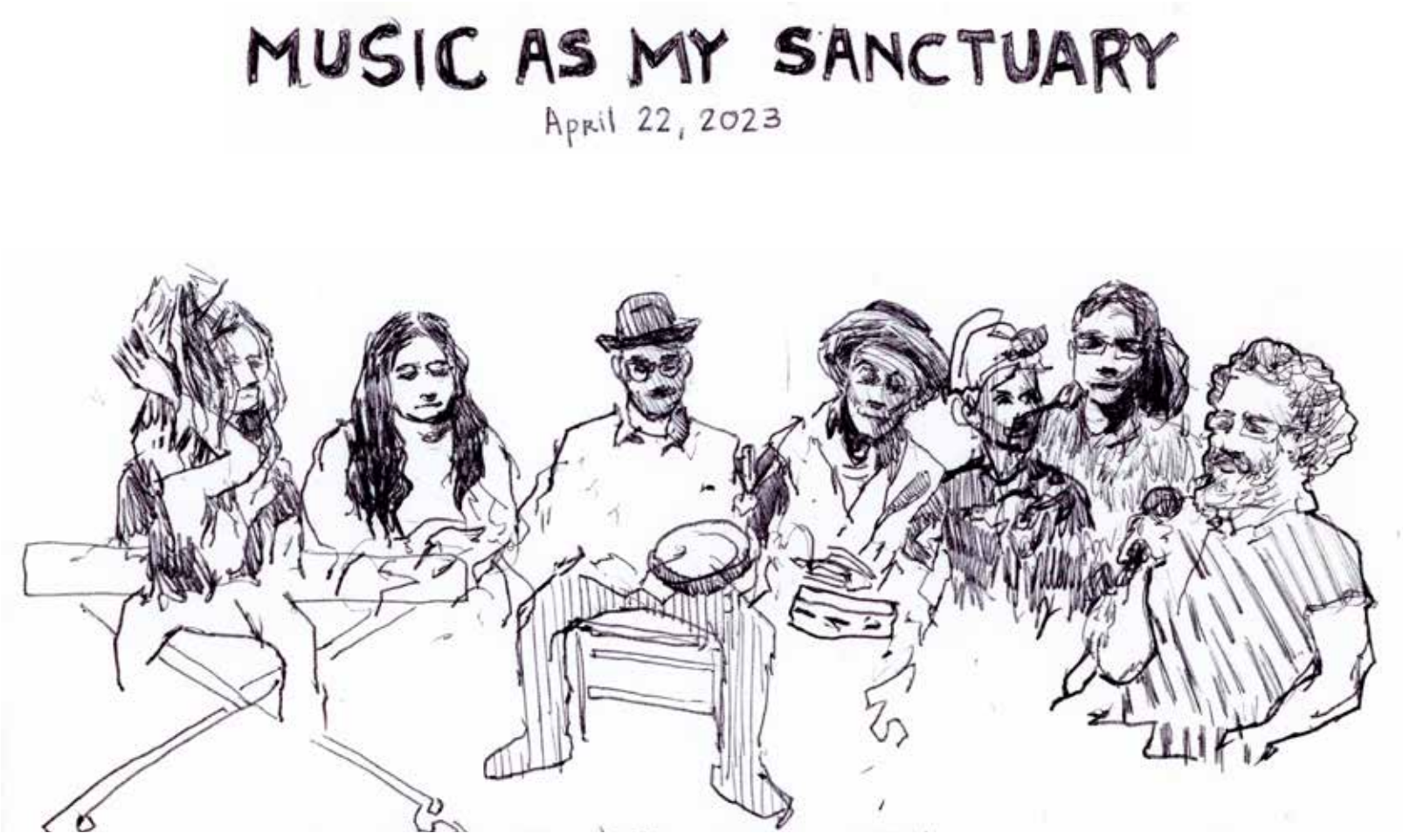
Linda Leigh (community/audience member): I first came to Skid Row in 2014, and I ended up at the Russ Hotel, and this is what I saw in San Julian Park—a wedding. I couldn't believe it. I was on my way back to the house, and I had to be in a certain time, and I was rushing back to get there, and I stopped because San Julian Park was all cleaned up, and this woman was getting married in the park. There were tables with linen. She had it catered. They were putting, not paper plates, but china on the tables. She had a full band.

My place was on the second floor, and I went to the bathroom so I could look out the window, because the second-floor bathroom looked right into San Julian Park, and I stood there and I watched, and she had a minister. She had them on the dais, the stage there, and her guests came in, and I'm gonna tell you, everybody was dressed to the T, everybody. I mean, they were in gowns, and the men were in tuxes, and then, I remember her bridesmaids coming in, and I thought, oh my God, these are the best-looking bridesmaids I've ever seen, and my thought was, this woman has class. Everything was just so beautiful. I just stood there, and my thought was, wow, even in Skid Row, you can find love, get married, and have a beautiful wedding. It changed my whole perception about Skid Row, because I had only been there for a little while.

Charles: I don't want to overlook the fact that not everything that happens in the park is wonderful, but I will say the people in the park are part of the community and they do listen. They listen, they're engaged, they're connected. And even though you think people are completely ignoring you, they're not.

We would do activities in the park and folks that were hustling in the park would stop hustling to watch the event. The people we put labels on are people. They have family members. People vilify these folks and say, "Oh, they sell drugs," or "They're gang members." They're people. And when you create a healthy space, it's healthy for them as well. And they appreciate it. So, there's power in us doing positive things in the park. I wanted to uplift that and engage the folks, and not put labels on folks, because when you're not in the park, who's in the park? A lot of times, they are the people keeping the safety in the park. There are people regulating the arguments and the fights, "Hey, cut that out." "Hey, you, get out the park." "Hey, stop, we don't need that right here."

And I do want to thank the folks that spoke today, the folks that showed up to hear them. All of us have contributed to making our neighborhood better. I want to say that we stand on the shoulders of people that came before us and as I started out, I wasn't the first person advocating in parks. And I have been here a long time, but some people have been here longer than me.



From L to R: Jamael Dean, pianist; Sharda Shashadar, singer; Omu Ade, DJ, drummer; Georgia Anne Muldrow, singer/songwriter; Rickie Byars, singer/songwriter; Ptah Ahochi Tehuti Eil, djembe player; and Charles Porter, drummer/singer

Charles: The name of this exhibit is "Cosmology & Community: Networks of Liberation." The deeper significance to that is our connection on a spiritual level, and how profound that really is. Before we get started, I want to do a little quick libation, to acknowledge the sacredness of who we are.

Libation is an ancient African custom of honoring the forces that support us, and the forces that protect us and heal us. Sometimes now, people do libations at community events, mainly to honor people who passed away. The libation is deeper than that. We do honor our ancestors, but we also honor those spiritual forces that created everything that exists. It's also appropriate as today is Earth Day, so we honor the sacredness of our planet, of the elements that support us. For the libation I learned—this is my short one, for real—we use water. Sometimes, people use alcohol. Water, in Yoruba, is called "omi." So, we say "omitutu." "Omitutu" means cool water.

Baba Felipé and Charles drumming at Black History Month Celebration 2017 at San Julian Park

Then, we say "onatutu." "Ona" is our path. You can say "ashe." "Onatutu" says, "May our path be cool." We use water also. There's a proverb in European culture that says, "Water has no enemies," because everything that exists depends on water to exist. That also shows how we're interconnected. "Ile tutu." "Ile" is the ground. Ile can also mean home, depending on the pronunciation. So, may our homes be cool. May the land be cool.

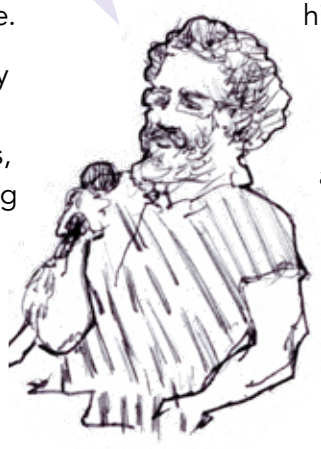
"Tutu ori." May we always communicate with each other in a cool manner, "Ori tutu." "Ori" is our head. So, may we always keep a cool head and always make the best choices and decisions. You can't undo a bad choice that you made—its consequences and repercussions. So, we want to make sure we make the best choices.

"Egun tutu." "Egun" are all our collective ancestors. May our ancestors be cool and refreshed and pleased with what we do. So, we give honor to the creator that created us all. We give honor to all the spiritual forces that support us and protect us and guide us and inspire us. We also honor the sacredness of each individual who's present here today. Whenever libation is

done, it's also a prayer for longevity. So, we also pray that we be spared from all the negative things in life, like death, sickness, affliction. And may our families not see them. And may all the good things that you're seeking reach us quickly. May these good things stay with us and our families.

"Networks of liberation" are the communities and families we create to support, protect, heal, and inspire ourselves. For me, this is the Black diaspora and the preservation and promotion of Black spirituality and wellness practices. The discussion today will touch on music and its relation to healing, as something profoundly present, nurturing, and instructive.

"Networks of liberation" are the communities and families we create to support, protect, heal, and inspire ourselves.



The title for the discussion today was inspired by Gary Barth's song, "Music As My Sanctuary," and it's a very powerful song. It used to be one of my favorite songs, and then I forgot about it, and then, as I was preparing for this exhibit, I heard it again, and I said, how did I forget about this great song? In the chorus he says, when life puts that "juju" on you, you gotta have the "gris-gris." That lyric talks about how powerful music is as a medicine, because in African culture, medicine is not just something you get from a doctor, it's a spiritual force that protects you. That's what gris-gris is: a charm. It's a medicine that you carry on you to protect you from negative spirits, and harm, and to bring you good luck.

That song connects with what I want to present to the community today, and today's panelists are musicians who, for me, represent that. The panelists are my extended family, and they'll share their wisdom, talent, and power, giving us a greater understanding of community and purpose.

One of my honored special guests I invited is Baba Felipé Garcia Villamil, but he's unable to be here. He's very busy, and I didn't coordinate with his schedulers. I talked about Baba Felipé in the intro, and there's a rendition of him on the last mural, right there, drumming. Because he's not here, I've tried to imagine what he would want to say if he were here. I've spent a lot of years around him, and so I want to talk a little bit about his life, and how that relates to me, and then we'll open it up.

The link to Baba Felipé is that he's used music in a spiritual context, and it has been able to sustain him. His foundation is ritual and ceremony and how invocation manifests in the world. And that's what I wanted to share. I've been blessed. Through Baba Felipé I've learned the connection of music to healing and to culture and to spirituality.

In Yoruba culture, music is a part of everything you do. They got songs for everything. They got a song—you putting some honey on something, there's a song for that. You opening something up, there's a song for that. You planting seeds, there's a song for that. Everything has a song, when children are born, when people pass away, all the rites of passage, everything that you do in your life, there's something musical connected to that. And the music is connected to the prayers, to the invocations, to the well-wishing.

There is a book about Felipé, it's called *Drumming for the Gods: the Life and Times of Felipé Garcia Villamil*. Baba Felipé is from Matanzas, Cuba. His great-grandfather, Enobla Cardenas, was a well-known Orisha priest of the Yoruba tradition, also a

Babalawo, a healer. He was a priest of Obatala. And he also helped to bring the drumming tradition to Matanzas and Cuba.

Baba Felipé's great-grandfather taught drumming. It was something passed down in the family line. And Baba Felipé says, in the old days you couldn't go to a class to learn drumming. The only way to learn drumming was from another drummer. So, there was a society of drummers, and we've been blessed, me and some of my friends that are here today, we're part of the society of drummers that Baba Felipé introduced us to, that was literally passed down from ancestors that came from Nigeria, from Oyo.

Now, in Cuba, drumming has been transformed into something folkloric, but during his time, it was persecuted. You couldn't practice. You couldn't be an African drummer. You couldn't have ceremonies and drum and sing. All the stuff that we cherish was forbidden. It was against the law.

I learned about Baba Felipé through Baba Faxina Felaté. He had a Yoruba temple in Leimert, Ijo Orunmila Adulawo Worldwide, where they were teaching about traditional Yoruba spirituality and philosophy and culture. Baba Felipé was doing a drum class there and that's where we first met him. I must give respect to Baba Faxina, who created that space, because he was one that stressed upon us the importance of reorienting ourselves. He said the stuff that you think you know is not helping. You need to find out what your ancestors believed in. If you love it or if you don't love it, you need to know about it. It's yours. He stressed upon us, this is our identity, who we are as a people. So, shout out to him. He's a drummer, too. That's how we got involved in the culture: drumming, and hearing music.

My earliest memories of music, and the power of music, come from my grandmother, Mabel Wilson. My parents were always busy hustling and traveling, business trips, and so, we spent a lot of time at my grandmother's house. My grandma was known for singing. She would always sing. I would sit and listen to her sing. I remember the power of the intonation of her song. It was something that took you to another place. It was entertaining and it was nurturing.

A lot of my family members started out in the Methodist churches, the African Union churches that Peter Spencer started, and then also the AME churches with Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. But my grandmother and my grandfather joined the Pentecostal churches. So, my family was a part of some of the early Pentecostal churches in New Jersey. It's ironic that the Pentecostal church started right here, pretty much in Skid Row.

One song I'll never forget is, "Fire, shut up in my bones, just like Jeremiah, won't leave me alone." She used to sing that song, and me and my sister we would crack up every time she sang that song because "shut up" is in the lyrics. She said, "shut up," did you hear her say that? It's a deep song, because it talks about the spirit inside of you. And her singing would sustain her. It was nourishment and that was powerful. I got to honor my grandmother, and for me, her connection to music is the standard. I have to feel it. I have to be able to say, "Okay, I feel that, okay."

I'm going to pass the mic to my man, Ray Lewis [now Ptah Ahochi Tehuti Eil]. Tell us who you are, your name, where you're from, and how you became a musician.

Ptah Ahochi Tehuti Eil: I'm a divine being, unfolding, still learning who I am. But, right now, I'm present with you guys. I'm

listening to you give all this history, and I resonated with what you were saying. You're speaking about a culture that exists way back, that's been handed down from person to person, and I'm listening to you. But I knew this intuitively. No one told me nothing, I just knew this.

When you were speaking about the sacredness of the drum, the drum came to me at a very low point in my life. I was homeless. I was on drugs. I was doing all kinds of wild stuff. And I was walking on Venice Beach, and a guy was playing a djembe, and I liked the sound, because it was something new, never heard it before.

So, I sit down and I listen to it, and from then I've been playing the drum, and this guy who first showed me the drum was a king, not in Ghana. His name was Esau, and if anybody's ever been to Venice Beach back in the day, Esau was the guy that had the big incense stand. He used to be down there by Abraham, across from the Titanic. That's the area where I started drumming. It was very deep and spiritual there. That's how the drumming came into me.

Who am I? I'm a divine being unfolding. My name is Ptah Ahochi Tehuti Eil, and I just told you how music got into me and how it changed my life. When the drum came into my life I was in a certain state, right? And as I was learning, I was developing myself, doors were opening inside me through a rhythm. I had several drum teachers and each one showed me a different rhythm that I made into me.

Then, I met Charles, and met beautiful, wonderful people in this journey of cleaning myself. I was still in my addiction, but

When the drum came into my life I was in a certain state, right? And as I was learning, I was developing myself, doors were opening inside me through a rhythm.

I made advance in my addictions, and I made advancements out of my addictions. So, it let be known that the divine and spirituality is what it is, because there was a point in time that I was a drug addict, and I was having profound visions, and insight that was telling me things about myself, the universe, and people around me. I couldn't understand, so I thought I was crazy.

And then I come into this conscious community that was in Los Angeles and New York, when I started traveling the world, and I found out that everything in school that they told me about reality was a lie. So, I had to deprogram myself. This is when Sadiki Bakari came into my life. I loved myself more, I filled myself with affirmations, and I resonated that with what I put inside myself. And I think that's it.

Jamael Dean: Hey, my name is Jamael Dean. I play piano, obviously. I'm sitting in front of the piano. But, yeah, who am I? I'm the youngest of ten kids. I started playing piano because all my other siblings were doing sports, and my dad was out there coaching them, yelling at them. So, I was like, I'm going to do music. I'm not trying to do that. What got me started was, in school they gave us recorders, and I was really into that. And then I got video games taken away because I was obsessed. And I was like, "Can I get a keyboard for Christmas?"

So, they gave me a CD that taught me how to read music. I play violin too and my inspiration for it is my grandfather, because he plays drums. He's a jazz drummer. He did a lot and man, going to see him play with his friends was my favorite part, 'cuz he would just have a good time. We'd be out there joking, laughing, and then, I get to come up in the gig, play a little and get some desserts.

Yeah, it was really social and a good time. That was my favorite part about music. And especially, sometimes they would be having a good conversation. Sometimes it'd be like, you know, other ways — they'd argue, and then they get up and play all that energy on stage and you see them work it out and they come out just laughing, joking even more. I'm like dang, that was crazy how it transformed just like that.

When I didn't want to practice, my dad used to tell me, "If you find something you love to do, then you're not really working." He's like, "I have to do construction every day and it has a toll on my body. So, try to figure out something that would be good for you." So, that's the reason why music has been there in my life for so long, and I think that's all I really have to say.

Rickie Byars: My name is Rickie, and I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and I was raised between Charlotte, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia. My mother's family was very interesting, and my real father's family was interesting too.

My story doesn't sound very historical, but it is. My story comes from the radio. My story comes from the church, the Black church, and from the Catholic church, in the Gregorian chant, coming through Black nuns. So, I had a real good education where I could get incredible rhythms from the Black church and then incredible Gregorian coming through African American nuns.

I could always do music. I was born with that. I could always pick out melodies. I'm self-taught and my children are self-taught, and that's pretty much all I got to say.

Sharda Shashadar: Hi, I'm Sharda Shashadar. I was born in Virginia and I grew up in New York. I am a recent resident of Los Angeles and I was born into music. My family's very musical, so it didn't really feel like a choice, it was just natural. I was two when I started singing melodies and my dad was like, "She's really good, let me teach her." My dad was my teacher my whole life and, it reminded me of what you were saying, Charles, about Baba Felipé's great-grandfather: very strict, very traditional. Like this: there's right, there's wrong — formal a little bit. So, I have that in me, and I also have a genuine love for music. It's just a natural part of what I do.

Georgia Anne Muldrow: Hey, now, everybody, y'all feel all right? Well, my name is Georgia, and I'm happy, and I'm joyful, and I'm so happy, because I'm a child of God.

Rickie: Amen. That's right.

Georgia: And it's by the grace of God that I get a chance to see you guys another day, and that I get a mama like Rickie. The grace is wide enough for everyone. The Holy Spirit is wide enough. Hallelujah. OK? So, music and my whole life is because of a miracle. When I was three years old, I got sung back into my body by God's grace. And there's a song that my mom wrote with this brother named Isaiah. And it was called, "God is Alive and Well." And it goes, "God is alive and well, living in the USA. He's alive and well, living in China, too."

You know, all this kind of thing. "He lives in me." Right? And I remember, I was so mad, I just wanted to go see the Father again. So, I walked out my body. I really stormed out. Because I was like, I don't like my father. I like the Heavenly Father. And I'm gone. Peace be. Kind of like that. And I remember watching Sesame Street outside my body in the hospital. And looking at the TV screen like, "Oh, but they all down there."

I'd be thinking, God, you gonna have to say something. And Mom would come sing, "God is Alive and Well" to me. And that's when I'd look. And I remember, next thing I knew, there's like a vamp at the end that goes, [singing] "It is His power." Right? And there was one day, I think it was in the sixth week? [singing] "It is His." And I came back singing about God's power. That's how I came back. That's me. So, I've been given the grace to be here to sing of God's power. That's my life. And that's what God is. That's what God is.

Music and my whole life is because of a miracle. When I was three years old, I got sung back into my body by God's grace.

Omu Ade: What I'm supposed to say after that? Hi, my name is Ade. Omu Ade. I was born and raised in Haiti. I always heard music around me. My father plays sports, but all his brothers were musicians. They were always playing music. The first song that I remember that's embedded in my head is a Mariam Makeba song.

I remember hearing that in Haiti and coming to the States and hearing it. I remember how I felt being transported back to Haiti every time that song came on. And then there was another song, "I Gotcha" by Joe Tex. I have a younger sister, and she loved that song when she was a baby. When I came from Haiti, we didn't speak any English, but she used to sing the song every time it came on, so, that's another song that resonates, that sticks in my head. So, music has always been with me, all kinds of music, right?

My uncle was in a band in Haiti playing Haitian music. When we came to the States, in Boston, he was playing funk and R&B. He's practicing in the basement, so I'm growing up with that. And I have another uncle that loves jazz, so I heard that a lot. My father loves salsa music. In fact, growing up, in his car the radio was always on a Spanish station, and we were forbidden to change it.

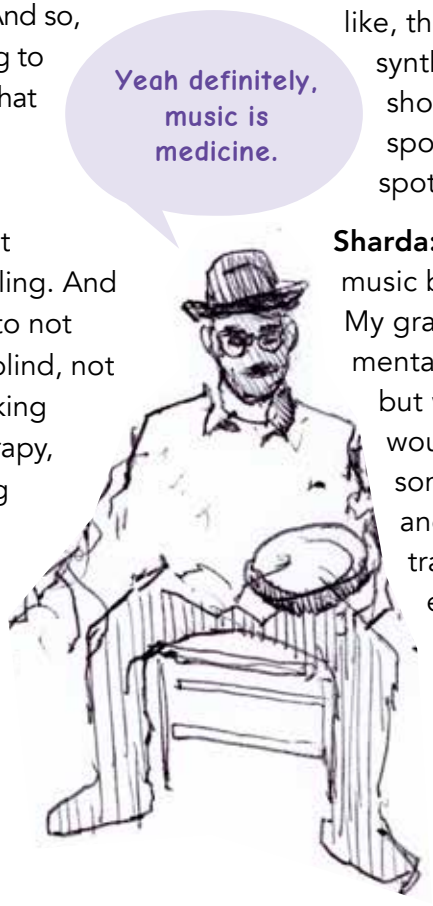
I play percussion instruments, I play the berimbau and all the instruments for capoeira, and drums I learned with Baba Felipé, but I feel like my real musical instruments are the turntables. I have the digital versions of the turntables here today. I love to play music from all around the world, everything, anything that sounds good to me, that feels good, I like to play. And I like to see how it makes people react.

So earlier, I was playing a couple of songs and I saw how it resonated with folks and how some people were singing the song, and people that didn't know it were still moving to it. That's the love, and that's the joy. I get joy out of that.

Charles: The next question is, what are your thoughts of music as medicine? How does it heal you, yourself? How does it uplift those who hear it? How can it protect people?

Omu: Yeah definitely, music is medicine. I remember a time I was going through depression, and nobody told me I was going through depression, right? I just assessed myself as going through depression. And the reason I realized it was depression is because I didn't have music playing around me all the time. I realized I'm not waking up to music. I'm not having music in the shower. I'm not going to sleep with music. "Yo, I think something's wrong with you, bro, for real." And I was like, okay, the way I'm gonna fix that is, I'm gonna wake up to music, I'm gonna go to sleep to music, and I'm gonna have music all around me, right? And so, every minute, every chance I get, I'm listening to music, and it really helped me get through what I was going through.

Georgia: My mom's a choir director. She'd been a choir director, music director, all that kind of stuff. The music's function is for healing. And picking up from the story, right, I was able to not need a wheelchair and not be completely blind, not be a quadriplegic. I remember my mom taking me to the dance collective for physical therapy, while I'm coming back into, really rebirthing back into the world. And I remember it's all these rhythms and all this music bringing me back. And ever since coming back, everything sounds like a song, because going from being blind to when you can see again, it's music, it's like the music of light. In the beginning, God said, let there be light. And I believe that light is the tone that everything's dancing to.



My mom became a part of a spiritual community, and they'd send CD's to the house, and they'd say listen to this. It'd be like, upwards of 10 pieces of mail every two months. I'd play this in the hospital, and my cancer went into remission. I don't have cancer no more, you know? This is my mama. This is the kind of person I come from. So, it was never no doubt that music is healing.

When I was a teenager, sometimes my mom would be concerned about worldly success and stuff like that. And I remember it being so clear to me that, you're healing people, like, this is the real deal. It's like, you're talking about synthetic lights to make somebody look good, but you should be talking about cosmic light. You got that cosmic spotlight on you, child. You healing people, that's a spotlight. You got utility.

Sharda: I can share my personal experience. I've witnessed music be medicine and I've also felt music be medicine. My grandpa was in his last days and not super responsive mentally, but he loved music. He didn't know who we were, but we put on tapes for him, and he'd be alive again. He would be like: "Oh, I'm here." I guess it could even be something as simple as when you're having a bad day and you put on a song, and it completely changes the trajectory of your day. It can move you. It can move energy. It's incredibly healing. I grew up singing traditional South Indian music. It's transformed my feelings, giving me life, giving me purpose, and that's healing to me.

Rickie: I can't talk too much because I'm still crying from listening to Georgia. It touched me because she was telling the truth. I remember what she went

through, and I remember the power of music and the part it played. As a composer, I know music is a healer and love is a healer, and music about love and music that's written from love, because it has a very powerful medicine.

Once I got that part together, my life changed, because I thought I was just a singer looking for a record deal. But my journey was never supposed to be that. And once, my little 14-year-old daughter sat down, and I was crying because somebody had called and left a message for me that their record was on the radio. And I'm thinking, why do some people get to go, and others don't get to go? That was bothering me, and I sat down, and I started crying, and my mom was in town at that time, may she rest in peace, but she was sitting beside me. I had my mom on one side and my daughter on the other side and I'm in the middle. They want to know what's wrong. I said what happened, and Georgia, without missing a beat, she's like, "One day you're gonna realize that you came here to heal people and your music came to heal people," and she said, "It's gonna be all right."

> I grew up singing traditional South Indian music. It's transformed my feelings, giving me life, giving me purpose, and that's healing to me.

Jamael: The first time I realized that music is medicine was when I would see the connections it made, it would bring people together. Before I was born, my father's mother put him up for adoption and didn't tell my grandfather. And so, he grew up without a dad. After I was born, he was able to reconnect with him. But the way he was able to do it was, he was in L.A. and he knew his dad was around here. He would go out to jazz gigs and be like, "Hey, do you know this drummer?" And he met one of his father's best friends and he's like, "Yeah, I know Donald. Are you his son?" He called him up, and they met that night. And now, because of that, I'm so close with my grandpa—I could not imagine my life without him, to be honest. I just hung out with him. So, music has always been that, even before I was born.

Ptah: Yes, music indeed is medicine. Sound and intention plus focus create musical medicine, because you wouldn't have no music if you didn't have no intention or no sound. I want to go back to an experience yesterday that certified that music is medicine. Yesterday, I came from San Diego, and I went to Leimert Park, because most of our friends, drummers, were drumming out there. We went out there and we were drumming. And we see some Rastas come up, they were walking across the street. We were still playing. The next thing you know, they started chanting Nyabinghi for three hours. Check this out. We were across the street drumming and then we heard the "doom, doom." All us drummers and most the people who was out there in Leimert Park went over to them.

The vibration from them chanting Nyabinghi all morning really changed everyone. Everyone was healed. I felt good. Everybody was smiling and moving. It was great. So, yes, music is medicine. Especially when you use it for that. It can hurt you. It depends on the tone and frequency and the intention that you have with the music. That's what it is. They say guns don't kill people. People kill people. Same thing with music. It's your intention

that you put into it. Music is medicine. The best medicine is cosmic medicine. When you're living from your heart, and listening to the rhythm of a universal orchestra, you live and walk in healing.

Charles: All right, this is the speed round. This is the last question I'm gonna ask y'all. It's a deep question. I want you to talk about how you know when you're in the zone. When you in that space where things is happening and you're like, wow, how did I get here? Like, you either connected with the people around you or you connected with something higher. How do you know when you're in that space?

Ptah: Wow, yeah, okay. There's two scenarios that I noticed when I know I'm zoning. When I'm freestyling with somebody. It's not traditional music, it may be a hip-hop beat. It's a freestyle I'm creating spontaneously, and I'm mouthing the sound I want to make with the drum. If anybody know me and watch me drum, you may see me. I'm saying something and I'm translating through my hands. When that get to happening, I'm listening to what they're putting down and I don't know the next thing they're gonna do but when I hear it, I got something for it.

And, when I'm playing my djembe and a rapper is rapping, they like it because I'm listening to what they're saying, and I accent them, and it keeps them going. I zone out. I completely zone out until we stop. Where was I? What was that? You know? I'm back. Those are two scenarios when I'm zoning out: when my mouth get to moving and I'm talking, and when I'll just disappear. I'm there but I disappear, yeah.

Jamael: Yeah, I really feel that, when you zone out and then you're like, all right, I'm back. I can tell when I'm not focused

or tapped in, when I'm worried about myself, like my timing, my sound, or my touch. When I'm really in it, then my body just reacts because I kind of train for it, right? I practice so that when I'm in the moment, I can just be in the moment. So, when I'm tuned in, I can feel it just wash over you. You know, you're worried about everything else except you.

Rickie: I'm in the zone when everybody's having a good time. When everybody's happy and they're moved by the music, I know I'm in the zone.

Sharda: I agree with everything. I have no concept of when I'm in the zone. I'm everything—except whatever I claim my identity is when I'm not in the zone. That's just gone. Everything's gone. I'm something else. I'm someone else.

Georgia: In the zone, it's another word for trance. It's a hypnotic space where God can speak directly.

Omu: For me, it's about not being conscious anymore or making decisions about what's happening, you're just a vessel and energy happens. For me, it's like the music chooses what I play. Right? I'm not intentionally deciding, I'm gonna play this in this way. When I'm in the zone the songs just come in, they pop up at me and play what pops up.

Charles: All right, I appreciate your patience. I think it's music time. For those that don't know, there's a playlist as part of this exhibit and Georgia has a song on my playlist, "Great Blacks." That's one of the greatest hooks of all time, "Great Blacks." And Rickie has a song on there, and Jamael has a song on there too, so y'all on my playlist. This exhibit has a playlist. So, some of my favorite artists is right here, right now. We're going to play a little bit of drumming for a minute, and then Ade will take us out with some ones and twos on the turntable.

Charles Porter and Ptah Ahochi Tehuti Eil

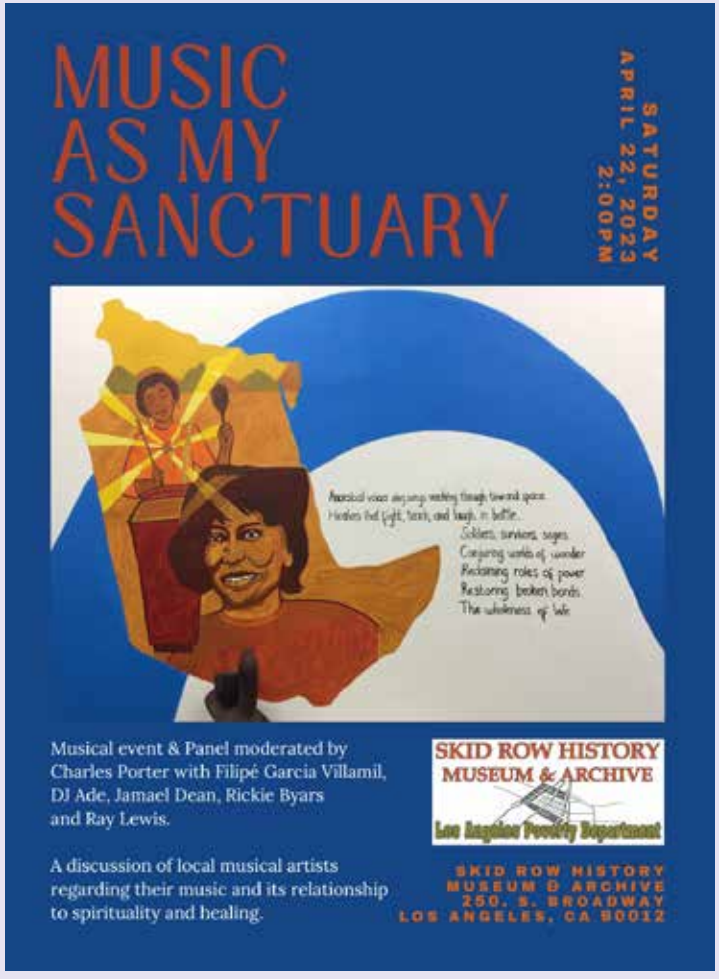
Charles: *The exhibition playlist is a compilation of the songs I have played at community events and activities. Music is a powerful medicine and can transform the spaces it permeates. These songs celebrate the Black diaspora, our geniuses, resilience, and limitless spiritual power. Here are my comments on a few of the selected songs.*

***I've Known Rivers,* Gary Bartz**
This song is a Langston Hughes poem. It is one of my favorite songs and speaks to the rich heritage of Black people.

***Optimistic,* Sounds of Blackness**
This is one of the songs that I try to play at community events as it is positive and uplifting. It gives a message of hope and possibility and resilience.

***Sorrow Tears and Blood,* Fela Aníkúlápó Kútì**
This is a powerful song by the Nigerian artist Fela Aníkúlápó Kútì. This song dispels the myth of white supremacy, and explains how Europeans spread sorrow, tears, and bloodshed across the globe.

***Golden,* Jill Scott**
The song I frequently play as it celebrates the value of one's life and the importance of one's existence.



***Closer,* Goapele**
This song Is well received as has a very spiritual energy to it. It also references transcending one's current position and people achieving their dreams. It has a very healing energy.

***Denko,* Oumou Sangaré**
This is one my favorite songs from Oumou Sangaré, a female singer from Mali. This musical style was traditionally sung by the hunters who were the keepers of history and medicine. This is the root of the music that we know as the blues. The sounds are very familiar, showing the connection that we have to the motherland.

***Expansions*, Lonnie Liston Smith**
Classic 70's track invoking the expansion of one's consciousness. Infectious groove.

***Got My Mojo Working*, Ann Cole**
This is the original version of a song Muddy Waters made popular. Mojo is an African term for a spiritual object of power. Many old blues songs reference African spiritual practices (hoodoo) such as the use of black cat bones, goofer dust, and roots. These practices gave the strength and confidence to endure and survive the social terror many were subjected to.

***Grazing in the Grass*, Hugh Masekela**
Timeless track from South African legend. Hard to believe this song is from the 60's. Classic.

***African Salsa*, Pape Fall**
Example of African salsa. Salsa has African roots but the Cubans took it back home to the motherland and it was widely embraced and propagated. This artist is from Senegal.

***Be Thankful For What You've Got*, William DeVaughn**
Classic 70's track that reminds us to practice gratitude and exhibit dignity and pride.

***Natty Dread*, Bob Marley**
So many great Bob Marley tracks. This is a song of spiritual transcendence and liberation. Natty dread is in contrast to western/white beliefs and standards.

***Be Real Black For Me*, Donnie Hathaway/Roberta Flack**
These legends met at Howard University and this is a powerful song celebrating Black love and Black beauty.

***Funky Drummer*, James Brown**
The poet Amiri Baraka once said that if Elvis was king, then James Brown is God. James Brown affected Black artists across the globe with a unique, powerful, funky groove. His music calls your inner being and evokes a response.

***Before I Let Go*, Maze**
Classic party jam and crowd favorite. Folks like to sing along and dance when this track comes on.

***Mercy, Mercy, Mercy*, Cannonball Adderley Quintet**
Classic jazz track that feels good to listen to.

***Cantaloupe Island*, Donald Byrd**
Another classic jazz track that makes you feel good when you hear it.

***Natural Mystic*, Bob Marley**
One of my theme songs as a fellow Mystic seeker. This song resonates deeply and transcends time and space. If you listen careful, you will hear. The air whispers.

***Tribute to Obabi*, The Last Poets**
The Last Poets were known for their spoken word, which was driven by African and Afro-Latino rhythms. This song is a Yoruba song to Ogun the Orisa of technology, hunting, and war.

***Bam Bam*, Sister Nancy**
Another classic dance hall track, bass, and voice. Perfect combination of elements.

***Elejigbo*, Lijadu Sisters**
Yoruba song showcasing cultural tradition of harmonizing/ synchronizing songs and chants. A unique sound to hear cultural performers moving in union with grace.

***Don't Forget Who You Are*, Commo**
This songs hook embodies the concept of sankofa, going back to learn from the past to be able to move forward and achieve. Knowing your true worth and power.

***Black Truck*, Mereba**
Another song with well blended elements. Swag, and the courage to be you despite social pressures otherwise. Dope.

***Great Blacks*, Georgia Anne Muldrow**
Awesome song with one of my favorite hooks. Celebrating the power of the ancestors to inspire and support us. We are our ancestors and are destined for greatness.

***Diamond Joe*, Big Charlie Butler**
Field recording from Mississippi showcasing Black vocal esthetics. The sound of Blackness. Singing that give you chills and goosebumps.

***Home Is Where The Hatred Is*, Esther Phillips**
A powerful song about trauma and its role in fueling addiction. The quest for healing, safety, wellness, and liberation.

***Rara (Ti Celia)*, Boukman Eksperyans**
This is an example of the music carried to Haiti that originates in the Kongo (Bantu culture). This is a music style played during Carnival. Haitian music also has strong elements of Benin (Dahomey) culture. That is where the word Vodun/Vodu/voodoo originates, which means a spiritual force/entity. This is African culture and Haiti is celebrated as the first free Black Nation in the New World to defeat European control.

***Mangoni*, Nahawa Doumbia**
Another great singer of the hunter music of Mali

***Gangan Move Tet 0*, Racine Mapou De Azor**
Another Haitian song with strong Kongo (Bantu) influences.

***Ain't Life Grand*, Jimetta Rose**
Celebration of life and gratitude from a local star and her community choir.

***When There Was No Time*, Rickie Byars**
Deep metaphysical track that takes you to other dimensions. Otherworldly experience. Timeless selection from the legendary Rickie Byars.

***Galaxy in Leimert*, Jamael Dean**
The future of jazz. Dope track celebrating the power of the Leimert Park community and local black culture.

***Workin' Women Blues*, Valerie June**
Black folk music with that Tennessee country twang. Amazing artist.

***Black Cat Bone*, Jessie Mae Hemphill**
Another amazing blues singer who inspired Valerie June and touches the soul. This track talks about Black folk religion and magic. Her man has some spell on her she can't shake. He must have that all powerful black cat bone.

***I'm Troubled About My Soul*, Lillie Knox**
Field recording of classic Black sound and spiritual invocation from South Carolina. Another transcendental song.

***Long John*, "Lightning" Washington and group**
An example of work songs that migrated from plantations to prisons. Power to create and transform hardship into something that invigorates and sustains. Resilience. Beats made by the rhythmic motion of axes chopping wood.

***Ring the Alarm*, Tenor Saw**
Classic Jamaican dancehall track. Powerful baseline and vocals. Adrenaline.

***No Code*, Teddyson John**
Soca tract celebrating the spirit of Carnival and people coming together to fill the streets in protest to laws and rules restricting the joy and movement of Black folks. "We don't want no code (bonds), all we want is road (movement)"

***Chango (Bata)*, Grupo AfroCuba**
This is an example of the music carried to Cuba and spread through the diaspora that originates in Southwestern Nigeria among the Yoruba people. The song celebrates Sango, the Orisha of justice, lightning, virility and leadership.

***Bantú*, Los Muñequitos de Matanzas**
This is an example of the music carried to Cuba and spread through the diaspora that originates in the Kongo. Bantu culture is extensive and extends across the continent of Africa.

L to R: Charles Porter, Adelene Bertha, Kevin Cedano, Lamar Profit, Roshon Cornett

We're Not Bad Kids! is a 2004 documentary showing the lives of young people living in Skid Row. The 26-minute film spotlights the social conditions they endured as well as their engagement with United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP), a program of Social Model Recovery Systems.

Franklin Arburtha came up with the concept for the documentary, and the film incorporates footage shot by Franklin and his peers living in the Ford Hotel. A woman living in the Ford Hotel was shot and killed by her boyfriend. This tragedy motivated Franklin to make his documentary.

UCEPP staff worked alongside Franklin and Paul Sabu Rogers to edit, record, and incorporate additional interviews and perspectives challenging the narrative that unhoused Black and Brown youth in Skid Row were a source of trouble. UCEPP's relationship with the youth began in 2003, and connections have been maintained with the vast majority of the individuals depicted in the film, who are now adults.

Charles: The documentary, *We're Not Bad Kids!* is a time capsule, so that to me is fascinating. I know you're like, wow, you had a lot of hair back then. I know. I didn't have no gray hair back then. We won't point that out.

When we made the film, we tried to be as faithful to the voices of the youth as we could. And we knew there were different perspectives. And I have to give a slight disclaimer. We really didn't have a relationship with any of the parents. And so, it was kind of interesting that we became like surrogate parents. We became this extra youth program. I want to mention, there were other youth programs at Central City Church of the Nazarene, and Say Yes, School on Wheels. There was also a youth program at the Ford Hotel. So, we weren't the only one. But we were a space that was culturally responsive.

The young people gravitated to us because we really took some time. And you hear Franklin mention that it feels like counseling when we come here because people actually listen to us. People actually talk to us and share information. And in the documentary, you saw some of our staff, (Zelenne, Socorro, and Leslie, rest in peace) were passionate about having these vibrant, strong, powerful voices, young people that really wanted to be heard, wanted to be seen, and wanted a better neighborhood. You saw the political responses always saying, children shouldn't have to ask for this. We need to do something about this. This is terrible.

That was over 20 years ago. And I don't want to downplay the challenges — we know the data. People that experience homelessness, their life spans are shorter. People don't live as long as they should when they experience homelessness.

L to R: Zelenne Cardenas, Kevin Cedano, and friends

People are subjected to traumas that they shouldn't have to be exposed to. And so, we don't want to downplay. When the young people were talking, they were like, we don't like living here. There are some things that we see here that we really don't like and that we're afraid of. And they were honest. That's what they were experiencing. So, we wanted to capture that. But at the same time, we didn't want it to be the same narrative of Skid Row as a terrible place. We wanted to show them laughing and having fun and we wanted to show their connection to the community.

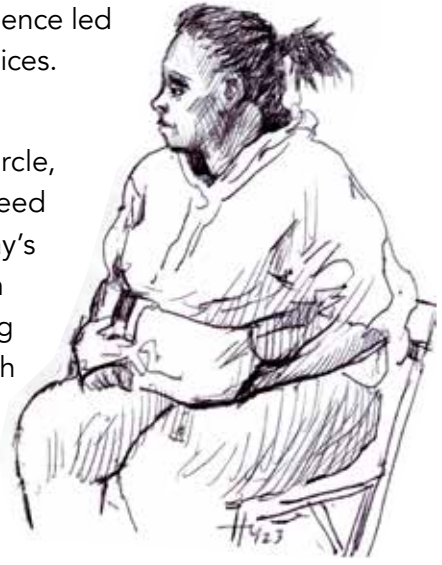
The first question I want to throw out to the young people is, what would you say were one or two of the biggest things you learned just living in Skid Row and growing up in Skid Row? And I know some of these old images could be triggering for folks, so I appreciate you taking that journey with us. But looking back now, what would you say are some of the things that stick with you about growing up in Skid Row?

Roshon Cornett: It's been 20 years since I was last on Skid Row, but one of the things that stuck with me is that everybody has a story. Everyone has gone through something traumatic, and it's just all how people chose to deal with it. Everyone has a story or reason for why they ended up on Skid Row, so it's not just everyone was on drugs and alcohol. No, everyone has a story. I've spoken to people who, when you hear their story, you thought, what are you doing here? I was a lawyer, I was a doctor, I had a good job, I had a home, I had a family, I had all this. You know, a series of unfortunate events happened, and now I'm here.

This was 20 years ago. I was still a teenager. I was 13 when I first got to Skid Row, and I was about 18 when I left, and then came back at 19. My life has been kind of a roller coaster. I don't want to say that being on Skid Row impacted that, but it probably did, and that experience led me to make some not so good choices.

Everyone just needs a chance, an opportunity to come around full circle, however long that takes. People need a support system, because in today's world, everyone is just focusing on themselves, and when you're trying to navigate the world without much of a support system, it can be exceedingly difficult to just move on throughout the day.

Everyone just needs a chance, an opportunity to come around full circle, however long that takes.



I personally wish I could say that the homelessness thing was a thing of the past. I'm experiencing it right now, but it's a little different being an adult and being a single parent. But I see good days in the future, and that being a part of the Skid Row community is not inherently a bad thing. And that was the purpose of the documentary, to show people that live outside of the community that there's more to us than meets the eye.

I'm sure prior to the documentary coming out, not a lot of people knew that there were children living on Skid Row, because its history has been built with adult men, so a lot of people already have this narrative about what it's like to live on Skid Row, the type of people who are down there. This documentary and all the other projects that we participated in basically broke through that barrier and showed people that we're more than just a homeless group. We're people too, and we have a voice, and we have a chance to sound off.

Charles: So, Lamar is one of those in transition. I'm putting him in the transitional age, youth category. Lamar, when he started coming around, he wasn't a little kid, but he was part of the package deal of folks that were like that. "He's the homie. Can he come? Can he have some snacks too?" Yeah, snacks for everyone. So, Lamar, what was your experience being at that time at the Ford Hotel? What it was like and what impact did it have on you?

Lamar Profit: Okay, my experience at the Ford Hotel was a little rough in the beginning because I didn't know nobody. At first, you know, I wasn't really down there for good reasons, so there's no need to get into that. But then I started living in the Ford and started meeting the young kids. I met Franklin first because he came and introduced himself and started showing me the ropes and wanted to know all about me and stuff. He was real friendly.

And then I met everybody else like Mike. I knew that was his cousin and he had some older friends, big trade dudes. Everybody was so friendly then. It was a tight little knit family. Everybody had different floors. It was cool. After a while, we'd get to hanging out and going outside and chilling and running up and down the building and everybody was having fun. And I was like, "Okay, this is cool." It ain't bad up in here and all that stuff.

> Everybody protected each other. If people got into it with the homie or friends or certain people, you know, everybody's coming to their aid.

But when I go outside, walk down Skid Row, now it's game on, you know, it's got to be a whole different mentality because of situations and people. And now that I'm a little older, other cats is looking at me. It was just a different ball game back then compared to today. And the Ford was raggedy. I mean, it was raggedy. Raggedy, yeah.

The Ford ain't raggedy outside, and the people on the inside are beautiful. It was a tight knit family. Everybody got along. Everybody protected each other. If people got into it with the homie or friends or certain people, you know, everybody's coming to their aid. Everybody, it was a nice little family knit.

I've learned a lot from the Skid Row community over these 20 years I've been out here. And I know one thing, they never stopped supporting me. They always, always, even homeless people, they look at me today and always say, "I'm so proud of you." And it always lifts me up. So, I don't want to never deny my people.

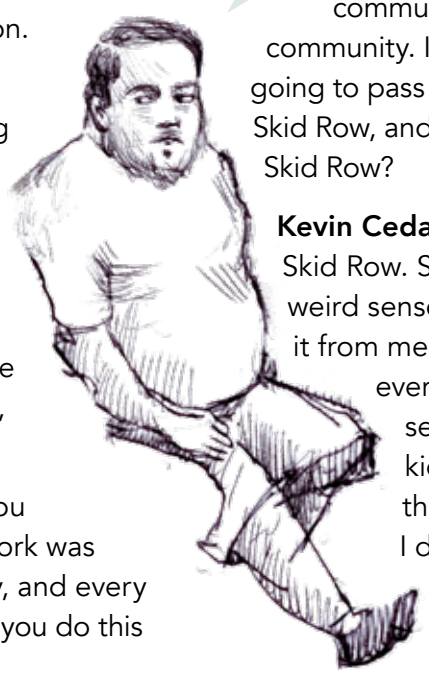
Charles: Kevin lived next door. So, I was embarrassing Kevin throughout the film because he was a little baby. He's a little baby. He's grown now. But Kevin lived next door. He lived at the Ohio Hotel, which is a few doors down. An interesting thing about Kevin is that we have multiple generations of youth. So, Adelene was from one of our newer generations. She's the new generation. These are the OGs. But Kevin was a part of every generation.

And, you know what, I thought about that. Kevin was a part of every generation. So, the cool thing about, not to embarrass Kevin and Lamar, but, like Lamar said, we've always been connected. And as Roshon pointed out, we try to stay in touch with everybody, and if we can offer support, whatever we can do, because it is community that's continued to this day. That's the power of community and connection. And for us, that's the prevention work we do.

People always want to know how do you know you prevented something? How do you know your work was impactful? And we're funded through the county, and every year we have to do an annual report for what did you do this year? It doesn't capture the stories of the lives that you affect and how you impact folks, and how people stay connected and reach out to you.

So, Kevin wasn't at the Ford, but he was part of the youth group, the original OG group. And through all our groups, Kevin was around. And so, when we started advocating to create the ReFresh Spot, Kevin and Lamar were two of the people that we first thought of to staff it. Lamar was one of the first employees of the ReFresh Spot. Lamar was there on day one, 2017, he was there. And both Kevin and Lamar currently work at the ReFresh Spot.

That's just beautiful, to be able to come from the community and be able to give back to the community and to be employed, giving back to the community. I just want to celebrate your work. So, Kevin, we're going to pass it to you. As a baby growing up, what it was like in Skid Row, and what do you remember most about growing up in Skid Row?



Kevin Cedano: Well, to start off, I was born and raised in Skid Row. So, I didn't have to move. I was used to it, in a weird sense. My parents tried to shelter me, tried to hide it from me. But I was a nosey kid. I didn't pay attention to everything. So even if I didn't know what it was, I've seen it. And it's kind of hard to hide things from kids because it's always there. And obviously, throughout the years, I understood what it is, and I didn't want to involve in it. I still don't want to involve in it. But living part of Skid Row, when I was in school, I didn't care. I told everybody

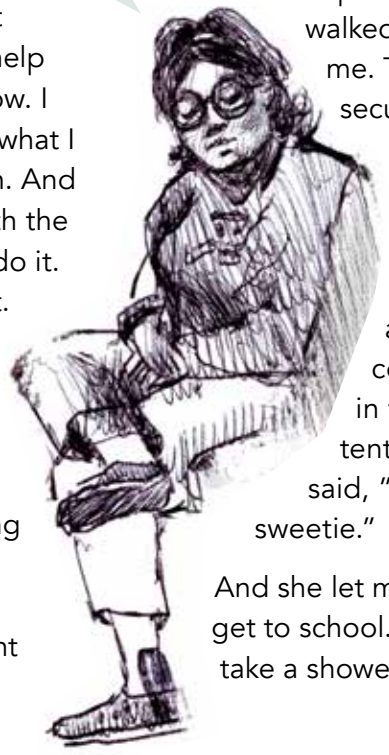
I'm from Skid Row. Sometimes I got targeted. I was bugged, bullied, just because I was a Skid Row kid. And I didn't care because Skid Row is just a name. It's not going to define who I am. I'm going to make my own history. And that's how I've been doing it ever since. And being part of Social Model helped me develop myself. When I was young, I was shy and quiet. I didn't hardly even talk. They helped me develop my voice that I have today. And ever since, I've been active, being constantly active, and using my voice to help people every day.

And if it wasn't for the experience of living down here, I could have drowned — definitely. And in a real way, it helped me develop. Seeing what people are going through, it's made me want to go help them. Which is why I remain here. I still live in Skid Row. I want to do my part to help these people. No matter what I do, I want to give it my all and help in every way I can. And that's why I'm still here, doing what I can, working with the ReFresh. Because if no one does it, someone has to do it. Someone has to do it. I might as well take a step to it.

Charles: That rhymes by the way. Now, last but not least, Adelene. I mentioned that we have multiple iterations of our youth program. And I have to apologize, in the old, old days, we had snacks, but people weren't getting paid. But we ended up getting some funding, which was cool, to give a stipend to young people. So, we were able to provide stipends for young people's participation and their involvement in the community. That was really an attraction, and something that I think more youth programs should consider, particularly when you're working with youth that experience extreme poverty.

If you could talk about your experience, what you remember most about your time living in Skid Row in your formative years and how it impacted you.

I don't see me winding up as homeless as a bad thing. I think of it as a blessing because if I never went to Skid Row...I would never have met anybody.



Adelene Bertha: OK. OK. I ended up in Skid Row because my mom was experiencing domestic violence. She tried to sell me to her boyfriend so he would pay the rent. And because I didn't want to have sex with him, I decided to run away. I winded up at Union Rescue Mission when I was 16. When I walked in there and I told them I was 18, they believed me. They didn't ask me for my ID or my social security. They just told me to get in line and wait for a bed.

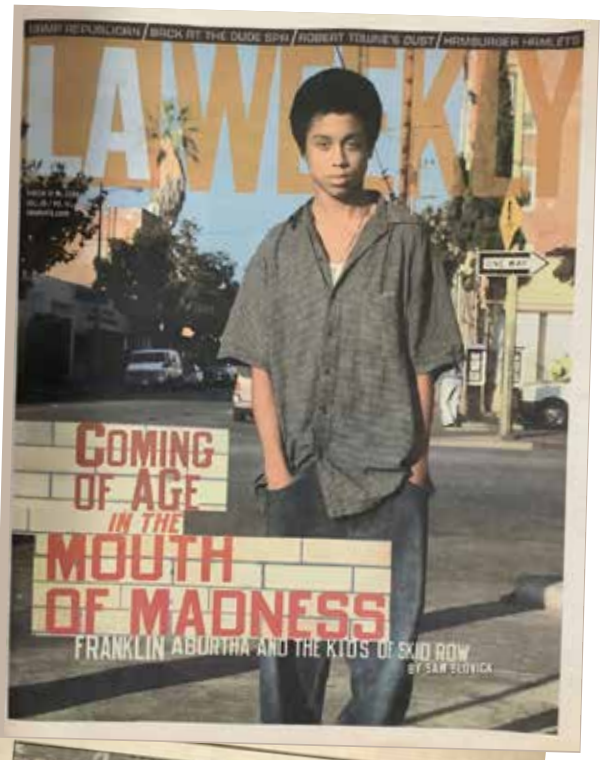
But at some point, they started asking me about social security and other stuff and they realized I didn't know what they were talking about. At some point, they told me that I didn't come in time to get the bed. There was a lady in front of the Union Rescue Mission that had a tent. And she told me I could sleep in her tent. She said, "You have nowhere to go, you come in here, sweetie."

And she let me stay in her tent. And then, I would leave early, get to school. I would have to sneak on the bus to school, take a shower there. Thank goodness I was playing varsity

basketball at the time, so I could use the lockers whenever I wanted. And at the same time, I had started the first Honor Society at my school. I started it because I knew if I was part of the Honor Society, that I could come into the school 30 minutes earlier. It gave me an opportunity to be in a building. And around that time, I met my current boyfriend. We've known each other for 10 years and been together nine in October. He introduced me to Charles. I remember just walking in, and this guy was talking about "your culture."

And I'm looking at him like, this guy is crazy. And I'm like, I thought we were here for snacks. I didn't know about the stipends. So, it was just a snack. And so, I was like, okay, I don't have to wait in line. And I had just got on the wait list for Covenant House California in Hollywood. I remember just sitting there looking at Charles and thinking, wow, this guy knows so much. I was just listening to him. And we were looking at him like he was the only thing that mattered in that moment.

After school, I would rush to come to Skid Row because he knew so much. I had lost my stepdad to alcohol poisoning because he didn't know he was diabetic. He was taking his insulin and drinking vodkas, little vodkas, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And I didn't see alcohol as a bad thing because he wasn't, quote unquote, an angry alcoholic. When he would get drunk, he was more fun. So, when I came to Skid Row and I would see people drinking, and they were smiling and



Central City community members unveiled a mural at the Para Los Niños Childcare Center at Sixth and Gladys streets. The mural was painted by artist Daniel Ruiz (far right) in an effort to clean up the neighborhood.

photo by Richard Smith

laughing. I just thought they were just normal people and that they were just getting a little drink on. When I looked at them, I would see my stepfather.

What impacted me the most is the people that Charles was introducing us to talk at City Council and stuff. I remember Charles was like, "You guys want to go to City Council and talk for a public hearing?" and I was like, sure.

I remember going to a public hearing for the very first time and noticing that every last person was on their phone while we were talking. And so, I was like "What's the point of talking if they're not listening?" And I think that's when General Jeff started rapping on the mic at a public hearing and I was like what is this, that guy's crazy. Afterwards he said, "You got to dot your i's and cross your t's."

For me it was a really reflective moment because I thought I was learning everything there was to learn about people and stuff in school. But I was getting a whole other world of knowledge from people that didn't realize that the knowledge that they were getting out was so impactful and so empowering. That's something that you can't get in psychology. You can't get that inside schools, you have to get that in life. I don't see me winding up as homeless as a bad thing. I think of it as a blessing because if I never went to Skid Row, I never would have met Charles Porter, I would never have met anybody.

Charles: I do want to say that it has been an honor to know these young adults and to be part of their life. As you saw in the documentary, just celebrating birthdays was a big thing. We still do that in the park. Happy birthday! That's important. Imagine you're a child and people have a cake and put some candles on it and all your friends come and we party. We try to make a big deal out of that. It's a blessing to stay in contact with folks and some of the folks in the documentary got married, people went to their weddings, they've got children — all these different milestones. I went to a couple of graduations of folks up here, and I embarrassed them a little bit. That's always fun too, it's like who's he? He doesn't look like he's related to you.

I didn't mean to hog the mic. Anybody else want to talk about

changes, the things that you've seen have changed since then?

Adelene: I would say the language. When I started going to UCEPP, Charles had us watch that video and then talk about it and I remember some of the language that is used, like "thugs." That language is not used now in Skid Row. I feel like people are more sensitive to other people's plight and situation, but at the same time, the language in the film emphasizes how the children looked at the world during that time. It also shows the impact of the advocacy that has happened throughout the community to change how we view each other within the community. Also, the parks have changed a lot and that's also due to the community advocacy. When it comes to Skid Row, I think overall people have come together to have those conversations.

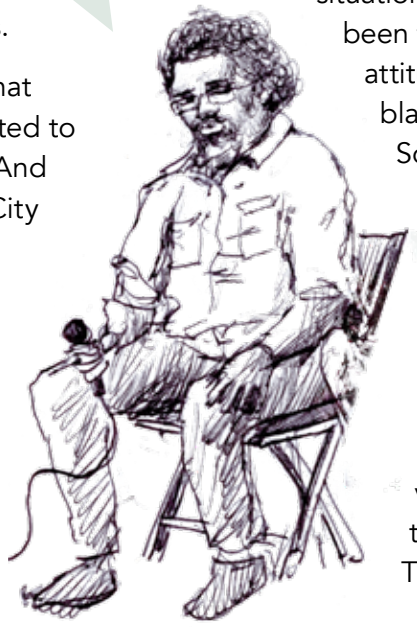
There were people who were part of Skid Row that didn't like it being called Skid Row and who wanted to be called Central City East. But that's changed. And so now no one ever says, "Welcome to Central City East." They say, "Welcome to the world-famous Skid Row."

Charles: That's right, they quote Coach Ron. Katherine?

Katherine McNenny (community/audience member): That was a really good film. What's so fascinating to me some of you have decided to stay in the community and work in the community and I know that you must have special insight into how to talk to people, how to help people in the community and I'm just wondering, what is that insight that you have?

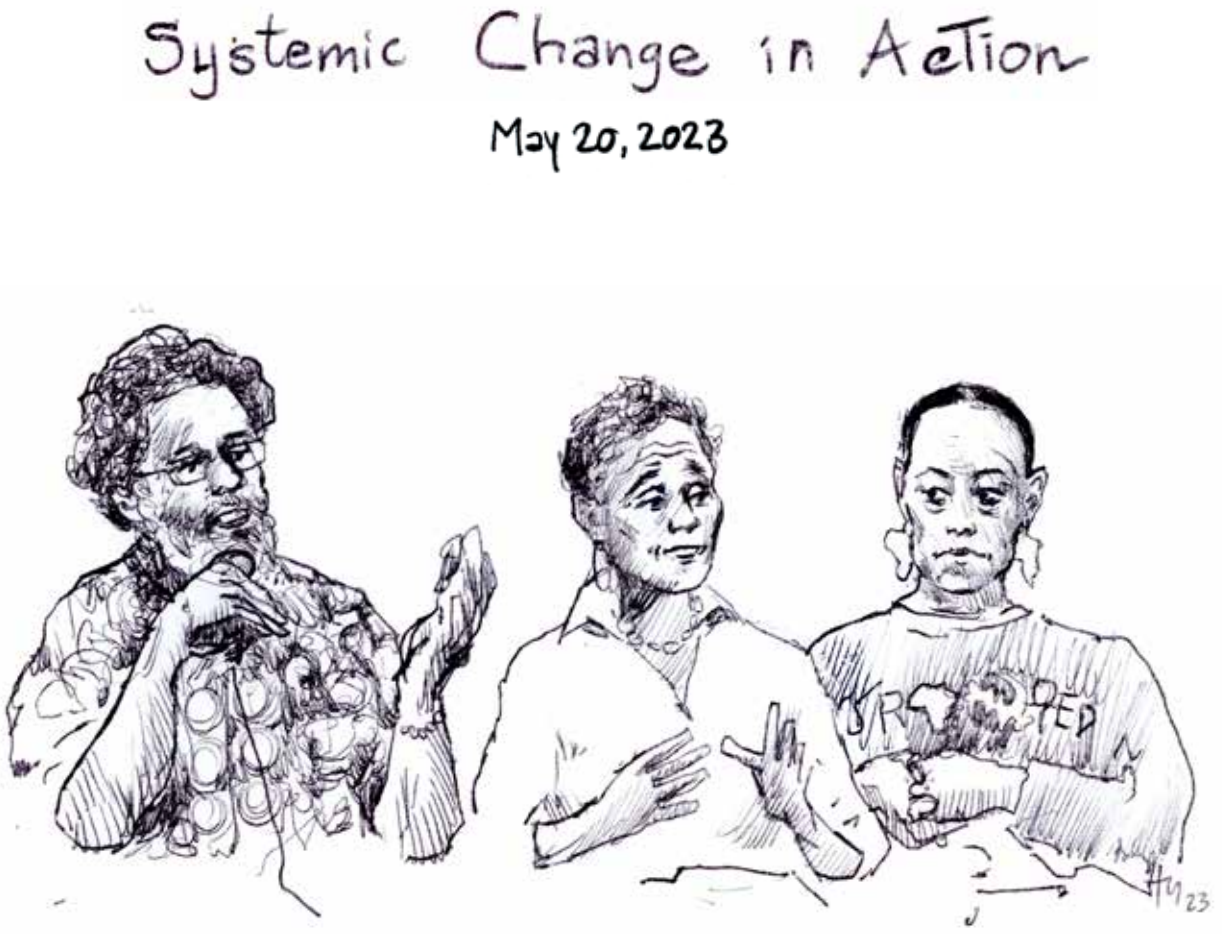
Kevin: Well, one thing, I will say is Mr. Porter's favorite word, it's all about patience. One thing that we do over there at The ReFresh, when it comes to talking to a guest, when it comes to one of our services, we give them patience. We ask what they need. We give them time to see what they want. We're going to give them time, see what they want. It's all about patience in the end of the day. And there's a way to talk. We always find a way to do it.

Anybody that works in Skid Row needs to be patient and compassionate. And if you don't have those qualities, then you shouldn't be here.



Charles: Anybody that works in Skid Row needs to be patient and compassionate. And if you don't have those qualities, then you shouldn't be here. Because if you have people that are in vulnerable situations that are already exposed to trauma and have been traumatized, it's not trauma-informed to have bad attitudes and be impatient and to deflect and put the blame back on the person who's already struggling. So, I think there are people that care, people in this room that do really great work and go above and beyond because it is what needs to be done.

So, I thank y'all for hanging out with us on this Friday. And thank you for the great folks at the Skid Row History Museum and the Los Angeles Poverty Department, and always an honor to tell our stories and document our history. I think it's very important, and these are folks that are part of the history of Skid Row. And check out the exhibit, Thursday, Friday, Saturday.



L to R: Charles Porter; Mary Lee, a lawyer who works to dismantle racially biased systems and build equitable neighborhoods; Dr. Cheryl Tawede Grills, a psychology professor whose work is grounded in overcoming the effects of inter-generational trauma in the Black diaspora.

Charles: Today's panel's gonna talk about systemic change. We're gonna cover the three A's of systemic change. The first A is awareness. Awareness, we gotta know what's going on. The second A is accountability. And the third A is advocacy. The first A is raising our awareness about what happened. What happened? The accountability piece deals with who's responsible for what happened. And advocacy is a discussion about how can we change it?

I work for United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP). It's a program, a social model, meaning we bring the community together to stand up for the community. I started working in Skid Row in '99. One of our first campaigns was around nuisance abatement.

We'd learned from the Community Coalition in South L.A. that our current mayor, Mayor Karen Bass, found that focusing on "nuisance abatement" was a way of holding business operators in the community accountable for activities occurring on their property. When we started, we had to demonstrate that Skid Row was a neighborhood and a community.

In our early work with nuisance abatement, the head of the zoning department told us, "Okay, you documented all these problems, but what do you want us to do? This is Skid Row." Our response was, what do you do in other neighborhoods? And he was perplexed. "No, but this is Skid Row." When people at the top don't see Skid Row as a neighborhood, decisions they make aren't gonna support neighborhood or community. And so, we learned that we were involved in a fight for representation and voice as a community. Our fight to create a Skid Row Neighborhood Council was a fight to have the ability to define who we are, what we want, what's important for us.

We were successful in getting the Skid Row Park Advisory Board. That is an official entity that came from community advocacy. But the struggle for representation has continued to have many challenges, as we see with the Community Plan process. A lot of folks have been advocating so that the Downtown Community Plan really is responsive to Skid Row and includes a piece on equity.

I want to highlight that the two ladies you see here, they were very instrumental in a lot of the work that we've done at UCEPP, helping to frame our discussion of it and to document it, including our work at the ReFresh Spot.

When we talk about systems, it's not always policies, it's also practices that we can implement ourselves that support community and support wellness. And so, on that, I'm going to pass the mic to our first speaker, Mary Lee. Mary is an expert on public health advocacy to address land use policy, and she

will share with us historic impacts of inequitable practices. I consider Mary and our other speaker, Cheryl Grills, to be geniuses. So, this is a panel of geniuses.

Mary Lee: As Charles indicated, our work has challenged the assumption of the city regulators that this is not a community. It is exactly a community. It is exactly a neighborhood where people have children, where children need the same kinds of places to play, need the same kind of opportunities to go to school. It is a place where single adults live and will need the same kind of supports that everybody else needs. And it's a neighborhood that needs and is entitled to the same sorts of protections, and the same police or health responses, that any other community has.

And yet, Skid Row residents are always having to push this point with everybody who might challenge them, including local elected officials, local police and fire, and the folks that would exploit the vulnerability of community residents to addiction. Skid Row has always had to fight for the protections and supports and resources that are expected in other communities. It's an inequitable situation.

I'd like to address these practices, and policies in Skid Row and other communities. We first and foremost, need to understand what's happened and talk about that. Secondly, we need to challenge it by leading with equity, and leading with racial equity and specifics.

And "equity" is not the same as equality. Equality is to give everybody the same exact thing, and it sounds wonderful, "equal opportunity," and that doesn't work at all. It doesn't work because we're not in the same situation to begin with, and you can't overcome 400 years, 500 years of oppression by saying, "Okay, we're all free and we can all do what we want." Well first, we're not all free.

What "equity" does, that is much more effective, is that it gives people the ability to be judged and determined based on their circumstances. Equity says you're here now, and if you're here, we need to get you there. If we're here, we all have a chance to be there. Let's go. In taking that step forward, you may end up responding to one group whose needs are much stronger than another's, and so they're going to get more services, or get more attention, or get more chance to apply the policy. And we want to make sure that we do that in a way that is not just limited to the front end of the problem, not just the question of "access" or "opportunity." We want to see the outcomes.

When we talk about systems, it's not always policies, it's also practices that we can implement ourselves that support community and support wellness.

When we see policy makers or government looking for solutions, too often they want to see something quick, and that makes me think, "They don't really want to solve the problem. If you wanted to solve the problem, then you'd support the connections and the recognition that people can be seen, they can be heard, they can be valued and valuable for who they are."

Charles: We're gonna pass the mic to Cheryl Grills. Dr. Cheryl Tawede Grills is one of the formulators of Emotional Emancipation Healing Circles, and a member of the State Reparations Task Force. Dr. Grills will share her local work grounded in the experiences of the Black diaspora. One of the things I have admired about Dr. Grills is her ability to understand indigenous African systems of belief and perspectives, worldviews, and how that connects to us being healthy and well.

Cheryl Grills: At the end of the day, a neighborhood isn't always a community. A neighborhood is a place where people are together in a space, but they're not necessarily connected to each other. There's an important difference there. We need to be able to be in communities and from that foundation, do the work of community, so that the forces that Mary was talking about can stop dismissing us, erasing us, and dehumanizing us.

The reality is that for Black folk and people of color, we don't see an American dream. We see an American nightmare. And in the context of that nightmare, we are trying to live lives. We are trying to stay sane. We are trying to maintain our health. And that's hard to do. Because of this context, we're dealing with multi-generational oppression, injustice, and chronic stress.

Skid Row has always had to fight for the protections and supports and resources that are expected in other communities. It's an inequitable situation.

There's an African proverb from Senegal, and it says, "We are each other's medicine." But we can't be each other's medicine if we are disconnected because we're so stressed out. Oppression—that injustice, that chronic stress—impacts us psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. It can affect our very souls. It can compromise our sense of agency, that we can make things happen, that we can have the "ashe." It can take away our sense of hope.

Most critically and heartbreakingly, it can compromise our ability to see each other, be with each other, and do that from a place of compassion and connection. This country was kind of defined on a principle that some people get to be okay, and the rest of us just got to deal with it. So, Baldwin nailed it. He said, "People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them." We are still living out the shameful history of this country.

When we are faced with those circumstances, we end up experiencing trauma, racial trauma. And it happens at multiple levels, at the level of the individual, at the level of the collective. It is also historical, and it's intergenerational. The reality is that I carry my ancestors' racial trauma. I'm not making an analogy. I'm not talking just psychologically. I'm talking at the level of your genetics.

Epigenetics is finally catching up with what African wisdom knew, which is that we pass on to our children, and our children's, children, the stuff that happened to us. So today, my nervous system reacts much differently than someone who doesn't come from a family where they were lynched, where they were enslaved, where they were raped and beaten. So, what are those signs of trauma? Irritability, inability to sleep, headaches, feeling shame, feeling hopeless, chronic pain, addiction, feeling depression, the list goes on and on. And so, then what does Western medicine do? They give us some kind of pill. Take this pill and you'll get over it.

But the pill isn't dealing with the source of the problem. What it's doing is just passing this on to the next generation, because you will not have resolved it, to create space so our children don't have to continue to live that life. We're talking about understanding stress and how it affects our nervous system. When we are stressed, we become mobilized to fight or to run or to befriend or appease the source of threat. Or we can become immobilized. We go into freeze. I don't know what to

do; I'm just gonna look around and I hope maybe I can become invisible in the moment, right?

Whenever we go into states of stress, we come out of our social nervous system, which allows us to be connected to each other, that allows us to have patience with each other, that allows for compassion, which allows for us to see, feel, and hear one another, that allows us to be vulnerable. And that allows us to heal.

When you're in stress, the medical system talks about this thing called "allostatic load," that you can bear a certain amount of stress — your system can handle it. We, however, deal with "allostatic overload." Now, what does that look like? If you're on constant alert, if you're hyper-vigilant, if you're waiting for the next shoe to drop, then you're always ready and in fight-or-flight mode.

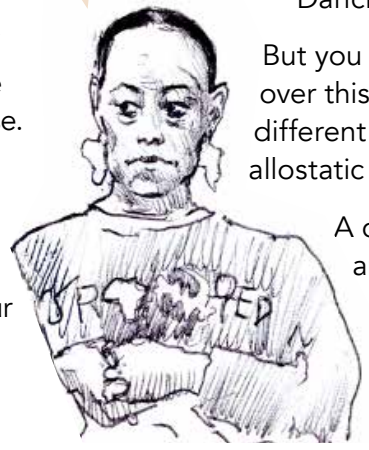
What happens when you put too many things into one thing? Overload. Overload. It will, you will blow the fuse. That's what we do to our nervous system, and that's why we end up with some of the health problems that we have. Now, when something happens, we do this calculation. Should I run? Should I fight? Should I pretend to be dead? And that's the thinking part of our brain. That's the evolved part of being human.

But the reality is, there are two other parts of our brain that are still operating. Our reptile brain, and when it takes over, we act purely on instinct. Sometimes it is appropriate to do that because you need snap judgment, like milliseconds response.

And then over hundreds of thousands of years, another part of our brain developed called the limbic system. So, reptile brain was first, then the limbic system came, and that's when we operate from emotions. You ever see the person who's angry and everything they're doing is coming out of that anger?

And then over more time, we evolved to our rational thinking brain where we make judgments. We say, okay, let me think. Now, should I do this? Should I do that? If I do this, this will happen, et cetera. That's what we want to do most of the time.

"We are each other's medicine." But we can't be each other's medicine if we are disconnected because we're so stressed out.



So, what does resilience look like? When you see it and you feel it, you know it. How's that feel? Good. That's the way resilience feels in your body. But that's not a plant coming up through concrete. This is resilience. Being in community with each other, having spirituality, exercising, celebrating one another, doing meditation. Dancing and singing.

But you can't get to that just by saying, I'm just gonna get over this. You gotta work at it and you gotta put all these different elements into your life. That's what will offset that allostatic overload. Awesome.

A community is people who feel a sense of connection and responsibility and love for one another. A community where people are in constant connection with one another, feeling each other, doing for each other, doing with one another. Being in community also means you realize that every stream has its source. What do I mean by that? That our culture is important. We come from somewhere. We come from traditions. We come from a set of values that give us a road map to being in and creating community. We have to build on our cultural wisdom, values, practices, and principles if we're going to be able to manage that allostatic overload. ❖

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About Los Angeles Poverty Department

Los Angeles Poverty Department's mission is to create artwork that connects the experience of people living in poverty to the sociopolitical forces that shape their lives and communities. LAPD is a multi-disciplinary arts organization that produces and presents artworks and events that instantiate the existence of the Skid Row community—affirming its assets, advocating for its rights, and supporting its aspirations. LAPD projects interweave exhibitions, publications, theatrical performances, public conversations, and cultural events. Programs are developed, produced, and performed collaboratively with Skid Row community members. Founded in 1985 by John Malpede, LAPD was the first performance group in the nation made up principally of homeless people, and the first arts program of any kind for homeless people in Los Angeles.

About Skid Row History Museum & Archive

Since 2015, LAPD has operated the Skid Row History Museum & Archive in downtown Los Angeles. In addition to being the primary venue for the presentation of LAPD artworks, the Museum partners with Skid Row organizations and individuals to provide free space for their civic and cultural activities. Our community archive houses 20,000+ items documenting the 50+ year history of activism and agency in Skid Row. Located at 250 S. Broadway, Los Angeles, 90012, the Museum is open to the public Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from 2-5 pm and by appointment, info@skidrowpovertydept.org. Visit **lapovertydept.org** for more information. All are welcome. Admission is free.

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answers abundant and bold
Listen!
We did this
The voice to be seen
The rhythm to be heard
The power to help, support, and protect
Our family
Our people
Our community

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