DO YOU KNOW BROADWAY?

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Like many other Angelenos, I enjoyed it with family on weekend visits, later as a teenager with friends, and as an adult. The Santa Monica Pier is the place where I said yes to a marriage proposal and it is the place where my parents would stroll at sunset in their retirement. The allure of the Santa Monica/Venice Bay area was always initially the beach. Over time, I came to know other parts of Santa Monica, but only superficially. When I learned about the Quinn Research Center and met Carolyne and Bill Edwards, who founded and lead the Center, Santa Monica became even more meaningful to me. A facet of its history was revealed and as an African American Angeleno, Santa Monica and specifically, its Broadway neighborhood, to me, stands as a too little-known testament to African American hard work, aspiration, resilience, and excellence.

On a sunny summer afternoon, I visited with Carolyne and Bill Edwards. Over tea, vintage photographs, hand drawn maps, and newspaper clippings, I learned about their journey to start the Center and their passion for making their version of Santa Monica more known. I also learned about the challenges they face in obtaining official designations that they see as crucial to their mission. As we were about to embark on a tour of Santa Monica through the lens of Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, Mrs. Edwards asked me, “Do you know Broadway?” While I had some familiarity with the area she was referring to, I had to respond, “No. I don’t know Broadway, not like you know Broadway!” Despite having traveled the street for many years, I felt I had not earned the right to say “yes.”
I knew nothing of the history of the buildings or old majestic trees that have been witness to both the steady presence of the African American community as well as radical changes in the area. Mrs. Edwards’s casual and simple question was quite profound and prompted a cascade of questions that have to do with depth of connection, memory, power, control over narrative and the built environment, and the fight against erasure.

What does it take to really know a place? Who gets to narrate and make visible its history? What does it mean to be a steward of heritage? Specifically, what does celebration of one’s history mean for African Americans and other historically marginalized communities? What do we lose as a society when communities can’t commemorate their histories on their own terms? The quest to honor and make visible the accomplishments and contributions of African Americans in Santa Monica is something Carolyne and Bill Edwards take seriously and embrace joyfully with passion and a sense of urgency. They recognize that the work of the Quinn Research Center must advance quickly while they and others proximate to the history are still alive. They also recognize that it is work that must be handed off to the next generation. At the core of the work is the desire that African Americans be seen and documented as the fully human, resourceful, joyful, and accomplished community that they have been.

As the area faces rapid demographic and economic changes, also pressing is the desire not to be erased and forgotten. In recalling the history of their community—the buildings, landmarks, organizations, and individuals that hold deep meaning, Mr. and Mrs. Edwards drew attention to the community’s Southern roots, their experiences of racialized oppression, the fulfillment of their aspirations for land ownership and self-determination, a shared entrepreneurial spirit, cultural solidarity, faith, and a deep commitment to continued collective uplift. Without question, all of this is an important dimension of African American history and a crucial part of the cultural and historic landscape of the Santa Monica/Venice bay area.

While the rationale for an official designation, such as a “cultural district” or “landmark,” is clear and urgent to those affiliated with the Quinn Research Center, rules like the need for significant buildings to be contiguous, or the requirement that buildings must have architectural or historical relevance as defined by others are obstacles. Such rules can militate against efforts to bring visibility to places and communities that have endured disruption and oppression.

Too often the importance of historic preservation and control over narrative get short shrift when we think about characteristics of equitable and just communities. Indicators of equity often focus on issues like housing, access to jobs and educational attainment, which are, without question, critical. However, frequently, we overlook the very things that give places character and make them meaningful, including a community’s ability to transmit history and heritage from one generation to the next; and the ability to connect to newcomers in ways that they too can share in the stewardship of place as they add their own layers, and make their own contributions. In my opinion, in many instances, markers of an unjust society include evidence that communities do not have control over their own narratives, and evidence that the ability to transmit heritage from one generation to the next has been hampered.
Around the world and throughout the ages, for historically marginalized groups, the reclamation of voice and the passing on of heritage is often an act of resistance and resilience. How does this work happen? As evident in the efforts of the Quinn Research Center, the work of reclamation of narrative and voice is not just about asserting facts and technical preservation. At its most effective, it is head-heart-hand work—work that not only engages one intellectually, but also emotionally and in a physical, embodied manner. The collection and telling of stories and memories; the preservation of selected physical artifacts and elements of the built environment; and the cultivation of stewardship among the current inhabitants of the place are all key. The work requires dedicated champions, allies, and policies that favor cultural self-determination as a dimension of equity and justice. Artists are uniquely suited to be essential allies in this kind of work given their ability to engage people fully—intellectually, emotionally, physically—as co-creators and/or audiences.

An example of this is the collaboration of the Quinn Research Center and Maj Hasager, a Copenhagen–based artist in residence at 18th Street Arts Center. For four years Ms. Hasager worked with the Quinn Research Center to help advance work focused on the Broadway neighborhood. She collaborated with the Quinn Research Center as a thought partner, helping to deepen inquiry and devise new ways of demonstrating stewardship of the historic and present–day Broadway community, including the creation of the Three Structures Touching exhibition. The exhibition is focused not only on the history of the Broadway community, but on the complex process of preservation and the crucial and passionate work of fighting erasure. The exhibition itself can be understood as a designation or validation of the place and the long labor to make it better known. The exhibition also serves as a way to educate and, most importantly, cultivate a humble curiosity about place, people, and diverse points of view.

To appreciate how artists can be allies in this often overlooked but critically important dimension of social change, one must embrace a comprehensive notion of community development, beyond just economic development, that includes consideration of heritage, narrative, and voice, particularly as these pertain to historically marginalized groups. One also must embrace an expansive understanding of the roles of artists and arts organizations in communities and the power of art to help us see differently, to cultivate that humble curiosity—the spark that can lead to deep understanding and action. The Quinn Research Center along with Maj Hasager, 18th Street Arts Center, and other collaborators is doing this foundational work and setting an important example for what it means to steward heritage in service of creating places where all can thrive.

Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson’s expertise is in comprehensive community revitalization, systems change, dynamics of race and ethnicity and roles of and arts and culture in communities.