

## LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

### *A Bed Behind the Portrait: An Ethnography Around Images in Segregated Los Angeles*

15 June, 2022, University of Helsinki

#### ABSTRACT

A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

'Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent,  
members of the audience'

The title of the dissertation I will defend today is 'A bed behind the portrait: an ethnography around images in segregated Los Angeles'. By now, I have written many first sentences like this to introduce this research, to try to capture the readers' attention, and to urge them to read on, or in this case, to continue listening.

Here is the sentence I originally wanted start out with today: 'This is an anthropological study of people doing art in a transforming city, where the divided urban space of yesterday was predicted to give way for more open and inclusive patterns of coexistence and interaction'.

But, this is just a difficult way to say that this thesis is about art in a segregated city becoming gentrified. The introduction to the final version of my dissertation begins with the following words: 'This ethnography moves around art to trace out how people make do

with differences historically fixed into their urban surroundings'.

This is verbose and horribly vague, but it reinforces the title and makes it absolutely clear that this is an urban ethnography with a focus on art and people doing things around it.

For the abstract, which needs to be more concise, I wrote: 'The research examines the legacy of segregation at the center of urban America in 2017'.

This is still rather general. But, it is straightforward and compact. No hovering around art works or 'differences fixed into urban surroundings', **but** the 'legacy of segregation at the center of urban America in 2017'. This is all American apartheid, riot gear, and burning buildings. Of course, I would have wanted to say, 'urban America **today**' to tap into and foster this sense of urgency that for the last ten years has surrounded these issues, and which I have also felt following media reports of police violence from the United States. To say 'today' would also imply that this account of events that took

place in Los Angeles in 2017 is still somehow relevant today, five years later. I leave that up to the reader to decide. But to be specific, I am stuck with 2017, a year when no buildings were set on fire in LA—by protesters, that is.

Now, I have put a lot of work into first sentences because it has been rather important for me to come up with a sufficiently dramatic and effective introduction to a dissertation that in fact makes for a *very boring read*. You might think that boring is good, that it offers certain proof that this is rigorous scientific research, which is often detailed and boring. Well, this is not that kind of boring. Personally, I think this research is so boring for a few related reasons and it is these reasons that I want to talk about today. First, aside from the occasional uprisings, there is something very boring about the legacy of segregation in urban America. And, second, there is something exceptionally boring about the way I have chosen to write about it. Segregation has been researched to death and I have nothing to add to this line of inquiry. The truth is that this could have been a dissertation about ‘gentrifying Los Angeles’ or ‘transforming Los Angeles’. I chose to focus on segregation because it has helped me to understand Los Angeles as a city and to understand people’s reactions to the changes, to all the ‘gentrifying’ and ‘transforming’ taking place in LA in 2017.

In my work, I approach segregation as the process via which a hierarchical racial taxonomy from the eighteenth-century becomes a material form in an American city. The story goes that during a crucial moment in United States history—before and after wars when much of urban America was being built—an evolutionist racist ideology is reproduced in a study on the effects that different racial and national groups had on land-use values in cities. These findings were then used to craft lending standards at the federal level, which in turn were adopted by

real estate and insurance industries across the US. Thus, the Federal Housing Administration institutionalised racial discrimination in cities and formalised a racial hierarchy in urban space in the United States, including in Los Angeles. This is not the most dramatic story, even in this rather simplistic form, but it has carried grave consequences. The effects of racial segregation in American cities have been seen for decades through disparities in wealth and the concentration of poverty, schooling, policing practices, spatial politics that works in the logic of designated territories, a sense of isolation, and day-to-day experiences of suspicion, resentment, and hate. Like I said, this is nothing new and, in 2017, versions of this story were presented by journalists, scholars, neighbourhood organisers, and housing activist in Los Angeles who were now rallying against the gentrification of the segregated geography.

To gain a better sense of the Los Angeles I became familiar with in 2017—the city and the neighbourhoods that this work focuses on—you need to add to this segregated urban landscape a crisis in affordable housing and a surge in the homeless population. These populations erected makeshift camps, sometimes set up by the building sites marking the expansion of public transit and the boom in transit-oriented development supported by city officials. These city officials were in turn supported by the developers building the shopping malls and market-rate housing in these long-disinvested neighbourhoods. You need to add Donald Trump being in office, news of white supremacist rallies across the country, and no end to officer-involved shootings of young Black and Latino men. You need to add coffee shops, art galleries, artisan donuts, and vintage clothing stores, speculators, white people in jogging outfits, and real estate tours on bicycle. And, of course, you need to add international artists painting

beautiful murals on top of it all. The outcome was a rather tense situation, where many people felt sufficiently threatened to declare that they would stand their ground—that is, those who thought they had some kind of ground to stand on.

Doing socio-scientific research about urban space, public art, gentrification, or police violence for that matter in a city where racial categories have informed the spatial distribution of people, it is obviously useful to talk about the populations depicted by these categories. It is also self-evident that this level of abstraction is essential for social justice work and advocacy work surrounding such issues. This is something that social scientists are intimately familiar with, for the social sciences are often about generalisation, about simplifying complex social phenomenon. In light of the history of segregation it made perfect sense to treat communities as if they were synonymous with populations and territories, to talk about people as if they were synonymous with communities and cultures, to point out that white people were now jogging and walking their dogs in neighbourhoods that Black people had once fought hard to move into, neighbourhoods that Latinx artists and entrepreneurs had brought to life with art and culture. But, it is this talk in terms of categories, populations, and communities—connected with the strong sentiments involved, and this ever-present sense of confrontation—that takes me to the second reason why this study can be such a boring read—specifically, that is, the way in which I have chosen to write about it. More precisely, I mean by this my passion for seemingly trivial detail and my focus on the efforts of a single person.

As tensions rose, this discussion around gentrification in the media and in public oratory tended to grow more polarised and

more coarse-grained. The actors involved in the narratives circulating developed from persons into abstractions, portraits of categories carrying the full weight of history with them. While this occurred, my own research led me through more familiar, more easily recognisable social scenes where very few people spoke in unison or ever fully agreed on anything for that matter. In fact, they were often debating the same issues, figuring out spatial politics, issues of race, identity, and entitlement, ownership, and representation, only with more circumstance and nuance involved. These discussions took place in meetings of all sorts, in front of murals being painted, or around art projects. In my dissertation, I have tried to grant proper space to these reflections in all of their detail, to display what the distanced view on the disenfranchised did not. The ideal way for me to account for the practicalities and the ever-so-significant particulars involved relied on focusing on the efforts of a single person. This person was Nery, a son of Guatemalan parents born in Los Angeles who was trying to make a living by painting murals on walls. During the time that I followed him in 2017, Nery was all over the place, trespassing across all these supposedly rigid lines, enforcing and drawing borders in the next moment, and then critically dismantling them. Following Nery's attempt to establish a public art nonprofit and his various engagements around arts turned into a topsy-turvy ride that for me seemed to pierce right through these clear-cut narratives about what was happening in the city.

Nery wanted to paint the courtyard of the new vegan coffee shop, just as he had painted the walls of the corner store that was really just a front for a local drug seller's point of operation. He had organised against an upcoming development, the same development that was now paying him to paint a communal mural. He

both supported and ridiculed local organisers and activists, in whose rhetoric of decolonisation and empowerment he was well versed. But, he also sometimes switched to the creativity and art-talk that accompanied the changes taking place in the city, according to which all walls could be repainted. That is, focus points could be created out of thin air, and blighted areas could be transformed overnight. The point I am trying to make here is that Nery was far from the internally resolved, coherent subject that in some media stories was displaced from his own neighbourhood through gentrification. Unlike some of the people in New York Sudhir Venkatesh (2014) discussed in his book *Floating City*, Nery was not so much floating on top of the spatial and racial divisions around him, as much as he was using them to move his weight around. Nery's method of movement depended on the gravities of the situations around him and, although he did not get to where he was going, he was exceptionally well skilled in manoeuvring around South Los Angeles. After all, he had grown up in this shifting landscape of gang territories that teaches one at a very young age to read and to manipulate subtle signs in space, space that is always political in more ways than one, and which, therefore, always has a grey area allowing for undetermined movement.

To someone who has not read the work, this might sound exciting, like 'anything can happen here'. Well, it was not and not much actually happened. The segregated landscape had across years acquired a mass, a heaviness and durability that offered resistance to change. Thus, while this thesis sometimes reads like a corrosion of categories and divisions that appear to be so at odds with the social complexity of the place, with people's experience and self-understanding, the same categories and divisions re-emerge on the next page. They were built into the city as were the relations between people living there,

and they continued to help to make sense of the environment. Together with the social complexity, this ensured that making anything happen took a lot of tiring, mundane work and had a very good chance of ending up in a bitter dispute over boundaries and ownership. This process of divisions breaking down, falling apart, and becoming reinstated recurs in the dissertation's primary ethnographic accounts of people doing art. The first of these is an account of a communal art project on gentrification and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Los Angeles riots. This project demonstrates how images intentionally or in all innocence provided a tangible form to social formations and how this made it difficult to create effective public representations that would not run counter to more intimate and volatile social realities on the ground. Secondly, the same process recurs and was commented on in the works that young aspiring artists displayed in galleries across the city. Here, art provided a means for self-reflection, a capacity employed by young artists trying to break into the art market with or without an ethnic or place-based label attached to them or their work. In their travels across social contexts, these artworks enabled the artists and their audience to critically examine the 'operational infrastructure' of their own making and reception to quote Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2013: 5).

Thirdly and most importantly, a common thread running through the study is the description of a dispute around a single wall in Historic South Central, historically an African American neighbourhood now populated by recently arrived Central American immigrants. I have tried my best to unpack the layers involved in the intentions and actions around this wall, the conflicting claims about the significance of the location that for one moment brought together world-renown street artists, activists,

business owners, historians, and local teenagers. The funny thing is, that while the events around the two consecutive murals painted at this street corner brings together, in my mind, the effects of speculation, the housing crisis, and the legacy of segregation in a fairly unexpected and even comical manner, the final mural painted on the wall loyally reproduces an image of Black and brown unity that from the outside looks like a very conventional representation of ethnic division and cooperation. However, I suggest that reading through this sometimes boring and sometimes tedious description that is my thesis can make a difference here. It can help to show that the conventionality displayed in the image was intentional and hid from view the serious social and moral complexity involved in the mural's making. It also helps to show that while seemingly fixated on the past and on colour, the mural was also one person's investment in the future, and that this message of solidarity was also a form of property laden with potentiality. Linking together various forms of social agency, the mural also served as a relational enactment offering people perspectives on one another. Fundamentally, we humans are creatures with fuzzy edges, creatures who live their lives in relation to and—to a varying degree—inside each other.

This research is an ethnography based on interviews, recordings, photographs, and detailed notes made during eleven months of fieldwork in Los Angeles. It is not a theoretical work in any meaningful sense, nor a scientific one, although I have stayed true to the material at my disposal. This work is based on the naïve belief that we people have the capacity to internalise each other's points of view—however imperfectly—and that to try to do so is worth the trouble.

Thank you.

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