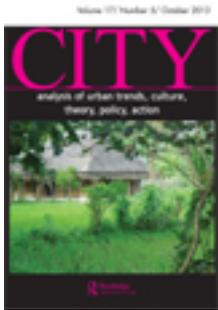


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On: 28 October 2013, At: 13:00

Publisher: Routledge

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City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20>

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Published online: 22 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Andrea Gibbons (2013) Liberatory struggles for housing, *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 17:5, 699-702, DOI: [10.1080/13604813.2013.827856](https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.827856)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.827856>

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Liberatory struggles for housing

Andrea Gibbons

Freedom now! Struggles for the human right to housing in LA and beyond, edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton. Freedom Now Books, Los Angeles, 2012, 116 pp., ISBN 978-0-9849158-1-1, US\$20.00.

'I mean, am I crazy? All I see here for miles here is nothing but Black folks. How can you not tell this story? Quote me on that because I am seeing Black folks until the eye goes dim. How can you be a person in the media and not tell this story?' (Chuck D of Public Enemy while touring Los Angeles' Skid Row with Pete White and General Dogon of LA Community Action Network)

A rapper will wonder why the media isn't talking about the thousands of black people living on the streets in Skid Row, but why aren't more activists and academics? For all the many critiques of the over-saturation of urban theory based on the American model, this remains a glaring absence. How can we be radicals and not tell this story? How can such a viscerally felt image as this not demand explanations that can fully theorise our arrival at such a devastating reality where over 50,000 people are homeless on any one night in LA County? How do we support the grassroots struggle to change it? This slim volume is a call to do just that. In the words of David Wagner and Pete White:

'Almost half of homeless residents in the city of Los Angeles are African American even though they comprise only 8% of the city's overall population. The chance of a white person being homeless on any given night is 1 in 272. By stark contrast, the chance that an African American is homeless in L.A. is 1 in 18. This extreme racial disparity should be a clarion call for more robust explanations

about why race and homelessness are linked in U.S. cities.' (42)

Freedom Now! is much more than a snapshot of reality and a call for action. Produced as a collaboration between scholars, activists, artists and the community organisation Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), it works to bring together theory and practice, political economy and the lived experience of men and women fighting for respect as much as survival. Editors Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton seek to 'reclaim the visions of freedom that have grown out of Black radical and working-class traditions' in 'an effort to think about the housing crisis from Los Angeles to Durban to better understand why such an emergent global struggle has emerged demanding housing as a human right' (4). The book is certainly centred around LA CAN's work in Central and South Central Los Angeles, but their struggle is situated nicely within the larger movement for housing rights and racial and social justice.

It also stands as a welcome addition to the debate being had within *City's* own pages and in the wider community over the relationship between activism and theory. In issue 13 (2) of this journal, Peter Marcuse (2009, 191) states:

'It is necessary to know who is most deeply affected, who is likely to lead the fight, who will be most likely to support it, what will their reasons be? Contributing to understanding exactly who that is a

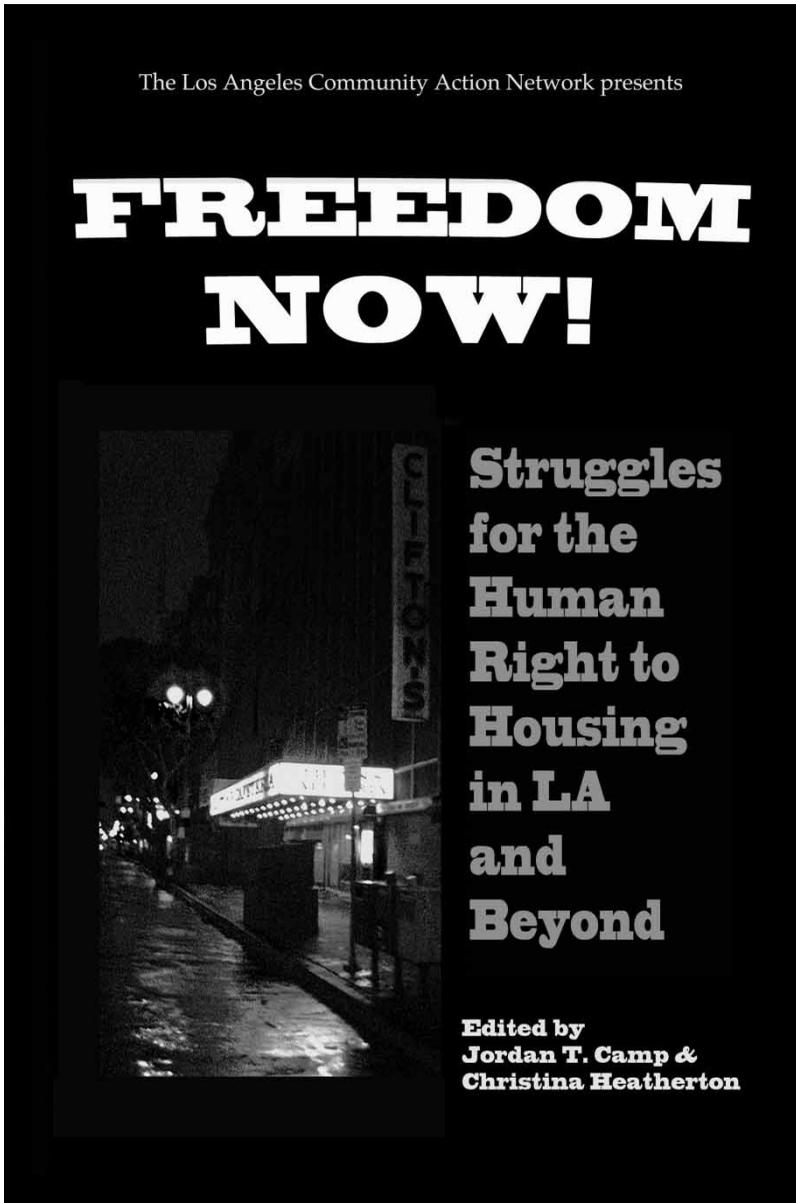


Figure 1 Cover of the book.

contribution critical urban theory should attempt to make.’

Here, the editors present those most affected through their own words and pictures, along with their struggle and motivation, and with them begin to unravel the political and racial economy of their context from street level. None of it is really unfamiliar ground,

but the exact contours and urgencies cannot help but be different. This is certainly a book that ‘exposes, proposes and politicises’ (Marcuse 2009, 193) in a bottom-up way that few others have.

The foreword from Ruth Wilson Gilmore (author of a fundamental text around the political and racial economy of prisons, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition*

in *Globalizing California*) and Christina Heatherton sets the context for LA CAN's work and the crisis faced by those living on downtown's streets and residential hotels. During the first three years of the \$6.5 million dollar 'Safer Cities Initiative', the Los Angeles Police Department issued 28,000 citations in an area with a population of only 15,000. A perfect example of 'broken-windows theory' policing,¹ joined up with efforts to clear a rapidly gentrifying area of its poorer residents, LA CAN has been one of the few organisations resisting the resulting wholesale incarceration, impoverishment and displacement of their community. This nexus between police occupation, gentrification and racism is an ongoing theme throughout the book, as it is in the lives of all those residents profiled in it. As another heavy-hitter of race critical theory George Lipsitz writes, 'The homeless population has reason to fear law enforcement more than they fear crime, reporting more frequent instances of police harassment (37%) than assault (24%) or robbery (18%).'² He argues that the use of the police to drive the poor from Skid Row is only part of a larger pattern of accumulation by dispossession, one that has gained the implicit consent of many it negatively affects through the use of racism and the creation of 'moral panics' around crime. Not simply a book of academic and community voices side by side, David Wagner, Professor of Sociology and Social Work, and Pete White, co-director of LA CAN, connect this criminalisation and mass incarceration to the massive deindustrialisation that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, the war on drugs and welfare reform. These lived realities of segregation; unemployment; police harassment; lack of housing; the absence of a social safety net and their collision with high-stakes development all come together in Skid Row.

Freedom Now! offers a glimpse of these intersections through the words and lives of these residents. The words of Soni Abdel, for example, speak to the lived reality of the police presence:

'I don't want to be enslaved any more.

I don't want to be enslaved like my great grandparents were.

I don't want to be told that I can't walk on this side of the street like my mother was told.

I don't want to be told you have to get up because we say so.

I don't want that, so that's why I'm here.' (59)

Her picture and words are among the many that are interspersed with longer articles. For those on the outside, they are small windows into Skid Row's reality, and the people working to change it. Professor Rhonda Y. Williams, in her piece on the struggle to keep public housing, underlines the way that scholarship too often ignores the experiences of such residents—low-income black women in particular—thus marginalising them even further. She writes of one constant and very basic demand: 'What must it mean to have to rescue one's humanity from injurious perceptions by having to vigorously assert, as Sharon Pierce Jackson felt it imperative to do, that "We are people. We are not animals"?' (15). What does it mean when our own scholarship does not always recognise the voice and humanity of those who are most oppressed? Over and over again, the voices found within these vignettes demand the respect that their inclusion in a volume like this provides: a way to join together lived experience and theory in mutually illuminating ways.

Part of this respect also lies in the format and style of the contributions from academics. There is a mixture of pieces written clearly and with a minimum of jargon, along with very accessible interviews. Mike Davis probably needs no introduction. Here, he gives more background to the explosion of homelessness in the 1980s and its connection to the closing of mental health clinics, the redevelopment of Bunker Hill, and the loss of casual labour opportunities and plant closures. He goes on to discuss the implication of hipsters in gentrification and lessons from the Unemployed Councils of the 1930s for today's struggles. He even brings Lenin's *What is to be Done* into the mix of

community organisers and activists of all ages in thinking through struggle, though the most prevalent references are to the Black Panthers and Martin Luther King.

There is another interview with Daniel Martinez Hosang, a 10-year veteran organiser of the Centre for Third World Organizing and author of *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California*, an impressive book looking at how struggles over state-wide propositions around race and immigration have shifted discourse and public perceptions of the possible. He says:

‘I think our challenge today in organizing is figuring out how to talk about racial justice and structural racism in a way that both makes visible the forms of violence, abandonment, and domination that poor people of color suffer, especially around housing, education, and prisons, but also to link it to a general and broader crisis. I think we have a way to go to be able to do that, to reclaim the language of universalism, of democracy, and of shared hopes without resorting to superficial colorblind or race-neutral language.’ (96)

This book is both an example of why this is so desperately necessary, as well as an example of how this kind of theoretical and practical work can be done. *Freedom Now!* begins to join together conversations between African American residents on Skid Row and Spanish-speaking immigrant women in South Central projects; academics; housing activists working in Chicago, Detroit and New Orleans and, stretching a little further, words from S’Bu Zikode, chairperson of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the shack dwellers’ movement from South Africa.

There is no better way to end than with the way *Freedom Now!* starts: with a dedication to scholar and activist Clyde Woods. We can only try and live up to the ways that he was

‘Acute and unrelenting in naming the problem of neoliberalism, a problem he refused to describe as new, but one fatally linked with the global legacies of racism, capitalism, colonialism, and slavery. He

challenged us to make these histories visible to a world that refused to see them as anything but individual deficiencies.’ (9)

This is a world and a history and a struggle made visible. It does not take the place of in-depth study and more deeply participatory work in analysing what is happening in downtown LA (and other city centres throughout the USA), but brings together what we know and opens up both important avenues for investigation and an ongoing conversation between the very different groups of people that should be coming together to make social change and movement possible.

Notes

- 1 The term ‘broken-windows theory’ references one of the most influential theories in modern-day policing, and refers to the idea that one broken window signals to the wider community that no one cares about the building and thus results in many broken windows. It comes from the seminal article by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in the *Atlantic Monthly*, published in 1982. George Kelling was a key person involved in the formation of Safer Cities, along with LA police chief William Bratton, formerly of New York and Giuliani’s efforts to transform Times Square (Blasi 2007).
- 2 Statistics come from Lamp Community and the Los Angeles Community Action Network, ‘The Safer Cities Initiative is a Failed Policy: End Human Rights Violations and Build Housing Today’ (2008): 33. Accessed August 22, 2011. <http://cangress.wordpress.org/tag/los-angeles-community-action-network/>

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