

alternative mobilities in orange county

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1: introduction - what lies in the cracks

“The social imaginary has just enough “truth” to make the false worth savoring, or else no one cares. The audience already senses, very consciously, that it is false, but buys it anyway, simply as the thrill of sharing in the magic trick. The gag can be blatantly awkward (big lies in shopping malls), and succeed brilliantly, simply because the map “feels” useful. It is useful because it is defiantly false.” [4]

On March 11, 1889, land was taken from Los Angeles County to form Orange County, setting the scene for a new kind of life for the envisioned, and unanticipated, inhabitants to come. Norman Klein details the recurring erasure and re-imagining of LA and in many ways the OC is a continual byproduct of these goings on in its parent city. It functions as one big social imaginary for LA—the safety and security of exurbia. But what is getting swept under the rug here, or, rather, who? The illusion works for if we can all agree, if we all take part, but not everyone can revel in the falsehood and not all of us want to be in on the joke. The infrastructure necessary for supporting such a grand spectacle is enormous in scale—giant malls, sprawling gated communities, and massive seven lane freeways—but unlike the bowels of Disneyland, the underpinnings of this infrastructure are not advertised as open to the public eye. Continually covered up, dismissed, displaced and eventually forgotten, what is happening behind the scenes of Orange County, what alternate understandings are at work?

“Geographies of dispersal achieved their apotheosis in Los Angeles, where noir protagonists ... faced the discontinuities of horizontal, circular, and fragmented space, in addition to the usual temptations. Marlowe’s privileged, detached status enables him to move across and connect these zones forming an urban totality. Although revealing, this was a map that rarely empowered its creator...” [2]

Although speaking about Los Angeles, the words of Farish are worth considering—there are alternative mappings at work in Orange County as well. One of the primary ways these mappings are developed and maintained is through the very prominent car culture of the OC. This is, however, not the only form that mobility takes on in the county, there are other ways, albeit often overlooked, of getting around. In order to uncover some of the different experiences one might have in Orange County I took on a study looking through the lens of an alternative mobility, riding the bus.

2: setting the scene and taking a ride

Personally I am a great supporter of public transportation, but when I moved to the OC about two years ago I had, it seemed, no choice but to buy a car. I came to know a transport system existed because I began seeing buses out the window of my car, but I wondered to myself “who actually rides the bus?” In an attempt to answer this question I engaged in a ten week ethnographic study of the Orange County Transport Authority (OCTA) with my colleague David Nguyen. Before I recount the study itself, I would like to describe briefly what it is like to live in the OC.

When one visits Orange County, they visit the entire county—there is no city center to speak of. It is thoroughly suburban, or, as it has been dubbed by Kling et al., postsuburban [5]. Cars are by far the most popular means of transport, yet the American Public Transportation Association declared that the OCTA was the best large property transportation system in the United States. We began our study of this “award winning” bus system using an approach like that of the 73 Urban Journeys project [3], by riding routes which we thought might cut through several different sections of the county.

One such journey we took was on route 57, roundtrip, which goes north through the county. We started at the southern endpoint, Newport Beach, which according to Claritas [1] has some of the wealthiest consumers in the county. The route begins at a large mall called Fashion Island—which is not, in fact, an island. Travelling north you enter Costa Mesa, which is home to South Coast Plaza, the most glamorous mall with the highest revenue in the county. A bit more north is Santa

Ana which according to Claritas “is a mecca for first-generation Americans who are striving to improve their lower-middle-class status.” You then pass through the city of Orange which contains another huge mall, The Block and the UCI hospital complex. Finally the route terminates in Brea, a town similar in economic status to Newport Beach that boasts several gated communities. The last stop of the route is, of course, the Brea Mall. After this trip, we came away with a few key observations.

Throughout the ride the bus was quiet. Even through the busy parts of the route, when the bus was completely packed, people remained relatively silent or conversed in a hushed manner. Although the bus stopped at four major malls and seemingly scores of smaller strip malls, very few passengers came on the bus with shopping bags and few people were seen reading, listening to music, talking on cellphones or even sleeping. Finally, the inside of the bus was clean, very clean, lacking any visible graffiti, lacking even advertisements, whose absence was, interestingly, striking. The only signs inside the bus, were cautionary ones, and though there was space inside the bus for ads, the only ones we ever saw were plastered on the outside, or wrapped completely around the exterior of the bus. The only consumers of importance were decidedly not the passengers. At first I had the expectation that we would find a lot of people “commuting” and thus engaging in what I perceived as typical commuting behaviour, but this was clearly not the case. So with my initial bias debunked, I set out to see; who rides the bus and *why*?

3: where are you going?

We started conducting semi-structured interviews, about 20 in all, by approaching people in mid-journey. In order to begin our conversations we chose what we thought to be the most obvious question: where are you going? Typically people told us that they were either going to home or to work. When we asked our follow-up question, however, confusion ensued. In one case I approached a Hispanic man in his mid 20s and we had the following interaction after he told me where he was headed to:

Johanna: “Santa Ana? Okay. Where’d you come from?”

Informant: “Uh I came from... the United States?”

Struggling to understand what we wanted to know, people often responded haltingly, asking us what exactly we meant, and giving us all sorts of answers—some, as with that gentleman, wildly off the mark we were aiming for, but nonetheless interesting. When we inquired further, trying to figure out where these places were we received a wide variety of responses: intersections, boulevard names, areas of towns, city names (of which there are 34), institutions like hospitals and schools, general types of places like “the beach” (which is quite vague given the 47 miles of coastline in the county) but also very personal answers like “my daughter’s swim class.”

Just from the very first question we asked, then, we were struck with the overwhelming diversity of the answers we heard. This heterogeneity was something we saw throughout our study, and even though it was relatively brief, a few very strong themes which were rooted in this diversity began to emerge. Although there were several which stood out, I will focus on just two of the themes here: the difference between novice and expert ridership, and the ways that people present themselves and view one another.

4: the makings of an expert

We asked the informants to try and recount for us the first time they ever rode the bus in Orange County, and one woman told us:

“The very first time I was so scared because I just came in from the Philippines. It was a different situation! I didn’t know where to sit. And sometimes it’s difficult to understand the Mexican who drives the bus. It was scary but it was exciting because... I’m by myself.”

Upon riding the bus for the first time this woman was overwhelmed when confronted with what seat she should take. Were the seats assigned? Were certain seats safer than others? Would the driver or passengers tell her she wasn’t in the right place? Was the choice hers to make, and would she choose correctly? Later in our conversation she began to tell us about the tactics she had learned over time, things like arriving to the stop early for certain buses which ran infrequently. Even in the course of a 15 minute interview with one informant we began to see the different levels of expertise with which one might ride the bus. However, and perhaps unintuitively, this did not always correspond to the frequency with which the person rode.

For instance, one student we met rides five blocks each day on his way to his college from his home and back, a distance which is easily walkable, though not necessarily a very pleasant walk. When we asked the student how he paid for the bus, he told us always with cash. We were aware that a one-way fare is \$1.25, while a 30-day pass is \$45 and the 75-day college pass is \$75.

David: "Is there a reason why don't... you don't get a pass?"

Informant: "Uhhmmmm... I don't know."

For this rider, a pass would be far and away a money saving choice, but he appeared to have little rationale for opting not to purchase one. It became clear to us that although you might ride the bus often, this would not necessarily make you "good at it." This lead us to the understanding that it was misguided to conflate frequency of riding with expertise, as well the opposite. One might be very new to the bus system, and yet still manage to "ride like an expert." Of course this leads to the obvious question that has not been addressed yet: what does it really mean to be an expert? Who's judging? What are the criteria? To try and answer this I would like to start by addressing the second theme which I mentioned, that of self-perception.

5: self-perception & projection

Not only was there a notable separation between people's way of riding and frequency of riding; there was also a strong tension between the ways people *talked* about their riding of the bus. Many of the people we spoke to explained that they were only riding the bus temporarily. Often saying they "I'm getting a car soon" or that they were just "waiting for their license." This type of justification was a theme we saw repeatedly, very reminiscent of the identity work which Snow and Anderson describe [6]; people often claimed that no, they were not bus riders. In fact several people declined our requests for an interview on the basis of this assertion, but in one candid moment of self-awareness an interviewee, a middle-aged Hispanic man, replied, after being asked if he rode the bus every day:

"Yeah, yeah I don't drive car right now, so I don't have a car, just basically, heh."

Those with the least choice were often the most forthcoming and accepting about the fact that they depended on the bus. Their talk of cars and licenses was more oriented towards hope, as if it were a goal to be attained, a dream to be fulfilled. Whereas those accustomed to, but not currently able to avail themselves of, a car, were typically forceful in asserting that they would no longer need the bus in the very near future. We met one older gentleman, a senior citizen who had recently suffered a stroke and so he was not comfortable driving in Orange County. While he does not mind riding the bus, he also does not enjoy it, citing such annoyances as long travel time and fat ladies. At one point when he was mentioning grievances the bus driver jokingly announced over the PA system that the gentleman was angry at the fare machine because it no longer took pennies. It seemed then that although the gentleman had a decent rapport with the bus driver, and was more or less neutral with respect to the overall experience, he still was not fully embracing this aspect of his life. As he said:

"I didn't think I'd be a bus person."

So even though occasionally the idea of regular riding was brought up by the informants, no one ever identified themselves, or others, as a "commuter." While in more urban settings, commuters are often public transport riders, here in Orange County it seems that this word is reserved for the people who travel by car. It seems in part because there is no merit, no status in being a "frequent rider," that people tended not to act like "typical commuters." Because there is no immediate corpus of commuters to associate one's self with, a distancing from the general notion occurs. We, along with some of the informants we interviewed, noted that there were few people reading, listening to music or engaging in other activities which both "pass the time" and "fit more in." By not acting like a commuter, by not reaching to be something that one cannot, an effective downplay is achieved. Interestingly though, this is a collective phenomenon. Thus, in order to be an expert rider, one must, in a sense, but a studied non-expert.

This reaction to the notion of commuting is not the sole cause of the behaviours which we observed. Many of the daily riders we saw were working class people who held service jobs which could be physically exhausting. The time of travel from work to home, could often be looked at as down-time, a time of simple rest. Between the demands of work and family life, a bit of time to one's self was often described as peaceful or serene. The woman from the Philippines told us:

"I reflect on the beauty of God's creation. Because, really, America is so beautiful. ... Yeah, the beach. I say, "God, you have made this place really beautiful." It's really interesting. And I find comfort because especially for me, my family is in the Philippines. You find comfort in seeing these places. It's nice. It's a tourist spot."

The uncommuter-like behaviour is as much a reaction to external social norms as it is to everyday experience. But interestingly, although we did see a great diversity in people's personal experiences, when we asked informants to describe for us a typical bus rider, those who were frequent riders most often described to us a slightly generalized version of themselves. Without the ability to name the mass of others as "commuters" and due to the general trend of justification, people adopted the strategy of equalizing the others around to be just like them. Here, instead of painting a picture of diversity, people created one of sameness. The same woman told us:

"A typical bus rider... she's carrying a bag. She has book. She has a drink. ... Yeah, water. They always bringing water with them. They have radios. They have headphones."

And when David asked her where her radio and headphones were she immediately made the move to almost correct this error, and bring the picture back in line with herself:

"I don't have... and what else. They are all thinking. They are all wondering. ... I think it's the best time for them think about things, about life."

Just like what she does. Those people who were frequent riders managed, then, to create for themselves a level of normalcy and legitimacy by seeing others as reflections of themselves. Yet there is a level of ambiguity. It's not clear what the others are thinking of, and the same holds for me—I, like the people around me, am full of potential; I could be anything. This self-projection was a way for each person to preserve and assert their unique identity on the one hand, but to create a safe social space on the other. We are all in this together, because everyone is just like me. So even with all of this diversity, there was a sense of a shared experience which led to a great deal of socializing. We spoke to many people who often made new friends or encountered old ones in the course of their journeys.

6: "the bus was like this stage called Broadway, and it was time to perform"

We met one amazing rider who had taken this to the extreme. Deon had ample access to other means of transportation. Although he now lives in Las Vegas, his ex-wife and children are residents of Orange County and so he comes for frequent visits. Typically he flies in and shares the car of his ex-wife while he is in town to see his children. He informed us that he takes the bus in order to escape from some of the burdens of family life:

"My kids momma's like "you wanna, like use the car?" and I was like "no, I don't feel like drivin' you to work today, and go pick you up, you take the car I'm jumpin' on a bussss." So I've been havin' a blast all day."

Deon used the bus to seek out social encounters. He described to us how he used the bus to pick up women, giving us very detailed information about which buses have the best women (night buses, and any bus that runs down a boulevard), the best neighborhoods (beach communities), and some key lines and tactics one might use (best to sit by the rear exit so you can see everyone getting on, and everyone getting off). For Deon the bus was a moving playground, a place where mobility and this shared experience were the keys to meeting women. He saw all the women as having the same motivation as he did. Why else, he asked us, would these women be on the bus?

7: lessons from the overlooked mobility

Although it might be the case as Farish says, that detached status of those apart allows them to move in different ways, those ways might actually give rise to an empowering perspective, one he might not have expected. The sort of mobility which we have seen does not stake out land claims or high social status in the eyes of the masses, but it serves as both an expression of and a site for the development of certain notions of identity, both individually and collectively. The places I move, the ways and rhythms with which I move through them, and my sense of the relationship between my movements and others' is a way in which identity can be managed. This bus could then be seen a site for the negotiation and production of forms of collective and individual identities, identities of one's own.

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biography

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