Skid Row Culture:

An embedded journalist's exploration of art and community in the nation's homeless capital.

By Danielle Charbonneau

Welcome to the Homeless Capital of the World

Strolling down Bunker Hill on a sunny August afternoon in 2005, I saw a man jump from the roof of a skyscraper near 4th and Spring Street. I stopped in my tracks, cupped my hand to my mouth and gasped audibly as I witnessed his body suspended in air, as if time itself suspended. My heart leaped, palpitating, as his body fell. I held my breath and clenched my eyes. Seconds later, as I cautiously released the tension from my face and eased my eyes open, I noticed a crane towering by the building, stationed among silver movie trailers in the parking lot below. The falling man was a stunt actor, filming a Hollywood blockbuster (Spiderman, I think). Inside the lot were luxury cars, sleek and shiny. Production assistants buzzed about with clipboards and walkie-talkies. Around the perimeter of the lot, separated by a chain link fence, a crowd of homeless people camped out on cardboard boxes, their heads tilted back, watching the action above.

"You're not in Colorado anymore, Toto," I remember thinking, channeling Dorothy as she dropped into Oz. I had officially arrived in downtown Los Angeles from the liberal hippie town

of Boulder. I will never forget the stark juxtaposition between wealth on one side of the fence, and destitution and poverty on the other.

I have replayed this scene in my mind many times over the six years I have lived in Los Angeles, intermittently between 2005 and 2015. It stands out in my mind as iconic imagery for Los Angeles. I realize now that day marked me. I have not been able to shake a curiosity about how how and why an affluent urban society can produce, right next to it, such poverty. I charged myself from that day forward to investigate. As a journalism student at the University of Southern California, first as an undergraduate and then as a graduate, I would find the facts and tell the stories.

Los Angeles ranks as the 10th worst city in the nation for income inequality between the richest five, and poorest 20 percent[1]. The city also has a strange ability to make what is not real (a man jumping from a skyscraper) appear real, and what is real (the homeless encampments below), seem insignificant.

LA Times Journalist Steve Lopez recently commented on this phenomenon in one of his columns, saying Los Angeles has "lost its sense of shame" when it comes to the homeless. What would

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[1] According the the 2014 US Census report's graph showing US Cities with the worst wealth inequality, Los Angeles ranked 10th in the nation. In Los Angeles, the bottom 20 percent of individuals earned an average annual income of $11,700 while the top 5 percent earned an annual average income of $413,000. https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p60-249.pdf

shock other cities — a homeless population that "roughly equals the total populations of Calabasas and South Pasadena" combined — is commonplace in Los Angeles.[2]

"Forty-five thousand homeless people have become such a familiar part of the landscape that we barely notice them," Lopez wrote in his column May 12, 2015.[3]

As an L.A. outsider in 2005, however, I did notice. At the time, the homeless count was staggering over 88,000 (over 65,000 of whom slept on the streets or in shelters).[4] I had volunteered for years at homeless shelters in downtown Denver, but had never witnessed the level of destitution I saw in the area known as Skid Row, the homeless capital of the nation.[5]

I started reading about Skid Row and found a series of articles in the *Los Angeles Times* written by Lopez that sickened me and further fueled my commitment to exploring the neighborhood. Each article detailed a different view of Skid Row through the eyes of paramedics, non-profit workers, fire fighters and the homeless. For one of the pieces, Lopez brought then-mayor Antonio Villaraigosa down to Skid Row to witness the conditions first hand.

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[2] According to the 2015 Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority report, there are 44, 359 homeless individuals countywide. Steve Lopez's column from the LA Times on May 12, 2015, "No excuse for L.A.'s surging homeless population," commented on that report.

[3] Ibid

[4] Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority - http://documents.lahsa.org/planning/homelesscount/2013/HC13-Results-LACounty-COC-Nov2013.pdf

[5] Skid Row is a social construct of homeless shelters, low-income-housing and services for the poor comprised of roughly 50 city blocks (0.4 square miles) of the greater downtown area. It has been defined as being bounded by 3rd Street on the north, 7th Street on the south, Main Street on the west and Alameda Street on the east. — http://www.lachamber.com/clientuploads/LUCH_committee/102208_Homeless_brochure.pdf

“The mayor didn't get a sanitized version either,” wrote Lopez in his October 23, 2005 column. “I watched as a man injected heroin and another smoked crack in his honor's presence.[6]”

Shortly after his Skid Row visit, Villaraigosa held a press conference and labeled Los Angeles the “Capital of Homelessness.[7]” In November of 2006, he publicly announced that he would allot $50 million for the city’s Housing Trust Fund for permanent supportive housing and pledged his support for a $1 billion bond measure to develop more affordable housing citywide.

At the time, I saw it as a victory — a demonstration of how journalism can affect social change. I declared print journalism my major at USC’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and launched into an internship at a Skid Row non-profit called the Downtown Women’s Center (DWC).[8] I was, however, still naïve about Skid Row politics. I later discovered how Villaraigosa’s funds were not what they seemed. My course, however, had already been charted.

My first day at the DWC, I rode the bus and walked a few blocks to the shelter (at the time, no public transportation actually serviced Skid Row directly, which some said was a deliberate

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[6] Steve Lopez, LA Times: http://articles.latimes.com/2005/oct/23/local/me-lopez23

[7] Troy Anderson, Daily News: http://www.dailynews.com/general-news/20060113/mayor-la-capital-of-homelessness

[8] In 2005, the Downtown Women’s Center lived between 3rd and 4th Streets on Los Angeles St. (right on the edge of Skid Row). It housed 47 women in semi-permanent housing, had a day shelter, served meals and had various other services like career training courses. While the DWC has expanded since 2005, it is still the only women’s shelter in Skid Row.

attempt to isolate the area). Approaching the Downtown Women's Center in the bustling toy district, I noticed a pile of worn out suitcases stacked about six feet high, crammed with folded tarps and flattened cardboard boxes. The grimy stack looked odd in comparison to the vibrant, toy-filled storefronts. Then I noticed a similar stack one block down, then another across the street.

"What are all those suitcases," I wondered. Perplexed, I asked my supervisor. She informed me that the police creatively enforced a city ordinance during business hours that required the homeless to pack up their belongings and stack them on the street corners during the day to clear the sidewalk. After the sun goes down, she said, "the area transforms."

I witnessed that first hand: As I exited the shelter at sundown, I rounded the corner of 4th and Los Angeles to find the suitcases gone, but the sidewalk lined, wall-to-wall, with makeshift housing. A new, wild world revealed itself. Tarps now hung from the parking lot fence, secured to the gutter with leather belts and tattered rope; bearded men now lounged on damp, odorous sleeping bags atop flattened cardboard boxes. Old crates served as camping chairs; newspaper as blankets and empty Steel Reserve 40s as latrines. Shopping carts rattled down the asphalt, packed to the brim with garbage bags of assorted recyclables. Coins jangled in styrofoam cups as panhandlers sought dinner. A stench of stale urine, concrete and cigarette smoke now wafted in the air, seemingly more potent than before. As I walked west toward Bunker Hill, I saw a frail homeless woman with stringy hair inserting a syringe in her jugular, the city skyline and sunset behind her. I cried. It wasn't so much the drug use as it was how alone and forgotten she seemed, huddled in the alley.

The imagery of the stacks of suitcases and the woman hiding behind garbage bins have come to represent, in my mind, the problem with Los Angeles' Skid Row tactics. Many politicians have seemingly been more concerned with making Skid Row appear better, than be better; to hide and isolate, rather than fix. Villaraigosa's response to Lopez's 2005 Skid Row series (the promised $50 million) is a perfect example: The $50 million did not go to housing. Rather, it went to instituting the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI) in September of 2006.

The initiative hired 50 new police officers to patrol the 0.85 square miles of Skid Row. The SCI officers strictly enforced a "broken windows"[9] policy, citing and/or arresting people for small crimes including jay-walking, blocking the sidewalk, littering and smalltime drug possessions. An average of 750 arrests were made every month in the first year and 12,000 citations were written, the "vast majority of which were for pedestrian violations.[10]" On a proportional geographic area and population basis, that's between 48 and 69 times the rate at which such citations are issued citywide in Los Angeles. Those citations frequently resulted in arrests as the individuals could not afford the $159 penalty (general relief recipients only receive $221 total monthly). The initiative did contain a housing element called "Streets or Services" that claimed to provide shelter for up to 21 days, but in the first 10 months of SCI, only 34 people were housed (compared to 7,528 arrests).

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[9] The "Broken Windows" policy was instituted by then Mayor Antonio Villraigosa and police chief Baca ….

[10]Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness: The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row — A study conducted by the UCLA School of Law using public records to quantify the results of the Safer Cities Initiative in its first year of existence. (http://www.ced.berkeley.edu/downloads/pubs/faculty/wolch_2007_report-card-policing-homelessness.pdf)

Now, less than ten years after SCI was introduced, Los Angeles is seeing the effects of an overly-active police force in Skid Row: According to a 21-page report issued by City Administrative Officer Miguel A. Santana released in April 2015, Los Angeles spends $100 million a year coping with homelessness; $87 million of that goes to arrests, skid row patrols and mental health interventions.[11] The city's affordable housing fund dropped from $108 million in 2008 to $26 million in 2014. Essentially the city spends almost three and a half times as much money on arrests, patrols and mental health interventions than it does on affordable housing.

As Lopez puts it: "It's as if a tsunami crashed ashore from Seal Beach to Pacific Palisades forcing thousands of our neighbors to live on the streets, some of them so sick they are dying as we walk past them, and all we know how to do is shoo them, cite them and arrest them.[12]"

Statistics like these have inspired me at various times over the past ten years to engage with the Skid Row community: I did an eight hour, overnight police ride-a-long with Safer Cities Initiative police officers in 2008 hoping to gain perspective, spent the night on the roof of the Union Rescue Mission (which overlooks San Julian Park — the gritty heart of Skid Row), shadowed Kevin Michael Key, the unofficial "mayor of Skid Row" and volunteered at a handful of non-profits.

Most recently, I had the opportunity to become an embedded reporter for eight months at the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a performance, arts and social activism group that has

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[11] https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1906452-losangeleshomelessnessreport.html

[12] http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-lopez-homeless-count-20150513-column.html

been serving the Skid Row community for 30 years. LAPD is made up of "primarily homeless and formerly homeless actors."[13] The company uses art and theater to tell the real stories of Skid Row. LAPD's Founder and Director, John Malpede, has been instrumental in introducing art as a tool for social advocacy and community building in the Skid Row neighborhood. LAPD was the first theater company of its kind in the nation and paved the way for other grassroots arts and advocacy organizations. A domino effect has occurred since LAPD started, and the grassroots frontier (in particular arts and activism) has grown substantially. For Malpede, theater is as much about activism as it is about art. As he says, "you can't have change without exchange."

During my time with LAPD, two of my professors, Sasha Anawalt, director of the Master's program in Arts Journalism at USC, and Brent Blair, director of MA Applied Theatre Arts, were working with LAPD to co-produce a production of "Red Beard/Red Beard," a play by Malpede, based on Akira Kurosawa's film about the cyclical nature of poverty and suffering. The process of producing the play, which included rehearsals, workshops and panel discussions, revealed a lot about the recovery culture that exists in Skid Row, the importance of community and the healing power of self-sacrifice.

I also had the opportunity to serve as a volunteer videographer at LAPD's Festival for All Skid Row Artists, an annual festival in Gladys Park. As the videographer, I got to interview over 50 Skid Row community members (most of them artists, musicians and actors), who shed light on the importance of arts and culture to the fabric of the Skid Row neighborhood. I saw firsthand how art is extremely potent when it comes to social activism, how it has the power to win over

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[13] LAPD defines itself this way in their public media and marketing.

hearts, not just minds. It spurs conversation and critical dialogue. Art rehumanizes people who have been dehumanized and breaks through the veils of stereotypes. It serves as a cathartic outlet for individuals, and connective tissue between community members.

Lastly, participating with LAPD as an embedded reporter opened my eyes to a new kind of journalism: one that is personal, participatory and long term. I fear that without this type of invested journalism, media could do more harm to Skid Row and communities like it than good. Without deep, layered, time-consuming investigation, media can stereotype, oversimplify, de-sensitize and dehumanize. Embracing a new form of embedded journalism could help avoid these pitfalls.

This thesis re-tells, examines and analyzes my experiences with LAPD and several of its individual members through a series of vignettes and essays, each examining the nature of Skid Row, the role art plays in the community and the role of the journalist. This thesis also explores the advantages of embedded journalism in producing work that fairly and tactfully portrays the complexities of misunderstood and oppressed communities.

The Grassroots Domino Effect on Skid Row

When dawn breaks on downtown Los Angeles, a homeless man named A.J. Martin stirs from his spot on the sidewalk at the corner of 4th and Crocker in Skid Row. He tiredly staggers a few short blocks to 6th and Gladys where he unlocks the gate to the humble Gladys Park. Inside the

green fence is a small rectangle of asphalt that serves as a basketball court, a concrete platform stage, a couple patches of grass and a few palm trees. A painted mural adds some much needed color to the otherwise concrete space. Elderly men meander across the park throughout the day to rest their canes and play chess at one of the built-in concrete tables. As the sun sets, Martin lugs a 10-gallon jug of coffee to one of the picnic tables and lines the court with rows of plastic folding chairs for the park's nightly Alcoholics Anonymous meeting (there is one every day, 365 days a year). The meeting is only one of 80 recovery meetings that takes place in the community every week. After the meeting is over, Martin locks up the park and walks back to his spot on the sidewalk to sleep. Outside the fence is the usual sidewalk scenery: tents, cardboard boxes, littered gutters and empty bottles. The park is an oasis.

Martin took over the operation of Gladys Park when it faced imminent closure two years ago when Governor Jerry Brown dissolved community redevelopment agencies to help address the state's budget crisis. Funding for Gladys and neighboring San Julian Park was on the chopping block.[14] While the city of L.A. eventually stepped in to provide funding to keep the park physically maintained, it cut funding to keep the parks operational. Martin offered to be a volunteer manager for the park.

Gladys Park enlivens during Skid Row's 3-on-3 basketball games. The tournament-style games are organized by a group called OGs in Service. The OGs (Original Gangsters) organize several of Skid Row's anticipated community events: Jazz in the Park and a Father's Day celebration.

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[14] Ryan Vaillancourt, "Two Skid Row Parks at Risk of Closing," *LA Downtown News*, web, http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/two-skid-row-parks-at-risk-of-closing/article_7185ecf8-6683-11e2-999b-001a4bcf887a.html

The OGs also stepped in to provide trash cans for the Skid Row neighborhood when the city failed to provide them. The OGs painted colorful cans are bright spots throughout the neighborhood. The organization was started by Manuel "OG Man" Compito, a visual artist who went through Lamp's art program[15].

When the 3-on-3 basketball games are in full swing, photographer Lynn Rossi is usually on the perimeter of the court, ducking behind her camera with its burrito-sized lens and squatting to get interesting angles of the tournament competitors. Rossi has never been homeless, but fully considers herself a member of the Skid Row community. In 2009, she joined Michael Blaze's[16] Skid Row photography club at The United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP).[17] She's felt at home in the community ever since and now gives back by doing pro-bono, activist-oriented, photography projects in the neighborhood.

"Skid Row has been a healing place for me—it helped me recover with many obstacles in my own life and it has been a holy ground for me in terms of being able to express myself," she said.

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15 Lamp is a non-profit shelter and services organization that primarily serves Skid Row's mentally ill. Lamp achieves one of the highest success rates in the nation for ending homelessness: more than 95 percent of the people Lamp houses stay housed for one year or more. Lamp offers access to affordable, safe and permanent housing without requiring sobriety or participation in treatment. Once settled, individuals receive mental health treatment, addiction recovery support and healthcare. Lamp also offers budgeting courses, visual and performing arts and job placement support. The Lamp arts programs are offered to the entire Skid Row community, including individuals without mental illness. Lamp was one of the first organizations to offer arts and culture programming alongside LAPD in the late 1980s.

16 Michael Blaze is a 64-year-old, African American photographer. In 2008, he started the Skid Row Photography Club, a free club for individuals living or interested in the Skid Row community. The club has periodically received funding from the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council, which helped Blaze to buy cameras, lighting and equipment. In 2012, Blaze gave away more than 100 Nikon D 40 cameras.

17 The United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP) is an activist and social service organization that mobilizes resources to prevent drug- and alcohol- related problems in Skid Row.

“Its the first time I've every really felt acceptance of myself from a whole community, so it really changed my life in a lot of ways.”

Inside Gladys Park, a grey-haired, tall and lanky man with a quirky, outgoing personality can often be found socializing, passing out plastic Solo cups and filling them with filtered water. This man, Michael “Waterman” Hubman, said that in 2006 he “walked up to a group of homeless people with a gallon of water in one hand and some cups in the other, said ‘Hi -- thirsty? Like a drink?’”[18] That single action, he said, started eight years of service. His non-profit organization is called Water Core.

I spotted Hubman amidst a busy crowd on a hot day, filling up a cup of water for Franc Foster at the Festival for All Skid Row Artists. Foster had just finished tuning his electric guitar and warming up his Skid Row jam band, The Melting Pot, to perform on the platform in the center of Gladys Park. Foster helps run the Lamp Music & Arts Recovery Program. The program, Foster said, “puts instruments in the hands of those disenfranchised that haven't played in awhile and gets them back up on their chomps, then puts ‘em in bands and puts them in positions to play.”[19]

Foster was once homeless, as was his Melting Pot bandmate,“KO Base” (as he goes by). Foster put one of Lamp’s guitars in Base’s hands when Base was homeless, living on Skid Row. Now Base plays bass in The Melting Pot.

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[18] Michael Hubman, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, Gladys Park, October 18, 2015

[19] Franc Foster, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, Gladys Park, October 18, 2015

Ray Rodriguez, a second guitarist in the band has a similar story.

"I used to be on these streets with the drug addiction and sleeping on the streets, but through my music I've realized my impact," said Rodriguez. "A lot of these people want to see someone who they know lead the way to help them, help themselves.[20]"

Compito, Hubman, Rossi, Foster, Base, Rodriguez and Martin are just a handful of individuals I met who are active participants in the community, connected by what Malpede calls Skid Row's "culture of compassion" and "spirit of service."[21] They demonstrate how service-oriented, grassroots activities grow authentically from the soil of Skid Row and spread. Malpede says this "domino effect" applies to individuals, and to organizations. Positive action, he says, grows "exponentially and organically" on Skid Row.[22]

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[20] Ray Rodriguez, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, Gladys Park, October 18, 2015

[21] John Malpede, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, *Annenberg Radio News* studio, January 2015

[22] John Malpede, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, LAPD Administrative Office in Echo Park, December 2015

LAPD is another example: LAPD was born out of Inner City Law[23]; Inner City Law was born from the Catholic Worker[24]. LAPD served as the inspiration for Dramastage Qumran[25], another activist-oriented theater group developed by one of LAPD's former actors, Melvin Ishmael Johnson. Johnson and Dramastage Qumran then partnered with USC and an organization called the Compassionate Response to Poverty and Homelessness Group to present a performance called "Nail Heads." For that performance, the group collected 80,000 nails to symbolize the number of homeless in the county of Los Angeles[26] before donating the nails to Habitat for Humanity.

"Its a dynamic situation," said Malpede. "People who used to live in a box, who have recovered from their homelessness, a lot of them have stayed in the community and are working in the community. Their work is both healing for them—just like my work is healing for me—and also for the people."[27]

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[23] Inner City Law is "he only provider of legal services on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles." The organization helps combat slum housing while developing strategies to end homelessness. The center is recognized for its expertise in housing issues, veterans' benefits, and homelessness prevention. When Malpede first moved to Los Angeles from New York 30 years ago, he volunteered at The Catholic Worker's free legal clinic, which later became Inner City Law. (http://www.innercitylaw.org/about_u/)

[24] "Founded in 1970, the Los Angeles Catholic Worker is a lay Catholic community of women and men that operates a free soup kitchen, hospitality house for the homeless, hospice care for the dying, a bi-monthly newspaper, and regularly offers prophetic witness in opposition to war-making and systemic injustice." (http://lacatholicworker.org/about-the-lacw)

[25] http://dramastage-qumran.org

[26] 88, 000 was the approximated number of homeless individuals in Los Angeles county in 2005 based on the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority annual report.

[27] John Malpede, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, *Annenberg Radio News* studio, January 2015

If there is one overarching observation I made about Skid Row, it is that the community has a striking level of active participation in arts, activism and social work to a degree that far exceeds any other place I've ever encountered. Malpede sums it up nicely:

> "The neighborhood—it's been a neighborhood where people do remain and they do help one another. A number of grassroots initiatives have been started by people living in the neighborhood that advocate on behalf of the neighborhood in a lot of different ways—whether it's cleaning up the trash when the city doesn't do it, keeping the park open when the city doesn't do it, preventing police abuse when they do do it, like unreasonable searches and seizures, or taking people's stuff when they go to eat at one of the missions, or um, the fact that 65 percent of the Jay Walking tickets written in the city of Los Angeles are written in the 50 square blocks of Skid Row, so that's not equitable policing. All these things and more are continually being dealt with by people who live there. There are 80 recovery meetings that take place in the community each week by people who live in the community."[28]

These exhaustive examples defy the stereotypes of the homeless as merely lazy, indigent, transient or addicted. These examples show a sub-section of people who are active, longterm residents dedicated to making positive contributions to a community committed to recovery.

Making a Case for Skid Row Culture

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[28] John Malpede, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, *Annenberg Radio News* studio, January 2015

As demonstrated in several of the already mentioned examples, the arts community (including LAPD, Lamp and Dramastage Qumran) is often intrinsically linked to forms of social advocacy in the Skid Row neighborhood. In 2008, Malpede set out to examine Skid Row's cultural landscape in more depth and draft a plan for the future. He partnered with Maria Rosario Jackson at the Urban Institute to create the study, "Making a Case for Skid Row Culture: Findings from a Collaborative Inquiry by the Los Angeles Poverty Department and the Urban Institute.[29]"

Jackson had studied the role of arts and cultural participation in communities across the nation (from an urban planning and public policy perspective) for over 20 years. Both Malpede and Jackson share the common belief that cultural participation in communities is valuable, if not vital: it "strengthens social networks in the community that potentially lead to increased social capital and collective advocacy;" it "provides residents with a range of emotional, intellectual and social experiences important for personal development;" and is "essential in helping create a healthy environment and normative neighborhood."

The study first conducted interviews with five community organizations: the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN)[30]; the United Coalition East Prevention Project

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[29] "Making a Case for Skid Row Culture: Findings from a Collaborative Inquiry by the Los Angeles Poverty Department and the Urban Institute" was a study co-conduced by John Malpede, founder of LAPD, and Maria Rosario Jackson, a senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute, as part of Animating Democracy, a program developed by Americans for the Arts. The study was essentially an investigation of Skid Row's cultural vitality.

[30] The Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN) is an activist organization dealing with a wide range of community concerns, including civil and human rights, housing and tenants rights, the poverty/ wealth gap, women's issues, violence and food access.

(UCEPP);[31] the Lamp Community;[32] OGs in Service;[33] and Ocean Park Community Center (OPCC).[34] Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the premise that cultural activity in Skid Row is imperative. While some of the organizations have little or no cultural programming, every interviewee agreed upon its importance. Next, the study collected data from focus groups consisting of Skid Row residents, and various leaders from other Skid Row agencies. The results were similar:

"The focus group discussions proved to be insightful and passionate. All involved agreed that even in the face of often extreme hardship (and, to some extent, because of it) arts and cultural activity is vitally important to the neighborhood."[35]

Based on the study, Malpede and Jackson made several recommendations: The first was that the community should create an artists registry and cultural inventory to better document the neighborhood's assets (which legitimize the neighborhood and protect it from destructive interests). Secondly, that organizations should embrace opportunities to change the public

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[31] The United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP) is an activist and social service organization that mobilizes resources to prevent drug- and alcohol- related problems in Skid Row.

[32] Lamp is a non-profit shelter and services organization that primarily works with the mentally ill. Lamp also offers an arts program to anyone in the Skid Row community, including those without mental challenges. It was one of the first organizations to offer arts and culture programming alongside LAPD in the late 1980s.

[33] OGs in Service organizes activities in the Skid Row community such as a Father's Day celebration, 3 on 3 basketball league, Jazz in the Park and a painted trash can project.

[34] The Ocean Park Community Center (OPCC) is a network of shelters and services for low-income and homeless people in Santa Monica that collaborates with agencies in Skid Row.

[35] Jackson & Malpede, "Making a Case for Skid Row Culture," Page 10

narrative concerning Skid Row and promote the neighborhood as a recovery community. The study also revealed a need for more creative collaboration between Skid Row organizations.

Based on these findings, LAPD partnered with Lamp to create The Festival for All Skid Row Artists. The annual festival, as planned, would hit many of the study's recommendations: it would double as a venue to create an artist's registry and cultural inventory; would be a place for creative collaboration; and would paint a vivid picture of Skid Row's recovery culture.

The first Festival for All Skid Row Artists happened in October of 2010 and was a one-day festival. Since then, the number of participants interested in performing and presenting at the festival has grown too large for a one day event. The festival expanded in 2012 to two days. This year's 2014 festival was the event's largest yet, showcasing close to 100 artists and performers. Every performance slot for both days of the festival was booked two weeks in advance. The festival's growth is a testament to the vitality and importance of an active arts and culture community.

The 2014 Festival for All Skid Row Artists

On October 18 and 19, 2014, over 200 people convened in Gladys Park for the 5th Annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists. The festival is a celebration of the many creative, talented and musical members of the Skid Row community. Everything from Elvis impersonators to stand-up comics, musicians, rappers, cabaret singers, theater groups, street artists, painters and Caribbean drummers participated in the two day festival. Most of them were homeless, living in SROs

(single residence occupancies), staying in shelters or were previously homeless (but still active in the community). There was a sense of joy and celebration in Gladys Park that weekend. Crowds danced around the stage, cheered their fellow creatives and congregated in groups of friends. Sounds of bongo drums, electric guitars and chatter reverberated through the park, attracting curious bystanders outside the gates. Los Angelenos from outside the Skid Row community were able to see a new, more positive image of the neighborhood.

After the festival participants performed or presented their work, they were instructed to come to an interview booth for the purpose of building the Skid Row Artists Registry. It was there that I had the opportunity to interview over 50 individuals with a wide spectrum of talents, from a variety of organizations. I challenged each person, asking them about the value of arts and culture in Skid Row, both for the individual and for the community as a whole. The following vignettes tell stories of a select few of those whom I interviewed. I also wrote a number of other short artist profiles for LAPD's 2014 festival newsletter (see Addendum A).

Myka Moon

Myka Moon is a large young man with a nasally, girlish voice and feminine facial features: rosy pink lips, perky-round cheeks, a wide button nose and neatly curved eyebrows. He has midnight black hair in an army buzz-cut and his rectangular glasses are daintily-rimmed. He arrives at the interview booth with his furry-haired companion, Lady Bird, a black, white and brown spotted

puppy. Lady Bird is Moon's ESA (emotional support animal) and Lamp art project's "newest mascot.[36]"

"She is living art,[37]" says Moon, petting the dog's head and stroking her floppy brown ears. Lady Bird is wearing a neon pink sport vest with black pockets and silver zippers. Moon says he's training her to become a full service dog.

"Everywhere I go, she goes," he says[38].

Moon has a positive childlike energy. Along with Lady Bird, he's toting a display board (the kind kids have for the science fair) with his paintings and drawings tacked to it. The drawings are made with what appears to be crayon and Tempera paint. One canvas is of colorful, block-style plus signs, stacked like a game of Tetris. Another has bright pink and purple clouds. Above that one, abstract pine trees resting on a patch of grass.

"My favorite is actually this one, 'Nightime Suffering,'" Moon says, pointing to a paper with grey, nebulous swirls atop a black background. "I did that at about 11:30 at night, staring at the sky. I love the clouds and I really wanted to showcase it, but didn't have the techniques to do it, so I did it in my own way."[39]

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[36] Myka Moon, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, Gladys Park, October 18, 2015

[37] ibid

[38] ibid

[39] ibid

It makes sense that Moon's artwork is youthful; depicting clouds, forests and fantasy. In a certain sense, he is reliving his childhood dream. Moon knew he wanted to be an artist by the time he was nine-years-old, but says his parents were adamantly opposed.

"My family told me that artists are burdens on society and that I would never make it in life.They proceeded to trash my art supplies," says Moon. "At that point it was always pencils and paper and anything that was small enough to hide in a binder.[40]"

Moon never pursued art as a career, working odd jobs with no real direction. He wound up homeless anyway. When he found Lamp, he wrote his parents a letter.

"I said: 'You told me this is what an artist was. I managed to accomplish it with no art in my life, so sorry, but I am going to be an artist.' I've been happier ever since," says Moon.[41]

While Moon's work may be elementary, he talks about it with sophistication. His eyes drift toward the sky when describing the process of making art, as if it is a spiritual experience.

"Art is not a *way* of healing," he said. "It *is* healing."[42]

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[40] ibid

[41] ibid

[42] ibid

Moon was homeless for about two and half years. He suffers from mental illness (from exactly what diagnosis, he did not say). He was living in a tent on Skid Row when he got involved with Lamp's art community.

"The art project at Lamp kept me sane," said Moon. "I had a point when everything was stolen out of my tent and I went crazy. I was actually forced by my case worker to continue an art project and before I knew it I was in poetry classes, photo classes, art classes. I found myself calming down."[43]

Moon has PTSD and had extreme social anxiety when he first showed up at Lamp.

"One year ago you wouldn't have caught me here [at the festival], and if you would have, I wouldn't have said much," he says. "Now look at me."[44]

For Moon the quality of his artwork is not what's most important. Rather it is the process of creating where the healing happens.

Hayk Makhmuryan, the program coordinator for Lamp's art program, says putting too much value on the end product while devaluing the process of creating is a common and harmful mistake.

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[43] ibid

[44] ibid

“That [attitude] keeps a lot of people from discovering how much visual arts can help them—help them, not just in general, but help them come out of a place, a very dark place sometimes,” explains Makhmuryan. “Our society looks at art and centers around skills and technique. Someone says I'm not good at visual arts and really what they're saying is that I haven't had formal training in certain techniques, because everyone can make marks on a surface. We do that from childhood.[45]”

Makhmuryan says convincing people of the value of creating, regardless of the outcome is “a battle day in and day out.”[46]

“I talk about it with artists one on one,” he says. “The more people that relay that message, the more there is a chance that another person will have a better feel for that use of visual arts, and have a better appreciation of the process.”[47]

In the face of hunger, homelessness, unemployment, poverty and staggering statistics in Los Angeles county, particularly on Skid Row, art programs could seem frivolous to skeptics, but Makhmuryan says that “arts and creativity do wonders for the social health of an individual and their confidence to interact with the world around them.”[48]

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[45] Hayk Makhmuryan, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, Lamp Community, December 2015

[46] ibid

[47] ibid

[48] ibid

“That’s a direct line of a greater probability to keep a job or an apartment,” says Makhmuryan[49].

It seems to be working for Moon. He has lived in Lamp’s apartment complex since October of 2014 and volunteers regularly in the art studio. He says he enjoys the camaraderie between the participants who all mentor each other.

Moon’s story, for me, raises a few questions: what happens when our soul-driven impulse to create is hindered in childhood? And what happens in adulthood when we deprive ourselves of the healing powers of creativity, because we fear not measuring up to some invisible social standard?

James Hillman, a psychologist who studied under Carl Jung in the 1950s, wrote in his best-selling1997 book, *The Soul’s Code,* that many of society’s ails are caused by individuals not fulfilling their soul’s function. He proposed that our calling in life is innate, and that our mission in life is to realize its imperatives. Hillman named it the "acorn theory”: the idea being that just as the oak's destiny is contained in the tiny acorn, so, too, are our lives encoded to accomplish some destiny. Essentially, if we don’t follow that calling, we make ourselves sick. Sick individuals contribute to a sick society.

While the idea of having a calling is certainly not a new one, it seems wildly appropriate for people on Skid Row who are seeking meaning in their lives and a purpose for pushing through their struggles. Perhaps, as it has been in Moon’s life, art is at least healing, if not imperative.

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[49] ibid

Walter Fears & The Skid Ro Playz

The Skid Ro Playz, a group of about ten drummers, percussionists and a flute player, are somewhat of a Skid Row and Gladys Park house band. The group has jammed at the Festival for All Skid Row Artists every year since it began in 2010, providing a steady backbeat for the celebration.

The Playz formed casually in 2009 when the men were all homeless. They started playing in a drum circle on the sidewalks of Skid Row. It was just for fun at first, but when the group met police opposition, they banded together and bonded through the adversity.

LAPD police officers initially viewed the group as "just noise" and attempted to stop the drum circles by enforcing a municipal decibel law. On one occasion, officers illegally seized the players' drums. The drummers filed a lawsuit and planned to go to court. It was then that some neighbors in the Skid Row community started advocating for the band.

"The community kind of came behind us to say, 'these guys are good for the community, they're not selling drugs, they're not drinking, they're not doing the things that everybody else is doing. This is one thing that we have that's positive and we'd like you to stop harassing them," remembers Walter Fears, one of the group's bongo drummers.

Having the community backing made the Skid Ro Playz take themselves more seriously. The band began to see themselves as a real cultural asset.

"It proved a lot. It really made us, as a group, look at the community more as a family," said Fears.

Since then, Fears says, the majority of the guys "are now inside" (not homeless anymore). The group itself has grown too.

"We have a rehearsal space now, we have several gigs throughout the year, and we're in the process of doing some studio work," says Fears.

Fears has also been a member of LAPD for eight years and is an aspiring actor. Fears comes across as shy. He seems like more of an observer. Yet, acting allows him to come out of his shell. He recently performed a monologue based on his life's story.

Fears says the the variety of artistic outlets available to him in the Skid Row neighborhood, and the sense of community camaraderie, are two of the main draws of the area. Fears has chosen to live in Skid Row for a decade, even when he's had opportunities to leave.

About fifteen years ago, Fears had been a successful businessman. He's handsome and athletically built, lived in a ritzy neighborhood on the west side, had veteran's benefits, a

beautiful girlfriend and an active social life, which generally included alcohol and cocaine. His partying lifestyle eventually took its toll, both financially and on his relationship.

Yet, it was an unrelated accident that demolished his life as he knew it. He was critically injured when a pool collapsed at an apartment complex he was visiting. The consequences were devastating. His hospital bills were six figures. His parents took out a second mortgage on their home to help, but it wasn't enough. He ventured to Skid Row for the free meals and stayed, sleeping on the streets, which only exacerbated his injuries.

It would have been unsurprising if Fears had turned to his familiar friend, drugs and alcohol, to cope; but that's not what happened. Skid Row, he says, encouraged him to stay sober.

"Seeing what drugs do to people every day — how it destroys people, turns them into shells — was motivation," says Fears.

When his injuries worsened, Fears was transferred to a room at the VA in upscale Brentwood, which saved him physically from the torture of sidewalk dwelling. Fears thought about using the opportunity to restart his life again on the west side, yet Fears found himself missing the Skid Row community. He moved back to Skid Row when his health returned. He says that had he stayed in Brentwood, he suspects he would have repeated his earlier mistakes, overvaluing materialism, partying and using drugs. Instead, he said, he rented a small apartment adjacent to San Julian Park in the gritty heart of Skid Row and has lived there ever since.

Fears says art and music have played an integral part in his recovery.

“I got into the arts, painting, drumming…I just started those simple things and eventually they become a part of you and it gradually helps fill that void or that hole that was there in your life,” explains Fears. “It is still healing today. You know when I have a hard day, listening to music, or strumming a guitar or beating a drum can really help dissolve away all the worries.”

Flo Hawkins & Officer Rich

Officer Rich looks more like a retired basketball player than a retired cop. He is over six feet tall, dressed in a shiny, ivory-white track suit with royal blue seams, has a smile as white as his outfit and a hearty laugh. The crowd is treating him more like a superstar than a cop, too. As he smoothly strolls into Gladys Park, he receives gentlemanly slaps on the back, handshakes and hugs accompanied by comments like: “This guy’s the man” and “Ooo, I just love officer Rich.”

Officer Rich was an LAPD police officer for 38 years and patrolled Skid Row for all 38. He was given many opportunities to transfer divisions, but never did. He’s one of the few LAPD cops well-loved by the homeless community. He’s known for an uncanny ability to settle issues with the county welfare office (retrieving people their checks when they need them), and for truly caring about the people: he gets to know them at a personal level.

This was particularly evident at the Festival for All Skid Row Artists through his adoring friendship with a formerly homeless artist named Flo Hawkins. Officer Rich introduced Flo to the crowd on stage at the festival, holding up one of her paintings of Al Pacino. Flo makes pastel

portraits that are reminiscent of a less vibrant David Hockney. They are flat, with angular facial edges and wide, accented eyes. Yet, they carry a sense of personality.

“I love to look at the people’s faces — how their eyes light up. I can do an old, old man, or an old woman or a very young baby. God has blessed me,” Hawkins said, glancing at officer Rich, who nodded in agreement next to her.

Officer Rich has known Flo for over 30 years—since she was sleeping on the streets and addicted to crack cocaine. Even when she was homeless, however, making art was Flo’s refuge. Officer Rich used to watch her climb up on a billboard to paint her canvases above the chaos of the street.

Officer Rich says he’s convinced that art is an important part of Skid Row.

“Art gives you insight with the people that are homeless. Law enforcement don't deal with people unless they are on their level. Since the artists have been around, they can get closer to the community—closer to the people… They've got such strong hidden talent that they had, but during addiction, couldn't use,” said Officer Rich. “Now they’re giving back. They draw people in… They inspire,”

“Red Beard, Red Beard” & LAPD’s Performance Community

Down on 6th Street, just East of San Pedro and west of Gladys Park, is a beige-bricked building with a worn burgundy awning. On the corner of its first floor is a small community room, about the size of a corporate conference room. From outside, you can recognize it only by its windows, which are lined with candy-apple-red, thickly glossed tiles.

Inside, the community room is sparse and outdated: it has a few long tables, some 80s-style swivel chairs upholstered with beige tweed fabric, and grey industrial carpet that's hardened with time. An old television and VCR are mounted high on one wall and a few construction-paper craft projects with recovery slogans like "One Day at a Time" adorn the others.

Like Gladys Park, the community room is a humble space, but one with heart. On Tuesday and Thursday nights, and Saturday afternoons, the room serves as a rehearsal space for LAPD. Upon arriving, LAPD co-directors John Malpede and Henriëtte Brouwers push the tables to the back of the room, line the walls with the office chairs and set up the stage in the center (a simple row of 10 chairs for "Red Beard, Red Beard").

As the LAPD members stroll in, the chatter grows. Sometimes the greetings are cheerful, marked by jokes and laughter. Other times people enter, head down, heavy-hearted, frustrated or wearied by life. In those moments, there are shoulder pats, hugs, and words of encouragement. There is a sense of supportiveness, even when personalities clash: as one member put it, "we love each other, even when we don't like each other."[50]

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[50] LAPD actor in conversation, UCEPP Rehearsal Space, December 2015

The rehearsal offers individuals an outlet through which to funnel their emotions. Frequently the energy shifts in the room as the cast warms up, or after someone delivers their lines with emotional fervor.

Every so often, someone who hasn't been around for awhile will show up mid-rehearsal and peek through the locked glass door. The nature of Skid Row as a recovery community means that sometimes people fall off-the-wagon and disappear for awhile. When they return, the rehearsal halts as the cast lets the person through the front door, gives their welcome-back hugs and says hello. LAPD tries to practice a 100 percent tolerance policy, meaning all are welcome, no matter their present condition.

When I think of the camaraderie I felt in LAPD's rehearsals, I am reminded of a passage written by Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).[51] He describes the "fellowship" that exists in the 12-step recovery community. While LAPD is not a 12-step program, many of its participants have overcome struggles and are in the process of transforming their lives. Wilson's words could easily apply to the LAPD and Skid Row community:

> "We are average Americans. All sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds. We are people who normally would not mix. But there exists among us a fellowship, a

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[51] *Alcoholics Anonymous* is an international community of people recovering from addiction through the twelve steps. The book, "Alcoholics Anonymous" is the main text that most twelve step recovery programs work from. The book describes how the fellowship of *Alcoholics Anonymous* started, what the 12 steps are, and how the program operates. It was written primarily by the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, in 1935 along with a committee of other members of the AA program.

> friendliness, and an understanding which is indescribably wonderful. We are like the passengers of a great liner the moment after rescue from shipwreck when camaraderie, joyousness and democracy pervade the vessel from steerage to Captain's table. Unlike the feelings of the ship's passengers, however, our joy in escape from disaster does not subside as we go our individual ways. The feeling of having shared in a common peril is one element in the powerful cement which binds us."[52]

This imagery, of shipwrecked passengers bonding over their shared journey and common triumph, beautifully depicts the sense of brother and sisterhood I felt in LAPD (and in Skid Row as a whole). They are "people who would normally not mix." They come from a myriad of circumstances (some are addicts and alcoholics, others have mental illness, some have suffered trauma and violence, while others were just down on their luck when they landed in Skid Row). Yet, they have found a friendship and deep bond, connected by their common goals of recovery and transformation. The LAPD group has become like a loving family-of-choice for its members; a family who also shares a love for art, activism, performance and creativity.

LAPD was the first performance group of its kind in the nation and has been serving the Skid Row community since 1985. LAPD generally creates performances based on the real-life experiences of its members (LAPD's tagline is "Bringing the Real Deal to Normalville"). In celebration of the group's 30th anniversary, however, Malpede decided to do something a little different: a scripted play, adapted from the film, "Red Beard, Red Beard," by Akira Kurosawa.

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[52] Bill Willson, *Alcoholics Anonymous,* Page 17, 4th Edition

“Red Beard, Red Beard” takes place in feudal era Japan at a clinic for the indigent and poor. The head doctor, nicknamed Red Beard, mentors an arrogant and entitled young doctor, Yasumoto. Yasumoto had gone to a prestigious Dutch medical school and is not happy to be placed at the clinic; he feels he is above serving the poor. As he warms up to the experience, Yasumoto learns about humility and service. Each patient in Red Beard’s clinic has a tale of great hardship. Malpede knew his actors would relate.

“I immediately knew that LAPD would understand the story,” said Malpede. “The stories within the story were really deep and profound and convoluted, about people living in poverty and dealing with their own death. I knew LAPD would have a profound understanding of the material.”[53]

For the performances, Kurosawa’s film “Red Beard” played on a small television, center stage, in Japanese with no subtitles. The actors synchronized their lines with their Japanese counterparts, and for two shows, performed back-to-back with a second cast. The actors mostly mirrored the film, but at certain parts deliberately contradicted the movie in order to emphasize the message. The synchronization was profoundly challenging and required teamwork between the the two casts.

“I think this is the most difficult performance LAPD has ever done,” said Brouwers. “You have to give up your ego and become part of this whole and synchronize with your performer on the

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[53] John Malpede, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, LAPD administrative offices in Echo Park, December 2014

other side, and with your Japanese partner on the television. You have to take the focus away from yourself and just be with the emotion."[54]

This process—of letting go of ego, sitting with emotion and becoming one among a chorus—is representative of the recovery process. Suffering humbles people, which allows them to let go of ego and become a part of a community. This is symbolic of what happens on Skid Row. "Red Beard, Red Beard" also carried the message that one helps himself or herself, through helping others.

"The play showed that there's a very circular situation, that basically you heal yourself by getting outside your own pain and caring for others, which of course is really hard to do," said Malpede. "It's also the principle of twelve step programs, for example. And so that is sort of central to the profundity of the movie and the relationship between it, and why it's meaningful for us."[55]

"Red Beard, Red Beard," as a theater production, was symbolic of Skid Row's culture. Skid Row is a place where healing happens by individuals helping each other transcend their suffering and find meaning in their lives. Suffering, it turns out, can be a great gift: it equalizes, connects and transforms.

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[54] Henriëtte Brouwers, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, *Annenberg Radio News* studio at the University of Southern California, January 2015

[55] John Malpede, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, *Annenberg Radio News* studio at the University of Southern California, January 2015

"There's real wisdom on Skid Row," said Malpede, "It is available to the rest of the world, but they don't necessarily take it in."[56]

In addition to the lessons taught by the play, I also had the opportunity to learn from many of the individual cast members in "Red Beard, Red Beard." Each of them revealed different attributes of Skid Row culture. The following are a few select profiles of some of the "Red Beard, Red Beard" cast members.

Malpede, Brouwers and Anthony Williams, who played Red Beard in one of the two LAPD casts, also appeared as guests on a podcast I hosted in relationship to this thesis. (See Addendum B).

Anthony Williams/Red Beard (in cast one)

Anthony Williams is like a classy godfather: He occasionally wears fedoras, has a deep, Barry White voice and gives hearty bear hugs. He is one of the newest actors in the LAPD company and found the performance group by accident (or as he calls it, by "divine intervention.")

Williams was in a dark place at the time he met LAPD — spiraling into depression. As a recovering addict and "ex-gangster-turned-square" (as he calls himself), he knew he couldn't descend much further without going back to old habits. He decided he needed a creative outlet. He was looking for a different theater company when he found LAPD. He had trekked across the

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[56] Ibid

city to find the other company, but found it disbanded. Disappointed and frustrated, he wandered home towards his artist's loft near Skid Row. On his way, he accidentally stumbled upon UCEPP and an LAPD rehearsal.

Within a few weeks of starting rehearsals, Williams landed the leading role of Red Beard. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays, he walks a few blocks to UCEPP from his artist's loft. His place feels surreal to him. It has exposed brick walls, a lofted bedroom and an aquarium the length of a VW Bug. It is a far cry from where he's been: Williams was a crack and heroin dealer, a gangster, and has done stints in "almost every jail and prison in the state of California."[57] Williams said he was "ran out of Venice and told never to come back."[58] His life now, sometimes still feels "unrecognizable."[59]

Williams is now a documentary film maker and radio talk show host. He credits the Skid Row recovery community for helping him stay on track. On the closing night of the "Red Beard, Red Beard" performance, William's high-school-aged grandson was among the proud, packed house.

Sylvie Hernandez/ "The Mantis"

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[57] Anthony Williams, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, in vehicle in Los Angeles, January 2015

[58] Ibid

[59] Anthony Williams, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, Tony's loft off Central & 6th St., Los Angeles, February 2015

Sylvie Hernandez is a tremendously talented actress. In “Red Beard, Red Beard,” she took on the role of “The Mantis,” a young girl struggling with PTSD and homicidal tendencies after having been sexually abused by multiple men in her childhood. Hernandez’s portrayal of the troubled young girl produced an emotional tension in the audience that was palpable. It was as if the crowd stopped breathing at certain moments when Hernandez was center stage.

While Hernandez hasn’t been through exactly the same circumstances as “The Mantis,” she says she has her own emotional bank of experiences to channel in order to relate to her characters.

“I’ve had to perform some other peer’s life and experiences—it connects me. In the end, all human beings are connected,” she said. “We are in different circumstances, but the emotions and feelings—they are the same.”

Hernandez has been a performer since she was a child. She grew up in Mexico as a spirited youngster, always involved in theater, with a penchant for activism.

“I think I've been a rebel since I was little,” she said. “That fire -- of a rebel solider that I have -- it’s in my blood.[60]”

At the age of eight, Sylvie boycotted church. At twelve, she helped start a protest at her elementary school to remove an unjust principal who she said was “violating their civil and

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[60] Sylvie Hernandez, interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, November 2015

human rights."[61] She and her fellow young protesters slept in the school for over two weeks before receiving national and federal attention and getting the principal removed. At age 21, Sylvie's younger brother died during a routine tonsillectomy, which she said fanned the flames of her anger toward injustice. That fire grew even hotter when she landed on Skid Row and was appalled by some of her early experiences at some of the Skid Row facilities.

Hernandez came to Skid Row a little over three years ago. At the time, she didn't speak English. She had struggled with mental health issues since young adulthood (exactly what diagnosis, she did not say). The condition contributed to various challenges, including sporadic unhealthy spending and gambling behaviors. It was a physical injury, however, that finally forced her out of work. Hernandez is a hair-dresser by trade, which requires her to be on her feet. When she couldn't make rent, she was evicted from her apartment and came to Skid Row for its services. That's when her activist spirit was re-awoken.

"I said, hell no. I cannot allow this to happen to people. Come on, we are human beings," she said. "They treated us worse than jail prisoners. The way they talked to us, like we were nothing. I said, I have to do something."[62]

The Downtown Women's Center helped her prepare "to do something." It provided Sylvie with some recovery resources (mental, emotional and physical), connected her with an English tutor,

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[61] Ibid

[62] Ibid

and helped her enroll in a University program for social advocacy. She became a member of the DWC Advisory Board, got involved with a protest theater, LACAN and LAPD.

“I started getting more involved with the leaders on Skid Row -- learning from them and learning from the people on the streets,” she said. “I was trying to get involved in anything that could involve the community. I had a close approach to the people and I started learning about the stories of Skid Row.”

Now, Sylvie sees her journey to Skid Row as a blessing. The community has given her a place to funnel her rebel spirit — to put her talents, passions and abilities to good use and to master English. She is also thankful to be able to relate to people living in Skid Row.

“In order to understand what Skid Row is about you need to have some relationship with it,” Hernandez said. “I relate with a lot of people because I was in the shelters, I was living on the streets with my wet stinky shoes, without sometimes taking a shower for almost a month, living in a car, so many things that connects you so you understand. We understand certain things that a lot of people cannot relate to.”

LAPD has been a great fit for Hernandez. The company is as much about activism as it is about the arts.

“Performing the arts is a great vehicle to make change without being aggressive or hateful,” Hernandez said. “You are just putting the truth out there the way it is. The truth, it hurts, but it

doesn't kill anyone. When you are sharing a story you are not criticizing anything. You are just telling people this is what it is. Its raw, its real, its true. Change has to start somewhere. Why not with theater?"

Suzette Shaw

Suzette Shaw is proud to be black and proud to be a woman. She recently published a poem called "I Am a Black Queen." Shaw knows, however, that being a voluptuous African American woman on Skid Row makes her vulnerable to certain predators and abusers. She is hyper sensitive to this, having been a victim of both sexual and racial abuses in her teenage and young adult years.

This racial and sexual sensitivity is both a blessing and a curse: on the one hand, it can make her short-fused, hot-tempered and defensive (with the tendency to take things personally). On the other, it fuels her drive as a feminist and civil rights activist. She runs a women's empowerment group at a downtown non-profit called Share, writes an opinion column for the LACAN Skid Row Newspaper (about women's issues on Skid Row) and hosts a radio talk show about social issues.

Shaw also organizes activist activities in the community. Most recently, she was the Skid Row point person for organizing a peaceful protest against police brutality on the 46th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination: she scurried around the crowds, passing out press releases

from her clip board, leading chants from a megaphone, and riding on the trucked that led the march.

Shaw wore a black tee-shirt that said, “I am Trishawn Carey.” Carey was a woman on Skid Row who witnessed the alleged murder of an unarmed homeless man on March 1, 2015 named Charly "Africa" Leundeu Keunang who was fatally shot by an LAPD officer. Carey was allegedly beaten by police and arrested for assault on an officer in the chaos of “Africa’s” death. She was held on an exorbitant $1,084,000 bond. When Shaw wasn’t shouting “You can’t kill Africa. You can’t kill Africa” from the megaphone, she was telling Carey’s story to anyone who would listen and encouraging them to sign up for a Facebook group Shaw created.

Shaw talks a mile a minute — sometimes with exuberance, sometimes with rage, sometimes in joy — but always speedily. One can’t help but get worked up alongside her. I joke with her that she adds more “pep to my step.” When I converse with her, I catch myself lifting up on my tippy toes.

Shaw lives in a tiny SRO studio off 6th Street, right across the street from where LAPD rehearses. Shaw once owned a considerable sized home before she was forced to seek refuge on Skid Row, escaping a bad home situation and a financial pitfall. Having downsized to the approximately 10-by-10 SRO studio, her space is packed to the brim. A neon purple shag rug decorates the small patch of tile floor that isn’t covered in crates of stuff.

On her CD player, Shaw blasts Christian rap music by Pastor Cue, Skid Row's most recognizable pastor. Pastor Cue is a Carribbean rapper who hosts the neighborhood's open-air church every Friday night. The "church without walls" is set up on the corner of Wall and Winston Streets, right across the street from Union Rescue Mission. A small group of about 20 people set up folding chairs in front of the closed garage door of the Giant Trading shop. Pastor Cue competes with the sounds of sirens, street cacklers and Motown music, which is projected from a ghetto-blaster that's set up on a cardboard box next to a tent encampment. An eerie orange-yellow hue permeates the street, making a sad scene feel even sadder. Homeless men wander aimlessly and cop-lights bounce off the dilapidated brick walls of buildings. The atmosphere gives Pastor Cue's words even more dramatic weight as he preaches about redemption and overcoming sin.

Shaw has a crush on Pastor Cue. She thinks God might bring them together one day. They would make a fiery couple. Pastor Cue was also stationed on the truck bed with Shaw during the protest. He gave several rousing motivational speeches and performed some of his original raps.

When Shaw talks about her life, she talks mostly about the present. Her life, she says, has gotten tremendously full since moving to Skid Row. In addition to everything else she's involved in, Shaw is an active member of LAPD's theater company.

"Were a community of people who are healing and these venues, like Henriette [Brouwers] and John [Malpede] have created, are great healing venues for those of us, like myself," said Shaw,"I found my voice through LAPD, as well as other venues on Skid Row. It's helped me to heal."

Kevin Michael Key

When strolling the Skid Row neighborhood with Kevin Michael Key, the areas "unofficial mayor," one better leave extra time. Key struts confidently, shaking hands, patting backs and saying hello to the majority of people he passes in the community. He knows just about everyone. He's lived in Skid Row for about 14 years now; 13 of which Key has been clean, sober and active in the area's recovery community. Key credits his ability to get sober, and stay sober, on living and working in the neighborhood.

Before he found sobriety, Key had been a criminal attorney for underserved populations. He would lecture his clients on breaking their drug addictions, meanwhile was in the thick of his own. After multiple failed attempts to get sober through various treatment programs, Key found and completed a free rehabilitation program at Skid Row's Volunteers of America. He gravitated towards Skid Row's sense of community and the plethora of individuals who were active in twelve step programs.

In 2005, Key started working for the United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP), an organization that helps establish and manage efforts to prevent addiction, abuse and violence in downtown and East LA. Those efforts include keeping a watchful eye on stores that sell alcohol, making recommendations to the city when it comes to liquor licenses and educating teens about addiction.

Key says recovery is often misunderstood as an individual person's effort—a pull-up your boot straps, just-do-it mentality—when really recovery requires community. Key's made it his life's mission to promote Skid Row as a hub for recovery and coined the term "Biggest Recovery Community Anywhere" after a sour experience he had with the press.

"He was interviewed by the *LA Times* and sort of showcased as this person who made it through recovery and was this wonderful person, as if it was his doing," explained Brouwers. "Kevin was very upset by that interview because he said, it's not just me, it's the community, it's the people that work the recovery programs, it's the people that give back to the community and it's because I live there [in Skid Row] and I continue living there that I was able to recover and do the work I do now."

After coining the phrase "Biggest Recovery Community Anywhere," Key helped LAPD craft a performance piece by the same name. Since then, Brouwers says many community members have caught on to the term and are describing Skid Row with a renewed sense of pride.

This spirit of pride—in living in the Skid Row neighborhood, being a survivor, transforming one's liabilities into assets by channeling them in a positive direction—is something that Skid Row insiders like Key, Shaw, Fears and Hernandez all understand wholeheartedly. For each of them, their darkest days have now become a bedrock on which to build purposeful lives.

Reflections on the Practice of Embedded Journalism

Drive-By Journalists

As I sat nervously swiveling in my chair at my first LAPD rehearsal waiting for warm-up to begin, I overheard LAPD co-director Henriëtte Brouwers grousing about an article that had appeared in the *LA Times* on October 3, 2014. The piece headlined, "Artists find inspiration among homeless in L.A.'s Skid Row," profiled a Dutch photographer, Desiree van Hoefor, who had spent her past five summer vacations capturing "the beauty and humor beneath the grit and misery of the 50-block downtown homeless enclave."[63]

"I'm a little bit hooked on Skid Row right now," Van Hoefor said in the article.[64]

Photographers like van Hoefor concern Brouwers because they shoot only what the eye can see. She calls these types of artists "drive-by artists." Images like van Hoefor's present no context or understanding for the community. The images, she said, reinforce stereotypes of Skid Row as being "just a bunch of addicts and transients."[65]

Ann-Sophie Morrissette, director of Communications and Policy for the Downtown Women's Center, shared a viewpoint similar to Brouwers in the same article, calling such photography, "poverty porn."[66]

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[63] Gale Holland, "Artists find inspiration among homeless in L.A.'s skid row," *Los Angeles Times,* October 4, 2014

[64] Ibid

[65] Henriëtte Brouwers, Interviewed by Danielle Charbonneau, United Coalition East Prevention Project, October 2015

[66] Gale Holland, quoting Ann-Sophie Morrissette, "Artists find inspiration among homeless in L.A.'s skid row," *Los Angeles Times,* October 4, 2014

Journalists can also be accused of doing "drive by" reporting without really understanding the culture on which they are reporting. Key's experience is a perfect example. The journalist missed an opportunity to show how Skid Row's recovery community works collectively. She re-affirmed the misconception that recovery is an individual effort, a pull-up-your-bootstraps and do it mentality.

In many articles, homeless are dehumanized. They are quantified with numbers and dollar signs. They are a crisis to be fixed. Individuals are not named, not quoted or given a sense of character. Common phrases are like these, taken from a few recent articles: "Over 44,000 homeless in the county of Los Angeles," or "L.A. spends $100 million on the homeless," or "Mayor fails to address homeless crisis."

The *LA Times* quoted City Administrative Officer Miguel A. Santana on May 12, 2015 saying, "Nobody wants formerly homeless people living next to them."[67] This type of NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitude illustrates how dehumanized the homeless can be, as if they are permanently marked with a scarlet-H and to be avoided. This of course is not always the case, but it is common.

Throughout my time shadowing LAPD, I was consistently challenged to examine my own perspective, misconceptions and motives, cautions of dehumanizing the community I wanted to

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[67] Soumya Karlamangla, "As homelessness climbs in L.A., a search for solutions," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 2015

understand. One night in particular I was confronted with my own perhaps skewed fascination with LAPD. It was during a panel discussion after LAPD's performance of "Red Beard, Red Beard" at USC. An audience member commented that people should be careful when referring to LAPD as a company made up of "homeless and formerly homeless actors." I had used the phrase on a handful of occasions in my work.

Her comment, at first, seemed odd, as LAPD is a company "made up of homeless and formerly homeless individuals," and the phrase is how the company defines itself. I understood, however, what the audience member was getting at: a tendency for the LAPD company to become spectacle. I was forced to ask myself if my fascination with LAPD was pure, or if I was only interested in the artists because of their often dramatic and gritty stories. Would "Red Beard, Red Beard," for example, have been such a draw on its own artistic merits if the actors were not formerly homeless? Could the actors be recognized for their talents alone, beyond their intriguing stories of redemption? For most of the LAPD actors, having overcome homelessness and personal struggles is a source of pride, not shame. Ultimately I concluded that the phrase was acceptable in the spirit of pride. I was, however, acutely aware from that day forward of the possibility of treating the company as spectacle, producing "poverty porn," or bolstering the Scarlet H and phenomenon.

Brent Blair, director of MA Applied Theatre Arts at USC's School of Theater and a practitioner of Theater of the Oppressed (a type of theater that uses performance to help individuals rehearse for revolution, heal from private traumas and empower oppressed communities) added to the discourse.

"The trap I believe our country, and the world largely, is suffering from, is a poverty of imagination that prevents us from seeing others as human beings or seeing difference," he said. "For me the great gifts of arts like LAPD and Theater of the Oppressed and other art forms is to re-humanize what has been dehumanized."[68]

The question is, how best can journalism do that?

Embedded or "Inbedded": The Debate

During my ten months as a graduate student at USC's Annenberg School for Journalism, I kept hearing about a "new" model for arts and cultural journalism called "embedded journalism" — a form of reporting where journalists spend long periods of time embedded in an organization or culture in order to investigate and report from the inside. The term sometimes refers to journalists who produce content for traditional, or third party, media organizations. Other times it refers to journalists who are hired by an organization to write about itself or its related interests. For example, Human Rights Watch, an international organization that conducts research for the purposes of advocacy, hired journalists to cover topics related to human rights. The journalists, the organization claims, have full editorial freedom and are not required to write about the organization itself.

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[68] Brent Blair, interviewed by Sasha Anawalt during panel discussion, University of Southern California, January 13, 2015

The *Washington Post* published an article in October of 2014 about arts organizations, like the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, that have recently hired "embedded journalists" to write for their organizations. The lede for the article called the trend a "dramatic shift in the way cultural institutions communicate with their audiences."[69]

Outside the realm of arts and culture, the term "embedded journalist" was both popularized and criticized during the Iraq war. At that time, it referred to reporters who traveled within military units. The Bush Administration and the military announced in 2004 that they would allow reporters to "embed" with soldiers in the field. More than 700 journalists signed up and were embedded.[70] Those journalists were vetted by the military before given clearance to report from the inside. The practice garnered a tidal wave of public criticism, saying the media had abandoned freedom of the press. Freedom from outside agencies has long been viewed as critical for journalists to remain objective, unhinged to any particular agenda. Critics dubbed these inside reporters "inbedded journalists" and opposed the level of oversight the military had over the reporters inside their units.

In a disturbing panel interview during the Media at War Conference at UC Berkeley, Col. Rick Long of the U.S. Marine Corps who managed a media training camp in Quantico, Virginia, commented on the military's decision to embed journalists:

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[69] Peggy McGloan, "Arts Organizations are hiring pros to tell their stories," ***Washington Post***, October 31, 2014

[70] Jeffery Kahn, "Postmortem: Iraq war media coverage dazzled but it also obscured," *News Center,* March 18, 2004

”Frankly, our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment,” he said.[71]

In a New York Times opinion piece on June 14, 2014, Chelsea Manning, the former U.S. Army intelligence analyst, criticized the practice of embedded journalism during both the U.S. military occupation of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan. Manning claimed that the vetting of reporters by military officials was used "to screen out those judged likely to produce critical coverage," and that once embedded, journalists tended "to avoid controversial reporting that could raise red flags" out of fear of having their access terminated.[72]

The criticisms of embedded journalism in a military sense could easily still apply to journalists like me, reporting on arts, culture and social issues.

In my time at LAPD, I grew close to its members and organizers. Finding a genuine voice—one that could criticize the people I had come to love and respect—was difficult. At times my obligation felt split: was it to the media outlet for which I was reporting? Or was it to LAPD? The lines grew blurry at times. Ultimately, my obligation was, and is, to the truth. I have concluded that if a journalist maintains their obligation to the truth, the advantages of embedded journalism most often outweigh the pitfalls. This, I have found, is particularly true for a

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[71] Jeffery Kahn, “Postmortem: Iraq war media coverage dazzled but it also obscured,” *News Center,* March 18, 2004

[72] Chelsea Manning, “The Fog Machine of War,” New York Times, June 14, 2014

community or culture like Skid Row that has been misunderstood, under-represented, oppressed and oversimplified.

Although they haven't always been called "embedded journalists," there are a number of shining examples, both old and new, of reporters who utilized immersion strategies to produce meaningful works of journalism.

Nellie Bly, a journalist writing for *New York World* in 1887, famously feigned a mental illness to get herself committed to a New York mental health facility, Blackwell's Island. Her exposé revealed the horrendous treatment of the clinically insane inside state mental health asylums.[73] While her reporting was under cover and not exactly embedded, her work is an example of immersion being used as a technique over 100 years ago.

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's book "Random Family" documents the lives of teenagers growing up in the grittiest parts of the Bronx. LeBlanc spent 12 years following the lives of her subjects. She formed a relationship with their families, recorded hundreds of hours of interviews with each character, spoke to their neighbors, lovers, drug dealers, kids and acquaintances, and exhaustively documented her observations. She gave some of the individuals recorders to tape their own thoughts when she wasn't around, had them read aloud love letters and even exchanged notes with individuals who were behind bars. The novel became a detailed, non-

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[73] Nellie Bly. (2015). The Biography.com website. Retrieved 02:17, May 26, 2015, from http://www.biography.com/people/nellie-bly-9216680.

fictional portrait of what it was like to grow up in the Bronx where drugs, teen pregnancy and gang violence is commonplace.[74]

In the same vein, Hunter S. Thompson wrote "Hells Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga" and "Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72." For "Hells Angels," Thompson spent over a year as an honorary member of the Hells Angels motorcycle gang, partying with his subjects, riding a motorcycle and traversing the country, tape-recorder in hand. For "Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail of '72," he invested a year on the road following George McGovern as he campaigned for the democratic primaries. Thompson recounted his adventures in voluminous detail and was as harsh as he was humorous. He popularized topics that may have never reached his counterculture audience otherwise.

"G-Dog and the Homeboys: Father Greg Boyle and the Gangs of East Los Angeles," written by Celeste Fremon, is another example. Fremon, a *Los Angeles Times* journalist, spent three years with Father Gregory Boyle, founder of *Homeboy Industries*, a rehabilitative non-profit that helps ex-gang-bangers transform their lives. She immersed herself in the Boyle Height's barrio to understand gangland culture with its "Kill or Be Killed" credo.

Perhaps the example that most influenced me in my journey with LAPD is Steve Lopez's "The Soloist," a book that grew out of his regular column for the *Los Angeles Times*. In April 2005, he wrote about violinist, Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, who had been a music prodigy and Juilliard

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[74] Robert S. Boynton, "Adrian Nicole LeBlanc," The New New Journalism [website], Retrieved May 26, 2015, http://www.newnewjournalism.com/bio.php?last_name=leblanc

School of Music student in New York before suffering a schizophrenic breakdown and landing in Los Angeles on the streets of Skid Row. While getting to know Ayers, Lopez found himself increasingly more emotionally invested. He helped Ayers secure permanent housing in the Lamp Community and took him on a field trip to Walt Disney Concert Hall where he played with the symphony.

As a reporter, Lopez had been taught to maintain objectivity and professional boundaries between himself and his subjects, so while bonding with Ayers, he openly struggled with journalistic ethics. He writes about those challenges in "The Soloist" and, at one point, even questioned publishing the book at all. Ultimately, Lopez decided the story was important to tell. Since then, he has written dozens upon dozens of columns about Skid Row for the *Los Angeles Times* and, in my opinion, changed the nature and content of public discourse about Skid Row in the press.

Hayk Makhmuryan says Lopez's "The Soloist" is what allowed Lamp's art program to grow. He says Lamp saw a huge influx in both physical and monetary donations to the Music and Arts recovery program at Lamp after Lopez published the book "The Soloist," and again when the book was made into a Disney film. The Lamp art program was able to expand its art studio and build a small recording studio.

These are just a few examples of works written by journalists who immersed themselves in a culture in order to do in-depth reporting. All of these books were partially published in newspapers or magazines before becoming books. While the ethics of commodifying such stories

is debatable, the reach and impact of these works was substantial. The articles, books and films assumably informed, engaged and expanded the public discourse.

Embedded Journalism, By Another Name

Robert S. Boynton, a scholar, former journalist and journalism professor at New York University, believes there is space for a resurgence of immersion journalism. Although this type of narrative-driven, nonfiction, long-form journalism seemed to disappear for a time, it isn't new, he says.[75]

In 1973, Tom Wolfe compiled "The New Journalism," an anthology of works written by authors who used these exact techniques. In spite of New Journalism's popularity at the time, Mark Weingarten, author of the book, "The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight" (a book about the New Journalism revolution), wrote that "less than a decade after Tom Wolfe's 1973 anthology, the consensus was that New Journalism was dead."[76]

Weingarten blames the apparent 1980s death of New Journalism mainly on two factors: one, that certain new journalists (primarily Thompson) took too many creative, non-factual liberties with their reporting that wrecked its reputation as legitimate journalism; second, that magazines "were beginning the long slide down toward 'Top 10' service features and puffy lifestyle stories."[77]

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[75] Robert S. Boynton, "The New New Journalism"

[76] Robert S. Boynton, "Whatever happened to New Journalism," *Los Angeles Times,* January 23, 2005

[77] Ibid

This slide is perhaps even more noticeable today with the explosion of the internet and social media. *Time* magazine summarized a study by Chartbeat that determined that "one in every three visitors spends less than 15 seconds reading articles they land on."[78] Finding a way to engage audiences in important work is even more imperative in this modern landscape.

In spite of such statistics, Boynton, points out the recent increase of journalists (like LeBlanc, Jon Krakauer, Michael Lewis, Eric Schlosser, William Finnegan, among others), who are using similar immersive strategies to their 1960s and 70s counterparts. He calls these writers "new, new journalists."

In his book "The New, New Journalism," Boynton writes, "In the 30 years since Tom Wolfe published his manifesto, "The New Journalism," a group of writers has been quietly securing a place for reportorially based, narrative-driven long form non-fiction. These New New Journalists represent the continued maturation of American literary journalism. They use the license to experiment with form earned by the New Journalists of the sixties to address the social and political concerns of the 19th century."[79]

While there are some differences between the old new journalists and the new new journalists (mainly that the new ones are more drawn to social advocacy) Boynton says that "what they do share is a dedication to the craft of reporting, a conviction that by immersing themselves deeply into their subject's lives, often for prolonged periods of time, they can bridge the gap between

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[78] Tony Haile, "What you think you know about the web is wrong," *Time*, March 19, 2014

[79] Robert S. Boynton, "The New New Journalism"

their subjective perspective and the reality they are observing, that they can render that reality in a way that is both accurate and aesthetically pleasing."[80]

Whether one calls this type of reporting "embedded journalism" or "new new journalism," I have come to believe that the form has a legitimate, if not critical, place in today's media sphere. Reflecting on my time as an embedded reporter at LAPD, I feel the form is especially important for reporting on social issues that are layered, complex and frequently misunderstood. Cultures in which people are afflicted, dehumanized or oppressed, need to be investigated and written about in ways that don't oversimplify, reinforce misconceptions or further dehumanize.

In her book, "Medicine Stories," cultural activist Aurora Levins Morales writes about how to be an effective social advocate. She defines a cultural activist as a warrior who does "battle in the arena of culture, over the stories we tell ourselves and each other of why the world is as it is." By this definition, the journalist is a cultural activist.

"The reality is that when we are unable to mobilize people on their own behalf, the difficulty is usually at the level of vision," writes Morales. "Either we ourselves have been unable to see the people with whom we are working as fully human, or we have failed to engage their imaginations and spirits powerfully enough. Cultural work, the work of infusing people's imaginations with possibility, with the belief in a bigger future, is the essential fuel of revolutionary fire."[81]

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[80] Ibid

[81] Aurora Levins Morales, "Medicine Stories"

This “revolutionary fire” and new vision is exactly what is needed in Skid Row to overcome what Lopez called our “lost sense of shame.”

Morales says cultural activists need to learn to “bring complexity into places where we are offered simplistic and shallow explanations; strip artificial complication from the straightforward; and name and reclaim the connections we are taught to ignore”[82] In order to do this, she encourages cultural activists to tell untold or under-told histories, contradict misinformation, “dismantle the idea of passive victimization,[83]”show complexity, embrace ambiguity, personalize and show context (both globally and locally). Quick-fire, “drive-by” journalism frequently falls short. Embedded journalists, on the other hand, have the time and access to truly understand the complex communities and cultures from which they report and seem to have a better chance of meeting Morales’ ideals.

Had I not been embedded in LAPD and in the Skid Row community, I would never have earned the trust of such individuals as Walter Fears who only recounted his story for me after I had spent seven months with LAPD; I would never have discovered the importance of arts and culture to Skid Row, which I only really understood after conducting over 50 interviews during the Festival for All Skid Row Artists and reading Malpede and Jackson’s study, “A Case for Skid Row

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[82] Ibid

[83] Morales expands this idea, saying passive victimization leaves people feeling ashamed and undeserving of freedom. Even under the most brutal conditions, she says, people find ways to assert their humanity.

Culture." I would never have uncovered the grassroots culture and "domino effect" Malpede described, because the connections between organizations took time to see. I would never have observed the amount of community activism there is in Skid Row or participated in the April 2015 protest with LAPD actors. I would have never discovered the recovery culture that exists in Skid Row, which revealed itself slowly. I would never have understood how people see their homelessness as a blessing in their lives, rather than a curse (like Suzette Shaw, Sylvie Hernandez and Myka Moon who pursued their callings only after becoming homeless). I would never have refuted the idea of Skid Row as a transient community or discovered how people stay in Skid Row even when they have an opportunity to leave (like Fears). And I would have not understood the many complex layers of issues (past and present) that have made Skid Row what it is today (the containment policy, gentrification, the Safer Citifies Initiative, the "broken windows" policy, the 1980 closing of state mental health facilities, the recertification process of people on SSI benefits, the availability of affordable housing and others). In short, it takes time and access to discover the "Real Deal.[84]"

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In May of 2015, ten years after my first encounter with Skid Row, I sat wearing a cap and gown in the audience of USC's Annenberg School for Journalism's commencement ceremony. The school's dean, Ernst J. Willson, said that the real job of the journalist is to "afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted." The graduation speaker, international journalist, Jorge Ramos, echoed, saying, "really good journalists always take a stand with those who have no

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[84] "Bringing the Real Deal to Normalville" is the tagline for LAPD.

voice and with those who have no rights." I smiled and felt a wave of gratitude for the time I had spent on Skid Row. As an aspiring "new new journalist," drawn to immersion reporting and longform nonfiction, I realized I was on the right track.