

Aburrido! Cycling on the US-Mexico Border in Matamoros, Tamaulipas

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Mobility on the US-Mexico border is confined within delimited zones. Matamoros, Tamaulipas - a “cartel city” in the Gulf region that hugs the northern frontera - contains many boundaries within itself. In this constricted place cycling is proliferating both as a means of mobility and a form of community-building. Inside Matamoros, described in the media as “Ground Zero” of Mexico’s Drug War, cycling is considered a safer mode of transportation, offering access to parts of the city otherwise off-limits. Groups of over 200 cyclists, led by the Doble Rueda (Double Wheel) collective, cycle weekly through ostensibly more dangerous outer barrios of the city on fifteen kilometer routes. The core collective works to support the group; the newest cyclists take the front, no rider is left behind, and intersections are blocked from cars passing so the mass can flow through the city’s potholed streets.

While Matamoros used to enjoy a rich degree of intercultural exchange with its transborder city Brownsville, TX, most residents of Brownsville now fearfully refuse to cross the border. Mexico’s ongoing Drug War and its relationship with the border provides the context for urban life in Matamoros. Matamoros is the base city of the Gulf Cartel and the cartel’s influence in the city is pervasive. Within this context, a large inhibitor of urban growth in Matamoros is the culture of fear engendered in large part by foreign media coverage. With no local press reporting from Matamoros, residents read sensationalized foreign news media and internalize a fear of violence. Many don’t visit the outer barrios of the city and hesitate to leave their homes after dark.

In this restricted context, Doble Rueda uses the bicycle to cross boundaries within the city and unite divided communities. Due to local stereotypes viewing the car as a symbol of wealth, the bicycle is considered a safer form of transportation. Cyclists describe that they feel safer on the bicycle, especially in groups, and the activity helps alleviate some of the stress and fear they feel related to mobility in the city.

In a city with little cycling infrastructure, Doble Rueda has developed rich and complex modes of social infrastructure, using the bicycle to bridge divides within the city. The cyclists provide bicycle maintenance for each other, leave no rider behind, and visit local businesses along pre-planned routes. The rides travel slowly; their objective is not to travel quickly, but to create a movement together. On the lively journeys, the most often exclamation heard is a cheerful, “Aburrido!” (boring). The interjection reclaims their space and activity as mundane amidst the border’s persisting imbroglio.

The bicycle also offers quick crossing across the border. Oftentimes the lines to cross, both pedestrian and automobile, are so extensive that the process can take hours. But with no infrastructure specific to bicycles in the physical crossing, cyclists bypass the lines of automobiles and wait at the front for a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer to call them forward. This experience offers a more integrated experience between the two cities - an increasingly rigid U.S. border becomes more permeable on the bicycle. In addition, the experience offers embodied interactions with CBP agents that can vary in outcome.

As a border city, mobility in Matamoros is contentious and controlled; it is a dichotomous space containing many physical, political, and social boundaries. This paper will describe how cycling in this context seems to slip through loopholes, not just through the border checkpoint but through many of the other restrictions within Matamoros. It is a means of mobility that doesn’t seem to be formally considered by the powers that be on the border, and this gives it a special significance. Somehow, the fact that bikes simply don’t fit the existing channels and protocols, and the lack of infrastructure to support them, proves beneficially exploitable. Mobility is full of meaning and is the product of various forms of power and so cycling in this context allows a type of freedom, expressed in Doble Rueda’s rapidly growing numbers and

enthusiasm. While Matamoros' context is extreme, the paper will posit that Doble Rueda's tactics for urban mobility may be relevant to urban sites around the world where similar internal division exist.

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