

ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn

Standing in the path of "development"

WATSONVILLE, CALIF.—Drive into this farm town in the Pajaro Valley, 90 miles south of San Francisco, and the sign says that some 27,000 souls dwell within the city's limits, which is a piece of solid misinformation, as such signs usually are. Double the number and you'll be nearer the truth. For years Watsonville, like other towns across the state and across the nation, has been facing and ignoring a crisis in low-cost housing.

The town itself has been prospering, by the conventional measures of such achievements. The north end of town has been sprouting new malls with broken pediments in the proper post-modernist fashion. In downtown Watsonville the old 200 block on Main Street went down on orders of the city manager, and the bare earth, where pleasant little restaurants like the Jalisco once flourished, now awaits the retail bric-a-brac of yet another mall. But all the while the workers, pickers and packers who help earn Watsonville its agricultural wealth—at least 50 percent of the fresh vegetables consumed in America are grown in this area—cram with their families into garages or made-over chicken coops or sleep in their cars.

It took the earthquake last October to signal just how bad Watsonville's housing situation really was. Of all the towns in California, it was the worst hit, just a few miles south of the epicenter of the 7.1 quake. The earth shook, the houses jumped off their posts, and when the red-tagging was done, it turned out time after time that two, three or four families were piled into the old Maybeck redwood houses. For most of them, the trailer homes extorted from a reluctant Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were a step up in life.

For the real-estate industry, the quake was the greatest of blessings. A civil engineer at his side, the city manager strode through town condemning with his red tags the buildings that stood in the way of "progress"—meaning development. To beat him you had to get your own civil engineer and fight through the ensuing hearings. Struggles like this stoked the atmosphere for the city elections that took place a month after the earthquake. They were the first after the Supreme Court had ordered that Watsonville have district elections to ensure adequate representation for the city's large Chicano community. When the dust settled, Watsonville had a new government of a liberal-leftish tinge and, for the first time, without a solid majority in favor of the developers. The city manager began to prepare for retirement.

As they assessed the situation, the new city council concluded that Watsonville needs 2,585 more units for low-income households. Under the laggard tempo of Business As Usual, there's no way this demand can be slaked. For a start, if land costs \$100,000 to \$600,000 an acre, how can any realistic economic arithmetic end Watsonville up with \$80,000 homes or with \$400 a month rentals?

Now it so happens that Watsonville does have over 300 acres of land at its disposal for low- and moderate-income housing, and on June 13 the Veterans Hall on East Beach Street echoed with jagged exchanges as citizens debated the merits of using the land

for this purpose.

It was local activist Frank Bardacke who, in the January issue of Watsonville's bilingual monthly *El Andar*, first pointed out that the airport—covering 331 acres on the north edge of town and owned by the city—would be doing humanity a far better turn as a site for cheap housing, parks and schools than what is now, as he rather snidely but accurately put it, an "aviation theme park for adults." Bardacke's suggestion was an unwelcome arrival at the table of respectable opinion.

The developers' plans are very different. They don't give a hoot for housing for poor people and would be happy enough if the airport swelled to three times its present size. That would represent progress. Also representing progress for them would be the conversion of Watsonville's source of wealth, its prime agricultural land, into condo units for rich folk commuting up 101 to Silicon Valley.

But in the months since it was first raised in January, Bardacke's idea has been pushed to and fro, and in mid-June it got a public airing at the Veterans Hall, where, commencing sharp at 7:30 p.m., the class geography of Watsonville was forthrightly on display: city and Santa Cruz County officials ranged across the top of the hall, flanked by staffers and experts; trim aviators and their business allies in the center sector; and off in the right rear bleachers, what used to be called the working poor, mostly browner and smaller and waving signs such as "Houses, not hangars," "Se puede vivir en un avion?" and "Why are we subsidizing rich men's toys?"

To hear the pro-airport faction tell the story, you'd conclude that Watsonville has played the same vital municipal function as LAX and the Port of Los Angeles rolled into one: a bustling commercial entrepot, apt for civic emergency, hosing treasure into the city's coffers. Besides, said the aviators, there were federal restrictions mandating that it remain an airport forever.

Then the housing advocates began to put in their side of the case and immediately scored a small but important victory. Mindful of due order and bureaucratic symmetry, the council members and supervisors had placed the public microphone dead center in the hall at the front of the middle aisle. Witnesses would of necessity face the dignitaries and have their backs to the audience, unless they screwed around with an occasional glance for support and encouragement.

When Bardacke's turn came, he seized the microphone and took it off to one side, where he could address the audience and the officials simultaneously. "Put it back at once," shouted Madam Chairperson of the county supervisors. "Leave it where it is," cried Bardacke's supporters. Then a businessmen heaved himself out of his chair and carried the seditiously located mike back to the center. A housing advocate dragged it back. Great clamor in the hall. Finally the new mayor of Watsonville told Bardacke he could speak where he wanted. Of such small things is the political texture of an event formed. The whole idiom of the evening, previously narcotic with bureaucratism, abruptly changed.

The claims of the aviators began to wilt. As a hub of commerce, Watsonville keeps

a very low profile. The only regular user is United Parcel Service, with a daily flight that may soon be terminated. For emergencies, there is Monterey Airport, half an hour down the road, plus private airstrips and heli-pads nearby. The airport's one moment of virtuous glory after the earthquake, when supplies were rushed in, balances poorly against the daily social emergency of the

As a hub of commerce, Watsonville keeps a very low profile. The only regular airport user is United Parcel Service, with a daily flight that may soon be terminated.

housing crisis. Just 67 airport users have Watsonville addresses; there are less than a hundred planes in the hangars, maybe double that number on the tie-downs outside; the place runs at a loss; the feds have no claim on it. As for the business executives who say that life would lack all meaning unless they can jet into Watsonville, it would be cheaper for the city to offer them a limo service from Monterey or San Jose.

Both nature and power abhor a vacuum, and so power—pilot power, developer power, the state airport lobby—is trying to fill the dangerous vacuum of this economically useless and socially marginal airport land with bureaucratic sludge: a brand-new independent "airport land-use commission," replete with members of the airport lobby, which will answer to state guidelines about "appropriate airport development" (meaning, in fact, that they would be able to veto unwelcome development in most of Watsonville, with decisions to be overturned only by a two-thirds city council or county supervisor majority. ... You get the idea. Push elected officials as much as possible out of the picture. Ah, democracy! So much to be cherished in Eastern Europe, so much to be feared at home, where, as

Manuel Osorio described that night in the Veterans Hall, families live in spaces smaller than the fuselages of the small planes out on the airstrip.)

The atmosphere got edgy. Guillermina Ramirez, one of the leaders of the packing-house strike, began to talk in accented English. "Speak in English," yelled Louise Blanchard from the audience. So Ramirez said that if they didn't like her English, she'd speak in Spanish, which she duly did most eloquently, with translation that followed from City Councillor Oscar Rios. "I'm not rich or educated," she concluded. "We need housing, so why don't you use your airplanes to live in and see how you like it?"

The battle will roll on. Even a couple of years ago, the housing advocates wouldn't have stood a chance and Watsonville would have been shaped by respectable power, as yet it may, into the familiar *fin de siècle* contours of dormitory for the rich, slum for the poor. But Watsonville has a very feisty activist population that has won some big triumphs in recent years; as Frank Bardacke wrote in *El Andar*: "We fought the Migra [the Immigration and Naturalization Service] to a standstill. We waged one of the strongest strikes in recent American history. We came back from the destruction of the earthquake and managed to get hundreds of trailers from FEMA. We won the struggle for district elections and then elected a left/liberal city council to replace the conservative regime that had run the city since the '50s. Are we strong enough now to shut down the airport and use the land for the benefit of the whole community?"

Footnote

In my article on Panama published a few weeks ago, there was some information regarding three Panamanian labor leaders (Mauro Murillo, Gustavo Martinez and Juvenal Jimenez) which included some remarks from Murillo to the effect that he and other trade union leaders had been informed by the U.S. State Department that they were on a list of people who "would be eliminated" if they "didn't get on their feet in support of the opposition [to Noriega]." This information and details about repressive new labor laws came from a story by Daphne Wysham in the April/May issue of *Labor Action* published in Oakland. Unfortunately, the attribution of this excellent report got omitted. ■

Distributed by Alexander Cockburn.

SUBSCRIBER SERVICES

MOVING?

Send changes with old mailing label to:

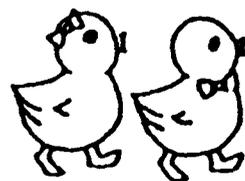
In These Times
1912 Debs Ave.
Mt. Morris, IL 61054

PROBLEMS?

If you have any problems or questions regarding your subscription, please write or call:

1-800-435-0715 (National)
1-800-892-0753 (Illinois)

MARIA SCALZITTI



KIDFEATHERS INC.

QUALITY RESALE FOR MOMS AND KIDS
(WE SELL ON CONSIGNMENT)

3525 N. SOUTHPORT, CHICAGO, IL 60657 • (312) 525-3887

10% OFF WITH THIS AD.

MATERNITY WEAR
CHILDREN'S CLOTHING
NURSERY FURNITURE
TOYS, BOOKS, CAR SEATS
ETC.

By Salim Muwakkil

WHEN U.S. DISTRICT COURT Judge Jose Gonzalez declared on June 6 that an album by the rap group 2 Live Crew was obscene, it was the first time a recording had been so judged. Although Gonzalez' ruling for a three-county Florida district was unprecedented, his reasoning resonates in U.S. history.

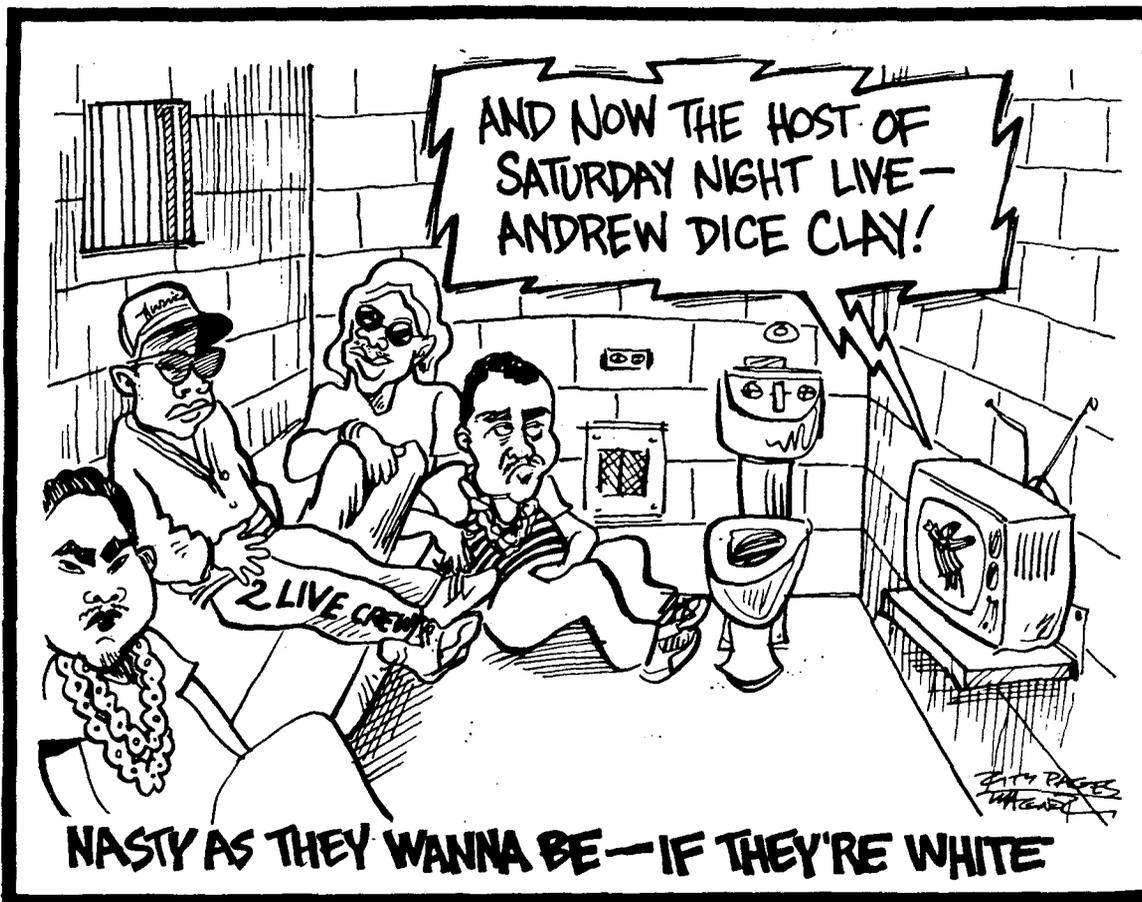
African-American idioms—and rap music is profoundly idiomatic—have traditionally been regarded warily by mainstream culture and occasional attempts have been made to throttle some black cultural expressions; too much sexual candor is the typical rationale for those censorious efforts.

Gonzalez' ruling that the 2 Live Crew album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* is "an appeal to dirty thoughts and the loins, not to the intellect and the mind," falls squarely within that tradition. It's a mystifying tradition, however, considering how many of those same black expressions eventually are incorporated into—or expropriated by—mainstream culture.

Many civil libertarians connect Gonzalez' ruling to the current furor over funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the recent attempt to criminalize the burning of the U.S. flag. All of these controversies were provoked by renewed attempts to limit freedom of expression. As a piece, they illustrate the growing cultural clout of politically empowered conservatives. A preoccupation with cultural issues also serves as a convenient distraction from some of the substantive issues this administration would rather avoid. After the Gonzalez decision, a record-store owner in Fort Lauderdale—a city noted as a cocaine import center—was arrested and handcuffed on a misdemeanor charge for selling the album.

Cultural offensive: A growing number of analysts argue that the Florida ruling represents something considerably more ominous than a temporary spasm of xenophobia or the mere politics of distraction. Some, in fact, contend that the Florida judge's decision fires another salvo in an ongoing war against African-American males. "It's no mistake that a group of young black males should be singled out for this offense, when there are many other groups doing similar things," said Houston Baker Jr., director of the Philadelphia-based Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture and author of several books on African-American literature.

African-American males "die earlier, are less educated, are more unemployed and incarcerated than any other segment of the U.S. population," Baker added. In view of what appears to be an all-out offensive on black males in other spheres, Gon-



Censorship and sensibility

zalez' ruling falls right in line, he said. What's more, Baker said, the accused offenders are practitioners of a "musical genre that is perhaps the most creative, innovative, entertaining, profitable and, yes, positive that young black men have ever invented."

Rap music has few parallels in the way it speaks to the concerns of the audience. If ever there was a musical expression with its finger on the pulse of the community, it is rap. Immediate and raw, the style embodies the volatile moods of urban black America. Although Baker is generous in his praise for rap's aesthetic vitality, he is not an uncritical booster of the genre. Like many others who share his view of the Gonzalez ruling, Baker is critical of 2 Live Crew's particular brand of rap.

"Their lyrics are offensive in many ways," Baker added. "The misogyny and profanity in their lyrics are of a high order and are particularly pernicious, and I'm surely not down with their program. And to be truthful, their rap is third-rate stuff anyway." But, he said, rap not only captures the spirit of the times, it also reflects and chronicles the realities of our nation's deteriorating inner cities. "These are places where black youth are faced with untenable decisions like whether they should work at McDonald's for \$9,000 a year or deal crack for \$9,000 a month."

Ribald tradition: Baker noted that much of African-Americans' vernacular style is rooted in the ribald tradition of sexual exaggeration and parody and that groups like 2 Live Crew must be interpreted within that

context. "A lot of what's going on now results from a lack of communication due to the increasing isolation of African-American culture from mainstream America," he said.

RAP

Baker echoed the views of Henry Gates Jr., professor of English at Duke University and one of the most celebrated critics of African-American literature, who wrote a *New York Times* op-ed piece June 19 defending the group. "In the face of racist stereotypes about black sexuality, you

For many middle-class black Americans, rap is a soundtrack for sociopaths.

can do one of two things: you can disavow them or explode them with exaggeration. 2 Live Crew, like many 'hip-hop' groups, is engaged in sexual carnivalesque. Parody reigns supreme." The group, Gates wrote, is engaged in "turning the stereotypes of black and white American culture on their heads."

But for many middle-class black Americans, rap is less the fresh sound of urban America than a soundtrack for sociopaths. Distance, both cultural and geographical, from the street-wise sensibilities that inform rap is precisely what distinguishes them as middle class, so

their feelings are hardly surprising. But mainstream black leaders largely were silent during the 2 Live Crew controversy until the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) released a statement upbraiding the rap group for claiming its raunchy lyrics represent the black cultural experience.

"Our cultural experience does not include debasing our women, the glorification of violence, the promotion of deviant sexual behavior or the tearing into shreds of our cherished mores and standards of behavior," said NAACP Executive Director Benjamin Hooks in the statement. Although Hooks affirmed the group's First Amendment rights, he was clear in his disdain for the lyrical content of *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*.

"There is no doubt that 2 Live Crew is a legitimate part of the black tradition," explained Cornel West, a professor of philosophy at Princeton University and chairman of the school's African-American Studies Department. "Denying their validity is also in the tradition of the puritanical black middle class, which would prefer that such vulgar groups wouldn't embarrass them by showing the race in its worst light."

Proper paranoia: The black middle class' reaction is understandable, West added. "They're angry at 2 Live Crew for providing the racist white mainstream with an easy target to attack. And the group deserves some of that anger. We have to support them for libertarian reasons, but our artists and entertainers must be held accountable if they showcase mis-

ogynist, homophobic, patriarchal and sexist attitudes."

And while West said he discerns a racist motive in the attack on rap, he insisted it is less ominous when properly contextualized. "White Americans as well as other Americans feel very concerned by the escalating social decay and civic terrorism they see around them, but they also feel powerless to do anything about it. There's a reason for the cultural paranoia we are feeling. Americans are full of rage, and they want to take it out on any available scapegoat. Young black men, because they are projected as America's leading criminals, are perfect for the scapegoat role."

In addition to the public furor provoked by the 2 Live Crew ruling, the controversy intensified an ongoing debate among African-American theorists about the function of art and the role of artists in the black community. Black cultural nationalists contend that black art should be dedicated to cultural liberation and in projecting heroic images. And, though they have different ideas about content, nationalists have made common cause with those middle-class cultural monitors who serve as de facto image police.

The African-American left generally is more libertarian and less prescriptive about aesthetic concerns, though some Marxist variants are just as rigorous in analyzing content as is the most Afro-centric nationalist. Even those NAACP middle classers who are embarrassed by the excesses of rap value First Amendment protections.

"This debate about the filth, trash and scurrilous trivia put out by that infantile rap group could be educational for a lot of black people," said *Village Voice* critic and author Stanley Crouch. "Because of that, the freedom of speech enshrined in the First Amendment is essential. I'm against censorship. But beyond that, I'm disturbed by the argument that the ruling against 2 Live Crew was a racial proposition because of some special black cultural propensity toward vulgarity. That argument is a gross insult to black lower-class people and an example of true racism."

Crouch, one of rap's earliest and most severe critics, dismissed both Gates and Baker as "lightweights" who don't understand cultural mores. "To say an expression has cultural validity just because we do it is facile. If the mere fact that we do something means it's worthy of display as a cultural artifact, then why don't we have glass bathrooms?" However, even Crouch agreed that the Florida judge's action amounts to a cultural assault on certain black expressions. But, he said, such assaults may serve a useful purpose if they help illuminate deeper issues. ■