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HERE(S)

by

Ambrose Naqeeb Stevens

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of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in Art
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This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

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CHAPTER 1

HERE(S)

1.1 Introduction

This project explores the lived experiences of six individuals who commuted to attend their former high schools in Los Angeles, California. Participants were encouraged to mine their memory of the past while considering the places they presently move through and inhabit. The narratives of all participants were collected as recorded interviews. Extending through disembodied voices to weighty objects, this work seeks to open questions of personhood, class, and spaces-between.

1.2 Methodology

Eight individuals were interviewed for this project. Six of the interviews were used. The interviews were recorded using an online communications program called Skype, as well as a handheld audio recorder. The interviews were conducted between October – November 2011. Two of the interviewees, Lamont Cobb and Fernando Garcia, attended Brentwood School when I was also a student there. Khalid Stevens is my brother and Garnette Wood is a family friend. Camille Baker was the only participant whom I spoke with for the first time during this project.

This project is sited in Los Angeles, California. Most participants were not current residents during the time of interview. Asking for memories, of which my own subjectivity was indirectly present as artifact in some accounts, enacted an erasure of the authority assumed in our researcher, subject position. This erasure allowed us to speak more casually and can be linked the notion of an autoethnography. Tami Spry argues, “Autoethnographic methods recognize the reflections and refractions of multiple selves in
contexts that arguably transform the authorial “I” to an existential “we” (Spry 711).
Locating my experiences in theirs, and theirs in mine, worked to soften some of the
rigidity of a purely sociological research investigation. We were able to laugh during
moments when our understandings overlapped in regards to specific characteristics about
Los Angeles and its transit system, commuting, and being a former high school student
generally. However, my own subjectivity remains absent in the work so as not to
privilege it to the participant’s disembodied presence.
1.3 Decentralization of Los Angeles
Glossing the early spatial development of Los Angeles might lend historical
background useful to the project. Los Angeles was founded in 1781. Transcontinental
railroads brought Los Angeles out of isolation in the 1880s. Developments in well
technology enabled farmers to tap beneath Los Angeles’ dry surfaces, transforming the
once arid area into a productive landscape. Many businessmen saw opportunity for profit
in Los Angeles synchronizing real-estate acquisitions with significant investments in
transportation, as development was contingent upon the implementation of a working and
usable transit system. With railways, inhabitants of Los Angeles’ sprawling landscape
could access the places they needed to go despite great travel distances. As Robert
Fishman writes, “The explosive growth of the city was accompanied by the decay of
precisely those urban elements which had previously been the mark of a great city: a
unifying centralized downtown and a viable mass transit system” (Fishman 155). Los
Angeles grew more decentralized as it expanded through the implementation of railways
and, later, highways. The development of railways coincided with agricultural production
and the search for jobs more generally.
As railways enabled people to live further away, the circumscription of L.A.’s center was pushed further and further outwards. The processes of decentralization inform Los Angeles’ present-day socioeconomic segregation and the resulting spillages that impacted how neighborhoods and communities were constituted. Public schools reflect the communities and neighborhoods, both physically and ideologically, in which they are located. The lived experiences of subjects in this project illuminate those overlooked structural nuances.

1.4 The Interviews: Education, Empowerment, and Space

The act of commuting, traversing concrete landscapes, becomes routinized in their daily occurrence. Drawing this into conscious contemplation, its seeming banality points to more complex questions. How does it come to pass that individuals decide to commute long distances rather than attend schools nearby? I asked Khalid if he had ever wanted to attend a school in his own community. His comments indicate a frustration with the opportunities he is afforded there. He said, “After experiencing a school outside of my own community, I think that…it would not have given me a sufficient education compared to the one’s that were inside of my community”. An awareness of educational differences across space might suggest his desire for upward mobility. Geographic location becomes an obstacle in such an endeavor. A closer analysis of where these schools are plotted on a map would illuminate the uneven distribution of educational resources throughout Los Angeles. He continued to mention, “schools outside of my community are better funded, better staffed, better materials. There’s an overall difference in the appearance of the school…[,] an overall difference of the kids that attend the school…[and] those just few factors have a real large impact on the level of education
that you receive”. The differences in appearance and student body reflect the demographics of a particular community. Where there are less economic advantaged people schools are typically worse, compared to neighborhoods with more economically advantaged people.

Though these observations also exist as statistics that can be found in census documents, Khalid’s lived experience brings overlooked nuances to the foreground. His comments illuminate how schools are structured by internal and external politics. As Madan Sarup argues, “Personality traits conducive to performance at different hierarchical levels are fostered and rewarded by the school system. That is to say, different levels of education feed workers into different levels within the occupational structure; in this way social relations of education replicate the hierarchical division of labor” (Sarup 169). Communities are reflected in the educational opportunities provided to students at the schools they attend. Though situated within a particularly rigid institution, personal agency persists. Sarup identifies where a potential consciousness can lead to the cultivation of upwardly mobile desires within the constraints of an invisible power structure. Khalid’s socioeconomic status did not reflect the area in which Palisades High school was located, but his ability to commute enabled him to meet his desires. Educational pursuits are sited both inside and outside the classroom. There is potential for learning to happen in unconventional environments. Geographic displacement from school opened possibilities for new and unforeseen lessons to be learned, adding greater complexity to the overall development of a high school self.

Daily commutes to and from high school served as a mechanism of empowerment. Camille Baker remarked on her sense of independence and knowledge of
L.A.’s transit system as an effect of her desire to attend a better school. I asked her what commuting had caused her to notice about herself. She stated, “I can stand on my own. I don’t always need someone to guide me to get around...If there was anywhere I needed to go I can easily just pull out my bus schedule and look. I didn’t need to call somebody like can you pick me up take me here because I was always just used to getting around on my own”. For Camille, the bus served as a means of empowerment. It also enabled her an opportunity to learn how Los Angeles’ transit system operated. Her comments further the potentiality of displaced learning environments and the kinds of knowledge that a formal education does not account for. I asked Fernando Garcia a similar question and he emphasized how those skills emerged from a basic need. He responded, “It was…not just the fact that I had to venture out for school…it was the fact that if I wanted to go anywhere. It was a social and economic necessity that I take the bus or public transportation”. Commuting was inseparable from the conditions that defined Fernando’s everyday circumstances of mobility. Contrasting these two comments reveals how productive outcomes can result from restrictive conditions. Self-determination and economic necessity occupy similar registers of personhood for Camille and Fernando. Neither is inhibited by their physical orientation in the city. Not only did they seek to craft their own means of automobility, but have found it in the means by which they could be hindered.

Communities are informed by the components that define their physical landscapes. These might include roads, trees, and businesses. The areas outside of Garnette Wood’s home community in Ladera Heights were distinctly less posh. Her comments point to the uneven distribution of wealth in Los Angeles and how money
travels. What one’s environment has to offer for the cultivation of a desired lifestyle is informed spatially. Garenette mentioned, “One thing that I do know is the majority of the time I would go to their neighborhood, rather than they come to mine…It was a shock to see people with so many things, so maybe at that point in time, it was more like, why would I want you to come to my house, when your house is so much better”. Objects that signified greater material wealth informed how Garnette imagined her self in Los Angeles at that time. Commuting to and from high school made her aware of the class differences that circumscribed different communities geographically. Both her hesitance, and others’ lack of interest in social venues that defined her home environment illuminate the components of identity construction. Lamont Cobb spoke similarly about this, emphasizing how individuals are oriented spatially. He noticed how people gravitate to specific parts of Los Angeles based on what is there. Lamont mentioned, “Seeing different people who inhabit those spaces, people who hang out in Hollywood versus people who hang out in Santa Monica versus people who hang out in the Magic Johnson theater…There’s kind of like a quiet understated division in terms of where people go”. Areas where people choose to go are not only determined by the presence of roads, but also the cultural capital inscribed upon the landscape. People seek out what best suits their interpersonal desires. If landscapes can be read as texts, people seek out environments that best resonate with their interests. Don Mitchell writes, “For many cultural theorists it is simply the case that we live in a world of texts, a world defined by a degree of intertextuality” (Mitchell 123). Ideologies are specific to the cultural composition of a site, which partially inform the texts of its inhabitants. As individuals commute, these sited ideologies mobilize and are mobilizing different contexts.
Collisions, expansions, and congruencies occur within these textual gaps, embodying and informing lived experience.

1.5 Installation

Things of industry such as automobiles, highways, skyscrapers, and concrete, more prominently, characterize a city landscape. The use concrete in this project is intended to reference the materiality of an experience traversing urban environments. The dimensions of each concrete slab match the dimensions of those found in a traditional city sidewalk. One concrete slab contains ten, sixty-pound bags of concrete mix plus its ratio to water, totaling roughly six hundred pounds per four by four feet wide by four inches thick. The slabs have also been used metaphorically to comment on the concretization of ideologies inscribed upon landscapes. Where this project extends in disembodied voice, it attempts to reclaim the evacuated body in its physical weightiness.

Four of the six slabs were used in this installation. Two were positioned to lean against the gallery walls and two were set on casters that enabled their mobility within the space. Gallery attendees were welcome to push the slabs around the gallery, activating the ground and disembodied presence of the project’s participants.

This installation included a two-channel video as well. Two standard-definition televisions rested on shelves that were oriented in order to suggest a conversation. The first video channel depicted each participant and his or her recorded interview designated by a color that filled the entire screen space. The recorded interviews were audible in the gallery. As the first channel progressed, the second depicted a statement that had been extracted and transcribed from the audible recoded interview. Words from those statements were selected and identified based on their parts of speech. Both videos
progressed in-synch according to this structure. Over duration of time, statements that appeared on the second channel video monitor accumulated and an attempt to comment on the structure of language in relation to how one navigates a particular place was posited. The rough quality of audio was preserved as an indication of the technology that mediated this component of the project.

1.6 Conclusion

This project enabled me to reconsider my former experiences commuting to high school in Los Angeles. Speaking to other people who had also commuted added greater complexity to the way I envisioned Los Angeles at the time. I’ve never owned a car and have always depended on public transportation, friends, and carpooling to get around, if the distance was too far to travel on foot. My hope for this project is that it reveals identity as always being constituted by the collisions, divergences, and resonances of everyday experience.
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