

With host Brian Sonia Wallace and guests Judy Branfman, Pat Raphael, Aanti Sumaiyya, and Tom Laichas.

JUDY

Lucky to live in Venice, Los Angeles, California.

Lucky to return to be the third generation of activist family in Venice
And see the sunset over the ocean from my bedroom

Unlucky to be evicted

Lucky that my resistance inspired my neighbor
Long after the eviction that happened anyways

Unlucky to have the City Attorney lie about me when I should have been able to return

Lucky, a few blocks away, eighty-seven evicted tenants finally returned to Lincoln Place
Out of 795 evicted

Unlucky some died in the process

Unlucky to be evicted

Lucky a Venice friend noticed the owner had screwed him and had to settle

Very unlucky for the owner once
in a blue moon

Lucky to have a home

Lucky over 6000 Angelino renters figured out how to file harassment complaints with the
city against their landlords
About rain, rats, broken floorboards and faucets inside, a Tenant Relocator haunting outside

Unlucky every one of the complaints have been ignored

Lucky to be able to watch the sunset over the ocean and post photos on Facebook
If there is a computer open at the library

Lucky if you have a home

BRIAN

You've been listening to Judy Branfman on 90.7 FM Poet's Cafe. Listener-supported Pacifica Radio. I'm your host for today, Brian Sonia Wallace. Judy, welcome to the show.

JUDY

Thank you. Brian.

BRIAN

Thanks a lot. Judy is the founder of “Where Has All The (affordable) Housing Gone?” project at Beyond Baroque and has been bringing together community members and artists to create a mix of poetry and visual work for exhibition at Beyond Baroque around affordable housing and displacement in Venice. Judy, can you tell us a little bit about this project? The genesis of it, how it got started and how you decided that you wanted to make poetry a part of it?

JUDY

Unfortunately, the genesis of it was that I was evicted from my apartment using the Ellis Act a number of years ago. And the Ellis Act is a state act that allows landlords to take units off the market, saying they're going out of the rental business, but they rarely go out of the rental business. They just raise the rent and start right over. You know, I realizee there were hundreds and hundreds, over a thousand units in Venice alone that have been taken off the market this way. And that's a lot of people have lost homes. These are rent control homes. So, you know, I thought, well, I'll take photos. And then I was like, no, no, no, we need to get other people to be involved.

And then, once it became a project that Beyond Baroque was excited about and we decided to do an exhibit, it became clear that writing would be a really great way to explore the personal pieces of it, the emotional pieces of it. And the hard-core policy pieces of it trying to mix them all together.

So that's what we've tried to do here. Looked at all this rent control housing we're losing in Venice and how that's happening. That was the genesis. And we have all these amazing people who stepped in, poets and all kinds of folks who have been really excited and have been out taking photos and writing and thinking about this issue for the past five months.

BRIAN

And we've got three of the other participants for you all to hear from in just a moment. Judy, I'm curious how getting to work on this in writing, how has the poetry of it, impacted your understanding of the issue or your relationship with the issue?

JUDY

Well, I think it's really helped us all tell our own stories and dig in deeper to the emotional piece of it, partly, but also to even look at the policy. What are the words in a policy, you know, what do we do with them? How do we make sense of them? Policy is always so, complicated. But when you're looking at it and trying to pick out pieces that might tell the story that's related to it, it takes on a different form.

So, yeah, it's had a lot of meaning. I think sharing our poems has inspired people to think about their own story and be willing to say things about their lives that aren't as easy, but have been inspiring to other people. And so, it's been a really great piece of the pie, and you've been part of that. So thank you. Thank you very much.

BRIAN

I love that idea of kind of close reading and poetry and policy has both sorts of documents or texts that require that sort of scrutiny and meditation. I think that's really compelling. I'd love to bring one of the other participants in the project who's been involved, I think, from the start. Pat Rafael, do you have a poem for us?

PAT

Yes, I do have one. And because it's in the same mode of that 'lucky unlucky,' I wanted to kind of talk a little bit about how we came up with that as part of the project. One of the tenants in Venice that got evicted through the Ellis Act, because part of what Judy's doing is gathering other stories as much as possible, so we can kind of have a big picture understanding of what happened to her individually in what might have happened to that guy that's telling the story. But once we start seeing the patterns of how so much of it is a recurring thing, then you can kind of chart a resistance a little bit better.

So he was telling us his side of the story from his place. He lived in that place, and everything he was telling us is something that could have happened to somebody else. But there were so many pieces of it that were just, just sheer luck - that if that didn't happen, aligned with this other piece of sheer luck with another piece of sheer luck, because he ended up getting to see some of the Ellis Act violations because he was able to come back and live in the neighborhood even after he got evicted.

So that made me see that, as hard as activists work, so much has to align. It's like such a one in a million shot, and then so much of the process is kind of tilted towards the landlords so that they can get away with things a little bit more because nobody's paying attention enough to see the violations in plain sight. So my poem was also a 'lucky unlucky' poem, but I feel like having it in space, seeing it from where it came from can make it make a little more sense.

BRIAN

Thank you Pat. Look forward to hearing it.

PAT

Unlucky that the landlord died?

Nah, that's just that old circle of life we've been hearing about.

Unlucky that the kid, a fresh-faced new landlord right out of the inherited lawyers will reading, is seeing dollar signs and wants to sell?

Nope. That's just a clean break when nothing in community compels him to stay.

Besides, look at all the millions he's about to have.

Unlucky that the new landlord wants to recoup their investment with higher rents?

Nope, that too is just the free market capitalism at work.

And then that Wolf on Wall Street tells us that greed is good.

Unlucky you. You're just the struggling renter hindering the big bucks from rolling in.

Now, let me make you feel lucky by offering some measly bucks for your keys.

And lucky side of all this is –

Lucky.

Why is it that a string of one in a million shots have to align one after another in order for low income housing to be found in Venice?

No. Those odds just will not do.

This is why we make our own luck.

We show up.

We meet our neighbors.

We continue being a positive member of the community.

We sow the good we want to reap, and then we let others call it luck.

And that's kind of, what we saw with the instance of the neighbor that found his housing. It's because he was a good neighbor. He knew people in the community. He was able to have good relations enough so that as the violation was happening right under his nose, he was able to make the case and actually get housing back. So, it encouraged us to see those one in a million shots.

BRIAN

Thank you so much. You have just heard from Pat Raphael. This is 90.7 FM Poets Cafe listener supported Pacifica Radio. I'm your host for today, Brian Sonia Wallace. Thanks for sharing that piece Pat. I was really struck by both the lucky? No!, unlucky?, no! - like this sort of refutation of the idea of luck having anything to do with it - and the sense, the sense of systems, as well as the idea that nothing in community compels him to stay. I'm curious within this project, about your own artistic practice, your own writing practice. Had you been writing before this project? Is this a new endeavor for you? How does this fit into your creative life?

PAT

Well, I guess it's my writing that aligned with some of my activism that even allowed me to meet Judy, because we met at a planning committee with concerned neighbors who were watching the rain pour down with the atmospheric rivers [on unhoused neighbors] and the city's response. And then at that time, she told me, about the project that she was working on, and it was the title that compelled me! The title was "Where has all the affordable housing gone?". As a person that lives in my RV, and I write for the Free Venice Beachhead - from that perspective, it seemed like a logical next question, because part of the reason why I'm living in my RV is because there isn't really any affordable housing available for me to live in otherwise.

So it just seemed like such a good question that needed answering. And in the process of answering it, I was taking pictures of affordable housing that was once affordable. The building is still there in most times, but the price isn't affordable. So seeing how that happened through maneuverings like the Ellis Act, like the Tenants Anti-Harassment Ordinance. You know, all that kind of gave me a chance to step back and see the big picture more at the human level. And I thought that was very, very valuable.

JUDY

I highly recommend reading Pat's columns in the Venice Beachhead over the last few years. They're really great.

BRIAN

I like that idea of the human level that you talk about, Pat. And I'm curious how working in poetry, as opposed to something more like a journalistic column, how that's felt different for you as a writer?

PAT

Well, I'm not a poet, but in the workshop we learned about that because it seems like the poetry is always there. It's just a matter of finding a reason to pull it out. And this was a good exercise to do. I don't really write creatively that way often, but then I look at some of my writing, I see it's full of imagery and it tries to capture people. So sometimes the poetry is a matter of who's naming it and for what reason.

BRIAN

Absolutely. I love that. And speaking of pulling things in and pulling people in, I'd love to pull in another member of this cohort. It's Aanti Sumaiyya Evans. Aanti Sumaiyya, would you grace us with a poem, please?

AANTI SUMAIYYA

Yes, I'd love to. Thanks for having me.

Unlucky.

Unlucky I lost my home. I worked very hard to get it.

Unlucky. Unlucky I have a painful, complex hearing impairment.

Unlucky. Unlucky I was prescribed opiates and then got trapped in the opiate epidemic.

Unlucky. Unlucky I lost 20-plus years of my life, the respect of my children, don't know my grandchildren, all my possessions, everything, including all my photos, all my treasures my dear Grandma Edna gave me.

Unlucky. Unlucky I didn't meet activists like these people here working on projects like this sooner.

Lucky. Lucky to know I am not alone and so warped from my post-trauma and still capable of having empathy for others' hardships and their heartbreak.

Lucky. Lucky there are others interested in aiding my brothers and sisters still on the streets.

Lucky. Lucky to have qualified for Venice Community housing. Never, never did I think I'd end up in a supportive community such as this.

Wonder? Wonder who I will become. What will Venice become?

I wonder. Wonder if this art project will really even make a difference at all.

I wonder. Wonder if newer and smarter technology can address this hearing complexity that is rampant among the homeless.

And lastly, I wonder. I wonder, as one of my little brothers is in the hospital with his mother, sick with grief from an alcoholic related hit and run, If people will slow down, quit honking, scaring us who have disabilities, who walk, who ride bikes, who roll in wheelchairs or run – So that regardless of class, age, race, color, creed, tribe, religion, absence of religion, national origin, sexual identity, political affiliation, ability, or even sober date, can we code this with compassion, belonging and purpose?

BRIAN

Thank you. You've been listening to Aanti Sumaiyya Evans on 90.7 FM. Poets Cafe. This is listener supported. Pacifica radio. I'm your host for today, Brian Sonia Wallace. Thank you so much for sharing that piece Aanti Sumaiyya - the raw emotion of it really comes through. How has it been for you within this project to be doing some of that writing? Had you been writing before?

AANTI SUMAIYYA

Well yes, I've been writing a long time. Mostly I just journal. And that's one of the things with being homeless, I just had to walk away from journaling. I had people steal my writing before, all kinds of hardships with wanting to be a writer. But now that I'm stable and secure for the first time in my life, in my apartment I have like two huge boxes of writing. I don't know if it will ever come to be anything. But I love to write. It's my way to cope. And to be included in this project has been so instrumental in feeling like I could be a part of the community, an invaluable member of the community, and hopefully be a mentor to other people who are homeless and get into affordable housing. To showcase what housing and then health care for the wonderful hearing aids I've received that I've needed since I was a baby. You know, that maybe my story can help. And so that gives me purpose. And I'm so grateful for this art project.

BRIAN

We're so grateful to have you. And thank you for just giving us that, that lens of intersectionality around all of the different factors that add up. And one of the things that you've talked about, I know in the past that's really struck me is this idea of almost survivor's guilt that now that you are housed and you're getting to see all of your friends who haven't been so lucky, if I may use the expression, yeah, I'm curious if there's any of that that you'd be interested in speaking to here.

AANTI SUMAIYYA

Oh yeah. It's huge for me. It's survivor's guilt. That's what gets me motivated in the morning to not just be overcome with it, to get up and try to go out and help feed people, help especially for me, the women and my sisters that are out on the street still struggling with people trying to sex traffic them or whatever it is. And, I was telling Judy yesterday about the grief wall I have of all the people that I've known in my entire life, really, that had been murdered or suicided or overdosed or, are just missing. And so I have a grief wall that I put up, and that I am still alive is nothing short of a miracle.

And I want to aid other people to help put their names of people, have a grief name wall so that we can come together as a community and not feel so isolated and alone with the grief - to kind of pull it together so we can levitate from it instead of having it engulf us.

BRIAN

Thank you for that. Thanks for the work that you're doing. And this sense of something artful being a way to move into that and through it and past that. That's really beautiful. We have one more writer and activist who is joining us, and would love to hear from them to sort of start rounding us out. Tom Laichas, do you have a poem to share with us?

TOM

I do. I should say, to start out with, the poem comes out of an ordinance that we read and in a sense is, 'lucky unlucky.' We were lucky that the city council in 2021 recognized this crisis. They passed an ordinance called the Tenants Anti Harassment Ordinance. And it's got some pretty terrific language of the ways that landlords can harm the interests of tenants and harass and force them out of their units.

However, on the unlucky side of the ledger, the language of the ordinance does not require that tenants be compensated, be paid if the court finds against the landlord. And because the court *may* award compensatory damages - *may* - therefore, attorneys aren't taking these cases. There are criminal penalties as well. Misdemeanor criminal penalties. But as Judy mentioned, these are not really enforced. So from that, I pulled together this piece from the language itself of the ordinance.

So this is –

Private Right of Action.

A tenant may
An aggrieved tenant may
A tenant prevailing in court may
The court may
the landlord may
a civil proceeding may

may use
may institute
may be awarded
may impose
may be enjoined
may be commenced
may make studies and investigations

The following words and phrase
whenever used in this article
shall be construed
as defined in this section
Words and phrases
not defined herein
shall be construed

as defined
in Sections 12.03
and 151.02 of this Code if defined
therein.

Shall may be construed
Shall may be defined
shall may be construed as defined
therein

Shall use be construed
and institute defined
awarded as defined
as enjoined as commenced
may be.

May be aggrieved
any person organization entity
may be aggrieved

may institute civil proceedings
may be awarded damages
may not
may be awarded fees and costs
fees and costs construed
may be defined may be awarded
due to harassment

City clerk mayor effective date
Do ordain may
do find that may
to read as may

may this bad conduct
be construed defined construed
as a misdemeanor.

Approved as to Form and Legality
I Michael N. Feuer City Attorney
I Odeborah Briethaupt
Deputy City Attorney

Shall not notice evictions.

BRIAN

Thank you. Tom. You've been listening to Tom LAICHAS on 90.7 FM Poets Cafe listener supported Pacifica Radio. I am your host for today, Brian Sonia Wallace.

JUDY

I was just going to say that over 6000 complaints were filed in a little over the last year, and every single one of them has been ignored or not considered of enough value to take to court. So none of them have seen any light of day.

BRIAN

Thank you for that context. It strikes me the care with language and really the dichotomies, the dualities - lucky/unlucky, may and shall - and the way that each of these pieces is playing between these kinds of opposing forces. And Tom, I know that you have been involved with Beyond Baroque for a long time, that you have a new book that's out that really chronicles each of the Venice streets. And I'd love for you to talk a little bit about how it's been working on this project in light of your long-time history of chronicling Venice through poetry.

TOM

Well, the book is 300 Streets of Venice, California. There are 300 streets in Venice. So it got me around the community. I started walking during the pandemic, but what really got me into this group was my experience. In 1995, me and my wife came here and we bought [a home] in Venice. We did that on a teacher's salary. I was teaching history at the high school level. And had we bought any later, there is no way I could have lived in this community on that salary. Not as an owner, not as a renter. My sense is that what's happened is that people have moved in over the last 20, 30 years, and they basically pulled up the ladder behind. And that ladder is affordable housing. If you get a starter apartment, you get a starter house - you can move up the rungs. That's really not something that's possible in this community anymore. And, that's a decision that in effect has been made by the city and by land owners as well.

BRIAN

Can you talk a little bit about your history with poetry, how you came to poetry, and how it intersects with your activism. I mean, certainly in the 300 Streets of Venice there's a real link there between a kind of urban, almost urban watching, I would say, as opposed to urban planning - and just what it means to be a poet and to be an observer of the world and someone who's recording it.

TOM

A lot of the work I do is about place and how place changes over time, sometimes for better or sometimes for worse. But when I walk the streets of Venice, what I'm seeing is a heck of a lot of new construction - as we all did. We all walked the streets and saw the very high hedges and the combination locks and, places that were once available for people here to live in that are now reserved only for renters of AB&B [Air B and B] properties.

So that process is something that's informed my work. I've also been on Next Door. I'm not sure if you're familiar with Next Door, but basically among the things that it does, it sort of broadcasts a great deal of paranoia and, really, hatred at the center of it. Of neighbors distrusting other neighbors. And I think that, as I was walking the streets, I would come back home at night, I'd get on Next Door and see people basically trashing their neighbors - and the people they were trashing are specifically the people who are being evicted and the people on the streets. And I found that rather disturbing.

PAT

Just to kind of connect this, Brian you talk about the tug of war that kind of goes from both sides. And what we're seeing is a world where there's both an anti-harassment ordinance [to protect tenants] while a tenant relocater is a legal job. Right? So basically a tenant relocater is somebody who's a professional harasser to get you out of your property so that it can be re-rented for higher prices. So that tug of war is supposed to be, on the side of, we would say, the tenant with something like the Tenant Anti-Harassment ordinance. But when that has no teeth, the real harassment on the ground starts becoming effective. Right? And that's what we're seeing, that for the most part the city seems to have taken the side of the landlord. During, our reading of some of these ordinances, we found out that more than half of the city council members are landlords themselves. So, it's no surprise when we see the scale is kind of tilted to help that side in some ways.

BRIAN

Thanks for that perspective, Pat. We've got a minute left. Judy, I'd love to give you the last word. What's next for the "Where Has All The (affordable) Housing Gone?" project at Beyond Baroque?

JUDY

Well thank you, Brian, so much for having us.

We're spending this summer planning for the opening of an installation that will be a visible form of what you've heard and more. People we've interviewed and photographs and all these facts, and where it's led us. We'll be having tours of the community and tours of the exhibit. I think that one way to find out what we're doing is to be on the Beyond Baroque blog.

And anybody who is having a hard time with evictions or harassment should definitely be looking at the LA Tenants Union and also stayhousedla.org has all kinds of workshops, connections to attorneys, a lot of facts and information. Every day there's a workshop. If you have a question, you can get on a zoom and talk with folks who can help you. So I would suggest all of these things because we're in the midst of an eviction tsunami. So we hope this will help people stay in their homes.

BRIAN

Thank you so much. And thank you for your work. You've been listening to Judy Branfman, Pat Raphael, Aanti Sumaiyya Evans, and Tom Laichas on 90.7 FM Poets Café, listener-supported Pacifica Radio. I've been your host, Brian Sonia Wallace. We'll see you next time.

<https://soundcloud.com/poetscafe/venice-housing-poetry-discussion-poets-cafe-kpfk-072623>

www.beyondbaroque.org/wherehasallthehousinggone/