

**URBAN CYCLING AS THE MEASURE OF THE CITY:
EXPERIENCE, POLICY AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS
OF MOBILITY**

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ABSTRACT

As the dominant mode of transportation in North America, the car-system has come to order our spatial allocations for work, home and play in the form of suburban sprawl. 'Car culture' contributes to the formation of broad social and political priorities and the phenomenological aspects of automobility informs and shapes the very way in which we experience the world. The ecological, health and social benefits of urban cycling are often touted by researchers and advocates, but less studied and appreciated is its uniqueness as a mode of phenomenological experience. Cycling allows for an immersive attenuation to the micro-climates and local topographies of urban space not available to the car-driver or pedestrian. Emergent North American urban 'bike cultures' can better promote the cause of cycling by dispensing with sub-cultural markings and embracing this shared experience of the local to create broad social impetus for the re-allocation of public spatial resources.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty; corporeal mobilities ; spatial geography; shared topographies; velomobility; urban cycling; hyper-automobility; urban planning policy ; New Urbanism ; spatial practices; cultural politics; urban 'bike culture'; 'car culture'; auto-space; suburbia; social movements; sub-cultures; Critical Mass; 'velo-space'

Research Areas: mobilities; phenomenology of experience; Marxist urban geography; cultural politics; urban planning and land use policy; sub-cultural studies

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INTRODUCTION

My first experiences with cycling, as for many, began in childhood. Some of my earliest memories are of seeing the Taylor Creek-Dentonia Park section of the Don Valley park and ravine system, in the East York borough of Toronto, from the rear-mounted child seat on one of my parent's bicycles. Later, when we moved to suburban Markham, on the north-eastern border of the city, my bicycle was a way to explore the construction of newer subdivisions sprawling ever-further northward over prime farmland and built on cornfields, as our own house was. At my high school I was one of the few students who occasionally biked to school in the warmer months, not as a political or ecological statement but for the sense of personal freedom and independence from the bus schedule and because it allowed for the ability to skip out (which I did rarely, of course) and head down to the park, or to another school which many of my friends attended.

During my undergraduate years at Queen's University in Kingston, and after graduation living in downtown Toronto, and then Montreal, my bike was a main mode of transportation even through the snowy and often brutally cold central Canadian winters. After finishing another degree I even chose to work as a bike courier for a few months, 'sharing' the downtown streets of Montreal's business district with car-drivers for seven to eight hours a day, an experience that taught me to assertively insist on my right to simply be on the road and allowed me to reach a level of comfort in being there.

But it wasn't until I moved out west to Victoria, BC in early 2005 that I was seriously introduced to 'culture'-building efforts around the bicycle. Victoria is a small urban centre that is geographically constrained in its growth on three sides by water, so that nearly any destination anywhere within the lower peninsula is usually less than a twenty minute bike ride away. Yet much of Victoria exhibits the type of low-density, car-intensive planning where a few heavy main arteries facilitating the flow of vehicular traffic at the expense of truly functional and pleasant pedestrianism or cycling that is found in every other urban centre in North America.

What was unique about Victoria, however, which I discovered to my pleasant surprise, was a small but vibrant and creative collection of young people who not only recognized that they shared cycling as a main mode of transportation, but melded this recognition with a spirit of cooperation as well as a healthy dose of fun. This was my introduction to 'bike culture'. Recyclistas, the community bike shop, held shows that featured local bands and put on social events such as 'bike proms' that celebrated the bicycle and 'bike love'. The social bonds within this tight-knit community were not exclusively oriented towards a collective adoration of the bicycle as an object or the practice of cycling itself, however; rather, the bicycle was used as a means of facilitating further social engagement. A group ride called the Moonlight Midnight Mystery Ride that took place late on the second Friday night of every month, for example, became a notorious and popular 'party on wheels' that allowed individuals to range far and wide on relatively quiet night-time streets and visit areas of the city (such as the

abandoned and crumbling WWII lookout post of Macaulay Point Park in Esquimalt, or the greens of the Victoria Golf Club along the shoreline of Oak Bay) one might not normally visit or indeed be allowed to go, thus extending the individual and shared sense of place.

When I moved to Vancouver from Victoria in the fall of 2006, to begin my master's degree, I had little idea as to what my final thesis project might be. I lobbed what I thought was a 'goofy' topic idea of studying 'bike culture' as a possibly nascent social movement as a topic for my initial term paper, and to my surprise, the idea met with strong encouragement. I became more intrigued and excited by the notion that I was both a witness to and participant in a genuine new movement for social change. Some of my Victoria friends had connections to an ostensibly similar 'bike culture' in Vancouver, and it was in the midst of this new social scene that I found myself landing in that autumn. Yet within exactly a year, despite my efforts to involve myself in the social events and group rides generally similar in style to those of Victoria (if different in substance and spirit), I found myself ousted from the house I was living in, and estranged from that particular sub-culture.

What had happened? I was the same person that I was in Victoria – I still liked bikes, which I thought was the only real criteria for entry into a 'bike culture'; only my social context had changed. In short, what my time among that particular aspect of Vancouver 'bike culture' imparted to me the hard way was that there wasn't anything inherent in the technology of the bicycle or indeed in the social practice of cycling which promoted cooperation, conviviality or a desire to see

social change. While I met many individuals in Vancouver who shared an appreciation for the bicycle and the practice of urban cycling as a way to promote ecological sustainability and urban liveability, the overall character of the Vancouver 'bike community' seemed to be both more atomized and less inclusive than their island counterparts.

While left somewhat bitter and discouraged by this turn of events, I decided to persist with the general direction of the project. It seemed especially important to identify the larger social forces at play, to more fully grasp that the mere existence of urban cycling sub-cultures in some North American cities are not necessarily the vanguards of a broader social movement. In themselves, they will not lead the way in a push for the kind of radical re-allocation of public space and shift in the prioritization of public infrastructure and resources that will be required to overcome the domination of the automobile over our lived space in the chronic, car-choked congestion of North American city cores and the aesthetic, social and existential blight that is the sprawling suburbs. But where these sub-cultures may be valuable is in contributing to the articulation of urban cycling as a unique mode of experiencing urban topography and a shared phenomenology of the built environment, and a more participatory way to 'live' the social spaces we inhabit here in North America.

This work begins, then, at the beginning – with a deeply philosophical examination of the epistemological and phenomenological roots of experience, mobility and space. If we are to challenge the hegemony of automobility and 'car

culture' in North America, we have to first clearly recognize how crucial our mode, or modes, of moving through the world are to framing or conditioning our understanding and experiencing of it. Thus in Chapter One I make use of Merleau-Ponty's work on phenomenology to highlight and articulate the centrality of the moving, phenomenal body to the character and content of experience. Merleau-Ponty's recognition of embodied consciousness as intrinsically dynamic and mobile is significant because it means the modes of mobility we employ profoundly style our relationship to the world at large. Further, Merleau-Ponty's work aids in dispelling the Cartesian notion of the universalized subjectivity of the 'rational' subject and an objective Reason that continues to contribute to positivistic approaches to urban planning policies, which have organised so much of our built environment.

In Chapter Two I take this line of reasoning further by engaging with Lefebvre's work on the social production of space, in particular his critique of the rationalization of social space by the intersecting forces of state and capital. Lefebvre shared with Merleau-Ponty the notion that the material body was the site of lived experience, the irreducible interface between our consciousness and the world. But with Lefebvre we shift from Merleau-Ponty's focus on the phenomenal body to the socially constructed and historically contextual space it inhabits. Understanding space as socially produced is crucial to creating an awareness of its active role in maintaining and replicating the dominant interests of economic and political power. The profession of urban planning tends to impose top-down solutions upon the sites of lived experience rather than solicit

ideas from those who inhabit these places, a theme that I further expand upon in Chapter Four with particular reference to the Congress for a New Urbanism, a progressive-minded movement of architects and urban planning practitioners.

A century of the normalization of automobility in North America and the increasingly 'hybridized' relationship between the human body and machine is the context for the applied phenomenology of Chapter Three. Here I attempt to defamiliarise some of the taken-for-grantedness of the experience of inhabiting the automobile and explore some of the phenomenological consequences of automobility as a means of extending the body into the world. I further contrast it with the spatial practice of urban cycling, articulating the latter's uniqueness as a mode of moving through and experiencing the world that can neither be conflated with car-driving nor pedestrianism.

The historical transformation of the street or roadway from a dense and diverse inhabitable 'place' in urban areas to a relatively homogenized and featureless space to be traversed as one enters car-scaled suburbia has profound cultural and political implications. I explore the relationship between hyper-automobility and the political culture of the suburbs in Chapter Five, attempting to understand how car-dependency underpins domestic 'networks of care' and contributes to suburban support for neo-liberal policies of deregulation and privatization. The 'micro-politics' of car-driving as enclosed, private mobility detailed in earlier chapters serves as a basis for discussion of the strategic mobilization of suburban fear of the city in the 'culture wars' by the conservative backlash in both Canada and the United States.

Finally, we turn to the social phenomena of urban 'bike culture' as a possible growing counter-movement to car-dominated suburban cultural politics in Chapter Six. My two very different experiences with both the Vancouver and Victoria 'bike cultures', as I briefly outlined above, greatly informed my thoughts on the formation and future of such cycling sub-cultures. It is there, I argue, that the negative aspects of sub-cultural exclusivity and in-group formation should greatly discourage any overly celebratory interpretations of urban cycling sub-cultures by those who may believe that the path to gaining greater acceptance and adoption for cycling as a functional mode of transportation in North American cities is by promoting such sub-cultures. Rather, as I argue here and in Chapter Seven, calls for cycling-positive infrastructure and policies must be the basis for widespread and mainstream adoption of the practice of cycling, rooted not in a fetishistic 'love' of the bicycle as an object but in the desire to more broadly share the perceptual world and understanding of local topographies that only the immersive experience of bike-riding allows.

1: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF MOBILITY

1.1 Introduction

Building from epistemological first principles and beginning with a heavily philosophical discussion of phenomenology may seem a bit pedantic for a work that concerns itself primarily with the cultural and social relationships between modes of mobility and the built environment. But it is the contention of this work that the actual lived experience of different modes of mobility, whether it be by car, bicycle or other means of transport, importantly condition our patterns of movement on both individual and collective levels, and subsequently shape cultural perceptions of space, mobility and spatial practices. Thus we begin this chapter and this work with a brief overview of phenomenological thought, particularly in regards to the shift from the Cartesian position, which understands the site of perception and knowledge as occurring entirely in a detached and disembodied 'mind', to Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology which allows us to appreciate how our seemingly 'independent' perceptions of external reality are both simultaneously sited in an irreducible corporeal body and situated in social space.

The movement of the perceptual body through space conditions its ever-changing relationship to the world. Merleau-Ponty shows us that the means through which the body inhabits and moves through the world matter crucially on the phenomenological level, as the body is the integral medium through which we

receive experience and information about the world. Our mobility connects us with that world in a very direct way, and the modes of mobility that we employ conjoins the production of social space with our perceptions of it.

'Modes of mobility' are means or methods of corporeal movement through space that employ differing technologies. Private means of transportation such as personal automobiles, bicycles, motorcycles, scooters, skateboards and so on, and public modes such as airplanes, buses and rail transport, all involve the use of technologies that are socially produced and historically contingent. Our habits of movement 'gear' us to this external and social world by framing our sense of what is a 'reasonable' distance to travel as we go about our everyday lives. All of our individual patterns of movement in their aggregate contribute greatly to social and political conflicts around more 'sustainable' forms of economic and ecological consumption.

Moving from the description of the phenomenological experience of the individual moving body to understanding it as a social body that always already occupies or inhabits a broader social context is where we will shift from Merleau-Ponty's more purely phenomenological account of the perception of movement and space to Lefebvre's analysis of the production of social space. Lefebvre carries us beyond Merleau-Ponty into this social world, and helps us to understand that the contradictions and conflicts between modes of mobility are grounded in allocations of physical space that concretize social relations of power. The production of social space through its rationalization and control by the state and the forces of capital has been a process whereby the utopic

potential inherent in the lived experience and spatial practices of everyday life are further sublimated by being ever more subjected to the logic of the market. The phenomenon of mass homeownership among the working middle-class in North America encourages a large segment of the population to participate in this logic and the socio-spatial configurations of suburban culture, the cultural and political ramifications of which will be the subject of subsequent chapters.

1.2 The Epistemological Foundations of Experience

Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology is both significant and useful for our purposes here, as it provides a strong epistemological ground for subsequent statements regarding the significance of the phenomenologically different character of the experiences of auto- and velo-mobility, and the social effects of collective habits of movement on the cultural politics of transportation. If we further accept David Morris' claim that "the ground of morals [is] in lived space" (Morris, 2004, 28), then we understand the necessity in beginning a discussion of the significance of the subjective experience of modes of mobilities with an outline of the phenomenology of the moving-perceiving body. "In philosophical terms," Henri Lefebvre says, "space is neither subject nor object" (1991, 92). How, then, can it be effectively understood? Our experience of space and its perception by consciousness thus necessarily begins with a discussion of epistemological first principles.

The foundation of Cartesian rationalism, encapsulated in Descartes' 'cogito ergo sum', espouses the notion that 'essence precedes existence'; that is, knowledge of an external world is contingent upon the fact of a perceiving

consciousness. The only thing of which the mind can be certain in the first instance, Descartes says, is its own awareness of itself as a thinking subject. Beyond this awareness of self, the mind receives external sense-data through the sensory-perceptual apparatus of the body. This sense-data then becomes the basis for ideas, the content of perceptual experience. Descartes establishes what for him is the primacy of the subject within the dialectical relationship of the subject/object distinction, a passive, reflective and un-extended consciousness that infers the connection between ideas, the content of experience, and sense-data of things received from the external world. A Cartesian conception of space understands it not as a property of objects or of the world, but rather as an ordering category of the mind itself. While the objects of experience have spatial dimensions, to the Cartesian space itself is an absolute category within the perceiving self that precedes and orders empirical sense-data. This irreducible self, the transcendental ego, is the site and source of self-evident, irreducible truth.

Husserl's 'phenomenological reduction' sought to radicalize the Cartesian method by 'bracketing' "all belief in transcendental existence and focused on transcendental subjectivity – that 'I' which Kant and Husserl claimed was necessarily involved in any act of consciousness" (Langer, xii-xiii). Husserl remained attached to the Cartesian notion of a transcendental ego, but shifted the ground or source of knowledge slightly, from specific instances of thinking or perceiving to the essence of the processes themselves. Merleau-Ponty takes Husserl one step further in shifting the site of knowledge towards a more

balanced position between consciousness and world. Rather than originating from the abstracted Cartesian self, engaged in reflective acts of pure reasoning, knowledge in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account emerges from the perceiving consciousness being sited, or *situated* in a phenomenal body. Consciousness is thus understood as inextricably bound up in the world as the fundamental site of experience, perception and movement.

Like Husserl's transcendental ego, Merleau-Ponty's consciousness has an intentionality or orientation towards the world, but Merleau-Ponty places emphasis on bodily movement and spatiality as the source of meaning or a 'pre-given ground' for the extended mind. Thus for Merleau-Ponty, "the traditional subject-object distinction begins to appear as an *empirical result* of being in the world, a *phenomenon*, rather than a presupposed beginning of all phenomenology" (Morris, 2004, 59). Meaning is constructed through the act of being in the world, and more crucially, in moving within and through it. Importantly and uniquely, unlike inanimate objects, which have a *spatiality of position*, the human body has a *spatiality of situation*, a dynamic or mobile spatiality driven by the perceiving consciousness and which allows it to apprehend and gain knowledge about the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 100).

Thus ways of moving and seeing co-develop, as we learn and employ different ways of traversing space, of being-in-the-world, and thus of encountering and experiencing the world. The phenomenology of perception is then also simultaneously a phenomenology of movement, as implicit in the account is that being-in-the-world is a dynamic, mobile state of consciousness.

More precisely, the perceiving consciousness is always in a dynamic state of moving-through-the-world, where habits of movement style the relationship of perceptual consciousness to the world. Unlike in Descartes' account, where reflective consciousness must infer a three-dimensional world from a stream of two-dimensional images received by the retinas, "bodily movement amounts to an inference in the flesh: by inherently streaming visual information outward, movement accomplishes what inference does in inferential accounts" (Morris, 2004, 12). It is in the process of moving closer to or further away from an object, for example, which allows the visual information around it to change; thus the world is received by consciousness through the act of movement from a specifically-situated bodily spatiality.

Monika Langer succinctly states the implications of this point in her exegesis of *Phenomenology of Perception*. "Bodily spatiality, inherently dynamic, is the very condition for the coming into being of a meaningful world. Thus it subtends our entire existence as human beings" (Langer, 1989, 47). The primacy of bodily spatiality and movement for the construction of meaning also then informs the perceiving consciousness' awareness of itself as inhered in the image of the body in which it is situated. 'Body image', Merleau-Ponty says, is a "way of stating that my body is in-the-world. As far as spatiality is concerned. . . one's own body is the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure, and every figure stands out against the double horizon of external and bodily space" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 101). Body image provides consciousness with an inherent orientation or sense of 'here'-ness, an irreducible

yet moveable spatiality from which it projects or extends itself outwards into the world. Both body image, in terms of a minimal spatiality, and movement are integral to the receiving of experience by a perceiving consciousness. As Langer explains, “[m]otion is... a structural phenomenon having to do with the articulation of our perceptual field into figure-background; and the way in which the body, as subject of perception, establishes its relation with the world is what determines part of the perceptual field to count as the background and another part to count as a moving object” (Langer, 1989, 87). The modes of mobility the perceiving body employ are implicated in its ever-changing relationship to the world. The means through which the body inhabits and moves through the world thus matters crucially on a phenomenological level, as it is the integral medium through which we receive experience and information about the world.

As infants, our first instances of awareness and experience of a larger world outside ourselves occurs within the intimate life-world of the family. We are, foremost and fundamentally, social animals. The fact of existence on both an individual and collective level precedes the self-awareness of consciousness. To presume, since we cannot be certain of the existence of any reality except that of our own consciousness, that consciousness determines or dictates reality, is an expression of extreme self-absorption bordering on arrogance. There is certainly a dynamic interplay or a dialectical tension between ‘internal’ consciousness and ‘external’ reality, but this dynamic presupposes a bond between this embodied consciousness and the world through which it travels that can never be fully disengaged, except in death. “In short,” as Langer says, “phenomenology must

awaken us to an awareness of consciousness as incarnate in a body and inhering in a world” (xv).

Merleau-Ponty thus provides a firm phenomenological ground for subsequent exploration of the ethical and social significance of the extension into the world of the body through the use of differing technologies of movement. A social body participates in the construction of a shared social world, in culture and language, with other subjectivities which it encounters and engages. As Langer states, existential phenomenology “stresses that we are not neutral observers but rather, situated participants in an ongoing, open-ended, socio-historical drama. It claims that truth comes into being in our concrete co-existence with others and cannot be severed from language and history” (Langer, ix). Thus the relational awareness Langer describes is one that implies an ability for openness and empathy towards others situated in different social contexts in order to function. The deeper implication is that this stems directly from our ‘concrete co-existence’ with others, and the primacy of each situated body must be both communicated and understood within these social contexts.

1.3 The ‘Mobilities’ Turn in the Social Sciences

The inherent irreducibility of bodily spatiality and its centrality to our encountering of the world signal it as the primary site of everyday life, where spatial practices evolve into habits of movement or stasis, contextualized by social space and either privileged or discouraged by ‘official’ allocations. Merleau-Ponty’s recognition of embodied consciousness as intrinsically dynamic and mobile is significant because it means the modes of mobility we employ

matter on a deeply epistemological level and profoundly style our relationship to the world at large. Establishing this helps us to recognise the implications of the mobility of human beings on a broader scale, and perhaps understand why corporeal movement is often at the core of social concerns and political conflict.

Regulating, planning and controlling mobility, whether at the level of the nation-state attempting to manage migratory flows of 'illegal' labour from developing countries to developed ones, or the perhaps more mundane matter of municipal governments addressing commuter congestion and traffic control, can all be understood as the imposition of the 'state-like' on more 'anarchic' patterns of movement, allowing the local, lived and everyday to be regulated and made predictable, and thus more controllable by state and capital. This evolution on the part of the state, from rationally ordering and controlling the use of space and its allocation, to monitoring and regulating the mobility of its citizens, signals both the increased level of information and knowledge made available to the state as modernity progresses and the degree to which this has allowed it to penetrate into everyday life.

Recent social sciences scholarship spanning the past two decades has also shifted its attention from more spatial concerns (the 'spatial turn' [see Harvey, 1989, Soja, 1989]), to a newer 'mobilities' turn or paradigm, a tighter focus on both virtual and corporeal mobilities, including the movement of bodies through space. While this scholarship signals an implicit epistemological resonance with Merleau-Ponty's articulation of the dynamic, mobile spatiality of the phenomenal body as the site of experience (Urry, 2000, 2007; Sheller and

Urry, 2006; Kellerman, 2006), this is rarely noted. This lack of a thorough epistemological grounding is most evident in the expansion of the definition of 'mobility' in the recent literature to include the 'virtual mobilities' engendered by communications technologies, from the telephone to the Internet (Larsen, Urry and Axhausen, 2006; Kellerman, 2006). While the need to understand how these newer technologies allow for the superseding of bodily corporeality and ever greater time-space compression is important, a shift in scholarly attention and theoretical focus to the technologies of virtual mobilities obscures the fact that it is the dynamic perceiving body that is the core site of experience. The notion that one is overcoming the inequalities of social relations associated with bodily corporeality through the evolution of the near-instantaneous transfer of information is problematic in that it is not often clear what the real-world effects of these acts of virtual mobility are. An awareness of the always-present and irreducible spatiality of the phenomenal body as the site of experience can inform a theoretical perspective that instinctively looks for more 'concrete' instantizations of the social relations of power.

At the heart of this theoretical shift from a relatively static, spatialised political economy to a more sociological 'mobilities' paradigm is an emphasis on movement or 'flow'. Sociologists such as Manuel Castells, who makes a distinction between 'spaces of flows' and 'spaces of places' (1996), and John Urry (2000, 2007), who goes the furthest in attempting to elaborate the 'new mobilities paradigm', deem that recognition of the centrality of 'flow' to capitalist societies has become of special importance in the era of late capitalism, where

neo-liberal deregulatory regimes at the level of the nation-state have led to an unprecedented global movement of financial capital. Urry, following Bauman (2007), suggests that 'fluidity' or 'liquidity' is the essence of late modernity. This is vividly illustrated by a film such as *Chronos* (Fricke, 1985), an art-documentary that contrasts time-lapse photography of the vast geological time apparent in the landscape of the desert plateaus of Utah with the sped-up blurs of people zipping through Grand Central Station and the concrete canyons of New York City. Movement itself seems to become its own purpose. Bauman's 'liquid humanity' is on display, suggesting our species' spatial and temporal contingency and impermanence (2007).

Indeed, 'flow' as a sociological concept comes into its ascendancy in concurrence with the rise and pervasiveness of combustion-powered transport technologies in the latter half of the twentieth century. Automobility in particular has contributed greatly to this attenuation towards 'mobility' and 'flow', which seems to not only come at the expense of a sense of place, but especially privileges motorized modes of mobility, which require the 'placeless places' of unobstructed roadways, airports, and dedicated right-of-ways for rail transport as conduits for unimpeded, rapid movement of goods and people. Different modes of movement require differing amounts of space in order to facilitate their optimal levels of flow, and this in its turn suggests and then comes to produce optimal levels of population density. A new subway line, for example, sees higher population densities along its route while requiring relatively little in the way of inhabitable surface area, whereas a new freeway with the same amount of

capacity necessarily requires many more square kilometres of surface space, and in effect displaces or pushes inhabitable space further outwards.

This allocation of public space for various transit uses illustrates their social prioritization. Freeways and major 'arterial' roads prioritize traffic flow or circulation, with few if any reasons or places for stopping along the route itself. They are primarily utilized purely as spaces of transit, conduits between destinations, rather than destinations in themselves. Yet streets and roadways account for one of the largest uses of surface space in urban and suburban areas in North America – up to 30% by some estimates (see Switzky in Carlsson, 2002, 189). Urry mentions that one-quarter of London and “nearly one-half” of Los Angeles are “devoted to such car-only environments” (Urry, 2007, 122). This historical transformation of the street or roadway, from a dense and diverse inhabitable 'place' in some urban areas, to a relatively homogenized and featureless space to be traversed as one enters car-scaled suburbia, has profound cultural and political implications. The roadway as a cultural or communicative space in its own right deteriorates as more space is allocated or optimized for movement flows. Spontaneous or incidental chance encounters have literally no place to stop and fully realize themselves, pressured as their subjects are by the general flow of traffic to 'keep things moving'. Pedestrianism and cycling, in contrast, with their lower relative speeds and ability to more easily 'step aside' and move out of the flow of traffic, as well as the ability for those on differing ultimate trajectories or vehicles to easily converse while traveling

alongside each other, can allow for meaningful social encounters to occur within the space of flow.

This socio-spatial ordering becomes significant in its implications when reproduced and amplified across large swathes of the built environment, with the result that different modes of mobility are systemically reinforced or privileged while others are discouraged or made impracticable. Duany and Plater-Zyberk, co-founders of the Congress for a New Urbanism, point out that transport planners' attempts to alleviate traffic congestion by building more roadways has the unintended consequence of further dispersing populations over a wider area, in effect making the problem worse: "By mistaking *mobility* for *accessibility*, they undermine the viability of both new and old places by focusing entirely on moving cars through them. The result – already well documented – is a landscape lacking in destinations worth getting to" (Duany, et al., 2000, 230-1). By privileging a certain mode of mobility, professional planners in effect preclude these other modes of travel, thus forcing individual 'choices' regarding transportation through the design of the built environment, which in its turn feeds cultural perceptions surrounding the relative desirability of differing modes of mobility. In the suburban context in particular, the position of dependency on car-drivers by non-drivers, or else immobility, becomes a social stigma that serves to further reinforce and replicate the system of automobility.

Mobility works very powerfully as a cultural trope, equated implicitly as it is with freedom itself. Both mobility and freedom act as "salient factors in

sustaining the dominant role of the individual passenger car in our system of transport” (Freund and Martin, 1993, 81). Expressions of personal freedom in popular culture are often represented by the use of a private vehicle to signal individual, autonomous movement, and are evident in popular aphorisms such as the ‘freedom of the open road’, itself implicitly signaling the ‘liberating’ aspect of the mode of automobility in particular. Thus, arguments for increasing the practicability and profile of urban cycling often rest upon framing it as extending the range and accessibility to the ‘basic right’ of mobility. Zach Furness, in his dissertation on the politics of bike culture, identifies the ‘mantra of access’ as one of the two main “rhetorical tropes that have heavily influenced the ideological and political paradigms of bicycling advocacy throughout the last 25 years” (Furness, 2005, 16).

Urban cycling advocates often concern themselves primarily with policy decisions aimed at affecting liberal reformist notions of equality of opportunity as they apply to public space and transportation infrastructure. This has gone some way towards improving the accessibility of roadways and public spaces for a broader range of mobilities, yet more fundamental shifts to more self-propelled and less energy intensive modes of transportation will require radical restructurings of cultural attitudes and social patterns of transport as well as to built infrastructure in order to improve real equality of condition regarding access. Understanding space as socially produced is crucial to awakening this awareness and engendering this restructuring. It is with a view to further illuminating the role that differing modes of mobility can and do play in

contributing to the shaping of this process that we will turn, in the next chapter, to Lefebvre's analysis of the social production of space.

1.4 Conclusion

As Merleau-Ponty amply illustrates, the movement of the body through the world is crucial to the reception of information for the supposedly disembodied Cartesian Self, and helps us to understand that it is deeply embedded and contextualized within this larger social world. This theoretical framework lends deep epistemological resonances and significant social implications to our lived experience of modes of mobility, whether by car, bicycle, or other means. The privileging of the Cartesian subject and the notion that the abstract mind precedes the empirical world, intended by Descartes to provide a firm foundation for the discovery of universal scientific truths, has broad ethical implications and social repercussions, underpinning the primacy of the individual and building the case for universal human rights. But this claim to absolute knowledge by an abstracted, individual subject using 'pure reason' to make inferences regarding the external world of sense-data are historically and socially contingent, implicitly constructed as male, European and of certain class backgrounds. It may be 'old news' for critical social scientists to debunk notions of an objective Reason and universality, but implicit assumptions about these continue to underpin the urban planning professions, reinforced by an appeal to the kind of universalistic, positivist empiricism that is undergirded by Cartesian rationalism.

2: THE PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL SPACE

2.1 The 'Rational' Production of Social Space

Like Merleau-Ponty, Henri Lefebvre critiqued the universalized subjectivity born out of the particular 'theoretical practice' of Cartesian rationalism as producing "a *mental space* which is apparently, but only apparently, extra-ideological" (Lefebvre, 1991, 6). Lefebvre criticized Merleau-Ponty for focusing primarily on perception and the embodied construction of spatiality and for not putting sufficient emphasis on the role of social practice in the production of space, but shared with him the notion of using the 'lived experience' of the body as the point of departure in discussing the social construction of space (see Simonsen, 2004, 49, and n8). Lefebvre further broadened Merleau-Ponty's more purely epistemological tack by emphasizing the *materiality* of the body as the site through which both the lived experience of social space is received, and by which the symbolic or perceived meaning of space is expressed. The materiality of the phenomenal body is a dialectical and inextricable part of social space, deeply integrated into the social world, which in its turn frames perceptual experience. It is through the irreducible interface of our material bodies that we engage with the broader social world, and through which the world impacts upon us in return.

Lefebvre's "materialist development of phenomenological categories" (Kipfer, 2008, 200) allows for the identification of a trialectic of 'moments' in the production of space: spatial practices, or the 'lived space' of everyday

experience; representations of space, or the 'conceived space' of urban planners and official maps; and representational spaces, or the 'perceived' or 'symbolic space' employed by writers, artists, and all those who draw rich meaning from lived experience (Lefebvre, 1991). From shifting the frame of inquiry from the perceptual body as the site of knowledge to the broader social context of the power relations in which the experience of that body is immersed, Lefebvre also provided a strongly materialist means through which to engage with the active role of space in serving the hegemonic or dominating interests of capital and political power.

Lefebvre's work on the production of social space and everyday life occupies a unique position in urban social theory, acting as a theoretical bridge spanning Guy Debord and the Situationists, the offsprings of the earlier Surrealists, and the more political economist bent of contemporary human geographers such as David Harvey, Mike Davis and Edward de Soja. As Derek Gregory notes in his excellent *Geographical Imaginations* (1994), Lefebvre's project was "to prise open the sutures between 'immobilised space' and 'realized Reason' by bringing the production of space into human history and disclosing the social processes through which 'abstract space' has been historically superimposed over 'lived space'" (Gregory, 1994, 354). The task of building the modern nation-state meant that information-gathering tools used to make the populace more legible to central administrators and make functions such as tax collecting and surveying more efficient also had the effect of standardizing and simplifying different and often bewilderingly diverse local practices.

Enumerating a largely illiterate and rural population for a census, for example, meant that local functionaries often had to assign surnames for whole populations, which helped to identify a person for state or bureaucratic purposes but that found little use in everyday life (Scott, 1998, 64-71). As it became more and more necessary to engage with the state-like in the form of property and tax assessments, banks, large private firms and other state bureaucracies, these official surnames became 'fixed' into everyday practice, signalling the triumph of a more quantitative and rational order over the informal and intimate knowledges and social histories that were more closely bound to the local. Even units of measurement, which historically varied greatly from region to region and indeed were the result of a more intimate spatial relationship or connection to the land in the form of manual labour (yards, feet, bushels, and so on) were standardized in order to render local yields and productive capacities more legible to state planners in some far-off centre. This also had the effect of allowing harmonious trade to range much further afield than the local or regional market (Scott, 1998, 25). This standardization and simplification allowed for more abstract information to be gathered, and thus allowed for even deeper penetration into the everyday lived spaces of the periphery by an ever more centralized administration. Thus the understanding of space as calculable and controllable allowed for the inscription of a certain kind of centrally administered logic upon social space, overwriting previous histories.

As Gregory eloquently notes, everyday life is both "the domain that is enframed, constrained, and colonized by the space of the commodity and the

territory of the state”, a product and outcome of modernity where “the routinized spatial practices that are so relentlessly diagrammed by time-geography take place”, but that also contains “traces and memories of spatial practices that were untouched by modernity’s estrangements” (Gregory, 1994, 363). In the realm of everyday experience, the result of the interaction between body and world means that all of us contribute in our own small ways to the production of social space, yet without effective economic or social power these contributions are often marginalized by the seemingly ‘neutral’ or ‘extra-ideological’ abstract Cartesian space appealed to in the decision-making processes of municipal planning departments. Thus, the myriad subjectivities of experiential ‘lived’ space and symbolic ‘perceived’ space are always in tension with the ‘conceived’ space “inhabited by the technocrats in their silent offices” (Lefebvre, 1991, 6).

2.2 The Primacy of Vision and the Case for the Re-Corporealisation of Space

For Lefebvre, the ‘abstract space’ of planners was commodified and bureaucratic, geometric, phallic, and visual. It was a modern and scientific space, “from which previous histories have been erased and the time needed for living eludes the logic of visualization and spatialization” (Gregory, 366). But the domination of the logic of visualization, together with standardization and more intrusive measurements of people and space, gave administrative planners a sense of having an overarching although inferential understanding of places they had never directly experienced, enabling them to make decisions based on simplified information organised in the form of maps, surveys and censuses. The

“rise of the visual realm” thus involved a series of substitutions and displacements which “overwhelms the whole body and usurps its role” (Lefebvre, 1991, 286).

These particular imaginative geographies, both shaped by and then in their turn shaping social reality through their concern with the ease of collecting quantifiable data, preferred straight lines and geometrically pure forms over the irregular spaces and practices of everyday life which were often bewildering and illegible to outsiders (see Scott, 1998, ch. 2). With the concurrent rise of modern alienation and the domination of the ‘abstract space’ of capitalism over everyday life, bureaucratic and commodified space came to have “no social existence independently of an intense, aggressive and repressive visualization” (Lefebvre, 1991, 286). Space began to be ‘rationally’ ordered both for visual harmony and administrative ease, rather than in consideration of, or in relation to, the human body.

Any project that seeks the re-corporealisation of space, then, is always and necessarily local and quite literally on-the-ground. Grassroots or ‘from-below’ movements often emphasize the tactical occupation of a given physical space as a site of social play and resistance, calling for it to be inhabited by material bodies and for people to exercise what Lefebvre termed ‘the right to the city’. Lefebvre himself consistently emphasized the role of festival, struggle, and play in actively creating or appropriating spaces from which resistance can be articulated, for the domination of the visual over the corporeal also carries with it the attendant threat that critique itself vacates the battlefield of lived space, of

everyday life, in favour of devoting critical energy to representations and the image.

Strikes involve picket lines and workplace occupations, protests against clear-cut logging and industrial deforestation use tree-sits as a tactic, and anti-corporate globalisation demonstrations surround convention centres and occupy downtown city intersections in examples of direct, spatial interventions that are both highly symbolic and sometimes very effective in their broader social impact. Such spatial interventions are illustrative of the ability of people to counteract the dominance or imposition of the official 'conceived space' of state planners and capital through intervention on a collective, grassroots level, one which involves the alliance of the symbolic, 'perceived' space of the imagination, and the concrete, 'lived' space of actual spatial practice. Perhaps not surprisingly, this often elicits repressive reactions from both political and economic power. Indeed, some modes of mobility themselves come in conflict with more established or official uses for public space and thus create or suggest a need for regulation. At its best, this gap between imagined space and conceptual space, between the experiential life constituting social reality and the normative abstraction of law, if collectively recognized can aggregate and coalesce in transformative approaches or orientations towards common spaces. Critical Mass, which will be examined in more detail in a latter chapter, is an example of just one such non-hierarchical intervention into the spatial allocation of urban streetscapes.

Understanding space as a social relationship, as Lefebvre did, as "one which is inherent to property relationships (especially the ownership of the earth,

of land) and also closely bound up with the forces of production (which impose a form on that earth or land)” (Lefebvre, 1991, 85), also means understanding its contestation as being at the core of political economic considerations. It is both a product to be used or consumed, and a means of production: “networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it” (Lefebvre, 1991, 85). Uncovering the social relations embedded in space is made more complex by the fact that “the dominant tendency fragments space” (1991, 89-90), enclosing it and further specializing the assignment of its organization and rationalization to different professions such as urban planners and landscape designers, transportation and land use policy-makers, architects, economists and geographers. The inscription of prevailing ideologies of ‘rationality’ on society in the form of specialized, technical knowledge by the planning professions continues even in its more progressive and ostensibly humanistic forms, as evidenced in the ordered traditionalism of the Congress for a New Urbanism, a movement of architects and urban planners that will be engaged with further in the next chapter.

2.3 The Privatization of Space and Mobility

The process of the increasing rationalization and organization of space, and the ever-greater encapsulation of its understanding as a property relationship is thus reflected in the cultural values of capitalism which privilege the ownership of space as private property. As space became increasingly standardized, produced and brought under the control of the state throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Western societies and land tenures rendered more

legible to the marketplace, land itself increasingly came to be seen and understood primarily as real estate, and its development concerned more with location and proximity and with producing rent rather than with agricultural productivity. The fragmentation and differentiation of space, through the above-mentioned process of specialization of uses and through zoning that separates residential from commercial, 'recreational' from industrial, and so on, allows for the privileging of the privatization and control of space in the form of home-ownership and contributes to a cultural frame that values and emphasizes individualization, the domestic sphere and private space over a sense of space as a public resource held in common.

When we consider this perhaps obvious point in the context of our main theoretical themes of corporeal mobility and the cultural implications of our current spatial practices and land use, we see that this trend towards the privatization of space has consequences that reach deep into and profoundly order our everyday lives, attuning us to also favour private modes of mobility which allow for the expression of cultural values of individual control and freedom. Further, if as Keil and Kipfer contend, "[t]he arenas of local and municipal politics in Canada have been captured above all else by an essentially bourgeois 'politics of property' and narrow, seemingly technical concerns of public administration" (in Clement and Vosko, 2003, 339), then it also reveals much about larger issues surrounding the socio-spatial characteristics of democratic participation.

The extension of homeownership to broad sections of the working middle class, particularly in North America after the Second World War, implicated a large segment of the population in the continued 'success' or health of capitalism and its emerging socio-spatial configurations, with the effect that "this segment's allegiance to the system of private property [could] be acquired in a fundamental way. In this sense, such an extension is 'functional' for the continued survival of capitalism" (Gottdiener, 1985, 92). Mass homeownership was integral to the American Dream and visions of social prosperity and cohesion, but it has also led to a preoccupation with property values and the creation of alliances based around shared values of ownership of private property. It has allowed political actors to cut across class lines by appealing to more narrowly economist and individualistic values, at the same time they perpetuate other social divisions. Many suburban politicians find electoral success running on platforms of defensive or reactive policies oriented towards protecting the desirability of residential property, focusing on law and order policies that maintain the perception of 'safe communities', and thus also property values, while at the same reducing the 'burdens' of property taxes that fund other public services.

This appeal to the protection of property values, or the 'politics of property', to use Keil and Kipfer's phrase, can have the effect of reinforcing tradition and convention in the name of 'community' while advancing public policies that further erode the 'sense of the local'. When homeownership becomes inextricably tied to car-driving, as it is for the vast majority of those located in the suburban fringe, then bold proposals and policies that confront this

auto-centricity by re-configuring road spaces to create dedicated lanes for cyclists or re-zoning to allow greater densities in an area must contend with the concerns of those whose habitual mode of mobility is itself the very problem that must be addressed. If narrow definitions of accessibility restricted to automobility continue to predominate, the political and social ills of the suburbs will only be 'solved' in the long run by the catastrophic collapse of an unsustainable, resource-intensive and highly-subsidised infrastructure.

On a more phenomenological level, when the space that is quite literally 'closest to home' comes to be viewed as the planned, profitable 'conceived space' of planners and developers by the inhabitants themselves, the effect is to further impoverish everyday life by eliminating this tension through reducing the worth of the domestic sphere to the rather narrow spectrum of its quantifiable economic value. The essential conflict between the demands of economic and political power of 'abstract space', as expressed through speculative leveraging of exchange-values and market forces, and the space of use values produced by the complex interactions always present in everyday life, suggests that one's home becomes liveable primarily as a source of financial equity. Yet by subjecting the basic need of housing to the speculative vagaries of the market, large swathes of the population live private lives suffused with precarity and insecurity, saddled with onerous mortgages driven ever upwards by speculative investment capital. The bursting of the American house market bubble in the fall of 2008 only made this more acutely felt by large swathes of the population in

that country, which saw entire neighbourhoods and subdivisions shuttered by a tidal wave of foreclosures.

2.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, both utopic and strategic visions are needed in order to re-humanise the urban and suburban landscapes, visions where the reclamation of social space from privatizing forces is necessarily linked up with a critique of the underlying logic of property relations. Or as Gottdiener puts it, “[t]he transformation of everyday life must proceed with the radical transformation of space because the one is bound up with the other” (Gottdiener, 1985, 150). Shifts in habitual modes of mobility as everyday spatial practices rely upon a substantial reconfiguration of public space, signalled for example by the reallocation of street space to prioritize cyclists as roadway users, but they also require shifts in cultural perceptions and the popular will regarding the often substantial investments necessary to re-order this public infrastructure. This dialogue, when it occurs at all, happens at the regional and municipal levels and draws upon constituencies who proceed from and adhere to differing phenomenologies of mobility that contribute powerfully to their ‘sense of place’, and thus may see themselves as having competing interests. One can then glimpse the first faint glimmerings of another iteration of the so-called ‘culture wars’, one that pits dwellers of the more densified urban core, where urban cycling appears more immediately feasible and which also contains proportionally more tenants and a presumably more itinerant population, against car-dependent homeowners in suburban and rural areas.

The active, mobile body is one oriented towards navigating the social world, and it is this interaction and engagement that signals the move from more purely epistemological and phenomenological concerns to their socio-political considerations, understanding the individual moving body as a social body that always already occupies or inhabits a broader social context. The extension of mass homeownership to a broader swathe of the North American population has implicated much of the citizenry in the kind of narrow economist thinking that land developers and the planning profession engenders, and has contributed to a kind of suburban political culture where “residents are preoccupied with the high costs of maintaining their standard of living while living lives that are increasingly distant from, and cut off from, the centre-city populations” (Andrews in Clements and Vosko, 2003, 320). This suburban political culture will be examined in detail in Chapter Five and contrasted with the urban cultures forming around the bicycle in Chapter Six.

3: THE PHENOMENOLOGIES OF MOBILITIES

3.1 Introduction

The past century of increasing normalization of automobility in the West has allowed for an accumulation of embodied knowledges that some suggest has led to a 'hybridised' relationship between the human body and the automobile (see Sheller, 2004; Thrift, 2004; Dant, 2004). Merleau-Ponty's insights into the nature of phenomenological experience contributes the deeper philosophical ground for this literature and helps us to understand why car-driving becomes not just a habit of mind but also and more crucially one of perception, thus conditioning the body and everyday mobility.

On a phenomenological level, 'hyper-automobility' is the experience of the car itself as "a kind of monad", a "world in itself" which is all-enveloping and heavily intermediates interaction with the outside world (Thrift, 2004, 51). The extension of the sense of primacy of the body to the machine, that body and machine are trained or 'geared' to each other or that one has a 'relationship' with a specific machine, whether it be a car or bicycle, is an important aspect of car-driving or bicycle-riding. This hybridized relationship contributes much to individual and collective or 'cultural' attachments or investments in various modes of mobility. As Mimi Sheller similarly argues, "kinaesthetic investments (such as walking, bicycling, riding a train or being in a car) orient us toward the material affordances of the world around us in particular ways and these orientations

generate emotional geographies. In societies of automobility, the car is deeply entrenched in the ways in which we inhabit the physical world” (Sheller, 2004, 227-8). Thus the concept of hybridization allows for the continuing integration of biological and genetic metaphors for cars and technological metaphors for the human body.

In the first section of this chapter, we explore the notion of hybridity as applied to the engagement of the human body with the automobile, entailing the integration of differing technologies or ‘techniques’ of mobility into the phenomenology of movement, and making it a crucial element in the perception and embodied experience of urban space. At the same time as the car filters immediate sensations about the larger world through which one is moving, the driver’s senses are both extended *through* the car, and the car becomes an extension of the driver’s senses. Both the phenomenological experience and effect of automobility will be explored in greater detail in this section, as the shared phenomenological experience of enclosed personal mobility is enacted daily by millions of North Americans, and thus a sustained description and exploration of this aggregation of shared phenomenological experience will help us to understand the domestic and social significance of car-driving and the political barriers and cultural resistance to a greater adoption of urban cycling in and around North American cities. If, as John Urry (2000, 59) claims, “[t]he car’s significance is that it reconfigures civil society involving distinct ways of dwelling, travelling and socialising in, and through, an automobilised time-space,” an illuminating starting point for any discussion of the larger implications and effects

of the system of automobility for civil society is the subjective experience of individual drivers and passengers.

The bicycle also extends the cyclist into the world, but in a manner that in many ways seems to contrast with that of the automobile (see table 1.1), while sharing with it a similar experience of melding or hybridity between human and machine. A description of the phenomenology of velomobility, and the contrasts and similarities with that of automobility, will be the subject of the second half of the chapter. Participating in an auto-centric system of mobility through another mode situates one in a literal and figurative position of 'marginality' for the duration of one's movement through urban space. Thus, the marginal social positioning of cyclists is derived directly from their spatial positioning on the road-scape. Urban cycling must be recognized as a phenomenologically unique mode of mobility that cannot be conflated with either automobility or pedestrianism. Current North American traffic engineering practices, urban planning policies, as well as regulations and legislation regarding roadways, all seek to define cycling with one or the other of those two modes. If the goal is to see urban cycling increasingly adopted as a normal, utilitarian mode of transportation, rather than a sporting or recreational activity, then its uniqueness must be more fully articulated in order to be appreciated by a society that currently views it as a marginal and exceptional practice.

3.2 Inhabiting the Automobile

3.2.1 Car-Driver 'Hybridity' and the Experience of Enclosed Mobility

For many adults in North America, the automobile is a private, even intimate sphere, perhaps the only personal, reflective 'place' they get to occupy in the course of going about their everyday lives. Being a space 'in-between' the variously social spaces of home, work, school, the marketplace and places of play, the interior compartment of the car allows for personal reveries as well as intimate conversations, even as the 'tyranny of sobriety' (Freund and Martin, 1993, 99-101), the need for drivers to be always in an alert and aware state, prevails. The automobile, as a mode of *enclosed* mobility, allows for the extension of the private sphere into the public space of the street and frames or shapes our experience of the world we travel through in crucial ways. As John Urry notes, "[t]he car is a room stimulating particular senses and emotions. Once in the car there is almost no kinaesthetic movement from the driver" (Urry, 127). The shared phenomenological experience of this combination of sensation and sedentariness, of the ability to experience high speeds while relatively immobile and at rest in an enclosed compartment, is a fairly recent and relatively understudied phenomenon that requires closer description and analysis to bring it more clearly into the picture. Exploring and explaining the quotidian and often mundane experience of automobility in some descriptive detail at the level of the everyday helps us to move on towards a broader consideration of its mass social, cultural and political effects.

Merleau-Ponty himself, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, often employs the automobile as an illustrative example of how “the cultivation of habit” is the “grasping of a motor significance” (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 142-3). The fundamental *motility* of the body, the sense of orientation or location arising out of bodily movement rather than through visual or auditory sensation, is the sphere in which our understanding of space and its contents are received by consciousness. As the original ‘here’ for every phenomenal subject, the body “appears . . . to belong to a different order” than objects in the surrounding world (Morris, 2004, 3). The body thus holds a ‘natural’ sort of primacy for the subject, which privileges it in turn and extends this sense of ordinality, or order of precedence, to the techniques of mobility utilized to move through the world. The dimensions of the body are exteriorized to incorporate the vehicle, which is then treated as an extension of the body. Through repeated use, the body learns to incorporate the operation of the vehicle into its repertoire of movement without much conscious or reflective thought required to perform the individual actions of driving. Learning to drive is a process of dynamic acclimation, of both adjusting the body to the machine and the machine to the body, for example by reconfiguring the driver seat, as well as other personalizations. The application of the metaphor of hybridity to the car-driver means both that the machines of automobility take on more human qualities, while human beings discipline themselves to be more machine-like, in harmony with their technologies (see Thrift, 2004, 49).

Thus the car becomes integrated into the perceptual apparatus used to engage with the world, ceasing to be an object “with a size and volume which is established by comparison with other objects,” and instead becomes a ‘potentiality of volume’ incorporated “into the bulk of our own body” (Merleau-Ponty, 143). This allows for the ability, for example, to navigate the car in and out of tight parking spaces and through narrow streets without having to constantly get out and visually confirm the available space relative to one’s own ‘body image’, or bodily corporeality; instead, the external dimensions of the vehicle begins to be ‘sensed’ from within. This feel for the precise volume of the car often becomes an expression of the skill and experience of the driver and the source of considerable pride and identity as a result of this extension of the body image, or the *spatiality of situation*, to the vehicle.

As Katz notes, “the driver, as part of the praxis of driving, dwells in the car, feeling the bumps on the road as contacts with his or her body not as assaults on the tires, swaying around curves as if the shifting of his or her weight will make a difference in the car’s trajectory, loosening and tightening the grip on the steering wheel as a way of interacting with other cars” (Katz, 2000, 32 cited in Thrift, 2004, 47). Cradled within the compartment, the car-driver must extend his or her sense of exteriority through the response of the vehicle as it drives over the pavement. Vibrations transmitted from the wheels back through the vehicle are sensed and understood by the driver dwelling within and ‘feeling’ the car, making for a limited sensual relationship between the car and the driver. In this way, automobility habituates the body to extend itself into the world in a specific

fashion, through a “demand for a certain amount of free space” (Merleau-Ponty, 143). Reinforced by official planning and the socio-spatial relations of urban centres, this habituated demand is part of the larger ideology of space and informs our relation to and experience of the social world.

3.2.2 **Safety and comfort**

Entering the denser, often highly-concentrated pre-war urban cores by automobile from the car-scaled suburbs, the density and diversity of activity and movement swirling around outside the car windows can often be intimidating and overwhelming to the car-driver and passengers who have acclimated to the relative homogeneity of the suburban landscape. From this perspective within the enclosed and intimate space of the personal automobile, urbanity may well appear inherently dangerous. The public spaces of downtown urban streets, with their rampant pedestrianism and apparently purposeless ‘loitering’, swirl around the vehicle and appear unregulated and anarchic. Buckled into his or her seat, the car-dweller is physically lower than both pedestrians walking along the adjacent sidewalks and in front of the car at intersections, as well as any cyclists alongside the vehicle on the roadscape.

Coming into the city fresh off the car-only freeway system, engineered and optimized for maximum efficiency in moving a high volume of vehicular traffic at fast speeds, the car-driver is frustrated by the congested, stop-and-go nature of navigating dense urban space. “Broadly speaking,” as Freund and Martin note, “a physical feature of pedestrian space that stimulates use is *complexity*, whereas auto space promotes simplicity” (Freund and Martin, 104). The evolution and

manufacture of larger and larger SUVs and the civilian use of the Humvee are perhaps the most obvious and visible manifestations of this securitization of a private mobile space through the exteriority of the automobile. By understanding hyper-automobility as part of an ongoing historical process of socio-spatial enclosure in Western societies, we can more clearly see the extension of the private sphere into and through public space, whose purpose becomes exclusively to facilitate the flow of private citizens between privatised spaces.

Situated in relative comfort behind the wheel, the car-driver inhabits an enclosed mobile room that quite literally 'frames' his or her field of vision. Insulated to a certain degree from the sounds, smells and other intense sensations that vehicular traffic itself engenders, a driver's repertoire of expressive actions are limited to "the sounding of horns, the flashing of headlights, the aggressive use of brake lights and hand gestures" (Thrift, 47). Encased in steel and glass that is often reflective or tinted, the exterior shell of the automobile comes to be perceived as the outer 'skin' of other drivers and inhabitants. Yet from the perspective of one dwelling in the interior of the vehicle, as Travis Hugh Culley, a former bike courier, dryly observes, "[t]he speedometer, the doors, the little sticker that says that the steering wheel is equipped with an explosive air bag, the seat belt, all of these aspects to driving a car condition the driver's mobility and perception" (Culley, 2001, 164). The appearance and perception of safety and being in control contribute both to the driver's sense of attachment to the vehicle and to the normalization of car-driving.

Alan Durning of the Sightline Institute has termed this auto-centric perspective 'car-head', which he defines as the belief "that roads are actually for drivers, not walkers or cyclists" (Durning, 2006). Similarly, Culley identifies "[t]he kind of perception that a driver has behind a windshield, a set of small mirrors, a thousand-pound engine, and dashboard", as seriously limiting his or her understanding of the urban cyclist's perspective and experience (Culley, 2001, 164). Situated within a private, enclosed space that insulates him or her from immediate contact with the surrounding environment, the car-driver may not pay much attention to cyclists or pedestrians, except when and where they appear as direct impediments to the forward movement of his or her own vehicle. One possible consequence of a perspective shaped by auto-identification is the inability to empathise with the *spatiality of situation* of others on bikes or on foot, who are similarly concerned with efficiently and safely navigating the streetscape. This disconnection between the private, mobile room inside the car and the outside world, when combined with the 'violent' potential inherent in navigating a two-ton steel and glass box at speeds of up to 120kms/hr, has significant consequences for others attempting to use the road under a system of automobility.

Because 'car-head' has been normalized and made so utterly ordinary, the car-driver does not feel like she or he is being specially treated or privileged on the road. The driver of the two-ton personal automobile is not constantly prompted to frame his or her obedience to traffic signals as ensuring the safety of others; rather, he or she will be more likely reminded by the drivers behind him or

her in no uncertain terms that it is about facilitating optimal traffic flow. The larger societal context of a transportation infrastructure that greatly privileges automobility also contributes to a personal sense of justification on the part of the car-driver in prioritising or asserting their perceived 'need' for unimpeded travel over those using other modes of mobility. Conflicts with cyclists or other non-motorised users of the road space often occur as a result of this perception of a certain entitlement to the spaces of transit, a belief it is only 'fair' that the laws of the road be universally applied and enforced, even as speed, horsepower and spatial allocations for different users of the road are unequally distributed.

Traffic laws in North America over the past century have been fashioned with the driver of the two-ton personal automobile in mind with the result that 'universal' application privileges those in larger and faster vehicles. If other users of the road space are understood as hindering the default forward motion of the vehicle, contributing to the perception that "other people on the road are *obstacles* rather than *drivers*" engaged in the same process of attempting to traverse the roadway as quickly as possible (Culley, 165, emphasis in original), then in this context, a perceived, symbolic or actual assault on the vehicle is considered an assault on the body of the person themselves, and provokes a sense of 'justified' outrage or cause for retribution, as in the oft-commented phenomenon of 'road rage'.

3.2.3 **A Consequence of Automobility: The Violence of Speed**

Quite apart from the significant and substantial toll in human lives due to traffic fatalities (one oft-cited statistic points out that more Americans die due to

car accidents each year than died during the entire Vietnam War [Worldwatch Institute, 1994]), the almost casual capacity of the automobile to reach and maintain high rates of speed contributes to an everyday, qualitative degradation of lived space. In auto-space, both pedestrians and cyclists are made to feel like interlopers in a space where the pace is determined by faster vehicles. Even when crossing the street with the light, the pedestrian can feel as if he or she is interrupting or 'holding up' the apparently more legitimate needs of car-drivers idling or waiting to turn across their path. The system of automobility means that the impatience of the driver is privileged and prioritized by traffic cycles, transferred upon the slower-moving person and further contributing to the devaluation of pedestrians and cyclists, "obstacles to the high-speed traffic cutting mercilessly through slower-moving pathways" (Urry, 123).

As Freund and Martin observe, "[w]hen the pace of life in society speeds up, the expectations for what is *normal* performance and what is *high level* performance are increased" (Freund and Martin, 2007, 45). A study conducted in New York City, for example, found that the average walking speed for seniors was one pace slower than the four foot per second standard upon which the timing of traffic cycles is based, suggesting that one of the more basic measures of individual autonomy and personal mobility, that of being able to cross the street unaided, is made more hazardous for those least able to simply move faster by the standards and expectations of automobility (Transportation Alternatives, 2007). This literal speeding up of the pace of modern life is further collaborated by another study on urban walking speeds, conducted in Toronto,

that found city dwellers walking 10% faster than they did in 1994, on average (Agrell, 2007, May 3).

The gentle trance of Baudelaire's or Benjamin's ambling flaneur from an earlier era is a bare echo of memory, unable to be maintained alongside the constant stream of loud, rushing vehicular traffic. The fast-moving freeway does violence to the lived sense of 'place' which atrophies, subordinated as it is to the constant predominance and urgency of 'flow'. What makes for a 'place' is its capacity to be a repository of human memory and experience, and the largely featureless spaces of transit, wide stretches of bare asphalt and concrete intended only for large vehicles moving at high speeds removes this capacity from large swatches of habitable space. This becomes, as Freund and Martin remark, "one of the more subtle forms of social control that accompanies auto-centred transport" (Freund and Martin, 98-99).

In part the design of the technology suggests a comfortable, 'proper' cruising speed, one that has been established by automobile designers in relation to the perceived needs and desires of the driver rather than in consideration of, or in proportion to, the environment which the vehicle will travel through. Keeping a car at or below 30kms/hr, such as when driving through residential areas, school zones and other lived spaces for example, often requires conscious restraint in refraining from pushing the gas pedal and indeed the monitoring of the surrounding built environment in readiness to apply the brakes instead.

Table 1.1

Contrasting Phenomenologies: Automobility and Velomobility

<i>Automobility</i>	<i>Velomobility</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enclosure/Interiority • Privatised/Domestized Space • Simplicity • Hegemonic/Naturalised/Normalised • Motorised/Gas-powered • Car-scaled = low-density sprawl (suburbia) • Heavily intermediated senses – reliance primarily on vision • Limited range of movement – both bodily within vehicle and confined to the road-system, requires great deal of space (parking, traffic) • ‘Fast’ = c. 60 – 120kms • Parking a hassle – (see Shoup, 2005) • Personal health – automobility a factor in high levels of obesity • High personal capital costs for private vehicles also publicly subsidized • GHGs – ecological degradation attributable to cars (see Statscan, 2006) • Perennial problem of congestion – carrying capacity of roads quickly reached • Driver identifies with, and becomes identified/associated with the car – vehicle as extension of the body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposed/Immersive exteriority • Public/Social Space • (Trends towards more) Diversity/Complexity • Liminal/‘Invisible’/Marginalised • Self-propelled/Human-powered • Bike-scaled = medium-density (urbanism) • Immediate sensation/immersive experience of surrounding environment (but still primary reliance on vision) • Can dismount quickly (switch to pedestrian mode) – also can navigate ‘vehicle’ on roads, sidewalks, into buildings, etc. • ‘Slow’ = c. 5-20kms • Can spontaneously stop – but problems w/bike theft probably relatively higher than with cars • Compelling research on health benefits • Even high-end bike relatively inexpensive • Most of ecological footprint incurred in production/ manufacture • ‘Liminality’ allows cyclist to ‘slip past’ vehicular congestion – level of density required to hit carrying capacity for bicycles fairly high • Cyclist may identify with their bike, but are not encased by it and remain recognizable

3.3 Biking in the City

3.3.1 Bike-rider Hybridity and the Phenomenology of Velomobility

Making the case for treating cycling as a unique mode of mobility, one that should not, and indeed cannot, be conflated either with car-driving or pedestrianism requires a clear illustration of how the road-scape, and urban space more generally, is experienced from the perspective of one moving through it on a bicycle. As Table 1.1 suggests, in many ways the phenomenological experiences of velomobility and automobility appear to be in direct contrast to each other, with their major shared similarity being in the hybridized relationship both technologies of mobility require and create between human and machine. Somewhere between de Certeau's famous 1984 essay on 'Walking in the City', which celebrated the way in which pedestrianism weaves together the life of the city, and Nigel Thift's application of de Certeau to automobility two decades later, in 'Driving in the City' (2004), the space exists within which to articulate a project in a similar vein, that of 'Biking in the City'. As between the car and driver, a similarly hybridized relationship occurs between the human body and the bicycle. The body adapts itself to the bicycle and learns to work the pedals, gears and brakes, after first acquiring a sense of balance atop the bicycle that, as the cliché goes, one never forgets.

In addition, and in contrast to the enclosed automobility described above, the experience of cycling in the city is characterized by the sensation of immediacy, of being immersed in the sights, sounds, smells and other immediate sensations of the urban environment. Many accounts of urban cycling report a

heightened attenuation to the micro-climates and topographies of what was formerly perceived or experienced as a relatively homogenous and continuous built environment (see, for example, Petersen, 2004). Cycling in the city allows for the gaining of an intimate understanding and experience of the micro-topographies of urban space, becoming more aware of and more directly experiencing the contours of the urban landscape, as well as its microclimates. As Jen Petersen relates, “I had the physiological experience – via leg fatigue – of a sprawling urbanity. . . I relished my first-ever metaphorical feel of distance between city and my native suburb – a chasm I had previously conceived of in monotonous highway miles” (Petersen, 4). Being entirely self-propelled, one becomes acutely aware of both the gentle and not-so-subtle grades of each stretch of road, as well as of the paving conditions of each street. The activity of traversing this distance under human power transfers this knowledge of spatial scale and distance into a direct, corporeal understanding of the urban landscape, one that has been experienced and lived in a manner not possible by either automobile or foot. Navigating a space transforms it into a ‘place’ that is meaningful to the individual. Thus a knowledge of the city is built up around what routes provide the most optimal combination of road condition, degrees of grading or hills to avoid or use to one’s advantage. This shared understanding of urban micro-topographies is often a common basis of conversation among urban cyclists. The cyclist’s cognitive map of the city is one that is fluid and continuous, at once more human-scaled than that of the purely automobile-bound and more encompassing and ranging further afield than that of the pedestrian.

The commuter cyclist moves through the city at a slower speed than the automobile, but at a pace still quicker than the fastest hurried stride of the pedestrian. At the same time, however, urban cycling allows for the more immediate, immersive experience of the surrounding environment. Urban cyclists are essentially at rest upon the seat of the bicycle while traversing the streetscape, particularly after having achieved a comfortable cruising or coasting speed requiring little additional physical effort or exertion, maintaining a kind of stillness in motion similar to the motorist sitting more or less comfortably in his or her vehicle and looking out through the frame of the windshield.

Paul Fournel, a writer and long-time amateur racing enthusiast who trains in the French countryside but also commutes around Paris, manages to be both gently boastful and wryly candid about the need to remain alert: “I get around about as fast as a city bus, and I cover about fifteen hundred kilometers a year... It helps to have eyes all around your head and new brakes” (Fournel, 2001, 44). This speaks to the fact that cycling in the city as transportation remains a perilous endeavour and requires the cyclist to remain in a primarily defensive orientation towards the world. Fournel’s description of ‘bike speed’, however, appears a bit more ideal and leisurely than the pace usually set by North American urban cyclists: “Bike speed requires you to be selective about what you see, to reconstruct what you sense. In that way you get to the essential. Your gaze brushes over the title of a book or a cover, a newspaper catches your eye, you glimpse a potential gift in a window, a new bread in a bakery. That’s the proper speed of my gaze. It’s a writer’s speed, a speed that filters and does a

preliminary selection” (44-45). Fournel points towards a style or mode of being-in-the-world on a bicycle that is receptive to the fleeting glimpses and impressions, those fragments of the urban fabric that contribute to personal narrative.

Further, and in contrast to the phenomenology of automobility, the ‘micro-politics’ of velomobility contributes to a different political sensibility and approach to the spaces of the city. Freed from many of the constraints and directives engineered into the road system to direct optimal vehicular traffic flow along main thoroughfares and discourage certain routes and pathways through no-left-turn directives, one-way-only streets, boulevards or concrete barriers down the middle of roadways to discourage changing direction except at intersections and the like, the urban cyclist is less likely to view navigating the geography of the city as stressful in itself, as the ability to craft the most advantageous route using the resource of open road-space and options to navigate are not as scarce as they appear from behind the wheel of a car. Maintaining ‘flow’ while cycling also requires deft, elegant and often graceful manoeuvres, spontaneous shifts and adjustments in trajectories that at its best can take on the qualities of a dance with pedestrians, other cyclists and elements of the streetscape, a cooperative element that may inform and point the way to a more harmonious sensibility and engagement with the built environment and other inhabitants of the city.

As Fournel’s account suggests, the speed of cycling combined with its immersive aspect allows for a more meditative and reflective pace, one that allows the cyclist to both engage more immediately with the spaces through

which he or she is travelling while also ranging over a wider area than as a pedestrian. And as Petersen describes, experiencing various neighbourhoods and areas of the city that may be geographically continuous but economically and sociologically disrupted in a manner more directly exposed to the social and built environment than one would be navigating through in a car can allow the cyclist a more holistic and empathetic perspective on issues such as homelessness and stark economic inequalities that are present in every major city, but more easily ignored from within the enclosed compartment of the private automobile.

3.3.2 **Liminality and the 'Invisibility' of the Urban Cyclist**

Urban cyclists often comment upon their lived experience of liminality, the 'in-betweenness' of not being a car nor a pedestrian, and their relative 'invisibility' while upon the bicycle on roads designed primarily for automobility in urban areas. "Lines and signs marked the street lanes explicitly for automobiles," Travis Culley notes. "The pedestrians were sanctioned to cross inside carefully drawn white lines. I was somewhere in between, unsure of which directions to follow" (Culley, 2001, 76). Sociologist Jeffery Kidder describes it similarly: "bicycles must ride in a liminal space – the shoulder of the road - a space suitable for neither car nor pedestrian" (Kidder, 2005, 351-2). Bike messengers, for their part, work this liminality and take it to its logical (and to outsider observers, seemingly dangerous), extreme: "Forced into a liminal zone, [messengers] have the freedom to manoeuvre anywhere their bikes can fit" (Kidder, 352).

This experience of liminality results in “sometimes violent spatial competition” between motorists and cyclists (Petersen, 3). The “visceral experience of anger, frustration and impatience,” and quite often outright hostility from drivers of automobiles, as Petersen describes it, is a very real element of urban cycling in a dense, built environment. This sense of being socially unwelcome on the road contributes to the sensation of physical intimidation felt by sharing the road with larger, faster-moving vehicles. Culley, a bike messenger, imparts this viscerality and the cyclist’s initial reaction with vivid description: “As a truck passed me and its wind pulled my hair, shook my cheeks, and rattled the ribs in my chest, I turned on myself and said, *You don’t belong here! No one does! This landscape is not human*” (119). The perception of risk, that one is ‘taking one’s life into one’s own hands’, is a commonly-cited barrier to even attempting to take up urban cycling for commuting or utilitarian purposes (see, for example, Teschke, 2006).

Thus a certain amount of stubborn persistence or commitment in the face of discomfort appears necessary to overcome the initial learning curve of how to engage and interact with vehicular traffic in contemporary North American urban environments. “[T]he urban cyclist develops intimate knowledge of physical impediments to movement by such a vulnerable mode – traffic patterns, poorly maintained asphalt, narrow shoulders, and bad air quality,” among other discouraging factors and constraints (Petersen, 3). Yet despite these deterrents, the ‘freedom’ or rewards of urban cycling are usually framed relative to the

system of automobility, in particular how the bicycle allows one to 'sail through' vehicular traffic congestion.

While primarily concerned with imparting the perspective of a messenger, Travis Culley's description of how being on a bicycle in the urban environment is an experience that is at once immediate and richly immersed in the world applies to any urban cyclist. He details how the unique spatiality of cycling allows for a much greater stream of situated yet mobile perceptual information than is available when within an automobile:

A cyclist works with a much more open sense of immediate space than a driver does. He[sic] has at least 330 degrees of unobstructed vision (looking forward, tilting the head left and right) and about 720 degrees of hearing (two ears, tilted left and right). As I glance down a street and see a white truck with a red bumper, my eye sees the truck first. It doesn't need to register the parts of the truck, the windshield, the white grille, and the red bumper, to understand that a truck is coming. I see wholes, even at the highest speeds I can reach. (Culley, 164)

This kind of almost hyper-attunement to the surrounding environment is both exhilarating in its immersive aspect and necessary as defensive adaptation, as Culley's account itself suggests. Exposed to the elements and situated upon the roadscape alongside vehicular traffic, the bravest, or perhaps just the most foolhardy, North American urban cyclists experience the diversity and phenomenological richness of the continent's major urban centres in a unique and compelling way.

3.4 Conclusion

What this descriptive comparison of the phenomenologies of automobility and velomobility allows us to understand is the degree to which the often contrasting character of everyday experience between these two modes of mobility makes for an inability to clearly articulate ones' own perspective, and understand others', regarding use of the road space – an 'empathy gap' that is difficult to overcome. Often this is cause for frustration, conflict and mutual hostility between car-drivers and urban cyclists.

The descriptive phenomenology outlined in this chapter suggests that the quotidian experience of automobility only reinforces the broader overall trend of the past few decades of neo-liberalism towards privatizing public space. The difficulties cycling advocates face are compounded by the fact that they must engage with and modify the shared phenomenological experience of enclosed personal mobility as it is enacted daily by millions of North Americans. The design of large areas of the urban and exurban environment to favour – and indeed, require – automobility, only serves to exacerbate this phenomenological disconnection.

One proactive route in which cycling advocates can connect their experiences as cyclists into the policy and planning realms would be to take local municipal planners and decision-makers on regular rides intended as functional transportation. By riding with experienced commuter cyclists on established 'bike lanes', which are usually just painted lanes located between faster-moving vehicular traffic on one side and parked cars on the other, this could be a way to

bridge the gap between differing phenomenological worlds and perhaps allow for the shared knowledge of urban cyclists to be brought into the planning process. At the least, the inadequacy of current facilities and the need for dedicated, separated bike lane infrastructure may be better appreciated.

It is in this radical democratic spirit of bending policy to lived spatial practice, rather than the other way around, that we next turn to the specific case of the Congress for a New Urbanism movement, a progressive-minded coalition of architects and urban planners, and their response to the planning and design rationale of the modernist and post-war period that induced car-oriented sprawl. In many ways, the New Urbanist movement illustrates the difficulty in counteracting the interlocking interests of top-down municipal planning with profit-driven and regulation-adverse developers and building contractors that serve to favour and perpetuate untrammelled, low-density development.

Building upon the discussion in the first chapter of the production of social space and the role of the planning profession in reinforcing the spatialization of the state and capital, a summary and critique of their approach to creating more human-scaled and less car-centric communities will illuminate the difficulties involved in attempting to 'solve' the current problem of hyper-automobility purely through the technical fixes and applications of the urban planning profession, and will inform subsequent discussion in future chapters regarding the social effects of the suburban form and the cultural intractability of the automobile.

4: 'AUTO-SPACE' AND THE NEW URBANISM

4.1 Introduction

As the descriptive accounts of automobility and velomobility detailed in the previous chapter illustrate, automobility has been inscribed into the urban landscape and the public spaces of North America. Broader socio-spatial relations of power are enacted through everyday lived experience, as evidenced by how urban cycling is not actively planned for or acknowledged as a meaningful mode of functional transportation by many urban planners. At best, the token amount of public space that it is allocated only serves to underline how cycling for utility is generally an afterthought in North American urban planning ideology.

Making velomobility practical, and practicable, in societies beholden to the system of automobility requires that settlement areas are developed at a human-scaled density, which in its turn makes it easier to rely upon more sociable and ecological modes of transportation. Using the bicycle as the measure of the city allows for medium-density planning at the regional or bio-regional scale that can be both more human-scaled than auto-centric sprawl, yet less intensively concentrated and dense with perhaps more green space than a pedestrian-only oriented city would dictate. Most distances under five kilometres can be comfortably cycled in a fifteen to twenty minute ride, a distance and range that encompasses much of the area of a compactly-designed big city and also,

perhaps not coincidentally, representing the distance of almost half of all daily car trips (Statistics Canada, 2007).

The majority of the population may not desire to range far and wide for the basic necessities of home, work and play, but the spatial patterns of settlement in post-war North America have created a culture of extreme dependency on the automobile for most of everyday life conducted outside of the immediate downtown urban cores. This 'auto-space' is a manifestation, in Lefebvrian terms, of the abstract, conceived space of urban planning professionals, both the outcome of a certain market logic and the imposition of a specialized rationality that combine to create a space where land uses are separated out into different areas for living, working and playing, which in this auto-centric schema has been mainly reduced to shopping and the consumption of goods.

After a brief section outlining the rise of hyper-automobility, the 'placeless places' and sameness of 'auto-space', I spend much of this chapter summarizing and critiquing the thinking that underlies the philosophy of the Congress for a New Urbanism, a newer approach to urban planning and architectural practice that has gained much ground in North American planning circles over the past two decades. While the New Urbanists' populist brand of progressive reformation of the urban form is largely on target in identifying the spread of car-dependent sprawl as the largest cause of the concurrent decline in sociable, civic public spaces, their prescriptions do not stray too far away from top-down decision-making planning processes that fail to fundamentally challenge and indeed ultimately replicate the status quo, oriented as they are mainly towards the

specialized and technocratic concerns that they themselves criticize as contributing to the current situation.

Working within the market-oriented system of capital and resource allocation, the New Urbanist movement gained prominence and support in the eighties and early nineties by advocating a more compact reconfiguration of the urban form, where the sites of work, school, shopping and play are mixed together once more instead of segregated by use. “The problem,” as the New Urbanists understand it, “is not one of architecture but of community planning, and as long as we continue to create places where walking, biking, and transit are pointless, we will continue to exacerbate the middle-class housing crisis” (Duany, et al., 2000, 57). Critically examining the New Urbanist approach will help us to understand the difficulties in dislodging the socio-spatial entrenchment of automobility within our society, and the degree to which cultural perceptions and patterns of movement can or should be modified by centralized urban planning.

4.2 Hyper-Automobility and ‘Auto-Space’

The excesses of low-density spatial patterns of settlement and the extreme dependency on the automobile for most of everyday life conducted outside of the immediate downtown urban cores has given rise to a new term: ‘hyper-automobility’ (Freund and Martin, 2004, 2007). Hyper-automobility, as Freund and Martin define it, is the emergence over the last couple of decades of “a new level of individualized and intensified daily transport ... associated with a social organization of settlement space characterized by geographically

expansive sprawl” that favours car use over other modes of mobility, and one that perpetuates the fragmented and decentralised spatial arrangements of North American cities, further extending and naturalizing the ideology of automobility (2004, 37). This auto-intensive space is built upon publicly-subsided infrastructure which allows the exurban and suburban fringes to attract capital investment through opening up the ‘accessibility’, at least by automobile, of relatively cheaper land, and made more attractive by lower municipal property taxes than in the central cities.

On a qualitative level, one disorienting effect of this facilitation of auto-centric exurban development is the creation of ‘placeless places’ which carry a certain sameness to their feel (Freund and Martin, 1993, 104-7). The freeway itself is a liminal non-place, an ‘in-between’ space where magnitude is measured in time rather than distance, as the space being traversed loses any sense of ‘place-ness’ and becomes reduced to its duration. The structure of auto space includes sixteen and twenty-four lane freeways that act as severances and ‘dead’, transit-only spaces, spatially fragmenting neighbours and physically inhibiting community cohesion, as well as supporting service infrastructure and facilities, including parking and gas stations, that “have come to constitute the principal material for the built environments of urban areas” (Freund and Martin, 1993, 111). This kind of homogenized anonymity has also inscribed itself on the North American landscape in such built forms as the highway motel, situated at interstate coverleafs and the outskirts of towns.

This domestic infrastructure is further and thoroughly interlinked with regional freeways and interstate and transnational highways, connecting it to larger flows of commerce and intranational migration. The costs of maintenance and upkeep for this system of automobility is externalised to the public, subsidised by government at every level, yet integral and vital to the facilitation of intra- and trans-continental trade. The far-flung and decentralized processes of production involved in economic globalisation are predicated on cheap oil and its availability, which makes transportation costs for consumer goods manufactured in Asia for the North American and European markets economically viable.

In North America, exurban sprawl and the attendant decline of the central city is a further domestic outcome of this process, as Freund and Martin note. The “fixity of Fordist production is replaced by the impermanence and fluidity of flexible production”, as the ‘outsourcing’ of creative or light-industrial production to the exurban or suburban fringes mirrors that of the move of heavier and more labour-intensive forms to the Third World” (Freund and Martin, 1993, 115). The logic of capitalist ‘flexible accumulation’ itself pushes auto-space inexorably outwards, constantly seeking lower costs by acquiring vast tracts of cheaper land on the outskirts where local municipalities may even subsidise infrastructure costs and give breaks on property taxes in order to attract such investment. This space is thus also the outcome of certain social relations between the state and capital, the result of which may seem inexorable to this technocratic and profit-driven logic, but which also makes for vast swathes of inhabited areas which contribute little to our social, cultural or aesthetic lives.

The New Urbanist collection of architects and urban planning practitioners take auto-space as their starting point and attempt to work through and within this system of mutual inter-linkages between municipal and regional governments, subdivision developers, contractors and construction firms, to push for a different kind of rationality which seeks to create medium-density, mixed-use developments that are pedestrian and cyclist-friendly – in short, popular, desirable places to live. Yet, as we shall see, the New Urbanism has as its ultimate drawback the same flaw as other technocratic planning systems, that of a centralized and anti-democratic approach which fails to fully appreciate and respect actual spatial practices and undermines the full civic character of the lived space they seek to create.

4.3 **A Critique of Urban Planners: The New Urbanism 'Movement'**

Suburban Nation (2000), written by Andres Duany and his partner Elizabeth Plater-Zybeck, the principal founders of DPZ, one of the leading New Urbanist planning firms and a major practitioner of New Urbanist thought and practice, is cognizant in its condemnation of the technocratic approach to town and city planning that has led to the traffic-congested, low-density aesthetic blight that is the highly resource-intensive sprawl surrounding, and increasingly supplanting, the urban centres of North America. Recognising the centrality of the relationship between transportation and land use, that “settlement patterns depend more than anything else upon transportation systems” (Duany, et al.,

2000, 85), they advocate for better design that both allows for and makes people want to inhabit the civic, public spaces of their neighbourhoods.

In the contemporary metropolis, social functions of work, consumption, play and family or home life are fragmented and decentred, separated out and arranged on a car-scaled spatial form. One of the main tenets of the New Urbanist movement of planners and architects is that new development should be built around the concept of the 'five minute walk', which means that most dwellings are roughly within one kilometre of the town centre, and eliminate the 'one car, one adult' auto-dependent structure of the suburban form (Duany, et al., 2000, 15). They also understand that the system of automobility is heavily subsidized, public highway infrastructure being perhaps the clearest example of the close relationship between state and capital in North America. As Manuel Castells observed, "state investment in the built environment is always done with private capital, either by subsidizing industry to make it more competitive, or by assuring a certain framework of organization for the mobilization of capital through financial/functional aid so private interests can amplify their ability to accumulate capital" (in Gottdiener, 1985, 137). Facilitating and normalizing high levels of car use over time has shifted social wealth from more publicly owned and managed modes of transport such as rail transit, streetcars and bus lines to the personal automobile. Mass public transportation is very rarely profitable, as it requires continuous mass transfusions of capital resources for maintenance and upgrades to the system. In this context, the bicycle emerges as a mode of transport that requires both relatively little investment in terms of public capital

funds as well as being a relatively small personal transportation investment compared to the automobile (Carlsson, 1993).

4.3.1 **The New Urbanists and the Codification of the Nature/Culture Dialectic**

The current paradigm of low-density suburban development and sprawl creates built spaces that both lack the cultural vibrancy and amenities of urbanity at the same time that they destroy the very charms of rurality and the countryside those 'escaping' the city claim to desire. 'Urbanity' and 'cosmopolitanism' are synonyms for social knowledge and cultural sophistication; the spaces of greatest human density are, perhaps not surprisingly, also usually the sites of greatest social diversity and cultural creativity. At the same time, it is necessary to preserve wilderness and rural areas from development in order to protect and foster natural ecosystems and ecological diversity.

To its credit, the New Urbanist design philosophy understands that what replaces nature must be a place of culture (Duany, 2002). Somewhat paradoxically, however, they believe that complexity and change can be carefully planned for and managed. "Variety" in the built environment, according to Duany and Plater-Zybeck, "is achieved not through natural selection but through careful programming" (Duany, et al., 2000, 169). Duany and Plater-Zyberk's planning firm, DPZ, has developed an entire coding system of transects that allocates design elements by their context, ranging from the almost untouched 'rural' on one end to the dense core of the 'urban' at the other (Duany, 2002, 251-253). Intended to be implemented at the town or regional planning level, DPZ's

SmartCode system of zoning codes and bylaws manages every conceivable design element, from the size, look and feel of streetlamps to the width of sidewalks, to building frontage relative to the street. As a result, one of the popular criticisms of New Urbanism is that they create 'urban'-seeming spaces that seem too carefully managed and sanitised.

4.3.2 **New Urbanism, Urban Planning and Democracy**

The New Urbanists recognize that in the system of automobility “the prevailing relationship is competitive”, as once one gets behind the wheel of a car, one “ceases to be a citizen and becomes instead a *motorist*”, a perspective which privileges private space over the public sphere, seeing oneself as struggling against fellow commuters for the scarce resource of a more advantageous position on the roadway (Duany, et al., 2000, 60-61). This individualistic orientation extends itself into decision-making processes regarding the community at large, where the economism of ‘rational self-interest’ which informs the desire to keep one’s own property values healthy often means opposing any new growth at all, but particularly affordable housing or increased density initiatives. This appears contrary to the progressive potential of municipal politics, which lies in its ability to be more directly responsive to and reflective of people’s concerns, and indeed to be the site of intervention into the ‘mundane’ components of everyday life that is expressive of larger, shared desires.

Certainly, parochial self-interests and ‘NIMBYism’ are always potential barriers to change, often ignored or downplayed in more positive, celebratory

conceptions of 'community'. But the New Urbanist belief that one can plan and build 'community' top-down, largely determined through the spatial form, is an example of how even enlightened and well-meaning progressive planners still further an anti-democratic strain of thought in presenting a vision of rationalized space to the people who actually live, work and play there. While the New Urbanist's prescriptions for fixing the built form include planning with public participation, which "should include community design workshops, citizen's advisory committees, ...and an ongoing feedback process," Duany and his co-authors also find it "painful but necessary to acknowledge that the public process . . . seems to produce the *wrong* results", that is, ones which are contrary to what New Urbanist planners and architects would like to see put in place, and therefore "decision-makers must rely on something above and beyond process": their own principles (Duany, et al., 2000, 226).

Statements such as "we shape our cities and our cities shape us" (Duany, et al., 2000, 83), lead one to believe that the 'we' in the first half of the sentence is the 'us' of the latter half, the citizen, or the population in general; however, it becomes evident throughout that the first pronoun is being more accurately defined by Duany and his co-authors as the narrower 'we' of the planning profession to which they themselves belong. This is further illustrated in their contention that "there are essentially only three tools for manipulating the physical environment: design, policy, and management" (Duany, et al., 2000, 216). Participation in local decision-making needs to come from the people who actually inhabit the places they discuss to be truly meaningful. Instead, decision-

making is performed through top-down management, reallocated to merchants' associations and regional or district authorities.

4.4 Bringing the Experience of Velomobility into Urban Planning Policy

Caroline Andrew approaches this issue of who gets to make decisions about the production of social space in the context of municipal amalgamation in major Canadian urban centres over the past decade, noting that “municipal politics deals with the issues of daily life and therefore with issues that ordinary people understand; in many cases they know that they have knowledge about these issues. For this reason it is a terrain where conflict about knowledge and the ‘knowers’ can be more easily engaged and where technical expertise and technical experts can be challenged. . . an arena where lived experience can make an important claim to be listened to” (Andrew in Clement and Vosko, 2003, 313). Yet often democratic participation in local decision-making processes requires the patience, skills and ability for the kind of procedural discourse that is the setting of much of educated, bureaucratic, academic or professional life. Many of the knowledges that prove useful at the micro-level of the everyday life of the city, however, do not get articulated within these processes. ‘Solutions’ to sprawl and auto-centricity come from modifying the manuals of transportation engineers to allow for the technocratic application of abstracted pedestrian- and cycling-‘friendly’ design, for example, rather than directly soliciting the everyday experience of pedestrians or cyclists such as through safety audits which would identify necessary and radical restructuring of existing infrastructure.

Andrew's discussion of women's safety audits, for example, which bring women's lived experiences of urban spaces as expert knowledge into the planning and policy discussions (Andrews in Clements and Vosko, 2003, 324-8), describes an initiative that could well be adopted by urban cyclists. As explored in the previous chapter, the one thing that urban cyclists experientially hold in common is a shared knowledge of the micro-topographies of the urban landscape they inhabit. Mandating that the everyday experience of cyclists be brought into urban planning policy would necessitate that the particular needs of velomobility be met by the re-design of street infrastructure from the perspective of one on the seat of a bicycle, rather than mainly from behind the wheel of a car, or, as is too often the case with architectural design, from the abstracted 'bird's eye' perspective of a planner or engineer sitting at the drafting table. Even the ostensibly progressive ambitions of the New Urbanists to re-create a more compact reconfiguration of the urban form through medium-density, mixed-use development impose a certain centralized version of what would be considered 'bike-friendly' planning.

The centrality of the moving body and the modes it uses to experience the world means that planners and architects must have awareness of the unique requirements of velomobility. This means that urban planners must also be urban cyclists, or at the least have enough experience with velomobility to imagine themselves attempting to cycle functionally and comfortably through the spaces they are planning. Imagining themselves atop the seat of a bicycle, the need for continuous and separated pathways would become acutely apparent. Truly

prioritising velomobility would also require designing such infrastructure for an optimal cycling speed that can be comfortably reached by the broad majority of the population, including mothers and fathers with small children in tow or accompanying alongside, the elderly, and indeed the young children themselves getting to school.

The immersive nature of velomobility allows one the ability to scan the surrounding environs as one cruises, unlike the demands placed upon the car-driver who must always remain attentive to the road directly ahead. Actively facilitating this slower pace would necessitate subordinating the speed of vehicular traffic flow, and even interrupting it more frequently where it intersects with cycling routes in favour of the latter, precisely the reverse of current traffic engineering and urban infrastructure design. All of these reconfigurations to the urban form, however, require that the lived experience of cycling as a spatial practice and functional mode of mobility be integrated into every level of the urban planning process.

4.5 Conclusion

Urban planners, despite the fact that many may have sincere, progressive intentions, cannot help but to serve as an ideological mask that allows people to believe that the interlocking and intersecting interests of investment and development capital and the state represent the public interest, when it may be more accurate to say that their task is to make the desired outcomes of these interests palpable, at the least, to the general populace. Even at the practitioner level, the many specialised professions and different financial and social interests

that are involved in the planning and creation of the built landscape often means that there is no real 'organic' connection between the developers and contractors who among them variously specialize in the construction of the roads, the buildings, and the very landscape that becomes the inhabited daily spaces of many others.

The often Byzantine nature and abstract rationality of zoning by-laws, and the demands of returns on investment by the marketplace, interlock with the rarified areas of expertise of disparate specialists to create a "unified theory" that works against even the moderately reformist ambitions of the New Urbanists; as Duany and Plater-Zybeck themselves eventually come to admit, "there is evidence everywhere that what is assumed to be a neutral, market-oriented and technocratic system is, actually, heavily biased toward a certain model" (Duany, 2002, 1-2). This model favours low-density growth which entails sprawl on the periphery of existing population centres, as costs for land and new construction materials are cheaper than attempting to in-fill already developed areas or retrofit existing structures. Real estate developers depend heavily upon lending institutions and financial investors, such as banks and pension funds, looking for safe, relatively low-risk but well-yielding investments, and single-family detached homes provide steady revenue streams over two or three decades in each case, in the form of interest payments on mortgages that over the amortization period ends up being close or equal to the original listing price of the house. Thus, strong political economic and cultural pressures intersect to encourage mass single-family homeownership, underpinning the suburban political culture of

individualism and privatization, and the social effects of the suburban form and this apparent cultural intractability of the automobile.

Considering the struggles of New Urbanist practitioners to implement even moderately progressive urban planning and design principles into the North American form highlights the difficulty of managing auto-centric sprawl as well as the role of the planning profession in reinforcing the spatialization of the state and capital. While their goal of creating more walkable and bikeable communities is certainly a step in the right direction, attempting to 'solve' the current problem of hyper-automobility purely through the technical fixes and applications of the urban planning profession reveals the inherently anti-democratic strain of thought informing such centralized attempts to 'rationalise' the built environment, even if it is in service of such ostensibly populist visions.

5: THE INTEGRITY OF THE AUTOMOBILE TO SUBURBAN CULTURE

5.1 Introduction

The manner in which the car has become a ubiquitous and wholly unremarkable feature of the North American landscape allows one to speak of a 'politics' or 'ideology' of automobility (see, for example, Urry, 2007, p. 130-134; and Freund and Martin, 1993, esp. Pt. II). When one considers that 70 - 80% of all daily trips in North American cities are taken by private automobile (Statscan, 2005; Pucher and Buehler, 2006), it easily can be said that the automobile has become the paradigmatic mode of mobility in the postwar period. The 'car culture' of low-density auto-space being seemingly difficult to extricate from official planning policies, as we have seen in the last chapter, our attention turns to the possibility that this state of affairs is indeed perhaps desirable for those who settle in suburban, auto-dependent areas.

A number of cultural and socio-political factors are at play here, not the least of which is the understandable desire to provide a safe, stable and secure home for raising one's children, preferably through private homeownership. The 'domestic ethics of care', to adopt Sheller's (2004) term, refers to the way in which the maintenance of suburban social and familial networks 'trump' ecological and social concerns about the detrimental effects of pollution, congestion and sprawl. This 'micro-politics' figures largely in underpinning the *de*

facto social order of the suburbs, where the private sphere extends into and interacts only uncomfortably with auto-dependent public space, and finds its political expression and resonance in buzzwords such as ‘family values’ and ‘law and order’.

Suburban perception and fear of the city as the locus of property theft, muggings, shootings and other violent crime, in combination with the ambition to participate in the capitalist promise of mass home-ownership, has created a reactionary suburban culture in the eyes of many observers (see, for example, Dale, 1999; Frank, 2004; Walks, 2005). This suburban culture, according to these commentators and others, is socially and fiscally conservative, and “tax-weary” from supporting social programs that are presumed to be mostly utilized in the distant urban core. Appeals to ‘common sense’ moral values, most particularly by highlighting tough-on-crime ‘law and order’ initiatives, resonate with this constituency and factor in their political mobilization by conservative politicians. The particulars vary slightly, but the template utilized by hard-right politicians remains largely the same, so that the Harris Tories of mid-90s Ontario harnessed a latent and ugly, but powerful strain of suburban resentment against welfare recipients in their rise to power, and Republicans in the United States mobilized the votes of evangelical Christians by hosting ballot initiatives against gay marriage and promising action on anti-abortion legislation (Dale, 1999, Frank, 2004).

But just how does the suburban pattern of spatial settlement and the use of the automobile as the dominant mode of transportation in suburbia factor into

the creation of a fearful and suspicious cultural politics, one that has become a reliable base of support for pro-business politicians wishing to further neo-liberal policies of deregulation and privatization (Frank, 2004, Walks, 2005)? What is the quotidian nature of this civil society that understands its social relationship to public space to an ever-increasing extent through the technology of the automobile and the experience of driving? Certainly, by designating as 'car cultures' the vast swathes of human habitation outside of major urban centres in Canada and the United States, we wish to call some attention to how the use of the automobile frames and structures patterns of movement, and everyday social behaviour more generally, in those areas, something that becomes 'invisible' or taken-for-granted when automobility is used to inhabit these suburban spaces. The use of the automobile in North America has become synonymous with a certain way of life, and personal investments in automobility are often 'irrational' in the sense that they are couched primarily in emotional investments and articulated, if at all, in those terms.

At the same time, these primarily qualitative experiences inform the 'micro-politics' that become the basis for participation in social and political life, informing the relationship between culture, in Williams' (1963) 'ordinary' sense, of the "whole way of life" of a society, and the political, as understood as the core principles and values that underpin attitudes and beliefs according to which that society should be organised. Importantly, culture is also often used in a narrower, more ethnographic sense to refer to the behaviours and beliefs of members of a social group, their "shared ways of looking at the world that provide meaning . . .

and help them interpret experience” (Wray, 2008, 97). The social content of culture is communicated through a variety of means, whether it be media such as music, literature or photography, or everyday objects and styles of dress, as well as social norms and behaviours, whenever one person interacts with another. Lefebvre’s understanding of the social production of space allows us to further recognize the implicit social and cultural codes spatially communicated through both the form and function of the built environment. The layout, design and placement of buildings and infrastructure, the space allocated for roadways, or the architectural features of storefronts are all material instances of culture. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology also allows us to understand the mobilities of the automobile and the bicycle, the mode which the moving body uses to traverse through the built environment as a critical dimension of situated experience and the interaction between individual perception and social reality.

Thus questions of mobility cut “to the heart of core questions about citizenship and contemporary civil society” (Miller, 2001, 15). The so-called ‘culture wars’, most pronounced in the United States but also picked up on by certain governments in Canada lie at this intersection of culture and politics, and indeed, of space and mobility as well. In this section I wish to draw a fuller picture or rendering of how this ‘micro-politics’ is rooted in the experience of automobility itself.

5.2 **Neo-liberalism and the Experience of Automobility**

As suggested in previous chapters, the phenomenology of automobility resonates with a neo-liberal and instrumentalist approach to the world in which

others are either barriers or instruments for our own gratification, contributing to an outlook which views life as a competition for scarce resources, such as the precious gap that opens up behind the rear bumper of the vehicle ahead and threatened by the driver in the next lane wishing to merge, or the valuable minutes shaven off one's commute that are the reward for aggressive driving behaviour. The limited opportunities for autonomous decision-making within automobility makes minor actions such as squeezing into the left-turning lane to be the last car to take a seconds-old advance 'green' appear as something one has 'won' back from an ostensibly impartial but frustrating system.

The experience of automobility also contributes to a preference for the privatized, the compartmentalized and the atomistic over the common, the communal and the shared. Privatized mobility becomes an important engine of economic growth while at the same requiring massive subsidies from the state. This is a characteristic feature of the neo-liberal relationship between the corporate sector and governmental jurisdictions, as the economic bailout of the North American auto industry by both federal governments in Canada and the United States in late 2008 and through early 2009 attested. The private automobile becomes another piece of personal property financed by credit and bank loans, and regulated and protected by the law and order apparatus of the state. The car-dependent suburbanite who demands lower property taxes and 'smaller government' is thus paradoxically the major maintainer of this economic and political status quo. The daily experience of automobility, where he or she competes against other drivers as consumers of scarce road-space and exerts

his or her individual autonomy in this limited manner contributes at one and the same time to the self-mythology of neo-liberalism, that of the rugged individual who by sheer force of entrepreneurial spirit wins out over others. The suburban driver who travels from home to work and back again through the book-ending experiences of the daily commute begins to not only view the house and the car as the two most intimate, domestic spaces of everyday life, but also starts to see them as individual accomplishments to be defended against the ever-encroaching intrusions of the state – the same state which enshrines the protection of these two major assets in private property rights.

5.3 Automobility and the Domestic Ethics of Care

As hyper-automobility progresses, a greater frequency of individual car trips are necessary in order to perform the essential social function integral to the maintenance of domestic and social networks. As Urry notes, “[i]n contemporary auto-dependent, decentralized and suburbanized residential patterns, regular access to an auto is necessary for social life within and between families” (Urry, 2007, 122). This contributes to a perspective that sees the public space of the roadway as existing primarily to enable the smooth facilitation of domestic errands, a space where conversations are limited to fellow passengers in the same vehicle, and life is lived privately. The car is experienced as a room where the driver often takes on the role of ‘host’, a domestic space with limited range of personal movement (Laurier et al., 2008).

The drawbacks and negative consequences and aspects of car-centred culture, particularly regarding the detrimental effects of congestion and emissions

on quality of life, are often readily acknowledged by car-users. However, as Sheller (2004) notes, concerns regarding greater ecological and sociological impacts are trumped by the more immediate needs and concerns of the familial network, which she terms the 'domestic ethics of care'. Due to the degree to which "cars have been deeply integrated into the affective networks of familial life and domestic spaces, as well as friendship networks and public sociability," they have become essential to the routine functioning of social life in car-configured built environments, and this makes it exceedingly difficult to reconcile the primacy of ensuring the personal and social mobility of one's own family with any concurrent sense of the ecological drawbacks of the personal automobile (Sheller, 2004, 229).

In his study with two small, in-depth discussion groups in Cambridge, England, Simon Maxwell (2001) draws out this ambivalence among some car-drivers, noting "a collective sense of unease about the increasing social and environmental problems associated with car use" that simultaneously "coexist[s] with positive meanings of car use embedded in social relations," which is often only articulated informally (Maxwell, 2001, 203). The two discussion groups of ten people, one consisting of parents of young children, and the other of people over fifty, suggested that there were varied social meanings connoted by their car use, as it was found that they undertook many car trips for the benefit of family members and others in their immediate social network. Driving a dependent, whether it be a child or an elderly grandparent, to an appointment or rendezvous was done as an expression or extension of caring, and also turned the car into a

social yet domestic space, allowing for private conversations that may not occur other than in this intimate, enclosed space.

As Urry points out, “[u]nlike ‘public’ transport, the car facilitates a domestic mode of dwelling and one in which there are many examples of giving and receiving lifts to others” (Urry, 2007, 128). The concurrent domesticization and privatization of transport gives rise to a ‘gift economy’ of ride-swapping, which constitutes an important but under-examined case of socially meaningful car use in car-dependent areas. For example, Alan Durning, founder of the Sightline Institute, a Pacific Northwest-based sustainability organization, learned that the automobile was vital to the ‘currency of parenting’ in the car-scaled suburbs when his family spent an entire year of their lives in the suburbs of Seattle without their own vehicle. Durning and his family came to realize that the social repercussions were more significant, and unforeseen, than the economic results or more specific effects on their daily routines (Durning, 2006).

Durning discovered that in giving each other’s children rides to and from soccer practices, birthday parties, and after-school events, a complicated social etiquette and ‘gift economy’ of ride-swapping existed among suburban parents. Thus at first, Durning and his family encountered the perception that they were ‘moochers’, free riders in a quite literal sense. Unable to participate in this social currency of swapping ride ‘favours’ with other parents, they were missing opportunities to build bonds of mutual reciprocity and trust, essential to community building. Durning reported that his family ultimately found other ways to reciprocate and maintain their ties with other families helping them with rides,

but this required a complicated social calculus and at first met with some awkwardness and estrangement.

The Durning family's experience amply illustrates the deep integration of the automobile into routine social life finds it essential to the maintenance of domestic networks, where attempting to live a 'normal' lifestyle without an automobile in car-scaled North America quickly meets with persistent expressions of concern or care from others, who may see a lack of a vehicle as indicative of financial hardship; or else it can meet with resentment or derision, if it is seen as stemming from a moral eschewing of the automobile. Being 'car-free' in auto-dependent or auto-intensive spaces can carry with it a significant social stigma that can seem insurmountable at first, and adversely affect certain of one's social bonds and community ties, while strengthening or opening up the possibility of yet others, as Durning also reported (Durning, 2006).

An awareness of the ecological and social externalities generated by personal car use becomes part of "a conflict between an ethics which is concerned with aggregate effects of personal action on the world at large and a morality that sees caring in terms of more immediate concerns such as one's partner and children. Thus the problem becomes one of whether we make a special car journey with adverse environmental effects because otherwise we feel we are exposing our children to discomfort or even danger" (Miller, 2001, 28). Transportation policy decision-makers need to be cognizant of these domestic ethics of care and the fervent desire of every parent to ensure the safety of their children, and design and promote public transportation with such

priorities in mind, in order to both reduce the number of ‘escort trips’ done by private automobile and promote more autonomous personal mobility among the next generation. As Maxwell argues, policy discussions have neglected the “positive social frames of meaning of car use associated with care and love for immediate others, as well as care for others within wider social networks” (Maxwell, 2001, 217–18).

Critiques, and critics, of car culture must recognize this understandable prioritisation of needs and empathise with the fact that the suburban parents may well be intelligently conflicted in desiring to improve their family’s overall health and quality of life, and even lessen their contribution to pollution and congestion impact on the planet, but also resigned to the fact that car-driving continues to be their most viable transportation option. The system of automobility has come to so thoroughly order and structure land use that one can seemingly only overcome it, ironically enough, by continuing to drive – further exacerbating the problem and leading to even greater overall levels of stress and frustration. Thus proposals to change the structure of automobility will continue to encounter political resistance from a stance or perspective that views such proposals as a threat to established networks of domestic care in the suburbs.

5.4 The Spatiality of the ‘Culture Wars’

As chauffeuring children around in the car-dependent suburbs becomes synonymous with providing for their safety, as well as becoming one of the few opportunities for ‘quality time’ spent within increasingly regimented and compartmentalized suburban lifestyles, it seems to create the inversion of

Raymond Williams' concept of 'mobile privatization', wherein "domesticity in industrial culture has always been linked to fantasies of being somewhere else while in the comforts of one's home" (Spigel in Silverstone, 1997, 225). Instead, one enjoys the comforts of domesticity, enacting or extending the practices of home, while actually being elsewhere, that is to say, in public space. But does this use of the automobile as an insulated, moving private room translate into a 'micro-politics' of enclosed, privatised mobility that in its turn predisposes one towards the stance and language of privatization and the free-market ethos? To what extent can we blame, or explain, the automobile as a factor in the "expectation of potential suburban support for political parties of the right" (Walks, 2005, 384), with their fiscally and socially conservative programmes of tax cuts, moralistic slashing of welfare programs in the name of 'individual responsibility', and enthusiasm for ever-more aggressive 'law and order' initiatives?

The combination of spatial dispersion and hyper-automobility which are the classic geographical characteristics of suburban sprawl also appears to create the conditions for the incubation of a fearful and "nasty-minded right-wing politics" that eschews or aggressively retreats from a communitarian approach to social issues in favour of a highly individualistic ethos that values private solutions (Andrew in Clement and Vosko, 2003, 320). Stephen Dale's *Lost in the Suburbs*, an in-depth comparative exploration of the York Region suburbs north of Toronto and the vast sprawl of Orange County outside of Los Angeles, details how the car-dependent infrastructure of these low-density, highly-privatised spaces breeds an aggrieved, mean-spirited type of citizen, one stressed by over-

long commutes and burdened by onerous mortgage payments. In its turn, Dale claims, this lifestyle leads to pessimism about the perceived value of government-funded services and infrastructure paid for through taxes, as well as a lack of sympathy for the poor and underprivileged (Dale, 1999). The cultural politics of suburbia are thus formed by two main factors: The combination of a high individual cost of living, no small part of which is the mandatory cost of a private automobile, and daily realities lived distant from the urban core, with its extremes of wealth and poverty, but also a greater overall cultural and socio-economic diversity.

The Harris Tories in Ontario in the mid-90s explicitly targeted the 'issues' of suburban Canadians, successfully capitalizing on a perceived "schism between urban and suburban values", their key image consultants told Dale (Dale, 1999, 108-9). Political strategist Rick Anderson suggested that this schism was based on a dynamic involving spatial and economic growth, one in which "entrepreneurial types... gravitate to the burbs" where the emphasis is on "making it grow' versus 'making it work'," the latter being the preoccupation of established urban centres looking to find solutions to social issues rather than displace them (Dale, 1999, 109). A focus on steady and constant growth makes for a natural affinity with capitalistic pro-market ideologies, and a pessimism and sense of resentment towards the government role of spending tax dollars on social services largely located in distant downtown cores. Thus the politics of the suburbs are increasingly mobilized by the fear of a wave of crime and violence surging out from the urban core, as well as the perception that one is carrying a

disproportionate share of the fiscal burden for such social ills, and motivated by a desire to insulate oneself from the social and economic costs of both.

Over a decade ago, Homi Bhabha noted that “[t]here is a culture war going on that seeks to ‘suburbanize’ the soul of America” (Bhabha in Silverstone, 1997, 298). Thomas Frank provides an excellent, lucid account of this ‘culture war’ in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (2004), where he explains how some of the poorest and most working-class of Americans have propelled and maintained pro-corporate, wealth-tax cutting Republicans in power at all levels of government. Frank contends that this occurs because it is culture, not economics that resonates with these voters as the key battleground upon which they seek social transformation. The conservative backlash, then, “mobilizes voters with explosive social issues” – as in the Harris Tories’ case, with the notion that those on the welfare rolls were living it up on the public taxpayer’s dime, or images of squeegee kids aggressively harassing ordinary, hard-working commuters stopped at intersections on their way back to their overleveraged houses in the suburbs after a long day working at a ‘real’ job – “which it then marries to pro-business economic policies” (Frank, 2004, 5). The concrete, material outcomes of this conservative movement, however, have been increasing disparities of wealth and years of record corporate profits throughout the nineties and early years of the 21st century, yet it continues to rather ingeniously “imagine itself as a foe of the elite, as the voice of the unfairly persecuted” (Frank, 2004, 6). As Frank describes it, Republican politicians appeal to suburbanites by campaigning on a hard-right, socially conservative platform to mobilize votes, then implementing a

fiscally-rigid regime of privatization and deregulation once in office that transfers and concentrates wealth upwards and further entrenches corporate control.

In Canada, this suburban shift towards more conservative attitudes is collaborated by Alan Walks' research on the spatial dispersion of political affinities (2005), which reinforces Dale's more anecdotal take regarding an ideological-political divide or 'cleavage' between the city and its suburbs in Canada, especially as expressed at the federal level. Walks notes a "clear pattern of increasing polarization," starting at the beginning of the eighties, "with the inner cities remaining to the left while the suburbs move ever further to the right of the rest of Canada" (Walks, 2005, 399). As Walks notes in his conclusion, the suburbs "appear to be maturing into a political force unto their own at the same time that they are diverging in their political values and party preferences" (2005, 408).

While Walks does not explicitly explore the spatial aspects of this apparent divergence of suburb and urban core, he does point to Dale's hypothesis that there is "something ubiquitous about suburban lifestyles that leads residents to adopt right-wing views" (Walks, 2005, 387). Even with higher average annual incomes in suburban municipalities than in many city neighbourhoods (Statscan, 2006), the greater privatization of the costs of living means that suburban households may feel as if they are working harder than others to maintain their quality of life. Car expenses are usually the single greatest household expenditure after mortgages, and cutting down or eliminating the family fleet completely often creates immediate domestic financial relief. Interestingly, Walks

notes that many commentators on the federal elections of the late 90s and early 2000s claimed that suburbanites in the Canadian context were merely “willing to overlook social conservatism in order to vote for tax cuts,” suggesting a persistent belief in a generally more egalitarian and social democratic bedrock to Canadian political values (Walks, 2005, 383).

The notion of a ‘culture war’ relies upon a more cultural notion of class, one that utilizes and attributes much meaning to objects of consumption as political signifiers, such as the type and brand of clothing one wears, the kind of food one eats or beverage consumed, the make and model of automobile, and even the breed of dog one prefers. This allows for what Frank terms the ‘latte libel’: “the suggestion that liberals are identifiable by their tastes and consumer preferences and that these tastes and preferences reveal the essential arrogance and foreignness of liberalism” (Frank, 2004, 16). Rather than asking whose economic interests the policies or platforms of each party would serve, a significant proportion of the American working- and middle-class population understands the things one consumes and where one resides as being more important than class in contextualizing political stances and affiliations. Thus, the ‘latte libel’ pits Red State domestic beer drinking, SUV-driving, rural and suburban dwellers against ‘Blue State’ espresso-sipping, bike-riding ‘elitist’ urbanites. Through this sociological stereotyping, car ownership and driving becomes yet another signifier in this Red State/Blue State ‘culture war’ rhetoric, with urban cycling an exclusive practice of the well-educated, urban elite.

As Frank amply illustrates throughout his book, it is not difficult to refute these perceptions with the available empirical evidence, and any attempt to apply such culture war rubrics to urban cycling as a signifier of elitist eschewing of automobility as the one true North American method of personal transportation also falls apart under closer scrutiny. In Vancouver, for example, a recent study of cycling in the city found that cyclists are slightly better educated, but have a slightly lower average annual income than the overall general population, hardly the profile of the affluent elite (Teschke, et al., 2006). In the United States itself, there are many populations who comprise the bulk of urban cyclists in a city or region, such as poor African-American and Latino youth, that certainly do not fit this perception of cyclists as educated, elite urban-dwellers (Furness, 2006). Yet even John Urry contributes to this narrative of transportation cultures, somewhat glibly characterizing those who live without a car as participating in a “significant lifestyle choice for both environmentalists and a small cosmopolitan elite able to live in expensively gentrified city-centres” (Urry, 2007, 132), ignoring the economic factors or that many - indeed, most - who struggle to live in the ‘gentrified’ city can hardly be counted among the numbers of any financial, cultural or social elite.

5.5 Conclusion

‘Car-drivers’, if identified as such, can represent a potentially powerful political constituency that municipal politicians are loathe to directly antagonize. When it comes to decisions regarding the allocation of resources for transportation, car-drivers are both the assumed and actual majority who both

benefit from and provide the rationale for development and planning policies of road expansion and low-density sprawl. Concerns about congestion increasingly become the normative stance from which political points about land use, community planning and population growth are argued. If public transit initiatives involve diverting significant amounts of transportation funding from road expansion and maintenance, for example, or when re-configuring a street to include a separated bike lane requires the removal of on-street parking, a firestorm of passionate opposition from local business organisations or ratepayer groups can be anticipated. The end result is often that such proposals to increase alternate modes of transportation do not even get past the planning stages, as 'car culture' perpetuates itself by reinforcing official planning policies with the everyday practices and conventions of the suburban form.

As John Urry notes, "It is only in thinking about what it would take to get people out of their cars that we can see the enormous transformations that automobility has wrought in the social organization of time, space and social life" (Urry, 2007, 131). If the goal is in fact to effect a significant reconfiguration of North American urban spaces and patterns of life, we need to boldly address and directly engage with the notion that the spatial practice of automobility, and the roadway as a communicative or cultural space, gives rise to a peculiar kind of civil society or cultural politics. If we concede that land use development and transportation planning are intrinsically intertwined, then we can begin to more clearly understand how cultures of transportation contribute to the political

cultures of both the densely urban city cores as well as suburbia, where an increasing majority of the North American population resides.

Challenges to this taken-for-grantedness of auto space, however, “will not be understood by those immersed in auto space and culture” (Freund and Martin, 1993, 94). Indeed, “the politics of automobility generates new forms of public protest and changing civil society’s repertoires of contestation” (Urry, 2007, 132), with the emergence of local, mostly community-based calls for ‘reclamation’ of public space often taking the form of explicit critiques of the system of automobility. It is to a consideration of the apparent emergence of urban ‘bike cultures’ in many major North American cities that we next turn, in particular the question of whether this phenomenon of an apparent increase in urban cycling is merely a sub-cultural trend or a social movement that seeks to affect a real change and shift in transportation behaviour.

6: THE EMERGENCE OF NORTH AMERICAN 'URBAN BIKE CULTURE'

6.1 Introduction

Often viewed in explicit counter-position to suburban-oriented 'car culture', the construction of collective identity around the bicycle in urban centres, and the notion that there are emerging 'bike cultures' in many major North American cities has been gaining increasing legitimacy in the popular media in recent years (Buchbinder, 2003; Walker, 2007; von Hahn, 2008; Reynolds, 2008). In an article in the Style section of the New York Times observing the popularity of bike messenger bags, Rob Walker noted that the products seem "connected to a more vague, but popular, notion of 'urban' cycling, which carries a whiff of progressive politics, creativity and preference for the outdoors, even a paved cityscape, to one of the Man's cubicles" (Walker, January 14, 2007). By the summer of 2008, even the Globe and Mail's pop culture columnist Karen von Hahn had noticed the stylish 'new' phenomenon of utilitarian urban cycling and asked, "can a form of transportation, no matter how popular, become anything near a culture?" (von Hahn, July 19, 2008). Bill Reynolds in a feature article in the June 2008 issue of the *Walrus* magazine points out that "[t]here is some momentum in urban Canada for mass engagement with the freedom of cycling, but it has [been] tempered by the law of the urban jungle", namely the dominance

of the automobile on urban roadways keeping the fear of getting hit a major deterrent to more widespread adoption of urban cycling (Reynolds, 2008).

The creation of micro or 'niche' media (Thornton, 1995) serving to self-define, disseminate and commodify 'bike culture' has also accelerated with various sub-cultural or urban cycling lifestyle magazines being launched in recent years, such as *Urban Velo* in Chicago (launched in May of 2007) and *Dandyhorse* in Toronto (launched in the summer of 2008). Most ambitious and notable is probably *Momentum*, a print and online magazine launched in Vancouver, BC in 2001 which describes itself on its masthead as "the magazine for self-propelled people", looking to reflect "the lives of people who ride bikes and [provide] urban cyclists with the inspiration, information, and resources to fully enjoy their riding experience and connect with local and global cycling communities" (*Momentum #40*, 2009). Over the past couple of years, *Momentum* has broadened its mandate to involve many of the public and civic space issues and concerns about urban planning that motivate this thesis, featuring articles on innovation in urban design and planning in various North American and other cities around the world, making the connection between the fostering of mobility or 'bike-ability' and broader developments in creating more livable cities overall.

Through exploring the limits of sub-cultural expression due to the necessity of the creation of in-groups and a 'constitutive other', I suggest here that the only way that Canada and the United States can develop 'bike cultures' in their downtown urban cores, and eventually outwards, is through the

normalization of urban cycling as a spatial practice and a mode of transportation experience. This means the level of 'phenomenological empathy' that car-drivers have for cyclists on the roads must greatly increase, but this will only occur if and when car-drivers shift their own behaviour to riding bikes as transportation for at least some of the time, as well. This apparent Catch-22 is the issue facing cycling and sustainable transportation advocates nationwide across both Canada and the United States (Pucher et al., 1999; Carlsson [ed.], 2002; Litman, 2004; Pucher and Buehler, 2006).

Recent thinking in social movement theory emphasises contingent victories fought and won by exploiting the 'cracks' and 'gaps' within the system of increasingly privatised and securitised urban space which has become thoroughly dominated and managed by neo-liberalism in the past three decades. At the same time, newer social movements attempt to maintain their political, economic, and socio-cultural autonomy by not making further economic demands on or concessions of the state, or otherwise consolidating, centralising or expanding their own power (for example Bey, 1991; Day, 2005; Holloway, 2005). In this specific context, the spatial practice of urban cycling itself as shared, lived experience is the shared ground or basis for a collectively imagined, 'bike-friendly' city. Interestingly, this point is somewhat complicated by the fact that when adoption of urban cycling becomes mainstreamed and normalized, as in the widely-celebrated example of the Netherlands and Amsterdam 'bike culture', non-participation in the practice is seen as a refusal of integration and cultural assimilation for newcomers such as African immigrants. In the Dutch context,

'bike culture' has proceeded to such an extent that it serves as a cultural marker of 'Dutch-ness', and *not* using a bicycle for utilitarian purposes is seen as a detrimental and possibly even anti-social practice. Problematically, this is all bound up in what appears to be larger currents of xenophobia in the larger context of racial politics in the Netherlands, and western Europe more generally. The point is that the bicycle is not a neutral object, but a social technology that is made to carry certain connotations and social meanings that shift according to cultural and geographical contexts.

Do the cultural dimensions of transportation matter at all in terms of transportation behaviour, and if so, what is the extent of the ability of any collectivity of urban cyclists to reimagine and restructure the city? Is it appropriate to correlate the lived experience of the 'spatial marginality', or the 'mobile liminality', of riding a bicycle in the city with the *social* marginality of other groups that have historically been disadvantaged? What political implications and consequences does construction of personal identity and collective meaning around the bicycle have, if any? Is the urban North American 'bike culture' phenomenon just another consumption-oriented subculture, or a genuine, if nascent, urban social movement? As we will discover in the ensuing chapter, answering these questions with any definitiveness will be difficult, but the engagement gives us the opportunity to explore the larger issue of what distinguishes transient, 'sub-cultural' currents from more inclusive and broadly participatory social movements, and to more clearly see that the building of sub-

cultural exclusivity around the bicycle is not the path to widespread mainstream adoption of urban cycling as a functional, utilitarian mode of transport.

6.2 'I Love My Bike': Personal and Collective Identity Construction around the Bicycle

Concurrent with the attention paid by popular media, academic treatments of urban 'bike culture' have increased in the past few years (cf. Furness, 2005; Horton, 2006; Wray, 2008). Within this literature, there is a tendency to view individuals and groups of urban cyclists as sub-cultural 'vanguards' "actively engaged in creating an alternative culture", that is to say, uniquely North American urban 'bike culture' (Wray, 2008, 97). Zach Furness' doctoral dissertation (2005) on the politics and counter-culture of the bicycle, for example, claims the existence of a "counter-culture' comprised of feminists, socialists, punks, anti-globalization activists, writers, environmentalists, and others who have created and developed a politics of cycling through a dialectic of communication and action" (Furness, 2005, iv). Harry Wray explores recent developments in advocacy for urban cycling infrastructure and public space in the United States, in *Pedal Power: The Quiet Rise of the Bicycle in American Public Life*, devoting entire chapters to profiling the personalities of cycling advocates (whom he terms 'bike eccentrics'); advocacy organizations such as the national League of American Bicyclists (LAB); and the regional Chicagoland Bicycle Federation (Wray, 2008). While focusing on the more formal politics of the bicycle (such as the establishment in the United States House of Representatives of the Congressional Bicycle Caucus by Oregon representative Earl Blumenauer),

rather than the more sociological and ethnographical approach of Furness, Wray also includes a chapter on the established bike cultures of Amsterdam and Copenhagen where he recognizes that the shared phenomenology of urban cycling does make for a different broader national culture in those countries.

Neither scholar, however, examines 'bike culture' through the lens of cultural studies or with references to the study of sub-cultures as developed by the Birmingham School, those scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The key work here is Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: the meaning of style* (1979), where sub-cultures are defined as "a resistant response to mainstream culture", a sociological division which represents "a solution to a particular problem or contradiction in dominant culture" (McArthur, 2009, 59). The Birmingham School focused on youth sub-cultures which coalesced around musical trends, such as punks and mods (Hebdige, 1979, Muggleton, 2000), and clubbers (Thornton, 1995). Here, however, we will explore how it is the bicycle that is used as the cultural object around which certain social groups in North American cities collect and define a sub-cultural style not strictly tied to a musical genre.

Sub-cultures, as more broadly defined by Woo, are "structured groups of people organised by communicative networks and with certain interests in common" (Woo, 2009, 29). As social networks of communication created around shared experiences and perceptions of a group, urban North American bike cultures differentiate themselves from the dominant mainstream culture through personal and collective expressions of affection for their bicycles both as vehicles

and aesthetic objects, and an adherence to the practice of urban cycling as both more pleasurable and preferable to car-driving, especially in the downtown core of the city. The membership of urban 'bike cultures' often coalesce around the monthly Critical Mass group rides, and can include bike messengers, young students and urban professionals who have adopted their stylistic elements such as fixed-gear track bikes, and commuter cycling advocates with more of a policy bent. It can be difficult to make meaningful distinctions between and within urban cycling sub-cultures and their social networks in North America, or generalize about the intentions or motivations of individuals, but some basic and persistent archetypes do emerge, and are even recognizable enough to provide fodder for tongue-in-cheek satire (see, for example, the "Field Guide to Vancouver Cyclists" in *Momentum* #29 [2007]).

The bicycle has long been touted as a means of transportation that enhances sociability and as a technology with an apparently inherent conviviality (Illich, 1974). Yet as it also facilitates a uniquely different character of experience of the phenomenal world for the perceptual body, the bicycle has come to hold much personal meaning for many of the individuals who use it as a means of transportation. For some it serves as a statement of individuality and uniqueness, while for others it expresses their views about consumptive limits and ecological sustainability (Walker, 2007; Reynolds, 2008). Personal narratives celebrating the bicycle and espousing its use usually emphasize its facilitation of individual autonomy, personal mobility and freedom of movement, as well as its quiet operation and relatively slight ecological impact (see, for example, Petersen,

2004; Pucher and Buehler, 2005; Reynolds, 2008; also Illich, 1974). The virtues of personal mobility and independence or ease of movement most often touted as the advantages of the bicycle as a mode of transport in the urban context, are the same as those claimed for the private automobile, while also claiming additional benefits such as the avoidance of traffic congestion and parking fees. This sense of personal independence and mobility engendered by the bicycle leads some to feel a personal relationship – a strong connection – with their bikes, analogous to that which some car-drivers have for their vehicles.

But is this creation of positive associations and values, even the feeling of 'love' for one's bicycle, not simply a classic reiteration of commodity fetishism, a substitution of one poetic-object for another? The bicycle is certainly a commodity object whose dissemination is almost entirely facilitated through the current dominant capitalism system of exchange. As Wray notes, "[i]n some ways the dominant culture seeks to domesticate the bike by turning it into one more variant of commodity fetishism;" yet, he goes on to claim, "most of those in the bike movement see it differently" (Wray, 78). The key to this claimed 'difference' has more to do with the often transformative effects in the character of urban experience that the spatial practice of urban cycling tends to engender, rather than anything about the bicycle itself as an object. Bob Silverman, in a tract written almost three decades ago, claimed that bicycles were a 'unique commodity', "not because of how they are made, marketed or advertised, but because of their capacity to change users' consciousness when conceived as daily urban transport" (Silverman [1980], in Antliff, 2004, 145). This need for the

shared perceptual world and 'unique' experience of urban cyclists to be recognized and articulated has only grown all the more acute over the ensuing decades since Silverman wrote.

Thus the claim of an inherent sociability or conviviality, in contrast to the socially alienating effects of car use, is difficult to defend or support by reference to the machine itself. Chris Carlsson, one of the co-founders of Critical Mass, acknowledged this well over a decade ago, noting that "today's bike advocates tend to view the bicycle as something that is inherently superior, that brings about social changes all by itself, endowing it with causal qualities that ought to be reserved for human beings. . . I greatly appreciate the bicycle for its functionality in short-circuiting dominant social relations, but let's not forget that it is merely another tool, and has no will of its own" (Carlsson, 1995).

Yet one frequently encounters this conflation of the spatial practice of cycling with the technology of the bicycle. Wray, for example, states that despite being "a very individualistic decision in our culture," the bicycle and cycling for transportation "deepens one's sense of connection to others", due to the phenomenological immediacy that one experiences while engaged in the practice of urban cycling (Wray, 79). This is a claim often made for cycling, but part of what contributes to the sense that one is part of a (presumably like-minded) bike 'community' or 'movement' is the relative visibility anyone riding a bike through the streets of a major North American city receives, due to the current marginality of the practice of urban cycling itself. At mode shares of less than 1% in most city centres (Pucher and Buehler, 2006), an urban cyclist is a rare enough figure to

be distinctive as an individual. Even if they do not self-identify as 'cyclist', many utilitarian riders may find that they are labeled as such by co-workers, neighbours, friends or acquaintances.

"How far this culture can be extended" is thus a question that Wray rightly asks (Wray, 80). While a sense of identification and emotional attachment to one's bicycle may accurately describe a small sub-set of urban cyclists, this may not be true for many or even most of those who currently cycle as a form of transportation. Thinking *about* the world 'largely in terms of the bike' is different from simply experiencing it *by* bicycle. The distinction is important, and is illustrated by the degree to which the bicycle as an object and urban cycling as a practice is called upon to contribute to personal and collective identity. In societies where a utilitarian 'culture' of bike use is much more widespread, such as in India, China, Vietnam, or indeed in Dutch and Danish society, thinking about the world 'in terms of the bicycle' is not a necessary requirement or precondition for quotidian use of the bicycle as a means of transportation.

The question also becomes whether it is truly appropriate to consider and discuss 'urban cyclists' in North America as a social group, analogous to systematically disadvantaged groups that have historically been oppressed due to essentialised characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. To return to Hebdige's definition of subcultures as a division or resistance in response to the dominant culture, much of the strength of the identity of 'cyclist' in North America relies heavily on its opposition to that of the 'motorist'. Beyond this, the more positive or generative construction of the term 'cyclist' in everyday

North American usage continues to connote images of younger, athletic Caucasian males as professional racers or bike messengers, or else older, bearded Caucasian men in brightly coloured or reflective windbreakers commuting to work. In Canada at least, rarely does the term evoke the sense that one is female, poor or a person of colour. At its most culturally and politically strident edges, urban bike culture has allowed for the articulation of queer-positivity and feminist values by some individuals, yet this is still based on a conception of a 'constitutive outside'. Individuals often still carry out the normative assumptions inherent in cultural whiteness, even as there exists conscious attempts to counter hetero-normativity, or dispel assertive masculinity.

All of this has the effect of making urban cycling seem both more exclusive and less desirable to those who do not. Cultural or social differentiation on the basis of one's means of transportation is problematic; if riding a bike in the city becomes widely viewed as joining a subculture of some kind, that will have an obvious effect on people's decisions to adopt it as a practice. If much social meaning is derived from the practice of urban cycling, then it may feel like both a point of personal pride and social obligation to ride in all conditions, and for all purposes, for members of some urban cycling subcultures. The 'constitutive outside' becomes negatively constructed; rather than building group bonds by emphasizing consciously inclusive values, subcultures often simply serve to reinforce informal friendship networks, with the *de facto* result that they appear as exclusive cliques that are difficult to penetrate by those not among their ranks. 'Requirements' or conditions for membership can be arbitrary, relying mainly on

individuals' liking or disliking of new or prospective entrants to the group.

Personal identity expressed through clothing style and branded accessories comes to mark one as being part of a specific cycling subculture, whether it be of commuter cyclists, bike messengers (and the associated popular trend of fixed-gear enthusiasts), professional racing cycling clubs, fully-armored downhill mountain bikers, low-riding cruisers, DIY (do-it-yourself) custom choppers or 'freak' tall-bike builders.

Urban cycling in North America has yet to fully recover from the bicycle's decades-long relegation to sporting or recreational status, as even commuter or utilitarian cycling is seen by many to require specialized equipment such as helmets, windbreakers, spandex shorts and 'clip-less' cycling shoes. The strategy of promoting 'bike culture' as a way to encourage more people to adopt cycling as another possible, and indeed, normal mode of mobility must eventually come to the realization that the aim is to become indistinguishable from the dominant culture in order to achieve the goal of making urban cycling a non-controversial, everyday practice. Attempts to claim certain attributes as definitional or characteristic of urban cyclists as a whole are thus deeply problematic and end up being necessarily exclusionary. Issues of identity are bound up in the larger question of culture, as definitional constructions of who is a 'cyclist' inevitably contain normative dimensions, which is extremely problematic if the overall goal is to broaden the appeal and adoption of urban cycling as an everyday socio-spatial practice.

6.3 Urban Cycling as Cultural Marker: The Dutch Example

The social or cultural meaning attached to being a 'motorist' or 'driver' in North American mainstream culture indicates how car use is thoroughly normalized, and hence ideologically 'natural'. Conversely, collective cultural identification as a 'cyclist' in Holland is indicative of its analogous position in mainstream Dutch culture, to the extent that where riding a bicycle is seen as indicative of 'Dutch-ness' (see Wray, 31-33). Wray discussed Critical Mass with the head of Amsterdam's cyclists union, Natascha Van Bennekom, who noted that the attempt to stage a Critical Mass in that bike-friendly city met with "very little interest. Since so many Amsterdammers ride every day, an event celebrating riding was not seen as serving any particular purpose" (Wray, 133).

We may not want to follow the Dutch example too closely, however. Xenophobia and hysteria regarding immigrants has been a problem of long standing in Western European countries, and engagement, or lack thereof, in the practice of urban cycling is used by some as a marker to judge cultural integration. Hans Groen, a member of the Vancouver Area Cycling Coalition originally from Holland, in a talk given as part of an evening panel with the SFU City Program in March 2007, attributed the low level of utility cycling in Amsterdam's outlying districts and suburbs (22%) relative to the city core (55%) to the apparent fact that "immigrants live in the periphery" (Groen, 2007). Rather than noting that lower population densities and different zoning bylaws are almost intrinsic to areas outside the city, Groen instead engaged in crude essentialism, stating that the immigrants, mainly of Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinam descent,

were perhaps missing something or deficient in some way; “they don’t cycle, it’s not in their genes” (Groen, 2007). Non-participation in the practice of utility cycling was used to mark newcomers to Holland as defining the ‘constitutive outside’, and therefore as not being appropriately ‘Dutch’.

Groen’s xenophobic comments generated only a mild stir and some chuckles from the (mostly white) Vancouver audience. In the Q and A period, the only person who directly addressed his observations about immigrants, who appeared to be of Asian heritage, took an apologetic tack: rather than disputing the essentialist nature of Groen’s antagonistic account, he took it at face value and attempted to explain that perhaps it was the aspirations of immigrants to Holland that were at fault; in their eagerness to achieve the kind of conspicuous consumption associated with First World standards or quality of life, including private automobile ownership, he posited, they had thus inadvertently failed to more properly assimilate into the Dutch’s strong self-perception as a socially and ecologically progressive people who eschew overly obstinate and conspicuous consumption.

But Groen’s essentialism is simply a blatant or more bluntly-stated example of the strong coding of urban cycling as a culturally ‘white’ activity, especially when pushed as a normative practice. This is either deliberately or genuinely ignorant of the reality of the ubiquitousness of the bicycle on nearly every other continent besides North America, not just those few celebrated examples in Western Europe. The noticeably disproportionate absence of people of colour using bicycles as a mode of transportation in Vancouver, a city where

42% of the population self-identified as belonging to some visible minority or ethnic group in the last census, is curious and a possible area of future study (Statscan, 2006). From my personal experience as a person of colour attending a number of bike-themed events and group rides over the past two years in the City of Vancouver, I can attest to the fact that event participants tend to be overwhelmingly white, contributing to the sense that one is encountering a sub-cultural enclave or exclusive in-group. This mono-ethnic profile extends to the 'bike cultures' of other large Pacific Northwest urban centres, such as Portland, OR (where 22% of persons are of colour), Seattle, WA (30% of persons are of colour), and Victoria, BC (10% of persons are of colour) (US Census Bureau, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2006). While perhaps understandable in the case of Victoria, this kind of ethnic exclusivity in more multicultural and diverse urban centres, whether intentional or not, severely limits the desirability of promoting the sub-cultural aspects of urban cycling.

6.4 Conclusion: A Shared Perceptual World as Basis for Solidarity?

This sub-cultural exclusivity that tends to mark the bicycle in North America has the wider social effect of shifting attention and emphasis from the shared perceptual frame generated by urban cycling, to the bicycle itself as a kind of fetish object. This mitigates the potentially radicalizing social effect of urban cycling as a spatial practice on perception and experience of the urban landscape. It is not the bicycle itself as a social object that necessarily forms the basis for any imagined community of urban cyclists, but the shared

phenomenological understanding of the urban topography which is the clearest collective ground from which any solidarity must spring. This, and not any sub-cultural marker, explains why any notions of a 'cycling movement' or 'community' are necessarily local.

As Wray notes, “[b]y its very nature, bike riding is linked to the communities in which it occurs. This means that the quality of biking environments varies substantially and is significantly affected by the receptivity of local political environments and the skill and imagination of local advocacy groups” (Wray, 107). Inherent in the character of experience perceived by the moving body situated atop the bicycle is an immersive relationship with the micro-topography and contours of a certain landscape. This immersivity leads the individual cyclist to undiscovered and underappreciated public spaces that are completely foreign to motorists spending their travelling time in the enclosed mobility of the automobile, insulated from the world around them. Further, it is from this localized, particular perspective that cycling advocates must recognize each other and form groups. The greater the number of people who take up cycling as a utilitarian mode of transport, the more they represent a broader cross-section of society. Or, as Wray puts it, “as riders increase, the perceptual world generated by riding becomes more broadly shared” (Wray, 132).

Yet simply having the spatial practice of urban cycling in common does not necessarily create a sense of social or political solidarity in and of itself, either. There are experienced long-time commuter cyclists who vehemently disagree with the mass civil disobedience tactics of Critical Mass, as well as those who

believe that the bicycle is literally the vehicle for revolution, inherently promoting values of mutual aid and community. It is to an in-depth consideration of Critical Mass as a non-branded, socio-spatial tactic that attempts to call attention to and widen the 'gaps' in the built infrastructure of the car-centric North American city that we next turn.

7: CRITICAL MASS: CELEBRATION OR DEMONSTRATION?

7.1 Introduction

On the June 2008 ride, one of the largest in Vancouver's history (with over 2000 participants by some estimates), I 'corked' one of the side streets that intersect with Denman Street, the main commercial thoroughfare for the west side of the downtown peninsula. It did not take long before I was talking with a couple of men who had left their vehicles to more fully see and experience what was happening. Their tone was at first angry and aggravated, not surprisingly, stemming from having an obviously external source for being frustrated in their movements around the city besides the usual vehicular congestion.

Standing there 'blocking' the vehicles from turning onto Denman into the flowing river of hundreds and hundreds of cyclists, I tried to strike a conciliatory note, working around to pointing out the reality of intimidation and real fear of being struck by a vehicle while 'sharing the road' that urban cyclists have to grapple with every day. It turned out that one of the men had actually been a bike courier himself at some point in the past, but he obviously hadn't been one to glamorize or idealise the 'sub-cultural' aspects of what was basically a minimum-wage, blue-collar existence. I tried to get him to at least cast his mind back and think about the character of that experience, the intimidation from some drivers

that one had to overcome every working day in order to do that job. At a certain point in our conversation, in response to my urging him to think of what it would take in terms of restructuring the streetscape to make urban cycling safer and more attractive, he even said, “But the road is for cars.”

“Really?” I asked, thinking about how North American roads were originally paved for bikes, largely due to the urgings and advocacy of the ‘Good Roads’ movement in the 1890s, over a century ago, before being quite literally ‘shouldered’ aside by cars.

He paused and looked at me, then looked at the street still full of cyclists flowing by, some ringing their bells or letting out the occasional joyful whoop, but overall making for a quieter, more peaceful qualitative experience than the congested car-space that was there only a few minutes before. I like to believe that we shared that glimmer of another way, another possible urbanity or city-scape flickering before our eyes as we watched the stream of cyclists together, until it was evident that it was the last stragglers bringing up the rear of the Mass, with a solid block of motor vehicles impatiently fuming behind them.

We parted at least somewhat cordially, him to his vehicle, and I to catch up with the rest of the Mass. I felt slightly elated, that I had made at least a small connection with one person, putting all the theory and research that has gone into this thesis into practice, at least for a brief moment.

7.2 What is Critical Mass?

It has become almost *de rigueur* to include a discussion of Critical Mass in the recent and small proliferation of books and articles on the emergence of North American urban 'bike culture' (see, for example, Carlsson, 2002; Furness, 2005; Wray, 2008). The major resource on Critical Mass remains *Critical Mass: Bicycling's Defiant Celebration*, published by AK Press in 2002 and edited by Chris Carlsson, a community activist in San Francisco and one of the co-founders of Critical Mass, a collection of polemics, essays and analysis with contributions from a couple of dozen participants from local rides around the world.

As it moves into its second decade of continuous recurrence on the last Friday of every month in over 300 cities and towns around the world, Critical Mass often serves as the most visible and public manifestation of urban cycling to a wider audience of current 'non-cyclists', especially in North America. Critical Mass participants address one of the most common deterrents to urban cycling - the perception that it is not 'safe' - by engaging in what is technically mass civil disobedience and collectively reclaiming urban road space in rides that often number into the hundreds or thousands, creating a powerful spectacle out of the old adage, 'safety in numbers'.

As Rebecca Solnit notes in relation to the Reclaim the Street actions that gained momentum over the course of the 1990s, primarily in the UK, seizing the roadways and reclaiming the public space of the road-space itself in carnivalesque dance parties or 'raves', recontextualising the street as an

inhabitable and festive space, opened up 'moments of hope', a tactic that merged and flowed into the anti-corporate globalization convergences later in the decade and into the early 2000s (Solnit, 2004). Critical Mass shares affinities with the Reclaim the Street action in its attempt to reclaim and temporarily reconfigure the public space of the roadway, and is interesting in that cycling participants directly and deliberately insert themselves into the car-system, displacing the motorists accustomed to navigating and sharing the space almost exclusively with each other. Thus it is a direct action carried out in public space engaging with other transit publics and private spheres, that of people in cars and pedestrians.

Much of the antagonism between Critical Mass participants and car-drivers occurs at intersections, which are usually 'corked' by cyclists on the ride who take it upon themselves to physically insert themselves in front of cross-traffic in an intersection for as long as cyclists are passing through, keeping the ride 'massed' together, maintaining density and preventing motorists from driving into the Mass. On very large rides, car-drivers may be sitting through a number of signal cycles, and their frustration at being 'stuck' has a very obvious external source. The 'corkers' become the *de facto* ambassadors of Critical Mass to frustrated motorists and curious bystanders and pedestrians.

Ostensibly placing an emphasis on "the politics of road space and freedom from hierarchy" (Keam, 2006, 31), Critical Mass is at its best both a festive, participatory spectacle and a monthly reoccurring 'situation' worthy of Lefebvre and the early Situationists. As a non-branded tactic of explicitly *spatial* intervention in the physical allocation of road space, Critical Mass calls attention

to the disproportionate spatial allocations for cars and bicycles on the road-space and the social relations this implies, and suggests a brief and temporary, alternate spatial configuration or reorganization of the street. For many participants, the ride allows for a lived critique of car culture and the social allocation of shared resources, modeling through a collective re-contextualisation of the street a more efficient and socially and ecologically-friendly use of urban space (Carlsson, 2002, 75). Critical Mass illustrates many of the issues and themes that have been running through this work, in particular the reassertion of the primacy of the spatial in everyday life, the privileging of automobility and the use and allocation of public space, the diverging natures of urban and suburban spatial cultures, and the feasibility of using sub-culture formation to bring attention to the spatial practice of urban cycling.

Even as it keeps the collective imagination open to more radical possibilities and re-imaginings of the city, and even as it has as its simple and most inclusive criteria for participation the practice of urban cycling itself, as opposed to some other sub-cultural marking or group identification, it is necessary to be critical of Critical Mass itself, as most accounts and analyses tend to be celebratory and over-emphasize the socially transformative effects of 'riding together', which does not necessarily create a broader culture or ethos of participatory action in everyday life.

7.3 Reaching Critical Mass: A 'pre-history' of cycling advocacy

Contemporary bike advocacy in North America can be traced back at least a generation. In the early seventies, the confluence of a growing ecological awareness and the OPEC embargo or 'oil shock' of 1973-74, where gas prices at the pumps quadrupled over a matter of a few months contributed to a popular realization of the underlying precariousness of running such a large portion of North American transportation infrastructure on a finite resource, the source of which was not under direct domestic control (Wray, 107). There were mass bicycle rides in New York City in 1972 and 1973, some organized by the then-newly-formed Transportation Alternatives, and dubbed 'Bike-Ins' in the spirit of the times, calling for a New York bicycle lane network. One poster from the time demands "No Private Cars in Manhattan (then rearrange the system of buses, cabs & trucks)"; and urban bike lanes were in fact implemented in some American cities in the wake of the energy crisis (Carlsson, 2002, 183-4). 'Gridlock Sam' Schwartz, New York's traffic commissioner for most of the eighties, recalled that many of the major avenues in downtown Manhattan subsequently had separated bike lanes, but they were removed due to public outcry over the vast increase in conflicts between cyclists and pedestrians (Streetfilms, 2006). This relatively recent history of popular mobilization and reconfiguration of the urban streetscape to 'make space' for the bicycle in a North American city is rarely mentioned, or more likely mostly unknown, by current cycling advocates.

The perception in North America of high percentages of trips made by bicycle in northern European cities is usually that cycling has 'always' been an

established mode of transportation in those countries. While the bicycle was indeed a widely-used, normalized mode of transportation in Holland and Denmark from its introduction in the very early years of the twentieth century right up until the early 1960s, large-scale, Le Corbusierian efforts to 'modernise' the road systems for car use in both countries led to the appropriation of increasing amounts of public space for automobile traffic. Crucially however, in Denmark "cycling never disappeared as a normal travel mode. The decrease was big, but the bicycle was still visible in urban traffic," even at the lowest points of mode share in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Krag in McClintock, 2002, 224-5).

Echoing Krag regarding the Dutch context, Ton Wellemen of the Dutch Cycling Council notes that in the postwar period, "cycling was recognized as a mode of transport that is also [a] part of life, as a mode of transport that also uses and may use public space, as a mode of transport that other traffic participants have to take into account" (Wellemen in McClintock, 2002, 195). Still, by the early 1970s the share of cycling as a mode of transportation had decreased at a rate comparable to the increase in car use. Both Krag and Wellemen recount similar social histories regarding the role of organized, popular mobilizations in contributing to bold political initiatives to increase rates of urban cycling in both Denmark and the Netherlands in the early seventies. John Pucher, professor of urban planning and policy at Rutgers University and one of the foremost bicycle researchers and advocates in North America, in response to my question to him regarding the social history and popular political context surrounding the bicycle after a talk he gave as part of the SFU City Program entitled "Cycling for

Everyone: Lessons for Vancouver from the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany” on May 15, 2008 (SFU City Program, 2008; Pucher and Buelher, 2008), noted that in Germany, particularly at the local levels of government, the Green Party were a significant presence that formed viable coalitions with the Social Democrats, and managed to initiate many policies that resonated with the broader conservation mentality that persisted in German cities towards energy and land use.

As in the American context, the 1973 oil shock and ensuing energy crisis, coupled with a growing awareness of the ecological and social effects of mass automobility, led to a popular recognition of the relative merits of the bicycle. A major difference occurred at the policy level; unlike their North American counterparts, key decision-makers and planners at the local and national levels in those northern European cities took serious initiatives to implement bold, unapologetic policies that took the bicycle seriously as a functional mode of urban transport. These initiatives included bold reconfigurations of the road-scape to permanently create broad, separated biking roads or paths alongside the roadways but on the inside of parked cars, beside the sidewalk. They also installed separate sets of traffic lights for bicycles, and marked paths through intersections for bicycles in bright blue paint.

With the picture of spatial marginality and routine intimidation by unsympathetic or simply uncomprehending car-drivers that constitutes the everyday lived experience of the individual North American urban cyclist firmly in mind, we can see why the idea of initiating ‘Critical Mass’ group rides occurred to

a few community activists and commuter cyclists in San Francisco in 1992. What was once a survival technique for cyclists in Beijing trying to cross impenetrable walls of automobile traffic has become a global phenomenon and a controversial tactic in calling attention to and combating the spatial and social hegemony of automobility.

7.4 **Critical Mass as challenge to the hegemony of automobility**

Richard Day defines hegemony as “a process, not an accomplishment, through which various factions struggle over meaning, identity and political power,” where “the actions of a dominant group are always open to contestation” (Day, 2005, 7). Certainly, it is important to emphasize the ongoing nature of the process of hegemony, and how it is always being constituted and reinforced in the social spheres of our political institutions, schools, workplaces, media and in the spaces of everyday life. But Day’s central argument in *Gramsci is Dead* (2005), is that what is occurring in the newer contemporary social movements is a shift away from “hegemonically-oriented ‘movements’, and towards *non-branded strategies and tactics*” (8). These ‘open-source’ strategies and tactics stem from a notion of resistance that seeks less to build up concerted, unified social movements, and more to exploit the temporally-contingent and spatially-contextual ‘gaps’ and ‘cracks’ in the totalizing character of neo-liberalism.

Historically, processes of resistance to the dominant group ideals took an explicitly ‘counter-hegemonic’ form, centred on a ‘vanguard’ party or social organization, based on “the assumption that effective social change can only be achieved simultaneously and *en masse*, across an entire national or

supranational space” (Day, 8). But rather than viewing processes of resistance in an instrumentalist fashion, as tools whose primary function is to mobilize the ‘masses’ in supporting a particular movement or party, some of the more vibrant strands of contemporary radical activism are understanding procedural resistance itself as the way to live the revolution and enact the change they wish to see in the world. Critical Mass may be one example of this notion of a ‘non-branded tactic’ of procedural resistance at work - or more appropriately, at play. Often described or framed as an ‘organised coincidence’ (Carlsson, 2002), one of the consistent and defining characteristics of most of these Critical Masses is the conscious attempt to maintain a largely non-hierarchical and leaderless form, suggesting a collective refusal of the conventions of the popular organization of previous generations in favour of an ‘affinity for affinity’, which Day describes as “non-universalising, non-hierarchical, non-coercive relationships based [on] mutual aid and shared ethical commitments” (Day, 2005, 9).

Personal reasons for participating in the Mass are as myriad as the individuals who constitute it, making any attempt to collectively characterize the ‘shared ethical commitments’ of Critical Mass participants difficult. People with different political orientations and varying degrees of social awareness ride in the Mass, and the continued recurrence and growth of the ride in most cities where it occurs is due to the positive framing of it as a ‘celebration’ of urban cycling rather than a ‘protest’ or demonstration. Many of those who promote and publicise upcoming Critical Masses have framed it as a ‘reclamation of public space’,

which suggests a much broader and more sweeping purview than specific calls for bike lanes or other changes to public roadway infrastructure.

Aware of the connotations of conflict and deliberate antagonism that the latter terms suggest, most participants prefer to frame the group ride as a festive celebration of the simple joys and utility of the bicycle (Keam, 2006). Chris Carlsson characterizes the rides as “really about reoccupying the city on a different basis, and that pleasure is a crucial, subversive principle of the reoccupation and reinhabitation of our lives” (in Lynn, et al., 2005). Critical Mass goes beyond a reformist liberalism or ‘politics of demand’ approach to public displays of participation because it is not entirely clear what its demands *are*; its participants do not orient the ride towards asking anything specific of local state actors, or any corporate ones. At its festive best, Critical Mass allows participants a tantalizing and transformative glimpse of another, possible city, where the reconfiguration of public space away from its current dominance by the automobile transforms the streetscape into a more human-scaled environment and allows for a more sociable and livable urbanity.

7.5 Sociable Mass? Or, ‘Mass’ Social Character

The most significant effect of Critical Mass is on the behaviour of those who participate. The experience of cycling slowly through dense downtown city cores with others, in a group large enough to temporarily ‘monopolise’ the road space is an experience that is often described as inspiring and transformative, even radicalising, and has prompted many participants to share their accounts, usually positive and celebratory (see Carlsson, 2002). Hugh Travis Culley, the

former bike messenger from Chicago, described the experience of participating in his first-ever Critical Mass this way: “Cycling in a group of three hundred people is an incredible feeling, but the first time, it was a little weird. I was used to biking hunched down in a posture of perpetual defense. But now there were all these people to talk to” (Culley, 2001, 73).

Critical Mass is for many of its participants their first truly sociable experience of cycling in the city. Participants and spectators alike comment on how the large group of cyclists changes the ‘feel’ of the urban spaces they pass through, as the often-oppressive noise of car and truck engines is absent and the air seems fresher and more breathable (Gottlieb, 2008). At its best, a Critical Mass ride illustrates the possibility for the sociable use of the space of the roadway itself. Two rows of two or even three cyclists riding abreast occupy the amount of space usually required by one motor vehicle. If the interior of cars function as private or ‘restricted’ social spheres, limiting the range of sociability essentially to those travelling with the driver, then the urban cyclist, exposed to his or her surroundings, remains open to the possibility of socialising with other cyclists, as well as being able to dismount and remove him- or herself from the flow of traffic relatively easily, if he or she wishes to converse with someone on the sidewalk.

The autonomous nature of velomobility itself, with each cyclist atop his or her own machine means that each can ride alongside another cyclist and engage in conversation, and disengage just as quickly. Thus mini-clusters or small groups of friends and acquaintances are constantly forming and re-forming in any

mass ride. But conversely and tragically, the opposite is equally possible - an ostensible celebration of 'community' that devolves into a ritualised, empty spectacle that reflects and reinforces the atomized, and individuated social mores of a consumer capitalism. As mass rides swell in size over time and become more broadly representative of the larger society, they also serve to illuminate the limits to solidarity simply having the spatial practice of urban cycling in common can reach. While Critical Mass can establish a sociable or civic space where none existed before, the forms of a participatory culture must necessarily be grounded outside of this temporary, moving 'place'. On the larger summer rides in Vancouver that reach well over a thousand participants, one is part of a teeming, anonymous crowd, and simply being on a bicycle and riding alongside others does not necessarily mean that social connections are guaranteed, or indeed that the 'festive nature' that is often highlighted in more uncritical accounts of the Mass occurs. Broader social norms are not entirely escaped on a Critical Mass ride; the social reserve developed from living in large urban centres does not entirely melt away.

This observation may seem obvious and unremarkable, except for the long-standing and persistent construction of positive narratives regarding the apparent inherently conviviality of the bicycle as a technology by cycling advocates. Often heralded as the (literal) vehicle of revolution, the bicycle is claimed to possess many of the values and characteristics of Day's 'affinity for affinity', including non-hierarchical, non-coercive social relationships and an ethics of mutual aid. Bob Silverman, one of the founders of La Monde a

Bicyclette a 'militant cyclist' advocacy organization founded in Montreal in 1975, writing almost thirty years ago, tried to make an explicit link between this anarchistic conception of cooperative interaction and the technologies of mobility: "Cars mean exploitation and hierarchy. Bicycles mean mutual aid and equality and openness" (in Antliff, 2004, 148).

The danger in this technological essentialism lies in its displacement of human agency onto the technology of the bicycle. Carlsson, to his credit recognizes this, and criticizes other cycling advocates for regarding the bicycle "as something that is inherently superior, that brings about social changes all by itself, endowing it with causal qualities that ought to be reserved for human beings. I greatly appreciate the bicycle for its functionality in short-circuiting dominant social relations, but let's not forget that it is merely another tool, and has no will of its own" (Carlsson, 1995). The technology of the bicycle can also just as easily reinforce dominant values of individualism, consumerism and consumption, becoming yet another commodity outlet for the individual to express their uniqueness through accessorisation, and displacing meaning onto high-end components and colour-coordinated parts. The social framing of Critical Mass necessitates the existence of a broader social and political discourse around the consumption of social and civic space to retain social relevance and internal vibrancy.

7.6 'Criminal' Mass?

Critical Mass is a topic of vigorous and ongoing debate among cyclists and cycling advocates, with many long-time commuter cyclists distancing themselves from the event, claiming that disrupting usual traffic flows harms more than helps to spread awareness of cyclists' needs and rights to the road among civil society and the state. One of the major criticisms of Critical Mass is that it unnecessarily angers and alienates those attempting to utilise other mobility modes at the same time as the Mass, due to its temporary monopolization of the roadway. Critical Mass prevents the shared use of the street not only by cars, but also intimidates and inhibits pedestrians from crossing the steady flow of hundreds, if not thousands of cyclists, as well as frustrating transit users by slowing down or stalling public buses and streetcars.

Indeed, what persistently emerges from the accounts of Critical Mass rides in various cities around the world is a sense of embattlement (Carlsson, 2002). Particularly in those accounts and reports from cities and towns in the Anglo-American world (Canada, the United States, and the UK), the accounts tend to focus on the often antagonistic relationship Critical Mass rides encounter with local law enforcement. Official responses by law enforcement have been repressive in some cities such as Montreal and Portland, and more recently in New York and Winnipeg. In New York City, Critical Mass was explicitly identified by the NYPD in a document issued to officers before the mass arrest of cyclists at the Critical Mass that took place during the Republican National Convention in August of 2004 as "the obstruction of public thoroughfares and transportation by

protest crowds, street theatre, bicycle groups, marching bands or by improvised barricades” (Lynn, et al., 2005). The NYPD characterised the ride as a protest tactic used by political groups, thus creating a justification for its criminalisation (Dwyer, 2006). The repression in New York City has persisted in recent years, with reports of routine police brutality against NYC Critical Mass rides (Neimeister, 2008).

7.7 Critical Packs? (De)Evolving Beyond the Mass

If one of the ostensible intentions of Critical Mass is to visibly insert another mode of transport into urban space, it creates an excellent opportunity to model what participants would like to see as new conventions of spatial allocation, and communicate them to pedestrians and motorists. It is with the former, most especially, that Critical Mass participants should be most concerned with forging a new contract. While maintaining the density of the Mass is necessary to use the ‘strength’ of numbers in discouraging motorists from driving into or through the Mass, pedestrians are also intimidated and hampered in their movements and flow across intersections.

The larger question then becomes whether Critical Mass participants can collectively create the rules and practices of the road as urban cyclists, in the spirit of genuine participatory democracy, ‘outside’ of the painted white lines on the road, by simply practising the kind of ‘traffic’ they would like to see, by *both* seizing *and* sharing the road in more equitable forms and modeling a more intuitive ‘hierarchy of use’. This can be best or most effectively done when Critical Masses reach a size of over three or four hundred cyclists by breaking up into

roughly block-long 'packs' or mini-Masses. Much like affinity groups of the global justice movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, friends riding together will support and back up each other better, having and being seen to be having more fun.

A very similar proposal to the above 'Critical Packs' model was circulated in San Francisco as early as 1995, only three years after Critical Mass began in its inaugural home-city ('The Pscycle-Analysts', 1995):

Let's still gather the last Friday of every month (or more often if that becomes popular) but instead of allowing ourselves to be herded along on these long, circuitous routes to "nice" neighbourhoods on the west side of the city, let's break into a half dozen groups of 150-200, or even a dozen and a half groups of 50-100, and reclaim an original purpose, which was to ride home together. This way smaller groups can actually go where they want to go, based on residence or preference, no one or a few people can work themselves into such a lather every month trying to get their way regarding the route that everyone's going to follow, everyone has to be much more active during the ride to ensure everyone's safety, and the larger goal of bicycle visibility is even better served by 10 or 15 groups of bicycles displacing cars along a variety of routes as they move through the city. I think we would have to behave more like regular traffic this way, trying not to block intersections unless absolutely necessary for our safety, running red lights only to stick together (but in smaller numbers this will be much less of a delay for cross traffic). Freed from the physical intimidation and casual violence implicit in being 'marginal' road users alongside people using vehicles of greater weight, size and potential speed, we demonstrate how a more humane street can and should 'feel', to both pedestrians and motorists alike.

The 'Critical Pack' model would increase the *effective* points of contact and communication with other people not on bikes (or other forms of self-propelled or human-powered transportation), while at the same time increasing the possibility that these points of contact will not be conducted in an air of frustration. Further, the diffusion of the spectacle of Critical Mass may both

amplify and serve to normalize its power, spreading the impact of one large festival of cyclists into smaller, autonomous packs that more effectively convey the truth behind the common Critical Mass chant of ‘we’re not blocking traffic, we *ARE* traffic’.

7.8 Conclusion

To a certain extent, Critical Mass has helped to ‘normalise’ urban cycling in some urban centres. As Amy Stork, one of the founders of Shift, a bicycle advocacy group in Portland, OR, observed, “[i]n places where they don’t have Critical Mass, they think bike lanes are radical” (Furness, 2005, 112). As a non-branded spatial tactic rather than a sub-culture or a social movement, Critical Mass illuminates the power of spatial intervention in one of the most significant yet ‘unremarkable’ spaces of everyday life, the street or roadway itself. As the only criteria for participation being the spatial practice of urban cycling itself, Critical Mass is an example of a collective tactic at its broadest possible point of inclusion. As a ‘festive’ suspension of the routine dominance of the urban environment by the automobile, it also illustrates that the creation of temporarily autonomous social spaces requires grounding in broader forms and traditions of participatory culture.

8: CONCLUSION: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

As this work has carefully and extensively illustrated, there are profound epistemological, ideological and cultural barriers to integrating the 'cycling perspective' into official urban planning viewpoints and into the public infrastructure of the North American built environment. But it is important to highlight that popular mobilization around urban cycling, organized around the lowest possible barriers and most inclusive level of entry - that is, around the simple spatial practice of cycling itself – proved a necessary and significant way to demonstrate popular utilization of the bicycle in cities such as Amsterdam and Copenhagen, and support for prioritizing the integration of cycling as a functional mode of transport into the transportation policy framework.

It is also crucial to highlight that these policy makers did not generally take these initiatives of their own accord; as Krag notes in the Dutch context, it is still “a permanent task for cyclists’ organisations and their local branches to keep all those policy makers on the alert!” (in McClintock, 2002, 197). Wellemen’s account of the Danish case acknowledges that the late seventies’ increase in cycling “was associated with big bicycle demonstrations and demands to the authorities to pay more attention to cycling” (in McClintock, 2002, 225). Even in these northern European countries usually considered in the popular imaginations of North Americans, when thought of at all, as having been

'naturally' or 'always' bike-friendly, popular mobilization at a particular historical moment was critical to bringing the kind of strong implementation and development of cycling-positive infrastructure policies.

Making demands of the state consisted not only of advocating for specific physical outcomes, but also ensuring the deep integration and consideration of the 'cycling perspective' into every level of the official policy and planning process. As Harry Wray writes in his book on the politics of urban cycling in the United States, policy success "is maximized by institutionalizing the idea of biking in the planning process. Wherever possible, it is essential for a bike voice to be heard from the beginning, so that biking is incorporated into the vision of the policy" (Wray, 119). A generational step behind the successful example of European cycling advocacy pressure and subsequent policy implementation, the importance of this model is just beginning to be realized here in North America.

As David Harvey notes, Lefebvre's famous invocation of the 'right to the city' is "far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization" (Harvey, 2008). Urban cycling as spatial practice can and should be seen as part of this 'cry and a demand' for the restoration of a certain kind of use-value to the city.

8.1 **'Velo-space' as the Measure of the City**

If the 'auto-space' of hyperautomobility has quite decisively illustrated the negative social aspects of sprawl, using velomobility as the scale with which to

construct a contrasting vision of 'velo-space' as the "measure of the city" is in order (Culley, 2001, 311). Our perception of what constitutes an acceptable distance to travel for work, school, domestic and recreational activities is ordered by both our modes of mobility and the lived spaces we inhabit. These, in turn, as I have attempted to illustrate throughout, are themselves the product of larger social forces. Thus, velo-space would be difficult to adjudicate by those not accustomed to velomobility as a main mode, habituated as much of the population is to the pace of auto-space. But considering a cruising speed of 10kms/hr as broadly achievable even for a family riding together or elderly cyclists, one can see that it suggests the kind of medium density, mixed-use land use planning and allocation that progressive urban planners have been advocating, from Jane Jacobs (1961) through to the New Urbanists.

One can envision a planning principle similar to one of the six 'fundamental rules' of the New Urbanism movement, namely, that no resident should be more than a five-minute walk from the "ordinary needs of daily life: living, working and shopping" (Duany, Plater-Zybeck and Speck, 2000, 15). Vital to the success of velo-space, of course, is the integration of a deep understanding of the phenomenology of the cycling experience into the planning process. Planners who do not cycle as part of daily life and for functional or utilitarian purposes will not have this store of embodied knowledge and experience from which to draw upon. Velo-space must be designed with the perspective of one attempting to navigate it by bicycle at its centre, as

calculations of traffic densities and requirements for right-turn curb cuts order 'auto-space' in current urban planning and design.

'Velo-space' would necessitate a more compact urban form than that created by the demands of hyper-automobility and the car system. The amount of paved surface area necessary to facilitate the movement of the volume of people currently served by the car-system by bicycle would be far less, even at rush-hour levels, as about a half-dozen bicycles can occupy the space that one car uses while on the move, and about twenty can be parked in the amount of space needed for that same car.

Velo-space would also more harmoniously interact with the complexity of pedestrian space. The richness of detail available to the pace of the pedestrian, and their ability to appreciate micro-topographies, 'enveloped' or immersed as she or he is in the surround of the streetscape, are better appreciated by the cyclist than the motorist. Using the bicycle as the measure of appropriate distance could function as a literal 'third way' of spatial ordering, one that finds a middle ground between the classic conceptions of both suburban and urban forms. The spontaneous sociability of cycling could be encouraged by design bike pathways wide enough for at least two cyclists to ride abreast at a conversational pace.

Such a measure would also promote an attention on the part of builders and residents to topographic details of the landscape that are quite literally paved over in order to facilitate smoother and safer traffic flows at higher speeds. At the same time, it would promote a kind of growth more appropriately scaled to

human needs than that of the automobile, yet one that may privilege 'flow' and need not be as densely packed as pedestrian-oriented development.

8.1.1 **Retrofitting the Suburbs for Velomobility**

Questions still remain, of course, regarding just how we can get there. There are hundreds of square kilometres of car-scaled suburban and exurban sprawl around every major North American city, and one easily despairs when forced to travel through them to visit relatives or friends that they can ever be reformed or retrofitted to a more human-scaled form resembling the velo-space described above. Along many main suburban arteries there run rarely-used sidewalks set far back from the road, separated by a wide strip of grass. The occasional hardy suburban cyclist can be seen using the sidewalks as *de facto* separated bike lanes, but the conflicts with pedestrians are obvious. Only a metre of the grassy stretches would be needed for separated bike pathways to be put in alongside the sidewalks, and cyclists could easily have long, continuous routes that mirror the ones provided for cars.

Some main suburban arteries are so wide, in fact, that one can easily envision converting two or even four lanes, as well as the sidewalks and grassy 'dead space' in between, into mixed-commercial stretches of small storefronts with apartments above to transform what are currently large expanses of paved space to transit on the way to somewhere else, into destinations themselves that are easily within walk-able and bike-able distance of the suburban subdivisions which currently have cracked concrete fences to protect their blind backyards

from the ever-present din of commuter traffic. Steeles Avenue, which constitutes the boundary of metropolitan Toronto and its northern suburbs, and which is six and even eight lanes wide along much of its length with Markham, the suburb in which I grew up, is an example of just such a stretch of anonymous road, and there is no shortage of similar 'non-locales' that the reader can surely conjure up from their own knowledge and experience.

8.2 'Slow' Movements and Re-localisation

Further intimations of how to get to greater mainstream adoption of cycling as a major and accepted mode of mobility are suggested by pulling back to re-focus on broader social trends. Among these is the call to re-establish 'the local' after decades of neo-liberalism, which saw the usurpation of effective local decision-making power by the profit-making demands of transnational corporations. An example of this renewed emphasis on localism or re-localisation is the growing mainstream awareness in recent years of the 'Slow Food' movement, first established in Italy in 1986 to protest the opening of a McDonald's in the centre of Rome, which promotes local small-scale organic food producers. The concept of the hundred mile diet, highlights the hidden costs of transportation as part of the industrialized system of food production and calls attention to this massively unsustainable infrastructure, advocating stronger awareness of the traditional local cuisines of one's bioregion (Petrini, 2006). The related growing awareness of food security and urban agriculture initiatives are also part of this trend to preserve and foster the diversity of local bioregions. Cycling is clearly the 'slower', more sustainable mode of mobility that is

harmonious with these broader initiatives in food security and economic investment in local communities presently taking place.

Further, there are many car-free initiatives worldwide that are gaining traction and turning the tide of car-dependence, although significant change in behaviour and attitudes may still be some years away. In Vancouver, for example, the annual Car-Free Day has spread from its beginnings in 2005 as a Commercial Drive-centred festival to become an officially sanctioned event to four neighbourhoods around the city by the summer of 2008. Yet the challenges the festival has faced further illustrate the perceived importance of facilitating automobility, as local businesses initially resisted the prohibition of car traffic and, more crucially, the removal of on-street parking facilities for the day. In its first year in Kitsilano in 2008, for example, these concerns of commerce maintained their primacy over the supposed intention of the event. Unlike in every other area, the main commercial street was not closed to car traffic; instead, about two dozen discontinuous 'block parties' occurred, with little in the way of an overall unifying theme.

8.3 De-regulating for self-management of the road-space: Other ways around the world

A further counter-example of an alternative approach towards the common space of the street for anyone who has said 'the road is for cars' is evident to anyone who has witnessed the traffic flow of Beijing or Hyderabad. One can attest to the functionality of the anarchistic notions of spontaneously cooperative activity, as what is at first impression a highly chaotic and seemingly dangerous

system comes to reveal itself as functioning on some basic organic principles, and a collectively organized hierarchy of road use emerges. There are often no demarcations as to the use of the roadway at all, but social conventions for traffic behaviour have evolved so that pedestrians, cyclists, small and larger motorized vehicles weave a complex tapestry of movement. The complexity and possibility of the presence of a diverse range of mobilities lowers the overall average speed of all vehicles to a level that allows for easy anticipation of the general path of each, and speedier and more manoeuvrable vehicles navigate around larger, slower ones, with pedestrians quickly learning to betray no sense of anxiety in being surrounded by the flow of moving traffic, instead looking for moving gaps in which to step into and in this way traverse the cross-traffic, without impeding the general flow or risking harm to themselves.

The function of the highly rationalized road systems of Western societies as fast-moving spaces of transit requires that legalistic notions of the 'rules of the road' prevail. Pedestrianism is supposed to happen only at painted crosswalks and intersections, and vehicular traffic flows relatively unimpeded. Thus traffic behaviour is determined to an extent by specific planning, but also significantly conditioned by a transportation culture used to a relatively high degree of regulation. Such a culture of transportation will be relatively rigid overall in its ability to adapt and accommodate different modes of mobilities sharing the roadway, accustomed as it is to a highly organized and enforced system. In contrast, a transportation culture that has evolved more spontaneously, with a relative lack of premeditation or historic involvement of the state, collectively

absorbs a new technology of mobility according to principles that are generally understood, but largely unwritten.

There is some evidence that this latter notion is catching on in the West in recent years, or at least in Europe. The notion of ‘naked streets’ or shared space, pioneered by Dutch traffic engineer Hans Monderman, has been adopted by many towns in Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the UK and other Western European countries, which have stripped their social centres of traffic lights and signage (Walters, 2002, June 30). The shared space of the ‘naked street’ concept requires that car-drivers proceed slowly and cautiously, taking their cues from the built environment and requiring them to make eye contact and engage with pedestrians and other users of the street. Preliminary evidence is that traffic accidents and fatalities drop dramatically in the years following the reconfiguration of previously signed and regulated streets into shared space (Walters, 2002, June 30).

If the bicycle ever truly becomes the ‘measure of the city’ in North America, it will mean a sweeping change to our culture (again, in Williams’ sense of the “way of life” of a society) has occurred. The vast car-dependent infrastructure of North America is predicated upon the steady and ever-present availability of cheap oil. However, oil is a non-renewable resource and within the lifespan of the next generation, within the next 30 to 40 years, we will most certainly have to adopt most if not all of the radical overhauls to our urban infrastructure mentioned here as well as serious initiatives to ensure the food

production capacity of each local bioregion over the current system of highly energy-intensive and publicly-subsidized trucking and shipping. Cycling will almost certainly become part of the new way of life for this generation and the next as yet unborn; we owe it to them to create the world they would most want to live in today.

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