



**Luis Escobedo**

## **A Story of Racial Violence in Global Warsaw**

Despite my -5 prescription glasses, I have never been short-sighted in the face of racism. This is not because I might be enlightened. I just had no chance. The fact is that a pair of eyes is no requirement to understand it. Racism first hurts the heart, the mind, one's life and experience.

I comfortably wear my glasses at home but, I cannot recall the last time I wore them comfortably and regularly on the street. Maybe as a teenager, on my way to school and back, while carrying a backpack full of textbooks, notebooks, and pens, and wearing a school uniform on my daily walk along one of Trujillo's longest avenues. No watch, bracelet, or necklace, short hair, nothing that could make me stand out. As a teenager in the late 1990s, I felt that I was more or less in control when navigating the very same city where my parents had escaped carjacking, a close friend had survived a stabbing of his femoral artery, some schoolmates and friends had been kidnapped and others violently assaulted, and where, by the age of 17, I had been intercepted at knifepoint more than once. And yet, while living there I often wore glasses, albeit simple ones that wouldn't have attracted anyone's attention.

Ten years later, wearing my glasses on the street was no longer an option. Neither were untied shoelaces – although even today I still love what that looks like on high-tops. I was living in Warsaw by then. Already an adult in my late 20s, with a decade of migration experience in three other contexts in Central and North America and Europe behind me, I felt that I could dress any way I wanted and be whoever I wanted to be. Bracelets, necklaces, long black wavy hair. My rock band played on large stages and on the radio. I occasionally played rugby and, on the weekends, regularly spent long nights with friends and acquaintances at parks, pubs, clubs, and on the streets. I was doing a PhD on racism in Peru and co-leading two initiatives dealing with racism and other migration issues in Poland, while working as a teacher, translator, and day labourer. In comparison to my teenage years, I felt strangely well, free: I didn't have much money, I was sleeping poorly and feeling a bit lonely, but I was engaged in activities I considered to be significant, some urgent. On the flipside, however, I felt that I had to always be prepared – contact lenses on, so that my glasses couldn't fall or break, and shoes well tied, so that I could move without tripping – before taking any bus, tram, or train, walking down a particular street, or in and out of a club.

Presently, I can recall having endured six or seven physical racist and xenophobic attacks during my time in Poland. Had I not been prepared when they took place, I would have lost not one but all of them. I cannot even imagine what it would have been like to defend myself with blurred vision, with a shoe missing, or, like the one time I did lose, without my ID and health insurance card on me. Yes, that one night changed my life. But racism first hurts the heart. And the mind.



That night, it was not my dislocated arm that hurt the most. I felt guilty for ruining the night of the five or so people that I had just confronted. Moreover, I felt that at the age of 30, I had once again lost control of my own life. I felt humiliated and embarrassed. I had had the choice to not engage with such behaviour and I had not taken it. I felt like an unworthy immigrant, an unworthy Peruvian, an unworthy relative and friend, and an unworthy human being, for all of which the punishment seemed well deserved. There was even a moment in which I came to question whether the whole incident had happened at all. Those who have gone through something similar will understand that racism operates in this way – it is internalised, and it becomes self-destructive.

It is internalised in the inability to forgive myself for having overpowered the two neighbours that had attacked a friend of mine in the street, the guilt for which made me write them a letter of apology, despite my actions having been ones of self-defence. It is self-destructive in the way it made me walk up to two drunk men

verbally harassing two women on a night bus and hand them an empty bottle, daring them to prove their bravery and implicit manhood by smashing it on my head. Having scared the other passengers on the bus, my unusual performance made me feel ashamed of myself, even though I was the only one who stood up to the two men and had managed to stop them from continuing to hurl sexual and racist offenses at others.

Thus, racism first hurts the heart, and the mind. It does not need to get physical. It can be enacted in the gazes and habits of the photographers, media institutions, and media consumers, like when they turned former Prime Minister Donald Tusk's 2008 diplomatic visit to Peru into a mockery, strengthening a dominant discourse where international relations between a then new EU member state like Poland, and a territory often imagined as 'remote' and 'backwards' like Peru were not seen as meaningful. Racism is embodied in the indifference and insensitivity of those witnessing a racist incident, such as a man spitting on me, reciting a xenophobic speech loudly, and threatening to stab me on a metro car back in 2010. I was more hurt by those desperately fleeing the metro, and leaving me alone with my main offender, than by him. Racism is given strength in the more covert beliefs and practices of those like the producers and consumers of the 2012 TV commercial for a popular car brand, for which I was cast, along with a group of other Peruvian, Bolivian, and Malaysian men, to represent what I would later perceive as a racist interpretation of Mayan people. The unequal interaction involved forms of violence, control, and punishment, resulting in the manufacturing of a romanticized yet stigmatized image of the non-Western Other in comparison to that of 'we, the civilized Poles', about which I have also written [elsewhere](#). Racism is perpetuated and continues to flourish in its widespread denial. It is not, however, solely in Polish hands, even in Poland.

The spaces in which I participated regularly, like the rugby club where I occasionally played, the formal and informal spaces shared by Peruvians and Latin Americans, as well as those facilitated by local institutions articulating diversity, equality, and integration narratives, constituted transnational spaces that reproduced in Warsaw the global structure of unequal, or asymmetrical, relations of power. Very specific, but subtly articulated, economic, legal, cultural (in fact racial), linguistic, and sexual criteria existed within these spaces to differentiate the 'expats' from the rest. Political, economic, racial, and gender inequalities and conflicts pervading Peruvian society back home played out in the relations between Poland-based Peruvians, often, ironically, because of the interference of Peruvian diplomats. The situation was similar between and within other groups of Latin Americans, despite a general discourse of regional unity and migrant identification. As for the institutions dealing with diversity, equality, and integration such as some organisations defending migrant rights or anti-racist agendas, they regularly engaged in the essentialisation, and exoticisation of migrants, while commodifying their lives, experiences, and stories, and distinguishing them in terms of their worthiness. But this sort of experiences with racism begins long before I moved to Poland.

Before relocating to Warsaw, I lived in Bremen, Germany, between 2001 and 2007. The unequal, or asymmetric, relations that took place on the campus of the allegedly prestigious private university I attended, among and within the student body, staff members, and the administration, were enacted in the institution's conservative humanism, developmental idealism, multiculturalist discourse, and Western gaze. In this environment students coded as non-white and 'exotic', like me, would be invited to take centre stage in visual promotional material aimed at highlighting the internationality of the university. In the same environment, racist practices between co-nationals and co-regionals, including racist speech in languages other than English and German, were not uncommon. Yet, they were not addressed, based on the assumption that this kind of behaviour simply could not be taking place within a space that had 'internationality' at the core of its publicity campaigns. Adding to the institution's lack of acknowledgement of various manifestations of racism was the idea that all students had purportedly been given equal opportunities, in part by their acceptance and attendance, often on scholarship, at this university, thus ignoring the diverging ways in which their lives and experiences had been shaped prior to beginning their university studies.

Moving off campus upon graduation made these deep structural issues more visible to me, as I was now categorised as a non-white immigrant (and thus potential criminal). Stepping outside of the campus bubble and entering the so-called real world brought me face to face with practices such as the denial of entry to public and private spaces (for example, clubs), surveillances in these places whenever I was admitted, and police questioning, among many others. Out there, classification, discrimination, exclusion, surveillance, punishment, and control, were straightforward and primarily, though not solely, based on racial and national categories. On campus I had

not been able to put my feeling of unease into words, perhaps because of the pervasive discourse of internationality, diversity, tolerance, and acceptance that veiled and excused these very same practices. Off campus, however, it was all clear. It is in this second half of my stay in Germany that I got the wounds I expected to heal in Poland.

Possibly the way I reacted to racial categorisation in Warsaw would have been different if the incidents I was confronted with in this city did not come on the back of my experiences in Bremen. Racism hurts one's life and experience. Or better said, racial categorisation, and for that matter all social categorisation, and the spaces where social relations play out on a racial dimension, continuously shape us, our lives, our experiences, and the world around us. The high incidence of violent crime in Trujillo, Peru, once made me dress, walk, talk, behave in a particular way. Similarly, racial spaces around the world, including Trujillo, Falmouth, Bremen, Warsaw, Queretaro, Bloemfontein, and Bucharest, places where I have been rooted for longer than a year, as well as those I haven't mentioned but where I spent under twelve months, have all left their imprint on who I presently am. Just as I still refuse to wear a watch when walking on the street, I still think twice before approaching the entrance of a club, and I wear my contact lenses, tie my shoes well, and put my hair in a bun when leaving the house. I still do all of these things despite a significant change in my circumstances towards the positive. The difference now, however, is that I no longer do these things from a place of anger or fear, but by habit. Similarly, I am not afraid of the potential reactions those locals and foreigners subjected to the dominant narrative of racism denialism in Peru, the USA, Germany, Poland, Mexico, South Africa, Romania or anywhere else where I have lived, may have to this short account of my personal experiences with racism.



*Playing with my former rock band in 2010. One of the best ways to address racist violence during my time in Warsaw was through music. Photo by Jan Jaczewski*

Racism has undeniably hurt my life. But it has also structured it in ways that are useful for those around me and for future generations. I believe that being in Warsaw in that moment of my life, gave me the unique opportunity to mature faster than I would have done elsewhere. There I felt free although I had arrived voiceless, fearful, and angry from my previous location. That one night in 2012, when I woke up with a dislocated shoulder and questioning what had really happened, confirmed that I had not been choosing the right way to fight. Today, I am fully dedicated to the employment of research, teaching, and myriad academic and social engagements to contribute to the struggle against racism and xenophobia worldwide. I am also building a family and friendships within which it is natural to discuss these issues in our daily conversations. This is the way I have chosen to fight today, first for my loved ones and the future generations, and, if I choose to do so, with my glasses on.

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### **Author's short bio:**

[Luis Escobedo](#) is a postdoctoral research fellow at the [Unit for Institutional Change and Social Justice](#), University of the Free State, South Africa. He is the co-editor and co-author of [Migrants, Thinkers, Storytellers: Negotiating Meaning and Making Life in Bloemfontein, South Africa](#) (HSRC Press, 2021).