

Introduction

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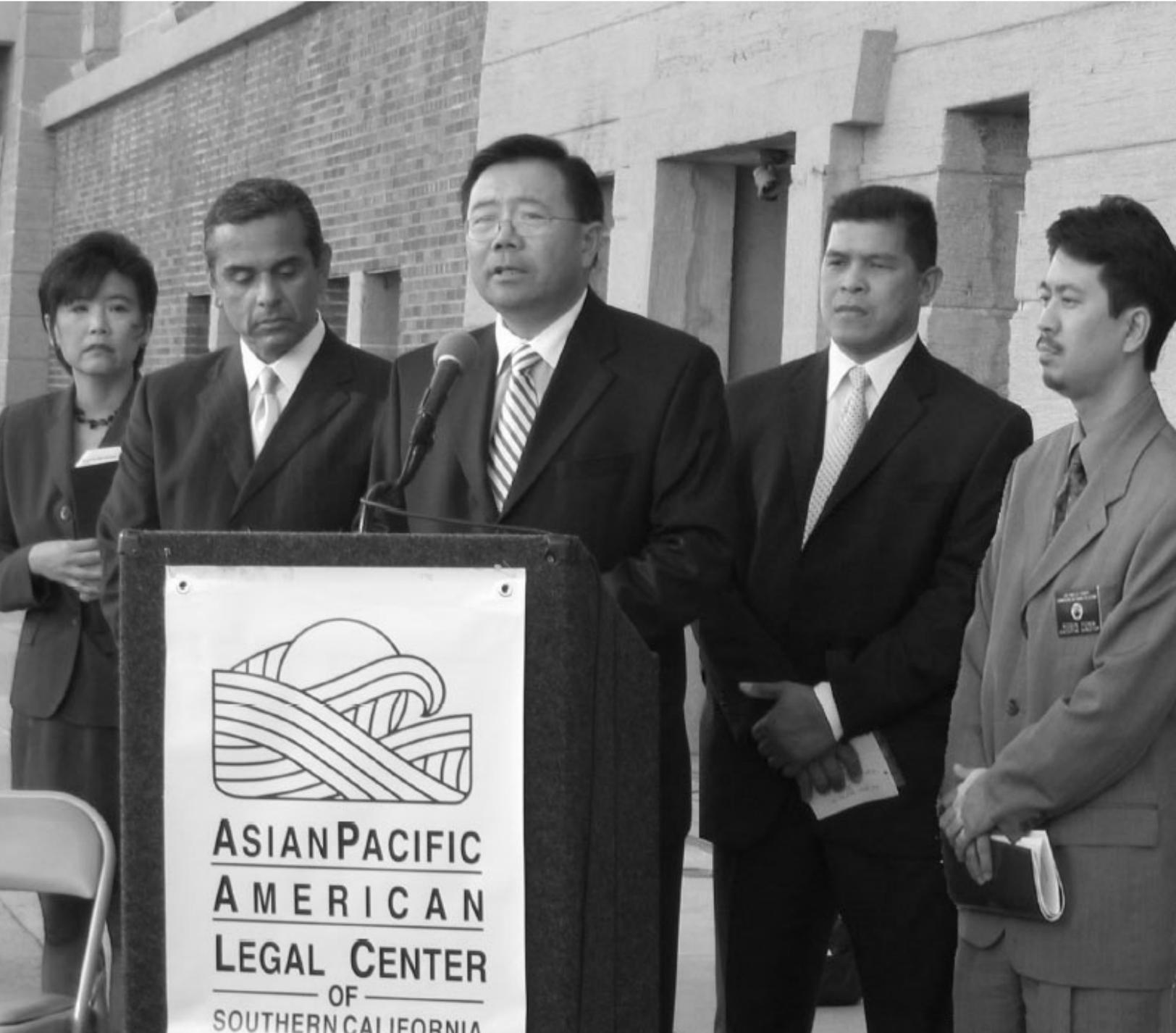


Photo: from left, the Honorable Judy Chu, L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Stewart Kwoh, Ismael Ileteo and Robin Toma at the Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles.

Introduction

STEWART KWOH

Hidden Stories, Unsung Heroes

As I was growing up, I watched Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Nelson Mandela fight for social justice by confronting and challenging the inequalities that affected their communities. These courageous public figures of different ethnic and racial backgrounds helped me to recognize the types of injustices happening everyday to those closest to me in my own life and community.

One of my first and most vivid realizations of this occurred when I was a middle school student. My church pastor, who was white, was nearly killed during a peaceful demonstration in Alabama in the 1960s. The demonstration was in response to the brutal murders of four African American girls in a church bombing by white supremacists. It was a result of such experiences that I began to develop a consciousness of how all individuals could be affected by racism and discrimination.

“I have always admired the ability of individuals to speak out, to articulate the connections between communities, and to protest against social injustice with just ideas.”

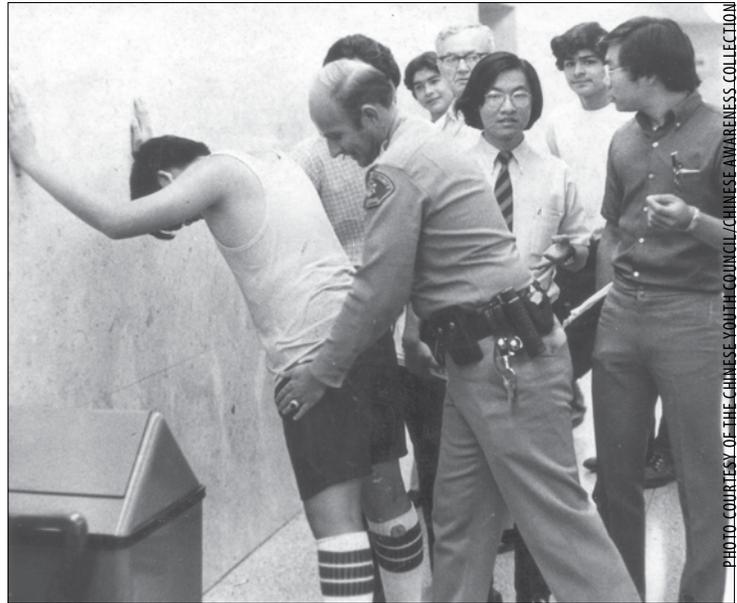


Photo: Law students Stewart Kwoh (right) and Mike Eng (third from right) assisting people being frisked by police while entering a courthouse in 1974.

There are tremendous leaders in all of our communities. The United States is a nation of diversity and California’s population is among the most varied in ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. One of the fascinating and inspiring characteristics of these individuals is that they have done not only extraordinary things for their own communities, but have also built bridges with other racial and ethnic communities. For this reason, I like to call these individuals “boundary crossing leaders,” for they embody the true essence of leadership for the 21st century — leaders who can build bridges across racial and other lines.

Nearly all American ethnic groups, particularly people of color, face a similar challenge — either sparse coverage of their community heroes or stereotyped coverage of their communities. We can all gain insights into real U.S. history by learning of the contributions of individual Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Latinos, American Indians, and others. We can see the many ways lives and experiences parallel and touch each other.

The challenges faced by the heroes of my own youth are similar to those facing young people today. One of my dreams has been to introduce young people to heroes who happen to be Asian Americans.

And today, with so many Americans losing their homes and jobs, these heroic struggles are an inspiration to all who fight for economic and social justice.

One of the main purposes of writing this book is to identify and honor these individuals who are heroes in the struggle for social justice. The general public does not know about the significant contributions of these individuals, and their stories have become forgotten chapters in American history and even within the Asian American experience.

Why is it that we often have a hard time identifying and giving recognition to these heroes? For Asian Americans, there are several reasons:

1. *Invisibility in the media:* One reason is that Asian Americans are often faceless, stereotyped, and invisible in the media. This invisibility can be attributed to a number of factors including racism, the lack of knowledge about our communities, and the lack of diversity in the media amongst reporters, editors, and others who make decisions about what stories or people are covered. Poor representation of Asian Americans in the mass media has largely prevented the stories and experiences of the Asian American community from reaching the general public.

2. *Invisibility in textbooks and curriculum:* While some Asian Americans have been recognized for their success in business, education, or sports, far fewer are recognized as contributors to influential political and social movements or the advancement of social jus-

tice. Asian Americans as a group have been, for the most part, absent from textbooks and curriculum taught in American schools.

3. *Difficulties in telling our stories:* Asian American communities — especially those of the immigrant or first generation — as with other newcomers and low-income communities often find it difficult or do not have the ability to promote their stories, experiences, and accomplishments. Because their stories have not been championed, many of the Asian American community's heroes are generally unrecognized and unknown even to their own.

The truth is that Asian Americans have played key roles in U.S. civil rights, labor, and human rights struggles since the 1800s and continues on to this day. For example, Asian Americans have:

- **Fought discriminatory laws** that prohibited immigration from Asia, banned citizenship, interracial marriages, barred business and land ownership, and mandated segregated schools. (1880s-1950s)
- **Marched with African Americans** in the South in the 1960s and some also reported on civil rights struggles. (1960s-1970s)
- **Played a large role in organizing** farm workers, together with Mexican American labor leader Cesar Chavez. (1960s-1970s)
- **Established their own English-language** newspapers to present a fairer and more balanced picture of U.S. society to all Americans. (1940s-today)
- **Challenged laws** that violated the U.S. Constitution, especially regarding the unjust incarceration and internment of racial and ethnic groups — and eventually won vindication. (1920s-today)
- **Been a driving force** in the creation of laws against racial profiling and hate-crime violence in Los Angeles and in the nation, in the years before and after 9/11. (1980s-today)
- **Organized Asian and Latino** immigrant workers against their exploitation in garment sweatshops. (1990s-today)

Untold Civil Rights Stories has been written to share with you the lives of important Asian Americans — average individuals and families who acted in extraordinary ways when caught in the midst of unusual circumstances and pressing conditions — such as anti-Asian violence, exploitation in the workplace, or unfair U.S. laws.

A second purpose for this book is to show how individuals, who are not famous, rich, or powerful, can make mighty, significant changes in their lives and for many other Americans.

Rosa Parks is often mentioned as one such ordinary person who made an extraordinary impact on the Civil Rights Movement. When we actually study the lives of ordinary people like Rosa Parks, we find that in fact, their entire lives were not so ordinary after all.

The untold civil rights stories of Asian Americans make up a hidden and vital chapter of U.S. history, and of the larger history of civil rights in this country.

As I reflect back in my own life, I know that their stories can be equally inspirational to young people so I have gathered these stories into this publication. My objective is to inspire all of us and to show role models that all of us can emulate. These individuals teach us that through advocacy that any of us, even if we are not rich, famous, or powerful, can make change.

Although there are many Asian American leaders and heroes, the following pages are devoted to those individuals with whom I have had the privilege and honor to meet. I want you, the reader to know them as I know them.

I am not the only one who was inspired and changed by these courageous heroes. The authors of these chapters have had a very significant, personal relationship with these individuals as well and I am very appreciative of their efforts to tell these stories.

A third purpose of this publication is one of education.

As I was starting law school in 1971, the 1970 U.S. Census showed only 1.4 million Asian Americans in the entire country. By 2005, that number exceeded 13 million; California alone had 4.8 million Asian

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Americans and Pacific Islanders. Many are immigrants from different countries arriving since 1965. They were not in the U.S. when many key laws were passed.

Would these Asians know the connection between the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and changes in immigration laws that affected them? Laws, policies, and practices (such as immigration quota restrictions) do directly impact minority and immigrant communities. Asian Americans, as well as all other Americans, need to know this. Americans need to know how individuals of Asian ancestry have helped to shape and influence American history and change the legal, political, cultural, and social landscape of this country.

Asian Americans even in 2009 are one of the racial groups least seen, recognized, or known on television or the news. We must challenge that state of affairs. By promoting the stories of ordinary Asian Americans whose words and actions have contributed to the Civil Rights Movement in this country, we can enhance the process of education for our fellow Americans, and for ourselves.

Moving from Invisibility

There are Asian Americans who have fought against the invisibility of Asian Americans in the media. In *Untold Stories*, I will introduce you to Beulah Ong Kwoh and K.W. Lee, both pioneers in media. Beulah Ong Kwoh was my mother and a pioneer in film and television. K.W. Lee is a journalist who continues to work to bring visibility to Asian American issues.

My mother, under the stage name Beulah Quo, challenged the invisibility of Asian Americans in film and TV. Initially she portrayed stereotypical characters but was able to move on to roles that accurately portrayed Asians and Asian Americans with great dignity and strength. Behind the camera she was

also a pioneer in the production of Asian American themed plays and programs. She co-founded a theater group, the East West Players, in 1965 that provides opportunities for many minority actors.

I came to know K.W. Lee in the 1980s because he was a writer for a local newspaper that covered the Asian Pacific American Legal Center's work. I also admired his investigative reporting on cases like that of Chol Soo Lee's, a Korean American man who spent a total of 10 years in prison on a wrongful murder conviction. He brought an Asian perspective to stories in his newspapers (he published several) and the articles he wrote. K.W. helped to inform not only the Korean American community, but the community at large. After the Los Angeles riots of 1992, I was in the audience when he received the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission Award and was amazed and proud to hear him articulate how Asian Americans and African Americans shared experiences of injustices and could build a common bond.

Ordinary Families who Organized Others against Racial Violence

I never met Vincent Chin or Joseph Ileto, who both lost their lives to racially motivated hate crimes in 1982 and in 1999, respectively. But I came to know and admire their families, who refused to allow Vincent or Joseph to remain "victims" of the media or of society. These ordinary families fought for justice and organized others against racial violence. Hate crimes, no matter when and where they take place, destroy the lives of individuals and devastate the spirit of entire communities. These two families refuse to let hate rule their lives.

I met Vincent's mother, Lily Chin, at a Detroit rally in 1983 after the killers of her son were sentenced to a mere three-year probation and a small fine.

"What can I do to help?" I remember asking her. She said, "I want justice for my son."

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Photo: At a press conference right after Joseph Ito's murder in August, 1999. From left, Stewart Kwoh, Joe Hicks, the then executive director for the L.A. City Human Relations Commission, Joel Jacinto, of Search to Involve Pilipino Americans, and Dennis Arguelles, the then executive director for the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council.

“Hate crimes, no matter when and where they take place, destroy the lives of individuals and devastate the spirit of entire communities.”

Although she spoke little English and rarely traveled, Lily decided that she would tour the country to get people to pressure the Justice Department to follow through. When Lily came to Los Angeles during the summer of 1984, she spoke at a crowded Chinatown restaurant. As she was speaking, she fainted. Those of us around her helped her to her feet where, despite the sweltering heat, she passionately pleaded for justice for her son. She just could not understand why her son's life was considered so insignificant that home probation and a fine were given after the perpetrators had pled guilty to manslaughter. Later that night, at my home where she was staying, I asked Lily if she was okay. She said that she had to go on; there was nothing she could do to bring back Vincent, but she did not want any other mother to go through what she had gone through.

A decade later, I found myself at the funeral of Joseph Ito, a Filipino American postal worker who had been gunned down in a racially motivated shooting in the Los Angeles area. Joseph's brother, Ismael,

and the rest of his family would become dynamic spokespersons against all forms of hate crimes, crisscrossing the U.S., speaking out and extending their hands to gays and lesbians, Jews and Muslims, and African Americans and Latinos who also were victimized. We here at APALC have come to know the Ito family well. Their grief, anger, and concern have been transformed into visible action that has benefited all who seek to reduce the pain caused by hate. I would like you, the reader to know these two families who stood up to hate.

Understanding Injustice

There are two important lessons that I learned from Fred Korematsu, a Japanese American who resisted the government-ordered incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. The first lesson is that perseverance as well as courage is often required to challenge injustice. The second is that community organizations (with legal expertise) are invaluable allies.

“No understanding of U.S. history can be complete without understanding how African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans have contributed to the wealth of America through our labor.”

Fred showed uncommon courage not just once but twice, in bringing a spirited challenge to his internment. In 1942, 120,000 Japanese Americans did not have the ability to effectively challenge the U.S. government’s violation of their civil rights and liberties. Even his attorney, Fred said, was himself ostracized by politically liberal organizations for representing him in his resistance to the internment order.

After a bitterly disappointing encounter with the Supreme Court, some 40 years later, Fred went back to the courts to seek vindication. Working with young attorneys at the Asian Law Caucus, Fred sought and succeeded in reversing the criminal conviction that had stigmatized him and others for decades.

Ageless Warriors

The role of the Filipino soldiers in World War II is in itself a little known chapter of American history. My Filipino American friends shared their remarkable story with me and I personally know Manong Peping, the subject of one of our chapters.

The story of Manong Faustino “Peping” Baclig is therefore an inspiring story to share with young people. A veteran of World War II, Manong Peping is now in his 80s. He is one of the key leaders of the Filipino veterans of Los Angeles. Even as a senior citizen, he remains active to a cause that is near and dear to his life.

Since the 1980s, I have worked with Filipino American organizations to propose congressional solutions to the veterans’ plight and to secure health assistance for many of them in Los Angeles. So I know their fight for recognition and justice has been long. Throughout it all, Manong Peping continues to be a dynamic, articulate, and dedicated spokesperson for Filipino veterans. He seeks justice for all the Filipino veterans who served so valiantly under the command of the U.S. Army. His courageous fight serves not only Filipino veterans but all veterans who have not received the benefits that they deserve.

Understanding Our Common Experiences in the Workplace

Asian immigrants before and after World War II share a common history with other Americans... they worked in mines, on railroads, in fields, and more toiled in cities — in sweatshops, restaurants, and laundries. I would like young peo-

ple to know Asian Americans who demonstrate this common history. No understanding of U.S. history can be complete without understanding how African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans have contributed to the wealth of America through our labor. Two chapters in *Untold Stories* share this history.

The United Farm Workers

In the late 1960s, when I was sitting in an Asian American Studies class at UCLA, I remember listening to a Filipino man who came into the classroom to talk about farm workers. At the time, I knew that early Asian immigrants worked on farms and in mines, and helped to drain and clear the swamplands of California. I knew that Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos labored in the orchards and fields of the Central and the Imperial Valleys, and cast their nets from Monterey to Baja, helping to establish the fishing industries. I also knew about labor leader Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union and their mass organization.

What I did not know was that Philip Vera Cruz, the man speaking in front of me, helped to start the United Farm Workers Union. In fact, only a few of us knew that it was the energy and courage of Filipino American farm workers, who became organizers, that actually began the Union. My lesson about Asian American labor, sitting in that class, had just begun. I hope that by reading Philip's story, you too will come to know the role played by Filipino Americans in the unionization of farm workers.

Asian and Latino Sweatshop Workers in Los Angeles

Working in the garment industry is an experience many families share. It is one of the most labor intensive but poorly paid occupations. My most vivid confirmation of this fact came with a phone call.

In August 1995, I got a phone call from a neighbor who worked for a state labor agency. He asked if I could find some Thai interpreters to accompany him on a labor raid. With Julie Su, then a new staff attorney and now the litigation director at APALC, we recruited a Thai speaker who assisted, along with others from the Thai Community Development Center. Later that afternoon she told me that the labor raid

had uncovered a sweatshop where more than 70 Thai workers, mostly women, had been held captive for up to seven years and forced to sew clothes.

In this book, we will introduce you to Jang, Jim, and Kaew, three Thai women who represent those enslaved in that sweatshop. They were uneducated and spoke no English, yet they stood up to some of the biggest names in the garment industry.

This raid led to a five-year struggle for liberation and justice, changing the landscape in the fight against sweatshops and justice for immigrant workers. It was their persistence, courage, and willingness to speak out and organize for themselves and with other sweatshop workers, both Asian and Latino, that secured victory for the garment workers.

I hope that *Untold Civil Rights Stories: Asian Americans Speak Out for Justice*, a joint co-publication of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, can help to educate and inspire all who read it.

My co-editor Russell Leong adds a vital link for the readers by covering the experiences of heroes within the Asian American community after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Readers are encouraged to become involved with the issues that may directly impact their lives.

I hope that young people will come to know these heroes. To encourage teachers to share these stories, I've asked Esther Taira, a 36-year veteran educator of the Los Angeles Unified School District, to develop a series of lesson plans for teachers. The lesson plans and accompanying timeline are designed to be user-friendly and encourage teachers to bring these stories to the classroom.

In addition, Irene Lee brings a young person's perspective while sharing with students her thoughtful insights as she read the chapters. There is a sense of pride and admiration in the accomplishments of ordinary people that translates into a call to personal involvement and action.

Dedication

We are all a part of a similar struggle for social justice and equality. It is through the inspirational stories of these courageous individuals that we all can be empowered to be leaders in making social justice a reality for all individuals.

Los Angeles, 2009