

From behind the lens in a familiar place: Reflections on using photography to explore gentrification in Los Angeles

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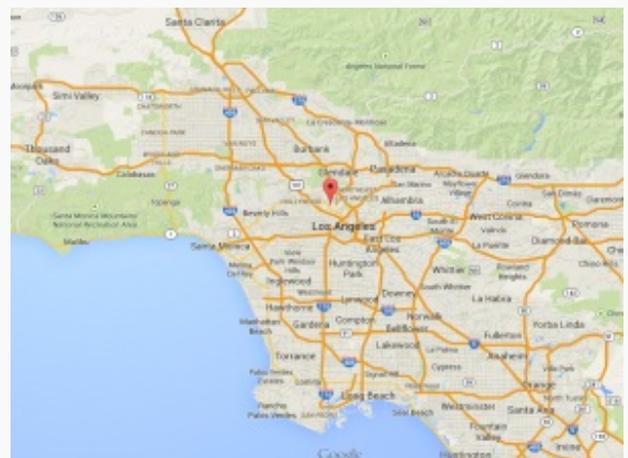
Editor

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*As I would assume many do, I found field research by far the most exciting part of the PhD experience. During the fieldwork stage not only was I released from the isolating process of reading, writing, and project planning, but I was able to watch theories, hunches, and answers come alive. It was the point where my relationship with the subject was most intimate and most revealing. The photographs that I took during fieldwork were a reflection of this intimacy, and were indeed the glue that held my data together. However snapping these images did not come without unexpected moments and a few lessons learnt, even in a location in which I could not have been more familiar. Here I reflect a bit on my time in Los Angeles making my way through the neighbourhood of Silver Lake with a camera in hand, and an open mind, writes **Juliet Kahne**.*

I am often envious when I hear exciting ‘tales from the field’ from colleagues, especially when fieldwork has been conducted in areas foreign and exotic to the researcher. In the case of my PhD, the field research consisted of seven months in Los Angeles – a well-known, well-documented, and well-developed city, and a city I already knew extremely well given I that I grew up there. The fieldwork experience was very much as I expected it to be, and overall everything ran smoothly due to my familiarity with the location, its people, and a great deal of pre-planning. However as a participant observer who was highly dependent on the use of a camera as I made my way through the research area, there was indeed an element of surprise in my fieldwork, and I did have some unexpected encounters.

My PhD research investigated a historic neighbourhood in the eastern section of Los Angeles – Silver Lake – that appeared to be resisting mature gentrification despite being situated in a sea of re-development projects around Downtown Los Angeles and Hollywood. Ostensibly, this was an investigation into ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ urban processes, and an attempt to identify the various physical characteristics of the gentrification process due to an influx of capital. Due to the socio-cultural nature of my research topic, fieldwork was based on people and their experiences, but also it was highly based on the changing physical state of the research area over time. I therefore used photographs to record much of what I was ‘seeing’. Photographs captured the setting of Silver Lake and the processes that were taking place within it, and a ‘photo diary’ became the foundation of ideas, thoughts, themes, knowledge, and observation shared throughout the final thesis. Using photography I was able to capture Silver Lake the ‘place’, rather than just the gentrified Silver Lake the media often described, and furthermore I was able to see, and show, the gentrification process in action.



Silver Lake, Los Angeles, California

Noting the participatory act of ‘doing’ cultural geography, as opposed to being a passive researcher, Shurmer-Smith (2002: 4-5) states that “Doing [cultural geography] includes looking, feeling, thinking, playing, talking, writing, photographing, drawing, assembling, collecting, recording and filming as well as the more familiar reading and listening”. I feel this very much applied to my PhD fieldwork and the photography that documented the entire experience (see also [Deljana lossifova's earlier post](#), which explains the use of photography in fieldwork). As I wandered through Silver Lake taking photographs over the seven months I was there, I saw change as it was taking

place – buildings changing from one use to another, shops changing hands, and new businesses popping up. In gentrification, there is typically an ‘aesthetic’ associated with this process (see Bridge, 2006), and this was something I tried to document since it is truly a visual change in the landscape. One day as I crossed into Silver Lake from neighbouring Los Feliz I noticed the final touches being put on a new coffee shop, clearly showing examples of this aesthetic. The building had held a variety of businesses over the years but remained a non-descript looking building without much character. It was receiving a make-over with a clean font title, style, and colour scheme that better represented the aesthetic of an up-and-coming neighbourhood – this is besides the fact that an abundance of coffee shops in a neighbourhood often signals gentrification in its early stages. This new establishment, and the abundance of similar ones in surrounding locations, became useful in photographs as I could track the visual changes taking place in the landscape that were representative of gentrification.



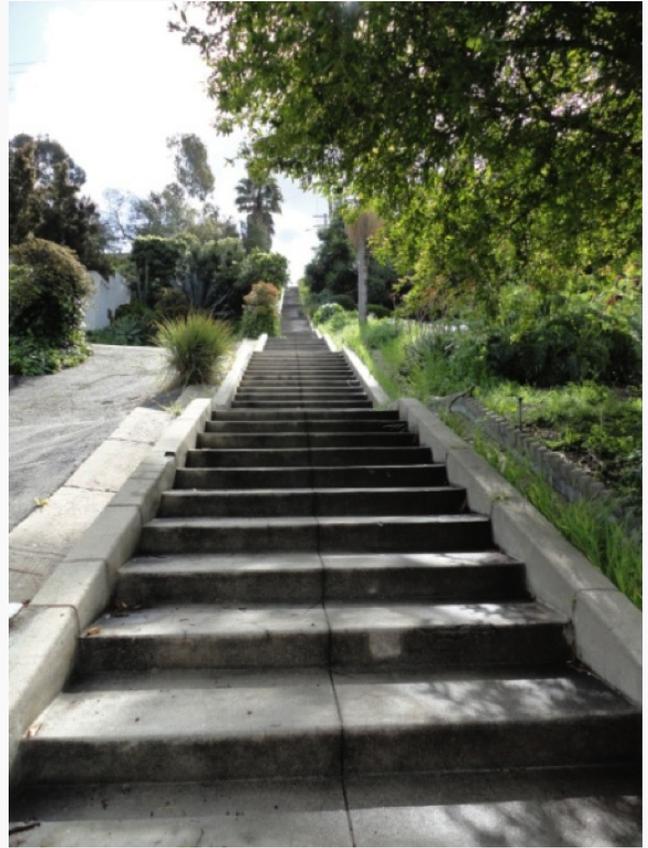
Workers putting the finishing touches on a new artisan coffee shop on Silver Lake's western border. (Photograph by Juliet Kahne, 2012)

Many years ago as an undergraduate at USC, I was warned about the difficulties and frustrations of photography in the field. Such obvious warnings included attacks from individuals, robbery, theft, and a series of potential altercations especially when photographing sensitive subjects. I was also warned of the possibility that subjects could easily be misrepresented and images potentially distorted as a result. However a more subtle reminder was that whilst taking photographs, a lens may provide the feeling that there is a barrier between you and the subject, where in actuality it is a very intimate and personal exchange regardless of the subject and surrounding environment. One does not have to be in a battlefield of chaos to be wary of what they are photographing, and problems can arise in the most unobvious of places.

I recall one afternoon as I was casually taking photographs of the Hollywood sign from inside Silver Lake's boundaries to demonstrate how the neighbourhood sits near major attractions and services. Within a few minutes of what was otherwise an innocent capturing of shots of the landmark, I found myself being followed from afar with the sounds of shouting coming towards me. As the individual grew closer, I could tell they were furious thinking that I had taken photos of their family and their property, and were threatening to harm me and my camera. Once I realised what was happening and that their anger was towards me, I assured them the photos had nothing to do with them and there was no reason for concern. However, this did not comfort them. I had to guide them with some discussion about what I was doing and why, even though these subjects fell far out of what I believed to be an ethical concern. After calming down the individual, they eventually left me alone finally convinced that they were in none of my photographs, but clearly their paranoia did not work in my favour and left me in a rather nervous state. What should have been a carefree afternoon of capturing images turned into a stressful and potentially harmful situation; understandably, my photographs were not strong. What I learned here was a reminder of what I had been told as an undergrad student in photography – to always remain cautious whilst pointing a lens, as people might react in the most unexpected ways, and interpret your work in a negative way. Common sense: yes, but easily forgotten in one's comfort zone.

To explain a non-threatening but still challenging case, I was desperate to capture an interview from a local activist who was planning a new arts and music festival in the neighbourhood. Due to his busy schedule I was forced to conduct the interview in his car between meetings as his young child sat restlessly beside me crying, and repeatedly grabbing the recorder out of my hand. Obviously not having the authority to stop the child's behaviour, I held in my frustration to attempt to finish the interview in a manner that kept the interviewee comfortable. The car itself was parked alongside Sunset Boulevard, next to where a local artist was creating a graffiti-like advertisement

for the festival. As the interviewee struggled to calm his child, I had the ability to take pictures of the process taking place beside me which turned out to be useful documentation about local involvement in the community. Though this experience demonstrated some of the difficulties encountered in interviewing, it also demonstrated the 'surprise' element of participant observation and the resulting data – which is available everywhere, at every moment. Even though I was conducting an interview, the more useful and interesting information was to be collected from what was taking place around me out on the street as a participant observer. In addition, this photograph is now a permanent reminder of an interview situation that was less than ideal.



Documenting the history and physicality of Silver Lake – stairs on Cove Avenue. (Photograph by Juliet Kahne, 2011)



Observing change as it happens: Documenting a local graffiti artist from the passenger seat of a car, as he created an advert for the 1st annual Silver Lake Jubilee, in 2011. (Photograph by Juliet Kahne, 2011)



Site of Le Barcito and neighbouring mural covered Laundromat, before the insertion of a new trendy gastropub (Photograph by Juliet Kahne, 2011)

Another issue I encountered in photographing Silver Lake that I had not taken into consideration before fieldwork was how much the area would change once arriving to the research site, and how quickly. There were occasions where I captured evidence in the landscape of cultural continuity and a lack of new developments and businesses that often signal gentrification, which were to demonstrate how Silver Lake managed to limit unwanted development. However, this continuity was short lived. In the case of Le Barcito and the LaunderLand next to it on Sunset Boulevard in the heart of Silver Lake, I had captured a long standing gay bar with historic political status and its surrounding environment covered in murals by local artists. Within the next few months, a hip restaurateur purchased LeBarcito. He turned the corner into a gastro pub with expensive food and a complete renovation of LeBarcito's historic interior elements. What I initially saw to be a strong example of community activism and political support ended up making little difference in the face of change moving across the neighbourhood. Though at the time my photograph captured something culturally significant and consistent about Silver Lake's cultural evolution, it was only very soon after that this significance was no longer relevant. Therefore at first sight, my observations and documentation was supporting my hypothesis, only to then change very shortly after.

Despite any difficulties in the field, I kept Shurmer-Smith's (2002) interactive and participatory approach in mind as I worked my way through Silver Lake's boundaries, not only to compliment and support an ethnographic approach in the field but to gather data in a way that could generate evidence that might have otherwise been overlooked. As Eysenck (1976: 9) said, "sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases—not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!" This is a similar idea to Jacobs' (1961) 'eyes on the street', where we can see sudden change through our 'own eyes' with participation and observation, noting what is taking place in a neighbourhood and how this change manifests in the landscape and in social relationships in the neighbourhood. In the case of this particular research and field work during my PhD, the camera functioned as my eyes, and often captured the unexpected – even in the most familiar of places.

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About the author

[Juliet Kahne](#) is a native Californian, who currently lives in London. She graduated from the University of Southern California (USC) with a BA in Geography, and graduated from King's College London with an MSc in Cities Culture and Social Change, and a PhD in Geography (Arts). Her main research interests include urbanism, visual culture, historic preservation/cultural heritage, and the arts – mainly in how these areas combined influence (positively and negatively) development and culture in the city. She feels a connection can and should be made between urban development and the preservation of arts and culture in order to maintain a 'sense of place' within a given landscape.

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