

I am still alive in Los Angeles!

I am still alive in Los Angeles

even as the price of rent rises
and gridlock strangles central arteries I'm old enough
to remember

disco parties and the build up to the 1984 Olympics
and news reporters like Jerry Dunphy and Hal Fishman;
I remember when Fernando Valenzuela was a rookie
Years before I loved Wanda Coleman and Bukowski,
my first LA poets were Chick Hearn & Vin Scully

—Then I read Mike Davis and Carey McWilliams
and watched the gospel of Huell Howser
looking at things that aren't here anymore recalling former glory
like Ralph Story I'm still exploring
from Panorama City to Pomona

I am still alive

in Los Angeles as they build high speed trains
down Crenshaw and out into the San Gabriel Valley
changes in transportation for the new generation foreshadow
the nation's transformation as millennials on bicycles call
for the return of the Garden City; green in the 21st Century
is a matter of survival -- witness the revival of the wetlands
the riparian watershed is a sentinel for sustainability
unbridled consumption is a liability, observe residents
of Angel City playing their part restoring nature's heart

I am still

alive in Los Angeles from festivals to funerals,
baby showers to weddings, each generation
ever more beautiful

reality is ever musical—
throng of people mix and match creating
the patchwork mosaic of multicultural souls coming
together to call LA home. The community is a poem
in progress called Los Angeles. The angels in a city singing
synchronicity from Central to Century City—
Olympic was 10th street and Pio Pico was the last governor
of California when it belonged to Mexico, he was born
a Spanish citizen— see the city Zen soaring to satori
on a Saturday morning circling the Evergreen Cemetery
or hiking up hills in Culver City

I am
still alive in Los Angeles as mamas monitor laundromats
from Lankershim to Long Beach, I walk the long streets
from Magnolia to Manchester, Rosemead to Redondo Beach
I am still alive in Los Angeles though there's no more open space;
most of the wetlands have been replaced by condos, Trader Joe's
and makeshift dog parks. The expanding corporate heart charts
a frenzied facelift of never-ending Christmas but only a few are
on that wish list. There's a generation of kids on snapchat
and commuters want that fast track
Alive in Los Angeles!

I am still alive in Los Angeles.
Thanks to family, friends and poetry. The past, present and future
of my city gives me energy. Untold generations of history from
Biddy Mason to Chavez Ravine to Toyo Miyatake punctuating
the power of place
turning the page sharing authority because we share
the story of the city unfolding—no hierarchy, we all belong
to this city—its oral *her-story*.

I am still alive in Los Angeles! Today I drive around
LA with my son and daughter like I once rode with my grandfather.

There's no more Perino's or the Brown Derby but there's still
Fosselmans, Cole's, Philippe's and the Pantry.

My children spill ice cream in the back seat,

Together we are alive in a city of destiny.

I am still alive in Los Angeles!

Community, Not A Commodity: The Ethics of Giving a City Tour

I have been curating city tours professionally since 1997. Over the last two decades, I have given thousands of city tours, most of them for Red Line Tours, the Museum of Neon Art and the Museum of Architecture and Design and more recently as an independent contractor. I am an advocate of community-based public history promoting the utility of historical knowledge to empower and deepen the public's connection to the past in a real-world platform beyond academia. A city tour is one of the most effective means to impart historical knowledge in an accessible and public fashion.

The starting point for giving city tours has been two-fold for me. As a third-generation Los Angeles native, my first exposure to history and geography were through listening to stories from my parents and grandparents. My grandfather schooled me on Southern California geography from a very early age. He told me many stories about the Great Depression, the streetcars of Los Angeles and how agricultural the region once was. We would drive in his car listening to jazz on 88.1 KKJZ back when the call letters were KLON. We drove everywhere from Long Beach to the South Bay to Downtown L.A. to the San Fernando Valley and the entire time he would tell me stories. At Point Fermin in San Pedro, he recalled proposing to my grandmother there in 1941. Almost everywhere we went he had a story whether it was the Griffith Observatory or the Central Library. I learned from him at a very early age the meaning and power of place and memory.

These family stories came to mean even more to me during my undergraduate years at UCLA shortly after the 1992 Rodney

King Uprisings as I took several classes on Los Angeles history, geography and urban studies. I read widely and books like *The Power of Place* by Dolores Hayden, *City of Quartz* by Mike Davis and writers like Wanda Coleman, Luis Rodriguez, Carey McWilliams and Lynell George further reinforced my interest in all things Los Angeles. My information sources for giving tours have always been a blend of both oral history from longtime residents and the many books I have studied on Southern California history, geography and architecture. My praxis is about uniting oral history with knowledge from books and more formal historical sources. The blending of these two together makes for a more balanced approach that unites theory and practice.

The Right to the City

I am aware how my neighborhood tours could be a gateway for boosterism, but my intent has never been to sell property or promote a neighborhood for redevelopment. Furthermore, cities across America continue to become more privatized, and this is problematic. In this era of gentrification and selling the city off to the highest bidder, this essay is also about the spirit of celebrating community. The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre coined the phrase, “the right to the city,” and this is something I deeply believe. The city belongs to everyone. Lefebvre believed that public space should not be privatized. Lefebvre called the city “an oeuvre, that all citizens have a right to participate in.” Urban historian David Harvey expanded on Lefebvre’s philosophy, iterating further:

“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and

remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."

I have always felt that giving city tours celebrates this right to the city and that it reinforces the entire community and our common interests. This is why I like giving tours of neighborhoods beyond Hollywood and the more popular tourist pockets of Los Angeles. The entire city has the right to be celebrated. As the writer, professor and poet Dolores Hayden writes in her groundbreaking 1995 book, *The Power of Place*:

"To look at ethnic and women's history as the missing mainstream experience means respecting the urban places that house ordinary working people. It means caring for the urban landscapes of South Central and East Los Angeles, Chinatown or Little Tokyo as part of understanding what it means to live in a city."

I have always taken the craft of giving a city tour very seriously. The research process is the most important element. Los Angeles Times reporter Steve Saldivar recently tweeted a statement by the UCLA Urban Planning Professor Dr. Eric Avila pertinent to this. Avila said at an event about gentrification that, "Activism that lacks knowledge isn't going to go very far." Deep knowledge of local history is equally necessary for giving a city tour or community activism. All the neighborhoods where I give tours of are areas that I know intimately from my experiential time spent there. The experiences range from having a previous job in the area to a family member or friend of mine that lived there. These experiences make the tour more authentic and ensure that the information provided is grounded. This methodology keeps the tour authentic and grounded in values that are lived-in.

Giving a city tour is about spotlighting the community, specifically the people and elements of the landscape that create its spirit. It is not about marketing or packaging it as a commodity.

Like Dolores Hayden, I am a practitioner of community-based public history.

What follows is a short list of core concepts I adhere to whenever delivering a city tour.

1. Get the History Right

The veracity of a city tour always begins with specific and accurate historical knowledge. A professional tour guide needs to be meticulous and get the history correct. It is important to name the names: the early architects, city founders, community leaders, the people who were instrumental in the formation of the specific neighborhood or location. Name as many of these names as you can and connect them to what they did.

We live in an era where history is often forgotten because time is moving faster than ever. The essayist Gerda Lerner explains in her book, *Why History Matters*, “Present-mindedness, a shallow attention to meaning, and contempt for the value of precise definition and critical reasoning are characteristic attitudes produced by mass-media culture. All of them run counter to the mindset of the historian and to the values and perspective historical studies provide.” In addition to the short attention span of this time, and what Lerner states here, there are also many important historical figures that are overlooked in the coverage of history.

The forgotten pioneers are often women or people of color who played a critical role in the area’s history. My sources for these names include not only books and documentaries, but from conversations with longtime community residents. The stories and folklore are priceless, and I do my best to collect these in the preparation of a tour. As much as I have studied Los Angeles and been all over the city, I always defer to longtime community members, and have them share their stories on the tour whenever possible.

Much of my approach in sharing public history has been influenced by the previously mentioned Dolores Hayden and *The Power of Place*. Her work advocates for a people's history. As she writes: "Public interpretation of historic places requires a broad understanding of urban history... Its best measure is shared meanings, Native American, African American, Latino, Asian American, and Anglo-American meanings, female as well as male values, children's experiences as well as grown-up patterns of life. It is city dwellers' shared lifetimes that create an American sense of place. In scale and approach, this is the opposite of top-down thinking that underlies urban design as grand-scale redevelopment planning practiced by American cities."

Hayden is critical of the top-down approach as this approach has minimal understanding of an area's history because it is much more focused on development and economics. She sarcastically calls this perspective, "the John Wayne view." Furthermore, she writes that it is usually marked in public as a sculpture of an old white man on a horse. In opposition to this, Hayden is interested in the people's history because it is the lifeblood of the city. Furthermore, she writes, "Listening to the resonant stories of working people in inner-city neighborhoods is the first step. Connecting the stories to reclaim the landscape as people's history is the next." The celebration of people's history triggers "social memory," and remaps the urban landscape. Finally, Hayden writes, "It is the controversial history Americans need to reclaim as our own, in order to give meaning to the contradictory urban landscapes of cities today, where wealth and neglect, success and frustration, often appear side by side."

One more element of getting the history correct is paying tribute to the *legacy businesses*. Recently, I collaborated with Traci Kato-Kiriyama, Kristin Fukushima, Allison De La Cruz and Scott Oshima for a series of walking tours of Little Tokyo. Traci, Kristin, Allison and Scott are deeply engaged in the Little Tokyo community and have been for many years. They

each spoke about the few remaining legacy businesses in Little Tokyo. One of them is Fugetsu-Do Confectionary, a family run-bakery on First Street that has been open since 1903. It is the longest-running business in Little Tokyo and one of the oldest continuing businesses in Los Angeles.

Fugetsu-Do has faced some challenges in recent years and still manage to keep going. Traci encouraged the members of the tour to support Fugetsu-Do by patronizing their bakery in the future. During other tours, I have given in areas like Leimert Park, I have proposed similar requests to support the independent bookstore EsoWon Books and other legacy businesses I have encountered there like the World Stage. This idea of supporting longtime family-run businesses within a community also connects to the next idea which is sharing authority.

2. Sharing Authority

Another key concept from Hayden's work is the idea of sharing authority. Hayden references this concept from the work of the Professor and Urban Historian Michael Frisch. Frisch's important research offers great insight on the craft and meaning of oral and public history. His book, *A Shared Authority* emphasizes "oral history's capacity to generate alternative visions of American history and culture and to serve as a source of change, especially from the perspectives of minorities and women." Furthermore, Frisch writes that "what is most compelling about oral and public history is a capacity to redefine and redistribute authority, so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy."

The concept of sharing authority translates into several actions within a tour. It means having long-term members of the community speak. When I have given walking tours of Leimert Park, I always bring the group to Ben Caldwell, the owner

and founder of KAOS Network. Ben has been in Leimert over 35 years, and he has been involved on the ground level on many important projects in the area. Caldwell has always graciously received my tour groups whether it was students from Woodbury, LMU, University of Redlands or the walkers I brought from the Museum of Architecture and Design.

I have also had the poet AK Toney join me on the tour and share his poems and experiences. Toney brought me into the Leimert Park poetry community over 15 years ago, and he has been sharing his work there for 25 years. I have also had my former students; the siblings Dante and Monique Mitchell share their poetry on my Leimert tour and several others across the city. The Mitchells grew up in Leimert and were in my class when I taught at nearby View Park High School in 2008-2009.

Similarly, when I have done tours in Boyle Heights, I had lifelong East Los Angeles resident Tomas Benitez share his experiences. Benitez always dazzled the audience with his 60 plus years of stories. I also always have the Boyle Heights native poet Francisco Escamilla, aka the Busstop Prophet share his stories and poetry on the tour as well. In Boyle Heights we have also stopped at the Otomisan Restaurant that has been in the area 60 years along with the Rissho Kosei-Kai Buddhist Temple on East First Street.

I have featured other longtime community residents on other tours as well such as native Angeleno poets and educators Rocio Carlos and Traci Kato-Kiriyama. As stated earlier, I always defer to longtime residents because their experience and knowledge trumps book knowledge or academia. This idea of sharing authority is common in all fields, whether it be in art museums or even medical research. The voice of community members is paramount in the historical process. Much of the backlash against gentrifiers and oblivious newcomers to an area is that they do not value the neighborhood history and the

residents that have always been there. Newcomers may paint over a longtime sign or be unaware of the traditions that define the neighborhood. I have a deep respect for the longtime residents, their culture and their willingness to share their stories with me. This reverence is critical for giving a city tour or accurate historical account.

3. Debunking Stereotypes

On many occasions I have had travelers ignorantly ask me to take them to South Central, Compton or East LA. The tone in their question comes across in such a way that the area is dilapidated and dangerous and that they want to see the landscape they have heard about in a gangsta hip hop song or in a movie like *Colors* or *Boulevard Nights*. I always respond that these neighborhoods are beautiful places with humble working-class people and quite different than the stereotype they associate it with from a gangsta rap song or some exaggerated film. These misconceptions are part of why I began giving tours of areas like Leimert Park to show that these stereotypes are false.

At the same time, I am always cautious to let voyeurs know that I am celebrating the community in the interest of respecting the culture. It is not about marketing the real estate as a commodity. Respect and appreciation are always the underlying value that guides my explorations of the city.

A Final Word: Impact vs. Intention

Another element of debunking stereotypes is unraveling history beyond the most obvious known elements of the local history. Beyond the obvious implications about gentrification, some have been critical of city tours because they feel that the celebration of a specific community will inevitably lead to the exploitation and colonization of this area. There has

been a historical precedent for this, and one example of the problematic relationship between impact and intention is the case of writer Helen Hunt Jackson and her book *Ramona*.

Published in 1884, many historians credit Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* for romanticizing Southern California and inspiring thousands of East Coast Americans to move to California after reading the novel during the Boom of the 1880s. Phoebe S. Kropp reveals in her book *California Vieja* that this impact was the exact opposite of what Jackson intended. Jackson was attempting social commentary. "Woven in with Jackson's tale of romance was reproach for Californians' behavior and attitude toward Indian people," writes Kropp. A few years before Kropp wrote *Ramona*, she wrote the nonfiction book, *A Century of Dishonor*, which was much less popular. This earlier book was "a nonfictional account of the abysmal record of the United States' relations with American Indians past and present." Jackson diligently recorded the dozens of treaties and broken agreements that the American government reneged on with indigenous peoples from the 17th to the late 19th Century. Not surprisingly, this book was not very popular.

"When sales were slow," Kropp reports, "she (Jackson) sent a copy to every member of Congress at personal expense. While the volume caused nary a ripple in the Capitol, she accepted a government offer to prepare a report on the condition of the California Mission Indians." Jackson was escorted around Southern California by real-estate promoter Abbot Kinney. After visiting Indian villages, crumbling missions and a few of the still-working ranchos, "she found material that she would later exploit for the romantic backdrop and charming characters she needed to tempt readers into her remonstrations." Once Jackson filed her official report, she "decided to present her protests directly to the public in novel form. In a tale more personal than *A Century of Dishonor*, she hoped to 'set forth some Indian experiences in a way to move people's hearts.'"

Jackson said on many occasions that “she hoped *Ramona* would be the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of Indian reform.”

Not only was this intention not realized, but Jackson died ten months after *Ramona* was published. She did not live to see the book’s impact. As Kropp reveals, Jackson’s “audience was primed to respond to the romantic angle more than the social critique.” *Ramona* became a runaway bestseller, and dozens of clever entrepreneurs around California capitalized on the book’s popularity by staging *Ramona* pageants, building hotels named after it and even creating small souvenirs based on it. There is a city named *Ramona* in San Diego County, and part of Alhambra and Monterey Park was once called *Ramona Acres* at the end of the 19th Century. Moreover, there are still dozens of streets named *Ramona* in Southern California that were a direct response to the book’s popularity. Jackson’s intention of advocating the Indian’s cause was not successful.

It is examples like what happened from *Ramona* that make long-term residents of certain neighborhoods wary of city tours and efforts to celebrate local history. Nonetheless, I believe that if historians and tour guides mindfully share their work responsibly and adhere to ethics like community-based public history and sharing authority, specific neighborhoods can retain their authentic charm and not be colonized or changed from their original spirit.

The bigger problem obviously is the power of market forces and how development always rules, but if policymakers can become even more conscious of promoting community-based public history, this could lead to more effective preservation of neighborhoods for longtime residents. As Dolores Hayden writes in her conclusion of *The Power of Place*: “Any historic place, once protected and interpreted, potentially has the power to serve as a lookout for future generations who are trying to plan for the future, having come to terms with the past.” This

is the spirit with which I give my city tours and write my essays and poems with. As Lefebvre said, everyone, “has a right to the city.” Therefore, through the process of sharing authority, naming the names, debunking the stereotypes and promoting a community-based public history, we can come to terms with our past and map a much more equitable future.