

# **We're Not The Zoo: LA Gang Tours Treat Us Like Animals in The 'Hood**

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When I read with terror and disbelief about the proposed Gang Tours of Los Angeles, I was reminded of the well-meaning, neo-liberal, writer of the early 20th century, Charles Dickens, who launched a deadly media-based campaign of poor people fetishizing when he toured, surveyed, studied and reported on the Manhattan tenements a.k.a the dwellings/residences/ roofs of thousands of poor immigrants in the New York at the turn of the century.

When Dickens published his report in the New York Times which became instrumental in the displacement of thousands of poor people out of New York, he characterized the tenements as deplorable cesspools. The subsequent demolitions of thousands of buildings in New York housing poor folks was for our own good, the social workers, city planners and real estate speculators told us, for the betterment of us seething, unwashed masses of poor people, unable to care for ourselves, speak for ourselves, or think for ourselves, our children or our homes. Silenced people they were, we are, intentionally unheard, talked about, studied, gazed upon, critiqued and researched.

To be fair Dickens didn't invent poor people/indigenous people fetishizing, we have anthropology, ethnography, politicians and psychiatry to thank for that since the beginning of time. From Daniel Moynihan pathologizing single, African descendent, mother-headed households as broken, which led to the criminalizing welfare codes we welfare-dependent mamas struggle with today to the poverty tours of favelas in Brazil people have been speaking for, studying on, and talking about poor people without ever really listening to us, talking with us, or properly compensating us for our images and knowledge for hundreds of years, but nowadays we have reality shows, tourism, corporate media and the non-profit industrial complex to truly progress us all into the complete and utter zoo-ifying of us poor people of color or as my fellow PNN poverty and migrant scholar Muteado Silencio says, "We are not animals in the 'hood."

And in the case of the bizarre, wrong-headed-ness of the LA Gang Tours and its non-profit organization of the same name, once again it is staffed by well-meaning advocates who aim to Save Lives, Create Jobs and Rebuild Communities, as their tag-line says. We are told by staffers and their corporate and non-corporate advocates that bus tours through gritty, neighborhoods peopled by poor youth of color caught up in violence, drugs and poverty, is for our own good. It will bring us jobs and opportunities and hope.

One of the many oxymoronic aspects of this concept is the notion, just like Dickens reported, that our neighborhoods, our communities, our corners, our schools, and our homes, are crazy, dirty, sick, disgusting and must be cleaned up, cleaned out and eradicated, hygienic metaphors about humans scattered about with impunity. And the complete and utter disregard for the fact that in everyone of these so-called, blighted neighborhoods, filthy apartment buildings and poor people schools, homes and communities, there are families and elders and children of color who are living, thriving, learning, and resisting.

There are heroes, and leaders, and lecturers and healers, and dreamers and teachers, and poets and artists, revolutionaries and scholars. And it is only the people who have engaged in philanthropy pimping, colonized learning and formal institutions of helping that get honored, recognized and listened to for their heroism, beauty, power and agency.

It is the reason that POOR Magazine launched the PeopleSkool and promotes the notion of poverty scholarship. It is the reason we launched PoorNewsNetwork/PNN and a non-hierarchical form of media creation based on indigenous teachings and eldership. It is why we create our own research and up-end all forms of institutional domination. It is the reason we resist the notion that there is only one form of legitimate education, research and media production.

Try raising a child in poverty with very little money and almost no support, try taking care of an elder, or keeping your family fed, try healing outside of the Western medical industrial complex. Try eating well in the hood or being endlessly po'lice harassed, racially profiled and messed with. These things happen and they don't happen. Heroism happens, beauty happens, art happens, violence happens, just like it does everywhere.

Last year when I did a walk-through of the Tenement Museum of New York, I learned that several hundred extremely poor mothers and fathers of 9 and 10 children managed to raise and feed and clothe their children with no indoor plumbing in a room the size of a closet. Try doing that. Tell me that mama or daddy isnt a hero, a scholar.

My poor single mama of color raised me alone in several of the neighborhoods slated for gang tours. In our Compton, Wilmos, East LA neighborhoods, we had gangs, which arguably were many more things than one colonized notion of violence, but we also had tamale vendors, muralists, break-dancers, poets, micro-business people, hip hop DJ's, low-rider car-art, lovers, grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles and aunties.

I started this piece by saying I had terror in my heart about the gang tours, but be clear its not terror for the poor, unsuspecting tourist, default colonizers and 21st century missionaries, stumbling and trampling over our communities and cultures as the well-meaning gang tours commence, rather, its terror for the residents of the proposed tour sites, and so I caution all of the community members, families and young people to hold on carefully to their purses, wallets, belongings, poetry, art and scholarship, cause, well, you know how dangerous those tourists can be.

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