

# Notes From The Field: Is My Fieldwork Compromised If I Don't Have A Car In Los Angeles?

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**Abstract:** In order to explore the implications of doing fieldwork in one of the biggest city in United States, this article offers a digression on Los Angeles' daily lives. The objective is to understand which lifestyle a student in urban anthropology starting fieldwork should choose so as to make the best of participant-observation, an ethnographic methodology developed in rather different contexts.

My Ph.D. in urban studies in Montreal (Canada) is focused on Los Angeles, where I explore, since 2008, how people interact in the public places of L.A., considered the most fragmented city in the (Occidental) world. Theoretically, I aim to use the Chicago School perspective in the city spoken for by the L.A. School. Los Angeles is indisputably a heterogeneous city, with a hundred spoken languages, large ethnic neighbourhoods, gated communities that vary from strict surveillance to symbolic closeness and many overlapping political entities within the boundaries of the city.

Chicago, as observed by its scholars at the beginning of the 20th century, was also diverse. With the metaphor of a biological organism in an ecosystem, Robert E. Park, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth imagined each separated area was linked to the rest of the city. Each zone has its functions and a certain type of inhabitants, all changeable over time. But the city is able to keep a certain equilibrium by replacing lost zones, creating new areas, "carrying off" useless parts. Los Angeles doesn't fit that metaphor of an ecosystem. At the dawn of the 21st century, some (the L.A. School) say that L.A. represents a new kind of city, a chaotic city, with no interest for any equilibrium or unity. According to Chicago School, citizens find their place in the city and fulfill the tasks given to them. When they try to escape the life that is traced for them by moving to another neighbourhood or trying their hand at new profession or lifestyle, they experience rejections, awkwardness and prejudice. In the contemporary context, how is the fragmented urban organisation of Los Angeles affecting people's lives? In public places, people behave in certain ways and send messages other. Looks, gestures, and movements of bodies through

spaces, are all non-verbal speech that may bear messages of warm welcome or unwanted presence. How do people reproduce their city's fragmentation in their everyday interactions?

I am in L.A. now, just about to start my fieldwork. I would like to take the opportunity here to think about something that has long bothered me: fieldwork undertaken in a city. My master's thesis was on the transmission of traditional knowledge in an aboriginal community of 2 thousand inhabitants in Quebec. What I experienced over the four months I was there resembled Claude Levi-Strauss' idea of fieldwork:

You have got to be up at dawn, stay awake until the last aboriginal falls asleep and even, sometimes, watch for his sleep. You have to try to be unnoticed while being always present: seeing it all, remembering it all, and taking notes of everything. Commit humiliating indiscretions, beg for information from a little swine, and always be ready to take advantage of a moment of indulgence or sloppiness. Or to know how, for days, hold back all curiosity and confine yourself to the great restraint imposed by a mood swing of the tribe. (My translation from the original French. Bonte and Izard 2000: 471)

But being everywhere and doing everything in a city as big as L.A. is to say the least quite impossible. There are many lifestyles and cultures in a city of 4 million inhabitants, each of them spreading out on a continuum of economic, political, ideological and social scale. My thesis topic is not about a specific group (homeless or Latinos), or a specific institution (community work or public health), but deals with something everybody does every day without acknowledgment: interacting in public spaces, such as parks, sidewalks and squares. I am thus concerned that my daily life should be as close to Angelinos' daily lives as possible – and not a confused mixture of me being a French Canadian enjoying the stereotypes of living in sunny California. What should I do as an anthropologist to make the best of my fieldwork? How far should my dwelling in L.A. go in order to get the most of my participant-observation? Is my way of living, of experiencing the city, "Angelino" enough? An example of a simple daily life issue I have about my life being "Angelino" enough is the following: Should I get a car?

In order to explore my scientific anxieties about living the perfect Angelino daily life, I present here three narrations with different L.A. views. The first one is mine, the other two from women my age, also from abroad and also tied to the academic environment in some way. Even though I intro-

duce them by the neighbourhood they are about, each explores briefly her preconceptions, first impressions, encounters, length of stay and means of transportation. To emphasize the variety of daily life experiences and issues exposed here, I choose to share the stories in the first person.

### **Los Feliz**

*I am in Los Feliz since September. I know I will be in the city for a while so I decided to invest in a good bicycle. I like to bike. It is my favourite means of transportation, it is cheap, it keeps me in good shape, it is respectful of the environment and the weather in L.A. permits more than three hundred days of bike commuting annually. I walked all over the place to find a shop that had the perfect bicycle. I finally found one where I could build a customized bicycle. Since then, I ride between 3 and 15 miles a day. Thanks to Los Feliz, my neighbourhood, I don't have to go very far. It is a convenient area, with a good share of restaurants, groceries, bookstore, schools and stores of all kind. It is lively with young families and artists, even "our" familiar homeless people. I go to Griffith Park many times a week, since it's only a few minutes' walk from my home. I come across a lot of people who enjoy being outside, looking at Mother Nature's work. When I ride my bicycle, I am always surprised to meet other riders since there are so few bikers in L.A. I sometimes recognize them, and we even wave at one another in the same way the drivers of Volkswagen Beetles wave at one another on the road. Bike riders form a small community here, and within this community, there are – as in any group – many sub-groups. There are sports bike riders who drive multiple-speed bicycles and wear aerodynamic helmets, whom I meet on the bike path along the L.A. River and in Griffith Park. There are the trendy bike riders with their single speed or fixed gear that hang around hipsters places in Silverlake. The University of Southern California students roam around their campus on beach cruise bicycles. I also come across ageless Latinos who ride old mountain bikes. There are also those safe adults who spend their Sundays biking around with helmets and pads. I may not have a car, but there is surely a biking L.A.*

### **Mid-City**

*I lived six weeks in Los Angeles, in Mid-Wilshire, a fairly residential neighbourhood, with detached houses behind fences of metal and trimmed trees. When I took the cab from the airport, the driver gave me an overview of the dangerous places in the neighbourhood I was going to live in. The area of Pico Boulevard was his main focus: "It has been better over the last years, but still... don't go there!" Pico was four houses away down the street.*

*Having that in mind, I did go on Pico the first morning I had off. I needed food for my stay and wanted a newspaper; the nearest mercado (supermarket) was on Pico. The adjacent stores were closed as if deserted. It did fit my idea of what a dangerous neighbourhood look like. Nevertheless, I went every day to walk on Pico. Nothing happened and the clerks became good acquaintances. I soon realized that not only I was the only person who didn't have a car in the neighbourhood, but it seemed that I was the only person alive. I never met anybody while I strolled around the block. Not a mother taking her kids out, not a youngster walking his dog, not a man mowing the lawn, not even a homeless person looking for valuable things in the garbage. And I walked a lot. The nearest bus stop was quite far, and the bus route was not convenient. So I walked everywhere, talking La Brea Avenue, Wilshire Boulevard, Olympic Boulevard, San Vicente Boulevard, Fairfax Avenue up to Santa Monica, Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards. Only once, I met the clerk of the mercado walking on the street; that seemed so awkward we just mumbled a quick "hi". It gave me the impression that my neighbourhood, and thus the whole city of L.A., were scary places. Not because it was dangerous, but because people seemed afraid. As I made my way in the city, everything my eyes observed was selected in a way that it confirmed that idea: drivers were getting out of their cars only to fight, police were everywhere making arrests, even the ghetto bird (as the Los Angeles Police Department helicopters are called) flying over my house one night looking with its big lighten eye for a prey hiding in the backyard. Probably somebody from around Pico, the taxi driver would have thought. Davis (1999) and Jacobs (1993 [1961]) were right: fear rules in L.A. and people have the (good?) idea to stay safe in their cars.*

### **Echo Park**

*I lived for a month or so in Echo Park. It was April. Oppressed by the winter still raging in my home country, I felt suddenly rejuvenated. The house was on top of a hill, with a beautiful view of historic Angelino Heights. It had a huge backyard where butterflies were in the throes of great passion, next to the lemon trees, lime trees and the garden full of fresh herbs. The neighbours were young DIY enthusiasts spreading their works of art in the shade of their surfboards and beach cruise bicycles. First thing, we went to the Trader Joe's store which was only a five minutes drive away. What a beautiful place, with beautiful people and beautiful vegetables and fruits! The neighbourhood was undoubtedly breathing a dynamic artistic life, blooming in the coffee shops, music venues, parks and vintage stores, all of that cohabiting peacefully with a Spanish-speaking population. All that I needed was accessible within walking distance, and the rest was easily drivable (we had a rented car) since two major highways were within a stone's throw of*

*the house. This confirmed my idea of Los Angeles as a dynamic cultural hub and a sunny paradise.*

All these experiences describing a life in Los Angeles reflect different neighbourhoods, times of year, means of transportation, expectations, mindsets, and previous experiences that we can guess but that are not related here. It is not surprising then, that different relationships with L.A. arise: a bustling city, a frightened city, a culturally dynamic city. Which one is the nearest to reality?

All of them are, of course, real Angelinas' experiences. And all the many others that are not narrated here are real as well. Maybe this is what fragmentation at the daily life level is all about; it is possible to live in L.A. without coming across other lifestyles, to never be close to knowing how life is in the next barrio. Does L.A.'s uniqueness lie on the fact that it allows you to live your lifestyle without crossing other people's lives? It is something you cannot avoid in smaller cities, in compact cities, in cities with less heterogeneity.

I am lucky enough that, as you may have guessed already, all three stories narrated here are my own. I had the chance to visit L.A. twice within a two-year period, for a research project of my supervisor, Julie-Anne Boudreau, on mobility as generative of socio-political mobilization in Los Angeles. We stayed in various neighbourhoods and lived according to our means. The stories written here are drawn from the personal notes I took during my stays. Even though nobody lives the same life, my experiences insofar of Los Angeles recall some great issues lived by a large numbers of Angelinos, notably the fear (of being afraid and of being feared) and the development of public transportation for transit-dependents. They recall, for example, the fights undertaken by the Bus Riders Union and the great fragmentation that stigmatises the city.

I guess that this is where the richness of anthropology lies: being able to undertake many lives, having the opportunities to understand, to a certain limit, what it is like to wear somebody else's shoes in Los Angeles and walk (bike and drive!) the streets in them.

At least as long as the fieldwork lasts.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Julie-Anne Boudreau, my supervisor, and Kathy Kolnick, who both introduced me to their Los Angeles, for their corrections and suggestions. This fieldwork – and the luxury of having scien-

tific anxieties - could not be conceivable without the financial supports of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Fondation Desjardins, the Canada Research Chair in the City and Issues of Insecurity and the Institut national de la recherche scientifique, Centre Urbanisation, Culture et Société.

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