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Ridazz, Wrenches, and Wonks: A Revolution on Two Wheels Rolls Into Los Angeles

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Ridazz, Wrenches, & Wonks:
A Revolution on Two Wheels Rolls Into Los Angeles

By

Donald P. Strauss, M.F.A.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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at

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(2015)



Department of Environmental Studies

Dissertation Signature Page

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A Revolution on Two Wheels Rolls Into Los Angeles

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Dedication

For Morgan, Lily, Ursula, and Zac—four people who have become, before my very eyes, so much more than just my children. And for all those who ride and dream of just and vital urban ecosystems...

1



Figure 1. Roadblock,
http://www.midnightridazz.com/images/gallery/large/wpP1020033_1183496342.jpg.

¹ Roadblock, *wpP1020033_1183496342.jpg* (JPEG Image, 700 × 525 Pixels) - Scaled (0%), accessed July 21, 2012,
http://www.midnightridazz.com/images/gallery/large/wpP1020033_1183496342.jpg.Ibid.

Acknowledgements

I beg for forgiveness in advance, if my memory fails me to the extent that I leave anyone out who has made a contribution, big or small, to this work. The members of my committee, Chair, Joy Ackerman, PhD, Mitchell Thomashow, EdD, and Jenny Price, PhD, have shaped this work through their insights, guidance, super-human patience, and collective, implied insistence that I not just get it done, but that I get it right. Tex Boggs, PhD, President of Antioch University Los Angeles, has been perhaps the greatest and most important mentor I have ever had. My solemn promise to him that I would complete this work and earn my degree left me with two choices: the betrayal of a friend, mentor, and colleague for whom I have only the deepest love and respect or the completion of a journey that has opened endless doors to an ever-growing sense of meaning and purpose in the work I do and the life I live. Andrea Richards, PhD, set the bar of friendship and collegiality at new heights through every leg of this journey. I could write a book-length description of her support from the first mention I made of an interest in returning to school, one last time, through a ten-and-a-half-year process that included six years of research and writing and the completion of this work. It would be a book filled with an unimaginable volume of acts of human kindness. My colleagues in the Urban Sustainability Master of Arts program at Antioch University Los Angeles, Gilda Haas, Core Faculty; Jane Paul, Teaching Faculty; and Program Coordinators, Tara Aesquivil, Sarah Brin, and Catherine M. McDonald have tended the fires admirably while I was frequently buried in this work. My friend and colleague, Rowland Russell, PhD, recruited me into the ES PhD program at Antioch University New England

and provided me with so much more than a couch during dozens of trips to Keene, New Hampshire. We walked, we talked, we commiserated, we dined, we drank, we bore witness for each other through any number of trying life-cycle events. It was Rowland who virtually strong-armed me into writing the “Night Ridazz” section in Chapter Two. Beth Kaplin, PhD, Jim Jordan, PhD, and Tom Wessels, MA accompanied my cohort, during our first intensive, on three hikes up Gap Mountain. On those hikes and subsequently in the classroom, each, in her/his own way, forever changed the way I looked at landscape/place. In doing so, each made contributions to this work that I can only describe as *sine qua non*. Seth Fisher, MFA provided me with a fresh set of eyes and some brilliant insights during the endgame when my own vision had gone a bit blurry. Cheryl Purdue, PhD listened carefully, reflected back, guided, and encouraged me every step of the way—well beyond the time frame of our weekly sessions. My children, to whom this work is dedicated, and their partners provided me with unconditional love and support, without which I could not have possibly arrived at this moment. To all of the aforementioned and those I have inadvertently omitted, thank you so much for your patience and support. I truly hope the energies you have given me throughout this process will return to you many times over.

Abstract

How can we make cities more livable? Los Angeles, in particular, is a notably challenging place to live. For many, it is hard to see Los Angeles—city or county—as anything other than a huge, sprawling, and some would say placeless place. Los Angeles is known by many as the place that tore up more than 1,000 miles of streetcar lines to make way for millions of cars and hundreds of miles of freeways. Because of this, Los Angeles is also known for its poor air quality and jammed freeways. Those who live in Los Angeles know that it can be a very real challenge to get around. But Los Angeles is also a city of possibilities. It is one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. It is mostly flat. It seldom rains. Surprisingly, Los Angeles has an alternative bike culture that has emerged and rapidly matured over the last nineteen years. It has gone from a rowdy and radical culture of bike messengers gathering for night rides to a substantial and growing community of riders, do-it-yourself bike mechanics, and homegrown transportation activists and advocates who have influenced the way bikes and riders are perceived and even how regional transportation policy is developed and implemented. How and why has that come to pass? In answering these questions, this dissertation seeks to describe the recent history of bike culture in Los Angeles through the eyes of its originators and ongoing participants. This is a narrative account of the recent past and the present in Los Angeles, California, in which a collection of bicycle-related phenomena appear to be transforming the land in ways that many might agree constitute a form of revitalization. The electronic version of this Dissertation is at Ohiolink ETD Center, <http://etd.ohiolink.edu> and AURA, <http://aura.antioch.edu/>. An MP4 video introduction by the author accompanies this document.

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Chapter One

Changes on an Urban Landscape²

The story that will unfold from the pages ahead is about Los Angeles—a city famous for its freeways, sprawl, traffic, and smog—and the improbable power, size, and intensity of the bicycle culture that has emerged from its streets. This is also a story about change—change in the observer, change in the thing observed, change in the place where the observed, the observer, and the place itself interact.

Before offering arguments in support of this work and its potential value, I want to share a story I heard many times growing up in Los Angeles from friends whose parents came from Mexico. They told the story of a cornfield that turned into a volcano, the story of Parícutin. In 1943 in the State of Michoacán, Mexico, Dionisio and Paula Pulido watched as a huge crack opened up in their cornfield. Within a week that crack produced a cinder cone over five stories tall. Parícutin must have been a volcanologist's dream of a lifetime. From 1943–1952, it grew to just over 1,300 feet in elevation and covered just under 10 mi².³

Over the last several years, as I myself have transformed from a stereotypical bike-phobic Angeleno into an active participant in the emergent, local bike culture, I have often thought that I felt like those volcanologists and

² Gratitude to William Cronon.

William Cronon, *Changes in the Land : Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

³ James F Luhr, Tom Simkin, and Smithsonian Institution, *Parícutin: The Volcano Born in a Mexican Cornfield* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Geoscience Press, 1993).

farmers must have in 1943. I have had the rare privilege of watching a movement erupt from the ground of my city and, the even rarer privilege, of being a part of it. Its movement was fast and slow, all at the same time. It had shiny lights and wore colorful eccentric costumes. It provided inclusive if sometimes loud opportunities to socialize and experience community. It provided education to anyone who showed up. Occasionally it fed people. It frequently performed community service. It did that on two wheels powered by human energy. It did even more than that, and it still does. I didn't see all of this at the outset. In fact, when I first came upon it, I hardly thought about it in the kinds of terms I ordinarily would as an academic, activist, and advocate for urban sustainability. I thought it nothing more than an exciting and amusing thing to muck around in. It was only later that the social, political, cultural, and environmental implications came into clear focus.

What do I mean by "bike culture?" Pretend, if you will for a moment, that you are looking at a bank of monitors linked to security cameras. You are looking at three scenes unfolding simultaneously. The bank of monitors labeled "Ridazz" reveals hundreds and, sometimes, thousands of people on bikes at night, sometimes, but not always, on a Friday or Saturday night. A considerable number of these ridazz are between the ages of 18 and 30. Often a number of them are wearing costumes. Sometimes the average blood alcohol levels across all ridazz may be approaching the legal limits. They are not out there riding in the middle of nowhere. They are riding on the streets of Los Angeles, California, a city that sees millions of automobile trips per day. Frequently, these ridazz "cork" intersections to let hundreds or thousands pass, while motorists

wait—often not so patiently. Occasionally, unfriendly words will pass from motorists to cyclists and vice versa. More often than these riders would like, the police appear. They have been known to issue tickets, make arrests, and knock riders off bikes by clipping them with their patrol cars.

Monitor two is labeled “Wrenches” and places you in a number of indoor and outdoor spaces. You see massive quantities of tools, bike parts, and bicycles in various states of repair. In these spaces, volunteers and customers equipped with varying levels of bike repair skills “turn wrenches” or just plain “wrench” on bikes. If you watch long enough, you will see that these citizens are working together toward two very specific ends: teaching how to repair and maintain bikes and creating sound and functioning bikes.

The last bank of monitors is labeled “Wonks.” You are looking in on city council chambers, mayoral and police advisory committees, whiskey bars, brew pubs, and other rooms where policy is under discussion and sometimes under construction. These rooms have been known to be hot and chilly all at once. The cast of characters on these monitors comes primarily, but not exclusively, from the other two banks of monitors. Some clean up “real good,” while others are a bit on the rough-shod end of things. Some are diplomatic while others could more properly be described as fractious.

What you have seen briefly on these three banks of monitors is, in thumbnail, the urban bike culture I have seen on the streets of Los Angeles. From the moment I encountered the emergence of an urban bike culture in Los Angeles, I found it so compelling, I could not resist joining in. My immersion forced me to confront and understand things I might not have ever confronted or

otherwise understood. It afforded me an experience of place I could not have experienced from a car. My immersion led me—seduced me, really, to develop mechanical skills when I thought I had no such aptitude. It put me in the presence of others who shared that same shattering of similar self-estimations, whether they were about riding a bike on a city street, riding a bike on a city street in the middle of the night, riding a bike on a crowded freeway at rush hour, changing a flat tire on a bicycle wheel, diagnosing a mechanical problem, working together to wrench a bike back together, or joining and forming interconnected communities of riders hell-bent on claiming their rights to commute and recreate on the streets of the place where we live our lives. It led me to ask questions about how bike culture was changing what it meant to be an Angeleno.

This inquiry brought my interests in my city as a personal place, in cities as ecosystems, and in the sustainability of cities into a kind of focused intersection. As I rode a bicycle in and out of small pockets of cool and warm air, through multiple microclimates, up and down varying grades, and along flat city streets in the middle of the night, I experienced this intersection firsthand in a way that I'd only before understood theoretically.

What's more, I was seeing never-seen-in-Los Angeles phenomena, shortly after or as they were emerging. Night rides involving thousands of cyclists, for example, were nonexistent in Los Angeles until 1997. Bike lanes, which had routinely been laughed out of transportation and planning departments, began to appear in various forms and in the most unlikely places on a weekly basis: big wide green lanes in the middle of downtown Los Angeles; a ten-mile bike lane going east and west from the beach at Venice to the heart of downtown; sharrows

and share-the-road signs with bike graphics; miles of Los Angeles streets closed to automobile traffic on the occasional Sunday so that cyclists, pedestrians, skaters, and others could enjoy the benefits of active transportation. Los Angeles elected a mayor—no, actually three mayors in a row over a period of twelve years—who rode, talked about, and advocated for bikes and bike infrastructure. Los Angeles had never had a comprehensive bike master plan. At present, the greater Los Angeles region has all of these things with more on the way.

It occurred to me, as I rode on these Los Angeles night streets—sometimes with thousands of people and sometimes riding alone—that there might be a connection between the presence of these ridazz, wrenches, and wonks and these tremendous changes in Los Angeles itself. A torrent of questions emerged that, in retrospect, have spun themselves into three key questions:

- How has this bike culture changed the transportation and cultural systems of Los Angeles?
- Has urban bike culture had any significant effect on making Los Angeles a more sustainable and livable place, and, if so, how has it done this?
- What does this teach us about how cities can be sustainable places?

Urban Sustainability

These questions about bike culture and its possible effects on Los Angeles grew out of a broader question about cities and their potential to ameliorate rather than exacerbate the processes of anthropogenic, global, environmental change. To get at this and a host of related questions, I took on the project of developing an advanced degree program in Urban Sustainability at Antioch

University Los Angeles. This work, which began in parallel to my work on this dissertation, provided me with a crucial frame that would ultimately serve as the scaffolding for both projects. It has immersed me in a nonstop critical examination of the sustainability of cities, which has, in turn, provided me with the perfect crucible in which to formulate questions about the role urban bike culture might play in the making of more livable and sustainable urban places.

When I began collaborating with others on the development of the Urban Sustainability Master of Arts (USMA) program in late 2007, no such degree program existed in higher education. There were a handful of sustainability programs and a growing population of programs that included sustainability in their titles, but there were none that focused exclusively on the concept as it might be explored in urban systems. Despite, or perhaps because of my serious reservations about the highly freighted term *sustainability*, I named the program in order to draw a line in the sands of the received definitions of sustainability—many of which derived from a United Nations document titled “Our Common Future.”⁴ My concern is not so much with the document itself as it is with the interpretations of it that serve to perpetuate rather than counteract, ameliorate, neutralize, and erase the often devastating effects of the powerful forces of globalization, hyper-industrialization, neoliberalism, faux free-market capitalism, faux democracy, and colonialism as they are almost universally made manifest at the large, urban scale throughout the world.

⁴ Gro Harlem Brundlandt and World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, 1st Edition edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

The U.N. report spawned such catch phrases as “people, profit, planet,” which is precisely what I have wanted to take on as I have built an ever-evolving description of what I think of as urban sustainability and its function as a practice-based discipline. People, in the form of anthropocentrism and profit as the centerpiece of a capitalist economic system, are the problem in my urban sustainability universe. The planet and all of its living and nonliving systems serve as our hosts and should be afforded respect and gratitude in that universe.

Urban sustainability, as I define it, is a values-based mash up of radical urban planning and resilient community development in which strong, localized, equitably practiced democracy results in just economies and equitable access to all urban ecosystem services. The urban bike culture that I have observed and participated in frequently exhibited these values and practices. The night ride is a momentary re-appropriation of public space in which anyone may participate. The wrenching co-op is a volunteer-run, local business that provides low-cost training in bike repair and doubles as a community gathering space. Participants and members are self-selecting. Volunteer activists and advocates do what they do with the aim of growing the cycling population—arguably a step in the direction of healthy, resilient communities. In fact, it may well have been my discovery and observations of values and practices like these in urban bike culture that helped to shape my definition of urban sustainability.

The bicycle is not a one-size-fits-all solution to all of our extractive and destructive habits, but an image of cities where bicycles are the dominant transportation mode can certainly serve as an equally potent symbol of a civilization on the mend. I will argue that bike culture is more than just a

symbolic representation of eco-friendly citizenship. Urban bike culture in Los Angeles offers a window through which we can examine a single emergent phenomenon actively transforming this vast urban region into a more sustainable place. That is why I firmly believe this is a tale worth the telling.

(Eco) Systems as Metaphor

To be fair to Gro Harlem Brundtland and the United Nations, I should acknowledge that “ecology, economy, and equity” also emerged in the wake of “Our Common Future” as a more authentically sustainable, if imperfect, triad of ideas to be considered as we reconsider our extractive and waste-filled ways. In thinking about bicycles and cities, the consideration of ecosystems and systems in general has played an important role. I do not purport to be an ecologist or an expert in the field of systems thinking, but I have found a number of terms from both disciplines that have served my more metaphorically inclined thinking and analysis as they relate to urban bike culture in Los Angeles. I seek to do these terms justice in my use of them as metaphors, but I would also remind the more scientifically inclined reader that words such as *disturbance*, *scale*, *flow*, *patch*, *nested niche*, and many more have had long lives in language that precede their deployments in scientific disciplines.

When I have considered various aspects of night rides, seeing them as systems unto themselves that move (or flow) through and across other systems/landscapes has helped me to understand a number of things about some of the ways we inhabit and relate to place. Donella Meadows’ *Thinking in Systems* was particularly influential in this regard:

A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something. If you look at that definition closely for a minute, you can see that a system must consist of three kinds of things: *elements*, *interconnectedness*, and a *function* or *purpose* [. . .]. A school is a system. So is a city, and a factory, and a corporation, and a national economy. An animal is a system. A tree is a system, and a forest is a system that encompasses systems of trees and animals. The earth is a system[. . .]. Systems can be imbedded in systems, which are imbedded in yet other systems.⁵

The culture I encountered and observed is a system that contains other systems and is nested inside others. When system *ridazz* encounters system *law enforcement*, a set of relationships emerges. Those that persist become their own systems. When system *wonk* emerges from system *ridazz* and encounters system *City Hall*, a feedback loop is set in motion that can produce long or short-term ramifications in the form of policy change and/or infrastructure development. My frequent returns to systems thinking to understand how change plays itself out in a larger urban system sometimes appears in the foreground in the form of language and is always part of the ductwork and wiring behind the walls of the whole work.

How I think about Los Angeles has also been deeply influenced by the concept of *hierarchical patch dynamics* as articulated by landscape ecologist

⁵ Donella H Meadows and Diana Wright, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Pub., 2008), 11–12.

Jinaguo Wu and zoologist Orié Loucks.⁶ I have found the late twentieth century movement toward seeing landscapes and other systems as inherently dynamic and chaotic, and made up of arrangements of patches and the edges⁷ profoundly useful as a storehouse of vocabulary that fuels much of the metaphorical representation I engage in and the discussion of urban bike culture.

Wu and Loucks' presentation of concepts such as "nested hierarchies of patch mosaics, ecosystem dynamics as a composite of patch changes in time and space, [and] scale perspective⁸ add another layer of complexity that allowed me to soften the boundaries between wonks and city hall and ridazz and law enforcement. The idea of varied temporal and spatial scales aided my thinking about the differences between rides with twenty people that lasted two or three hours and covered 20 miles and rides with thousands of people that went all night and traveled only 8 or 10 miles. When looking at the proliferation of wrenching cooperatives over a five-year period, consideration of temporal and spatial concerns aided me in determining where in the system these cooperatives were and were not located and assessing who did and did not have access to

⁶ Jianguo Wu and Orié Loucks, "From Balance of Nature to Hierarchical Patch Dynamics: A Paradigm Shift in Ecology," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 70, no. 4 (1995): 439.

⁷ Steward T Pickett and White, *The Ecology of Natural Disturbance and Patch Dynamics* (Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1985).

⁸ Jianguo Wu and Orié Loucks, "From Balance of Nature to Hierarchical Patch Dynamics: A Paradigm Shift in Ecology," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 70, no. 4 (1995): 439.

them, which led to thinking about whether or not there were barriers to access and inequities in the system that would need to be called out.

The core of this dissertation is divided into three descriptive essays, each dedicated to a distinct subset of the bike culture that represents my experience with the discreet and interpenetrating domains of urban bike culture in Los Angeles. Each essay seeks to answer the questions of how this bike culture has changed the transportation and cultural systems of Los Angeles, if urban bike culture has had any significant effect on making Los Angeles a more sustainable and livable place, and what this might teach us about how cities can be sustainable places?

My hope is that by cycling three times through three worlds that intersect like three circles of a Venn diagram, you will see what I saw: a new and exciting collection of phenomena that appeared to have lifted up a small corner of the most auto-mobile-dependent, urban region on the planet; phenomena of *ridazz*, *wrenches*, and *wonks*, that have erupted from the ground and onto the streets in ways that could not have been predicted; a movement that operates mostly outside of traditional economies and inside traditional politics and policymaking with outsider perspectives and tactics; a sometimes quiet and sometimes not so quiet attempt at making the region a more livable and sustainable place.

The first of these essays looks into the phenomenon of group rides, mostly occurring at night, and the culture of *ridazz* who populate, inhabit, produce, and perform the rides. The second piece examines *wrenches* and the do-it-yourself bicycle repair cooperatives, or “wrenching co-ops” they have founded, operated,

and continue to operate. The third piece is a quasi-taxonomic narrative of a cast of characters I refer to as *wonks*. These are the originators, the organizers, the early adopters, the activists, the bloggers and their various organizations situated inside Los Angeles urban bike culture. Taken as a whole, these three worlds, with the ridazz as their bellwether, make up a formidable triptych of change on a near horizon that is worthy of our attention.

This is a place-based narrative of personal experience.⁹ It is also a narrative about change. Though I will surely drift in and out of the story, my goal is to provide some greater understanding of three parts of the larger whole that is urban bike culture in Los Angeles. In doing this, I will make a case for the appearance of a new horizon in transportation, culture, and concept of a sustainable urban place. This account is constructed largely from several forms of my own participation in actions that ranged from the overtly political to the purely educative. My observation was facilitated through active and sincere interest and engagement. My understanding was fed by participation in collaborative actions aimed at making change at multiple levels from the individual, to the community, to the region, and beyond. Advocacy for change was sine qua non to this project. Put another way, from the moment I clearly understood what I was looking at, and what I was participating in, I had and have every intention of seizing the opportunity to be an agent of change.

⁹ I am using this designation in favor of the more commonly used term “memoir.”

In addition to my own participation in and observations of the three worlds of bike culture—night rides, repair cooperatives, and transportation advocacy and activism—local and, to some extent, national print and online journalism focused on these phenomena, along with many of the key actors, served as corroborating primary source material.¹⁰ Though I will cite this material in the following chapters, I will focus on it and discuss it more directly in Chapter Four where I will let the players themselves do more of the talking through the various media channels they adopted as part of their strategy to elevate commuters, recreational cyclists, and ridazz into a more just and equitable place on the Los Angeles landscape—particularly on its roads.

Before I move on to the genesis of this work, the reasons why it matters, and how I went about it, I want to place this work in its interdisciplinary context. My thinking about urban sustainability has been shaped by multiple disciplines and practices, and while this work may fit into an emerging literature in that field, it also draws on a handful of other literatures relevant to this account of urban bike culture.

Thinking About the Land Beneath the Pavement

Like all robust ecosystems, my critical stance is a mosaic of environmental, ecological, and eco-hyphenated perspectives. If the narrative of personal experience is the larger biome of this work, its patches are place-based literature, with the literature of Los Angeles as its subset, the small-but-growing literature

¹⁰ These include print and online editions of Los Angeles Times, LA Weekly, Streetsblog, New York Times, Los Angeles Magazine, American Bicyclist, Bicycle Times, and Momentum Magazine, among others.

of urban bike culture, and an understory composed of ecological theory, environmental history, and eco-cultural criticism. I want to spend some time with a key example or two from some of the aforementioned, in the hopes that I can provide a kind of topographical map of the terrain of my thoughts, observations, and conclusions on the subject of bike culture in Los Angeles and its effects on urban space.

Sometime in Y2K¹¹, long before I happened upon the emerging bike culture in Los Angeles, I came upon two collections of essays that would forever change my relationship with place, in general, and with Los Angeles, in particular: *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon,¹² and Jenny Price's *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*.¹³ *Uncommon Ground* includes Cronon's essay, "The Trouble With Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,"¹⁴ in which he argues for a reconsideration of the ways in which we view and value place through an examination of the human relationship with wilderness. Cronon argues that our constructed and romanticized notions of wilderness fuel a devaluation of places that are not wilderness, for example, cities, where most of us live. By holding on

¹¹ 2000, CE

¹² William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground : Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995).

¹³ Jenny Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999).

¹⁴ William Cronon, "William Cronon - The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," n.d., accessed November 13, 2009.

to this duality, we necessarily place wilderness and not wilderness into an uncalled for hierarchy of value. As I reflected on my experiences in L.A. urban bike culture, I returned constantly to the image of a devalued place. Even among cyclists, some of whom routinely load up their cars with mountain bikes and head for wilderness areas, and some of whom leave trash in supermarket parking lots during large-scale night rides, the articulation of Cronon's point is loud, clear, and dualistic—hence, my own attraction to urban ridazz and their culture where any evidence of such a devaluation is tempered by an overt celebration of urban space as a kind of wilderness unto itself.

The second collection of essays, *Flight Maps*, played a dual role in that it included five mind-bending meditations where plastic pink flamingos, women's hats, the life and times of the passenger pigeon, 1990s primetime, network television, and The Nature Company serve as unexpected, but dead-accurate windows into the human relationship with nature as “A Place Apart” and “The Real World.”¹⁵ In this complex set of human culture/nature relationships, cities are explicitly excluded as not-nature or “anti-nature,” while things that, by this same logic should be categorized as not-nature, for example, cars, are excused when they transport us on not-nature roads, to “The Real World,” for example, forests, lakes, mountains, etc. This is all fairly standard fare in primetime television advertising.

¹⁵ Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*, New edition (Basic Books, 2000).

Flight Maps turned out to be a gateway to Jenny Price's 2006 essay titled, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L. A.," a two part essay that had evolved from a talk I heard Price give about the Los Angeles River at Antioch University Los Angeles in 2002. In that essay, Price follows her own rules as set down in *Flight Maps* by circling back to her sturdy descriptions and arguments about the ways in which we depict and distort nature and how these depictions demonstrate how artfully disconnected we are from "Places Apart" and "The Real World." In "Thirteen Ways," Price uses a personal account involving her parked car and a note on its windshield from a person whose car had collided with her own. The note was written on a cash-register receipt from a store called "Skin Market," which sold, as one might hope, skin care products. The product listed on the receipt was something called "Mango Body Whip," which set Price off on a brief meander to consider the origins and travels all of its component parts.¹⁶ Against the backdrop of Los Angeles—a place that has experienced more lives than most cats—deconstructed Mango Body Whip proved to be the perfect standard bearer for extracted "nature" from "The Real World" transported to a place—L.A.—as somehow not real and not nature.

Finally, it was Price's suggestion that, "L. A. has become the finest place in America to think and write about nature"¹⁷ that caused me to sign enlistment papers for the City as Nature brigade. Her argument included the following:

¹⁶ Jenny Price, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A. Part One: The First Six Ways and a Trip to the River," *The Believer* 4, no. 3 (April 6, 2006): 3–4 – 14.

¹⁷ Jenny Price, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A. Part One: The First Six Ways and a Trip to the River," *The Believer* 4, no. 3 (April 6, 2006): 6.

I live in a Valhalla for wealth and consumerism. The nearly incomprehensible quantity of people's connections to nature in L. A. could mobilize a light infantry of nature writers. And all this nature is of such critical importance because these connections—how we use and move and transform nature here—entail enormous consequences for places in the U. S. and throughout the world.¹⁸

Price's concern, very near the surface of her claim, goes to the very core of the questions I intend to address. Aside from all of the systems I have listed before, Los Angeles is also an ecosystem, and the behaviors of its human inhabitants have great consequences for not only all of its fauna and flora. From cultural and ecological perspectives, the effects of urban ecosystem Los Angeles radiate into the world to a greater extent, perhaps, than any other city in the world. The case that Price makes in "13 Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A." on behalf of the Los Angeles River is an argument for a more sustainable and livable place. She writes:

Altogether, restoring the river to health would improve water quality, control flooding, and restore wildlife habitat. Neighborhoods throughout L.A. would acquire much-needed park and green space. It would enhance local water supplies dramatically, and so would potentially change how water moves through the West. All the new greenery would help clean the air. [. . .] And by reviving a premier symbol of urban

¹⁸ Jenny Price, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A. Part Two: Another Seven Ways and an Arrival at the Confluence," *The Believer* 4, no. 4 (2006): 3–4 – 13.

destruction, it could make just about anything imaginable in urban transformation. A healthy L.A. River wouldn't be quite as wondrous as the chocolate factory, but it would be close.¹⁹

Though it may not be immediately obvious to someone who is not from Los Angeles, as a major civic undertaking the revitalization of the Los Angeles River is the kissing cousin of urban bike culture. What began as a ragtag collection of artists, poets, and activists' rabbleroxing about the liberation of the Los Angeles River from its ungainly concrete kimono has morphed into one of the largest public works projects in the United States. What began as a ragtag group of bike messengers, artists, emergency room doctors, and activists rabbleroxing about their right to ride in whatever numbers they cared to has not yet taken on the proportions of the River Revitalization project. It has, however, moved the needle significantly. Even in midsentence, the emergent urban bike culture has—aside from transforming the face of Los Angeles' roadways and creating more acceptance of bicyclists from politicians and motorists alike—spawned multiple functioning nonprofit organizations whose missions support riding, repairing, and advocating for bikes. To that end, this emergence is having and will continue to have a measurable effect on the sustainability and the livability of one of the most visible urban places in the world.

Ourselves in Time and Space

D. J. Waldie, a Southern California historian, who writes about the relationships between people and place in Los Angeles, straddles the literatures

¹⁹ Ibid.

of memoir and urban place-based narrative. His book, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*,²⁰ is a braided story of family history, colonial history, and the particular modern development history that birthed the City of Lawndale, California. Over 316 chapters that span 179 pages, Waldie interweaves personal, local, and historical narratives to shed light on, among other things, the relationships between people and place and how each affects and changes the other over time. He gives intimate accounts of lives led by those he refers to as “ordinary people.” He includes himself and his family quite emphatically in this designation—alongside accounts of the eighteenth century Spanish Monarch’s rules and regulations for establishing colonies in newly explored territory and detailed descriptions of the pouring of slabs, framing, and eventual occupancy of 17,500 houses on 3,500 acres over three years in the place that would become Lawndale.²¹ It is difficult to capture Waldie in small quotes. Many of his “chapters” in the book are 2–5 lines long. The following three micro-chapters serve as a window into the complex and tenuous relationship between people and place—in this case a place that intervenes on the lives of its inhabitants through the literal movement of the ground beneath their houses and their feet—and the irony of our conscious decision to live in a place, with our habits as our protection, that threatens to bury us and that which we can never hope to tame regardless of how certain we are that we can:

²⁰ D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York: Buzz Book for St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

²¹ D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land : A Suburban Memoir* (New York: Buzz Book for St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

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These postwar houses were built so lightly that they might even shelter us in a major earthquake.

The burden of our habits may do the same.

I avoided most of my father's Catholicism, but I still live here.

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Sometimes I think the only real forces here are circumstance and grace.

253

The danger here during a major earthquake is liquefaction.

In a wet year, the water table is only three or four feet from the ground's surface in some parts of the city where I live. Prolonged shaking during an earthquake causes the loose, alluvial soil to shift, letting the water wick upward.

In less than a minute, solid ground flows under the weight of the structures built on it.

Tall buildings sink. Horizontal buildings crack and fall apart. Square, frame houses may slide off their foundations.[. . .]²²

By fracturing the narrative in this way, Waldie weaves his own story, using place-based, historical, and urban development narratives in poetic and unconventional ways that shatter the more stereotypical narratives about life in Los Angeles and served to raise my own awareness and understanding of the region in which I have spent my entire life. Place is more than land, particularly when people move their lives onto it, betting that the land will be good to them but the outcome does not go their way. There is an unspoken sense of inevitability here that the house can come down on us at any time. Who lives in such a place?

²² Ibid., 138.

I discovered Waldie around the same time I discovered Price and Cronon, and, like the latter two, I have returned to him over and over when considering how to tell the story of bike culture in Los Angeles. Waldie writes about a time when the land is not only being transformed for the purpose of profit but also in service of an emerging mostly blue-collared middleclass in search of livable places to raise families.

In the following chapter, I have borrowed Waldie's tactics of narrative disruption as best I could in "Night Ridazz." It was, in some sense, an early exercise meant to deepen my understanding of night rides. If it is successful, it is in large part because it is not a transportation memo or a policy paper. It is an impressionistic, lyrical account of an unusual transportation phenomenon made up of people moving across an automobile-dominated landscape. It is intended to lull the reader into the experience and understanding of a night ride in a place where night rides have historically been less frequent than earthquakes.

Waldie, and Price—and for that matter Cronon—have opened windows on some of the great blunders of the twentieth century that reverberate in the Los Angeles of the present. But they have done it in such a way that the reader is not left in a hopeless, irreversible dystopia. All three of these authors stir up in the imagination of the reader visions of how this or any other urban place might be un-blundered. Waldie accomplishes this by bringing his reader home to a place where ordinary lives are lived. We cannot help but trust him when he asks us to forgive what we are seeing in the areal images of scarred land because people live there and have lived there in a succession of first time homeowners pursuing an American, middleclass life. Price imagines a revitalized river and the city it made

possible by drawing attention not only to the ways in which we see “nature” in Los Angeles but by bringing us face to face with a river once blundered into nonexistence. Cronon, in a much more general way, asks of us that we find a way to honor and value the places in which we live, and clearly the work of making more livable places begins with finding that respect and value.

Cronon was skewered by his colleagues for even making such a suggestion, and, perhaps, that was its appeal for me. I like a good heretic. This same form of heresy may be found among those who dare to ride and advocate for bikes in Los Angeles. Perhaps it is the heretic’s tendency to refuse constructed limitations that moves the discourse to a different level. In the story of urban bike culture in Los Angeles, you will see, as I have seen, a refusal to accept limitations that has opened up a conversation that has, indeed, led to changes in behavior, in policy, and in the culture of the city.

Getting Back to Where I Never Once Thought I Belonged

Los Angeles is freighted with a historic reputation that is composed largely of myths that, like many myths, sometimes have some basis in fact. The sun always shines in Los Angeles (May and June are almost always cloudy); dreams come true here (no more frequently than in Omaha, Nebraska or Bellingham, Washington, I suspect); everyone who lives here has written a screenplay (I have. So have thousands of others; millions have not); the place is a desert (in fact, it’s a Mediterranean climate zone); movie stars are everywhere (if you shop at Whole Foods and live in a neighborhood where the cheapest house costs millions of dollars); if you move here from somewhere else, you stand a good chance of becoming one (check that against a regional population of 18 million); the traffic

is bad (yes, it is); the air quality is worse (but far from the worst in the world); L.A. once had over 1,000 miles of light-rail transportation, and now it has none (now it has a whopping 90 miles); *no one in their right mind would consider riding a bicycle on the streets of L.A.* (but for the 40,000 right-minded citizens who hop on their bikes every day).

I will confess that I was, until not so long ago, a subscriber to the latter myth. I rode a bike out of necessity until at the age of sixteen, I was permitted to join the millions of other automobile drivers. For the next few decades, the bicycle mostly faded into the deep recesses of memory, and most of my attempts at city bicycle riding served only to reinforce the diagnosis in question.

It was only very recently that the myth began to crack. It was a warm, sunny day in October, 2007. I found myself shaking my head in disbelief at the sight of two friends getting off their bikes in a courtyard near my office. They were there to speak at an event I was putting on, with a group of local activists, to discuss how my university might educate graduate students in the field of Urban Sustainability. They were dressed for the occasion in what is sometimes referred to as “business casual,” and did not look at all as if they had just ridden ten miles that included a short, but unfriendly hill. Part of me was intrigued, but that part was completely overshadowed by my knowledge of the perilous terrain they had just crossed and the thought that they were out of their minds to have done so for reasons based on any number of my own truths and myths: L.A. drivers are insane; the air here is hazardous to your health; cyclists arrive at their destinations soaked in perspiration regardless of the weather; worse yet, you could get yourself killed riding a bike on these streets! I have a very clear memory

of thinking in that particular moment I would *never* ride a bike on the streets of Los Angeles, and no one could ever convince me otherwise.

Not long after this episode, I was having breakfast with my eldest son. He was bleary-eyed from a “night ride.” I listened with some form of parental concern and total fascination as he described the Midnight Ridazz ride. On a brakeless fixie,²³ he rode with a group of 100 or so “ridazz” sometimes over 40 miles through alleys, abandoned underground parking garages, and parts of neighborhoods where a modicum of cultural literacy could result in amazing street food and new friends. Soon thereafter I found myself down a deep rabbit hole from which I would never return. So began my inquiry and, eventually, my dispatches from above and below ground, my collected thoughts, and my observations about what I have come to know as *urban bike culture*.

Early in my investigation, I discovered that, over the course of the last seventeen years, a slow, sometimes quiet, sometimes noisy revolution had emerged in Los Angeles. I encountered a world of people riding bikes in unexpected ways and doing other bike-related things I would not have expected to see in the region. This is a movement that has been happening in other cities all over the world—in some cases, for decades—but common “wisdom” has

²³ A brakeless fixed-gear bike is the contemporary version of the “Safety Bike” first introduced in the early twentieth century. The cog on the rear wheel is in a “fixed” position. A chain connects the rear cog to the chain ring, which the rider rotates by moving the cranks and pedals in a circular motion. Because the rear cog is fixed, the cranks and pedals move continuously as the rear wheel rotates. This type of bike can be ridden without brakes because the rider can stop the bike by resisting the turning of the cranks. See Appendix 1 for more detail.

historically suggested that such a thing would be highly unlikely to thrive or even persist in Los Angeles.

But thrive it has.

There is no official history, of course, but the unofficial history goes something like this: somewhere close to the 1997 end of things, a rag-tag bunch of bike messengers and other riders of human-powered, two-wheeled vehicles started riding their bikes on the streets at night just for fun—first by the tens and, just a few years later, by the thousands. In the very beginning, these rides occurred a few times a month. At their peak, the rides grew to multiple times at multiple scales every night of the year somewhere in the region. By a process of co-evolution, a culture of wrenching and teaching others to wrench on bikes emerged, first in a single location, then eventually in several. The third emergence took the form of ridazz and wrenches eventually organizing themselves to appear before city councils and neighborhood councils, serve on transportation and police advisory boards, run for elected offices, start non profits, stand up to all manner of vehement opposition, and eventually influence regional transportation policy and habits. The first 12 years of this evolution moved at a glacial pace. Like all good evolutions, it almost looks like nothing is happening in those years. Then something catalyzes, and suddenly it looks like *revolution*—an apt simile and pun perfectly fitted for a story about people and bicycles.

The story of this particular historic moment in which an alternative bike culture emerged across Los Angeles is not about connected phenomena that grew out of traditional political efforts; it was not inspired by profits, markets, or

entrepreneurial activity; and there were no opportunities to accumulate wealth, monetize the movement, or acquire fame and power. Looking at its brief history in Los Angeles, this is a culture that appears to have come together for an odd constellation of reasons, most of which we do not typically associate with hobbies: its own brand of altruism; a sense of wanting to be together having fun, which admittedly includes an element of hedonism; a desire to serve each other, whomsoever that might be; the occasional, unfortunate outbreak of hooliganism; an urge to engage in an alternative economy that made no money but fulfilled a need to provide public benefit, educate, hang out, eat, flirt, and get your hands greasy;²⁴ and an interest in making a better urban place.

Some Notes on Memoir and Manifesto as Method

What you will encounter in the chapters and pages ahead is an inquiry into the nature, origins, emergence, ongoing development, meaning, significance, and influence of alternative urban bike culture in and on Los Angeles. It is an account that hopefully leads to some understanding of what the Los Angeles version of urban bike culture is and how it has structured, educated, and sustained itself.

²⁴ I should note here that while local bike shops have seen increases in business as the numbers of bicyclists, whether fadists or true converts, has increased, the common ethos one observes in the wrenching co-ops leans both co-op members and their customers away from mainstream bike shops. While the occasional expensive bike might appear at a co-op, and it might have an admirer or two gathered around it for a moment, the values more consistently run in the direction of the safest bike possible (excluding freakishly tall bikes) built from the greatest number of recycled and rebuilt parts. I find that I'm not reading the footnotes as I go, and yet they do contain a lot of relevant information. Not sure what to do about this, let's see what the committee says.

From time to time, I will refer to various phenomena that are not peculiar to Los Angeles. These are undoubtedly the common ingredients, in varying proportions, of urban bike cultures, regardless of their geographic location. San Francisco, Minneapolis, Boulder, and Portland each have a police force, for instance, and certainly all of those cities have motorists. All of these have relationships with their cycling communities in all of their forms. I am after not only what is unique about these relationships, as they appear to occur in Los Angeles, I am also after what is *unlikely* about these relationships.

On its surface, and some would say to its roots, Los Angeles has been given over to the car and the freeway as I have suggested earlier. From the moment when I first dipped my toe into urban bike culture, and for at least the first five years, my experience of the cyclist/motorist relationship occurred along a range that extended from empathy to antipathy to rage. Every rider I spoke with during that time, along with the great preponderance of blog posts by cyclist-bloggers, confirmed my experience. For several years, I remained convinced that this was an intractable condition. I felt the same way about the persistence of police violence on large-scale night rides. And yet, in both of these arenas, these assumed unlikelihoods have melted away to an uncanny extent.

This is how I gathered, sifted through, and analyzed my observances and experiences. I have lived a life on two wheels in the Los Angeles urban ecosystem and in the world of urban bike culture: I've wrenched, I've ridden, I've wonked, and I've catalogued it all. I have checked my own experience against the experiences of others, against journalistic accounts—online and in print—against the official accounts in city halls, and of planning and transportation

departments. In doing so, I have come to know something I did not know before. Borrowing from Waldie's fractured narrative and the vocabulary of ecological and systems theories, I have produced an aggregate of accounts of experiences that will show how bike culture has transformed Los Angeles and created a system that could have ramifications for transportation systems and urban sustainability world wide.

Message in a Bottle

If this is a kind of manifesto, it is one in search of a glimmer of hope that the longer story can have a happy ending, one that results in a more livable, just, equitable, and democratic Los Angeles. Los Angeles is a classic case study of land use and transportation policy, infrastructure, and implementation gone wrong. It is also a place well positioned to cure its own ills by learning from past mistakes and the effective practices of other cities. And it appears there is a generation of citizens here committed to this kind of development and change.

Among North American cities, Los Angeles must certainly ranks high in the top quartile of contributors to a global environmental crisis. Few cities have more cars per capita; larger ports and higher volumes of goods movement; a longer history of fossil fuel *production* and consumption; or a more vulnerable and costly exogenous supply of water, energy, and nutrients. Few cities have longer histories of self-generated, profound transportation problems. That the race is on in Los Angeles to address and mitigate these problems, that people riding bicycles in Los Angeles in seemingly increasing numbers from one year to the next holds any possibility of driving one small wedge into the regional and, by

turns, the global problem, indicates a significance worthy of attention and examination.

I cannot think of another city in North America, nor, for that matter, in all of the world, where an effective and extensive—the most extensive if not the most effective—light rail transportation system was so thoroughly dismantled in favor of cars, freeways, epic traffic jams, smog, and serial public-health crises. Per my earlier reference in the description of Los Angeles, I cannot think of a flatter place more conducive to the riding of bicycles for the purposes of commuting to work, socializing with people in nearby or even distant neighborhoods, running errands, and getting exercise. Could it be that a once unlikely, long-term response to these abandonments I have just described might be a return to the riding of bicycles for all of these latter purposes? If so, both the activities I am about to describe and the land on which they are happening are changes worthy of our attention.

Chapter Two

Ridazz: An L. A. Creation Story and Other Tales From the Streets

“You have to make your own rituals.”²⁵

Robin Kimmerer

Fifty-something, halfway up a mountain in New Hampshire, stopped by an aching back, resting against a rock, dazed by the quiet and the leaf-littered forest understory and the scene I was witnessing—a bryologist of some considerable renown narrating the goings on in a tiny opening in a pile of leaves as a tunnel spider navigated its way around any number of species of moss—this wasn’t the place I had expected to begin a study of alternative urban bike culture. Earlier, on the way up the mountain, I had complained that I had not even so much as a remote sense of being indigenous to anyplace. I came from a family where in seven generations both sides had lived on at least two continents, several countries, an ocean or two, and dozens of cities, towns, and farms—a fairly typical story for those who are descendants of European kleptomaniacs and worse. My companion on the trail had learned to look at spiders and mosses, among other things, from her father and grandfather as they had learned from theirs, in the forests of places that may have been called by names that sounded remotely like Michigan and Wisconsin and later in the forests near Onondaga, New York and for more generations than anyone had ever bothered to count.

²⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, Author Conversation with Robin Kimmerer, October 2009.

Depending on whose nearly equivalent articulation of origination you might be listening to, they had been in those places since a great turtle had emerged from the sea, or since a couple of millennia after the ablation of the Wisconsin Glacier.²⁶ Robin Kimmerer looked at me in a state of disbelief as I lodged my complaint. Her experience, I guessed from the look on her face, was informed first by roots sunk long and deep into place, whereas mine had always only skimmed the surface of place. I recall saying with what must have been palpable envy, “I will never have that experience.”

“You could,” Robin countered and anticipated my response. “You have to ‘reindiginate’ yourself . . . through ritual.” She anticipated my first question.

“I can’t bring myself to borrow anyone else’s rituals. It’s such a new-age cliché.”

“What do you think my ancestors did? At some point, they made their own.”

In the moment, I’m sure I nodded politely. I’m guessing the thought that crossed my mind was something more like an ironic, “Right!” It would take a bit

²⁶ I once wrote a paper about human migrations across the Bering Land Bridge, in which I discussed the controversy surrounding the competing narratives and the grievous sense of disrespect articulated by many First Nations commentators in response to a narrative that seemed intended to erase one that had been sacred. On reflection, it has occurred to me that the narratives are differently told *and* identical. The ocean floor of the Bering Sea is no more than 150 feet below its surface. As the Wisconsin Glacier headed south, the surface of the oceans lowered by as much as 450 feet. (William G. Haag, “The Bering Land Bridge,” *Scientific American*, no. January (1962): 112–13.) The representation of a recently exposed ocean floor as the back of a turtle is not inconsistent with the hinging of any number of cosmological narratives to observable phenomena. Accorded equal gravity, neither one need be privileged over the other.

of time to fully appreciate the rare experience of a person who so successfully integrates traditional knowledge systems with western scientific thought and articulates it with such ease and authenticity.

Weeks later, as I rode home on some dark and quiet LA streets, after a long night of wrenching on bikes, as I felt familiar pot holes, slight inclines, bends in the road, pockets of warm and cool air, silhouettes of buildings and trees, I understood what Robin was saying. It occurred to me that ritual didn't have to be danced, chanted, spoken, or sung. This was my ritual. It occurred to me right in that moment that so much of what I had ever come to know about the shapes and smells, who lived where, and the geography, geomorphology, microclimates, flora, and fauna of the place I came from, I learned riding around on a bike. Those things were in my muscle memory, learned between the ages of 6 and 16. Dormant for decades, they were rising up in me again. Riding as ritual: this would be my practice, and this would be the foundation on which these stories would rest.

I would argue that all ritual is ultimately about place. In some cases, it is about where we are in the here and now. In others, it is about where getting from where we are here and now to some other place at some other time. Some of those places are imagined and believed in—heaven, hell, purgatory, paradise, afterlife—while others are concrete, geographical locations imbued with powerful and sometimes contested meanings associated with the divine as manifest in a single place—Jerusalem, Mecca, Uluru, Fuji, Bodh Gaya, Dharamshala, Varanasi. Then there is ritual that is about place as that which sustains us, that with which we have relationships, that with which we aspire to collaborate and sustain. The

inference I took from Robin Kimmerer's admonition set me on a course pointed at the latter form.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe night rides, the population of *ridazz*, their origins, and their interactions with geographic, political, and cultural Los Angeles as place, as ecosystem, as home. Much of the narrative that follows is produced from my participation, observations, and immersion in night rides and the culture of *ridazz*. That immersion led me to an understanding that I was observing change as it was taking place—change that set into motion feedback mechanisms that persist to this day. What you will see is that rides and *ridazz* beget more rides and *ridazz*. They also beget disturbances in the form of conflicts with authorities that generate internal and external culture shifts. The latter, which I will foreground to a greater extent than the former, has taken the form of change in regional transportation policy and in the overall culture of transportation in the Los Angeles region.

These *ridazz* and night rides are part of a larger phenomenon I have encountered in Los Angeles. It is most commonly referred to as *bike culture*, *alternative bike culture*, or *urban bike culture*. Depending on the source, the definitions vary. Some would describe phenomena that exclude all riders, save those who ride brakeless fixed gear bikes as their primary mode of transportation.²⁷ Others would include all those who have ridden and still ride frequently in any number of organized, mostly night rides that one might find

²⁷ See Appendix 7.

posted on the Midnight Ridazz website.²⁸ The more inclusive descriptions might consist of the full range of bike-related materials and activities from privileged road bike clubs to sidewalk riders and everything in between.

I will focus primarily on the phenomena of Los Angeles night rides and ridazz that derive from LA bike-messenger culture. The latter has produced a kind of branching evolutionary process from which, 1) LA night rides, 2) d.i.y bicycle repair cooperatives,²⁹ and 3) *wonks*, a core group of activists from latter and/or former have flowed. Briefly, wrenching co-ops, which I will cover extensively in Chapter 2, are volunteer-staffed, storefront operations where anyone who rides a bicycle can learn how to repair and even build a bike. The co-ops are typically not-for-profit operations that are able to offer their services at prices well below the cost of a conventional bike repair at a typical bike shop. The community of wonks is made up of individuals—many of whom ride in night rides and wrench at co-ops—who engage political processes, social media, and other web technology, bicycle education and encouragement programs, and other tools in service to the entire population of active, dormant, and potential cyclists in the region.

More so, I think, than the transportation planning consultants, city planners, planning commissions, city and county traffic engineers, those who have brought these latter phenomena up out of the ground and into being, are the

²⁸ Midnight Ridazz, “Midnight Ridazz Bicycle Ride,” n.d., <http://www.midnightridazz.com/>.

²⁹ These are also known as “d.i.y. wrenching co-ops,” or simply “wrenching co-ops.”

actual engineers and authors of this movement. They are responsible for setting the feedback loops into motion, finding the intervention points, and applying the leverage to bring about the changes I will chronicle in the ensuing narrative.

Messengers

Before there were ridazz, there were messengers—bike messengers. Most of the urban bike culture creation stories begin with the bike messengers in the downtown areas of large cities. Until I started looking, I confess that I never paid much attention to them in any business, financial, or legal district I had been in, particularly not in Los Angeles. In a world we mostly think of as electronic/digital/virtual, bike messengers seem totally counterintuitive and anachronistic. But as long as there are documents requiring “wet” signatures, notarizations, and “eyes only” needing transport between a law firm, an accounting firm, a court, a client, and back again to the lawyers; and until we have robots and drones walking and flying the streets and riding the elevators of high-rise buildings, there will be bike messengers. Whenever you finally do notice them, either in action or at rest, they are something to behold. To begin with, they make bats out of hell look like something out for a slow shuffle to the corner market. Many of them ride fixed gear bikes, commonly called *fixies*, many of which have no brakes.³⁰ They weave in and out of car, bus, and truck traffic in a manner that appears to court death and, sadly, sometimes does.

³⁰ Again, see Appendix 7 for more detailed descriptions and illustrations of various types of bikes. Briefly, the fixie is a direct descendant of the “safety bike” of the late nineteenth century, as described in Appendix 1. On a fixed gear bike the rider’s legs are always engaged. Simply put, if the bike is going down a hill, the rider has no option other than to pedal, and the speed of the bike—

When I made the connection between messengers and early ridazz, it made a certain amount of sense in terms of material culture. Though this doesn't apply to all bike messengers, the most noticeable inhabitants of both worlds tend toward a certain kind of punk chic—extensive visible tattoos; skinny jeans with rips, frays, and studs; studded belts; well-worn messenger bags; ear lobe piercings that might double as a golf-ball holder; and many, additional visible piercings in other ear locations as well as in eyebrows, multiple nose locations, lips, chins, etc.

Both messenger culture and messenger history deserve extensive treatments of their own and, in fact, have associated bodies of literature in print and online. That said, I only touch on it here to provide some context and history for an entirely different culture that owes some significant part of its own origins to the very existence of bike messengers. Bike messengers first appear in the age of the “high-wheel” or “penny-farthing” bike in late nineteenth century France.³¹ They come and go over the next century, only to reappear in the mid 1980s when they manage to secure a toehold that will allow them to persist into present day.³² At some point in its history, messenger culture collides with *punk*

particularly in a case where there are no brakes—is controlled by the amount of resistance introduced through the rider's legs. This style of riding can be particularly hard on the knee and hip joints.

³¹ David V. Herlihy, *Bicycle: The History* (Yale University Press, 2006), 177.

³² *Ibid.*, 319.

culture—another historic and cultural study entirely³³—and when the flesh and blood grown up out of the soil of Los Angeles becomes part of the admixture, eventually people like Jimmy Lizama, a bike messenger, Marisa Bell (a.k.a. Ma Bell), a children’s trauma physician, Don Ward (a.k.a. Roadblock), and Kim Jensen (a.k.a. Skull), among others, appear to create and stage night rides.

Night Rides

Looking for something to do after work, bike messengers seem to gravitate to late-night activities that involve groups of people on bicycles. It may seem counterintuitive in the manner of a “busman’s holiday,” but then the bicycle seems to have greater allure than the bus. So “dark centuries” (100 miles ridden with a group at night), bike jousting, bike polo, and any number of differently composed, sometimes crazy, bicycle races all have roots that extend deeply into bicycle messenger culture. So, too, does the night ride with larger numbers of people, many of whom are not messengers.

Night rides have their own brand of enchantment. Before I knew that this was anything I wanted to write about, I found myself going on night rides. Since I had never worked as a bike messenger, I was a relative latecomer to the LA ride scene. I was on an alternative evolutionary trajectory. My participation in night rides was more of a natural outgrowth of the experience of learning to wrench. My experience was a bit like that of Tommy Albright in Brigadoon; but this reality-as-fantasy has not receded into the mists on the moor, and it appears a

³³ Z. M Furness, “Put the Fun Between Your Legs!": The Politics and Counterculture of the Bicycle.,” 2005, 140.

great deal more frequently than “once every hundred years, for a day.”³⁴ I landed in what felt like a parallel, hidden culture world that immediately appeared to be growing and sustaining itself. Not all wrenches were ridazz, and not all ridazz turned wrenches, but there was enough overlap, enough diversity of interest, some kind of chemistry that allowed the two worlds to flourish separately and together all at once. Not all rides were created equal, nor did they have the same meanings to all of their riders. To Ma Bell it was a way of connecting with Los Angeles, “An incredibly beautiful city with incredibly rich architecture and history that you totally miss and have no chance to participate in when you’re in a car.”³⁵ To Roadblock it is political. It is about the rights of cyclists. When told by a police officer during a Midnight Ridazz ride in 2009 that they are blocking traffic, Roadblock responded by giving his interpretation of the hundreds of ride participants. “We are traffic. [. . .] We’re like a big—a big bus.”³⁶ To mathematician/ride organizer Alex Thompson, PhD, “It’s a party.”³⁷

Before we go any further, let us enter the mist that occasionally hangs low over the Los Angeles coastal plain. Allow me to take you on a Los Angeles night ride. Over the course of the next 10 pages, you should have a good sense of what I am talking about with regard to night rides as living systems that are influencing

³⁴ Alan Jay Lerner, *Brigadoon* (New York: Alfred Publishing Company, Inc., 1947).

³⁵ Matthew Segal, “Bike Culture: Spokes People,” *Los Angeles Magazine*, January 2009, 92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

and changing the landscapes, cultural and political, of the larger urban systems in which they are nested. Multiply this one experience times hundreds at this scale (thousands of riders) and thousands at smaller scales. By any analysis, that this is happening at any scale with any frequency in a city that has been historically indifferent and even hostile to the rights of its citizens to ride bicycles in the streets, indicates many different kinds of change.

On the occasion of the ride I am about to describe, I was working on a bike at Bikerowave—a wrenching co-op where riders of all levels of skill and experience can learn basic to advanced bike repair. I had been learning about bike repair for a few months of intermittent work at Bikerowave, and by this time I had developed a serious case of fix-it fever. I would not have classified myself as a wrench at that point—perhaps an incipient wrench, though. I was seeing the possibilities of several kinds of transformation. I might start riding a bike more. More people might start riding bikes—even in Los Angeles where up to that point it seemed impossible to many, if not most. It was a moment—2008—when the U.S. economy was circling the drain. Gas prices were on the rise as the housing market was in free fall. Everyone was feeling it, particularly those who lived closer to the economic bone. A disturbance regime was in play.

Close to the time when the shop would normally close on a Saturday afternoon, a handful of people I knew, from that few months of wrenching and the handful of night rides I had done, showed up at Bikerowave and got busy with things that had only tangential relationships to bicycle repair. Most of them had arrived in what they called “The Box,”—a massive, graffiti-covered,

music-blasting, recreational vehicle/house on wheels owned by a guy named Rich-to-the-I-E, whom you will meet momentarily. Most of the crew that emerged from “The Box,” along with a billowing cloud of smoke, were making elaborate costumes for a ride called *C.R.A.N.K. Mob*—the first anniversary ride, to be precise. The place took on the air of a prop shop just before a large theatrical production. Suffice it to say, I was intrigued, and as it is in one of those very old cartoons when one of the characters follows a beckoning, hand-shaped trail of smoke, dumbstruck and hypnotized, so I attended *C.R.A.N.K. Mob* and became one of them.

Night Ridazz

“If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

African Proverb

A mild July night: I am riding with a dozen or so “ridazz” to a neighborhood on the west side of Los Angeles, once upon a time known as Sawtelle, one of the Southern California neighborhoods from which Japanese-American families were extracted for internment in the early days of World War II. An air of rebellion hangs low over Sawtelle Boulevard as cyclists—not your father’s League of American Bicyclists cyclists, but a new breed entirely—pull up solo or in small packs, riding endless variations of what some consider to be the single-greatest, human-powered invention of the industrial/consumer age. Blinged-out fixies, beach cruisers, mutant tall bikes, a penny-farthing or two,

pieced-together-from-odd-used-parts frankenbikes, mountain bikes, hybrids, touring bikes, fetish-collector bikes, all gather slowly at the “meet up” starting at around 9:00 p.m. About every third person wears some kind of costume. Santa Claus, Uncle Sam, Casper the (Possibly) Friendly Ghost, nurses, librarians, sex-industry workers, a human candy cane complete-with-matching-bike down to the wheels, spokes, and chain. This colorful murder of urban crows, swelling to somewhere around seven-hundred strong, gathers a few blocks from the Police Department’s Purdue Station. Ridazz flood the street. Traffic backs up for a couple of blocks. Trickling through, carbon burners and their passengers alternately cuss and show their solidarity with C.R.A.N.K. Mob nation (where C.R.A.N.K = Crazy Naptime Killers). In the urban ecosystem that is Los Angeles, CA, these kinds of material and energy flows—large-scale convoys of human-powered vehicular transport mechanisms—have been, until recently, unprecedented phenomena. C.R.A.N.K. Mob is distinct from the daily procession of hundreds of thousands of cars moving east and west along Interstate 10 because the energy that moves it, and all other group rides, mostly comes from the photosynthetic processes of the second half of the twentieth century: These flows are made from the aforementioned bikes topped with homegrown humans from vegans to carnivores, from Eastside to Westside, north to south. These are not, as some would like to suggest, “just a bunch of privileged Westside white kids.” They’re rolling in from Echo Park, Boyle Heights, South LA, Eagle Rock, Cypress Park, Lincoln Heights, The Valley, LGBTQ, woman, man, and all the colors that

make this place one of the most if not *the* most ethnically diverse urban ecosystem on Earth. These are ridazz—not racers, not commuters, not radonneurs, at least not tonight.

•••

The cops are concerned. AT—a PhD mathematician, suspected alter ego of a feline bike activist named Knittens Cat, coauthor of the Cyclists’ Bill of Rights, cofounder of one of LA’s original wrenching cooperatives, and the resident California State Vehicle Code expert—conducts shuttle diplomacy between the vibrant, swelling, seemingly happy mob and the not-yet-pissed-off law. A small group of kinder, gentler vigilantes move the rider spill back onto the sidewalk after a series of call-and-response whoop-whoops! (a ridazz birdsong on one side of the street and the sounds made by LAPD cruisers on the other) and the law rolls off. The ridazz turn their various attentions back to enthusiastic greetings, more amusing costume displays, and dancing at the altar of the large video projection and a blasting sound system. And then.

Somewhere in the distance comes a thunder. The Box rounds the corner up at Santa Monica Boulevard and slowly heads south to the meet-up. It appears to be the biggest Winnebago I have ever seen, with huge speakers mounted to its sides, a dozen or so kiddie bikes mounted on the roof, and all wrapped up in an impressive, four-sided graffiti mural. Exquisitely loud hip-hop music creates a sensation of gravity in which the crowd and The Box are drawn hard together as if each is being pulled into

the same ecstatic vortex of bike love. As The Box comes to a stop, it occupies a good three parking spaces. Two deejays work their Macs. The subwoofers put out a sphincter-loosening pulse. And a chant builds: Rich-ee-oh!! Rich-ee-oh!! Rich-ee-oh!! . . . The door flies open, and out jumps the tallest faux-hawk I've ever seen, and it's planted on a red-and-black, spandex-clad, caped, adult-sized replica of Rufio, the lost boy from Peter Pan's Neverland crew in the 1991 movie *Hook*—a cinematic artifact that for so many reasons clearly means something to the generation that populates this dancing, chanting, hooting throng. Richie Thomason, one of the founding fathers of C.R.A.N.K. Mob and full-time inhabitant of The Box, is celebrating the first birthday of his brainchild, and this is the party. All street pirates, urban assault cyclists, wolves, cubs, ridazz, crimanimalz, cyclistas—anyone who has a human-powered set of wheels and the will to witness an all-night rolling party—are welcome here.

•••

I am dumbstruck as I consider the emergence of the night ride. There may be many night-ride creation stories, a promising child with many parents, but the narrative I have received most often is one that describes the 1992 birth of the San Francisco Critical Mass ride. I'm not at all convinced or even concerned, however, that this is a history that requires a single-point origin. What interests me is the fact that once there were only a handful of these rides taking place in North American urban ecosystems, and now a rider living in the Greater Los Angeles area can find a ride every night of the week. Fast, slow, long, medium, short, hilly, flat,

oppressively hip, exclusively anarchist, highly democratic, sober, esthetically oriented, firework-friendly, with or without musical accompaniment, de facto or de jure costume requirements, political-protest-rush-hour-freeway rides, these manifold species and subspecies of rides and their ridazz most often take the form of a non-violent nod to the much-maligned and undervalued enterprise of tilting at windmills—a vibrant element of emergent alternative urban bike culture—and constitute an authentic study in complexity. The LA scene is evolving into a bio-diverse metro-ecology complete with a steering committee that now generates rides with simultaneous and sequential multi-sited meet-ups from which a multiple choice of themed rides generate an algorithmic array of vectors ultimately converging at a common final destination. Wrenching co-ops—community-based tool-shares staffed by volunteer mechanics who teach bike owners all manner of bike repairs—and local bike-policy advocacy groups have grown and proliferated throughout the region. And then there's the fact that this is happening in something like four hundred cities all over the biosphere, generating a new energy calculus in which hundreds of thousands, eventually millions, tens of millions, and ultimately billions of people will choose to live and recreate in ways that reject the automobile, the freeway, and the release of billions of tons of formerly sequestered carbon back into the atmosphere.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention the fact that I am obsessed with matters of global environmental change. This no doubt

skews my thinking as I look at this emergent property of the urban ecosystem I inhabit. That said, I firmly believe that, consciously or unconsciously, global environmental change as a phenomenon driven primarily by anthropogenesis is a key motivating force in the minds of most of the ridazz. To be sure, any given ride is composed of individuals whose reasons for participation fit into multiple categories: political activism, new tribalism, party animalism, pure recreation, and, yes, even malicious mischief-making to name a few of the broad ones without getting into gradations. But a palpable thread runs through every conversation: the profound unhappiness about what cities have become and a progressive actualization of imagination about *what they might become*.

Consider this. The city in its ur form, take the ancient city of Ur, relative to the contemporary city, was mostly a sustainable place. The material and energy flows were not terribly different from those of forest, marine, lacustrine, riparian, or desert ecosystems. Nutrient budgets were met locally, and the sun met the city's energy requirements either directly or indirectly. Over the course of several thousand years, as *Homo sapiens* populations moved in the direction of two billion individuals (approximately 1900 CE), urban-dwelling populations accounted for 8 percent of the total or roughly 160 million. By this time, urban ecosystems were starting to rely on exogenous material and energy sources to satisfy their needs: houses made of lumber from distant forests, meals made from animal and plant material raised hundreds and eventually thousands of

miles away. Think of the energy required to heat those houses; to harvest, transport, mill, and transport again the lumber and other materials required to build them; and eventually to move ourselves around in fossil-fuel-consuming trains, busses, airplanes, and single-occupant motor vehicles. Now jump to the present, and add to your calculations the fact that world population has grown to 6.75 billion human beings, 50 percent of whom are living in urban ecosystems. Consider what it takes to feed, clothe, and move a population of that size—one that no longer lives near the things it consumes. If nothing else, consider tens of thousands of supermarkets stocked with ton after ton of Mexican strawberries or Peruvian asparagus in January. Are you staggering under the weight of these numbers yet? I am.

In this vast and daunting tableau, the bikes and their ridazz at this moment function at the level of metonym or synecdoche—or maybe both, I can never get them straight—but even if they represent nothing more than a tiny sliver of the picture, no matter what angle we view it from, something is brewing. Prankster, malcontent, exercise freak, environmental activist, or policy wonk, any of us who hit the streets at night and, in the language of the movement, “put the fun between our legs,” do so because we sense the need for change. We seek common cause with those who share our sensibilities. We recruit constantly. When we arrive at a meet-up to find twice as many bikes as there were the month or the week before, we smile and make a wish to see the numbers double again.

...

C.R.A.N.K. Mob is about to burst the urban artery on which it stands. Rich-ee-oh! has made his promenade through the throng. Some version of a majordomo, in the person of Mob cofounder Kieron Menzies, looking like the love child of Bela Lugosi as Dracula and the *Thriller*-era Michael Jackson—silver glove, red jacket—conducts a brief tête-à-tête with Rich-ee-oh! and the two iBook-equipped deejays working their music magic inside The Box. It's time to roll.

In a slow-motion version of the way flocks of starlings make their astonishing mid-air course changes, this velvet urban assault moves out. The Box heads north. No one but the junta directiva inside this mobile strategic-ground-command vehicle knows the route. No one asks. It's enough to be moving, to be in the center of a sea of blinking red taillights as ridazz negotiate the first few blocks out onto the Big Streets of LA, first slowly and then at an array of velocities that will stretch the mob out over a good quarter mile. At 10:05 and moving, there is an unmistakable elevation of the collective blood-alcohol level, but it is far from universal. The sober look out for the inebriated. No one hesitates to assist with changing a flat, fixing a broken chain, communicating with the central nervous system of the ride to get the quickest route to the next stop. I am drop-jaw blown away by the Woodstock Nation ethos demonstrated, moment to moment, street by street, in this rolling community composed of real *citizens*—locals, residents of every turf you can name, ridazz without borders.

Tonight's ride is a mosaic of "peak" moments forever tattooed on my neural network. The narrative escapes the orbit of the linear and the temporal. It oozes into the work product of a wandering gaze that pauses just long enough in one place and then another to not know, in the most useful of ways, the precise nature of what it is seeing. The first stop comes way too soon. I am just barely getting my legs warmed up. My mind is spinning down to a low enough rpm that I am just beginning to comprehend this thing. Seven hundred bikes in the parking lot of a local supermarket. Some shop for beer. Some dance. A few at first, and then a couple of hundred snaking, throbbing, bumping, moving. The police show up for a menacing moment. AT, who alternately ends up cuffed at these events or brokers the peace that lasts an evening, whispers a few kind words to The Man: "These are not the droids you are looking for." "This is not the hill you want to die on," they respond. The music hits new decibel highs, the subwoofer reaches new lows, and The Box moves again. On the way to what turns out to be the Little League fields of my childhood—a public recreation facility tucked into the armpit of the 405—I find myself at the top of a small hill at the back of the ride. Looking down as the group cuts through the Santa Monica Airport, I am sent into a dream as the trail of blinking red lights, propelled by an urban energy I have never before experienced, disappears around a distant bend and into the dark. This massive flow of indigenous energy, costumed human biomass, conveyed by slender collections of metal alloy tubing and moving parts in various states of use and reuse opens a window onto something more promising

than the grim thudding future I am forced to confront in the part of my day job that includes reading peer-reviewed articles on global environmental change. But that is another story. Looking through the window opened by C.R.A.N.K. Mob's first-birthday party ride, I can see that when I ride the Los Angeles River later this year there will be two or three times the two thousand ridazz who participated last year. This ride is not just large-scale pranksterism. Farther down the road, I can see a night ride on the freeway to an elevated urban farm to pick a midnight snack. I see cooperative police departments and enlightened motorists. I can see a time, even in Los Angeles, as crazy as you might think I am to entertain such a thought, when it will be uncool to drive a car that isn't filled to the headliner with passengers heading for a common destination, when the only cool form of solo transportation will be powered by what you ate for breakfast.

All is not always peaceful in the land. From time to time a chest-beater motorist will get into it with a chest-beater bicyclist. The police departments, depending on whether it is one of the small cities or an unsympathetic LAPD officer, have been known to get fed up and come out with the large zip ties when it takes three complete cycles of a light to uncork an intersection through which 700+ ridazz have just ridden. Mostly one hears the occasional horn leaned on a few beats too long and maybe a couple of hostile shouts, at the very worst a threatening swerve or intentionally opened car door. These are anecdotes. The greater part of a ridazz' riding life is spent at one with a bike, basking in the warm glow

coming from a stream of blinking red lights, leaning into turns, feeling the expressions of the road transmitted through its wheels and the topography of place alternately burning in their thighs or facilitating the relief that only a sweet capitulation to gravity can bring.

Then there are the last few stops of the C.R.A.N.K. Mob night: the roof of a giant electronics store where kiddie bikes serve as jousting steeds and polo ponies as The Box continues its musical accompaniment, and more ridazz dance; another supermarket-as-watering hole/dance-off location/and the final cop confrontation of the night complete with helicopters, spotlights and threats of arrest for unlawful assembly; and finally, C.R.A.N.K. Mob Park, where the surviving fifty or so ridazz will gather around The Box and decide where to get breakfast, plot the next ride, sleep it all off as they dream about going always farther, sometimes faster, and always in greater numbers. The end of this night ride constitutes an open doorway for these ridazz. They will fan out later into their collective days to wrenching co-op meetings and volunteer shifts, planning sessions of other rides, neighborhood and city council meetings, police commission meetings, blogging, jobs, dreaming of the next bike (it is said that the formula for bike ownership is $n + p + 1$, where n is the number of working bikes currently owned, p is the number of project bikes in the works, and 1 represents the next bike in the dream queue that waits to be born), and when the moon is on the rise again, they will ride with Cub Camp, Midnight Ridazz, Taco Tuesdays, Wolf Pack, Arc Ride, Robotz,

VCR, Chinatown Mosey, Friends of the Friendless, Water Gun, and rides soon to be imagined.³⁸

The persistence, expansion, and proliferation of night rides like C.R.A.N.K. Mob happened because their populations included numerous ridazz willing to wear the activist mantle. Because so many rides produced tension and resistance, as you will see, the two sections below titled “Cops and Ridazz” and “Cyclists and Police,” it appears that a self-reinforcing feedback loop was set in motion early on in the Los Angeles night-ride timeline. The clear intent of police in the various municipalities in the Los Angeles area was to contain, control, and eventually staunch the entire phenomenon. The effect, however, was quite the opposite. The greater the resistance and tension the more people seemed to want to ride, and the more people seemed to want to defend and advocate for their right to ride. There is a history there, and it is not without precedent elsewhere beyond the borders of Los Angeles and prior to the time of the “Night Ridazz” story.

While I will get into activism and the activists I have observed in action in Chapter Four, it seems important to at least set the stage for them here with some of that history. Like the wrenching and night-riding communities, there is a shared cast of characters among the early leadership in what would become a mostly leaderless world. Though there have been cycling activists in the western cities of North America since the nineteenth century, their histories as they may

³⁸ Donald Strauss, “Night Ridazz,” *Whole Terrain* 16 (2009).

have occurred in Los Angeles have been so literally and figuratively paved over that to draw a through line as if to make a claim of descendancy, obscures rather than enhances an understanding of the tableau under examination. Zachary Furness, in *Put the Fun Between Your Legs!: The Politics and Counterculture of the Bicycle*, his timely and extensive 2005 account of the general phenomenon of bike culture in the United States, draws such a through-line between the July 25, 1896, bicycle “parade” in San Francisco and the September, 1992 origins of Critical Mass in the same city.³⁹ Furness relies on the works of Chris Carlsson⁴⁰ and Hank Chapot⁴¹ in *Critical Mass: Bicycling’s Defiant Celebration* to inform his brief historical introduction to the idea of bicycle riding as a political act. Chapot’s piece paints an interesting picture that may or may not be accurate, given the fact that it lacks citations of any kind. Carlsson’s derives primarily from his own experience and primary research and is useful for understanding Critical Mass, itself, as a freestanding phenomenon, but he omits any reference to CicloVía, which is the great mother of large-scale urban bicycling celebrations—one that originated on the streets of Bogotá, Colombia around 1976 and most certainly has its roots in a history of resistance and defiance. The works of Furness, Carlsson, and Chapot have all made important contributions to the

³⁹ Furness, “Put the Fun Between Your Legs!”,” 1.

⁴⁰ Chris Carlsson, *Critical Mass: Bicycling’s Defiant Celebration* (Edinburgh, Scotland ; Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2002).

⁴¹ Hank Chapot, “The Great Bicycle Protest of 1896,” in *Critical Mass: Bicycling’s Defiant Celebration*, First, vol. 1 (Oakland, CA; Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2002), 175–182.

literature of ridazz and ride politics in San Fransisco, California, but it has mostly underserved the Bogotá, Colombia and the Los Angeles, California narratives, particularly where the generation of new knowledge of bike culture is concerned.

The placed-based origins and separate evolutions of urban bike cultures matter. Furness, perhaps because he is writing in 2005 about a rapidly evolving phenomenon, sees this happening only in a singular place, at least where the night ride phenomenon is concerned:

Critical Mass has almost single-handedly changed the way in which cyclists and activists both perceive and utilize the bicycle. In addition to their monthly presence in over 200 cities throughout the world, the participants of Critical Mass have created an extensive discourse about the politics of the bicycle that has been translated into a wave of “Do It Yourself” (DIY) bike activism and advocacy in recent decades.⁴²

Things have changed radically in a relatively short period of time. This may have been so in other cities when Furness wrote this in 2005, but no such claim could stick in Los Angeles—not then, not now. Even if one assumes the presence of influence that flowed from San Francisco to Los Angeles, there are so many other factors that set Los Angeles apart and bind its bike culture creation story: the uniqueness of its geographic place, its status as a generator of culture that reverberates at a global scale, and its deeply engrained auto-centricity/bike antipathy.

⁴² Furness, “Put the Fun Between Your Legs!”,” 10.

It is true that other cities experienced greater progress through the 1990s and 2000s. It is also true that bicycles have been normalized to a greater extent in those more bike-progressive cities than they have in Los Angeles during some of that same time period. An observer could claim, with some measure of certainty, a causal relationship between these favorable cultural and political conditions and the presence of Critical Mass rides in those cities. There can be no question that there have been Critical Mass rides in multiple locations in Los Angeles County since the late 1990s, and it is true that these rides continue into the present with a certain arrhythmia. It is also true that many of the people who have been influential in Los Angeles bike politics and culture have ridden in some of those rides. Critical Mass has offered up a delicious, chaotic vision of what is possible. A claim such as the one quoted above makes a great deal of sense when social scientists generalize about people and their social behaviors and social movements as detachable from place. It makes sense even in a discipline where the examination of a particular place is detachable from a larger biospheric system comprised of a mosaic system of places. My investigation has been a conscious effort to affirm my strong philosophical bias that there is an inexorable connection among person, phenomenon, and place. In part, that bias is born out of a strong resistance to the nature-culture separation paradigm—a hazardous form of boundary making that allows for much in the way of compartmentalization.

There is an irony in the confinement of this work into a single, albeit spread wide in every dimension, urban place in North America, in that it has provided me with the very beginning of a glimmer of understanding about the

differences and similarities in and between developments and evolutions of multiple bike cultures. Looking at the components of bike culture deeply, in one place, provides an alternative and rich view to those that focus on a single phenomenon across the universe of urban spaces.

Unlike the movement that emerged in the 1960s to oppose and end the American occupations and genocides in Southeast Asia, where the mostly unifying value was peace, bike culture is not always about shared values beyond the bike. For some it is a gathering of misfits; for others it is an engagement with an alternative economy; for others it is altruism; for many it is a response to the fossil fuel/environmental change nexus; for some who know it and some who may not be entirely aware of it, there is, however, an inherent examination of place and its reappropriation as public space imbedded in their participation and experience; and for some of us, it is all of these things and then some.

The Freeway Rides

Though the night ride is the most common opportunity for the observation of *Homo sapiens ridazz* in action, the Los Angeles bike culture story would not be complete without, at least, a brief account of a more radical form of urban group rides: the freeway ride. Clearly, a high-risk, high-drama form, the freeway ride is arguably more overtly anarchic, political, and message-driven than the vast majority of its night-ride cousins. Freeways are a part of the Los Angeles mythology that is grounded in truth. They are free, in that historically no tolls are charged for driving on them—though that has recently come to an end with the advent of the “toll lane” for which a driver can pay to sometimes drive faster than the cars in other lanes. When few people are on them—which is seldom—they are

an effective, if high-carbon, convenience. The rest of the time, they are parking lots where a driver might cover a distance of 25 miles in two hours.

Freeway rides were ephemeral, like the Pony Express. While they loom large in the Los Angeles bike culture story, the freeway rides played themselves out in just under a year—seven months shy of the Pony Express tenure.⁴³ I would argue that the considerable attention they drew contributed to stocks and flows of the LA. bike ecosystem. Many included in this cast of characters played multiple roles in the worlds of ridazz, wrenches, and wonks. What follows is the parable of the Crimanimalz and the Freeway Ride Heard ‘Round the World⁴⁴:



Figure 2: *Crimanimalz - The Freeway Ride II*, 2008,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNZSe8Q8-Iw&feature=youtube_gdata.

⁴³ “Pony Express National Museum/History,” *Pony Express National Museum*, accessed September 20, 2014, <http://ponyexpress.org/history/>.

⁴⁴ *Crimanimalz - The Freeway Ride II*, 2008,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNZSe8Q8-Iw&feature=youtube_gdata.

Sometime in mid May of 2008, my oldest offspring, Morgan, called me on the phone to tell me something he hoped I wouldn't pass on to anyone else in the family just yet (this was just a little bit more than two months before his 30th birthday). "I rode my bike on the freeway with a bunch of other people. We have an interview on NPR. I wanted to tell you myself before you heard it on the radio.⁴⁵"

"We' would be...?"

"The Crimanimalz."

I had mixed feelings about this. The Crimanimalz ride was a defiant political act that leapt directly into the hotly contested urban-cycling transportation discourse, which made me a proud dad. On the other side of things, I was scared shitless—something I had been since he first told me that he was having these amazing riding experiences (helmetless, on a brakeless, fixed-gear bike, or fixie)⁴⁶ with Midnight Ridazz. I was, however, greatly relieved when I looked at the video footage of the freeway ride and saw that Morgan was wearing a helmet.

⁴⁵ "Bicycle Activists Take to the Freeways in L.A. : NPR," *NPR.org*, accessed August 19, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91414814>.

⁴⁶ The "fixie" is the bike of choice for any number of species of riders and ridazz. It is, according to some, the bicycle in its purest form: A frame, stem, handlebars, saddle post, saddle, chain ring, chain, front wheel, rear wheel with cog, and two tires. That's it. When the cranks turn, the wheels turn and vice versa. No coasting, no squeezing on brake levers to slow down or stop, just the power of the rider's legs and athleticism.

Once the parental dust settled in my head, I learned that there were articles in *The Times of London*,⁴⁷ *Wired*,⁴⁸ and the aforementioned piece on National Public Radio's *Bryant Park Project*, as well as a fairly substantial collection of videos that were popping up on *You Tube* and *Vimeo*. I learned from my reading of the various pieces and from my discussions with Morgan—after watching the videos with some fair measure of twisted parental pride—that the rides were intended to be political statements aimed at drawing a different kind of attention to a problem that has been a decades-long, international cliché/joke about Los Angeles.

The first Crimanimalz video as it was posted on their original website—now defunct—showed a small band of urban cyclists, some disguised by respirator masks and bandanas, painting and then hanging a large sign on a chain-link fence with the message facing away from them and the camera. The action cuts to a view toward the 17th Street overpass over US Interstate 10⁴⁹ and the sign that hangs on the overpass fence. It says, in large block letters, “RIDE A BIKE. YOU’D BE HOME BY NOW.” In the next scene, the various Crimanimalz prepare to ride. Then the ride begins as in the screen capture above. I can never make out more than 20 cyclists and 3 skaters in any single frame. The graphic on

⁴⁷ Chris Ayers, “Pedal Power Challenges Car Culture on LA’s Freeways,” *The Times*, July 28, 2008, sec. Overseas News.

⁴⁸ Chuck Squatriglia, “Radical Cyclists Take to L.A. Freeways to Say Bikes Are Better | Autopia | Wired.com,” *Autopia*, accessed August 19, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/autopia/2008/05/in-a-city-built/>.

⁴⁹ Also amusingly known as the Christopher Columbus Transcontinental Highway.

the screen as the riders are riding up the freeway onramp clearly says 30. In the information section directly below the video on the You Tube page claims 28 bicyclists, so the three skaters would make it 31 Crimanimalz. Though the number may be an important fact for some, the important fact for the purpose of this narrative is that a group of activists engaged in a premeditated act that was clearly designed to send a message. The following mission statement and statement of long term goals can be found on the You Tube page where the video is archived:

Mission

While the ride's political stance and agenda was neutral, many participants invoked the group's collective motto: "If you rode a bicycle, you'd be home by now!" – a statement against oil dependency, in support of sustainable living, and a collective critique of the Los Angeles transportation infrastructure. The riders are pointing out that in a city like Los Angeles, made for cars, bicycle riders are reaching their destinations faster.

Long Term Goals

Members of CRIMANIMALZ are looking for city officials to make bicycle safety a priority, not only through the creation of safe and easy places to ride, but also as a means of transportation on the city's increasingly busy thoroughfares. With rising gas prices and a government encouraging sustainable practices, more people are expected to turn to bikes as an alternative means of transportation.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *Crimanimalz - The Freeway Ride II.*

In the comment area below the mission and long-term-goal statements, there are 25 pages with 257 comments that stretch from the days immediately following the posting of the video all the way into June of 2012, showing equal numbers of supporters and detractors. As with the precise numbers of riders and skaters who participated in the original ride, a precise accounting of the numbers does not in any way alter the fact that citizens of Los Angeles County, calling themselves Crimanimalz, rode on two of the most congested freeways in North America and in doing so, insinuated themselves into the larger dialog about how we live and get around in cities.

Parental concerns notwithstanding, just shy of five months later, on September 24th, I found myself with a few members of the original Crimanimalz, attending the Santa Monica Critical Mass ride. At around 9:00 pm, we rode north on Lincoln Boulevard and crossed Interstate 10, or “The Ten” as we call it out here in the Wild West. Normally, traffic moves at speeds in excess of 60 mph at that time of night, but all we could see were thousands of red taillights stretching way out into the east until they disappeared around a bend in the freeway.

One of the Crimanimalz shouted out “Freeway ride!” The group of us turned up the next eastbound street and circled back around to a place where we could get a better look and make a plan—to the extent that a spontaneous eruption of insane and impulsive behavior can be planned. The collective adrenaline of the group was palpable. In what seemed like seconds, stone cold sober, easily 75% of that evening’s Santa Monica Critical Mass ridazz barreled down the Lincoln Boulevard eastbound onramp into the sea of automobile

taillights. The cars moved at a walking pace; the cyclists were going anywhere from 15 to 20 mph.

Time attenuates in moments like these. Seconds stretch themselves into minutes. Even the most acute vision blurs into little more than a series of impressions as the sound of blood rushing through your veins joins the sound of heavy breathing in an otherwise indescribable, whole-body experience.

Weaving through bumper-to-bumper traffic is a thrill I don't expect I will repeat as I slip into my seventh decade, but I would put the lie to the entire experience if I didn't emphasize the crazed sense of exhilaration that redounds to the freeway rider. Around the bend, we encountered the source of the slowdown: a nasty looking accident at which as at least a dozen officers of the law and emergency medical technicians presided over a few accident victims, all of whom looked on in complete disbelief as this pack of nighttime bicycle pirates pedaled past at a thigh-burning pace. As this part of the scene unfolded, I found myself, with one of my comrades, in a drama of our own. My particular choice of bike for the evening was not exactly built for speed, and as we rode around the left side of an eighteen-wheeler, from the left-most lane of the freeway, all we could see ahead of us was open road. On one hand, this was great news because it meant we could make our way back to the right and then to the next offramp; on the other hand, the motor vehicles, including the eighteen-wheeler had begun to accelerate. Confident cyclists are accustomed to changing lanes in traffic, typically when they need to make a left-hand turn, but this doesn't happen so much on packed interstates where traffic is moving at a different clip. I don't know that I have ever made a bike go so fast. I am sure I have never climbed any hill as fast as I

climbed the 20th Street freeway exit. I know for a fact that I have never had a more evident sense that my heart—my actual heart—was going to explode.

As I wrote this, I had it in the back of my mind that one of my fellow riders had a video camera or a smart phone attached to the seat post of his bike. I even had a vague recollection that he turned it on just before we headed out. I searched for the video online. I emailed everyone I could think of, but no one knew of such a video or its whereabouts. Recently, as I was rounding up other LA urban bike culture-related videos, I came across one I had not seen that bore the title “SMCM Rides the Freeway. Once again, if you are reading the .pdf version, click the link—and very closely matching my memory is a video of the ride described above. If you are reading this in hard copy, please go to <http://vimeo.com/channels/crimanimalz/1801240>.⁵¹

Barely a year before this, it was quite clear to me that anyone who rode on the streets of Los Angeles suffered from poor judgment, possibly poor mental health, youthful inexperience, or stupidity so great as to render “good” judgment an impossible act. I’m not always certain as to how I might account for the turnaround. As utterly counterintuitive as it may seem, my own history now shows very clearly that at a time when many of my contemporaries are considering what to do with all of our free time ten years hence, I was finding both conventional and strange forms of encouragement to move past the stodgy, totalizing voices that occupied my head and wade up to my nostrils into this thing

⁵¹ Flunky Carter, “SMCM Rides the Freeway,” September 24, 2008, <http://vimeo.com/channels/crimanimalz/1801240>.

that kept presenting itself as urban bike culture. Encouragement braids itself together with education. In this case, the braid as with so many braids made from such good things, has transformed my life, transformed my understanding of place, and in a profound and definitive way, answered at least half of my questions about free time.

Cops and Ridazz

Our messenger friend the bike messenger, Jimmy Lizama, gave a TEDx talk at UCLA in 2011. When I first viewed the talk, I felt his thesis was a bit of an impenetrable koan. “Fear and imagination have everything to do with mobility and transportation.”⁵² The more I think about cities and bikes, the more sense I am able to make of Lizama’s statement. Fear and imagination have had quite a bit to do with the development of cities when looked at from a certain angle. Starting with agriculture, the production of surpluses, the subsequent need to fortify and defend locations where these surpluses are stored and traded, fear appears in the equation almost immediately—fear of the outsider, the attacker, the robber. It seems only logical that fear drove a sense of necessity, which, when combined with imagination and intelligence, leads to the birth of the city, the economy, the army, infrastructure, civilization, politics, to name just a few familiar phenomena. From there, it is only a small leap to mobility and transportation. As you will come to understand below, encounters between the informal and often renegade community of ridazz and their rides and city

⁵² “TEDxUCLA - Jimmy Lizama - My Message Is Bicycle.mov - YouTube,” 2:32 – 2:25, accessed November 4, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBJPhHNZyds>.

governments in the form of police, sheriffs, councils, commissions, and other official entities generated ample amounts of fear, anxiety, and anger, as well as equal amounts of imagination, collaboration, and cooperation. The outcomes could have easily been an amplification of all of the above. Instead, what could have gone awry led unexpectedly to an opening of a broad and deep, regional dialog about transportation and mobility that reverberates into the present. The following is a peek at some of those moments and their outcomes.

In mid-2008, the news from most of the night rides usually included references to zip-ties. I came from the anti-war protest era, so my familiarity with restraints was limited to handcuffs. But here in the new millennium, things had changed. Cheap, plentiful, and easy to carry and use in bulk, the zip-tie has become the way to maximize the catch at any action where groups of people are detained and possibly placed under arrest. The objective on the part of law enforcement, it seems, during the Homeland Security age, is ever-increasing levels of intimidation as a preventative measure—even when the event that is being policed is only somewhat political and only to the extent that it deals with highly localized issues.

Ridazz in zip ties pale in comparison to the horrors of disappeared and murdered civil rights workers, National Guardsmen shooting and killing unarmed students protesting the killing of others thousands of miles away in Cambodia, or the endless violence visited upon organized laborers fighting for just wages and working conditions. Through all of this, constitutional rights to free speech and peaceable assembly, which have admittedly been applied asymmetrically along lines of race and class, seemed more durable—at least to

the blissfully naive. The façade holds to some extent when there is a through line from the death of Medger Evers to Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech on the National Mall in Washington, DC or from the Kent State shootings to the multiple anti-war marches on the National Mall in the ensuing years. The remnants of that façade have fallen away in a time when failure to secure a permit for an assembly of more than ten people comes with the prospect of allegations of terrorism against the state under the Patriot Act.

These were objective conditions I observed, on the ground, directed at citizens engaged in municipal recreation where the full extent of what is contested goes no further than issues related to whose version of fun is the most legal and least threat producing. Whether or not it is so, conversations on some of the larger night rides frequently considered the prospect of police action in which some part of the Patriot Act could be invoked or even enforced. At least this was my observation on the first few rides I attended in the middle of 2008, particularly the ones that involved elements of protest.

Though I know of no instances of ridazz arrested, indicted, and convicted under the Patriot Acts, the facts were that in 2008, 2009, and into the middle of 2010, riders were routinely being cited for any number of alleged violations—some were legitimate, others were technically legitimate but historically overlooked, and some were not anything that approached legitimacy. Rides were routinely broken up by spontaneous police decree, and a general climate of threat was part of the culture of night rides. This is not to say that there weren’t legitimate concerns because there were. Many rides began with significant percentages of individuals who had blood-alcohol levels well in excess

of the legal limit of 0.08%.⁵³ An unfortunate number of these aforementioned inebriated riders appeared to be under the legal drinking age in the State of California. Among underage riders, there were fair numbers of curfew violations on the rides. Frequent stops at supermarkets and liquor stores often resulted in allegations or actual incidents of shoplifting. Occasionally, one rider would visit some form of bodily violence on another—mostly over something incredibly stupid like what part of town someone was from or who did the more awesome stunt. Despite the best efforts of most ride organizers, riders sometimes left behind a small lake of trash. Narratives like these insinuated themselves deeply into police perceptions of night rides and frequently shaped the outcomes of police response during any ride. At the same time, the fact that nearly every ride included episodes in which ride leaders who engaged the police on issues related to the rights of cyclists and general rights having to do with the use of public space were almost routinely restrained in zip ties, detained by the side of the road, and sometimes released but sometimes taken to jail and booked for any number of misdemeanors, ranging from drunken and disorderly behavior, to public nuisance, to destruction of property—misdemeanors for which charges were almost always dropped. This is not to say that ride leaders were never actively provoking the police to the point of irritation, but it is also not to say that the actions taken by the police fit even the perceived threat.

⁵³ This is the legal limit in the State of California. I am comfortable admitting that I am not a human blood-alcohol level testing mechanism, but I am equally confident that I know a drunk person when I see one.

Clearly, this history of relationships between the cops and ridazz in the city of Los Angeles, as well as in many of the other 87 cities of Los Angeles County, is at least a very mixed bag. The idea of “connections between the cycling and law enforcement communities” could not, for the most part, be considered good connections, particularly where this new urban bike culture that nobody had a name for was concerned. To begin with, things did not start out well between the communities of nightriders and with most, if not all, of the police departments of the 88 cities and unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County. This history is well documented in the diverse network of blogs mentioned in Chapter 4. From the sober to the most enflamed, there is little in the variation that would alter the accuracy of a broad picture or of a well-drawn timeline that depicted at first escalating tensions, followed by periods of standoff, with periodic, localized moves toward the occasional uneasy peace, to some downright sincere and successful efforts at finding better ways of getting along. Where the rides are concerned, things happened when they happened, and sometimes they happened on video. Even when there is such documentation, the police perspectives frequently differ from those of other eyewitnesses, participants, and victims.

Then came the May 28, 2010 Critical Mass ride, about which virtually every bike blogger in Los Angeles wrote in detail. This was the ride where an officer from the LAPD Hollywood Division was caught on videotape kicking at the tires of a ride participant.⁵⁴ Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa responded to the

⁵⁴ *Hollywood Cops Attack Bike Riders, 2010*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bl7WWkQrkyo&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

incident in a post that was published on the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition website. “The video from that night is disturbing. The LAPD is conducting a full investigation of this incident, and I have complete confidence in Chief Beck’s commitment to making the city’s streets safe for everyone.”⁵⁵

Things had begun to shift already, but the May 28, 2010 Critical Mass was a catalyzing event. In the following days and weeks it became obvious to me that something had shifted. It felt like a redistribution of power by agreement. There were regular meetings with police departments. A movement that seemed so intrigued by its combination lawlessness and internal ethos was now developing a voice that had an emerging audience. Out of this came a growing agreement that this self-organizing, self-regulating phenomenon of night rides should be sanctioned and left to their own devices to the extent that no harm comes to any person or property. Ride organizers had talked their way onto advisory councils or had the ears of those who sat on them. The community of ridazz sent representatives to appear before city councils and police departments. These representatives comported themselves with sufficient passion, commitment, reason, intelligence, enough good manners, and a great deal of good will, to such an extent that the most enlightened among the police departments and city councils listened.

⁵⁵ “Mayor Villaraigosa’s Response to LAPD’s Brutality Against Bicyclists « LA County Bicycle Coalition Wwww.la-Bike.org,” accessed August 23, 2012, <http://lacbc.wordpress.com/2010/06/07/mayor-villaraigosas-response-to-lapds-brutality-against-bicyclists/>.

As tensions eased between the realm of ridazz and the realm of public servants, a few key events made this easing concrete. The LAPD appointed a bicycle community relations officer, Sgt. David Krumer, to engage with cyclists. The LAPD and the cyclist community formed a task force in January of 2010.⁵⁶ On June 25, 2010, the LAPD provided a cooperative escort for the Critical Mass ride at which cycling activist and LAPD Bike Task Force member, Dr. Alex Thompson exclaimed, “We should have a holiday on this year every year from now on.”⁵⁷

Transitions are seldom smooth. Two years after the apparent detent, the death of a young cyclist, 18 year old Jerico Culata, raised tensions once again between police and ridazz.⁵⁸ An illustration of lingering resentment appears in an on the BikingLA blog in the days following the tragedy. The range of response from the cyclist community is not at all surprising. There are varying “eyewitness” reports that, at one extreme, blame the police. At the other extreme, some blame the decedent cyclist for not wearing a helmet and/or for riding a fixed-gear bicycle. There are those who defend the police by denying that the

⁵⁶ Enci Box, “Cyclists, LAPD Working on Their Relationship | Streetsblog Los Angeles,” accessed August 23, 2012, <http://la.streetsblog.org/2010/01/19/cyclists-lapd-working-on-their-relationship/>.

⁵⁷ “6/25/10 LACM/LAPC AT Afterwards,” *YouTube*, accessed August 23, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gf8Gjgh7s.

⁵⁸ Damien Newton, “Cyclist Dies on Critical Mass, NBC Opens Fire | Streetsblog Los Angeles,” accessed September 20, 2014, <http://la.streetsblog.org/2012/09/01/cyclist-dies-on-critical-mass-nbc-opens-fire/>.

circumstances as described by some even happened at all. There is the voice of Sgt. Krumer (see below), the LAPD bike liaison, engaging diplomacy and empathy in an attempt to calm the already volatile situation. There are the voices of Ted Rogers of BikingLA, Josef Bray-Ali, and Will Campbell, both local bike activists and bloggers, and Katie O'Shea, veteran of the night riding scene and frequent contributor on numerous blogs, all appealing for calm and reason. There are the more emotional voices that range from hysteria to blame to full-blown crackpot authors of serial 1,000+ word posts. Then there is a single but perhaps not singular voice from the police community that indicates something about the nature of the Critical Mass/LAPD relationship that is at the very least noteworthy:

Rank and file cops assigned to escort duty of critical mass rides are MANDATED to provide this service. We are required to be there, under duress. The resources allocated to this event could be better served, oh I don't know, fighting actual crime as opposed to putting the general motoring public at risk. But fear not. As long you have city leadership and a command structure of the LAPD that would rather cater to the public as opposed to police it, you may all carry on. You are all evidently entitled to break whatever laws you want.⁵⁹

I have not included this because I feel that it is indicative of a pervasive attitude in the Los Angeles Police Department. Given the longer history, I would

⁵⁹ Ted Rogers, "Update: L.A. Critical Mass Rider Killed in Westwood Fall," *BikinginLA*, accessed September 20, 2014, <http://bikinginla.com/2012/09/01/breaking-news-l-a-critical-mass-rider-killed-in-westwood-fall/>.

suggest that it is evidence of greater complexity than sometimes meets the eye. Power shifts. Things change. Deals are made. Not everyone is happy.

Cyclists and Police

Outside of the world of rides, individual riders in the greater Los Angeles area in the second half of the twentieth century and so far in the new millennium have ridden their bikes in a place that was quite intentionally designed for cars and drivers. In fact, the project over the last several decades to lay down 915 miles of freeways and highways in Los Angeles County,⁶⁰ has been a roaring success for those who drive cars as well as those who profit from the building of roads; the manufacture, marketing, and selling of cars; and the extraction of petroleum and its refinement into fuels for automobiles, trucks, busses, and motorcycles.

According to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), drivers travel 100,000,000 vehicle miles per day on those freeways and highways. Not including the annual maintenance of that 915 miles of road, the United States Congress and state agencies in California have conspired to spend hundreds of billions of dollars building those roads. Bicycle related initiatives may have received an amount equal to something on the order of .01% of that,

⁶⁰ “California Department of Transportation: District 7 Profile,” accessed August 26, 2012, <http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist07/aboutus/profile/>.

funded through Caltrans' on-again-off-again efforts at attending to the needs of the state's cyclists.⁶¹

Given all of that, it is only recently that any of the 88 cities in Los Angeles County have shown an interest in educating their police officers as to the vehicle code as it relates to cyclists. A reasonable person might assume that police officers charged with enforcing traffic laws would have a decent working knowledge of the *Vehicle Code* of the state in which their particular municipality is located. In the greater Los Angeles area, cyclists talk a great deal among themselves both in person and through the network of blogs mentioned in Chapter One. I don't imagine it is terribly different in other cities. It may be that cyclists who have positive experiences with law enforcement seldom, if ever, give voice to such narratives. I have faint memory of one or two accounts of police who actually knew something about the rights and expectations of cyclists as operators of vehicles sharing streets with automobiles.

The *California Vehicle Code* is reasonably clear as laid out in the following sections:

21200: A person riding a bicycle or operating a pedicab upon a highway has all the rights and is subject to all the provisions applicable to the driver of a

⁶¹ "California Department of Transportation - Division of Transportation Planning: Bicycle Program," accessed August 26, 2012, <http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/tpp/offices/bike/index.html>.

vehicle by this division, including, but not limited to, provisions concerning driving under the influence of alcoholic beverages or drugs[. . .]⁶²

21202: Any person operating a bicycle upon a roadway at a speed less than the normal speed of traffic moving in the same direction at that time shall ride as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of the roadway except under any of the following situations:

(1) When overtaking and passing another bicycle or vehicle proceeding in the same direction.

(2) When preparing for a left turn at an intersection or into a private road or driveway.

(3) When reasonably necessary to avoid conditions (including, but not limited to, fixed or moving objects, vehicles, bicycles, pedestrians, animals, surface hazards, or substandard width lanes) that make it unsafe to continue along the right-hand curb or edge, subject to the provisions of Section 21656. For purposes of this section, a "substandard width lane" is a lane that is too narrow for a bicycle and a vehicle to travel safely side by side within the lane.

(4) When approaching a place where a right turn is authorized.

(b) Any person operating a bicycle upon a roadway of a highway, which highway carries traffic in one direction only and has two or more marked traffic

⁶² "California Vehicle Code: Section 21200 Laws Applicable to Bicycle Use Peace Officer Exemption," accessed August 27, 2012, <http://www.dmv.ca.gov/pubs/vctop/d11/vc21200.htm>.

lanes, may ride as near the left-hand curb or edge of that roadway as practicable.⁶³

I don't want to give the general impression that all law enforcement officers in the greater Los Angeles area are unaware of the provisions under the law as stated in CVC 21200 because I would have no evidence to support such a claim. I can claim with complete confidence, however, that there are numerous police officers who do not act as if they are aware of such a section in the vehicle code. Police understanding and/or interpretation of CVC 21202, on the other hand, seems a great deal murkier and generally devoid of nuance. The problem seems to hinge on the term "practicable." In discussions of the law among lay people, I have often heard someone say, "What do they mean by 'practicable'?" Truth be told, though I am comfortable with my own understanding of the term, I am not convinced that it constitutes the best choice of words. The term is not the only problem though. I would submit that the balance of the misunderstanding or misinterpretation extends to clauses 1 – 4 of the code section.

In such an unabashedly "carcentric"⁶⁴ place as Los Angeles it is easy to imagine a culture of drivers and law enforcement officers who do not see the bicycle as a vehicle of sufficient status as to be entitled to or accorded nearly identical rights to those enjoyed by motor vehicles. I think that it is safe to say

⁶³ "California Vehicle Code: Section 21202 Operation on Roadway," accessed August 27, 2012, <http://www.dmv.ca.gov/pubs/vctop/d11/vc21202.htm>.

⁶⁴ Though this is not a generally accepted term, it does appear in frequently in the popular literature of cycling and in a great deal of public testimony.

that most motorists in the greater Los Angeles area do not have a picture in their minds—at least not one placed there by repeated experience—of cyclists crossing two or three lanes of traffic to get themselves into a left-turn lane. Nor do they seem to have a similar picture of a cyclist “taking a lane” that is not the lane farthest to the right, for any number of reasons that would include 1) the presence of a zone in which a motorist opening the door of a parked car poses an extreme hazard, 2) the presence of debris in the right-most area of the right-most lane, or 3) other hazardous road conditions that would include things like deep and wide longitudinal cracks in the road, deep potholes, or otherwise uneven, soft, cracked pavement conditions that particularly at night can be extremely dangerous. Even though I represent nothing more than an “*n* of 1” in any analysis, my own experience as a motorist is not terribly different from what I have described above. The irony is that I have those pictures very firmly planted in my mind as a cyclist, but behind the wheel of a car, I have to work very hard to keep those pictures in place. Sometimes I fail—without consequences to anyone on a bicycle, but I fail nonetheless.

The behaviors of motorists and police have historically indicated to many in the various tendencies within urban cycling communities that “practicable” means despite any of the aforementioned conditions. I say “historically” because as this writing has been taking place, conditions have improved considerably in the most recent past. Even though I very recently experienced an episode in which an older driver behaved in a surprisingly threatening way in response to nothing more than my presence on the road—inspiring me to take a picture of her

license plate with my mobile phone—it feels as if these kinds of events are diminishing in number in my own experience and in the narratives of others.

Above, I have included the provision in the State of California Vehicle Code stating that the rights and responsibilities of cyclists are identical to those of drivers of motor vehicles. I have done this because the general impression in various cycling communities is that the motorists themselves are not aware of this provision. A quick scan of the bicycle related blogs and the use of “motorist” or “driver” as a search term in these blogs will yield substantial volumes of accounts of unpleasant encounters between cyclists and drivers. A further scan in which the terms “cops,” “police,” or “law enforcement” are added to the search could give you the impression that in the very recent past, encounters between cyclists and motorists where the police were called in frequently seemed to end with the police officer or officers siding with the driver. The frequency of these anecdotes has often led me to believe that while the officers may know that cyclists have the same rights and responsibilities as drivers of motor vehicles, they wish and act as if they didn’t.

An extreme but emblematic example of this was what I will call The (Not So) Great Downtown Humvee Debacle. This is the brief synopsis of the events of Friday, April 24, 2009, pieced together from the various blog reports and public testimonies. A group that would no doubt identify as ridazz—which holds the possibility that they were packing a bit of an attitude, but I wasn’t there and don’t know anyone who was—were riding in downtown Los Angeles early Friday morning (2 am). They were taking the lane as it is said in the world of vehicular cycling. Someone driving a Humvee H3 drove up in back of the cyclists and

honked. This is undoubtedly where the first part of the undiplomatic interactions took place. The Humvee then drove up behind one of the cyclists and knocked him to the pavement. Luckily for the rider, he was knocked clear of the vehicle which then ran his bike over. Because the vehicle had no license plates, the dozen or so cyclists surrounded the car “to ensure that the driver didn’t leave the scene.”⁶⁵

Witnesses at the scene seem to agree that the heat of the dialog rose considerably and included a couple of threatening claims by the occupants of the vehicle. The claims included a suggestion that one of the occupants was in possession of a firearm; the second was an assertion made by one of the occupants of the Humvee that if the cyclists intended to pursue the matter, they, the occupants of the vehicle, would leave the scene and return “60 Crips deep.”⁶⁶ The driver then drove at several of the cyclists who jumped out of the way, narrowly escaping, as three of their bicycles went under the car and were destroyed. It gets a little fuzzy after this as to exactly what happened next, but those involved agree that at some point shortly after the driver of the Humvee ran over the second, third, and fourth bikes, he was stopped by Los Angeles Police

⁶⁵ Zach Behrens, “SUV + Bicycle Incident Leaves All Parties Not-Guilty: LAist,” accessed August 28, 2012, http://laist.com/2009/04/27/bicyclist_suv_incident_leaves_all_p.php.

⁶⁶ Alex Thompson, “Hummer Hits Cyclist. Officer Cho Sympathizes with the Driver, Adding ‘and I Carry a Gun in My Car.’ | Bikeside LA,” accessed August 27, 2012, <http://www.bikesidela.org/hummer-hits-cyclist-officer-cho-sympathizes-with-the-driver-adding-and-i-carry-a-gun-in-my-car/>.

Officer Harry Cho. This is where the official version and the cyclists' version of the story deviate considerably.

The public records show that Officer Cho maintained that one of the cyclists accidentally ran into the vehicle. This account became the official Los Angeles Police Department testimony in multiple public hearings as delivered by Deputy Chief, Kirk Albanese. The cyclists maintained that they were the ones who were treated like criminals. Their accounts of being threatened with guns by the passengers of the Humvee were met with Officer Cho's less than friendly response. "If it had been me with my family in that car, I'd have done the same thing, and I carry a gun in my car."

Despite the fact that the driver of the car left the scene of an accident, no citation was issued, and no charges were filed. Despite the fact that the driver of the car ran over three of the bicycles as he was leaving the scene, no charges were filed. At the time of Deputy Albanese's testimony before City Council, two months after the incident, the only charges still under investigation had to do with the driver's complaint of vandalism to his vehicle. There is no question that this is an anecdote, but a survey of police responses to 1) cyclist fatalities involving hit and run 2) drunk driving incidents in which cyclists have been critically injured 3) the history of police behaviors while enforcing the law during large group rides, all indicate a history of extreme bias on the part of the Los Angeles Police Department against cyclists that was palpable up through the middle of 2010 when something shifted.

Cyclists and the City of Los Angeles

In July of 2011, the City of Los Angeles settled a quarrel with itself (sort of). The subject: just how does the city feel about people riding bicycles on its streets? From a popular perspective, ambivalent-but-getting-better would be the most accurate characterization, at least as I have observed it over the last several years. It hasn't been for lack of trying. Though at first, it mostly seemed to be in a circular-firing-squad kind of way. For the longest time, there were several dialogs going on simultaneously. Some were at odds with the others' voices—the interests of mountain bicyclists did not square with commuters, road racing clubs, or ridazz. Others appeared, at times, as if they could not care less—law enforcement, LADOT, Metro, along with other city and county agencies and elected bodies; others held the entire community of two-and-three-wheeled, active transportation participants in total contempt—again, the latter group; some made sounds that could lead one to believe that they saw themselves as superior to all others, as did some of the others—well, actually, that would be all of them.

On this aforementioned occasion, the City Council of the City of Los Angeles passed, by a unanimous vote, Los Angeles Ordinance No. 181817 also known as “Prohibition Against Harassment of Cyclists”; it is thought to be the first such ordinance of its kind in any city in the world.⁶⁷ The keyword here is

⁶⁷ Ross Hirsch, Esq., “First-of-Its-Kind Cyclist Anti-Harassment Becomes Law in Los Angeles | Streetsblog Los Angeles,” accessed August 5, 2012, <http://la.streetsblog.org/2011/09/27/first-of-its-kind-cyclist-anti-harassment-becomes-law-in-los-angeles/>.

“harassment.” The law can be seen as favorable to cyclists, given the range of possible behaviors that might qualify as harassment. The ordinance (see Appendix 6) includes such things, to the extent that a cyclist can prove it, as assault; attempted assault; threat of physical injury; actual injury or the attempt to injure; distraction or attempted distraction; and intentional forcing or attempt to force a cyclist off the road “because of, in whole or in part, the Bicyclist’s status as a Bicyclist.”⁶⁸ To put some teeth in it, the authors of the ordinance made provisions for cyclists to bring civil suit against offending drivers. Those found liable would pay a minimum of \$1,000 or three times the actual costs of any damages their actions may have caused. In addition, a motorist who is found liable is also required to pay “reasonable attorney’s fees and costs of litigation.” On top of all of that, “A jury or a court may award punitive damages where warranted.”

The foregoing discussion of laws and law enforcement/ridazz/cyclists relationships is important to a narrative about rides and ridazz because it is an inescapable part of the experience of riding a bicycle in Los Angeles. The relationship is direct and immediate. Rare is the rider who has not experienced motorists *and* police officers who know little to nothing about the laws and vehicle codes as they apply to a person on a bicycle. This is not to say that an unhealthy percentage of bicyclists are well-versed in law, but those who value

⁶⁸ City of Los Angeles, “Los Angeles Municipal Code Chapter IV, Article 5.10: Prohibition Against Harassment of Bicyclists,” June 2011.

their safety, their lives, and their rights very often can recite their rights and responsibilities as stated in the California Department of Motor Vehicles Code.

Recent changes in both civil and state codes, such as the anti-harassment and “three-foot”⁶⁹ laws indicate important changes in the ways in which the voices of cyclists are heard by elected officials. Clearly, there are multiple stakeholder voices to which these changes can be attributed, but it is a fact that these voices were joined by many whose names are mentioned in this chapter. The interests of this latter constituency most certainly arose from a collective interest in improving the riding experience for anyone who rides a bike.

Ciclovía

As innovative a place as Los Angeles is, it is still a place influenced by what flows into it, at least to the same extent that it is influential by virtue of what flows out of it. Los Angeles, after all, is a place made from so many other places. I would argue that what an outsider might perceive as a mass identity crisis often attributed to collective sense of “placelessness,” is, in fact, a messy abundance of identities connected to a multiplicity of places.

It feels right to land the often hard-edged tale of *ridazz* in one of those places of influence. That place is the city of Bogotá, Colombia, which has encouraged cyclists to ride the streets on Sundays to engage in all forms of active transportation and recreation that can be named and practiced on city streets. Musicians, puppeteers, mimes, actors, aerobics instructors, dancers, and others

⁶⁹ Assembly Bill No. 1371 which mandates that drivers of automobiles must allow a minimum of three feet when passing a bicyclist on the road. It took effect in September of 2014.

teach, engage, feed, exercise, and entertain their fellow citizens as all explore and enjoy over 150km⁷⁰ of streets and the place where they live in a way that is not typical for residents of most large urban areas. This is not something that darted out from under a rock in Los Angeles, nor did it spring up simultaneously with the emergence of urban bike culture in North America.

CicloVía does not trace its roots back to 1992, or to messenger culture, or to Critical Mass rides, but rather to December 15, 1974, and its originator, Jaime Ortiz who envisioned an entirely different way of seeing and experiencing his city.⁷¹ It was a new way of inhabiting time. Sunday has not been, for the last 39 years, simply Sunday. Sunday is CicloVía. CicloVía is a testament to the staying power and the sustainability of a mass scale public ride that has managed to grow by a few more miles every few years, from a few miles of streets in a small corner of Bogotá to its current size. It has grown up in a city with a remarkable share of supportive and enlightened mayors. CicloVía is the grandmother and grandfather of all post-World-War-II urban bike rides. It is the ground of being from which all others flow, and its namesakes have appeared in various forms at various frequencies in hundreds of cities all over the world. All of this has happened despite the fact that only the most microscopic fraction of

⁷⁰ R. Montezuma, M. Cleves, and L. Marmolejo, "PEOPLE POWER," *Sustainable Transport*, no. 14 (2002): 26–28.

⁷¹ "Historia de La CicloVía Y RecreoVía," Bogota colombia - in bogota - inbogota.com - informacion de bogotá, accessed August 24, 2012, <http://www.inbogota.com/transporte/ciclovía.htm>.

literature—scholarly, journalistic, popular or otherwise—mentions it or gives it its due as a major influence in the current state of urban cycling culture.⁷²

Regardless of the work that has or has not been done examining the insides and outsides of CicloVía, its persistence could be seen as a phenomenon that has functioned like a scion grafted onto the lives of hundreds of other cities. Given the aforementioned tendency of Los Angeles to incorporate the influence of other places into its DNA, CicloVía could also be seen as a telescope, or perhaps a kaleidoscope, into a future Los Angeles—one that takes fully into its warm embrace every last one of its ridazz.

Tire Tracks

Clearly, rides and ridazz have produced a culture, and cultures within that culture, of their own. This culture has challenged the status quo in Los Angeles, and in doing so, it has brought change. Where there were no known organized night rides in 1995, there are now hundreds each year. In their infancy, these rides and the riding culture were exotic species—some might even have seen them as invasive. Now these rides are commonplace occurrences that are nearly normalized. Looking back to the questions I have posed in the first chapter, it also seems clear that the phenomenon of night rides—which would include the complex network of relationships between ridazz and place as city, place as polis, place as land, place as place—has created a sequence of disturbances that have opened up new opportunities for constructive change. In that way I am

⁷² The preponderance of the scholarly literature that examines or, more frequently, mentions CicloVía seems to come from the social science and public health domains.

comfortable arguing that there is a strong correlation between the emergence of bike culture in Los Angeles and night rides, by default a significant player in that correlation.

I have to think that the enduring presence of CicloVía in Bogotá, Colombia has inspired other cities to encourage and accommodate events where the streets are turned over to the will and whim of pedestrians, cyclists, skaters, and other practitioners of active transportation for a morning, an afternoon, an evening. In a similar, but different manner, Los Angeles night rides have grown in the same petri dish/ecosystem as evolving peace talks with police departments, planning departments, and transportation departments; farther down the timeline, in another corner of the dish, sanctioned, legitimized sponsored rides such as CicLAvia have emerged. Night rides appear to have forever insinuated themselves into the civic life of the greater Los Angeles region.

I will concede that ill-willed encounters among ridazz, Humvees, and individual members of a police force do not necessarily improve the life of a city or effect a culture shift on their own. I will argue, though, that combined with other events like C.R.A.N.K. Mob, Wolf Pack Hustle, Cub Camp, Taco Tuesday, FMLY Ride, and the dozens of other rides that happen on a monthly basis, even with the occasional ill-willed encounter or littered supermarket parking lot, the gestalt of these events has reverberated in such a way that their contribution to change cannot be ignored.

Riding has changed me into someone from which I can and would never change back. Robin Kimmerer was right. I did have to create my own ritual in order to feel indigenous to Los Angeles. I won't say that the job is complete, and I

won't say that I am a disciplined practitioner of the ritual I discovered after returning home from my conversation with Robin. I will say that every time I get on a bike I am more connected to the place where I was born than I was before. There is a connection among my mind, body, bike, and the land across which all of those things travel. I know heat, hills, potholes, rain, and wind in ways I cannot know them in my car. I see and hear a different city when I ride. I must believe that others do as well.

Have night rides alone changed the transportation and cultural systems of Los Angeles? No. Have their organizers, their increasing numbers, and their persistence over 18 years made a significant contribution to an accelerating and evolving conversation about transportation and cultural systems in Los Angeles? Unquestionably. Ride along with me through the lands of Wrenches and Wonks. The further expansion of the chronicle, the refinement of the manifesto, and the accumulation of evidence will support this claim.

Chapter Three

Wrenches Grow a Culture of Education and Service

The night ride—for that matter any bike ride—flows in the direction of bike repair and maintenance. It is not always obvious to those who set out on a ride that the brand new bike of the present contains the broken bike of the future, or at the very least, the bike in need of future maintenance and repairs. Anyone who rides regularly eventually catches up with this bike on a frequent basis.

In the chicken-and-egg story that is urban bike culture in Los Angeles, it is certain that the ride preceded the d.i.y. bicycle-repair cooperative—or *wrenching co-op* as they are most commonly known. The first L.A. Critical Mass, the first AIDSride (1997), and the first L.A. River Ride, as well as the appearance of the first bike lanes in the Silver Lake neighborhood (1999); the expansion of Critical Mass to multiple parts of the city; the Democratic National Convention Critical Mass ride where 72 cyclists were arrested (2000); and the first Cranksgiving ride (2001) all occurred before the appearance of the first wrenching co-op in 2002, The Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina.⁷³

This chapter is about the emergence, evolution, and proliferation in Los Angeles of wrenching co-ops and wrenches—the common name of those who share their maintenance and repair expertise with ridazz, riders and cyclists. The journey across this terrain will include a brief history of the phenomenon as it has unfolded in Los Angeles; a description of the first three wrenching co-ops

⁷³ Adonia Lugo, “Los Angeles Bike Movement History: A Collaboration Exploring Culture Change,” *L.A. Bike Movement History*, accessed September 9, 2014, <http://labikemvmt.org/>.

established in the region; my own experience with building, maintaining, and repairing my own bikes; a mini biography of the late Sheldon Brown—the Newtonville, Massachusetts wrenching god who created the first-known, exhaustive, online, encyclopedia and archive of bicycle repair, used extensively by every wrench with whom I have ever spoken; and, finally, a reflection and analysis of what this all means and how it adds up to profound change in Los Angeles.

From Ridazz to Wrenches and Back Again

There is very little if anything written about bike messenger and night-riding populations and their relationships to bike repair capacity. The following is a brief attempt at describing one particular form of bicycle repair capacity: the do-it-yourself bicycle repair cooperative in its many forms. The goal is to describe their genesis in the greater Los Angeles area, as I have observed it, and their existing landscape within that system.

There are four basic approaches to deal with a broken bike. The rider can 1) take the bike to a bike shop and, typically, spend a great deal of money to hire the services of a bike mechanic; 2) park the bike in the garage, on the back porch, or in the back yard and either 2a) stop riding or 2b) purchase a new bike, initiating the cycle again;⁷⁴ 3) junk it; give it away; or sell it; or 4) learn to fix the bike.

⁷⁴ This is not a particularly viable option if you are a bike messenger who is living at close to the regionally adjusted poverty line.

If your livelihood depends on the bicycle as a mode of transportation and or professional practice, for example, bicycle messenger, it is highly likely that expensive bike-shop repairs are not an option. Learning bicycle repair is very nearly an imperative unless prevailing on the kindness of friends is a persistent option. If you are one of the night riders, an autodidact, and mechanically inclined, even a few of the wrong tools, combined with the mountains of shared bike-repair knowledge immediately available on the internet, will get you very far in a relatively short amount of time. If you are somewhat of an autodidact and a social animal at the same time, you can invite your friends to gather up their tools, knowledge, and beer so that they might join you while you make pizza, drink beer, and learn together, over time, to become better bike mechanics or *wrenches*.

And so it began something like this. By 2002, Jimmy Lizama had put in a few of years as a bike messenger. Bike messengers weave in and out of traffic; jump curbs; negotiate potholes; dodge careless, sometimes hostile drivers; and collide periodically with cars, trucks, busses, other cyclists, and the occasional pedestrian.⁷⁵ Beyond the frequent flat tire, even the simplest of bikes will need something tightened, adjusted, or lubricated on a monthly basis if the rider wants to get the most out of the machine. Riding daily ups the frequency to every week.

⁷⁵ If you have seen the movies *Quicksilver*, made in 1986 starring Kevin Bacon or the more recent *Premium Rush*, released in 2012 starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, you have seen a moderately exaggerated representation of what a bike messenger takes her/his bike through daily. An internet search for “bike messengers” will turn up a slew of movie trailers and other video clips that will demonstrate the perils of this profession for both rider and bike.

Wrenching of some kind or another can be a daily necessity, but there is only so much a rider can do with a 15mm wrench, a patch kit, a couple of tire levers, and a place to turn a bike upside down.

Do-It-Yourself Wrenching Co-ops

If the night rides constitute the wilder exterior of urban bike culture, the co-ops function as its more organized, though sometimes-turbulent interior. Although there is a great deal to learn about place on the rides, the co-ops are where riders go to repair and maintain the trusty steeds that move them through these places. Co-ops are halls of learning, community centers, and the riders equivalent of back rooms where collaborators hatch plans to hit the streets with greater frequency and larger populations.

Jimmy Lizama and Ben Guzman were living in the Los Angeles Eco Village⁷⁶ ⁷⁷ when they got the idea to repair their bikes in the kitchen of one of the empty apartments. Soon many of their cyclist friends got wind of what was going on at the Village. Riders brought tools, beers, and food. They made their own pizzas. They filled the shelves with wrenches, chain breakers, lubricants, salvaged parts, and other bicycle stuff. At some point, the place became so crowded, they had to find another repair stand and chain it to a fence outside the apartment. The outside stand eventually did double duty as a 24 hour emergency

⁷⁶ First conceived by visionary/activist Lois Arkin in the early 1990's, the LA Eco-Village Intentional Community is a relatively early example of a cohousing model that makes use of existing building stock—in this case a small cluster of older apartment buildings located near the downtown business district.

⁷⁷ "Los Angeles Eco-Village," accessed October 7, 2011, <http://laecovillage.org/>.

repair spot for anyone who happened upon it in a coincidental moment of need. And so, in 2002 CE, The Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina entered the world with all four burners blazing.

When the number of friends showing up to repair bikes exceeded the carrying capacity of the kitchen and then the apartment, the co-op emerged from a somewhat private realm to become a public, community asset. The participants eventually discovered that they had learned/taught themselves to create and run a wrenching co-op where they taught others, who in turn taught others. Eventually, as it happens in some ecosystems, overpopulation leads to migration in search of a more nutrient-rich habitat.⁷⁸ As they grew inside the original apartment/kitchen, they considered the prospect of turning what they had created outward to the community.

In order to continue to fulfill its de facto mission, the loose affiliation of cyclists, wrenching enthusiasts, and eco villagers entered into a process of self-evaluation and strategic planning. As a result of the planning process, the founding group of The Kitchen first foresaw the need to formalize as an organizational entity. The group came to a consensus that operating as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit would serve the greatest number of interests. They also

⁷⁸ Think of bees. A population grows large enough that in some corner of the hive, the existing queen places an egg in one of the perfect little wax cells, and that egg will be nurtured in such a way that it will eventually become a queen itself. At some point, that queen has a large enough following to establish a viable colony elsewhere. They tank up on honey, almost to the point of inebriation, and off they go.

agreed that they needed a larger space with a more public presence than the Los Angeles Eco Village afforded. In 2004, The Bicycle Kitchen moved to more long-term quarters at 706 Heliotrope Avenue, a few blocks away from the Los Angeles Eco Village and a small commercial area that would soon be dubbed *The Bike District*.⁷⁹

By establishing themselves in this way, knowingly or unwittingly, these wrenching bike messengers and nightriders, who end up calling themselves “cooks,” set into motion a self-reinforcing and eventually a set of self-sustaining feedback loops. The wrenching coop is an attractive community asset that has the capacity to inspire non-riding bicycle owners to learn basic repairs and take up riding. It accomplishes this with little more than a space, tools, spare parts, and a deep, collective knowledge base that resides in the volunteer mechanics who staff the co-op. They also created the capacity for replication. As rides expanded into other parts of the region, so, too, would wrenching capacity.

The timeline of the wrenching phenomenon looks something like the children’s board game *Mousetrap* where a steel ball is set in motion along an elaborate, Rube Goldberg like contraption. In this example, let’s substitute the steel ball with a handful of people who engage in a kind of relay race. We’ll substitute the gravitational pull that moves the ball down the chute with the excitement that each newly accomplished wrench brings to the place on the chute where they trip a lever that causes the next wrench to jump through a hole onto a

⁷⁹ Andrew Vontz, “The Strange Case of the Visionary in the Bike Shop in the Kitchen,” *Bicycling*, May 2006.

lever that flips the next wrench into a tub, that excites the next wrench who shimmies down a pole to another part of town where they start another co-op. The time-lapse version of the urban-ecosystem evolution machine that spawned multiple wrenching co-ops goes something like this:

Someone in the neighborhood rolls a bike to Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina because he wants to learn how to fix the flat tire that has been that way since three weeks after he got the bike five years ago. He learns. He is empowered. He rides the bike home. While he is at the co-op, he learns about *Critical Mass*, a night ride. The prospect of joining up with a community of other riders is revelation, so he rides the next *Critical Mass* where he runs into a friend who has squeaky brakes. The experience of community is so intoxicating he tells his friend about the ride and about this co-op place where she might learn how to fix the brakes so that they don't squeak. While they are at the co-op, they run into another friend who is there to replace his bottom bracket. She tells them about *Midnight Ridazz* and this amazing 30-mile ride all over hell-and-gone that lasted until dawn. One is coming up on Saturday, and they all agree to ride. One of the three decides that the experience of empowerment is something she wants to share with others so she signs up to volunteer at the co-op with the idea of eventually becoming a full-fledged cook (wrench). She tells a guy she knows about the amazing *Build-a-Bike* program the Kitchen has developed where a young person who is strapped for cash can volunteer at the co-op and build a complete bike out of salvaged parts. This is that ridazz gateway to more than becoming a wrench and regular participant in night rides. It is also a place where all wrenches can see a form of economic justice in action. Those who might not

be able to afford a bike or shop time can pay with their labor, earn a bike, and develop a skill.

One particular wrench moves a few miles away to a place that has a garage where he starts tinkering around with a couple of bikes people have given him since he has started riding again. His friends start showing up with beers. One of them doesn't have a bike when he gets there, but after learning how to change out a bottom bracket,⁸⁰ he, too, has learned a skill that allows him to ride away on a bike he built out of used parts. The garage stays open all night, seven days a week. It becomes a hangout but not really a co-op; it's not a kitchen, but, clearly, something is cooking. People are fixing their bikes, to be sure, but the structure is loose—a little too loose for the neighbors who complain to the police about the all-night comings and goings. Someone has a friend who has space. The friend is willing to host the too-loose-hangout/wrenching gang. In keeping with and in honor of its origins, a Bike Oven is born.

Meanwhile, while riding across town at all hours, a young, broke, UCLA Mathematics PhD Candidate, night-ride party animal with a head for transportation policy and cyclist advocacy, decides to participate in the build-a-bike program. At some point, in between the demands of his dissertation-driven schedule demands and a handful of beer-infused conversations, he and two other car-free, bike-riding, wrenching denizens of the “Westside” make the decision to open a third co-op in a tiny storefront leased

⁸⁰ See Appendix 8, Figure 6. Find the bottom bracket.

from the Green Party. It is sometime around Valentine's Day, 2007, when a Bikerowave is born.

Within three years of the appearance of Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina, Bike Oven, and Bikerowave, Valley Bikery formed as a one-night-per-week operation inside a commercial bike shop. This created a wrenching presence farther north in the region. Approximately a year later, the Bikery found a more permanent home in a small, but well-used rented space, in the Van Nuys area of the San Fernando Valley. Shortly after The Valley Bikery settled into its new quarters, The HUB Community Bike Center established a presence in Long Beach, at the southern end of Los Angeles County (This was the first in the early succession of co-ops to depart from the kitchen-themed names. It was, coincidentally, the first of the co-ops to fold). Finally, in late 2010, Bici Libre/Bici Digna—the former having enveloped the latter—opened its doors just west of downtown Los Angeles where it served a substantial clientele of bicycle-riding day laborers and homeless Angelenos who can teach a wrench a thing or two with a nail, a wire, and a file.

A Look at the Co-op Landscape as Place and Population

Before I return for a closer look at the original three cooperatives: The Bicycle Kitchen, The Bike Oven, and Bikerowave, I want to offer a coarse-grained look at the co-op landscape and the numbers as they relate to regional demographics and wrenching co-op capacity. This should set a context for understanding where these co-ops are situated and how they are situated in a way that demanded and still demands further expansion as more riders and ridazz hit the streets over time.

The emergence of d.i.y. bicycle repair cooperatives is both a phenomenon of people, as described above, and a phenomenon of place. The Bicycle Kitchen was one place in a 440+ miles² city, with a population of 4,000,000 in a 4,700+ miles² county with a population of 11,000,000 where a person could learn to put a bike together from used parts and likely spend less than \$200, sometimes as little as \$25, to get roadworthy. A horseback estimate of one cooperative's capacity, using the number of repair stands (4), multiplied by the annual number of hours of operation (27/week x 52), divided by the average number of hours required to get a bike ready for the streets (3)⁸¹ indicates that Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina could serve the needs of just over 2,800 bike projects annually.

Approximately 0.6% of the greater Los Angeles area population commutes by bicycle. Let's say, for the purposes of putting a number up there, another 3.5% are casual cyclists who use their bikes more than once each week and another .5% are people who are pulling a dusty bike out of a garage because of some new inspiration to renew a past cycling interest. This is 5% of a population of 4,000,000 in the city and 11,000,000 in the county. Using the city number alone, that amounts to 200,000 bikes in need of some form of regular maintenance. Let's assume 10-25% of that number have even a remote interest in doing their own repairs but don't have the time or resources to establish a

⁸¹ This is based on an rough analysis of stand time as it appears in the cash and credit card receipts records of Bikerowave. This analysis does not include pro bono stand time or time put in by co-op members working on their own projects.

home shop of their own. That would mean approximately 20,000-50,000 cyclists could use the services of a DIY bike-repair co-op at least once. If this were the case, Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina could accommodate barely 6-14% of the city demand and 10% of the county demand. Without comprehensive cyclist counts across Los Angeles County, it is impossible to measure or predict increased demand over time. Informally, though, anecdotes heard among riders seem to indicate increasing numbers of riders on the road year after year.

In any ecosystem, the sudden appearance of an unexpected abundance of nutrient materials is frequently followed by population increases among interested indigenous and exogenous consumers. If it can be assumed that in a population of active and inactive bicycle owners, there is a dormant or pent up demand for DIY repair opportunities (the nutrient), it is far from a logical stretch to speculate that the appearance of such an opportunity or opportunities would, in turn, give rise to the appearance of the bicyclist equivalent of the aforementioned consumers. This being the case with the appearance of Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina, and given its capacity, clearly there would be a need for more Kitchens or something like them. In fact, as word spread among the cycling communities of the greater Los Angeles area, cyclists were known to travel “across town,” which could mean anywhere from 8–20 miles, to work on a bike.

Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina

After seven years in their Hel-Mel/Bike District home, Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina became a homeowner in 2012.⁸² Given that I have described the history and the founding cast of characters of Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina, I will spend some time describing the physical space in which they operate. In some respects, this description should serve as a proxy for the spaces currently occupied by all three of the co-ops. In their original forms, the three co-ops were born in cramped spaces that were barely adaptable to the task at hand.

Through the generosity of local artist, philanthropist, and Annenberg Foundation director, Lauren Bon, Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina is located in its own free-standing building located at 4429 Fountain Avenue, in the East Hollywood neighborhood of Los Angeles. The building is a generous 1,500 ft² on the inside, which is similar in size to Bikerowave. In some sense, this is where the appearance of revolution and outlaw status stops. The place is neat and orderly. Used parts are separated into several bins along one wall. Hundreds of tools, workbenches, and supplies line the other walls. Three double-head bike stands accommodate six bikes at any given time; everything one might find in a professional bike shop is in this room. What can't be found in a professional bike shop that is in massive supply at Bicycle Kitchen is a deeply committed volunteer staff on a mission to make Los Angeles a different and better city by building capacity in its riders and ridazz.

⁸² Lugo, "Los Angeles Bike Movement History: A Collaboration Exploring Culture Change," 2012.

The current leadership of the Kitchen is mostly three generations removed from the founding group (assuming a leadership generation is approximately four years), which by most measures is a sign of health in an organization. Twelve years after its founding, the Kitchen is on a firm financial footing. The organization owns its physical plant. It delivers the same service and product—an effective bike repair and maintenance education—as it continues its own internal process of training trainers and maintaining reliable hours.

Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina maintains high standards for its cooks/wrenches who must take a test in order to graduate from trainee. Foul language is not appreciated. Alcohol is not allowed. The movement from an informal wrenching club to a public business brings with it a new set of rules and requirements. Risk is no longer an individual choice but something that must be identified and managed. And the beat goes on.

The Bike Oven

In 2005, the Bray-Ali brothers , Joseph and Adam, sensed just such a growing demand in their own Highland Park neighborhood, which was approximately 7.5 miles northeast of the Bicycle Kitchen. They opened The Bike Oven in a single car garage below an apartment. While Bicycle Kitchen elected to structure themselves as a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization, the Oven took a more organic approach that some have referred to as anarchic. In the beginning of their operations, there were no set hours. If the garage door was open, the Oven was open.

The operational model was amorphous, open-ended, and some would say anarchic. From time to time, the neighbors might become agitated as a result of

some of the time-of-day/decibel-output relationships and goings on. Unlike the Bicycle Kitchen, where traditionally on-shift drinking has been prohibited and colorful language has been actively discouraged, the occasional libation—some would say more like periodic or even frequent—loosening the occasional tongue, resulting in the occasional lively conversation, enjoyed at high volume were a kind of *modus operandi* at Bike Oven.

Combined with the pressures on the inventory of tools presumably resulting from the open-garage-door policy, at a certain point an interest in peaceful relations with the neighbors prevailed, and it became clear that more suitable quarters might be found in a conventional storefront space nearby. In 2007, the Bike Oven moved to the space it currently occupies at 3706 North Figueroa Street in the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. As of this writing, some nine years after its informal establishment, Bike Oven lives on. They have managed to maintain their open structure despite their more conventional location. This could have something to do with the fact that the Bray-Ali brothers opened Flying Pigeon, a commercial bike shop located next door to Bike Oven, where they started by selling a bike cheap and affordable, if extremely heavy, bikes by the same name.

Despite the potential air of “legitimacy” created by the new location, the loose confederation of volunteers at Bike Oven remained stalwart in their maintenance of the original structure. Power and leadership would be distributed as horizontally as possible.

Bikerowave

As Bike Oven made its way through its nascent stage in the Bray-Ali garage, three riders from the west side of Los Angeles (map), Yoli Hodde, Alex Thompson, and Zack Beatty hatched a plan for a third co-op that would be located several miles to the west of the Kitchen and the Oven. Picking up on the cooking theme, the new co-op would be called The Bikerowave.

Bikerowave was conceived in an alehouse in Santa Monica, California. Shortly thereafter, the three founders put together a small fund of several thousand dollars, secured space on the border of West Los Angeles and Santa Monica⁸³ in a storefront that served as headquarters of the Santa Monica Green Party. Shortly after their alehouse meeting, it is alleged that the founders opened the doors of Bikerowave on February 14, 2007. The space was approximately 200 ft². Initially, it was staffed by the founders. Eventually they were joined by what would become the core group of 12 volunteers over the next year.

During that time, the Green Party lost their lease, which put Bikerowave's founders in the tight corner of finding a place to rent with funds that were coming almost entirely from their own pockets. With more volunteers showing up, Zach, Yoli, and Alex found that they were broadening and deepening their networks of relationships in the riding community. That's when Bikerowave 2.0 was birthed. Someone told a friend who told a friend, and the location at 1816 Berkeley Street, Unit A, in the "Media District" of Santa Monica, again just west of the Los

⁸³ I should note here that Santa Monica is a separate municipal entity in Los Angeles County. It is bordered on its southwest side by the Pacific Ocean and surrounded on all other sides by the City of Los Angeles.

Angeles border, became the new home. Barely 600 ft², 2.0 was a luxury palace compared to 1.0. The ceilings were high enough to hang maybe a dozen bikes that belonged to customers, individual volunteers/members, or the co-op as a whole. On the back wall, facing the entry, volunteers installed a serviceable workbench. On the opposite wall, adjacent to the entry, they installed an impressive array of tools. In the middle of the floor sat three professional bike-repair stands that could accommodate two bikes each. There was room left over for a glass display counter that served as a front desk/check-out, a back room/office/storage space, and a small computer workstation where volunteers and customers could research anything and everything related to bikes, bike parts, and bike repairs.

Bikerowave had truly come into its own. Along the way to this moment, the founders recognized the need to define the Bikerowave mission and develop a governance structure that could help sustain it. The mission and bylaws can be found in Appendix 4, but the mission itself bears repeating as part of The Bikerowave origin story:

Bikerowave's primary mission is to empower the cycling public by providing affordable hands-on education about bicycle repair and maintenance. We aim to provide the space and tools necessary to assist cyclists in repairing and maintaining their own bicycles. We also seek to serve as a community center for Westside cyclists by providing a venue for gatherings and events. We are a not-for-profit, all-volunteer organization that strives to be eco-friendly in all aspects of its operation. We believe the

success of our mission will lead to a safer, stronger, larger and more vital Westside cycling community.⁸⁴

Time and time again, as I sat in on meetings of the Board of Directors or monthly member meetings, this simple, clear mission statement served a very important purpose in the life of the organization. As can often be the case in any group dynamic, conversations can go off-road without finding their way back to their original purpose. Having a clearly stated mission and having a leadership group committed to that mission creates a mooring to which all of the organizational work can be tied. So long as there is someone in the room to remind everyone else that everything flows from the mission and that a group should guide all conversations so as to advance the mission, the important work gets done.⁸⁵

These five (the original three plus two) d.i.y. bicycle repair cooperatives operate under different legal statuses. The most common model is the nonprofit or 501 (c) (3); the member-owned consumer cooperative, which is an official designation in the State of California; or the clubhouse model, which is an entirely informal model that strikes me as vulnerable to tax scrutiny when money is changing hands.

⁸⁴ Bikerowave Cooperative Membership, "Bikerowave Mission Statement," *Bikerowave.org*, 2007, http://www.bikerowave.org/?page_id=252.

⁸⁵ In my wildest dreams, I never would have thought I would receive such a detailed education in organizational management. If nothing else came of this project, that bit of knowledge acquisition would have been worth all of the time I spent in its research and writing.

The founders of Bikerowave elected to operate as a member owned “consumer cooperative.” In the State of California, this form of corporate structure mandates that all benefits and net income of the corporation are to be distributed to its members and its customers. Bikerowave has done this with great success, and it has suited the mission well. Very early on, by open agreement, surplus funds went to four places: the payment of all obligations and expenses, the building of a small but mighty inventory of bike-related retail goods, the establishment and maintenance of a modest reserve fund, and the replacement and replenishment of the considerable inventory of tools. The election to structure itself as a consumer cooperative eliminated the mountains of documentation and filings required of a non-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation. This has quite literally freed the hands of the members to perform duties that fulfill the Bikerowave mission.

So what does the fulfillment of the mission look like? At first, it looked like the founders and the first group of volunteers covering shifts two to three nights each week from 6:30 pm–10:00 pm. Now it looks like a volunteer force of 40, give or take a few, staffing shifts Monday–Thursday at the aforementioned hours, as well as two shifts on Saturday that span from 11:00 am–5:00 pm and Sunday from 11:00 am–2:00 pm. It looks like five bike repair stands with two workstations, each filled with customers learning from skilled volunteer mechanics everything they might want to know about how to repair a bicycle. It looks like a big room with all of the tools and stands pushed to one side and filled with folding chairs while hosting a mayoral or City Council candidates’ forum. It might look like a room full of women teaching other women how to wrench, to

assess whether or not their bikes are properly sized, or to fix a flat tire. From time to time the place turns into a movie venue or a huge public party to which riders roll in from as many as 30 miles away. For a time there were regular nights when members rolled out to unnamed local chain grocery stores to dumpster dive for perfectly good discarded foods. Following those nights you might see members, customers, and the occasional individuals in need of a meal nourishing themselves with the product of these dumpster rides.⁸⁶

Though there is always some rough going where humans are interacting, particularly in institutional settings, Bikerowave has managed to produce, from the elements I have named above, a secret sauce that has allowed it to not simply sustain itself, but rather to thrive as a shining asset in its community and in the larger region. Any systematic assessment of the success of mission fulfillment and customer satisfaction at Bikerowave would show unusually high achievement of outcomes. Thousands of people have been provided “*affordable hands-on education about bicycle repair and maintenance*” because Bikerowave has provided “*the space and tools necessary to assist cyclists in repairing and maintaining their own bicycles.*” More than just cyclists on the West Side of Los Angeles have enjoyed the benefits of “*a venue for gatherings and events*” at Bikerowave versions 2.0 and 3.0. In addition to all of this, co-op members have turned their skills, abilities, presence, and participation outwards into the

⁸⁶ For better or for worse, the dumpster diving days ended months after they began. The unnamed chain grocery stores, in an effort to manage corporate risk, enclosed and locked down their dumpsters as they returned their practice of sending thousands of tons per year of perfectly edible food to local landfills.

community, sometimes dozens of miles from the mother ship. They have set up and operated valet bike parking operations at multiple farmers markets. They have conducted riding-safety and bike-repair clinics in economically challenged communities. They have led bike tours, night rides, and any number of other activities that have added value wherever these activities have occurred.

I have no doubt that the wrenching co-op phenomenon as described above has had a significant effect on a number of cultural and political fronts in Los Angeles. The sequence of messengers, ridazz and night rides, and wrenches and their co-ops has had a cumulative effect that can be mapped and quantified. Two decades ago there were no freewheeling night rides in Los Angeles. There were mountain bikers. There were groups of cyclists, mostly in clubs, who dressed themselves in spandex, mounted expensive road bikes, and simulated part of the automobile experience by going fast and paying little attention to place. Two decades ago, there were no wrenching co-ops to be found anywhere in the greater Los Angeles area. In a scant 12 years, one startup d.i.y. bicycle repair cooperative gave rise to more than a dozen of the same. During that time, thousands of people who had neither the means nor the experience have learned to fix a flat tire, lubricate and adjust a drive train, and assess and maintain safe breaking systems for their bikes, at the very least.

Thousands of people each month ride bikes in groups of 20 to 3000 at night on the streets of a city that has been hostile to all modes of active transportation since the late 1940s. Many of these people gained confidence about riding on these streets because they had the protection of the group. For many, that confidence has evolved to forms of practice that include commuting,

riding for health, and riding for pleasure—sometimes all three. It is impossible to look at all of this, even at its smallest scale, and fail to observe changes in the ways these thousands of riders, ridazz, and wrenches move differently through the city and interact with one another. This was not this place 20 years ago. Now it is.

The co-ops have done something else that is not stated in any of their mission statements. They have shifted the culture of commerce in a unique and unexpected way. Regardless of their recognized—or not—legal status, each co-op has made itself into a volunteer worker-owned cooperative, in which every individual's labor belongs both to the collective within the cooperative and the client who is receiving the benefits of that labor while laboring themselves.

Money flows through the co-ops, but it doesn't flow into pockets of the members. It does flow directly into the pockets of landlords, suppliers, the state, and the municipality. It flows indirectly into the pockets of manufacturers of finished goods, producers of raw goods, and extractors of natural resources. The surplus is held in banks and in inventory which are earned by an always-changing roster of members—those who volunteer for an agreed upon number of hours per month.

On its surface, this does not seem sustainable, but it is. My assessment of why this is so has to do with several factors. In talking with members of the bike repair co-ops, I have found a nearly unanimous agreement that these things are so. There are no hierarchies. There are no salaries. Compensation comes sometimes in the simple form of a meal shared after a shift and funded by the contents of a tip jar. It comes in the form of deep discounts on used and new

bicycle parts and accessories—a form of money to those who see their bikes as crucial to their mobility. It also takes the form of a social space where multiple values from individual to individual are shared. Very often these shared values related directly to the values stated in the organizational mission. There is an opportunity to serve in ways that have both concrete and abstract benefits to the individual being served, the organization, and the community. Make no mistake that these are not little utopias, but they are oases in a larger landscape where members work in hierarchies for compensation, raise families, seek fulfillment in places where there may or may not be a catalog of shared values and sense of mission. Living in this world a night or two each week was and has been a revelation for me. I know from listening to numerous testimonies that this is a common experience in the wrenching co-op. I know as a witness and a life-long native of the region—one who has been reindigenated—that this constitutes change, and for as long as it lasts, it is change for the better.

Through the efforts of their volunteers, all of the cooperatives where I have observed and/or participated have accumulated massive amounts of social and political capital. They are known and trusted sources of expertise. Not only do individuals seek them out in order to repair their own bikes, but also public agencies seek them out for collaborative projects such as the County Cycling Collaborative, which brought bikes, bike safety education, and bike repair classes to economically disadvantaged communities.⁸⁷ Elected officials give briefings

⁸⁷ Joe Linton, “A Look at L.A.’s First Bike Wrangler, and His Wrenching Space,” *Streetsblog Los Angeles*, n.d., <http://la.streetsblog.org/2011/01/12/a-look-at-the-l-a-s-first-bike-wrangler-and-his-wrenching-space/>.

and have been known to seek out the advice of co-op leadership on matters of bike infrastructure.

In the context of Los Angeles, this is a form of urban sustainability that is not found in the literature. Through the relatively simple act of teaching people how to repair their bikes, wrenching cooperatives, as I have seen them, value collaboration and community. They promote and facilitate the proliferation of a form of transportation that has a very low carbon footprint. That form of transportation affords its regular riders greater possibilities of cardiovascular health because it is also a form of exercise. They share, rather than accumulate, wealth. They encourage volunteerism and civic participation. They promote an authentic form of recycling in which things are rebuilt and repurposed before they are melted down and made into something else. They provide training and skill development that frequently lead to employment. They demonstrate and serve as models of an alternative to business-as-usual capitalism—models that can and have been replicated across multiple sectors. Wrenching co-ops are self-sustaining, socially, economically, and environmentally just institutions open to all who want to learn, volunteer, and participate.

I haven't even gotten to the infrastructure changes yet. I will leave that to the wonks to explain those processes and histories to you in Chapter Four. In the meantime, in the next section, I want to offer a personal case study that illustrates the path from disempowered cyclist with no wrenching and limited riding skills to a confident city cyclist with the wrenching skills to back it up. As I have made clear above, in the process of observing all of the foregoing, I learned to wrench on and build bikes, and I have ridden these bikes extensively in groups

and by myself. In doing so, I have experienced personal growth that has come in the form of mechanical skills, education, and a deepened sense of place.

The Bikes I Ride

The story of my bikes is not simply the story of my bikes. The whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. These bikes are literal vehicles that have served an important developmental function in my life. They tell a story of my growing connection to Los Angeles—a connection that was all but lost until I started riding and wrenching. They tell a story of identity, belonging, and participation. On these bikes, I have changed the way I sometimes move through the city. I have witnessed the birth of phenomena that have altered the political, cultural, and physical landscapes of Los Angeles from the saddles of these bikes. I have ridden them in swarms of thousands of people. I have ridden them to government buildings where I have participated in a variety of actions that have resulted in changes in the way all cyclists experience Los Angeles and where greater access has been granted to citizens who may only be considering the bike as a viable transportation choice. I have been educated on and by these bikes. I have made relationships and joined communities with them. This is not a family photo album. It is a window looking out at a changing landscape, a changing city, a changing world, and inward at a changing heart and mind. I am one of thousands, by now, who have had a similar experience in Los Angeles.

Since the late 1970s, I have owned six bikes. Three of those bikes have belonged to others—even multiple others—at some point. One—the decedent I describe below—came to me as a new bike, moved around the extended family a bit, became a part of my oldest son's stable of bikes, and ended up back in my

hands. Some of these bicycles have morphed from one genus to another, and sometimes to another and another, only to go “back to where [they] once belonged.”⁸⁸ Unless I am misjudging myself, others will surely join the five surviving bikes in the future, but they each have found an identity that should outlive their stable master.

The Peugeot: Rest in Pieces



Figure 3: 1980 Peugeot; Photo: © Donald Strauss

This was not the first bike I ever worked on, but it was the first bike for which I developed a deep respect and admiration. When I originally purchased it, sometime in the late 1970s, it was a “12 Vitesse” as it said on the chainstay, or a twelve-speed. I can’t say that I was a terribly enthusiastic rider at first. In fact, I was one of those people I now shrug my shoulders at and do my best to repress all judgments of when I encounter them. If I wanted to ride on the long bike path that could get me about twenty-five miles south of where I was living at the time, I would put the bike in the back of my car, drive to the beach, and ride from there. That would happen a couple of times a year.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ The Beatles, *Get Back* (EMI, 1970).

⁸⁹ The shrug and the judgment come from a ridazz ethos that I just can’t shake. If you still have a car, which I do, frequently you have to ride

Then, like so many men my age at the time, I made a sincere effort at collaborating on the project of making a family. That part of the story, I'll leave at this. Eventually, the bike got left behind in a garage that my son and others had access to. Quite rightfully, at a certain point the bike was considered by those in charge of the garage as abandoned. After a relocation, an alteration, and the passage of a few years, my son Morgan rediscovered the bike at about the same time he was discovering that an urban bike culture had poked its head up through the Los Angeles asphalt. Morgan turned the bike into a fixed-gear and rode it without brakes until he took a spill on it and returned to riding other bikes that were a few centimeters smaller. After returning it to its pre-fixie state, Morgan assisted me in reacquiring the bike. I wasn't thrilled about the components on the bike so I set about the business of turning it into a single-speed. I purchased the bright orange wheels seen in the picture above. I put some nice squishy, orange bar tape on the handlebars, as seen in the picture above. I rode the bike for a bit, did a couple of additional modifications, and crashed into a parked car (a story for another time) within five minutes of putting the finishing touches on it. I rode it for a couple of weeks until a guy in a bike shop pointed out that the frame was buckled. I took it to Bikerowave, only to find that not only had I

somewhere in order to drive somewhere. On the other hand, you don't drive your bike somewhere in order to ride it somewhere and then drive it back home. The bikes you are about to read about have, in their current incarnations, only been on a rack attached to a car for the purpose of moving from one domicile to another.

buckled the frame beyond repair, but I also had bent the front fork and steer tube as well—also beyond repair. End of bike.

Mongoose Rockadile/First Frankenbike/Cargo Bike



**Figure 4: Mongoose Rockadile with Xtracycle® FreeRadical®;
Photo:© Donald Strauss**

My first victim on the repair stand was a late 1980s Mongoose Rockadile. This was one of the early mid to low-end mountain bikes produced for unwitting consumers who thought they might ride in the mountains. I purchased the bike with the intention of riding it in the mountains but rode it in the mountains once. I didn't particularly like riding in the mountains. To me it was an exercise in bone shaking and teeth rattling. It was also one of those aforementioned activities that encouraged the use of bike racks on cars driving to trail heads.

Riding a mountain bike on a city street, though it is done more frequently than I would have expected, is mostly unpleasant. The rider finds him/herself fighting the relationship between those big knobby tires and bigger, knobbier stretches of asphalt. So prior to acquiring even the most basic knowledge of bike maintenance and repair—which would include changing tires—I paid a bike shop to partially convert the bike to a more city-friendly, hybrid bike by putting

considerably less knobby and narrower tires on it. That helped the feel of the bike, but it did nothing for the geometry. I was now living near the bike path mentioned earlier; that got me out on my bike more frequently, but I would not refer to that version of my riding self as a cyclist.

Mountain bikes have short, very straight handlebars that tend to put the rider in a closed-up, forward leaning position that quite simply felt very uncomfortable. So, I made a plea to my son Morgan to help me out, which resulted in a bike with elevated, recycled handlebars, new brake cables, goofy new fluorescent green and orange grips, and an extremely loud air horn. That and a bit of grease and oil made it my first self-wrenched, ride-worthy machine. Again, this was an improvement, but I began to feel an itch common to cyclists and others—but it seems particularly true of cyclists—the itch to get to the next bike.⁹⁰

Surly Steamroller



Figure 5: Modified Surly Steamroller; Photo: © Donald Strauss

After my sad experience with the Peugeot, there was nothing to do other than to go on a bike-buying spree. Because I had fallen down the rabbit hole of

⁹⁰ Hence the formula on page 51, “It is said that the formula for bike ownership is $n + p + 1$, where n is the number of working bikes currently owned, p is the number of project bikes in the works, and 1 represents the next bike in the dream queue that waits to be born

the d.i.y. ethos, the “new” bikes had to somehow not be new. I spent hours on Ebay and Craigslist searching for suitable replacements. Because of my size (I am just a shade under 6’5”) I need to ride a bike with a tall frame. The Peugeot was actually just a little small for me at 61 cm. I can get away with 62 cm, but my ideal size in most standard road-style diamond frames is 63 cm.

To determine the size of a frame, one measures the distance from the center of the bottom bracket shell to the place where the seat tube and the top tube meet. There are those who would measure from center to center and those who would measure from center to top (of the top tube.) If the top tube is relatively parallel to the ground when the wheels and tires are on the bike, I measure to the top of the top tube. In any event, I found this 62 cm Surly Steamroller—designed to be ridden as a fixed gear bike (think Rover Safety Bicycle) or single speed⁹¹—on the Ebay store of a bicycle shop in Fargo, North Dakota. It was a demo bike that had been ridden fewer than 100 miles. Apparently, the fixie was not going to catch fire in Fargo, at least not for the time being. I won the auction, paying less than half what I would have for the same thing brand new in Los Angeles. I received the bike broken down into its components. I put it together in short order and rode off to have my first fixed-gear, urban-cycling experience.

To a certain breed of cycling purist, the fixed gear ride is the only possibility a rider has of having an authentic and pure cycling experience. It is the bike almost at its most basic. It is a frame and fork with two wheels, a

⁹¹ See Appendix 1

crankset, two pedals, a chain, a rear cog, a seat post, a saddle, a bottom bracket, a headset, handlebars, (maybe grips or grip tape), and, for the most orthodox of purists, *no brakes!* If you have a brake, it's only a front brake. Your legs do the rest.⁹²

What I discovered almost immediately was that fixed-gear riding is very hard on the knees. Starting out from a dead stop, riding up hills with only one choice of gear combinations, as well as riding downhill (because your legs are moving with the wheels) all put significant stress on the various ligaments that keep the knees in top working condition. Already in my mid fifties, I decided after a few months that I would put a free-wheel cog on the rear wheel, which would allow me to coast down hills and even on the flats when I had enough speed, without moving my legs. Though I have ridden this bike more than 20 miles in a single trip, this is the bike that gets me around the neighborhood for a visit or a quick errand to pick up a pound of coffee.

⁹² The fixie is not to be confused with the old coaster-brake bikes that many of us learned to ride on. As is made explicit in the name, coaster-brake bikes coast downhill if the rider so chooses. When it comes time to slow down, the rider places pressure on the back pedal, and the bike slows to a stop.

Nishiki Riviera: The Big Red One



Figure 6: 1984 Nishiki Riviera; Photo: © Donald Strauss

Beauty may well be in the eye of the beholder, but the fact is, this bike is a head turner. A picture might not do it justice, but pulling up to anyplace where there are people who might or might not appreciate bicycles and more than half the time, someone will say, “Nice bike!” or “That’s a beauty.” As much as I would like to take credit, I feel like nothing more than a parent who does a nice job of dressing the kids. We talk about houses and other things having “good bones.” These were the good bones, the ones on which I would mount the “bits” from my Peugeot. I found this as a frame and fork only. An artist who made things out of old bikes and bike parts was selling it on Ebay. I got it for \$75 plus shipping. By the time I was done with the first iteration of this bike, it was the most bike for \$150 I had ever seen. This was a 63 cm frame so it fit me much better than any other bike I had ever ridden.

By the time I finished putting The Big Red One together, I was starting to get a handle on this bike thing, and I started having ideas. I had never loved the thunky feel of the free-wheel cog on the Peugeot so I started hunting around for something more high-end. I found it. I put it on—it being an expensive White

Industries free-wheel cog. It was worth every penny of the difference between \$15 and \$90. The ride was now smooth and untroubled. I stopped feeling like I was about to leave a crucial part of the drive train on the road.

At some point, I was introduced to the Shimano Nexus 8-speed, internally geared hub, and a massive flirtation began that blossomed into a romance. Simultaneously, I became fascinated with wheel craft. By building a wheel with the Nexus hub, I thought the bike could maintain the single-speed simplicity but have multiple speeds. This was when I began to learn about the fine points of bike dimensions. It was also where some mild addiction behaviors manifested; it was the place where, as with all addictions, money began flying from my pockets at an alarming rate. By the time I was done, I had a cool and unusual bike, and \$1,000 had fled my bank account.

The Brompton

And then I got another bike. It folds. In fact, it folds up into something I can fit into the overhead compartment of most commercial airliners. I bought this bike brand spanking new. For now it is the bookend new-bike purchase to the Peugeot. I bought this bike because I moved to a house that is very close to a light rail station that serves as a portal to a larger system of rail lines. A folding bike stretches the distances I can travel without a car even if it takes me twice as long.

This is not where it ended. After a long educational process that could easily produce a novella, all of the bikes above underwent the metamorphoses that brought them to their current states. Each is precisely the bike I want it to be. Much of what fueled those foregoing gestures and strategies had to do with

discoveries and learning that inspired a child-like enthusiasm for the undiscovered. Some of it was propelled by the making of mistakes, rapid prototyping, resilience, and succession.

When I achieved a certain level of awareness, my interest in further modification had to do with self-care. Riding bicycles was taking a toll. One part of my body after the next began to hurt, so I turned to the biomechanics of cycling. I tinkered with position first, and then went on to shock response. I engaged in an iterative process where I considered what was happening to my wrists and shoulders, my back, and my legs. I went with my intuition, frequently going against esthetic currents, and found parts that would get me in a more upright position; make the best use of my calves, hamstrings, and quadriceps; and absorb the shock produced by as many of the bumps, potholes, and other road hazards as I could. By now, I had enough knowledge to sort out the various problems of geometry and physics to such an extent that I could actually fit a bike to myself. This was my successional process for sure because as soon as all of my bikes were made into suitably comfortable rides, the soreness in my muscles and joints abated, and my rides subsequently increased in their frequency and duration.

I attribute these transformations to my participation in night rides and wrenching co-ops. The fact that I could learn to repair a bike in an environment where I was supported in my learning and granted membership in a very open community fed me. The Bikerowave experience opened a door to the possibility and experience, as an individual and as part of a collective, of riding around Los Angeles and doing what Robin Kimmerer had implored me to do—make my rides

into rituals. As a result of my participation, I experienced the near magic and quiet adventure of repeated night rides home over dark streets and ground I could feel and know, past ancient creek beds that once flowed through a vast and luscious coastal plain of Los Angeles. It also raised in me an awareness that I had become a part of something that was much larger than I had imagined when I turned my first wrench. I understood that I was part of a community of people who made conscious decisions about how they wanted to experience Los Angeles, how they wanted to contribute to it, how they sought systemic change in pursuit of another city than the one trammled over by cars for nearly a century. I understood that I was possibly looking into a future in a place shared with millions of others that looked more inviting than any Los Angeles future I had contemplated before.

In the next section, I pay tribute to a man whose influence in the wrenching community cannot be exaggerated. If it reads like a hagiography, it might not be, at a certain scale, all that inappropriate. His legacy is a kind of codex that promotes the health and longevity of millions of bicycles all over the world.

Sheldon Brown

July 14, 1944 – February 8, 2008

May He Rest in Grease

Having said all of this, turning my gaze to the Boston, Massachusetts area may seem like a counterintuitive thing to do. It is entirely appropriate, however, to reach into cyberspace, across time, and through the noosphere to an everyman/god, Sheldon Brown, who has informed and inspired bike tinkerers everywhere, I believe—at the very least in Los Angeles where I am certain this is the case. Though I have generally chosen to concentrate on the uniquely local qualities of bike culture in Los Angeles, it is important to acknowledge that its formation has been influenced by many factors from many other places. Ridazz have Ciclovía in Bogotá and Critical Mass in San Francisco to look to as inspirational origin tales. Wrenches have a number of retro-grouches who prowl the chat rooms and discussion forums offering their expertise and extensive knowledge regarding everything related to the bicycle. Most prominent among those prowlers is the man in the bike helmet with a gold plastic eagle taped on top.

I don't remember many times in Bikerowave when one of the three computers on the premises was not deployed to the place to which we are about to travel. I haven't met a wrench who isn't aware of and in awe of the monumental contribution of Sheldon Brown. It may well be that the leviathan gesture of generosity that is his contribution has served as a crucial building block in the making of a culture of service and contribution. Gentle men and gentle women, I give you...

It would be the gravest of omissions if I were to write a chapter on wrenching in and of any bike culture anywhere without an extended meditation on the life, times, writings, and Internet presence of the great retro-grouch and uber-wrench, Sheldon Brown. It should, in fact, be *The Great Wrench, Sheldon Brown*. When I first expressed an interest in fixing up my bike, when I couldn't name more than a third of the parts or understand the whys and the wherefores of the anatomies and geometries of different bikes, my son and bike guide, Morgan, suggested that I go to sheldonbrown.com⁹³ and just nose around. "It's a great resource," he said. I figured it would be something like the early days of Wikipedia but specific to bikes. I had no way of imagining what I would find there. It is neither a website nor the biggest bike repair manual on Earth. It is, both of these things, and it is so many other things as well.

If you are a citizen of the world of bikes and bike repair, all roads lead to Sheldon Brown. If you like to tinker with bikes, Sheldon Brown is not simply a god in your universe, he is *God in your Universe!* I cannot emphasize strongly enough the reach and influence Sheldon Brown has had in building the communities of wrenches I have been a part of as in Los Angeles. As I have indicated above, his presence is a constant and a glue. "Let's go look at Sheldon Brown," is a constant refrain, spoken by a wrench to a customer on any given shift in any given co-op.

⁹³ Sheldon Brown, "Sheldon Brown-Bicycle Technical Information," accessed August 11, 2008, <http://www.sheldonbrown.com/>.

If you have never been to his website, I highly recommend going there now. In fact, your reading of this section of the chapter will be greatly enhanced if you will browse the Sheldon Brown website as you read. Scroll from the top of the landing page, all the way to the bottom. This is something I didn't do until well after I had been greedily taking in the encyclopedic bike repair resources Sheldon Brown had so generously given to the world.

On the landing page, interrupted by a picture—a variation on the one above—of a very goofy looking man with an Amish-style beard, what appears to be a highly satisfied smile and a red and white cycling helmet with the ever present gold plastic eagle taped to the top, the headline reads, “Sheldon Brown’s Bicycle Technical Info.” Scrolling down from there, one finds “What’s New at sheldonbrown.com.” Continuing down there are links to a highly respected Bicycle Glossary, followed by a set of yellow boxes arranged in a grid three-high by seven-wide that contains a set of links. The grid is labeled, “Articles by Sheldon Brown and others.” If you are looking for the best way to adjust cantilever brakes or v-brakes, both of which can be vexing until the novice has reached a certain level of experience, there are pages with detailed explanations that are sure to expedite brake adjustment. Adjusting the brakes didn't do the trick? Check to see if your wheel is “true.” If, when spinning, the wheel appears to wobble back and forth between the brake pads, there are a couple of possibilities. Go looking for it and you will find a page that suggests gripping the wheel and moving it from side to side. If that is easily done, check your hubs. If it isn't, take the wheel off the bike and put it in the truing stand. Grab a spoke wrench and get a lesson in the physics of the wheel.

I could go through the entire anatomy of each of the bikes I have described in the previous section, each of which has a different braking system, different types of wheels, cranks, tires, hubs, spokes, etc., and Sheldon Brown's site will have either a clear set of repair, restoration, or maintenance instructions, a link or a suggestion as to where else you might look: a manufacturer's page, another blog, or a book that has served as a long-trusted resource. If you can take my experience as a proxy for the hundreds of wrenches and tens of thousands of wrenching co-op customers in Los Angeles, the following sidebar should give you an idea of what it is like to go on a journey with Sheldon Brown. Following that, I will explain in greater detail why, beyond just pure education, Sheldon Brown's site has been such a huge influence in the world of d.i.y. bike repair.

I'm fairly certain that my undying love and my enchantment with wrenching began, like so many things, with the wheel. A couple of scenes from my early midlife bike-riding career caused me to become fascinated with the bicycle wheel. The first was an entirely benign evening turned into early morning, shooting the breeze with a friend who was rebuilding a wheel. There was something hypnotic about the wheel turning and stopping and turning in the truing stand; something about the wheel wobbling from side to side, considerably out of shape and then "true" to within 0.1 mm, with a few turns of the spoke wrench on the nipple that held the spoke in place where it connected from the hub to the rim; something that whetted my appetite.

Then there was something that could have brought me to great harm: a ride down a steep hill in which my theretofore, recently-purchased,

robot-constructed, theretofore, stiff wheel turned into a large version of a very well cooked pasta wheel. New bike, new wheels, no explanation for why every one of the 36 spokes on my front wheel came loose enough that I could have taken the spokes loose from the rim and hub, using only my thumb and forefinger. As frightening as it was to think that as I went down a relatively steep grade with a wheel in the act of self-destruction, I could have left a lot of skin and bone on the transition from 23rd Street to Walgrove Avenue on the Santa Monica/Mar Vista border, my almost immediate response to my loosey-goosey wheel was a forensic one.

I wanted to get to the bottom of how such a thing might happen and, more importantly, how it might be prevented from ever happening again. I brought the former investigation no further than the realm of an unanswered, hypothetical question—nearly 1/8th of a ton of live load on a light steel frame, careening down a hill riddled with cracks, bumps, and potholes could potentially shake the fillings out of one's teeth so why could it not loosen 36 spoke nipples? I've had a great deal of success getting to the bottom of the latter—success attributable to Sheldon Brown and his lyrical essays on truing wheels and wheel-building.

Understand that the building of a bicycle wheel is most likely an act best enjoyed with at least a very healthy respect for certain principles of geometry, mathematics, mechanical engineering, metallurgy, chemistry, and physics. I don't want to mislead anyone into thinking that I work with any facility in any of those domains, so much as I have a healthy respect for certain aspects of all of them. All of the above have aided my intuitive understanding of what makes a sound wheel. Torsion and tension, the glue-like properties of linseed oil, the

relative virtues of nickel-plated brass, spoke-length calculators, and others of their numerous sisters and brothers have become my friends. One would think that lacing up 36 stainless steel rods with a bend at one end and a thread at the other to connect a hub to a rim would be a relatively simple act easily explained. But the poorly explained wheel build to the robot that built my aforementioned noodle of a wheel could be the explanation for the conditions that brought me close to never getting started on an investigation such as this.

In the process of educating myself around my fascination with the wheel, I learned that there were numerous schools of thought on the subject of wheel-building. There were those who swore by any number of videos available on You Tube. Others sung the praises of *The Art of Wheelbuilding: A Bench Reference for Neophytes, Pros and Wheelaholics*.⁹⁴ Still others worship at the altar of Jobst Brandt's *The Bicycle Wheel*.⁹⁵ None, however, held a candle to Sheldon Brown's page titled, "Wheelbuilding by Sheldon 'Wheels' Brown; substantially expanded by John 'Bespoke' Allen."^{96, 97}

⁹⁴ Gerd Schraner, *The Art of Wheelbuilding: A Bench Reference for Neophytes, Pros, and Wheelaholics* (Buonpane Publications, 1999).

⁹⁵ Jobst Brandt, *The Bicycle Wheel 3rd Edition*, 3rd ed. (Avocet, 1981).

⁹⁶ Sheldon Brown, "Wheelbuilding," accessed June 24, 2012, <http://sheldonbrown.com/wheelbuild.html>.

⁹⁷ One of Sheldon Brown's tropes was bestowing upon himself and others amusing nicknames that matched the theme of whatever particular subject he was presenting. John Allen, along with Sheldon Brown's wife, Dr. Harriet J. Fell, manages and continues to develop the website where he periodically fills in missing details (a rarity) or completes articles that Brown was not able to finish prior to his death.

The former was the first text I encountered when trying to “true” the offending wheel described above. Had I come to this new avocation with an interest in learning about the great wheel builders of Europe concurrently with acquiring knowledge about setting up a large scale wheel-building factory staffed with the finest European wheel-building robots, Gerd Schraner’s book might well have been the proper reference. But I needed something simple and warm.

I’m not making even the smallest of jests when I tell you that my first reading of Sheldon Brown’s wheel-building article caused me to blaspheme myself out loud by making a messianic claim on his behalf. He does in the rough equivalent of 20 pages what Gerd Schraner takes five times as many pages to pull off. Had I come to Schraner first, by the time I made it to page 19 where I would have encountered the “Tension-Warp” table,⁹⁸ my brain would have left the building. This is not to say that I haven’t found Schraner’s book to be helpful and that a detailed understanding of every detail of the physics that brings all of the parts together and an understanding of the parts themselves isn’t important.

I have nothing against knowing that Eddy Merckx⁹⁹ had amazing wheels because his mechanic paid particular attention to spoke tension.¹⁰⁰ I am happy to know about “Fritz Bruhlman: The Institution” and co-inventor of the aero spoke or “Ivan Gotti: The Featherweight,” or the debate about 24 vs. 32 vs. 36

⁹⁸ Schraner, *The Art of Wheelbuilding*, 19.

⁹⁹ Before there was Lance Armstrong, there was Eddy Merckx. Now there is only Eddy Merckx. Among other cycling accomplishments, Merckx won the Tour de France five times.

¹⁰⁰ Schraner, *The Art of Wheelbuilding*, 13.

spokes per wheel or the evils of hub manufacturers who drill spoke holes microns too large for the spokes they will ultimately receive, or worse than any of these, *Schraner's Way of Spoking's* brain-numbing diagrams, all as a prelude to understanding many of the important and some of the not-so-important things that influence the soundness of a bicycle wheel.¹⁰¹ But this is not, as Schraner's title suggests, an effective initiation for a neophyte. I didn't learn to make art by starting with an understanding of the chemistry of crayons. Schraner's book drove me to the edge of not wanting to build wheels. Perhaps when he uses the term neophyte, he is talking about someone who has been riding a bike for years, religiously watches the Tour de France, belongs to a racing club, has always had a good bike mechanic to tune up his bikes, and is now developing an interest in bike repair as a way of broadening the experience. There is nothing wrong with this within the realm of insider experience. That said, from an outsider perspective, this is an introduction that has ice water running through its veins.

Jobst Brandt, comrade retro-grouch in arms to Sheldon Brown, does something similar to Schraner with fewer photographs. *The Bicycle Wheel* is as straightforward as its title. He actually does a couple of things that Sheldon Brown doesn't do that I have found seductive, but ultimately not the way I want to build a wheel. Holding the technical explanation to a minimum, let's just say that Sheldon Brown comes from the school of one spoke at a time, and Brandt (if you are lacing a 36-spoke wheel) comes from the school of nine spokes at a time—in my experience, the wheel-building equivalent of herding cats.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

Perhaps another way of illustrating the universality of Sheldon Brown's expertise and influence is contained in a small vignette in which I first learned to true one of my own wheels. I had broken a spoke. First I learned from a kind wrench at Bikerowave, in one of my first trips there, that I would have to first remove the tire and tube from the wheel. From there I could remove the broken spoke, find a suitable replacement, and "lace" it back into the wheel. Having done that, the kind wrench let me in on a not-so-secret wheel-truing secret. We observed the wheel together, and he pointed out to me that if I followed the spokes as they were arranged along the wheel, I would notice that they were alternately connected to the left and right sides of the hub. If I wanted to take out a wobble that warped the wheel to the right, I would tighten a spoke that connected to the left side of the hub. Left side wobble called for a right side tightening. It wasn't just as simple as that because one action here had consequences there. It would take multiple trips around the entire wheel, tightening or loosening lefts or rights, to bring the wheel closer and closer to being true.

Later, I would discover that the instructions I had been given were straight out of the Sheldon Brown playbook. Later still, I would be the wrench other wrenches would point to and say, "Go talk to him. He's the wheel guy." I would then give the same patient explanation and encourage the customer to try the same hands on experience I had been gently nudged into. In my case, perhaps because I am a hyper-vigilant academic, I always attribute my knowledge to its sources when I am passing it along. More importantly, as any teacher knows, the hoped-for outcome is that knowledge imparted is taken out into the world, tested,

and, if found to be sound, retransmitted. With rewarding frequency, during my Bikerowave experience, I have witnessed this scene played out by those I have taught. Whenever I do, I raise a glass to Sheldon Brown.

My best explanation for why Sheldon Brown is the virtual person I turn to first and usually last when I have a bike related question is best summed up by my wheel-building experience. When I haven't built a wheel in a few months, I consult a guide just for the lacing process. When I have tried to switch it up by going to Schraner or Brandt, I end up building a wheel two or three times because something always goes wrong for me. I think it is in the narrative. Whenever I have gone to Sheldon Brown's wheel-building page, I build the wheel once.

There is something else, though, that has inspired this enduring relationship with someone who has now, by virtually every definition, become an avatar. Many wrenches go beyond the bike repair information on Sheldon Brown's site. Perhaps it is just curiosity, but I expect it is also a sense of kinship engendered by the tone and trustworthiness of the lessons he has imparted that sends us father down the page to the next yellow grid titled "Sheldon Brown's Personal Pages" containing links, two high and eight wide; a pale yellow grid, two by five, titled "Sheldon Brown's Photography;" another bright yellow box with a single row of eight links and the title, "Sheldon Brown's Home Base;" another single-row, white box titled "My Articles on Internet Topics; and finally a headline that reads, "Other Sheldon Browns on the Internet," with three pictures and links to "Sheldon Brown the Arts Professor," "Sheldon Brown the Football Player," and "Sheldon Brown the Jazz Musician."

I attach significance to this diverse collection of links because the generosity and friendliness evident in them serve as inputs into another of the self-reinforcing feedback loops found in the wrenching community and in the larger world of urban bike culture. This is not just an encyclopedia of bicycle repair so much as it is an invitation into a life and a relationship with a master. Many conversations on the subject of bike repair lead in the direction of not just this site, but to the life of Sheldon Brown.

The quest for an understanding of wheel building, or brake repair, or an understanding of some part of a Sturmey Archer three-speed, internally geared hub,^{102, 103} seldom stops at the article on that subject before the seeker has taken a stroll through a few entries in “Sheldon Brown’s Journal–Books Page,”¹⁰⁴ or perhaps “Sheldon Brown’s Web Glossary.”¹⁰⁵ Not only do we have available to us everything Sheldon Brown ever knew about repairing every imaginable species of bicycle and bicycle part, but we also know what he thought about the things he read, what movies he watched, the photographs he took, his great-grandfather,

¹⁰² One of the many revolutionary steps along the way to an ideal human-powered, wheeled vehicle, the Sturmey Archer hub, originally introduced on British bicycles in the 1920s, moved the gearing from multiple cogs attached to the right side of the rear axle, to the inside of the hub.

¹⁰³ Hans-Erhard Lessing, *Bicycle Design: An Illustrated History*, 1 edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁴ Sheldon Brown, “Sheldon Brown’s Journal-Books,” accessed June 24, 2012, <http://sheldonbrown.com/org/journal/books.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Sheldon Brown, “Sheldon Brown’s Web Glossary,” accessed June 24, 2012, http://sheldonbrown.com/web_glossary.html.

his love of Gilbert and Sullivan, the identity of his “evil twin,”¹⁰⁶ Morris Dancing, and so much more as found on “Sheldon Brown’s Personal Pages.”¹⁰⁷

To complete the circle of intimacy with Sheldon Brown, if you dig deep enough, you will even come upon the hours leading up to his death—not by way of some morbid You Tube video but by the journal entry dated February 3, 2008, followed by no further entries.¹⁰⁸ I found it devastating when I came across it. As with so many losses, particularly the loss of someone recently met who, by all appearances, seems immortal, some part of the world seems to come unraveled and shift itself into reverse.

This is not so with Sheldon Brown. With the creation of his website, he managed to achieve immortality without losing his mortality—a lovely paradox if there ever was one. I have found that this, along with the range of subjects listed above, is what binds me to Sheldon Brown. Who can resist non-threatening intimacy even if it is only with a virtual presence?

Sheldon Brown has so much to do with the fact that I can call myself a wrench. I don’t generally do terribly well with instruction manuals in general. My earliest attempts at bike repair drove me to purchase a volume or two before my son pointed the way to Sheldon Brown. When friends catch wind of the fact

¹⁰⁶ Carapace Completed Umber

¹⁰⁷ Sheldon Brown, “Sheldon Brown’s Personal Pages,” accessed June 24, 2012, <http://sheldonbrown.com/personal-pages.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Sheldon Brown, “Sheldon Brown’s Journal January-February 2008,” accessed June 24, 2012, <http://sheldonbrown.com/org/journal/journal-0801.html>.

that you are trying to fix a bike, a common response in my experience produces a dusty copy of a repair manual recently retrieved from some dark and dusty corner of a garage somewhere near an abandoned bike. That is how I ended up with copies of the 1973 “classic” *Glenn’s Complete Bicycle Manual*¹⁰⁹ from the offspring of a deceased neighbor, later *Zinn and the Art of Road Bike Maintenance*¹¹⁰ from a kind friend who swears by it and just happened to have multiple copies, and then another amusingly retro manual, whose title I am unable to remember, from a friend who seems to have had second thoughts and apparently has pinched it back into his own possession. All of them were and are barely cracked open beyond the preliminary scan or first attempt at a mid-repair reference. None of them ever began a chapter or an article by giving themselves a goofy new nickname.¹¹¹ None of them, to my knowledge, ever wore a bike helmet with a plastic eagle taped to the top. None of the others have anything even approaching a homegrown quality.

Sheldon Brown, above all things, strikes me as a warm and welcoming expert whose mission is to spread the good news about bikes and bike repair. He is with you in the shop, helmet on head, eagle on top, walking you through the process from the measurement of spokes—done best with any number of spoke

¹⁰⁹ Clarence W. Coles and Harold T. Glenn, *Glenn’s Complete Bicycle Manual: Selection, Maintenance, Repair* (Crown Publishers, 1973).

¹¹⁰ Lennard Zinn, *Zinn & the Art of Road Bike Maintenance* (Velo Press, 2000).

¹¹¹ “Sheldon ‘Wheels’ Brown;” “Sheldon ‘Stop!’ Brown;” “Sheldon ‘Hi Ho, Hi Ho...’ Brown;” and “Sheldon ‘Shifty’ Brown,” to name a few. I’ll let you sort out what bike parts or riding scenarios go with what nom de guerre.

calculators linked to his article—through the placement of the “key spoke,” the placement of the first “leading” and trailing spokes—nine of each per side on a 36 spoke wheel laced in a “three-cross” pattern. Sheldon Brown is the outsider’s insider. He is the popular educator of the d.i.y. wrenching universe. He is the exemplar of the intent behind the popular education idea of “Complicated things. Simply explained.”¹¹²

In the final chapter of this dissertation, when I am bringing things to a close with a number of conclusions, I will point back at these discussions of Sheldon Brown and his centrality to the wrenching co-ops. I will point to the fumble-fingered, like me, and the many others who initially walked through the co-op doors to learn how to fix a flat tire and often—seemingly by virtue of the various practices and techniques of popular education—emerged as competent wrenches, night-ride organizers, and home-grown transportation policy activists who had learned everything that made them effective practitioners in one or more of these domains.

Sheldon Brown is the unwitting god of this universe. He is a perfect storm of bike and information technology. He was there at the dawning of the second wave of the bike—the one that stands, in part, as a reaction to the post-World War II auto-mobility storm. He was an early and enthusiastic adopter of the Internet, the website, and the blog. He built hundreds of bikes. He took thousands of pictures. He watched and wrote journal entries about hundreds of movies. He died, and he left a limitless gift to those who would avail themselves

¹¹² Haas, Gilda, et al, “Dr. Pop,” accessed July 24, 2012, <http://drpop.org/>.

of it, for all of eternity or until some great planetary process renders hard drives and servers inoperable. Sheldon Brown has, without saying it in so many words, told us to find all of the odd bike parts, abandoned frame and fork sets, and old wheels so that we might fool around with them and make them into bicycles with new lives. From his deathbed and his grave, he has had a hand in hundreds, if not thousands, of automobile owners eschewing their cars in favor of the bike. He has lowered the carbon footprints of many of those same people. Without lifting a finger, he does this every day. He lives the kind of afterlife that many of us aspire to—one whose benefits can be quantified.

Tightening Down the Bolts

This odyssey through the land of wrenches is, for now, a tale told out. Wrenches and wrenching co-ops do so many things. Through the lens of urban sustainability, they make more likely the prospect that bike owners will actually ride their bikes. I am a case in point as are the preponderance of fledgling wrenches I have met along the way. All of us have produced fewer pounds of carbon dioxide because we ride more and drive less. Many of us have, in turn, trained others who, themselves, may not become wrenches but will ride more and drive less—even if it is just slightly so. Our carbon output is not where it stops. We are microscopic agents of traffic mitigation because for us there is no such thing as traffic.

Many of the wrenches I have met are herd animals. Many wrenches are, under their grease-stained facades, ridazz who ride in packs. I have seen the antisocial socializing on large group rides. Many of these were wrenches disguised as ridazz. Many wrenches are also political animals who put on their

Sunday best and appear in front of City Council to lobby for better laws that keep cyclists safe, driver education, and every form of bike infrastructure.

Looking at the first two panels of the triptych I am constructing here, it is hard to deny that significant cultural and behavioral changes have come to Los Angeles—changes coincident with the appearance of ridazz and wrenches. By any measure, but particularly in a car-choked urban place, a bikeable and walkable place is a more livable place, and Los Angeles gives the appearance of heading in that direction.

In Chapter Four, I will complete the picture. I will introduce you to the community of “Wonks” who have coevolved with and, in some cases, from rides, ridazz, wrenches, and co-ops. I will show you their organizations, blogs, and websites. I will chronicle some of the highlights, and perhaps lowlights, of the actions they have taken, the ways in which they have participated in civic life, and the campaigns they have waged. And like the ridazz and the wrenches, I will show you how they have made a culture of their own, influenced the culture of transportation in Los Angeles, and how, in doing so, they have changed the place.

In the final chapter, we will see if I have answered my questions and supported my claims. To the Wonks.

Chapter Four

The World of Wonks: DIY Transportation Policy Activists

One of the stories that must be told in the world of Los Angeles urban bike culture is the curious evolution of a species of homegrown, d.i.y., transportation-policy activists, scholars, and educators I will call *wonks*. A *wonk* is an individual who has acquired deep knowledge of a particular thing—typically policy as it relates to any number of things—food, money, housing, waste, or, as in the cases ahead, transportation. However, a *wonk*'s knowledge goes beyond policy. It extends into the dissemination of knowledge and opinion—often at the grassroots level. To that end, *wonks* are often known for exhibiting prodigious talents when it comes to explaining the details of their expertise. This comes mostly in the form of a persuasive argument in support of a position and/or opinion in the realm of their expertise.¹¹³ As I have observed—and to some extent even become a member of—the community of bicycle transportation *wonks* in Los Angeles, their collective, sometimes-cooperative efforts have played a significant role in moving transportation discourse off its traditionally automobile-centric perch. The cumulative effects of these efforts have brought real on-the-ground change for those who ride bikes in Los Angeles.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the *wonk* community and, in the process, evaluate my assertion that they have contributed to significant change in the transportation landscape of Los Angeles. Many, though

¹¹³ Some of the informally accepted definitions of the term *wonk* appear in the *Urban Dictionary*. Various, “*Wonk*,” *Urban Dictionary*, accessed September 23, 2014, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Wonk>.

not all, of the individuals I will name, describe, and discuss in this chapter coevolved inside the overlapping worlds of ridazz and wrenches, discussed in detail in the two previous chapters. All of them are leaders who lead from very different positions. Some are content to do the business of their organizations and, perhaps, sit for the occasional interview with the press—particularly if it will serve the interests of their organizations. Others pop up in front of cameras and microphones at every turn. Many in this latter group make news that is covered in the blogs, newspapers, and magazines. Many of these same wonks cover the news and write about it—sometimes in their own blogs and sometimes in the more journalistic online outlets like streetsblog.org, which has bureaus in New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. I will discuss the latter group in greater detail in the sections of this chapter that cover the Bike Writers' Coalition and blogs.

I will start with an examination of four organizations founded by some of the original members of these aforementioned communities: Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition (LACBC), C.I.C.L.E. (Cyclists Inciting Change through Live Exchange), Bikeside, and Sustainable Streets. Although these organizations perform different functions, they share a common characteristic across the cast of characters that make up their founding groups. All of the founders share a strong conviction that the 88 cities in Los Angeles County must change the ways they view, treat, and accommodate (or not) bicyclists as citizens and visitors who commute, exercise, tour, run errands, and play on bikes. I will discuss a few wonks who have made great use of the Internet, via blogs, websites, chat rooms, and discussion forums to communicate their expertise, their observations, their

positions, and their passions as they relate to all things bike in Los Angeles. Many who fall into this category will be familiar faces from the group of organization leaders above. Near the end of the chapter, I will describe an historic moment in Los Angeles that brought then Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa into a sometimes raucous, but ultimately productive dialog, with 200+ bike advocates from every corner of the regional cycling universe. Finally, I will discuss the work of two people, Charles Gandy and Adonia Lugo, whom I have labeled *uber-wonks*. Each of their very different endeavors have or will have had great influence in both the discussion and development of a more thoughtful, just, safe, and healthy climate for every type of cyclist in the greater Los Angeles area.

My primary goal for this chapter is to introduce the players and show their various roles in making real change in the lives of Los Angeles cyclists and in the life of Los Angeles. I have spent the last six years observing, getting to know, and, in some cases, working with most of the individuals included in this chapter. So have the Los Angeles Times, the L.A. Weekly, LAist.org, StreetsblogLA.org, Los Angeles Magazine, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and other news outlets. In many cases, I will trace their origins to the communities of ridazz and wrenches, where they also assumed leadership roles. I hope to paint a picture that shows how wonks, acting as members of communities rather than as individuals, bring the power and energies of these communities to a kind of democracy that is different from business-as-usual electoral politics and policy making.

Wonks can be found in any number of places on the great coastal plain of Los Angeles. They can be seen and heard testifying before any number of city councils. They sit on various task forces appointed by mayors, police chiefs, commission chairs, and sheriffs. They also sit in front of laptops and desktop computers in libraries, coffee houses, living rooms, dens, and kitchens all over the Los Angeles. Some research and write policy while others lay out designs for ambitious infrastructure initiatives. Some take people on tours of bike infrastructure that has been built. Some teach classes designed to train timid riders to be competent cyclists of the urban jungle.

Had night rides been started by people whose sole aims were focused on riding around on bikes, or if the wrenching co-ops were established only so that their founders and customers could turn wrenches on bikes, there might have been an interesting story in it, but I, most likely, would not have been its author. I have been compelled to take a closer look specifically because people who were and are interested in making change are the same people who started both the rides and the co-ops. Dr. Marissa Bell, M.D., co-founder of Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina and Midnight Ridazz, sums it up. “I suspect one thing that unites us is that we’ve all given up on changing things from the top down, but we all believe in change from the bottom up. And that’s what the Bike Kitchen is: change from the bottom up.”¹¹⁴

Night rides and wrenching co-ops are powerful phenomena on their own. Each has brought about some form of change. Literally and figuratively, each has

¹¹⁴ Segal, “Bike Culture: Spokes People,” 90.

opened previously nonexistent niches in urban space. Each has opened previously nonexistent niches in the lives and imaginations of their many participants and few observers. Each has offered unique experiences and education—particularly in the case of the co-ops where the latter is concerned—that have drawn attention to the bicycle as an unexpected form of entertainment and recreation as well as an alternative form of transportation in a mostly inhospitable urban transportation environment.

Wonks bring a catalytic portfolio of ingredients to the urban bike culture story: commitment, voice, organization, and leadership. In keeping with the d.i.y. nature of the night rides and co-ops, the wonks I am referring to are mostly autodidacts. For the most part they do not have formal education in transportation planning, policy, urban infrastructure, etc. In some cases, a preoccupation with law and policy as it relates to bicycles originates in a night-ride experience that ends with hands behind backs secured by the police with large zip ties. For others, it begins with an after-hours conversation or a candidates' forum held at a wrenching co-op. These experiences have been known to engender and inspire a sense of agency that leads to the development of a public voice used in acts of civic engagement in pursuit of a better Los Angeles. Some have done their work as individuals, others have worked informally in dyads and triads, and others have gone on to found organizations. Some wonks ride their bikes by day and stoke websites and blogs by night, or vice versa. All of them share a passion for the streets of Los Angeles. They cover the political waterfront from neoliberal to anarchist. As strange as these bedfellows may be, most seem to share visions of justice and equality.

In service of this narrative analysis, I will organize the work community into clusters of affiliation. These clusters generally share participants, channels of expression, philosophies, and approaches across their common landscape. These clusters are intended to function as narrative maps that should provide an overview of the objectives and short-term outcomes of a selection of initiatives and campaigns taken on by the community of works for the good of the local cycling community, as well as the greater good of the region.

Revelations Along a Timeline

Thus far, I have told the story beginning with the rides followed by the appearance of the d.i.y. wrenching cooperatives because, by my lights anyway, it makes for a clearer and more compelling narrative. The co-ops and their activities are concrete worlds filled with beautiful abstractions—like the re-appropriation of public space and engagement in alternative economies. The works, however, inhabit concrete corporeal space while producing these abstractions by the bale. The truth is, however, the organizations and their founders appeared after the establishment of the night ride. What followed the first organization was a small trickle of infrastructure projects, more rides, and a handful of public events—the most significant of which were the first sharrows¹¹⁵ to be placed on a street in the region and the launch of the annual Los Angeles River Ride. Then came more rides, and then came the co-ops, followed by more

¹¹⁵ A sharrow is a street graphic used internationally. It is painted directly on the street. The graphic consists of a double chevron, pointed in the direction of traffic, above a figure of a bicycle. The sharrow typically covers an area approximately six feet wide by eight feet long.

rides, more organizations, large public events, and urban-bike-culture-related businesses. It's all there on Adonia Lugo's Los Angeles Bike Movement History timeline—labikemvmt.org.¹¹⁶ Once all of this was in place, all of these disparate-yet-related elements required a network of communications, and along came the ride and event calendars followed later by an explosion of blogs and other urban-bike-culture-related websites.

Wonks and Their Enduring Organizations

Beyond the wrenching co-ops, numerous other bike-related education programs continue to appear and evolve in the greater Los Angeles area. I will examine two significant and periodically intersecting categories of organization. The four organizations that fall into these two categories were all founded by and are led by mostly self-taught experts. Two organizations Los Angeles County Bike Coalition and Bikeside are primarily concerned with addressing issues of transportation policy and bike and pedestrian infrastructure. C.I.C.L.E. and Sustainable Streets focus almost exclusively on direct, hands-on cycling education specifically designed to teach riders of all skill levels safe and confident use of bicycles on city streets. All four organizations operate as incorporated, nonprofit organizations. Three of the four are fully functional while one is on hiatus. One of these organizations, the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition (LACBC) emerged in 1998, straight out of the first Los Angeles Critical Mass ride of 1997. The second, C.I.C.L.E. (Cyclists Inciting Change through Live

¹¹⁶ Lugo, "Los Angeles Bike Movement History: A Collaboration Exploring Culture Change."

Exchange), was birthed simultaneously, in 2002, with the first wrenching cooperative, The Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina. The third, Bikeside, first a blog and later a bike advocacy organization, appeared in 2006 smack in the middle of an explosion of night rides and shortly after the dawning of the first bike blog, Soap Box L.A. I will describe each organization in more detail below. I will touch briefly on how the organizations operate and how the organizations and their founders have effected change in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles County Bike Coalition, C.I.C.L.E., Bikeside LA, and Sustainable Streets have been “legitimized” by virtue of their longevity, sustained efforts, and relatively well-defined missions. They comprise the nexus of organizations that, in varying degrees, share political power and responsibilities in Los Angeles County where bikes are concerned. All four organizations have either 501C3 or 501C4 nonprofit status.¹¹⁷ C.I.C.L.E. and Sustainable Streets are both engaged primarily in what the latter has called “Competent City Cycling” education. In addition to teaching safe cycling practices in the classroom and on city streets, both organizations engage in information gathering and dissemination as it relates to bicycle related developments, policies, infrastructure changes, and events taking place throughout the region. C.I.C.L.E.

¹¹⁷ The distinction between the two designation lies in the ability of a C4 to devote a significantly greater portion of its time and resources engaged in various forms of political advocacy. Whereas, a C3 may only dedicate a very limited amount of its time and resources in service of educating the public about issues and candidates and their relative importance to the mission and purpose of the organization.

also offers an extensive program of curated and guided rides designed to raise regional cultural and historic awareness.

Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition

Let's return for a moment to the living room of the Los Angeles Eco Village (Eco Village). You will recall from previous chapters that the Eco Village was and is an intentional community that is also believed to be the first co-housing development in Los Angeles. Barely five years old at the time, the Eco Village was and is the first known co-housing developments in the Los Angeles area. Lois Arkin, the founder of LAEV (1993) and the Cooperative Resources and Services Project (CRSP, 1980),¹¹⁸ has served as a mentor to a legion of urban sustainability activists in the Los Angeles area, particularly those who were Eco Village residents. In some respects, LAEV could easily be dubbed *The Wonk House*, given its service as an incubator to not only LACBC but also The Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina and CicLAvia. The replication in Los Angeles of San Francisco's Critical Mass ride—a phenomenon with many parents—was birthed in the halls and salons of Eco Village.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ "Los Angeles Eco-Village," accessed October 7, 2011, <http://laecovillage.org/>.

¹¹⁹ If you have a hunger for a description of Eco Village, suffice it to say that it would not appear in a Scandinavian version of *Architectural Digest*, like many contemporary co-housing projects do. It's a scruffy collection of apartment buildings built at various times in the twentieth century. Behind its gates you will find a tangle of vegetable gardens and patios decorated with outdoor furniture and children's toys. The substance of LAEV is in its residents. They walk their talk, and they make things happen. The residents have built a power base out of time banks, worker owned cooperatives, organizers and others. They have influence. Virtually everywhere you turn in activist L.A. and Eco Village wonk is making a convincing argument about something.

Not long after the Los Angeles Critical Mass started up in fall of 1997, when a hefty percentage of the 20 or so riders lived at LAEV, a dozen or so residents began talking about the need for an organization that would advocate for cyclists. If you rode a bike, the streets of 1997 Los Angeles were like a paved version of a wild-west town.¹²⁰ By spring of the following year, Los Angeles Eco-Village residents Ron Milam and Joe Linton launched the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition (LACBC). The founding mission of LACBC, still in place today, seeks, “to build a better, bike-able Los Angeles by improving the bicycle environment and quality of life in Los Angeles County[. . .].”¹²¹

Because of my biases, stated in a footnote below, I prefer to describe only the LACBC projects and initiatives I know of, strictly in terms of their impact on transportation policy, public health, and the culture of the region.¹²² My reasons for including LACBC owes to both its objective organizational effectiveness and its roots in the alternative urban bike communities of Los Angeles as described in the preceding pages.

Relatively early in its life as an organization, LACBC elected to operate in ways that could be described as mainstream or conventional. Unlike many of the

¹²⁰ Think of cars as gunslingers.

¹²¹ LACBC, “About Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition | LACBC,” *Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition*, accessed October 8, 2011, <http://la-bike.org/about>.

¹²² I feel compelled to disclose some personal biases where LACBC is concerned. The original board of directors of Sustainable Streets—of which I am currently a member—was comprised, in large part, of former members of the board of directors of LACBC. Sustainable Streets was founded by three former members of the LACBC over differences that included disagreement as to how the organizational mission might best be fulfilled.

less conventional nonprofits that came out of the Los Angeles Eco Village, LACBC elected to work directly with the larger governmental entities in the region, such as various offices of the governments of the City of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County. This level of access, and the funding that came with it, allowed LACBC to work on larger scale public projects such as the Los Angeles River Ride, CicLAvia, and the County of Los Angeles Bicycle Master Plan. However, their strategic decision placed LACBC in a position that necessitated compromises that were not seen as altogether salutary in the bike communities that chose to operate mostly outside of a more official world unless it became absolutely necessary to go inside. When asked not to criticize an expensive and controversial Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) project in a more affluent part of Los Angeles, then LACBC board member Stephen Box replied, “Do we work for the [city]? Or the cycling community?”¹²³ On leaving the board, cycling consultant and educator Dan Gutierrez made a more direct objection. “I don’t want to be involved in an organization if they are taking money from some of the organizations they are supposed to be influencing.”¹²⁴

That said, LACBC has played a pivotal role in changing the landscape of cycling in Los Angeles in very positive and dramatic ways. If the bicycle plan can be executed, it will constitute a giant leap forward for anyone who rides a bicycle

¹²³ Aron, Hillel, “The Bikeroots - Page 1 - News - Los Angeles - LA Weekly,” *LA Weekly*, February 10, 2011, 22, <http://www.laweekly.com/2011-02-10/news/the-bikeroots/>.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

in Los Angeles. If CicLAvia can continue its momentum and eventually reach a frequency of monthly rides, and eventually weekly rides, this will have been an unimaginable shift in the transportation culture of Los Angeles. Finally, there is no doubt that the Los Angeles River Ride, which attracts tens of thousands of riders each year, draws considerable attention to one of the most important parts of regional, cultural, and environmental histories that were very nearly extinguished a mere 25 years ago—The Los Angeles River and the communities that line its banks and levees.

Perhaps one of the superficially less sexy, lower profile, and perhaps more socially just of LACBC's projects deserves mention here. In 2009, The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) received a multi-million dollar RENEW grant as part of President Barack Obama's Stimulus Program. The DPH created the Choose Health LA program, which was designed to incorporate cycling activities into a larger public health strategy. Choose Health LA, in turn, created the County Cycling Collaborative (CCC), which included LACBC as a grant administrator, C.I.C.L.E. personnel as cycling competency educators, and the then-known d.i.y. bicycle repair cooperatives (Pedal Movement Bicycle H.U.B., Valley Bikery, Bicycle Kitchen, Bike Oven, Bikerowave, Bici Libre/Bici Digna, and Bikesanxs del Valle). The CCC project targeted economically disadvantaged communities with populations that experienced higher than average health risks. The program consisted of three parts: group bicycle rides in which the participants received safe riding instruction; bicycle repair clinics taught in the selected neighborhoods; and a vigorous bike

acquisition, repair, and redistribution program for which LACBC hired Jonny Greene to oversee in the capacity “Bike Wrangler.”¹²⁵

Though I have not been able to find a report, I know through my participation in the program that there were over 100 repair clinics, over 1,000 redistributed bikes, weekly rides, and bike safety classes over the 18-month span of the program. While the DPH gathered considerable data, it would require a longitudinal study lasting several years to determine the success of the program with regard to impacts on public health. As is the unfortunate case with programs like this, there seems to have been a built-in abandonment of the client neighborhoods and populations when it came to an end. I interpreted this to be holdover colonial behavior, which has been my greatest and most persistent disappointment. I have wavered on this, but after considerable reflection, I feel all of the “good-guys” are accountable. The co-ops went back to doing what they do in the neighborhoods they do it in. LACBC returned to what they do. The DPH went on to other funded programs when the funding for this one ran out. It was a lost opportunity to collaborate in a different kind of transformation—the kind I believe must be at the heart of any discussion around urban sustainability. If one of the successes of the bike movement in Los Angeles is its willingness to educate itself and use that education for the public good in persistent and politically clever ways, this kind of character needs to be applied across the board. If we are to sustain ourselves in cities, we must persist on all fronts. The

¹²⁵ Linton, “A Look at L.A.’s First Bike Wrangler, and His Wrenching Space.”

accumulation of a particular kind of power and influence persistently applied is what got us where we are today. Reaching out to neighborhoods, asking how to best be of service, and walking away when the clock strikes midnight is no kind of service at all.

Finally, LACBC has done an excellent job of building its own capacity throughout the region. Much of this has been accomplished through the establishment of a system of colony organizations located throughout Los Angeles County. These organizations, listed below, are volunteer run, often referred to as “spokes,” and serve at the pleasure of the paid staff of the mother ship. Antelope Valley Bicycle Coalition, Better Bike Beverly Hills, Culver City Bicycle Coalition, Montebello Bicycle Coalition, Pomona Valley Bicycle Coalition, Santa Monica Spoke, South Bay Bicycle Coalition, Walk Bike Glendale, West Hollywood Bicycle Coalition, and West San Gabriel Bicycle Coalition cover well over half of the 4,700 mi² of Los Angeles County. In doing so, they appear to have created brand loyalty and established high levels of credibility with municipal governments across the region—a handy and admirable status where organizational effectiveness is concerned.

The work of LACBC has brought massive and highly visible change to Los Angeles. In 17 years—which began in a time when twenty scruffy cyclists not clothed in racing spandex, riding ten miles to the beach and back, would have been considered a freakish sighting—the phenomena I have described above have moved the bike to the cusp of normalization. In early 1997, few would have imagined a steadily growing population of cyclists riding in groups of thousands or commuting to work. Who but Joe Linton, a guy who refers to himself as a

“creek freak” and a “bridge dork” would put bicycles and a river—long vanished from the collective memory of the city—together in a way that has raised the visibility of both river and cyclist? In this way, ridazz and riders have made a major contribution to the long-term revitalization of a nearly erased riparian ecosystem that runs right through the middle of several cities, big and small.¹²⁶ As imperfect an attempt as it was, LACBC brought new players to the public health discourse, and in the process it has brought together multiple strands into an L.A. bike culture helix. The next order of business will be to build capacity in all Los Angeles County cities and neighborhoods. As mainstream as they are in some ways, LACBC still has the funk. They are still a grassroots, community-based organization working from the bottom up in a complex urban environment. They got the fire started in the first place. Now they must persist in lighting new fires and fanning the existing ones.

C.I.C.L.E

C.I.C.L.E. is in many ways a paragon of what I am talking about above. Established in 2003, C.I.C.L.E. (Cyclists Inciting Change through Live Exchange), was the first organization in the Los Angeles area dedicated to the education and edification of the local cyclist. C.I.C.L.E. was founded by two women, Shay Sanchez and Liz Elliott, who ran bikenow.org, a website dedicated to encouraging cyclists to ride more frequently and establish a culture of cycling that might ultimately live alongside, if not in total harmony with, automobiles and their

¹²⁶ In early 2014, the City of Los Angeles received over \$1,000,000,000 from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to begin a comprehensive multi-decade revitalization project along the Los Angeles River.

drivers on the streets of Los Angeles County and beyond. Where they have gotten it right is in understanding their capacity and limitations and using that knowledge to maximize their service. They don't go to places where they have no intention of going back. They are mindful of the geographic limits of where in L.A. County's 4,700 mi.² they can deliver their programs, given the physical reality of regional travel to and from via bikes and trains. They serve diverse populations, and they stick to what they know, which is to use the bicycle as a weapon of mass instruction by teaching people to ride bikes, to have fun on bikes, and to see their cities and neighborhoods on bikes.

In one of my earliest conversations with Sanchez and Elliott, I learned that they were both veterans of the night-riding and wrenching communities. They were also League Cycling Instructors (LCIs).¹²⁷ In these same conversations, Elliott and Sanchez expressed a frustration with the "boys' club" nature of almost every facet of bike culture they had experienced. Many of the early night rides often included an undercurrent of competition in which very few women were present, and, if they were, the implicit understanding was often that they were there as audience. Wrenching at the three existing cooperatives, Sanchez, Elliott, and other women found themselves drastically outnumbered and overshadowed by men. This is a phenomenon that pops up in blogs, personal anecdotes, panel discussions, and discussion forums that reference the early days of the wrenching co-ops. The antidote to this manifestation of male-domination of an institution

¹²⁷ "Become an Instructor | League of American Bicyclists," *League of American Bicyclists*, accessed September 26, 2014, <http://bikeleague.org/content/become-instructor>.

was, in some cases, the establishment of whole shifts and evenings dedicated to the encouragement of women in cycling and wrenching culture. During these evenings women teach wrenching skills to other women without any of the “mansplaining”¹²⁸ that even to this day can be commonly observed in male-as-volunteer-mechanic/female-as-student exchanges.

Neither Sanchez nor Elliott made detailed and comprehensive complaints about the aforementioned behaviors and conditions. I took the reasonable inference that systemic conditions they had witnessed throughout their lives—seemingly gender related behaviors observable at public meetings, organizational board meetings, task force meetings, virtually everywhere men and women share space—strongly influenced their shared interest in establishing a “Room of [their] Own.” That “room” took the form of a bike advocacy organization operated by and sensitive to the needs of interests of women. Additionally, this would allow the two to put their energies into the formation and operation of an organization that would focus on the cultural and educational aspect of bike riding.

In the latter case, C.I.C.L.E. developed and still runs a series called *Urban Adventures*.¹²⁹ These are a series of guided and well-staffed rides that go at an inexperienced rider’s pace and make periodic stops at a series of related sites.

¹²⁸ “Mansplain,” *Urban Dictionary*, accessed August 1, 2012, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Mansplain>.

¹²⁹ C.I.C.L.E., “Urban Expeditions – CICLE - Cyclists Inciting Change Thru LIVE Exchange,” accessed July 31, 2012, <http://www.cicle.org/attend-an-event/urban-expeditions.html>.

They have conducted graffiti tours, early-twentieth century Beaux Art, Art Deco, and Art Nouveau L.A. theater tours, urban agriculture tours, and more. These rides provide less-experienced riders opportunities to ride safely in groups with riders who have slightly more to considerably more experience.¹³⁰ Having participated in several of these rides, both as participant and observer, I have witnessed people connecting with parts of Los Angeles they may have never experienced. They did this using a transportation mode—the bicycle—they were not necessarily accustomed to. I have also experienced a deepening of my own relationship with this place. It was an entirely different experience from the night ride. Touring art galleries and old theaters is bike culture examining and experiencing the culture of a place. Night riding is the culture of riding across place. Each has its own value and its own transformative qualities.

On the education side, C.I.C.L.E. offers an ongoing suite of classes in city cycling for riders at every level.¹³¹ Though the courses are led by League of American Bicyclists (LAB) LCIs, C.I.C.L.E. has adapted the league curriculum to more closely suit their philosophy. The LAB curriculum is highly influenced by the cycling philosophy of John Forester, author of *Effective Cycling*, where the orthodox code of what Forester calls “vehicular cycling,” (or VC as it is also

¹³⁰ Disclosure: It should be noted here that I served as a ride leader for two of the C.I.C.L.E. Urban Adventures in 2009 and 2010. In each instance, this involved a scouting ride before the scheduled ride, participation in the ride itself, as well as post-scouting ride and post-ride meetings (typically conducted at a nearby restaurant/bar) to evaluate and discuss ride related issues.

¹³¹ C.I.C.L.E., “Our Workshops – CICLE - Cyclists Inciting Change Thru LIVE Exchange,” accessed July 31, 2012, <http://www.cicle.org/learn-to-ride/our-workshops.html>.

known among cycling educators) first appears: “Cyclists fare best when they act and are treated as drivers of vehicles.”¹³² This is not a philosophy shared by all bike educators, particularly those whose mission extends more to less-experienced, even timid riders, who may not be so well served by the strong individual emphasis of Forester’s mantra. VC is undoubtedly a necessity for advanced urban cyclists, but both Shay Sanchez and Liz Elliott recognized immediately that it is not an effective means of getting people started.

The success of the C.I.C.L.E. approach can be measured by its ongoing classes and its well-attended rides. Both the latter and the former have steadily increased in popularity and gone on without interruption since the organization’s inception. By making cycling experiences, whether educational or cultural, available to the broadest and most diverse population sectors in Los Angeles, Liz Elliot and Shay Sanchez have deepened the discussion of equity in Los Angeles urban bike culture. They have influenced the ways in which their clients, students, and volunteers experience the streets as public space that is not limited to its generally perceived role as automobile-centered infrastructure. They have carved out significant space where women and communities of color can avail themselves of safe, affordable, place-based entertainment, education, and physical exercise. This is not to say that issues of male dominance and asymmetrical distribution of power have vanished in the presence of all C.I.C.L.E. events and activities, but having observed significant, palpable, enduring change

¹³² John Forester, *Effective Cycling: 6th Edition*, sixth edition (The MIT Press, 1992), xix.

in that direction, I can say that it appears to be on the run in the domain of Los Angeles bike culture.

Bikeside Los Angeles and the L.A. Bike Working Group

While LACBC continued their working away at policy as way of transforming Los Angeles and C.I.C.L.E promoted safe urban cycling through education and place-based cultural experience, Bikeside put its collective shoulder to the grindstone of the Los Angeles Bicycle Plan. The largely untold story behind the *Los Angeles Department of City Planning 2010 Bicycle Plan*, finalized and adopted by the City of Los Angeles Planning Department in 2011, belongs primarily under the heading of Bikeside Los Angeles, cofounded by Dr. Alex Thompson and Stephen Box, respectively cofounders of Bikerowave and Sustainable Streets.

Known for their long-since tempered, very loud and aggressive conversations, both with each other and with others—complete with reddened faces and bulging arteries—as well as their keen understanding of regional transportation problems and policies—particularly where bicycle infrastructure was concerned—Box and Thompson were of the opinion that LACBC alone could not be trusted to advocate effectively for the Los Angeles Bicycle Master Plan. Their mistrust was born out of several years of history of contentious relationships with LACBC that could not be unilaterally laid at the feet of our bellicose odd couple. The conflict between Box and Thompson on one side and LACBC on the other centered around just how far to push the master plan. LACBC, in it for the long game with a more established organization with an overhead to feed, tended more in the direction of compromise. Box, Thompson,

and even some members of LACBC's founding board felt that maximum pressure would push the plan closer to what they were looking for.

This latter group responded with a fair amount of ire and frustration when the first iteration of the Los Angeles Bike Master Plan, which was released on September 29, 2009, allowed only six weeks for public comment. The responding voices included everyone from ridazz to commuters to club riders, from the west side to well east of downtown, and everyone in between. In his public comment before the Los Angeles Bike Advisory Committee (LABAC), Stephen Box noted that "cyclists rate somewhere below trash . . ." in reference to the fact that sanitation matters generally allow between 75 and 120-day periods for the public to comment.¹³³ Bike Girl, a blogger and member of the L.A. Bike Writers Collective, called the comment period coupled with the paucity of proposed locations for public comment, "infeasible."

The Los Angeles City Planning Department, hearing the uproar, wisely sent the early draft plan back to the planning board with word that the cycling community was poised for a serious struggle to exponentially expand any proposed bike plan. The draft that came back in September of that year fared no better. An LA Streets Blog article titled "L.A.'s Draft Bikeway Plan: Noncommittal, Sloppy, and Perhaps Illegal"¹³⁴ authored by the usually moderate,

¹³³ Stephen Box, "LA's Draft Bike Plan - Return to Sender - YouTube," accessed September 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYDk3q-VcOW#t=16>.

¹³⁴ Joe Linton, "L.A.'s Draft Bikeway Plan: Non-Committal, Sloppy and Perhaps Illegal | Streetsblog Los Angeles," October 19, 2009,

LACBC co-founder Joe Linton, shredded the plan. In his own article, Linton cited several other bloggers, including Stephen Box and Alex Thompson, who had strong words for the inadequacies of the new draft.

Box contended that the plan, “[failed] on three levels, based on content, process, and commitment.”¹³⁵ The missing content was the *Cyclists’ Bill of Rights*, (see Appendix 9) a document he, Thompson, and several other L.A. bike activists coauthored in 2008.¹³⁶ The content complaint included a criticism that the plan under examination was less ambitious and included fewer miles of bike amenities than its successor 1997 plan had included. The process complaint is outlined above, and as Box pointed out in his article, was echoed all over the Los Angeles bike blogosphere. In short, there was grievously little time to comment. The application complaint contended that the plan had no teeth, would not have significant impact if the goal was to accommodate more bikes on the streets of Los Angeles, and would ultimately collect dust.

Bikeside Los Angeles, Thompson, Box, and many others formed a coalition of other bike advocacy organizations and individuals into the Bike Working Group. The Working Group convened five times for lively discussions that would

<http://la.streetsblog.org/2009/10/09/l-a-s-draft-bikeway-plan-non-committal-sloppy-and-perhaps-illegal/>.

¹³⁵ Stephen Box, “L.A.’s Draft Bike Plan Enters ‘Civic Enragement’ Phase | Streetsblog Los Angeles,” accessed September 26, 2014, <http://la.streetsblog.org/2009/09/29/l-a-s-draft-bike-plan-enters-civic-enragement-phase/>.

¹³⁶ “Bike Writers Collective,” accessed August 11, 2008, <http://bikewriterscollective.com/index.html>.

ultimately lead to an alternative plan titled “The Backbone.” It was revolutionary and subversive and best described by Damien Newton in LAStreetsblog:

Simply put, the Backbone is just a statement that these are the major routes cyclists can take to efficiently get from one place to another. If the city recognized this Network as the glue that holds all of the local improvements together, and made certain to treat this network as the most important part of its bikeways system; then everything else would fall into place. Does the Backbone require that all of these routes get bike lanes, Sharrows, separated bike paths, or other bicycle improvements? No. It's simply a statement that this is where cyclists belong, and the city should prioritize their street cleaning, road maintenance, enforcement and planning efforts to make these roads safer for everyone.¹³⁷

By “these,” Newton was referring to every major arterial in Los Angeles. This was a plan that required nothing more than paint and readjusted schedules and attitudes—the latter being the biggest challenge of all.

When the third iteration of the *Los Angeles Department of City Planning 2010 Bicycle Plan* was released in September of 2010, it included, without so much as a single credit to its actual authors, the Bike Working Group’s Backbone proposal. Shortly thereafter, the Planning Department approved the plan, as did the Transportation Committee of the Los Angeles City Council. Finally, in late

¹³⁷ Damien Newton, “What Is the Backbone Bikeway Network and Why Is It So Important? | Streetsblog Los Angeles,” accessed September 26, 2014, <http://la.streetsblog.org/2010/02/09/what-is-the-backbone-bikeway-network-and-why-is-it-so-important/>.

February of 2011, the City Council approved the plan unanimously. Councilman Ed Reyes' comments typified a popular sentiment of the moment, "It's a cultural shift toward different types of transportation."¹³⁸ It wasn't a perfect victory. Even the celebrants had their critiques. Joe Linton weighed in with the following comment: "I think that the plan is good but leaves some hard decisions for implementation. It's not visionary. We got the worst poison pills out of the really awful versions . . . then we said finally, 'Let's just approve this.'"¹³⁹

After the well-deserved din of self-congratulations died down, Bikeside LA, et al, returned to their posts where they remain to this day, watching over all things bike in the region.

Sustainable Streets

As the battle over the Los Angeles Bike Plan was nearing its end, yet another group of bike advocates and activists, who were participating in the bike workgroups, identified a geographic gap in the area of bike education. C.I.C.L.E. had it covered from downtown to the East and North. West of downtown, there was very little happening. In 2010, Ron Durgin, a longtime bike advocate and LCI; Michael Cahn, UCLA Lecturer, bike advocate and occasional west side night rider; and Stephen Box, who appears above as a principle in the bike plan

¹³⁸ "L.A. City Council Approves Bicycle Master Plan," *LA Times Blogs - L.A. NOW*, March 1, 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/03/los-angeles-bicycle-master-plan.html>.ick

¹³⁹ Alissa Walker, "What L.A.'s New Bike Plan Means For Cyclists—and the City," *GOOD Magazine*, n.d., <http://magazine.good.is/articles/what-l-a-s-new-bike-plan-means-for-cyclists-and-the-city>.

narrative, left the board of the Los Angeles County Bike Coalition to form Sustainable Streets. The three were inspired by a mutually perceived need for an organizational emphasis on bicycle education and programming in parts of the region where both LACBC and C.I.C.L.E. had a minimal presence.

Sustainable Streets' programming and other activities take their inspiration from the League of American Bicyclists Bicycle Friendly America program. The program is organized around "The Five Es: Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, and Evaluation." More specifically, Sustainable Streets engages in activities associated with encouragement, education, and evaluation. If tested for alignment of the mission statement of Sustainable Streets (see Appendix 5) and its actual activities, the outcome would appear not so much as misaligned but rather asymmetrical or lopsided. Further analysis might find that Sustainable Streets has leveraged the strengths of its board members and the timing of various events at the state and local level so as to provide a great deal of service in the area of urban bike safety education. To this end, the primary project of Sustainable Streets throughout much of 2011 and 2012 was the fulfillment of the terms of a grant awarded by the California Office of Transportation Safety (OTS): the delivery of a series of two-day bike education classes in the Cities of Burbank, West Hollywood, and Santa Monica that would be offered at no cost to anyone in the region who signed up.

The first order of business for the fulfillment of the terms of the grant was to train enough LCIs to deliver 30 courses in the three participating municipalities. Three LCI trainings were conducted, producing 36 LCIs. This brought the pool of potential instructors in the region to approximately 100, a

50% increase in the educational capacity of the region where urban cycling is concerned.

Shortly after joining the board of Sustainable Streets and two and a half years after going through the LAB *Smart Cycling: Traffic Skills 101* course,¹⁴⁰ I completed one of the three LAB LCI training courses offered. The training is a rigorous three-day boot camp in which a master instructor, assisted by three other LCIs, trains the trainers. Candidates who became LCIs formed the corps of trainers who would deliver the *Competent City Cycling* courses.¹⁴¹

My own interest in completing the course stemmed from a lifetime of on-again-off-again cycling in a city that never, in my experience, seemed to be the least bit bike friendly, combined with my most recent connection with night rides—a very different kind of urban cycling from any I had ever encountered. It was a step in my own evolution as an educator and as an advocate for livable/sustainable cities. My experience of four years of frequent urban cycling prior to the LCI training, which included my participation in the *Traffic Skills 101* course, provided me with an opportunity to reflect on what it had meant to ride a bicycle in Los Angeles without the benefit of any cycling-related education at all. This was also the four-year period in which I found myself using the bike, the ride, and the contact with the ground as a way of transforming my relationship

¹⁴⁰ *Smart Cycling: Traffic Skills 101* (Washington, D.C.: League of American Bicyclists, 2008).

¹⁴¹ *Competent City Cycling* is the name given to the courses delivered under the terms of the OTS grant. This course is the equivalent of the *Smart Cycling: Traffic Skills 101* course referred to above.

with Los Angeles. The acquisition of skills that would bring me to the level where I could gain certification to teach these skills to others opened up an opportunity to transmit the lessons of connecting to place as well. In fact, that is what happened; I have experienced a compounding effect on my connection to the region from having led well over 100 local riders of varying levels of skill. Even as I write this, I know for a fact that many of those students continue to ride, and some have become League Cycling Instructors as well. For many of those students, feeling safe and competent while riding in an urban environment was an “ah-ha” moment.

The OTS grant provided Sustainable Streets an opportunity to make a small inroad into that now deeply engrained road culture in Los Angeles. This was the moment for us to bring the “ah-has” to the public. For the most part, we found ourselves welcomed and showered with gratitude in the communities where we were delivering *Competent City Cycling*. That said, I find it hard to resist a small digression in the form of a story that I will call “The Curious Tale of Dr. Gordon and Corey Wilkerson.” If one can ever take encouragement from opposition and resistance, this particular example of perverse encouragement is illustrative—and encouraging. At least it was for me.¹⁴²

Click on this [link](#). Go to 5:30:00 of the video recording of the City of Burbank (California, USA) City Council meeting, held on December 20, 2011.

¹⁴² If you are reading a printed version of this dissertation, you may find the cited record at the following:
http://burbank.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=6&clip_id=4239&meta_id=131985. Otherwise you may click on the hyperlink on the line above.

There you can witness a moment in which various members of the Sustainable Streets board of directors are named by one of the City Council Members, Dr. David Gordon. According to Councilperson Gordon, we were people with a “social agenda,”¹⁴³ which, of course, we were and are. The problems were a) my areas of research: urban sustainability and bike culture in Los Angeles and b) the fact that Sustainable Streets is an education and encouragement nonprofit organization trying to convince the City of Burbank to accept a grant from the State of California Office of Traffic Safety to conduct “Competent City Cycling” classes, which were to be offered for free of charge to the citizens of Burbank, at virtually zero cost to the city. This same program offered its participants a protective helmet certified by the same standards as the most expensive ones available, as well as a high-quality headlight and taillight set. These items have a retail value of just under \$100. The classes, helmets, lights, literature, and some minor swag are free of charge. Dr. Gordon had conducted a detailed study of the Sustainable Streets website and my biography on the Antioch University Los Angeles website as well. His research led him to the unmistakable impression of my clear and present danger as someone with a social agenda, joined by other fellow travellers with odious aims similar to my own. I should allow Dr. Gordon to speak for himself.

It didn’t matter that the program was not going to cost the City of Burbank so much as a nickel. It didn’t matter that this was a program to empower the

¹⁴³ Which I take to mean a “socialist” agenda. If you watch the video segment, you will be in a better position to affirm or overturn.

citizens of Burbank and other cities nearby to ride safely on city streets, possibly use a bike to go grocery shopping or ride with a child to school, thus decreasing the numbers of cars on the roads as well as the demand for car parking. It didn't matter because this had, apparently, by Dr. Gordon's lights, the big greasy paw prints of government spending money all over it, and that was simply not right.

"The tale of the tape," as it is called in many sports media, will indicate that the motion carried five-to-one. The City of Burbank fulfilled on its promise of acting as the fiscal agent for the program. Sustainable Streets and its affiliated LCIs delivered the programs, which were mostly booked in advance. The three municipalities expressed their enthusiastic appreciation. Sustainable Streets has gone on to develop new programs for future delivery.

One important postscript to the OTS grant activities is that to date, no follow-up studies have been conducted, as far as I can tell, by any of the cities. Sustainable Streets collected data in the form of names and contact information of the participants in all of the classes. These data could easily be used to analyze the effectiveness of this particular program. If the outcomes indicate significant value added to the communities in which the classes were delivered, or not, such an analysis could be of use to other cities throughout the world that might be entertaining similar undertakings. This is disquietingly similar to the way the CCC project was left at the end. Setting aside matters of accountability between grantee and grantor; this loss of useful knowledge, information, and raw data strike me as wasteful at the very least.

Looking back to the 1960s, I recall a time when only kids and European cycling fanatics rode bikes. That was it. None of us wore helmets; at least I

didn't. I wouldn't have known how to get one. As I tested out my new-fangled European "road bike," I only occasionally found myself surrounded by cars, and then totally petrified. What I mostly experienced was something akin to what I experience now. I knew things about where I lived that I didn't experience in my parents' cars. I knew my way home from ten miles in every direction when I was 11 or 12. I knew the trees, the streets, the windy places, the hot and cool places between the Santa Monica Mountains and the Santa Monica Bay. This may sound unbearably sentimental. It isn't. I wouldn't go back for a 30-second peek. After all, back then vehicular cycling was not even a concept, and certainly no one was educating anyone on the subject of bike safety. It was a wonder we weren't killed or seriously injured. I prefer now. I prefer the more complex connection I have with place in the present. I also prefer having an opportunity to aid in the transformation that is underway. Seventy years of planned auto-centricity is enough—too much in fact. The Dr. Gordons of the world need to pass on the left and share the road. That's really all these organizations are after—streets and attitudes designed to accommodate multi-modal transportation.

LACBC, C.I.C.L.E., Bikeside Los Angeles, and Sustainable Streets have made significant contributions that have changed Los Angeles for the foreseeable future. They have established deep toe holds into the terrain of Los Angeles area transportation planning and culture. It is now a given that members of these organizations can be counted on to show up at any public event where anything related to bikes is being discussed, heard, contested, or celebrated. They have created networks of relationships within the universe of political and governmental institutions. They speak the lingua franca of policy and civic

engagement. They have transformed themselves from rough-hewn, sometimes abrasive, agitators to smooth operators. Most important of all, they have driven a huge wedge into the auto-centric mentality of the region, and power has shifted in the most unexpected ways. What follows is the unlikely tale of CicLAvia, a now-quarterly event sanctioned by the City of Los Angeles. The Los Angeles incarnation of an event that takes place every Sunday in Bogotá, Colombia is, once again, something incubated in the common rooms of the Los Angeles Eco Village.

CicLAvia

In Chapter Two, I talked about how the Los Angeles bike story started in the saddles of messengers and then ridazz. I ended that chapter by paying proper respect to Ciclovía—the 90+kilometer ride that has taken place on the streets of Bogotá, Colombia every Sunday since 1974. On 10/10/10, after much planning and politicking, Los Angeles celebrated the first of what have now become many CicLAvias. There were two rides in 2011 and 2012, three in 2013, four in 2014, and possibly as many as five scheduled in 2015. All of the rides have received local press and television coverage, but by the fourth ride, which occurred in May of 2012, the ride had come to the attention of the *New York Times*. An article titled “Los Angeles Lives by Car, but Learns to Embrace Bikes,” starts by talking about CicLAvia and then goes on to talk about the proliferation of group rides—both daytime and night time—the existence of multiple wrenching co-ops, and the Mayor’s broken elbow. The article describes a Los Angeles in which bicyclists

were very nearly normalized—hence four CicLAvias with more to come.¹⁴⁴ Most of the rides have been centered in the Downtown Los Angeles area and have branched east to the Boyle Heights and East L.A. areas, into South L.A., and west, once to Venice and the Pacific Ocean, and twice to the Mid-Wilshire areas.

CicLAvia is a case of success with many parents. This is a quick time line/family tree. Adonia Lugo and Bobby Gadda went to Bogotá, Colombia in 2008 where they experienced Ciclovía. When they returned to Los Angeles, they began talking up the event with the intention of bringing such an event into being in what Adonia Lugo and others have referred to as “Autopia.” After making a proposal at an LACBC meeting, Adonia Lugo and Bobby Gadda were joined by traffic engineer Stephen Villavaso; Jonathan Parfrey, Executive Director of the Green L.A. Coalition; UCLA student and LACBC intern, Allison Mannos; and conservation policy expert Sandra Hamlat in the formation of the core group that met on a regular basis to plan the Ciclovía-like event. They were later joined by graphic designer Colleen Corcoran, bike policy expert; Joe Linton; and, eventually, Aaron Paley, who is the last man standing in CicLAvia’s current incarnation. Paley and Linton brought the political expertise and spoke the language as it is understood in City Hall.¹⁴⁵ This is the group that made CicLAvia,

¹⁴⁴ Adam Nagourney, “Los Angeles Lives by Car, but Learns to Embrace Bikes,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2012, sec. U.S., <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/20/us/in-los-angeles-drivers-and-bicyclists-learn-to-co-exist.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Adonia Lugo, “Body-City-Machines: Human Infrastructure for Bicycling in Los Angeles” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California at Irvine, 2013), 117–121.

including its first logo, maps, and other graphic representations. They navigated the tides as they shifted from negative reactions to positive reactions. Ultimately, they brought the Mayor and his minions, City Council, the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, and the Los Angeles Police Department into alignment. Finally, they launched the first CicLAvia on 10/10/10 with 7.5 miles of traffic-free streets stretching from just west of Downtown Los Angeles into Boyle Heights to the east. Like its mother ride, Ciclovía, the biking, walking, skateboarding, rollers-skating, stroller-pushing route included music, dance, art exhibitions, information zones, food, water, and many other amenities that made it, by most accounts, a massive success for the approximately 20,000 people who took to the streets.

Aaron Paley's role in CicLAvia cannot be overemphasized. A native of Los Angeles and a longtime festival and event producer/planner, Paley had a strong interest in the ways we use public space. In 2008, Paley received a Stanton Fellowship from the Durfee Foundation. The intent of the Stanton Fellowship starts with the question, "How would you make Los Angeles a better place?"¹⁴⁶ Paley set out to design a project that would draw attention to the Los Angeles River when an urban planner friend suggested he look at Ciclovía. It took very little convincing for Paley to recognize that creating Ciclovía in Los Angeles would be the perfect way of fulfilling the objectives of the Stanton Fellowship. This put

¹⁴⁶ "Stanton Fellowship – The Durfee Foundation," accessed September 27, 2014, <http://durfee.org/what-we-support/stanton-fellowship/>.

him first on a parallel and, then later, convergent path to the core CicLAvia group described above.¹⁴⁷

In many respects, CicLAvia seems to have been the thing that Aaron Paley was born to do, and the City of Los Angeles has recognized it. Before Paley and his collaborators could catch their collective breath, representatives from the Mayor's office—who had once expressed a great deal of skepticism about the whole event—were knocking at the door. Paley puts it this way, “There wasn't any question of whether this was gonna [sic] happen again. It was just, ‘How soon can we do it, and how high can we aim?’”¹⁴⁸ He has been a tireless champion of the event. He has fought hard for routes that go to traditionally underserved and ignored neighborhoods in Los Angeles. He has worked hard to include all voices in the process. If the ride is going into Boyle Heights, a predominantly Latino neighborhood in East Los Angeles, Paley convenes local leaders and asks them to form a steering committee which ultimately sees to it that all aspects of the event that will touch their community are designed to add value and show respect. When the ride goes into Liemert Park, a predominantly African-American neighborhood in South Los Angeles, he engages the community in the same way with the same results.

¹⁴⁷ Aaron Paley, “Aaron Paley, Fellowship Summary – The Durfee Foundation,” accessed August 24, 2012, <http://durfee.org/summaries/stanton-summary-aaron-paley/>.

¹⁴⁸ Kate Linthicum, “CicLAvia Organizers Plan for Round 2,” *LA Times Blogs - L.A. NOW*, January 5, 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/01/ciclavia-los-angeles-bicycle.html>.

Under the stewardship of Paley and his staff at Community Arts Resources (CARS), there have now been ten CicLAvia events between October, 2010 and December 2014. The estimates range, but the agreement among those who claim to be counting is that the size of the ride doubled in its second outing, doubled again in its third, and again in its fourth when an estimated 150,000 people participated. Rides since then have been estimated at 150,000–200,000. The routes have grown to over 10 miles, and with regard to frequency, mileage, and attendance, there seems to be no end in sight.

The fact is, when the conversation first made its way out into the public realm, the vocal opposition was loud and diverse—reaching a fevered pitch in advance of each of the first couple of events. I suppose there was a time when the entire enterprise could have been overturned, but not now. CicLAvia has reached a critical mass, ironically in a way that Critical Mass has not. It is now woven into the fabric of public life. It is an opportunity for hundreds of thousands of Angelenos to get out on a Sunday and ride bikes, skateboards, and scooters or put on a pair of skates or walking shoes and move around freely along miles of streets while their city entertains them free of charge. That is something that was not happening even when I began my research.

CicLAvia is a classic example of how a city can be moved from the ground up. Far from a top-down initiative, CicLAvia's grassroots origins, first in Bogotá, Colombia, then in Los Angeles, illustrate a stunning redistribution of power that is indicative of noteworthy change in Los Angeles. In many respects, though the bike has a long way to ride to get to the mainstream, CicLAvia has legitimized the

bicycle, the rider, and the urban bike culture that has so zealously fought for a voice in civic discourse and a place on the road.

Blogs

Somewhere in the middle of the time line that stretches from the 1998 launch of the Los Angeles Bicycle Coalition and the debut of CicLAvia, Los Angeles bike culture began popping up in the blogosphere. The Los Angeles blog story, as I will lay it out below, begins with Stephen Box and SoapBoxLA.org in 2006, but I can't resist a brief sidebar that involves chickens, eggs, and our old friend from Chapter Three, Sheldon Brown.

On November 8, 1998, Sheldon Brown, web master, bicycle mechanic, and parts manager at Harris Cyclery of West Newton, Massachusetts, posted what had become known as a *weblog*¹⁴⁹ entry on his personal website, making him one of the earliest bloggers. Prior to that, in the early 90s when the World Wide Web and websites began popping up, Brown began a website of his own from which he dispensed bicycle repair advice and information. I am recapping that here because in the *ridazz* and *wrenches* story there is a moment I cannot put my finger on when *wrenches* discovered Sheldon Brown's presence on the web. I think it's safe to assume that prior to the 2002 start of the Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina, these encounters with Brown happened on an individual basis. I would further speculate that by 2006, when the first L.A. bike-related blog appears,

¹⁴⁹ A term coined by Jorn Barger, according to a 2008 *Wired* Magazine article. Jenna Wortham, "After 10 Years of Blogs, the Future's Brighter Than Ever," *WIRED*, http://archive.wired.com/entertainment/theweb/news/2007/12/blog_anniversary.

much of the bike community was habituated to web searches that led them to Sheldon Brown. Anyone who has ever done a web search knows that web searches beget more web searches. I am going to go way out on a limb with a fair amount of confidence and make the claim that the origins and proliferation of bike related blogs in Los Angeles carried much more than just faint traces of Sheldon Brown's web DNA.

The network of blogs and other websites energized many of the direct actions discussed above—the formations of organizations, policy and planning campaigns, and the dissemination of cycling-related education. I want to take us now into that world and further discuss its effects and significance in the growth of urban bike culture in Los Angeles. An exhaustive account of every site that ever appeared on the landscape might yield dozens of sites, many of which are now non-operational so I am going to focus primarily on those that have some enduring resonance.

Though their chosen mode of transportation could be categorized as low-tech—particularly the fixed gear bike—ridazz and bike advocates seem to share a taste for contemporary technology. Long before Twitter and even Facebook were as common as cellphones, the bike community at large seemed to be an early adopter of both. Night ridazz found their way to food trucks via Twitter feeds stoked by their proprietors. Night ride mobs could break up into several pods, only to come back together again because of combinations of tweets and text messages between organizers and ridazz. They were also fairly early adopters of the blog. The mobs themselves were their own kind of webs and networks. Given the particular historic moment of their coming into being—the

mid 1990s into the early 2000s—the World Wide Web as a crucial tool and even a form of nutrient is no surprise at all.

Here are a handful of examples of what I see as blogs or collections of blogs that either heralded or precipitated pivotal moments in Los Angeles bike culture history. SoapBoxLA, The Bike Writers' Collective (which included the latter), Street Heat LA, Streetsblog LA, Midnight Ridazz, and Wolfpack Hustle were either there at the beginning; generated important documents; set the stage for legitimate online journalism about transportation and bike culture matters in Los Angeles; galvanized the community of ridazz and facilitated their communication and the proliferation of their rides; or produced, announced, and reported on some eye-opening stunts that may have influenced the way Angelenos perceive bike culture in their region.

The blog story begins with SoapBoxLA.blogspot.com in July of 2006.¹⁵⁰ An examination of the Los Angeles Bike Movement History timeline, shows that from that moment forth, the establishment of bike-related blogs, ride boards, discussion forums, and, for that matter, night rides and wrenching co-ops blew up like a giant balloon that has yet to pop.¹⁵¹ I am not claiming that this is anything more than coincidence—but a coincidence stoked in some measure by whatever is the more localized version of a zeitgeist. Soap Box L.A. did, in fact, become a node as evidenced by the formation of the *Bike Writers Collective*.

¹⁵⁰ Stephen Box, “Blogger: User Profile: SoapBoxLA,” accessed September 9, 2014, <https://www.blogger.com/profile/03423782294035596253>.

¹⁵¹ Lugo, “Los Angeles Bike Movement History: A Collaboration Exploring Culture Change.”

Some of it stuck; some of it didn't. As with any new life form, including those that originate at the margins of the underground, everyone was trying something out. In the case of the first bloggers out of the gate, riders were trying out new voices and making determinations as to what niche each was going to occupy. The blogs and websites fall into two general categories. Some are entirely freestanding sites maintained by their owners, sometimes on a consistent basis, sometimes very active at the beginning then trailing off at a certain point; others are sites that belong to bike oriented organizations.

Rather than take on the entire recent history of actors and their sites, I am going to spend some time surveying those that seem to have had some staying power and enduring influence. Before describing that landscape and its significance to urban bike culture in Los Angeles, I want to pay tribute to the portal through which I was originally introduced to this world.

"The Bike Writers Collective" (BWC) consisted of twelve writers and activists with varied interests that intersect at all things bicycle. As a group, their most enduring collaborative project is the *Cyclists' Bill of Rights*.¹⁵² I should note that their site, bikewriterscollective.com, is and has been for sometime a ghost town.¹⁵³ Very few of the blogs have entries dated past early 2012. Many have not had a fresh post since sometime in 2011. For the time being, it is more or less a static archive that is valuable for the brief history it contains because it is not

¹⁵² See Appendix 9

¹⁵³ "Bike Writers Collective," accessed August 11, 2008, <http://bikewriterscollective.com/index.html>.

being replenished with new writers as the old writers retire from blogging or move onto other blogs.

With this in mind, the writers fall into three categories with regard to the current state of bike culture in Los Angeles. Some are currently active and connected—of those, some more than others; some are deeply engaged in other forms of activism that frequently intersect with LA bike culture, such as urban farming, urban homesteading, permaculture, to name a few; and others seem to have faded into the background or fallen out of the conversation, mostly swept away by the events of a life. The members of the Bike Writers Collective refer to themselves as “The Dirty Dozen”—a probable copyright violation, but that’s what they call themselves.¹⁵⁴

The central document of the collective, *The Cyclists’ Bill of Rights*, is still accessible from the site, and that may be enough of a reason for its persistence as a website. My sense of the site when it was new, though, was that *The Cyclists’ Bill of Rights* derived some of its authority and validity from the currency of its authors’ contributions to the recording of that particular moment in Los Angeles bike-culture history. It was in some respects evidence of the culture’s self-awareness. It was a direct outgrowth of the cops and ridazz encounters discussed in Chapter Two. It was also a powerful rhetorical device as is evidenced above in Stephen Box’s critique of the second iteration of the Los Angeles Bike Plan.

¹⁵⁴ See Appendix 10 for a list of the less active and completely defunct sites. You will also find a number of other bike-related websites that link to a number of businesses that grew out of Los Angeles bike culture.

Beyond the *Bike Writers Collective*, other species of websites and blogs have come and gone. I want to mention a handful of individuals, not mentioned above, who have maintained sites that either persist into the present or have evolved into something more complex and wide reaching. These sites and their keepers perform several functions that serve as evidence in support of the argument I am making about changes in the culture of transportation, transportation policy, and the livability and sustainability of Los Angeles. They serve as a chronicle and archive of the time line of bike-related developments in the region. The blogs constitute a chorus of voices insisting on being heard, insisting on a place at the table, insisting that they gain greater influence over important matters that affect their readers and writers very directly. They also serve as a system of checks and balances that influence the ways in which decision makers think and act. Again, a very clear example of this is found above in the L.A. Bike Plan narrative. I can imagine a very different outcome had there not been a rapid response from the bike community each time a new draft of the plan was released. The speed with which even a blog with 100 regular readers is able to transmit its produced narratives is lightening fast. The ripple effect is broad as you will see when you arrive at the section that describes the Mayor's Bike Summit.

Street Heat L.A./ streetheatla.blogspot.com¹⁵⁵ was the brainchild of Damien Newton, former traffic engineer for the New York Mets. In October of 2007, he began his L.A. blogging life like this:

Some of you know me, if there's any luck this blog has been passed on enough that most of you do not. My name is Damien Newton, formerly the NJ Coordinator for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, and a very new resident of Los Angeles. While I'm trying to figure out how best to fit in to the transportation reform scene out west, I'm going to try some reporting and other transportation writing right here at Street Heat.

Some of you may have heard a rumor that there's going to be an LA branch of the transportation mega-blog, Streetsblog. While I might be involved with that when it starts, this blog should not be viewed as a prequel to LA Streetsblog.¹⁵⁶

Newton goes on to say that he is going to scan the region for almost any reportable subject that lights him up. As it turns out, that is mostly transportation. An active blog from 2007–2010, Street Heat is a valuable data base of LA bike and other transportation policy and politics up through that time. His important disclaimer in his opening post notwithstanding, Newton went on to become the first editor of Streetsblog Los Angeles.

¹⁵⁵ "Street Heat," accessed August 11, 2012, <http://streetheatla.blogspot.com/>.

¹⁵⁶ Damien Newton, "Street Heat: Opening Post," accessed September 9, 2014, <http://streetheatla.blogspot.com/2007/10/opening-post.html>.

Possibly gold standard where reporting on national and regional sustainable transportation, livable communities and their related policy, politics and cultural concerns, Streetsblog Los Angeles/ la.streetsblog.org¹⁵⁷ is a trusted source that the press and other news media look to as a source of their own reporting. Los Angeles is only one of the major US cities covered by Streetsblog Network/streetsblog.net/. Locally staffed by Newton; Sahra Sulaiman, Communities Editor; Joe Linton, Head Writer; and Melanie Currie, Statewide Policy writer, other contributors include virtually the entire portfolio of usual suspects named above.

Ride Boards and Discussion Forums

The ride boards and discussion forums described below perform a similar but different function from the blogs. In many respects, they have functioned as the memory and the central nervous system of urban bike culture in Los Angeles to an even greater extent than the blogs and bloggers. I say this because the data they contain is mostly raw and unprocessed. On the forums, while there may be entire mobs of axes to grind, there is no single axe to grind. Everything is aired there—editorials, grievances, flirtations, rants, remembrances, condolences, memorials, tips, advice, resources, and more. Though a reader might not immediately be aware of it, many of the voices heard on the discussion forums are the same voices heard on night rides. They are two manifestations of a larger community. They are interconnected places where relationships are created and

¹⁵⁷ “Streetsblog Los Angeles,” accessed August 10, 2012, <http://la.streetsblog.org/>.

nurtured, and just as easily damaged and destroyed. On their own, they have generated a culture that has deposited evidence of itself for a decade so far.

Ride boards are simple and straightforward in their appearance because their primary functions are to let people know where, when, and what rides are happening. They are also narrative timelines that track the lives of particular rides and the growth of the night riding phenomenon itself. In that way, they serve as very clear evidence of change over time—no known rides one year, 600 rides in the 10th year after that. Let us look at two related sites that get the lion's share of credit or blame, depending on your perspective.

Midnight Ridazz/ www.midnightridazz.com¹⁵⁸ has been in operation from 2005 to the present, under the stewardship of Don Ward, a.k.a. Roadblock—one of the most ubiquitous, vocal, and devoted wonks on the scene in Los Angeles. It is another important and persistent part of the network for somewhat different reasons from the Streetsblog L.A. success. Midnight Ridazz is the great mother of ride schedules, tools, and archives. Every ride that has been reported since its inception can be found here.

In some respects, it is an anthropologist's dream. The Midnight Ridazz site, which is live as of this writing, has performed several functions. It was almost immediately an immensely popular discussion forum with more than 18,000 thousand discussions, some of which contain several hundred posts each. The subjects range from debates about the relative merits of one type of bike over another, to long discussions about the evolution of a particular ride, to serious,

¹⁵⁸ Midnight Ridazz, "Midnight Ridazz Bicycle Ride."

anguished discussions about road deaths in the community of ridazz. The site is also a massive archive of photography and videography that chronicles nearly a decade of night rides. The feature that has hypnotized me to the greatest extent may well be its most mundane collection of pages: the ride calendar. It begins on February 28, 2004, with the first Midnight Ridazz ride and lists over 9,000 rides that have taken place in the greater Los Angeles area up into the present. The calendar charts the rise of the night ride in Los Angeles from its earliest horizon when there were only four documented rides in that first year, 94 rides two years later, and over 300 rides in the first six months of 2014.¹⁵⁹

Wolfpack Hustle/wolfpackhustle.com/.¹⁶⁰ is the hard core, or corps, of the Los Angeles bike culture scene. They like to go fast. They also like to collect sponsors (not a bad thing at all if this movement is to sustain itself). The site is maintained by Don Ward, a.k.a. Roadblock, who also tends the Midnight Ridazz site. It is a rich resource for videos and schedules that does not play to the readers' temptations to chat online.

Wolfpack Hustle began in 2005 as a fast-paced, Monday-night ride that went along a route that changed every week. The meet-up was and is at a donut shop at Sunset and Hollywood in East Hollywood. The ride typically covers a minimum of 20 miles, with the occasional "century" (100 miles) thrown in to mix

¹⁵⁹ "Midnight Ridazz Bicycle Ride-Event Calendar," accessed July 1, 2014, <http://www.midnightridazz.com/events.php>.

¹⁶⁰ "Wolfpack Hustle," accessed August 14, 2012, <http://wolfpackhustle.com/>.

things up. This has never been a ride for the faint of heart. If you are out for a mosey, this isn't your ride.

After a few years, the wolves had puppies. First came the “Marathon Crash Race” which started out as an outlaw event in 2009.¹⁶¹ Wolfpack Hustle invited all comers to show up at 4:00 am for a fun, fast ride along the Los Angeles Marathon course as it was being set up. The next three years the event was turned into a legitimate race with divisions determined by gender, skill level, and type of bike. In 2014, the City of Los Angeles, which had previously looked the other way, decided to crack down on the race. With all of the arrangements in place, Don Ward, the race organizer for Wolfpack Hustle, received a notice from the city that the race required a permit and a \$300,000,00 insurance policy. The permit would take 45 days to issue and cost a prohibitive amount of money. The race was cancelled, but the city relented and issued a permit for a ride not to exceed fifteen miles per hour.¹⁶² Wolfpack Hustle held a “fun ride,” and the City of Los Angeles took a tremendous amount of flack—much of it in the Los Angeles and national blogospheres.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Amina Khan and Catherine Saillant, “Pre-Marathon ‘Fun Ride’ to Replace Canceled Crash Race,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-0309-fun-ride-20140309-story.html>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Damien Newton, “Times: City Blew It on Wolfpack Hustle Marathon Crash Race | Streetsblog Los Angeles,” accessed September 27, 2014, <http://la.streetsblog.org/2014/03/07/times-city-blew-it-on-wolfpack-hustle-marathon-crash-race/>.

In 2011, Wolfpack Hustle gained national and international attention when Highway 405—a major Los Angeles freeway and subject of endless complaint—was for a weekend referred to as *Carmageddon*. The closing meant that for two days the most direct freeway access connecting the northern and southern extremes of Los Angeles County would be cut off. Jet Blue Airline offered a limited number of seats for \$1.00 for a flight from Burbank, in the north to Long Beach, CA, in the south—a distance of approximately 36 miles by car. Wolfpack Hustle challenged the Jet Blue passengers to a race. The conditions of the race required the Wolfpack to depart simultaneously with one of the passengers from the home of that passenger. The results can be seen here: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/07/carmageddon-bicyclists-declare-victory-over-jetblue-flight.html>. Spoiler alert: Wolfpack Hustle, a handful of people on roller skates, and another group taking L.A.'s notoriously slow public transportation all got there first.¹⁶⁴

In the wake of that shot heard round the world, Wolfpack Hustle went somewhat legit with the creation of the *Wolfpack Hustle HP Gran Prix Unified Title Series*. This race series has major sponsorships and attracts elite riders from all over the world. It is a strange trajectory for a group that started out as proud outlaw ridazz, but it isn't terribly inconsistent with many things that have relatively radical roots and eventually drift into the mainstream. It will never be

¹⁶⁴ “Carmageddon: Bicyclists Declare Victory in Race with JetBlue Flight,” *LA Times Blogs - L.A. NOW*, July 16, 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/07/carmageddon-bicyclists-declare-victory-over-jetblue-flight.html>.

Tom's Toothpaste or Burt's Bees, but Wolfpack Hustle has established itself as an urban bike culture institution that has grown up out of the cracks in the streets of Los Angeles.

Midnight Ridazz and Wolfpack Hustle tell a story of how bikes made a toe hold in car land. They tell that story from the streets where they have navigated automobile traffic with abandon. They have done it under the persistent and steadfast leadership of wonk-about-town, Don "Roadblock" Ward. It is hard to imagine a night riding scene blowing up from two rides a month to something on the order of 600 rides a year if the Midnight Ridazz board had never gone online. It is hard to imagine legitimized sponsored night races on bikes occurring in Los Angeles without the culture generated by Wolfpack Hustle as it happened on the streets and on the world wide web. Maybe Los Angeles would have eventually built a night ride scene, but the curve would probably take us into the post-fossil-fuel era before it became steep. Maybe it could have all been done with flyers, but where would the budget have come from? Like CicLAvia, this was change from the grassroots up that didn't ask or wait for anyone's permission.

Wonks on Steroids

The following section is a necessarily mixed bag that will take us out of this chapter and into the conclusion of this dissertation. In the first case, the heading refers to 200 or so wonks, in the same place at the same time, producing an historic moment. It is a moment from which there is no turning back in the establishment of a permanent bike culture in Los Angeles. There is also no turning back from the influence of that culture in terms of the very public changes that have occurred because of its presence. In the second, third, and

fourth cases, the heading refers to a couple of very different kinds of pioneers. One, Charles Gandy, is a transportation engineer who brought bicycle infrastructure to the City of Long Beach, California, at the southern end of Los Angeles County. He also served for several years as an evangelist who gave weekly tours to anyone who would come to Long Beach to see what they had done. I think it is safe to say that every wonk who appears in this chapter, and many who don't, went on those tours and took encouragement from what they saw—a medium size city reachable by light rail, mile after mile of bike lanes (including protected lanes), bike paths, bike parking, bike-friendly businesses and schools, and by the estimation of some, but not all, bike paradise. Two, Joe Linton is an institution in Los Angeles bike culture. The breadth and depth of his involvement is very nearly the stuff that legends—and possibly Woody Allen films—are made of. The third and final major wonk is Dr. Adonia Lugo, PhD, who has made the first major contribution to urban bike culture scholarship as it is found in Los Angeles. Before I engage in dialog with Dr. Lugo, I want to take you to the event described above where each of us had our 90 seconds with the Mayor of Los Angeles and a room filled with our wonk colleagues.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's Bike Summit: A Tale in Which the Mayor Meets Every Wonk Within a Twenty Mile Radius of City Hall

An elbow broken in eight places as a result of a biking accident brought us all together at the Metro headquarters in Downtown Los Angeles. On Monday, August 16, 2010, Mayor Anthony Villaraigosa invited all constituencies in the local bike community to attend a “summit.” Only months before, the Mayor had been forced off his bike by an errant taxicab. Eight fractured bones in his elbow

and a few surgical steel screws later, the Mayor was on a mission—a somewhat ironic one given the fact that he had been largely silent on the subject of cycling and the fact that his bike accident occurred on his first bike outing since taking office six years prior to the summit. He had some big ideas to announce.

After parading out some of the more “senior” members of the community, such as Richard Riordan (billionaire, major downtown player, former mayor, and octogenarian cycling enthusiast who presented the Mayor with a set of training wheels), the mayor listened while representatives from the Los Angeles Bicycle Advisory Committee, the Los Angeles Police Department Bicycle Task Force, officials from a number of nonprofit organizations such as Sustainable Streets, Bikeside, and Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition expressed their concerns about the state of cycling infrastructure in the City of Los Angeles. Citizens shared their views about the draft bike plan, their support for the upcoming CicLAvia, the harassment of cyclists by operators of motor vehicles, and the prospect of a helmet law.

The assembled wonks were unsparing in their criticism of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) and its generally disappointing performance where cyclists were concerned; General Manager, Rita Robinson, sat mostly in silence next to the Mayor, and LADOT’s Bicycle Program Senior Coordinator, Michelle Mowrey, was notably absent.

I was the last speaker in the group, representing no particular group but sharing some preliminary analysis after my first two years of observation of emergent urban bike culture in Los Angeles. I spoke directly to the Mayor and told him that where bikes were concerned the city appeared unambitious and

lacking even in the vision put forth heretofore. As his jaw dropped and he stared vacantly in my direction, I suggested to him that he should be thinking in terms of 4,000,000 bicycle commuters in the county by 2025—by that time, roughly the equivalent of the current City of Los Angeles population—and that anything less would be little more than a collection of symbolic gestures.

After an awkward pause, during which I returned to my seat, the Mayor changed the subject to the big vision that he did have. He was going to urge city council to pass a mandatory helmet law. Given that the room had at least 200 very independent cyclists from various corners of a more alternative form of LA Bike Culture, the vision was not terribly well received from even those who wear helmets. In fact, the Mayor received a healthy dose of “boos!!,” which he handled with a fair measure of grace.

Activist and City Council candidate Stephen Box characterized the experience of cyclists in a beautifully compressed remark directed at the Mayor and his panel with a single tweet. “Mayor focuses on cyclists’ behavior, cyclists ask him to focus on motorists’ behavior.”¹⁶⁵

Don Ward (Roadblock) reminded the Mayor that he (the Mayor) had been in Copenhagen for the post-Kyoto, post-Rio, pre-Rio, climate-summit fiasco and asked whether or not he had noticed that virtually no one there wears a helmet when riding a bike. He went on to suggest that it was because they had infrastructure that considered the safety of cyclists. The following day, on the

¹⁶⁵ Zach Behrens, “Hundreds of Cyclists Pedal to Mayor Villaragosa’s Bicycle Summit: LAist,” accessed August 17, 2012, http://laist.com/2010/08/16/bike_summit_notes.php.

Midnight Ridazz Forum, Roadblock further elaborated by saying, “helmets are great but the number one issue is that the streets aren't safe, not that we should be wearing more armor *because* the streets aren't safe.”¹⁶⁶

Despite the tensions in the room, the event was the first of its kind, and directly or indirectly, much may have come of it. At the very least, the Mayor of Los Angeles created an opportunity for a dialog, and in doing so, committed an act of recognition with his invitation to the cycling community. Out of that recognition came the unmistakable fact that the Mayor and his people had listened to what the community said—better even than listening, I got the distinct impression that we were heard.

A few months after his bike summit, in October of 2010, the Mayor rode with Lance Armstrong and others in the very first CicLAvia, an event that took over 7.5 miles of streets in downtown and East Los Angeles. As I have mentioned, a total of nine CicLAvias have happened since, with longer routes and different parts of the city covered each time. Slowly but surely, bike parking appears on sidewalks outside of businesses whose owners have appealed to their councilperson. City Councilman Bill Rosendahl, who at the mayor's bike summit introduced the prospect of a city ordinance that would prevent motorists from coming within three feet of a cyclist, guided that bill through the Los Angeles City Council where it has been made into law in the intervening time.

¹⁶⁶ Ward, Don, “Mayor's 18+ Helmet Law Proposal,” *Midnight Ridazz*, August 17, 2010, <http://midnightridazz.com/forums.php?searchType=title&showThreads=1&keyword=Mayor&topicId=15771>.

Very possibly continuing on the momentum of the Mayor's Bike Summit and the expectations of an empowered and energized community of bike activists, Mayor Villaraigosa surprised many on April 15, 2012, at the opening of CicLAvia, with the announcement of an extensive "bike share" program that would become one of the largest of its kind. In December of 2012, Bike Nation, a private vendor will place over 4,000 bicycles at numerous kiosks located in the Downtown Los Angeles, Hollywood, Venice Beach and Westwood areas of the city.¹⁶⁷ Bike share programs have seen varied levels of success in Paris, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., and New York. The Los Angeles program has met with little resistance, possibly due to the fact that the cost to the city will be minimal. Bike Nation, with the cooperation of the city, will fund the building of all necessary infrastructure and furnish the necessary bikes.

A Word About Joe Linton

In his LA Weekly article on bike activism and bike culture in Los Angeles, Aron Hillel called Joe Linton, "A Zeligesque figure in the bike community who seemed to know every other person riding a bicycle and, like the movie character, kept popping up at key moments."¹⁶⁸ The Zelig characterization isn't entirely fair, because, as I recall, Zelig bordered on the sociopathic at least to the extent that he was an opportunist who contributed little more than showing up and

¹⁶⁷ Damien Newton, "Surprise! City Announces Massive Bike Share Program Coming in December | Streetsblog Los Angeles," accessed June 26, 2012, <http://la.streetsblog.org/2012/04/15/surprise-city-announces-massive-bike-share-program-coming-in-december/>.

¹⁶⁸ Aron, Hillel, "The Bikeroots - Page 1 - News - Los Angeles - LA Weekly," 18.

having his picture taken at virtually every historic event of his time. The fact is, and this is not even a small exaggeration, Joe Linton was there at the dawn of virtually every pivotal moment along the Los Angeles Bike Culture History Timeline. He organized the first Los Angeles Critical Mass rides. He co-founded the Los Angeles County Bike Coalition with Ron Milam, a city planner cum mediator/facilitator, that was the first group to lobby effectively for widespread, bike-friendly policy and bike infrastructure in and across Los Angeles County. He was one of the early bloggers (B.I.K.A.S and L.A. Creek Freak). He was briefly the executive director of C.I.C.L.E. He was a member of the founding group of the Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina. He was a transportation policy guy at the Urban Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College. He was a member of the founding group that brought CicLAvia to Los Angeles. When I last looked, Joe Linton was a head writer at Streetsblog LA. He has written dozens of articles in multiple publications and been quoted, or at least mentioned, in hundreds of articles written by others. I have quoted him multiple times in this dissertation alone.

Joe Linton was not just there for the photo opportunities, the bylines, or the opportunities to be quoted. He has been on the ground in Los Angeles working tirelessly on behalf of bicyclists everywhere in the county because he believes that we cannot have enough riders on our streets if we want Los Angeles to be a livable city. The cast of characters who have come and gone in positions of leadership as bike culture has evolved, over the last 17 years in Los Angeles, may well number over a 100, but to my knowledge Joe Linton was the first man there, and he is still standing. He has seen massive change in the region over the

last 17 years. I could solicit a quote from Joe, and I am sure he would gladly give it to me. He's a journeyman writer. He wouldn't shy away from any of the credit I have given him—though he would happily share much of it. But nothing he could say would be as eloquent in its testimony to change as his resume of accomplishments and collaborations.

The City of Long Beach and Charlie Gandy, Uber-Wonk

Charles Gandy is presently the President of Livable Communities, a consulting firm “focused on community design, trail planning and design, bicycle and pedestrian advocacy, and creating charismatic, vibrant and economically successful communities.”¹⁶⁹ Gandy is the ultimate urban bike infrastructure evangelist. As Mobility Coordinator for the City of Long Beach, he presided over a major overhaul of the City's relationship with cyclists and bike infrastructure. The larger project involved turning Downtown Long Beach into a bicycle friendly district by building protected bike lanes and capitalizing on the presence of a light rail line that runs from the center of Downtown Los Angeles into its own center.

As all of this was being developed, and right up through the present, Gandy has conducted twice-weekly bicycle tours of the downtown area. Armed with an encyclopedic knowledge of cycling infrastructure statistics, for example, studies citing correlations between the development of walkable and bikable

¹⁶⁹ “Adventures in Active Living with Livable Communities Expert Charlie Gandy - About Charlie & Livable Communities,” accessed August 17, 2012, <http://www.charliegandy.com/about-charlie/>.

neighborhoods and increases in property values,^{170, 171} he has accumulated a substantial fan base for the City of Long Beach and its downtown area.

Work of this nature has been a lifetime project for Charlie Gandy. Prior to signing on with the City of Long Beach, he was the founding executive director of the Texas Bicycle Coalition from 1990–1994. He has served in similar capacities at the national, state, and local levels throughout his career. His weekly tours of the “Bicycle Friendly District” in Downtown Long Beach have become a point of pilgrimage for those who seek to understand about how such things are accomplished. One of the wisdom’s Gandy offers up on these tours is his three-tiered hierarchy of urban bikability. There are, “Bellwether cities like Davis[, California] and Portland, Ore., which invent new ideas and living patterns; bandwagons, with the creativity and clout to borrow good ideas and build on them; and backwater cities.”¹⁷²

Though many other cities in the Los Angeles region have mobility coordinators, bike czars, senior bicycling coordinators, and others with related titles, Charlie Gandy stands out as the enthusiastic showman among them. This

¹⁷⁰ D. P. Racca and A. Dhanju, “Project Report for Property Value/Desirability Effects of Bike Paths Adjacent to Residential Areas,” 2006, <http://tutelasalute.info/pdf/adjacent/o.pdf>.

¹⁷¹ B. Bavousett, “Sustainable Economic Benefits of Human-Powered Recreation to the State of Arizona,” 2011, [http://www.imbacanada.com/sites/default/files/Arizona%20Human%20Powere d%20Recreation%20Study%20041211.pdf](http://www.imbacanada.com/sites/default/files/Arizona%20Human%20Powered%20Recreation%20Study%20041211.pdf).

¹⁷² Robert Greene, “What Long Beach Can Teach Us about Cycling, and Politics,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/mar/01/news/la-ol-cycling-long-beach-lessons-20140228>.

is something that cuts both ways. While he clearly has mastered the art of the message, his facility with the facts frequently raises the political and even academic eyebrows. Based on my observations, I would attribute this to our natural inclinations toward disagreement with anything that does not precisely conform to our deontological tendencies—in this case one man’s deontology versus the deontologies he may encounter. Put another way, Charlie Gandy is a lightning rod operating in a world of different particular interests and silos of knowledge.

Hardcore, orthodox, League of American Bicyclist, vehicular cycling advocates don’t necessarily see the protected bike lanes in Long Beach as much more than a slightly safer version of sidewalk riding. They may grudgingly admit that Gandy’s enthusiasm is warranted because of the improvement in conditions for cyclists in the Long Beach Downtown area, but they can’t get the perceived loss of an educational opportunity unstuck from their craws. Cyclists should be out in the street, acculturating motorists to their presence, thus making things safer for the next cyclists. But the fact is, cities and neighborhoods are systems in the same way meadows and ponds are. Those systems with the greatest diversity, hence greater complexity, appear to be healthier than those systems that have been simplified through loss of diversity. A downtown area with three transportation modes where one mode is significantly more dominant than the other two—single occupant vehicle versus pedestrian versus bus—is an entirely different experience from a similar area that has a more even distribution over several modes—single occupant vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists, light rail, and bus—for instance. The balance shifts. Behaviors change. The opportunities for

what Liz Elliott and Shay Sanchez of C.I.C.L.E. refer to as “live exchange” broaden and increase the possibility of relationship—people to people as well as people to place.

Adonia Lugo: First One Across the Line

As I was doing my research for this dissertation, I was introduced, via email, to a doctoral student in anthropology at the University of California at Irvine. Adonia Lugo, it turned out, was writing her dissertation on urban bike culture in Los Angeles as well. In some respect we were ships passing. As I was handing over an earlier draft, she was defending and receiving her degree. Her research ends in 2010, and her questions center around activism and riders, themselves, as infrastructure. Lugo comments extensively on the traditional preoccupation in the riding community with physical infrastructure that segregates cyclists from motorists and creates another form of physical urban space that, “falls in line with the larger economic trend of neoliberal urbanism, which imagines a city whose life can be sold at market.”¹⁷³ Lugo writes this in answer to the question, “How does bicycling produce or challenge difference in Los Angeles?”¹⁷⁴—a brilliant question, well answered by her dissertation. While I may from time to time wander into her political space, the fundamental question I am asking is more about the ways in which an emergent bicycle culture may have brought about cultural and transportation-related changes in a mostly

¹⁷³ Lugo, “Body-City-Machines: Human Infrastructure for Bicycling in Los Angeles,” 8.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

urbanized Los Angeles region. What excites me is that Dr. Lugo and I have set the stage for what I believe will be a highly productive dialog. I will elaborate on this in the final chapter.

Apart from her dissertation, Adonia Lugo has also produced an extraordinarily useful reference tool that I have returned to over and over as I have researched and written this dissertation. The Los Angeles Bike Movement Timeline¹⁷⁵ has at least superficially corroborated, validated, and verified nearly every significant event and date I have named in this dissertation. The only exceptions are events and times that I would add that the timeline collaborators may not have known about. As with the dissertation, the timeline is yet another platform for dialog and collaboration in the future.

All of the organizations and individuals I have described above represent only a fraction of a larger body who have shared a common vision of greater Los Angeles County where cyclists would have their fair share of the roads—roads brought into being through the efforts of their forbears more than 100 years prior to their founding—and a region that would be the better for it. The vast majority of those I have written about have had zero formal training in city planning or transportation policy and politics. This in itself is remarkable. Even more remarkable, it would seem, is the fact that many of these individuals are still at it 16 years after Ron Milam and Joe Linton founded the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition.

¹⁷⁵ Lugo, “Los Angeles Bike Movement History: A Collaboration Exploring Culture Change.”

Los Angeles is a different place for the boundless energy and commitment of individual wonks and the complex neural network they created as they persisted in creating change. They and it truly are the brains of the operation. For the last 17 years, wonks have organized, communicated, and campaigned. The results are all over the streets in the form of everything from sharrows to networks of green lanes crisscrossing Los Angeles County. The results are all over civil and motor-vehicle codes in the form of anti-harassment laws and the new three-foot law enacted statewide, requiring motorists to give bicyclists a minimum of three feet of clearance at all times—not just when it is convenient. Failure to comply will result in considerable fines. Questions of larger system change remain open and require monitoring. Issues of gentrification, further enunciation of difference, and segregation will require attention. If there is one thing this chapter affirms, Los Angeles has just the army of wonks to handle it.

Chapter Five

Meanings, Connections, and the Road Ahead

At the outset of this long ride—before I even knew it was a ride—I stumbled into the middle of what I came to understand as a self-organizing phenomenon: urban bike culture in Los Angeles. Looking individually at any one of its three domains, as I had identified them—ridazz, wrenches, and wonks—they appeared spontaneous and chaotic at the time because they were. Ridazz wanted to go on rides so rides happened. An assorted group of bike messengers and ridazz came together, informally, to wrench on their bikes. There was no plan to open up a do-it-yourself bicycle repair cooperative. It happened as the group recognized the need to expand because unexpected things were happening. More and more people kept showing up with varying levels of wrenching skills. And wonks! Who knew where they came from? Some, like Joe Linton, came from the earliest rides. Others, like Stephen Box, came from near-death experiences riding bicycles on city streets. Alex Thompson came from the community of ridazz.

As each of these domains came more into focus for me, as I observed and reflected on what I was seeing, it became clear that humans were doing what many living and nonliving things do. They were organizing themselves in response to the conditions of their surroundings. And though I didn't see it at first, it soon became apparent to me that individual and collective agency organized around shared values fueled the development of each of these worlds. Soon I was seeing the connections among the ridazz, the wrenches, and the

wonks, and I saw the multiplicity of ways in which they were connecting to one another and responding to conditions in the greater Los Angeles area.

I saw and participated in night rides with dozens of others and eventually with thousands of others—mostly people less than half my age—who called themselves *ridazz*. The rides and the riding led me to a curiosity about the workings of the bike I was riding, and I was introduced to places where I could learn to maintain and repair a bike. They weren't schools in any formal sense, and they weren't bike shops—these do-it-yourself bicycle repair cooperatives—but they were most certainly places of learning, places where the educators called themselves *wrenches*, and the customers were students. In those places, I met a number of individuals, I've called *wonks*, who, in some cases, wanted to change the streets of Los Angeles to make them safer and more convenient for anyone who wanted to ride a bike anywhere in the region, and, in other cases, simply wanted to claim their rightful place on the streets—a seemingly impossible, if not quixotic undertaking, in a place largely seen as the automobile capital of the world.

Somewhere in the middle of this experience, the *ridazz*, *wrench*, and *wonk* that I was becoming collided with the scholar, writer, and urban sustainability educator/practitioner of my day job. It wasn't enough to simply watch and participate in what was going on. Something much larger than my individual experience was afoot. I was witnessing a significant shift along the environmental and cultural continua of Los Angeles. I was simultaneously experiencing a tectonic shift in my thinking about urban sustainability as a practitioner discipline. To the extent that I might be looking at something that

could help to shape my definition of urban sustainability, an inquiry into what this bike culture was, how it might be changing Los Angeles, and who might be the beneficiaries of such changes became all the more urgent.

It became a process of research and analysis that has accompanied me right up to the last revision of the last chapter. The design of the study emerged from the depth and length of the experience. It started with riding, wrenching, hanging out with and eventually taking on the role of wonk(s). I heard and collected the stories of individuals, rides, and co-ops. I read their blogs to understand how they were seeing this world, I watched documentaries made by members of the local scene, and I eventually looked to more traditional journalistic media for a longer view from outside of the worlds of ridazz, wrenches, and wonks.

As I have said, from the outset to well along in the process, I was working with very coarse-grained questions, which eventually I massaged into something more manageable and useful. I posed three questions. The first two asked how and in what ways these observed phenomena, collectively called urban bike culture, have affected the transportation and cultural systems of Los Angeles and how bike culture has made Los Angeles a more sustainable and livable place. The third was a more general question about urban sustainability that floats in the background of the three preceding chapters and is more directly addressed here. As it has turned out, these are not just questions about change and sustainability. I learned along the way that they are also questions about power, place, and self.

I have made the argument that the communities of Los Angeles ridazz, wrenches, and wonks self-organized into cultures of their own, which they, in

turn, insinuated into the transportation conversation that has been at the heart of L.A. culture, politics, and economics since the first bicycles rolled into town at the end of the nineteenth century. Ridazz, wrenches, and wonks challenged and moved a long-entrenched culture of transportation policy by moving from the margins to the center of the discourse and by refusing to leave until the City of Los Angeles adopted a comprehensive bike plan of their own design. They precipitated a transformation of the culture of the road by challenging the status quo—sometimes as outlaws and sometimes as law-abiding citizens. Through what is now going into its 18th year, those responsible for the persistence and growth of bike culture in Los Angeles have brought about significant social change by asserting their equal rights to the most extensive and crucial public space in the region—the streets.

From the outset, the efforts to change this realm of public space have happened at the grassroots level, mostly due to a profound mistrust of top-down approaches to change. The words of Midnight Ridazz and Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina cofounder, MaBell (a.k.a. Marissa Bell, M.D.) bear repeating here. “One thing that unites us is that we’ve all given up on changing things from the top down, but we all believe in change from the bottom up. And that’s what the [this] is: change from the bottom up.”¹⁷⁶ The same could be said of the founding of the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition by Joe Linton and Ron Milam in 1998. It can also be said of much of the “illegal” and confrontational activity that has

¹⁷⁶ Segal, “Bike Culture: Spokes People,” 90.

happened on night rides. It is also true of the endless City Council committee and subcommittee meetings and votes attended by *ridazz* and *wonks*.

Through the agency of these communities, power and influence appear to have shifted more than ever in the direction of the people calling for change. Much of this change coincides with some growth and development within the Los Angeles bike culture. The approval of the Los Angeles Bicycle Plan in 2011 required two years of thoughtful strategy and deft political action that involved taking the confrontational tone down a notch or two. Political savvy and more respectful treatment of the opposition facilitated a significant turning of the corner during which the cycling community gained new friends. One observer and former staunch opponent summed up the change.

Clearly they've turned the corner from being the bad guy, disrupting traffic, being abused by cops, being run over by motorists without anything being done about it, to a movement that's being embraced by everyone from the mayor and council, to winning major concessions to policies they've advocated.¹⁷⁷

The results of this turning of the corner can be observed all over the Los Angeles region. Some of the evidence is painted on the pavement in mile after mile of bike path, bike lane, and sharrows that simply were not there when I first started looking. Some of the evidence is rolling down the street in the growing

¹⁷⁷ Aron, Hillel, "The Bikeroots - Page 1 - News - Los Angeles - LA Weekly," 17.

number of cyclists on the road on a daily basis—a more than 100% increase between 2011 and 2013 were on bike paths, bike lanes, and sharrows.¹⁷⁸

My goal for the rest of this chapter is to discuss how I have experienced change in myself and how I have seen it manifest in Los Angeles as a geographic, political, economic, social, and cultural place. As I have in the preceding chapters, I will talk mostly about grassroots change in the foreground and top-down change in the background. I will make a general comment about the sustainability of urban places and the role that human powered transportation might play in the future of Los Angeles. I will close with some thoughts about place, about where we are now and what this all means, and about Los Angeles as a bike city of the future.

Old Place, New Place, Same Place?

The emergence of bike culture in Los Angeles is worthy of our attention as a significant occurrence because it has taken place in one of the most car-dependent metropolitan areas on the planet. In 1997, when the first Los Angeles Critical Mass ride occurred, the sight of 20 people riding bikes at night, from Korea Town 10 miles due west to the beach, might just have been seen as a freakish occurrence if it had only happened once. Seventeen years later, on the last Friday of every month, over 1000, and sometimes 2000-3000 riders take off from Korea Town, heading out on a different route for every ride. After endless attempts by the Los Angeles Police Department to stop the ride, the department

¹⁷⁸ Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, “Bicycle Findings & Recommendations from the 2013 L.A. Bike and Pedestrian Count,” accessed January 1, 2015, <http://la-bike.org/bikecountreport>.

did an about face and adopted an if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em stance. They actually escort the ride now. There may be many people who see this activity as freakish or even aggravating, but there are also many who have seen it over and over until it is part of the fabric of where they live.

The linked phenomena of night rides and their ridazz, do-it-yourself bicycle repair cooperatives and their wrenches, and the autodidactic transportation activists I have called wonks constitute a culture of change evidenced by a set of shared values and goals: rebellion against the car; relationship with urban space; relationships with self and other selves; a desire for a more livable and just urban place; a will to engage in the political process; an interest in informal education; a desire for a more local, just, and alternative economy; and a sense that these various forms of participation might contribute to some good end. For the most part, these values, opinions, passions, and positions made their way among the participating parties through their own self-organized neural network of the online blogs, ride boards, discussion forums, and chat rooms. This network was and is where the community argued policy and practice, and it is where they organized themselves into affinity groups that would appear at hearings and sessions throughout the region where transportation planning, traffic ordinance, and infrastructure decisions were scuttled, enacted into law, or put into effect.

Rides beget rides, as an examination of the Midnight Ridazz website's seven-year archive of ride calendars, discussion forums, and photo archives

suggests.¹⁷⁹ Rides beget wonks. Most of those I have referred to as wonks have emerged from this scene. Wonks beget change. Many of these wonks have experienced urban bike cultures in other American cities and in large urban areas outside of the US. All of the wonks who are night ridazz know of the great mother of all Sunday bike rides, Ciclovía—a Bogotá Colombia 90 km ride/walk/skate/dance that has taken place there every Sunday since 1975. Those same wonks convinced the City of Los Angeles to sanction CicLAvia—a scaled-down (both in frequency and distance) version of the Bogotá ride—launched on 10/10/10. As of this writing there have been 10 such events. The number of miles of streets closed for CicLAvia Sunday has increased from 7.5 to over 12 with routes extending from the downtown area into South Los Angeles, East Los Angeles, and westward all the way to Venice and the Pacific Ocean.

CicLAvia has changed Los Angeles by demonstrating to hundreds of thousands of its citizens that public space, including the road, is not the exclusive domain of the car. By extending itself first into some of the least affluent, yet culturally rich neighborhoods, CicLAvia has moved power in directions it has traditionally never gone before. By expanding, evolving, and enduring, it has anchored itself into civic life in Los Angeles. Time will tell if it has become a permanent feature—like the Hollywood Sign—that will ultimately serve as a signifier of how Los Angeles sees itself and how the world sees Los Angeles.

My own experience of the CicLAvia rides has been profound in that it has taken me to places, now multiple times, on my bicycle that I had only ever been to

¹⁷⁹ Midnight Ridazz, “Midnight Ridazz Bicycle Ride.”

in my car and to some places I had never been at all. I felt the ground and breathed the air of unfamiliar places—an experience that is unavailable to a driver, isolated from the surroundings, in a car. I will confess that I felt a certain amount of shame over my own history of unfamiliarity and disconnection from those places. I also feel that the project is far from done. The difference between now and then—then being a time when none of this was going on—is that now I can see a future in which patterns of hundreds of thousands of people on bikes circulating through miles and miles and many neighborhoods away from where they live has been normalized into the life of the city. I can't help but think that familiarity opens up the possibility of affiliation and, possibly, even a sense of kinship and connection.

If my individual experience of riding bikes can bring me to a greater understanding of people and the places they experience as their neighborhoods and homes, consider the possible outcomes when tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands are having these experiences. It doesn't mean we will be holding hands and sharing our utopian fantasies, but it certainly means we are having a different experience with our city and our fellow citizens. We are having an experience of each other—an experience that is not available in a car.

When I began riding and wrenching in 2008, participation in rides—generally an outlaw undertaking—was a choice made by people who undoubtedly had a fairly high tolerance for that kind of experience. But I recognized that I was making a relatively privileged choice. I wasn't going to be stopped because of the color of my skin or my age. I didn't run the risk of deportation or incarceration if stopped. Transformation of the mass ride from an

unsanctioned event to a sanctioned and welcomed event transformed the population of cyclists to the extent that probably less than 5% of the participants identify themselves as ridazz. It also transforms the rider experience.

Police-ridazz antagonism vanishes. Law enforcement is there to help and facilitate, to “protect and serve.” People on bikes can breathe regardless of their rap sheet or their citizenship status.

In this story, all ridazz and all wonks ride bikes. Bike riding begets the necessity of bike maintenance so some ridazz and some wonks become wrenches. Wrenches beget do-it-yourself wrenching cooperatives where anyone in the city can learn to wrench on bikes. Wrenching co-ops are the heart, the hearth and the home of urban bike culture. They are meeting houses where the plans of ridazz and wonks are hatched. They are social centers where strangers meet up and sometimes ride off into the sunset together. Wrenching co-ops are electronic libraries, where the librarians take the public on electronic tours of vast oceans of knowledge about bike repair. They direct customers to online ride boards maintained by wonks and ridazz so that they and you and I might find a place to ride of an evening.

While the night ride in its various forms provides a social environment, these are sometimes fast-paced, always-moving kinesthetic interactions; they are not for everyone. The co-ops constitute a home base for their core volunteers or members, and a rich, stationary, social experience for their customers. It is a different pace and a different scale.

There is something more than just education going on there. Relationship happens inside the walls of a co-op. Governance happens. Service happens.

Something on the order of domestic finance goes on. Volunteers produce spontaneous workflows that result in repaired bicycles ridden in the streets where they may not have been for a long time or ever. Members and customers collaborate and create. Though they are businesses, the wrenching co-ops offer a different experience of money and power. Volunteers are there to educate rather than sell. Because the only financial concern of the co-op is covering expenses, there are greater opportunities for generosity. A mechanic can waive fees or give away used parts, not to engender customer loyalty, but to serve the customer in need. In that sense, they seem to be participating in an economy that has one foot in the mainstream and the other in some alternative economy where learning and relationships trump profit.

The population of d.i.y. wrenching co-ops increased from one in 2002, to two in 2005, to three in 2007, to four in 2009, to five in 2010,¹⁸⁰ and then came the great explosion of April 2011 when it was discovered at the Los Angeles County Bike!Bike!¹⁸¹ gathering that there were 13 co-ops either on the ground and operating or very close to opening their doors. This proliferation of resilient, networked entities can only have been made possible by a regular stream of people who want to learn how to fix bikes and other people who want to teach

¹⁸⁰ Notice how the species is evolving or something notable is happening. The gestation periods are shortening.

¹⁸¹ Bike!Bike! is a shared “brand” that signifies gatherings of wrenching co-ops, where information exchanges and the occasional beer tasting take place. Historically, they have happened at local, regional, and national scales.

those people how to fix them. That the stream has persisted for 12 years says something about the sustainability of the wrenching co-op .

A closer look at the “original three” co-ops, Bicycle Kitchen/Bici Cocina, Bike Oven, and Bikerowave reveals that through various highs and lows, upheavals and periods of relative calm, generations of leadership have turned over two and, in some cases, three times, sometimes peacefully and sometimes with more than a modicum of internal tension. In each of these instances, each of the co-ops seems to have survived and endured. As the co-ops endure, they seem to expand the public benefits provided to the communities in which they operate and beyond. I would attribute this to a number of things. The co-ops are delivering something that is in demand, particularly in a time and in a region that is increasingly more hospitable to cyclists. They are inclusive places of shared values—human powered transportation at the very least—that are not grounded in traditional beliefs or political affiliation. Because it is not unusual for the conversation in a co-op to turn in the direction of urban bike infrastructure and policy, customers and volunteers are afforded a listening post and a window into networks that offer opportunities to participate in civic life outside of the co-op.

I Change

In the car city

Bikes on the freeway at night

My dad is badass.

Sara L. Strauss, "Untitled Haiku"¹⁸²

I rode my bike on the freeway at night. In response to that fast-traveling bit of family news, my older daughter wrote the haiku above. I include it here because it is a kind of inspirational talisman and keystone. I don't generally see myself as a badass, but the fact that my daughter did raised the stakes on this project and drove me straight into its conclusion. It illustrates perfectly what enchanted me about the topic of urban bike culture in Los Angeles. In some strange way, my daughter's haiku is the seventeen-syllable version of both the conclusion and the dissertation—not because it says, "My dad is badass," but because the world I fell into is badass. I am nothing more than an accidental pilgrim whose son engaged in a co-conspiracy and a purposeful act of civil disobedience by riding his bicycle in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Santa Monica and San Diego Freeways at rush hour. In doing so, he and thirty others on bikes and skates sent a message to the city and the world: "Ride a bike. You'd be home by now."¹⁸³ His early adoption of the cultures of ridazz and wrenches in Los Angeles also led me to an aspect of this work that became a kind of

¹⁸² Sara L. Strauss, "Untitled Haiku," Poem, (September 2008).

¹⁸³ *Crimanimalz - The Freeway Ride II*.

multi-locational pilgrimage. Both the haiku and the words on the Crimanimalz sign made prescient Robin Kimmerer's exhortation that reindignation was a possible portal to connecting with a place I had called home for my entire life. All I had to do was make my own rituals. All I had to do was ride a bike, and I'd be home by now.

Riding in the streets, with my kin or without, alone, or in a sea of ridazz, wrenches, wonks, rag-tag hipster kids, cops, flâneurs, boulevardiers, randonneurs, seniors, elected officials, organizers, educators, clowns, giant chickens, ghosts, and others I encountered practices and communities I had somehow not noticed before. Riding in the streets also became my ritual and my research. What unfolded for me in that undertaking was a view of a temporal and spatial landscape—my native landscape—on which three distinct features stood out: at the global scale, my city as an urban space that had long since extended its material and energy appetites thousands of miles outside of its actual footprint; at the local scale, people on bikes in a traffic-jammed place famous for its love of the car, bringing into being an emergent cultural property that suggested a powerful and positive infidelity to that famous love; and at the future scale, possibilities.

Most of my ambivalence about my native pavement eroded over time, giving way to fascination standing at the fringe of love. From that fringe, I reflected over and over on the interaction between people and place until it occurred to me that these interactions make place what it is and make us who we are. I don't think that if I had stayed exclusively in my car for the last seven years, I could have possibly experienced this so profoundly as I have riding a

bike. When I ride, I experience place in something closer to ur time than I have since I was a child, when the mountains I hiked and rode through were thoroughly mine. This work has changed me. I am no longer simply in Los Angeles. I am of it as well.

Places Change

If it can happen in Santa Monica, who is to say it can't happen in Los Angeles? In a city that measures a scant 8.42 mi.² with a population of 91,812, Santa Monica's bicycle-related infrastructure initiatives for cyclists are impressive. They include a 37 mile bike network; the largest bike center in North America—including several hundred bike parking spaces, lockers, and shower facilities for commuters and casual errand runners and an extensive bike rental inventory for tourists; an ambitious 20 year bike action plan that will more than triple the existing street infrastructure in favor of cyclists; and an education program designed to prepare cyclists to ride on urban streets anywhere.¹⁸⁴ When I started this work in 2008, there was no such infrastructure, and the plans were not nearly as public or ambitious.

Meanwhile, back in the City of Los Angeles, there have been great steps forward and a leap or two backwards. The most notable leap forward was the 2011 adoption by the Los Angeles Planning Department of the 2010 Los Angeles Bike Plan, which was enthusiastically endorsed by the grassroots cycling community after their rejection of two early iterations that were deemed woefully inadequate. While there has been lingering skepticism as to the city's

¹⁸⁴ "SantaMonicaBicycle-Action-Plan.pdf," n.d.

commitment to funding and executing the proposed infrastructure, more paint appears on the pavement annually, more signs go up on the roads, and more roads are redesigned with cyclists in mind. Bike infrastructure agenda items regularly find their way onto the agendas of the Los Angeles City Council and the various committees that have the power to move these items forward.

Then there is the elusive bike-share program, which is, in brief, a public bike rental service for trips fewer than five miles that operates in the same manner as luggage cart rentals at a typical urban airport. The bike renter puts a credit card into a vending machine that dispenses bikes, and the renter takes a bike, rides it to another vending machine that is closest to their intended destination, deposits the bike in the vending machine, and goes merrily along to the next destination.

Early in 2013, months before leaving office, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced that the city would be contracting with Bike Nation to establish the largest bike share program in the United States at a minimal cost to the city's general fund.¹⁸⁵ The announcement came at a time when most of the local bike-riding community was unaware that such a plan was even in the works. Apparently, Mayor Villaraigosa was unaware that Bike Nation was teetering on the brink of an insolvency that would destabilize and ultimately nullify the much hoped for project.

¹⁸⁵ Newton, "Surprise! City Announces Massive Bike Share Program Coming in December | Streetsblog Los Angeles."

In the intervening time, smaller Los Angeles County cities like Santa Monica, Culver City, West Hollywood, and Burbank, to name a few, are chomping at the bit to get going with their own bike-share initiatives. The ideal situation would be a regional one, but that is less likely to happen if the smaller cities sign contracts with multiple vendors or develop their own infrastructure. As I write this, there is a great deal of loud whispering going on in various corners of the city. The word is that an announcement is imminent, but the word—mostly rumor it would seem—comes in a number of versions, many of which rule out a unified solution, while others insist that such a solution is a certainty. What seems certain is that pilot programs will start appearing sometime in 2015, followed by an expansion determined by the success of the pilot.

All that said, it is far from an exaggeration to say that things have come a *long, long* way since I began my research. In addition to CicLAvia, which grew, in part, out of an explosive night ride culture that has increased in population and frequency by several orders of magnitude over the last decade, the aforementioned Santa Monica expansion and the development of a strong grassroots movement, discussed in the next section, have brought massive change to the Los Angeles region. The conversation has turned to the bike as a solution to everything from public health crises to automobile traffic congestion. Bike parking and bike lanes are popping up everywhere, and it feels like we are close to a time when word on the street will be that “ridazz are the new normal!”

Change: Grassroots vs. Top-Down

From a political perspective, the emergence of a different kind of bike culture in Los Angeles has demonstrated, at least for a brief and thus-far,

self-sustaining period, that not all of this change needs to come from the top down. In fact, it can't all come from the top down. In 2008, I attended a meeting of the Westside Cities Council of Local Governments. The group had gathered to hear a panel of elected and appointed officials talking about the problems of small cities in a larger urbanized region—particularly those smaller cities that are surrounded on all sides by the City of Los Angeles. The topic of bicycle infrastructure came up, and one of the panelists, Fran Pavely, who had recently been elected to the California State Senate, made a statement that has proven itself to be sound advice over and over as I have observed the frustrations of grassroots transportation activists. “Don’t rely on your electeds to move on this.” She told the assembled group, “It’s going to have to come out of a grassroots effort.”

This was early in 2008, when most were unaware or in denial of the looming economic downturn. Many cities with ambitious transportation master plans shelved them because of the deep cuts in their budgets brought about by the economic collapse and weak recoveries that plagued the intervening period. This same collapse, however, would open up opportunities for grassroots activists and their movements to close some of the gaps and fill some of the vacuums.

With very few exceptions, everything I observed over the next several years affirmed the wisdom of Fran Pavely’s admonition. Those things that have come from the ground up are the things that have grown and endured. The handful of wonks I traveled with were not particularly impressed by the way power is distributed in any of our traditional systems of governance, which gave them a kind of outlaw fearlessness when it came to making their own organizations. The

rides, the co-ops, and the advocacy organizations are all examples of this. CicLAvia is a near-perfect illustration. It was born in the meeting rooms of grassroots organizations and the living rooms of interested individuals. Its originators seized a moment when they had empirical evidence that thousands of people were riding around on the streets of Los Angeles, en masse, in hundreds of rides per year. They knew enough about this population, because many of them came from it, to know that it contained a potentially potent political force. Before the entire project became too vertiginous, they knew where to go to bring progressive fixers on board who could navigate through snarling packs of bureaucrats and elected naysayers.

In a matter of two years, the group emerged with a negotiated deal for a designated Sunday when seven and a half miles of Downtown Los Angeles streets closed for four hours while 20,000 Angelenos strolled, ran, skated, wheeled, and road to nowhere in particular, in no particular rush to get there. For those few hours the streets belonged to the people and not their cars. From that relatively slow, small start, Los Angeles now has an institution that produces four CicLAvias each year. The estimates range, but the ride is now populated by upwards of 200,000 celebrant riders, walkers, skaters, and strollers. All signs point to an increase in the number of annual rides, and there is minimal resistance to the ride in its present state and to its further expansion. Because the rides have been so impeccably produced, the organizers still hold in their hands all of the political capital they started with, if not a great deal more.

Before CicLAvia was even remotely imaginable in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition had launched as a transportation-policy

advocacy organization in 1998. While they worked primarily in the policy realm, ridazz rode, and wrenches began dreaming up the co-ops. Cyclists Inciting Change through Live Exchange (C.I.C.L.E.)—a name that presaged CicLAvia because that is precisely what cyclists, pedestrians, skaters, and others are doing on those designated Sundays—set about the business of educating cyclists in safe and competent urban cycling while encouraging exploration of the city through their “Urban Adventures” rides. Given the size of the region and the northeasterly location of C.I.C.L.E, Sustainable Streets took up the education slack west of Downtown L.A.

As this cauldron of activism began to boil, grassroots, policy bloggers, ride calendar/discussion forum webmasters, and d.i.y.-online journalists built a communications network that connected everyone in the movement. One of the results of this network was a peak moment of self-awareness in the wrenching community that jumped off the pavement on April 23 and 24, 2011. The first Los Angeles regional *Bike!Bike!* brought representatives from all of the known d.i.y. wrenching co-ops together in one place for the first time ever. The meeting was originally intended to be a gathering of the five original DIY bike repair cooperatives, plus Bici Libre, which was born out of the *Choose Health LA* project (see below). The process of organizing the gathering revealed that there were more co-ops popping their heads out of the ground and more in the planning stages than anyone had anticipated. Thirteen co-ops in varying stages of development attended the meeting and 55 mile ride that ended at the Hub in Long Beach. The two-day event resulted in stronger connections among the established and newer co-ops. The flow of information and support among the

co-ops continues to this day. This gathering affirmed the power of grassroots organizations. It also gave its participants a sense of their shared histories as well as a hope for posterity wherein a steady stream of kindred spirits who support a common sense of vision and mission provide a sense of a distant future.

In partial contrast to the successes of the grassroots efforts, two notable projects found their way to the ground from the highest levels of government where they reached into the pools of activists for collaborations that couldn't have otherwise happened without them. I say partial contrast because both projects achieved varying levels of partial success. I participated in both of these initiatives, and while they had their moments, both had their chilling moments of realization that the benefactors were like absentee landlords who barely cared if the tenants paid the rent—a condition that might make for lovely living circumstances, but not a great formula for making headway toward significant mitigation of public health and safety crises. The following two examples should illustrate my point.

In March of 2010, the first five d.i.y. bike repair cooperatives, The Bicycle Kitchen, Bike Oven, Bikerowave, The Valley Bikery, and the Long Beach Hub, brought their collective energies together with C.I.C.L.E. and the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, as the County Cycling Collaborative (CCC) to participate in *Choose Health LA*.¹⁸⁶ This was a program initiated by the Los Angeles County Health Department and funded by the United States Department

¹⁸⁶ “ChooseHealthLA.com | Health and Fitness for LA County – Eat Healthy, Move Healthy, Live Healthy,” accessed September 30, 2011, <http://choosehealthla.com/>.

of Health and Human Services as part of the 2009 economic stimulus program. The program promoted a variety of exercise programs targeted at economically disadvantaged populations of Los Angeles County disproportionately at risk of obesity and other associated health issues. Choose Health LA was a hybridized version of a top-down initiative in that it tapped the grassroots community and organizations to execute the mission.

The execution was a success in that the bike giveaways, repair workshops, and riding clinics were standing-room-only performances. The follow up, which was the responsibility of LACHD, was nonexistent. The community-based organizations were left in an awkward position once the project-funding period expired. Many of the client communities were fair distances from the organizations. Many of the organizations, operating on shoestring budgets, lacked the capacity to effectively maintain relationships in communities they had hoped to serve, in part by helping to build more local capacity. There was something sad, even devastating, about both the wide-eyed naiveté with which the grassroots community entered into something which hindsight has revealed to be business-as-usual, ham-handed colonialism.

The second case was not anywhere near as hollow as the outcome of the County Cycling Collaborative, but the loss of opportunity was an equivalent waste. Beyond the similar problem of a lack of program evaluation, the Office of Traffic Safety (OTS) grant won by Sustainable Streets enjoyed a fair measure of success. Perhaps because it was a go-it-alone venture in which Sustainable Streets could reflect internally about the lessons learned, the sting of the minuses was minor in comparison to the CCC project.

The California Office of Traffic Safety was also funded by stimulus grant money from the federal government. The purpose of the grant was to develop and deliver a comprehensive urban bike safety education program that was designed to educate several hundred participants in three cities in the greater Los Angeles area. These were mere drops in the bucket in a region that boasts a population that has topped out at over 13,000,000. Still, it was a beginning and a success for Sustainable Streets in that it delivered what was promised. The lost opportunity was a ball dropped by the OTS. We had in our grasp an excellent population sample that could have been surveyed and tracked for some period to measure changes in behavior, but apparently from the OTS all the way up to the Transportation Department of the U.S. Government, no one cared to know the outcomes.

What I have taken away from the rich opportunity to compare and contrast grassroots and top-down approaches is that passion and commitment rule. They are the blood and circulation system of a resilient system. There is something almost intoxicating about the experience of showing up with others day after day, week after week to move something forward that promotes the health and safety of the people, that doesn't involve violence, and doesn't cost a whole hell of a lot of money. There is fertility in action of that nature.

On the other hand, what the world of top-down enterprise seems to be up to is self-perpetuation while no one notices. Make the projects sound important enough and good enough. Keep them moving through the pipeline. What happens at the end of the pipe is of no consequence when you have neither the

time nor inclination to care. Just keep the spotlight away and show us where the money is.

Urban Sustainability

Air, water, food, housing, education, sanitation, transportation, flood control, and recreation seem to dominate the sustainability conversation in large urban areas. Large, transnational, corporate interests mostly influence the conversations that lead to decision-making in cities. The large top-down initiatives are often sold as “sustainable development” and part of the new “green economy.” Though the emphasis on growth is somewhat more tempered, a great deal of the mainstream of the sustainability movement remains driven by traditional economic interests that are still very connected to a highly globalized, highly extractive economy.

Many of the conditions that must be attended to if we are to achieve true sustainability, as I see it, are persistently ignored. Poverty is unsustainable. Grossly inequitable access to education, employment, and influence is unsustainable. Growing disparities in wealth between the richest and poorest are unsustainable. Mass incarceration and the criminalization of youth is unsustainable. Underutilized capacity is unsustainable. Top-down solutions are unsustainable. All of these things mirror the massive inventory of disturbed, breaking and dying ecosystems all over the planet. The very scale of it is unfrontable. The scale of urban bike culture as a different and more way of doing things, however, hints at a more Los Angeles.

Very early on in my enchantment with urban bike culture in Los Angeles a question tumbled over and over in my mind about the relationship between its

mostly sustainable possibilities and the overtly unsustainable transportation habits and infrastructure of the greater Los Angeles area. Urban bike culture alone will not make Los Angeles or any other city into a sustainable place. It can, however, very publicly model ways in which urban places can move in the direction of sustainability. As a way of thinking about that as a possibility, I offer an analysis of the transportation habits of those living in the City of Los Angeles.

In 2009, the City of Los Angeles published its *Transportation Profile*, which indicated a population of approximately 3.7 million occupying approximately 440 mi².¹⁸⁷ The Department of Motor Vehicles reported that there were 2,499,764 motor vehicles registered in the City of Los Angeles; 1,977,803 of those were automobiles.¹⁸⁸ The *Transportation Profile*, using US Census data, indicates that of the 3.7 million citizens, 1,662,238 are workers over the age of 16; 7.8% of these workers live in households that do not own an automobile; 79.5% commute to work in a van, truck, or car; 10.3% use some form of public transportation; 3.2% walk; 4.7% work at home; 1.7% ride motorcycles or take taxicabs; and 0.6% ride bicycles.¹⁸⁹

Simple math shows that, in the City of Los Angeles, in 2009, 91.5% of the 1,662,238 people in the work force, or approximately 1,520,948, are getting to work using modes of transportation that produce greenhouse gasses: shared or

¹⁸⁷ “The City of Los Angeles Transportation Profile 2009” (The Public Information Office of the Department of Transportation, 2009), 6, <http://ladot.lacity.org/pdf/PDF10.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

single-occupancy automobiles, commuter vans, rail, bus, taxicab, or motorcycle. This leaves 141,290 who are not. Of those who are not driving themselves, 17,021 are walking, and 9,973 are riding bicycles. The remainder, one can only presume, are not commuting at all. A modest estimate would suggest that those who are commuting in some carbon-emitting vehicle are, on average, responsible for five tons of CO₂ per year. At that rate, the City of Los Angeles alone is good for 7,604,740 commuter-related tons of CO₂ deposited in the atmosphere per year. For every person who gives up the car altogether, that number is reduced by five tons.

From the climate-change perspective, this is where the bicycle story becomes useful. If 25% of those who drove to work on a daily basis were to abandon their cars in favor of walking, biking, and occasional public transportation, the tonnage would be reduced by just a little bit less than 2,000,000 tons. At a global scale, this is admittedly a drop in the bucket. There are numerous ways of addressing CO₂ emissions that do not involve people riding bicycles. At the human scale, however, there are significant benefits that are left on the table year after year in the current Los Angeles transportation story. With a baseline of 0.6% share of transportation modes, the bicycle story in the Los Angeles region has far to go if it is going to tap into these benefits in any significant way.

The night rides described in Chapter Two constitute public play and performance in the form of unconventional urban recreation, which, again, can be characterized as sustainable, if periodically outlaw. It can also be characterized as nearly CO₂ free, or at least as CO₂ ultra-light. On the nights

when there are mass-scale rides such as the Los Angeles Critical Mass or C.R.A.N.K Mob, thousands of people on bikes out for entertainment are thousands of people not in cars out for entertainment. Depending on the size of a car, somewhere between four and six bikes take up as much road space as a single car that could comfortably carry four to six passengers but seldom do in Los Angeles. 1,000 bikes replacing 250 automobiles over an average of 20 miles—the approximate distance of many night rides—represents a reduction of 20,000 automobile miles. That represents 8.46 metric tons of CO₂ that do not end up in the earth's atmosphere. The actual CO₂ savings would be a great deal more, given the fact that the vast majority of automobile trips are made by single occupant vehicles. At the scale of all cars and all bikes in Los Angeles this constitutes a small change, but it is change nonetheless.

Not to completely subvert my own analysis, but in my definition of urban sustainability we could repeat these same analyses substituting dollars and cardiovascular health for CO₂. We've been counting volumes of CO₂ for some time now, and it goes up year after year. The outcome of this alternative analysis would show that the bicycle is a more economically just, democratic, and healthier transportation option than any form of fossil fuel dependent transportation. Consider just a few examples. I pay just as much for a car, new or used, as anyone who is wealthier than I am or anyone who is not as wealthy as I am. I pay the same amount to register and smog-certify my car as anyone else who has a car that is of equivalent value. I may pay less for car insurance than those who live in areas that are more economically disadvantaged than mine because despite its illegality, insurance companies still engage in covert redlining

practices. I pay the same for gasoline. If there are toll roads—a phenomenon on the rise in Southern California—I pay the same tolls.

If I ride a bike everywhere I go, I pay none of these costs. I am not at the mercy of anyone or any institution that makes decisions about how much I pay to ride my bike. Depending on my needs and interests, with or without a volunteer mechanic walking me through the process, I or anyone else can build a bike for under \$200 at a wrenching co-op. The new parts, grease, and oil required could be as little as 5% of the total cost. Clearly, there are many more parts to this analysis, but the deepest and most detailed analysis will not confound the conclusion that the bicycle is an economically progressive, just, democratic, and healthy form of urban transportation. If my experience is not singular, the bicycle also connects the whole rider to the road, to the topography, to the weather. The awareness required of a cyclist creates a necessary connection to place. Connection to place often leads to connection to people and culture. The automobile is a regressive form of transportation that costs those who have less a higher percentage of what they have than it costs those who have more. It does nothing for your health, and in some very real sense, it disconnects you from where you are. That, in my world, is unsustainable.

The End of a Road—Many More to Come

So, one might ask, “What has all of this amounted to?” Bike culture in Los Angeles, probably not unlike bike cultures in hundreds of other cities, has meant many different things to its observers, participants, and supporters, as well as its internal and external critics and detractors. If it is a question of outcomes to date, the most coarse-grained analysis reveals that there is a movement afoot in

Los Angeles that is somewhere close to the end of its second decade, having survived a raucous adolescence. A seven-year explosion of activity followed a long, slow decade of gestation and birth. Of the 88 cities in Los Angeles County, only a few have incorporated substantial bike-infrastructure planning into their master plans and specific plans, but that number has increased year by year. Slowly, both the City and County of Los Angeles add more miles of bike lanes each year.

As riders have taken to the streets by the thousands for an evening's entertainment, as citizens of the region have taken it upon themselves to become educated in the urban version of bicycle safety, as the availability of bicycle repair education has grown, and as these activities have spread out across the county to increasing numbers of communities representing an increasingly diverse cross section of the regional population, the great spool from which the fossil fuel supply chain has been issued has been slowed and possibly even reversed. Per my earlier analysis, the millions of miles traveled by people who have opted to participate in human-powered recreation activities and daily commuting where the car has given way to the bicycle, translates into millions of metric tons of fossil-fuel derived CO₂ left in the ground where they belong. Urban landscapes relieved of automobile-congested roads also amount to change. When the energies have flowed from the people to the institutions—particularly when the people will not go away, the messages seem to resonate; the work seems to get done. The changes seem more durable, and they seem to serve more people.

In the end, it is all about place and change—how connecting to place changes us and it. Los Angeles is often characterized as an urban version of a hot

mess, which has always struck me as a lazy person's analysis. It is a greater challenge to arrive at a conclusion that suggests otherwise. There are no surprises in claims that Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Boulder, Portland, Bogotá, Minneapolis, Paris, San Francisco, or New York are the great bicycle-friendly urban centers of the present. Consider this a challenge. Bury it in the ground like a time capsule, and let's revisit it in twenty years. Los Angeles is the urban bike center of the future! Let's leave it at that.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

A Very Brief History of the Bike

For those who ride bicycles there is a history of bikes that they may not know at all, but when they see a *draisine*, as you will see below, there is a strong chance that a sense of identity with that odd machine will have been preformed by virtue of its two-wheeled and human-powered characteristics. So, for the benefit of those who know little or nothing about bicycles, before I set out on this other tale, I want to set this one very important context with an ever-so-brief history.

In a beginning, there was the wheel, as there has been in the histories of so many other things. I only mention this because the wheel is the sine qua non of the bicycle. Put simply, different bicycle parts can look, feel, and be very different from one another, but a wheel, no matter what its diameter is always round.

It was a very long stretch of time between the invention of the wheel and the invention of the bicycle. By all of the reliable accounts that I have discovered, earliest known relative of the bicycle, the *draisine*, was mostly inspired by the desire for a mechanical horse.¹⁹⁰ Earlier attempts at horselessness involved various four-wheeled carriages in which a more privileged person rode while a person in his or her employ expended considerably energies turning either a foot or hand-operated crank so as to move the vehicle forward as needed. One of the many participants in the race for a human-powered transport device of the four-

¹⁹⁰ Herlihy, *Bicycle*, 15.

wheeled variety was a German forest master, Baron Karl von Drais.¹⁹¹ After all of Drais' and his colleagues attempts were roundly rejected, scorned, and ridiculed, he returned to the woods determined to solve the seemingly intractable problems of utility, practicality, and public relations that had beset their best efforts. The subtraction of two wheels and the manservant gave the entire project the lift it so badly needed. In 1817, Drais unveiled his "laufmaschine (running machine), soon to be known as a 'draisine' or a 'velocipede' (from the Latin words meaning fast foot)."¹⁹² But there would be miles to go before anyone slept because the draisine was in fact a running machine. Unlike what most of us think of as a bicycle in all of its forms past and present, the draisine had no pedals. The rider sat astride the device and ran (as in figure 1 below), presumably lifting both legs off of the ground when the terrain allowed for coasting.

The next great milestone in the evolution of the bicycle is the invention of something that was actually called a "bicycle" and was also sometimes referred to as a "velocipede." After some amusing debate as to which of these it should properly be called, the common name for the first two-wheeled mechanism upon which a person sat and operated pedals, as a means of achieving forward locomotion, was the "boneshaker." Just off the Champs Elysees, in Paris, a blacksmith named Pierre Michaux claimed to have forged a set of cranks and affixed them to the front wheel of what was to be declared the first bicycle. Michaux apparently had a flair for marketing, because the first promotional

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹² Ibid., 21.

pamphlet extolling the virtues of the new-fangled velocipede depicted a soldier, a hunter, and a “gentleman” all riding his machine on their respective ways to their various occupations and pastimes.¹⁹³

The ownership of invention, however, came into question when it was revealed that in 1866 another French citizen had filed for and been granted a patent in the United States Patent Office for the first “basic bicycle.” Pierre Lallement, it seemed, was the true inventor of what would eventually be called “the boneshaker.”

Three brief years later, for what had become a craze in France, Great Britain, and the United States, the lights began to dim on the bicycle. As it had been with the draisine, so it was with the velocipede/basic bicycle that racing was the thing that caught the imagination of those who could afford to buy one. Mobility for the already mobile who had numerous choices was a small issue in the face of an opportunity to compete or live vicariously through those who did. Unfortunately for those who were making, selling, and profiting from the popularity of the two-wheeled machine, the thrill of possible victory was not enough. So began the time of the “high-wheeler,” which also bore the names penny-farthing,¹⁹⁴ and the “ordinary” bicycle.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 76–77.

¹⁹⁴ The urban legend, which may also be a fact, is that the penny-farthing got its name from the coins of the British realm that bore the same names. The size ratio of the two wheels of the high-wheeler are allegedly the same as the relative sizes of the penny and the farthing.

Before the flame could flicker and die however, one James Moore showed up at a bicycle race riding a rig that had a 43” diameter front wheel and a rear wheel have that size, that had been built on the continent by Eugene Meyer.¹⁹⁵ Racing received a full transfusion and a new star was born in the form of the “Ordinary” bicycle. The Ordinary/Penny-Farthing/High-Wheeler achieved greater popularity than its predecessors. It was affordable to a greater range of the populace even if it was still out of the reach of most.

Even as the High-Wheeler was enjoying its moment as the next big thing, the plans for the next successor to the throne were in play. James Moore continued to thrill crowds with feats of speed that would barely raise an eyelid—fifty miles in less than four hours with more records from more riders on the way. Racers soon discovered that high-wheel racing was a tall person’s game. It makes sense given the physics and mechanics of that particular type of bike. All bikes at that time were direct drive, meaning that one full turn of the crank translated to one full turn of the front wheel, with the rear wheel along for the ride and providing stability. So it stands to reason that the bigger the wheel the greater the distance the rider would get out of a single revolution. For guys like James Moore, there was a catch. In order to maximize what a racer can get out of his or her legs, the legs to extend at each half turn of the crank, just short of a full extension—longer legs, longer extensions, wheels of greater diameter. The next innovation would have to come in the realm of the leveled playing field on which the short and the tall could compete as equals.

¹⁹⁵ Herlihy, *Bicycle*, 170.

For the moment, I will conclude this brief history with the introduction of the Safety Bicycle. For the most part, all other bikes from this point on are further refinements of this great leap of progress in the world of two-wheeled, human-powered transportation. You can see in the image below that the direct drive crank formerly attached to the front wheel, as in the boneshaker and penny farthing bicycles above, has been replaced by a chain drive mechanism that puts the crank directly below the rider. Attached to the crank is a large cog or chain ring. The rear wheel has affixed to it a fixed cog. The chain runs in a continuous loop around the chain ring and the rear-wheel cog. This innovation introduces the gear ratio—and thus the leveling of the playing field. Through the magic of physics, once again, the size of the rider would not matter. Wheel size relative to rider size gave way to frames that could be sized to the rider, uniform wheel size, and a single gear ratio that could be changed according to rider preference. Put simply, with all other factors being equal, the higher the gear ratio the farther the bike would go on a single revolution of the cranks.

The first concept of the safety bike did not, in fact, involve a chain, but it did introduce the concept of rear-wheel drive. As conceived by Henry Lawson in 1876 and built by Singer and Company in 1878, this early attempt did not meet with any measure of success. A second attempt in 1879, “The Bicyclette,”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ It is perhaps noteworthy that all that is left of the Bicyclette is its uncapitalized form as it was officially adopted by the French Academy as one of the terms for the English “bicycle.” The other official term is “vélo.”

introduced the chain/chain ring/ rear cog concept, but also failed to catch on, apparently due to its “rickety ride.”¹⁹⁷

In 1885, John Kemp Starley introduced the Rover Safety Bicycle.¹⁹⁸ Though the first Rover did have a larger front wheel, it nonetheless introduced the rear-wheel chain drive mechanism that would spark a wave of innovation and variations on a similar set of themes that resonates into the present. The Whippet, pictured above followed soon on the heels of the Rover. And with that, the Ordinary bicycle faded into almost instant antiquity.

Clearly there is more to the history of the bicycle than this. What remained of the nineteenth century and the whole of the twentieth century saw wave after wave of developments in cycling with dozens of species of bikes coming into being—the cruiser, the ten-speed (and more) road and touring bikes, the BMX, the mountain bike, and any number of working bikes used by messengers, families, commuters, and small-cargo haulers, just to name a fraction. But because the longer work here is about urban bike culture in Los Angeles, California, I am going to stop at the Rover Safety Bicycle.

¹⁹⁷ Herlihy, *Bicycle*, 216–17.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

Appendix 2

Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition

Mission:

Our mission is to build a better, bike-able Los Angeles by improving the bicycle environment and quality of life in Los Angeles County through the following strategic goals:

- **Increase bikes as a mode of transportation** in Los Angeles County by working with Metro on better bicycle and transit integration, to increase the amount of cities applying for and receiving funding for bicycle infrastructure from the Metro Call for Projects, set regional goals and better policies in the Southern California Association of Governments Regional Transportation Plan, and conduct bicycle and pedestrian counts in collaboration with cities and local advocacy chapters.
- **Advocate for improved bicycle infrastructure** and supporting laws through Complete Street policies, better bicycle master plans, and increased municipal funding, such as Measure R, for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.
- **Serve as an umbrella organization for all bicyclists in LA County** by fostering local chapters and regionally coordinated campaigns and planning through the 88 cities of LA County, and by reaching out to and raising the concerns of low-income, marginalized cyclists of color, through programs like City of Lights, Living Streets, and our Transit Hub Report.

- **Provide better education to both motorists and cyclists** through our Give Me 3 bus shelter ad partnership, our Spanish bike resource guides and safety workshops, and our Sharrows pamphlets for drivers and cyclists.

Vision:

LACBC envisions a new Los Angeles that is a great place for everyday, year-round cycling; a Los Angeles with healthier, more vibrant communities, where the air is cleaner, streets are safer and quieter; a Los Angeles where people of all ages can safely and easily bicycle to meet their daily needs.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ LACBC, "LACBC Mission and Vision."

Appendix 3

Bicycle Kitchen Mission, Vision, Etc.

<http://www.bicyclekitchen.com/index.php?/about-this-site/>²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Bicycle Kitchen, “Bicycle Kitchen • Los Angeles: About Us,” accessed June 10, 2012, <http://www.bicyclekitchen.com/index.php?/about-this-site/>.

Appendix 4

Bikerowave Mission, Vision, Etc.

Bikerowave is a bicycle repair collective, much like the Bicycle Kitchen, Bike Oven, or Valley Bikery here in LA County. We provide space, tools, and equipment in order to effectively teach people how to build, repair, and maintain their bicycles. We are a not-for-profit all volunteer member run organization. Our goal is to empower cyclists with the basic knowledge to maintain their steed, as well as enable them to more easily connect with the cycling community.

Our mission statement:

Bikerowave’s primary mission is to empower the cycling public by providing affordable hands-on education about bicycle repair and maintenance. We aim to provide the space and tools necessary to assist cyclists in repairing and maintaining their own bicycles. We also seek to serve as a community center for Westside cyclists by providing a venue for gatherings and events. We are a not-for-profit, all-volunteer organization that strives to be eco-friendly in all aspects of its operation. We believe the success of our mission will lead to a safer, stronger, larger and more vital Westside cycling community. ²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Bikerowave Cooperative Membership, “Bikerowave Mission Statement.”

Appendix 5

Sustainable Streets: Mission and Vision Statements

Mission:

Sustainable Streets is a nonprofit organization committed to building healthy communities by encouraging people of all ages and backgrounds to engage in active transportation for their everyday mobility needs. We carry out this mission through research, community plans and programs, and education on sustainable transportation alternatives, including walking and bicycling. Sustainable Streets works in partnership with researchers, volunteers, educators, advocates and community planners to make non-motorized transport an essential part of sustainable community strategies.

Vision:

Sustainable Streets envisions streetscapes and transportation systems that harmonize community, nature and the human spirit, to support social interaction, resource efficiency, physical activity and health.²⁰²

²⁰² Sustainable Streets, “Mission & Vision | Sustainable Streets,” accessed June 10, 2012, <http://sustainablestreets.org/about/mission/>.

Appendix 6

Text of Los Angeles Municipal Code Chapter IV, Article 5.10

THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES

DO ORDAIN AS FOLLOWS:

Section 1. A new Article 5.10 is added to Chapter IV of the Los Angeles Municipal Code to read as follows:

ARTICLE 5.10

PROHIBITION AGAINST HARASSMENT OF BICYCLISTS

SEC. 45.96.00. FINDINGS AND PURPOSE.

After public hearings and receipt of testimony, the City Council finds and declares:

That the City of Los Angeles wants to encourage people to ride bicycles rather than drive motor vehicles in order to lessen traffic congestion and improve air quality;

That harassment of bicyclists on the basis of their status as bicyclists exists in the City of Los Angeles;

That existing criminal and civil laws do not effectively prevent the unlawful harassment of bicyclists because of their status as bicyclists;

That riding a bicycle on City streets poses hazards to bicyclists, and that these hazards are amplified by the actions of persons who deliberately harass and endanger bicyclists because of their status as bicyclists; and

That because people have a right to ride a bicycle in the City of Los Angeles and should be able to do so safely on City streets, it is against the

public policy of the City of Los Angeles to harass a bicyclist upon the basis of the person's status as a bicyclist.

SEC. 45.96.01. DEFINITIONS.

The following words and phrases, whenever used in this Article, shall be construed as defined in this Section. Words and phrases not defined herein shall be construed as defined in Section 12.03 of this Code, if defined therein.

A. **Bicycle.** A device upon which any person may ride, propelled exclusively by human power through a belt, chain or gears, and having one or more wheels.

B. **Bicyclist.** A person riding a bicycle.

SEC. 45.96.02. PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES.

A person shall not do or attempt to do any of the following:

- A. Physically assault or attempt to physically assault a Bicyclist because of, in whole or in part, the Bicyclist's status as a Bicyclist.
- B. Threaten to physically injure a Bicyclist because of, in whole or in part, the Bicyclist's status as a Bicyclist.
- C. Intentionally injure, attempt to injure, or threaten to physically injure, either by words, vehicle, or other object, a Bicyclist because of, in whole or in part, the Bicyclist's status as a Bicyclist.
- D. Intentionally distract or attempt to distract a Bicyclist because of, in whole or in part, the Bicyclist's status as a Bicyclist.
- E. Intentionally force or attempt to force a Bicyclist off a street for

purposes unrelated to public safety.

SEC. 45.96.03. REMEDIES.

- A. Any aggrieved person may enforce the provisions of this Article by means of a civil lawsuit
- B. Any person who violates the provisions of this Article shall be liable for treble the actual damages with regard to each and every such violation, or \$1,000, whichever is greater, and shall be liable for reasonable attorneys' fees and costs

of litigation. In addition, a jury or a court may award punitive damages where warranted.

- C. Notwithstanding Section 11.00(m) of this Code, violations of any of the provisions of this Article shall not constitute a misdemeanor or infraction, except where such actions, independently of this Article, constitute a misdemeanor or infraction.

D. The remedies provided by the provisions of this Article are in addition to all other remedies provided by law, and nothing in this Article shall preclude any aggrieved person from pursuing any other remedy provided by law.

Sec. 2. Severability. If any provision of this ordinance is found to be unconstitutional or otherwise invalid by any court of competent jurisdiction, that invalidity shall not affect the remaining provisions of this ordinance, which can be implemented without the invalid provisions, and to this end, the provisions of this ordinance are declared to be severable.

Sec. 3. The City Clerk shall certify to the passage of this ordinance and have it published in accordance with Council policy, either in a daily newspaper circulated in the City of Los Angeles or by posting for ten days in three public places in the City of Los Angeles: one copy on the bulletin board located at the Main Street entrance to the Los Angeles City Hall; one copy on the bulletin board located at the Main Street entrance to the Los Angeles City Hall East; and one copy on the bulletin board located at the Temple Street entrance to the Los Angeles County Hall of Records.

Appendix 7

The Further Evolution of the Bicycle in the twentieth century

This is by no means intended to be a comprehensive list so much as it is a list of important stops along the twentieth-century bicycle timeline. There are several excellent books and articles available on bicycle history. Some are listed in the “Works Cited” section. A decent taxonomy of bikes and bike types can be found in Wikipedia.²⁰³ What follows below is merely a small set of important mile markers along the way.

With the advent of the cruiser, the age of the “comfort bike” commenced. Larger tires, a heavier frame, baskets, and racks combined with twentieth-century modernist design returned the bicycle from a working and racing machine to something that combined utility and enjoyment.

The development of front and rear derailleurs—mechanisms that allowed the chain to travel along a cluster or pair of gears, thus allowing a greater range of gear-ratio choices—is probably the individual bicycle-part equivalent to the entire Safety Bike in terms of its importance to the continuing evolution of the bicycle. Developed by bicycle racers, for racers, the derailleur made the climbing of hills considerably easier than when the rider had only one gear ratio choice. It also added extra power to the downhill legs of racing by allowing the rider to shift into a higher gear ratio than had ever been practicable with the single-speed bicycle.

²⁰³ “List of Bicycle Types - Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia,” accessed August 20, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_bicycle_types.

The BMX, which became a highly popular rough-terrain racing and stunt bike, evolved from the Schwinn Stingray, which itself was more of a novelty bike than anything else. Compact, reasonably light, equipped with an amusing “banana” seat and sometimes a “sissy bar,” California surfers and other daredevils in other places began performing tricks on Stingrays in the late 1960s.²⁰⁴ Ultimately, the Stingray could not hold up under the punishment inherent in the physics of many of the attempted stunts, resulting in dangerous frame and handlebar failures. Backyard welding of gussets and crossbars ultimately gave way to intentional design leading to a new species of bike, a daredevil sport, and most recently a Summer Olympic event.

Early BMX riders in Northern California began trucking their bikes to the tops of places like Mount Tamalpias, in Marin County, but the low slung BMX frame was more conducive to shorter courses with smaller variations in terrain. As a result, the taller mountain bike frame was developed to allow the rider a distance from the ground that was similar to but different from the position of a road racing cyclist. The mountain bike also used the same drive train—front and rear derailleurs, a rear-cog cluster, and sometimes a triple rather than double chain ring attached to the crank set. From this, yet another entire sport, recreation activity, and Olympic event emerged.

²⁰⁴ I know this from my own personal experience, as I and several close friends owned Stingrays (along with prehistoric skate boards, which were literally made from the front and rear sections of a steel skate nailed to a scrap of 2x8 lumber.) Though I had no stomach for it, I was an eyewitness to hundreds of attempts—some successful, some that resulted in trips to hospital emergency rooms—at various bike stunts.

The mountain bike achieved such high levels of popularity that bike stores and eventually department stores and “big-box” stores were selling cheap, mass-produced versions to people who would never ride them in the mountains, and in many cases never ride them at all. Using the basic design of the mountain bike, designers outfitted the Hybrid or City bike with slightly more upright handlebars and narrower, smoother tires for decreased drag on the road, and therefore greater ease of riding in the city.

Appendix 8

The Sharrow

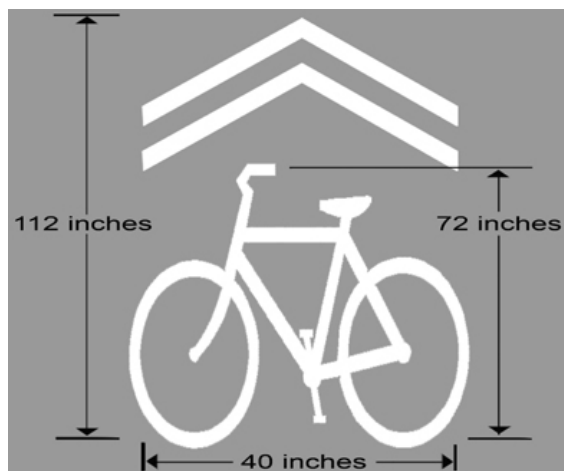



Figure 7. A Sharrow or Shared Line Marker²⁰⁵








²⁰⁵ "Safety Strategies Study - Vol. 74 · No. 6 - Public Roads," accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/11mayjun/03.cfm>.

Appendix 9

Cyclists' Bill of Rights²⁰⁶



CYCLISTS' BILL OF RIGHTS

WHEREAS, cyclists have the right to ride the streets of our communities and this right is formally articulated in the California Vehicle Code; and

WHEREAS, cyclists are considered to be the "indicator species" of a healthy community; and

WHEREAS, cyclists are both environmental and traffic congestion solutions; and

WHEREAS, cyclists are, first and foremost, people - with all of the rights and privileges that come from being members of this great society; and

NOW, THEREFORE, WE THE CYCLING COMMUNITY, do hereby claim the following rights:

- 1) Cyclists have the right to travel safely and free of fear.
- 2) Cyclists have the right to equal access to our public streets and to sufficient and significant road space.
- 3) Cyclists have the right to the full support of educated law enforcement.
- 4) Cyclists have the right to the full support of our judicial system and the right to expect that those who endanger, injure or kill cyclists be dealt with to the full extent of the law.
- 5) Cyclists have the right to routine accommodations in all roadway projects and improvements.
- 6) Cyclists have the right to urban and roadway planning, development and design that enable and support safe cycling.
- 7) Cyclists have the right to traffic signals, signage and maintenance standards that enable and support safe cycling.
- 8) Cyclists have the right to be actively engaged as a constituent group in the organization and administration of our communities.
- 9) Cyclists have the right to full access for themselves and their bicycles on all mass transit with no limitations.
- 10) Cyclists have the right to end-of-trip amenities that include safe and secure opportunities to park their bicycles.
- 11) Cyclists have the right to be secure in their persons and property, and be free from unreasonable search and seizure, as guaranteed by the 4th Amendment.
- 12) Cyclists have the right to peaceably assemble in the public space, as guaranteed by the 1st Amendment.

And further, we claim and assert these rights by taking to the streets and riding our bicycles, all in an expression of our inalienable right to ride!



www.BikeWritersCollective.com

BWC@BikeWritersCollective.com

Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0/>

Figure 8: Cyclists' Bill of Rights, Creative Commons license
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0/>

²⁰⁶ "Bike Writers Collective."

Appendix 10

Bloggers & Businesses

The Active:

- Stephen Box, www.soapboxla.blogspot.com/.²⁰⁷ Box's strong interest in community politics are well represented by his accounts of and comments on the political goings on at Los Angeles City Hall with a focus is on transportation in general with specific emphasis on transportation issues as they affect cyclists and pedestrians. Box also operates a second site, which was primarily used for his political campaign when he ran for Los Angeles City Council. The posting has been sparse on Soap Box L.A. this year, with the most recent entry arriving on May 18, 2012.²⁰⁸
- Enci Box, www.illuminatela.com/.²⁰⁹ This is an eclectic site that has one section devoted to "Everything Bike & Metro." The posting is mostly sporadic through mid 2011 (see footnote for Soap Box L.A. author Stephen Box for reasonable excuse.) Does include links to many of the other sites listed here.

²⁰⁷ Stephen Box, "SoapBoxLA," accessed August 11, 2008, <http://www.soapboxla.blogspot.com/>.

²⁰⁸ Eyewitness reports confirm that Box became a father early in 2012. There may be a causal relationship between this new state of the author and the diminished number of blog postings.

²⁰⁹ Enci Box, "Culture, Community, and the Ride That Takes You There. / illuminateLA," accessed August 10, 2012, <http://illuminatela.com/>.

- Alex Thompson/Bikeside/bikesidela.org/. Co-founder of Bikerowave; co-creator of “The Backbone Bikeway Network”²¹⁰ concept for an LA Bike Plan, and coauthor of “The L.A. Bike Map,”²¹¹ an interactive map that locates and accounts for incidents of harassment, collisions, recovered bikes, stolen bikes, close calls, falls with no motorist involvement, and road hazards. Allows individuals to report incidents. Covers the waterfront where bike news, controversies, progress and other noteworthy events. Author has been extremely active, particularly in the area of police/cyclist relationships, mostly with the Los Angeles Police Department.
- Josef Bray-Ali, ubrayjo2.blogspot.com.²¹² Longtime bike commuter, co-founder of Bike Oven and Flying Pigeon L.A., Bray-Ali has been one of the more influential figures in the development of a bike culture of Los Angeles. The blog content runs from essays about unfortunate encounters with motorists to analysis of some of the more arcane city codes having to do with a broad array of things that largely affect cyclists, such as bike parking.
- Gary Kavanagh, GaryRidesBikes.blogspot.com/.²¹³ A regular contributor to LA Streetsblog, Kavanagh has provided commentary since 2007. As with

²¹⁰ “The BACKBONE | Bikeside LA,” accessed August 10, 2012, <http://www.bikesidela.org/the-backbone/>.

²¹¹ Mihai Peteu, Jason Leung, and Alex Thompson, “LA Bike Map,” accessed August 10, 2012, <http://www.bikesidela.org/labikemap/>.

²¹² Josef Bray-Ali, “Brayj Against The Machine,” accessed August 10, 2012, <http://ubrayjo2.blogspot.com/>.

²¹³ Gary Kavanagh, “Gary Rides Bikes,” accessed August 11, 2008, <http://garyridesbikes.blogspot.com/>.

many of the other blogs, the posts have become fewer and far between each year after 2008, but the value of his presence has not been diminished.

Generally well informed and up-to-date on both the national and local scenes.

Bicycle Fixation/ www.bicyclefixation.com²¹⁴

Bicycle Fixation is everything its name says it is. Started by Richard Risemberg roughly around the same time as Stephen Box launched Soap Box L.A. A number of things distinguish the two. Risemberg is an old-school bike nerd—not necessarily a bad thing—whose “fixation” predates the early horizon of urban bike culture, perhaps in any city. In some respects, he is more 19th Century cyclists—he is frequently seen wearing knickers on his routine bike outings—while in others, he is entirely up-to-date on many of the important policy debates surrounding bike infrastructure. While his site might be slightly more of interest to an anthropologist/ethnographer studying the material culture of the urban bike world, there is an ethos there, articulated in the Bicycle Fixation mission statement:

We celebrate bicycles . . .

. . . in all their diversity. We celebrate fixies and singlespeeds, road bikes and touring bikes; cruisers, hybrids, choppers, and BMX; [...] We celebrate these machines because of the strength and freedom they give us, and because of the ways they link us to [...] our cities, towns, and countrysides, to each other, and to ourselves. We celebrate bicycles because they are

²¹⁴ Richard Risemberg, “Bicycle Fixation: Bicycling and the New Civility,” accessed August 11, 2012, <http://www.living-room.org/index.html>.

clean and efficient, requiring little in the way of material, energy, or space. We celebrate bicycles because they amplify our lives while diminishing our needs.²¹⁵

BikinginLA/ bikinginla.com²¹⁶

Ted Rogers, author of BikinginLA, has been chronicling the Los Angeles bike scene since 2008. Frequently taken to task by other L.A. bike bloggers, such as Stephen Box and Alex Thompson, for what has been characterized as sloppy journalism, Rogers has, nonetheless, been persistent in his distribution of information about public hearings, Los Angeles City Council votes and committee meetings related to bikes and bike infrastructure. Rogers is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles County Bike Coalition, which has also earned him a fair measure of criticism and questions about the objectivity of his accounts where the latter is concerned. The following passage from the “About” section of his blog is, however, indicative of his commitment and motives:

Heaven on Earth? Or hell on wheels?

Los Angeles may look like a great place to ride a bike. But don't believe everything you see on TV. From broken streets, gridlocked traffic and bike lanes that vanish without warning, to a cadre of over-stressed, angry drivers more engrossed in their cell phones than the roadway ahead of them. Where beach-front bike paths are so choked with tourists and

²¹⁵ Richard Risemberg, “Bicycle Fixation: Mission Statement,” accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.bicyclefixation.com/mission.html>.

²¹⁶ Ted Rogers, “BikingInLA,” accessed August 11, 2012, <http://bikinginla.wordpress.com/>.

pedestrians there's no room for bikes. And riding at rush hour is a contact sport. And yet, I love it here. Go figure.²¹⁷

The Active Elsewhere:

- Erik Knutzen/Root Simple (formerly Homegrown Evolution)/www.rootsimple.com/.²¹⁸ Author and activist with his partner Kelly Coyne, cycling is part of their low-impact life, which includes a single car and a couple of kids all on their urban homestead. Their site links to most of the active sites on this list.
- **Will Campbell**/[sic]/www.wildbell.com/.²¹⁹ On a given day, this may not seem like an LA Bike Culture-related site. A quick view of the “Categories” articles count reveals that there are 594 articles listed under “biking.” The next largest category is “animals” with 440 articles, then “adventure” with 201.

Moved on altogether:

- Mikey Wally (Mike McDermed)/mikeywally.com; Mark Peterson/vectorcircle.blogspot.com; Matt Matt (Matt Ruscigno) truelovehealth.com; Bike Girl/www.bikegirlblog.blogspot.com²²⁰

²¹⁷ Ted Rogers, “About BikinginLA | BikinginLA,” accessed September 10, 2014, <http://bikinginla.com/about/>.

²¹⁸ Erik Knutzen and Kelly Coyne, “Root Simple,” accessed August 10, 2012, <http://www.rootsimple.com/>.

²¹⁹ Will Campbell, “[sic],” accessed August 11, 2008, <http://www.wildbell.com/>.

²²⁰ Sadly, one of the great losses to the world of LA-related bike blogs. Bike Girl went on hiatus in March of 2011 and doesn't appear to be returning anytime soon. She is the source of the bike formula $(n + 1) =$ the number of real and imagined bikes owned by most cyclists. I modified her formula and used it in

Bike Business Wonks

While the world of night rides was emerging from its intermittent, infrequent state, others looked to homegrown commerce that would cater to a new culture. Not all wonks turned their wonkiness purely to policy, activism, journalism, nonprofit management, or advocacy. Some spread the good word about bikes and ownership of the streets by selling such things as bikes, bike bling, and bike apparel. I want to point them out briefly. I am not receiving so much as a brake cable (a \$1.10 item) or a pair of socks (can get a little pricier) for these plugs. I mention them because before all that I have described in the preceding pages, these businesses and their particular markets did not exist. Because they represent such a microscopic fraction of the business that is conducted in Los Angeles, I don't see them so much as evidence of change as I see them as harbingers of change. The owners of these businesses are not simply merchants. They are curators and innovators. They are betting on an expanding bike future in Los Angeles. They are investigating older, more developed urban bike cultures in places like Copenhagen and Amsterdam in an effort to anticipate the material needs of individuals and families who may want to live car-free lives. They are small-scale, local, and they too grew out of the streets of L.A.

“Night Ridazz.” Additionally, because LA bike culture is gender imbalanced, the presence of a smart, articulate, spicy commentator—who also happened to be a woman—was a valued one.

Flying Pigeon L.A.

Flying Pigeon²²¹ is one of the enlightened bike shops that serves the larger bike community not only through its sales of quality bikes at a range of prices, but for its support of the larger cultural scene in the area through its sponsorship of rides like “Spoke(n) Art” and “Get Sum Dim Sum.” Started by the brothers Adam and Josef Bray-Ali, Flying Pigeon is an outgrowth of the Bike Oven, which they and others also founded.

Orange 20

Orange 20 Bikes²²² was probably the first bike culture friendly bike shops in Los Angeles. Part of the “bike district” that once was home to Bicycle Kitchen, Orange 20 was started by two former “cooks” from Bicycle Kitchen. Lot’s of bike “bling” but also a lot of sensible bikes for the more budget minded. The relationship with the kitchen, when I last looked, was an exemplar of symbiosis and cooperation.

swrve

www.swrve.us/. If I could sell advertising space in a dissertation, this would be it. I would take my compensation in goods. Though quite expensive, and catering mostly to the world of bike dandies and hipsters, I tip my helmet to swrve for offering generous discounts—what amounts to cost—to wrenching co-

²²¹ “Flying Pigeon LA | Home,” accessed August 11, 2012, <http://flyingpigeon-la.com/>.

²²² “Orange 20 Bikes,” accessed August 11, 2012, <http://orange20bikes.com/>.

op volunteers/members, bike advocacy nonprofit members, as well as individual bike activists and advocates. The stuff lasts forever, and some of the pieces are suitable for appearances before the Los Angeles City Council.

Appendix 11

Permissions

Dedication Page, p. i

 **Roadblock** 10:16 AM (6 hours ago) ☆  
to me ▾

You/Donald Strauss have my permission to include my image on the dedication page of your dissertation, which will be available in open access in AURA <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and Ohiolink <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>.

-Don Ward
photographer

Sara L. Strauss, Untitled Haiku, p. 208


 **Lily** 5:59 PM (23 hours ago) ☆  
to me ▾

Dear Dad,

You have my permission to include the text of my work, titled "Untitled Haiku" in your dissertation, which will be available in open access in AURA <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and Ohiolink <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/> .

Love ya!
Lil

Appendix 2: Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, p. 242

Tamika Butler 2:36 PM (20 hours ago) ☆  
to me ▾

Hi Donald,

You/Donald Strauss have the permission of Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition to include the text of the organization's mission statement in your dissertation, which will be available in open access in AURA <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and Ohiolink <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/> .

We are looking forward to seeing it, before putting it in, can we see the dissertation?

t

--

Tamika L. Butler, Esq.
Executive Director



634 S. Spring Street, Suite 821
Los Angeles, CA 90014
www.la-bike.org

Appendix 5: Sustainable Streets

 **Stephen Box - President, Sustainable S** 11:17 AM (5 hours ago) ☆  
to Ron, me, Ron 

You/Donald Strauss have the permission of Sustainable Streets to include the text of the mission and vision statements of Sustainable Streets in your dissertation, which will be available in open access in AURA <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and Ohiolink <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>.

□

Stephen

Stephen Box
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