INFRASTRUCTURING ETHNOGRAPHY

ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH Staccato Project Design

Use this sketch -- either quickly or more comprehensively -- to draw out an ethnographic research design -- for your own project or just for practice. Do this sketch many times for different kinds of possible projects -- thinking of it as calisthenics for ethnography.

TITLE

Financing Displacement: Real Estate Development and Gentrification in Los Angeles Chinatown

RESEARCHER/S

Raymond Fang

I, the lead researcher, am the only member of the study team. I will train myself in Chinese, participant-observation, and interviewing. I will be interacting with non-English speakers.

ABSTRACT, INTELLECTUAL MERIT, BROAD IMPACT

Aims

This project hopes to understand the raced, gendered, and classed contours of financialized displacement, eviction, and gentrification in Los Angeles Chinatown. How do law and governance produce and exacerbate inequality? What forms and scales of law and governance produce real estate speculation and financialization in Los Angeles Chinatown? How is this process raced, gendered, and classed in ways that reproduce historical and structural inequalities? With a focus on how raced, gendered, and classed imaginations of space and time in US Chinatowns are articulated and enacted by activists, tenants, property owners, real estate developers, and city bureaucracies in conflicts over property development and gentrification, this project seeks to develop an analysis of law and community in conditions of precarity. In particular, this research project will focus on the intertwined legal, political, and economic architecture of housing and real estate development in California.

The purpose of this study is to clarify the ways in which governmental power operates with regard to real estate and gentrification. Attending to the

various imaginaries of space and time at play in the legal architecture of real estate law and property development, this study asks: how are imagined futures of Los Angeles Chinatown are articulated and enacted by activists, tenants, property owners, real estate developers, and LA city bureaucracy in contests over property development and housing? What is at stake in such imaginations? How does governmental and legal authority operate in these spaces, and how can it be subverted?

Methods

I will employ a variety of qualitative research methods for my project. These methods include:

- Participant-observation
- Interviews
- Archival research
- Legal research
- Policy and planning research
- Real estate market research
- Photography

Theoretical Framing

I hope to draw on theories of racialization and racism in the US; the model minority myth; East Asian-American masculinity, patriarchy, and gender; capitalism and neoliberalism; financialization, real estate, land use, and housing; bureaucracy, law, and policy; urban planning and governance; geography, space, and place; and displacement and gentrification. This suite of theories should, I hope, allow me to adequately conceptualize displacement in Los Angeles Chinatown as part of a deeper history of racialized, classed, and gendered violence of racial capitalism.

Current anthropological scholarship on urban development in the US has paid close attention to questions of race and class in its analysis of the process of gentrification. However, anthropology has not yet grasped to the ways in which municipal law and power operates through business improvement districts, eminent domain, and funding for affordable housing, among other things. This project seeks to nuance and ethnographically describe the ways in which various levels of governmental authority—city, county, state, and federal—co-operate and conflict to produce state-sanctioned racialized, classed, and gendered forms of displacement in low-income urban neighborhoods of color. Additionally, anthropological scholarship has not paid enough attention to how county and state-level courts and their selective exercise of statutory interpretation produce varying and uneven worlds of precarity, homelessness, and displacement. This study intends to bridge all of these gaps.

Expected Results

Expected results of this study are that the financialization of rental housing is experienced as racialized displacement and eviction. Although some federal, state, and municipal laws and policies are well-intentioned and may aim to put the brakes on this process, the overall architecture of these

laws and policies ultimately serve to accelerate this process.

Implications

Some implications of my research may be to argue for a broad shift in policy for rental housing in the US to favor affordable, safe, and habitable social housing funded by government rather than privatized "affordable housing" which transfers wealth from public to private. The research may also support the enactment of speculation and property flipping tax, the enactment of a vacancy tax, the enactment of vacancy control laws, and closer policy attention to race and gender in federal, state, and municipal housing policy.

OVERVIEW / RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Theoretical Questions: How does law produce or exacerbate inequality? In what ways is this part of a longer history of racialized and classed dispossession in the US, and in what ways is it a novel phenomenon? How is this related to late industrialism?

Empirical Questions: What forms and scales of governance and law produce real estate speculation and financialization in Los Angeles Chinatown? How is this process raced, gendered, and classed in unequal ways that reproduce structural inequalities? How does the financialization of rental housing "touch down" in LA Chinatown in specifically raced, gendered, and classed ways? What drives (practices, instruments, perceptions) speculation and financialization in Los Angeles Chinatown?



Figure 1. Los Angeles Chinatown tenant organizers hold a press conference announcing a lawsuit against the City of Los Angeles and a real estate developer for approving a luxury housing development in Chinatown with no affordable housing. May 2019. Photo by Chinatown Community for Equitable Development.



Figure 2. Posters and banners calling for affordable housing at the planned site for a luxury housing development in Los Angeles Chinatown. May 2019. Photo by Raymond Fang.



Figure 3. Organizers, tenants, and allies pose for a photo underneath a Metro Station in Los Angeles Chinatown after a march calling for affordable housing in the neighborhood. May 2019. Photo by Chinatown Community for Equitable Development.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Development and speculation have been accelerating in Los Angeles Chinatown in the last five years, with two massive luxury market-rate housing developments constructed in the last five years, and with hundreds and hundreds more market-rate units planned across at least a dozen upcoming developments. Understanding what kind of racialized, gendered, and classed governance and financialization make this possible is key to combating these changes.

News Item 1 https://la.curbed.com/2019/6/13/18661440/chinatown-development-tom-gilmore
We are protesting this developer for harassing and kicking out the only full service grocery left in Chinatown.

News Item 2 https://la.curbed.com/2019/10/31/20940579/chinatown-tom-gilmore-ai-hoa-market-closed More details on the closure of the grocery store

News Item 3 https://la.curbed.com/2019/5/8/18535838/chinatown-college-station-lawsuit-atlas-capital-cced Details on our lawsuit against the City of LA for approving a luxury development in Chinatown

LITERATURE REVIEW

Asian-American Studies

There has been much written in the discipline of Asian-American Studies on the history of US Chinatowns as it relates to racism, segregation, and exclusion. There is also some literature on the relationship of US Chinatowns to gender and sexuality, class, and colonialism, though it is not necessarily in the main part of the historical literature on the subject. My research would build on existing Asian-American Studies literature by contributing an ethnographic study on contemporary US Chinatowns that attends to displacement and gentrification, is deeply interpretive, attentive to race, gender, and class, and is oriented towards forms of action and solidarity.

Anderson, Kay. 1987. "The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category." *Journal of the Association of American Geographers*, 77 (4), 580-598.

Legal Anthropology

Legal anthropology is concerned with ethnographic studies of law and how law is experienced in everyday life. Literature in this field often pays close attention to power and politics in the production of law and state power, and there is usually some analysis of race, gender, and class. As part

of the broader field of socio-legal studies, this sub-discipline of anthropology asks after what work law does in the world, in terms of acting as a semi-autonomous social field that simultaneously constitutes the world and denies doing so. My research would contribute to the legal anthropology literature by adding an ethnographic analysis of law and policymaking as it actively produces racialized displacement and eviction, even despite public rhetoric to the contrary.

Valverde, Marina. Everyday Law on the Street: City Governance in an Age of Diversity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Urban Anthropology

Urban anthropology is concerned with studying the production of space and place in cities. This sub-field of anthropology draws on traditions of geography and urban planning to create ethnographically rich depictions of urban life around the world. With nuanced analyses of the ways that space and place are actively produced by a wide variety of actors, urban anthropology is attentive to how power, colonialism, and capitalism are all implicated in the formation of contemporary cities. My research would contribute to this literature by adding an ethnographic study of a particular working class urban neighborhood of color in the Global North, and how displacement and eviction are operating in this context in specific ways that intersect with racialized histories.

Cheng, Wendy. *The Changs Next Door to the Diazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Economic Anthropology

Economic anthropology asks after modes of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption in human societies around the world. With the global financialization of real estate massively amplifying processes of displacement and dispossession, economic anthropology has a lot to offer with thick ethnographic descriptions of human economic activity. My research would contribute to this literature because it is concerned with economic processes of valuation, investment, securitization, financialization, and exchange of real estate in LA Chinatown. An ethnographic study of how gentrification is lived and experienced, and the economic and legal architectures that make it possible, would greatly improve understandings of how economic processes continue to actively reproduce inequality in the form of dispossession. And it would point towards visions of what housing justice could look like.

Rolnik, Raquel. Urban Warfare: Housing Under the Empire of Finance. New York: Verso Press, 2019.

METHODS AND DATA RESOURCES

Participants will be eligible for inclusion in this study if they are involved in real estate development, housing, city planning, and/or property management in Los Angeles Chinatown in any capacity. This includes tenant organizers, tenants, landlords, city/county/state/federal policymakers and politicians, lawyers, city bureaucrats and planners, property owners, property managers, and real estate developers. I will approach potential participants through email and/or phone call. I will obtain potential participants' contact information either through a public website or flyer, or through an intermediary who has already agreed to participate in the research project.

I will employ a variety of qualitative research methods for my project. These methods include:

Participant-observation with tenant organizers in Los Angeles Chinatown - I have been volunteering as co-chair of the research committee for tenant organizers in Los Angeles Chinatown for about a year. This access will allow me to do research on the questions that motivate community organizing work. Participation will include activities like attending meetings, drafting agendas for meetings, running meetings, supplying materials for events and protests, providing volunteer labor for research and organizing needs, and speaking with tenants, lawyers, and allies to gather information. Observation includes activities like taking field notes on meetings, protests, and direct action occurrences, taking photographs of meaningful events, locations, and people, and video/audio recordings of public discussions regarding real estate development in the neighborhood.

Interviews with tenants, bankers, developers, landlords, organizers, and politicians - I hope to interview a wide range of actors involved in real estate and land use development in Los Angeles Chinatown. Tenants - both residential and commercial - are clearly a key group that need to be a central part of this research project, as it is their lives and livelihoods that are at stake in these questions of displacement, eviction, and rising rents. I will hope to ask about their life histories, their experiences and concepts of what Chinatown means to them, and what it would mean for them to stay or to leave the neighborhood. I hope to ask these questions in order to get at the deeper imaginations of place and time operative in their lives. Bankers are another major group of actors in this phenomenon.

Bankers are the ones that issue loans and interest rates to developers and real estate corporations for the acquisition or development of property. If I want to understand the logic behind the financialization of real estate, I need to speak with these bankers to understand why affordable multifamily residential rental real estate has suddenly become such a big site of investment for these banks.

Developers and landlords are a central group for the neighborhood, too. They are often the face of gentrification, and are the actors most often targeted by organizers and tenants. To understand their stakes and interests in the neighborhood, as well as their imaginations of place and time, I would ask them about their interest in Chinatown, real estate, and what considerations go into what makes a certain property a worthwhile investment.

Organizers are a key counter-hegemonic group. Many are either retired, or are middle-class professionals, often with ties to the Chinatown

neighborhood. They work with sharp critiques of capitalism, commodification, and gentrification, and push for community control of the neighborhood. Understanding their imaginations of community, place, and time, especially with relationship to tenant imaginaries and landlord/banker imaginaries, will be critical to grasping the conceptual architecture of displacement.

Finally, I hope to interview politicians because they are important actors in the political and city planning process. They are the ones who approve developments, zone changes, land purchases, and the like. As such, they have tremendous power and have to walk a line between talking a good talk about fighting displacement, and walking the walk (even if this means pitting the desires of constituents vs the desires of wealthy real estate developer donors). With all of their complicated political machineering, what notions of place and time are at work for them?

Archival research - A deep historical understanding of US Chinatowns, anti-Chinese racism, segregation, and displacement is necessary for properly situating neighborhood struggles against displacement and eviction. I have already completed some preliminary archival research at the Southern California Library in Los Angeles with members of Chinatown Community for Equitable Development. We examined documents about historical activism in Los Angeles Chinatown from the 1970s and 1980s. I have also completed a summer internship with the Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles, where I developed an educational interactive for K-12 students based on archaeological remains of historic Chinatown held by the Museum and the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California. I hope to build and expand on this analysis of archival and archaeological materials.

<u>Legal research and policy research</u> - With my professional background in legal research, I have the skill-set to conduct legal research on US, California, and Los Angeles City legal cases, statutes, dockets, policies, and legislation. This skill is invaluable, both for academic research and organizing research. Understanding the legal and policy architecture of real estate and land use law is critical to developing an analysis of racialized and classed gentrification and displacement. It is also important for developing and formulating organizing strategies that are responsive and attentive to the legal and policy climate.

<u>Data analysis and mapping</u> - Data on neighborhood-level demographic information, housing sales, and displacement exists, but is somewhat scattered and hard to put together. For various reasons, data on evictions is very difficult to obtain in California. Data on sales, financing, and loan structuring are also not easy to obtain, but can be done with access to the right resources. Similarly, mapping such data is also not necessarily easy as it requires a developed suite of technical skills and software, but I have basic training in these skills and could further develop them to enhance my ethnographic analysis.

<u>Photography</u> - I have very amateur photography skills with my entry-level Nikon DSLR camera. While CCED has more trained photographers to help with photography of actions, protests, and events, I hope to use my photography skills to document changes in the neighborhood and the people who live there.

THEORETICAL FRAMES & DATA ANALYSIS

Racialization and racism (Omi and Winant)

Howard Omi and Michael Winant provide the foundational analysis of racialization and racism in the United States. My research would build on their analysis of racialization in the context of housing justice, housing policy, and law-making.

Model minority myth (Asian-American Studies)

The model minority myth is a key concept of Asian-American Studies, and it concerns how East and South Asian Americans have been racialized as a successful "model minority" in the US, usually "backed up" with quantitative data on income, education, and profession. The model minority myth is doubly damaging, however, because it both erases Asian-Americans who do not fit the mold of model minority (particularly Southeast Asian Americans), and also acts as a bludgeon against black and Latinx populations in the US. As if to say "if Asian-Americans can over come racial difference, why can't you? So it must be an inherent defect of your race!"

East Asian-American masculinity, patriarchy, and gender (Gender and sexuality studies, Asian-American studies)

Masculinity studies are a growing subfield of gender and sexuality studies, and offers important insight into how men experience gender, patriarchy, and sexuality. Less studied, however, is East Asian-American masculinity. What are the ways in which dominant white masculinity affects the production of East Asian American masculinity and sexuality? And how does East Asian-American patriarchy and masculinity figure into gentrification and displacement, which are often discussed in terms of race and class, but rarely gender? My research would address these questions as a way into incorporating a critical gender and sexuality analysis of gentrification in LA Chinatown.

Racial capitalism and neoliberalism (Marx, Gramsci, Hall, Robinson)

Neoliberalism and capitalism are hot buzzwords in academia and, increasingly, policy circles. Critical understandings of neoliberalism as ideology and capitalism as a mode of production are important for addressing the structural aspects of gentrification and displacement. But racial capitalism, as formulated by Cedric Robinson, is a key concept that informs my research as well - that capitalism has been deeply infused with racialization and racism from its very origins.

Financialization, real estate, land use, housing (Raquel Rolnik)

Financialization in real estate is an important concept that helps me understand the deeper machinery behind gentrification and displacement through the creation of loans, investments, securities, and returns that necessitate displacing working class people of color from their homes.

Bureaucracy, law, and policy (Vismann, Hull)

Bureaucracy, law, and policy as analyzed in the legal anthropology literature are important concepts for my research because they point to how apparently-neutral processes are deeply embedded in the production of inequality and power. In gentrification, city planning and city policy are key points of intervention and of analysis because governance and state power are integral to the operations of capitalism.

<u>Urban planning</u>, governance (Ananya Roy, Valverde)

Urban planning and governance are forms of practice, analysis, and expertise that underpin so much of the debates over gentrification and displacement. Ananya Roy's work, which merges this expertise with critical theory, offers a great way to understand these governance practices of space in ways that articulate with critical theories of race, gender, and state power.

Geography, space, place (Ananya Roy)

The discipline of geography, which is fundamentally concerned with space and place, offers a lot of conceptual richness for my project. Ananya Roy's work, again, is a critical examination of how space and place are actively produced in ways that extend inequality and power, and the forms that resistance can take.

Displacement, gentrification (CCED)

Displacement and gentrification are core concepts that CCED works with, and I hope to use these concepts to anchor my research, writing, and theorizing. Displacement and gentrification is about more than the loss of a home or small business, but is about the active destruction of a community by wealthy capitalist interests to be replaced with a middle-class yuppie playground for investors.

PLAN OF WORK

My plan of work includes:

- Participant-observation for several years with tenant organizers. Since I am already a co-chair of the research committee and member of the steering committee, participation will involve keeping up with emails and text messages, attending working meetings virtually and in-person, planning and running research meetings with my co-chair, and attending and helping out at protests, celebrations, direct actions, marches, and any other events
- Interviews. I hope to conduct interviews over the course of several months with various actors involved in real estate politics in Chinatown. My work will be presented as the research project of a PhD student, to ensure neutrality of response and improve the odds of access to certain interlocutors. Semi-structured interviews will be structured around a core set of concerns and questions, and then will adapt per the interviewee's responses.
- Archival research. I have visited the Southern California Library three times, twice for school and once with CCED members. I hope to use this Library as a continuing resource. I may revisit on my own and do a deeper dig into SCL materials on housing in LA broadly, not just in Chinatown.
- Legal research. Since I have professional legal research background, and will be attending law school in Fall 2020 and will have access to legal research databases, I hope to leverage those resources for my PhD to learn more and produce knowledge about law and policy in housing. This will likely occur simultaneously with participant-observation.

This research will primarily take place in and around Los Angeles Chinatown, with possible additional fieldwork in Sacramento, California. This will an ethnographic research study involving long-term participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, archival research, legal research on relevant cases and statutes, and analysis of housing and real estate marketing and promotions materials. Participant-observation will not require any additional time from participants, as I will be joining them in activities they had already planned to undertake. Semi-structured interviews will take between 30 minutes and three hours, depending on the nature of the interview. Each participant will likely be interviewed 1-2 times. If a participant will be interviewed more than once, then there will likely be more than three months between interviews.

I chose the setting of Los Angeles Chinatown because it is one of the oldest and most enduring Chinatowns in the United States. It has undergone tremendous change in the last decade, including the construction of two massive market-rate housing developments and the proposed construction of many, many more luxury housing developments. The neighborhood also has one of the highest concentrations of affordable housing covenants in all of Los Angeles, making it a very interesting site for ethnographic research on housing in low-income communities of color, especially in a context of rapidly rising housing costs and gentrification across Southern California. I have attended and will attend rallies, protests, direct actions, and marches. I also attend meetings and workshops as the co-chair of the research committee.

CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The primary challenge and ethical consideration of my research will be navigating my positionality as engaged scholar. I do not hide my alliance with CCED as a co-chair of research committee and member of the steering committee, and as such, I am imbricated in local politics. The question becomes how to leverage the privilege of student status for research and CCED's work, while also fulfilling the academic requirements of the PhD program. How?? It is unclear.

Another key need is to make sure my research is accountable to the needs of my interlocutors. This is an ongoing process, but is made easier by my position as CCED research co-chair: in some ways, I can help control what counts as a research need! But I also listen to my fellow co-chairs about what they want to know as research driver - this gives me a close ear to the ground about CCED research needs.

If I do interview tenants undergoing displacement, I will need to find a way to do so that does not produce more trauma and pain. Eviction is already such a difficult process, and I do not want to make it worse with my prying questions. So how do I build rapport without creating an extractive and instrumentalized relationship? This is unclear. To minimize and prevent emotional distress during interviews, interviewees will be provided with a content warning before I ask questions about potentially emotionally and psychologically difficult subjects such as homelessness and evictions. If the interviewee indicates they would be uncomfortable with such a line of questioning, I will not pursue that line of questioning.

Finally, I need to consider what it would mean for me to live in Chinatown as an ethnographer, contributing as a gentrifier to the very problem I hope to study. Ironic, and everyone navigates it differently - how would I?

The possible benefits that participants may experience from the procedures described in this study may include learning more about the legal and social issues around housing in their neighborhood, whether they are tenants, landlords, real estate developers, business owners, or politicians.

VALIDITY AND EVALUATION

I will have my ideas and manuscript run past my interlocutors to see if they think it is an accurate assessment of the situation. I will video and audio record my talks and presentations, and also ask if that seems valid to my interlocutors.

I will consult with the people who gave me permission to collect data before I publish any research. I will do so in order to validate my analysis and ensure it fits with the interviewee's and/or participants' own understanding of their actions.

Overall research results will be shared with participants in the form of a presentation, video, article, and/or other multimedia formats.

PREPARATION AND WORK THUS FAR

I have been working with tenant organizers in LA Chinatown as a research committee co-chair since November 2018. I have attended a weeklong Housing Justice in Unequal Cities, hosted by UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, in August 2019. I completed a summer internship at the Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles in summer 2019, where I designed and implemented an educational interactive for K-12 students based on archaeological remains of historic Chinatown. Therefore, I have a grasp of the neighborhood institutional politics, the broader structural elements of dispossession in Los Angeles, and the historical grounding of the neighborhood and its specificity to conduct a good ethnographic study.

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DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN

I will anonymize sensitive data and make it available upon request. However, non-sensitive data will be made available online for public open access.

To protect confidentiality, all identifiable participant data will be kept on an encrypted hard drive in a locked room. Audio interviews and photographs with identifiable participants taken on a cell phone or DSLR camera will be transferred to an encrypted laptop computer within 72 hours of their capture, and then deleted off the cell phone and DSLR camera.

Research data will need to be maintained on the following portable device(s) for the following reason(s): Audio interviews will be recorded on a passcode protected smartphone using the Voice Memo software for minimal intrusiveness and convenience. Photographs will be taken either on a smartphone (for minimal intrusiveness and convenience) or a DSLR camera (for maximum quality). Any audio interviews or photographs taken with a smartphone or DSLR camera will be transferred to an encrypted laptop computer within 72 hours of their capture, and then deleted off the cell phone and DSLR camera.

Subject identifiable photographs will be maintained indefinitely as part of potential publication and research dissemination; faces and other identifying information will be appropriately obscured if such photographs are published and shared.

Audio or video recordings destroyed upon completion of the study.

In the section for research questions, articulate both theoretical and empirical questions for your overall project. / In the section for a literature review, describe two to four topical literatures that you will build on and contribute to through this research. See articles in <u>Annual Review of Anthropology</u> for ideas. / In the methods section, describe what you will do, where and with whom -- and the data and insight these activities will produce. / In the section for theoretical frames, describe the basic theoretical insights that you can mobilize in your study design, data collection, analysis, and writing. You could mobilize understanding of "the subaltern," for example, or Foucaultian ideas about discourse and subject formation. This can be a long list with very cursory descriptions. Note that this section is not usually included in a proposal submitted to funders -- but should be part of your thinking and dialogue with collaborators