

Collective Movement: Claiming Space and Contesting Spatial Inequalities through Cycling in Los Angeles

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I use participant observation to examine the activities of a women-of-color urban cycling collective in Los Angeles, and how it uses cycling culture as a way to contest inequalities and advocate for social change in urban communities of color. I draw upon the work of Henri Lefebvre, particularly his concepts relating to the "Right to the City" and the social constructions of space - perceived, conceived and lived - to understand how this bicycle collective uses urban cycling to embody space, promote its activist agenda, and create new ways of experiencing urban life.

Using examples from organized bike rides, anti-gentrification efforts, and women-only bike classes, I demonstrate the ways in which an ethno-racially diverse, female-led bicycle collective from Los Angeles' Eastside works to contest spatial exclusion and marginalization, and also claim physical space and inclusion in society. Though I aim to understand more broadly how communities of color respond to urban inequalities, I focus largely on gentrification as particularly salient example of the type of displacement these women face in their neighborhoods. I examine the aims, practices, and anti-gentrification campaigns of this bicycle collective. I ultimately show how gentrification is contested on an everyday level, and demonstrate how the efforts of this bicycle collective tie more broadly to discussions of an everyday politics of resistance within communities of color. To that end, I find that organized anti-gentrification resistance is not merely reactionary, but rather entails pre-figurative action and visioning for space and community.

I show how this collective is able to use cycling to connect with a broader coalition of like-minded activists and affinity micro-groups, and that collective cycling, as spatial practice, makes possible transformation on multiple scales. I trace the transformations at three levels: the individual, the group, and the community. I introduce a new theoretical model of *nested empowerment* to explain how group and community activism begins with individual-level self-empowerment and self-politicization.

This paper engages with previous scholarship that also analyzes the ways in which individuals and groups engage in seemingly mundane "everyday practices" in politically charged ways (de Certeau 1984). By necessity, this paper examines cycling through a sociological lens that considers how intersections of race, class, and gender shape cyclists' individual and collective identities, as well as the ways in which these interlocking categories shape the embodied experiences of its members.

This paper thus offers a more complex discussion not only about resistance to gentrification, but also more broadly about our understanding of the scale of everyday grassroots activism by coalitions of color in contested urban neighborhoods within super-diverse cities. I find that members use the bicycling group to build personal, group, and community identities and personal, group, and community political power to battle exclusion and claim space and community.

Ultimately, this is also a story rooted in Los Angeles about community and spatial justice. That the bicycle is used as an organizing tool makes sense in Eastside Los Angeles communities, where social and cultural debates have been historically framed by transportation (Avila 2014). While the postwar development of the interstate highway in Los Angeles expanded the geographical reach to many in the suburbs, it simultaneously cut through working class and immigrant neighborhoods. Thus, while freeways signified mobility to some, for the residents of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles they symbolized immobility, spatial

confinement and loss of community. These conditions shaped mutual struggles that eventually enabled new alliances and affinities to form. As physical space became increasingly off limits, some constructed "social spaces" as a means of making "spatial claims" to city spaces in new ways (Johnson 2013).

Particularly for members of these Eastside communities, bicycling as a practice represents an oppositional mode of self-transport. Whereas the bicycle served as a tool to access physical spaces that were not easily accessible, it also functioned as tool for constructing social spaces that challenged "spatial confinement" (Johnson 2013). In the case of this bicycle collective, members that grew up in different geographic swaths of the city share in common daily struggles that unite them, and share an appreciation for the liberating potential of the bicycle as a tool for combating immobility and feelings of constraint due to insufficient transportation options in and around their neighborhoods.

References:

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