

Our Bikes in the Middle of the Street: Community-building, Racism and Gentrification in  
Urban Bicycle Advocacy

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As scholars, we are taught and encouraged to write and research with a fairly positivist, rational approach. As human beings, we learn that life simply is not rational and sometimes the structure of a dissertation contrasts against the lack of structure in our daily lives—making us feel insane. There are people and places in my life that were solaces in times of uncertainty. I have always found comfort in cafés and so Fuel Café, Caffetto and Hard Times Café played a very important role as my office during my writing process. Colleagues including Tony Nadler and Heidi Zimmermann have intercepted a lot of my anxiety and redirected me to more productive grounds. Carol Stabile is an indispensable person in my life, my feminist mentor, friend, and fellow troublemaker. I can always count on Mrak for excellent life advice and Tony Unger is my favorite n00b. I am grateful to know a lot of people under the age of 5 who have brought me much joy, love, and stress-relief. Thank you to Tate, Naomi, and Nat for reminding me how to have fun. Lastly, thank you to my family—Mom, Dad, Andy, Jon, and Robby. I am lucky to have a family who is proud of me and has never questioned my life choices. Your love and support has been crucial throughout my life.

*Often when you think you're at the end of something, you're at the beginning of something else.*  
—Fred Rogers

*For all the people who ride their bikes against traffic and on the sidewalk*

## Abstract

It is no surprise to people living in U.S. urban spaces that bicycling continues its ascent into popularity. Neighborhoods and cities across the country are now committed to making their spaces welcoming to bicyclists which include bicycling events, bicycle lanes, and businesses that cater to cyclists. In my time as an urban bicycle commuter, I have noticed that a particular bicyclist is being hailed by neighborhoods and cities—one that has both racial and class privilege. Through my ethnographic research in three U.S. cities I have confirmed my suspicion that the bicycle *signifies* different values and meanings to different bicycling demographics. In this dissertation I ultimately argue that the “rolling signification” of the bicycle contributes to its ability to build community, influence gentrifying urban planning, and reify and obscure systemic race and class barriers. I begin my dissertation with a case study on the Riverwest 24, a 24-hour bicycle race, and how its organizers and participants build community but I complicate this understanding of community building by exploring the neighborhood’s long history of activism and its spatial connection to a major segregation line. The importance of a neighborhood’s history as it intersects with bicycle advocacy is made clear in my second case study in Portland, Oregon where neighbors clashed, along racial lines, about renovating a specific bicycle lane. And thus I argue that the Black residents and history rooted in Black culture in Portland’s Albina neighborhood produce a haunting (Gordon, 1997) within the reconstruction of that bicycle lane. In my final case study I explore whether the theory that bicycle lanes can lead to gentrification holds any merit. In Minneapolis I have found evidence that the local government *is* coopting bicycle infrastructure to recruit educated, upwardly mobile people--with little regard to its impact



on residents who fall outside of that demographic. This cooptation is wrapped up in power relations that allow the city government and “creative class” to define what a sustainable and livable city looks like. This dissertation makes a rather large intervention in Communication Studies as it illustrates the importance of rich description, spatial analysis, and ethnography in our scholarship.

## Table of Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Chapter 1: One less car, one more critique: U.S. urban bicycle culture and advocacy</i>	1
<i>Chapter 2: ‘A community hug disguised as a bike race’: The role of an urban 24-hour bicycle race in community building</i>	62
<i>Chapter 3: ‘Bike lanes are white lanes!’: The role of haunting Black bodies in Portland’s gentrifying bicycle infrastructure</i>	120
<i>Chapter 4: Greenways and greenwaves: Power-based sustainability in Minneapolis’s bicycle infrastructure</i>	164
<i>Chapter 5: Riding into the future: The possibilities of urban bicycling spaces</i>	211
<i>Bibliography</i>	237

## List of figures

Figure 1: Start/Finish line at the Riverwest 24 2009, p. 64

Figure 2: Riverwest 24 2009 manifest and bonus checkpoint sheet, p. 66

Figure 3: Fuel Café, Riverwest, p. 68

Figure 4: Riverwest Food Cooperative, Riverwest, pg. 69

Figure 5: Riverwest 24 2012 racers completeing the bonus checkpoint of playing *Michael Jackson: The Exerience* at Lala's House in Harambee, p. 100

Figure 6: Riverwest 24 2012 racers completeing slip-n-slide bonus checkpoint at Kilbourne Park in Riverwest, p. 101

Figure 7: Google map of Lower Albina, p. 135

Figure 8: Site of future New Seasons on N. Williams Ave. as of May 2012, p. 142

Figure 9: Hostess Bakery Thriftshop signage on N. Williams Ave. as of May 2012, p. 142

Figure 10: For Lease sign at site of condominium building construction site on N. Williams Ave. as of May 2012, p. 144

Figure 11: Condominium construction on N. Williams Ave. as of May 2012, p. 145

Figure 12: The HUB Building on N. Williams Ave., p. 146

Figure 13: Window display at Screw Loose Studio on N. Williams Ave., p. 148

Figure 14: Steps in front of an empty lot on N. Williams Ave. north of Skidmore St. as of May 2012, p. 150

Figure 15: N. Williams Ave. Traffic Operations Safety Project Open House, p. 153

Figure 16: Honoring History poster board at N. Williams Ave. Traffic Operations Safety Project Open House, p. 154

Figure 17: Aerial map of N. Williams Ave. businesses in 1956, p. 154

Figure 18: 2012 City of Minneapolis Bicycle Advocacy Committee, p. 171

Figure 19: 2007 Minneapolis Critical Mass arrests, p. 172

Figure 20: Railroad tracks with graffiti in late 1990s at the site of current Midtown Greenway, p. 197

Figure 21: Graffiti artist working on a wall in the late 1990s at the site of the current Midtown Greenway, p. 198

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **One less car, one more critique: U.S. urban bicycle culture and advocacy**

#### **Introduction**

I have vivid memories of my father teaching me how to ride a bicycle without training wheels. Tucked away in our small neighborhood near Milwaukee, WI, he would run beside me and my frantically pedaling legs and then let go. I was scared but I kept pedaling. When I became a more experienced bicyclist, the Midwest suburbs allowed me freedom to ride down sidewalks, across parks, and through front yards. As I grew older, my bicycle stuck with me and took me up and down the rolling hills to my friends' homes. It was not until I was able to legally drive a vehicle that I put my bicycle away. A short, expensive, and stressful affair with a handful of cars catapulted me back into the seat of a bicycle. In college, I gradually started replacing my car trips with ones on my bicycle. Getting to campus, work, and social events in a dense urban space was much easier on a bicycle. In winter, I would shiver at the bus stop watching bicyclists go by. But I figured, why stand in the cold and snow when I can work up a sweat riding to school and work? Then I just gave up driving all together. The expense, time, and stress of car ownership were not worth it, especially when using a bicycle as transportation was so much fun.

My story of how I became a year-round bicycle commuter is not unique as many commuters would tell you a similar story.<sup>1</sup> We also tend to have another thing in

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Zack Furness (2005) writes in his dissertation preface, "Like many children who grew up in the Midwest, I used a bike in order to ride to friends' houses, to commute to school and to get Slurpees at the 7-11 across town. Biking was an easy way to maneuver the suburban landscape... More than anything, biking was a great deal of fun" (p. 3). Furness goes on to describe his transition into a bicycle commuter as a graduate student.

common: privilege. My entire experience as a bicycle rider is enmeshed in the privileges I was born with and maintained into adulthood. As a child, it was a privilege to have a father who took the time to teach me how to ride a bicycle and continued to support my love for bicycling by buying me new ones as I grew out of them. It was a privilege to be able to ride through my neighborhood and across town at any hour of the day and not feel or be in danger. The financial and social conditions of my childhood allowed me the option to bicycle until I chose not to anymore. My privilege in being an urban bicycle commuter is more acute. I do not ride a bicycle because I cannot afford any other modes of transit; even though commuting by bike *is* financially savvy, it is simply a choice. It is a choice that I can make partially because of my current situation: I am an able-bodied, healthy, educated, white woman with no children. I have no restrictions but myself in my ability to use a bicycle to get around town. My workplace and home are “bike-friendly” in that they come with space to safely store my bicycle. My career as a researcher, writer, and college instructor bodes well for showing up to work disheveled, sweaty, snow-covered, drenched in rain, red-faced from subzero weather, and/or out of breath. I have the space and time to change, rest, or just go with the Crazy Professor look. I live in a city that *loves* its bicyclists, so I have ease in getting to and from work. My lifestyle is an anomaly and I am lucky that I have the privilege that I do to be a bicycle commuter. This is simply not the case for many people in urban spaces. My dissertation largely focuses on how privilege like this, mostly seen through race and class, impacts whether bicycling is taken up and respected in three specific urban communities.

## **Tour de rolling signifier**

My dissertation is a tour of three cities—Milwaukee, WI, Portland, OR, and Minneapolis, MN—that constructs a narrative about how the signification of the bicycle is communicated, operationalized and understood by residents, city officials, and bicyclists in each city. The tour of cities is structured around participant-action ethnography and supported by multiple humanities disciplines including Communication Studies, Urban Geography, Sociology, and Cultural Studies. As I take readers along to specific neighborhoods, streets, and bike paths we pick up concepts of community-building, racism and gentrification—leaving our bicycles rather arduous to maneuver by the end of our journey. In Milwaukee I develop a grounded theory<sup>2</sup> about community-building that emerges during a 24-hour bicycle race, the Riverwest 24. Through this theory, I explore how communication intersects with the event, such as the bicycle allowing easy communication among participants and the neighborhood. The Riverwest 24 succeeds, in part, because of the rhizomatic organizing model. But I interrogate the organizers’ insistence of maximum community involvement and whether this model of leadership communicates an unwillingness for leaders to deal with larger systemic issues that are symbolized in the event (e.g. gentrification). In Portland, I investigate the historical conditions surrounding N. Williams Ave. in the Albina neighborhood, paying particular attention to how this history informed a conflict over reconstructing a bicycle lane. Particularly, I am interested in the dialogue between long-time Black residents and their new white neighbors as both groups try to traverse a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood that once used to be Portland’s “Black Downtown.” This case study

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<sup>2</sup> Grounded theory is a methodology where the researcher inductively crafts a theory about a phenomenon. Grounded theory is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

illustrates the bicycle's power in signifying and communicating exclusionary classifications (i.e. bicycle lanes are for white people). In Minneapolis, I explore the city's incentives to build and market its bicycle infrastructure in hopes of recruiting educated and upwardly mobile residents. Here the focus is on the top-down model of communication, where political leaders harness the power to change and/or interrupt communities through bicycle infrastructure. I suggest that bicycle infrastructure communicates to or hails particular demographics that can, in turn, influence property values and shift populations.

This tour is not one of leisure but of necessity. The bicycle can both bring neighbors together and, perhaps rather surprisingly, cause tension with neighbors. Communication can either flourish, as neighbors reminisce about their community bicycle race *or* it can be strained, as neighbors fight over the necessity of bicycle amenities in their neighborhood. The popularity of bicycling can influence the construction of beautiful paths and trails but it can also be a signifier of gentrification. The figure of the visible white, upwardly mobile bicyclist who has dominated urban bicycle culture can, often unintentionally, marginalize other types of people who bike through cities. This is reflected in mediated images of bicycling that systematically under-represent people of color cyclists (Mohan, 2011) and in the gentrification of "bike friendly" cities that alters who can communicate with whom. This is not a popular tour because of the uncomfortable topics and it is not one that most privileged bicyclists would know about or choose to take. It is a difficult tour, with its path both hopeful and painful. How can a bicycle work to build tight-knit communities while also working to disempower other communities? How can a technology built for ease in mobility,



minimizing environmental pollution, and improving the health of its riders also do harm? What can possibly be wrong with riding your bike in the city? Are bicyclists not already situated in a marginalized position, in direct conflict with the dominant U.S. car culture? The answer to these questions rests in privilege and power. Bicycle advocates have gained substantial power in cities, popularizing this mode of transit and leisure through independent and State-sanctioned channels. But the way that bicycling has materialized in places like Portland and Minneapolis works to communicate delineations of who belongs in these bicycling spaces. “Advocacy of any sort has the capacity to frame certain issues in a way that can either directly or indirectly marginalize interests that exist outside of an established rhetorical framework,” argues bicycle scholar Zack Furness (2005, pp. 22-23). The white, upwardly mobile people who often make up bicycle advocacy groups can (and do) utilize their cultural privilege and power to control how their advocacy will materialize in cities. This includes controlling what areas of the city get bicycle amenities and what these amenities look like.

Ultimately, I argue that the “rolling signification” of the bicycle contributes to its ability to build community, influence gentrifying urban planning, and obscures *and* reifies systemic race and class barriers. In this introductory chapter I will review pertinent literature about my dissertation’s core themes of urban geography, community, gentrification, racism and bicycling. Then I will explain my research methods and ethics and end this chapter with a short narrative about who is represented in urban bicycle culture. First, I would like to explain the concept of “rolling signification.”

This project investigates how the bicycle is a rolling signifier who’s meaning changes through encounters with various urban spaces including a community bicycle

race, neighborhood meetings, city government, bicycle advocacy committees, and the omnipresent “bicycle culture.” The bicycle as a rolling signifier is an expanded understanding of Stuart Hall’s (1996) theory of race as the “floating signifier.” By this he means that cultural understandings of race are taken up as natural or biological aspects of human beings, but that these change across historical moments and geographical space. I have found that the bicycle also has cultural understandings embedded in it, and that these understandings are seen as natural to those in power positions. For example, a lot of bicycle advocates in urban spaces understand the bicycle to be a superior mode of transportation due to its lack of reliance on oil and thus demand street alterations to make room for them (i.e. bicycle lanes). Therefore, it is a challenge to question the status quo about who a bicyclist is and what they need to ride in urban spaces. As my dissertation will suggest, bicycle advocates who push the dominant, cultural understanding of bicycling have a hard time grappling with community members who question this understanding.

The present cultural understandings of the bicycle is also impacted by its historical understandings as well. The bicycle, as a cultural artifact, has denoted different meanings across time and space. For example, the bicycle was once a source of panic in the 1890s as wealthy women mounted the two-wheeled machine and rode away from their domestic responsibilities. Now the bicycle is largely understood as an alternative form of transportation, a tool of leisure, and part of elite sports (e.g. Tour de France). Therefore, there is nothing static about what the bicycle represents. Similarly, Hall (1996) argues that attempts to ground the concept of “race” scientifically has shown to be untenable, and so soci-historical or cultural definitions should be used. There is nothing

“biological” about the bicycle, but people always attempt to categorize it as *something*—an innocuous form of leisure, transportation, or mobility that helps to curb environmental destruction. After all, as Hall (1996) argues, it is easiest to understand a subject if it can be classified. My dissertation will show why, like race, the bicycle’s signification changes as it rolls through different socioeconomic, cultural spaces, as well as other historical moments.

Signification occurs via classification and Hall (1996) argues that until we classify a subject, human or inanimate—we cannot generate any meaning of that subject. Once a subject is classified, different understandings of the subject fall into place, some of which work to maintain the status quo. We try to classify subjects in an attempt to guarantee or predict how particular subjects will behave. Hall (1996) calls for a “politics without guarantees,” a turn away from classifications. If classification is used as a form of prediction that rests on, for example, a biological racial reference point, then a politics without guarantees would leave us *without* a way to predict subjects’ behaviors. Hall uses the idea of classification to explain how racial oppression is embedded in our society. Racial oppression is not comparable to classifications of *bicyclists*, so I discuss the two in tandem with apprehension. In short, I find the idea of classification as it intersects with prejudice helpful to this project but I am not conflating bicycle stereotypes with racial ones.

In the bicycling world, people often attempt to classify different types of bicyclists, with the repercussion of excluding many other types of people from bicycling spaces. For example, in *Bike Snob: Systemically and Mercilessly Realigning the World of*

*Cycling*, BikeSnobNYC<sup>3</sup> (2010), presents a tongue-and-cheek presentation of these classifications. In his chapter, “Velo-Taxonomy: The Various Subsets of Cyclists,” he describes in great detail different types of cyclists including The Roadie, The Triathlete, The Urban Cyclist, The Messenger, and The Righteous Cyclists—and why other cyclists do and do not like them. For example, other cyclists do not like The Urban Cyclist because “they’re trendy” (BikeSnobNYC, 2010, p. 71). These classifications are problematic not just in the ways Hall (1996) suggests (i.e. being able to predict a person’s behavior, reaffirming the status quo) but also because the classifications exclude many other types of cyclists—mainly people of color, poor people, and women who *also* ride bicycles but do make it part of their explicit identity.<sup>4</sup>

And so, if the goal is to move beyond classifications and towards a “politics without guarantees,” then Hall (1996) suggests to understand race, for example, as a discursive concept. The “discursive concept of race” (Hall, 1996) moves beyond a naturalized understanding of race to how ideas and knowledge about race organize people’s practices. Framing race as discursive can destabilize the ways people comprehend the constructed nature of racial understandings. In this dissertation I model a discursive concept of bicycling that shows how a community’s epistemology can impact their relationship to bicyclists. I also illustrate how people with systemic privilege insist on reifying a “naturalized” understanding of bicycling that *they* have crafted. For example, bicycle advocates have struggled in at least two “bike-friendly” cities when

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<sup>3</sup> Pen name for Eben Weiss. Weiss runs *Bike Snob NYC* a popular blog where he often makes fun of other bicyclists.

<sup>4</sup> All of the cyclists described in *Bike Snob* are accompanied by illustrations that represent white men. The one exception is “The Beautiful Godzilla” cyclist who is “a particular kind of urban female cyclist who rides as though the rest of the world were created to simply yield to her.” (BikeSnobNYC, 2010, p. 75). His classifications largely assume a white, male-bodied bicyclist.

their propositions for more bicycle infrastructure have been met with resistance from community members. The advocates understand bicycling to be a natural “good” and do not see why people would *not* support more bicycle infrastructure. Advocates struggle when other people do not understand bicycling in their way. In Chapter 4, I ask what would happen if bicycle advocates gave up on their naturalized understanding of urban bicycling and instead listened to what other groups of people understand the bicycle to mean.

In this chapter and the subsequent case studies I speak to the complicated ways that bicycles and community are rolling signifiers. Minding the pun, it is clear that a discursive concept of the bicycle and community undergird how bicycle advocacy is understood in particular spaces. The bicycle and its connected bicycle communities have classifications that create tensions in spaces where people do not fit into the classifications. I am not suggesting that bicycling as a rolling signifier is an analogy to race as a floating signifier. The stakes in classifying racial groups so they are easier to comprehend (or stereotype) are not the same stakes in classifying the bicycle in various ways. I borrow Hall’s concept of the “floating signifier” to talk through how easy it is for the bicycle’s meaning, vis-à-vis classification, to change. For example, the bicycle has been classified to signify leisure, anti-authoritarianism, environmental-friendliness, exercise, transportation, white privilege, and poverty. As I will sketch out later in this introduction, the concept of bicycle culture itself signifies a particular and privileged type of person and how these people interact with the bicycle.

## **Literature review**

In this literature review I discuss scholarship on Black feminist geography, Communication Studies work on community as communication, sociological studies of the creative class, and Cultural Studies-based bicycle scholarship. All of these areas form the theoretical admixture from which I draw my research.

### **Space as historical**

Black feminist geography literature has been essential to the ways I have thought through my dissertation project. This scholarship acted like the handlebars of my work—steering me down paths I had not taken before. Black feminist geography work focuses on the understanding of space as impacted by histories and current renderings of slavery, diaspora, segregation, and urban landscapes. Black geographies look at how racialization has long formed the underpinning for the production of space:

A history of brutal segregation and erasure...inform a different or new approach to the production of space; this erasure, segregation, marginalization, and mysterious disappearances are geographically available, depending on the vantage point. (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p. 4).

In-line with other feminist research methods, Black geography studies demands “an interdisciplinary understanding of space and place-making that enmeshes, rather than separates, different theoretical trajectories and spatial concerns” (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p. 7). Black feminist geographers often focus on the radical potential of urban space—a space in which the other geography thematics are omnipresent. This politicization of urban space is heavily influenced by Lefebvre who suggests that “revolutionary events generally take place on the street—in public spaces. These public

spaces, then, are the sites of contestation, regulation, and resistance” (as paraphrased in Tyner 2007, p. 218). These ideas are crucial to my research because I see the streets—where bicyclists typically exist—as a politicized space for bicyclists and communities. In my project, the literal streets carry a lot of political meaning including community-building and displacement. The racialized history of these streets is imperative to understanding what is happening in these spaces today.

Black geographies are alternative arrangements alongside and across from traditional geographies, which assume that geography can be fixed and known due to its roots in the white, patriarchal, classed, heterosexual, and European framework. Black geographies are not just about material space but also the social production of space (McKittrick, 2006). Black diaspora populations have told and are telling how their surroundings have shaped their lives (McKittrick, 2006). By interrogating the ways that we understand space, alternative histories and realities are communicated. In *Demonic Grounds* Katherine McKittrick (1996) argues that we are all implicated in the production of space and that geography is integral to social struggles. This approach to geography reflects my goal to interrogate how bicycle advocacy impacts various community spaces. Bicycling requires a reproduction of space, be it a repainting of street lanes, constructing new off-street trails, or the mere existence of bicyclists on the streets. What these reproductions of space communicate is dependent on who is doing the looking. To some, a bicycle lane communicates that a neighborhood is friendly to bicyclists. To others, a bicycle lane communicates gentrification.

Overall, Black feminist geography pushed me to integrate the historical context of the spaces I studied. In Chapter 2 I consider how Riverwest has historically managed

their community activism and its possible role in affirming the unofficial segregation line that runs directly west of the neighborhood. In Chapter 3, I explain how Portland's well-documented history of segregation and displacement of people of color directly influenced the current conflict over a bicycle lane. In Chapter 4, I invoke the history of an old railroad corridor, once a "disgrace" to the city filled with graffiti artists and the homeless, to explain the significant shift in demographics once the corridor turned into a bicycle path. To study the present I had to study the past. This literature also showed me how to interrogate the production of space as one of violence and segregation. This was especially helpful in Chapter 3 as I explore how construction through the Albina neighborhood in Portland has historically been rooted in race-based displacement. In Chapter 4 I suggest that bicycle infrastructure produced to recruit educated white people can lead to racialized and classed segregation throughout Minneapolis.

With Black feminist geography steering my general approach to gathering research, work on community as/and communication also proved to be foundational scholarship for this dissertation. However, I found many flaws in community research, which in turn inspired me to research bicycle communities from a space-based approach.

### **Community as/and communication**

"What is community?" is a question that has produced numerous scholarly texts, both theoretical and practical. Communication Studies research on community tends to understand the notion of community as a positive force, creating an "uncritical deployment" of the term (Joseph, 2007, p. 60). At its most basic, community can be identity or place-based, classifications which are continually debated and criticized in scholarship.



Through a detailed search of “community and communication” scholarship in peer-reviewed communication journals, I have concluded that the majority of communication-community research is quantitative scholarship that lacks discussion of how place impacts community. These studies are rooted in surveys, longitudinal studies, and mining completed data such as the U.S. Census to find out, for example, what characteristics neighborhoods have that make neighbors feel a strong sense of community (Nam, 2009; Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Jung, 2006; Temkin & Rohe, 1998). Community-communication research that is quantitative does not give readers a strong sense of the look and feel of communities. Without rich descriptions, interviews, and participant-observation methods, the research remains conceptual and leaves the reader without any real sense of the studied communities. For example, a neighborhood study done by Thomas B. Crew, June Woo Kim, and John H. Schweitzer (1999) surveyed 550 residents in Lansing, Michigan about people’s willingness to be leaders in their community. One of the findings suggested that people’s perceptions of the community may predict leadership and participant in community happenings. “Perceptions of community” were operationalized to represent socializing, a person’s sense of community, and known issues in the neighborhood (Crew, Kim & Schweitzer, 1999). Despite the importance of one’s perception of the Lansing community, the authors did not describe the community from which these surveys came. In a study about the internet’s effect on neighborhood networking, Keith N. Hampton (2007) conducted longitudinal, social network surveys of four “contrasting” neighborhoods. His results suggested that experience using the internet increases one’s communication with their local networks. Hampton does not describe the neighborhoods in which he based his surveys, nor explained why the neighborhoods were

“contrasting.” In both of these studies, the unique elements of the neighborhoods (e.g. its history, current populations, future goals of the community) are never considered as variables to either leadership potential or the strength of local networks.

This dissertation tries to remedy scholars’ oversimplification of theorizing about community. My qualitative study of community clearly illustrates how a neighborhood’s construction of space, history, and current political landscape deeply impacts community relations. If quantitative community-communication scholars considered the literal make-up of the communities they study, they could develop more nuanced questions about, for example, why a specific community succeeds or fails at producing leaders. Is there something *special* about the neighborhood that impacts leadership? With that said, quantitative research is helpful in being able to draw conclusions about more generalized subject matter. My research, however, suggests that it is difficult to make generalizations about community because of their unique social, historical, and political traits. For example, I argue that the Riverwest 24 succeeds in community-building in large part due to the neighborhood’s activist-based history. Qualitative research on community is usually conducted by scholars outside of the Communication Studies discipline, in urban geography (Zukin, 2008) or political science (Putnam, 2000), for example. This is because the Communication Studies discipline has historically preferred social science approaches to scholarship. Because of the focus on data and surveys, Communication Studies scholarship on community lacks theorization of space. Overall, it is peculiar that research about a particular space and place lacks any description *of* the space and place. The same critique can be leveled at the theoretical-qualitative research that lacks the praxis needed for productive scholarship. This is not to say that the quantitative research

lacks merit or usefulness. In fact, it lays down some important groundwork on what community looks like. Overall, I have found that the Communication Studies research approaches community in three main ways: theoretical, constructing models of community, and focusing on specific elements of community (e.g. space/place, identity, media).

Scholars who theorize about community often seek to redefine what community means, sharpen existing definitions, or operationalize their definition into social action. In my own project, I craft a theory of community-building with specific attributes including forced interaction with neighbors. In his study of online community networks, Longan (2005) isolates two forms of community: instrumental and communicative. He defines instrumental community as existing “to achieve an end rather than further relationships” and communicative community as “interaction where people reach common understandings concerning a shared situation and seek to co-ordinate their places of action” (2005, p. 850-51). Concerned with the “geography of communication,” Longan (2005) finds that in interviewing 70 communication network activists, instrumental community is much easier to foster online than communicative community (p. 849). The theory that communicative community works best in face-to-face encounters helps me define what community *is* and highlights that place-based community is necessary to strengthen one’s neighborhood and relationships with neighbors.

Other community scholars focus on the importance of allowing activists to create their own theory of community. Ian Goodwin (2012) privileges community activists as a counter to research that dismisses and minimizes the relevance of community members’ accounts. He theorizes community *as* discourse by utilizing “community informatics,” a

form of activism that uses information and communication technologies to develop community in specific localities. “The choice of community language as used by activists is fundamental to debates over community...in ways unrecognized by current theorizing” (Goodwin, 2012, p. 49). As Goodwin suggests, privileging community activists’ accounts is not the norm in community theory; my project helps to bridge that gap by stressing the opinions of community members about various bicycle infrastructure issues. Most obviously, in Chapter 2, my community-building theory is crafted solely on Riverwest 24 organizers’ and participants’ ideas about community.

The “process model of communication” is an organizing model discussed by Kazhoyan (2012) in his research on community-building in multi-ethnic settings. The “process model” typically starts with community leaders and their visions about how to solve a community problem. While organizing themselves and others, they create new structures, disseminate new visions and change the pace of social processes. According to Kazhoyan (2012), “community-building usually refers to a participative process of responding to local challenges,” but “capacity-building” in communities is more productive than this need-based approach (pp. 225, 227). In developing a plan for social change, “capacity-building” or volunteerism is a necessity. Capacity-building involves strengthening the community from within, instead of asking outside institutions for assistance. Moreover, “it is important to cultivate a sense of collective ownership of such projects by *reinforcing the local identity* of the participants” (Kazhoyan, 2012, p. 237). The process model of communication relies on community leaders to develop a vision to solve a community problem and empower community members to help make that vision a reality. I argue that it is difficult to have change “start with leaders” while also trying to

cultivate a sense of collective ownership. However well-intentioned an organization is to create collective ownership, the standpoint of the initial leaders is privileged. The leaderships' intention to create collective ownership waxes and wanes throughout my case studies. This is acutely seen in Chapter 3 where community leaders in Portland presented *their* vision of improving the neighborhood (i.e. a better bike lane), but this vision did not align with all community members. The community leaders, including government workers and bicycle advocates, appeared to incorrectly assume that there was a "collective ownership" over bicycle safety on N. Williams Ave.

Various scholars have attempted to disprove misconceptions about the constraints to community-building; misconceptions including lack of organization, cultural barriers between neighbors, and how class-status impacts whether neighbors are interested in building community. This scholarship connects to my work because my case studies are based in culturally diverse, working class neighborhoods where race and class issues have intersected with bicycle advocacy. Theodori (2008) is interested in why people do/do not become active in their community. He argues against the idea that community-building constraints exist primarily on the organization level, which ignores "individual-level manifestations of structural constraints that impede the emergence of community" (p. 18). Instead of focusing on how to organize a community, Theodori (2008) suggests that building, strengthening, and maintaining community through social interactions is the best way to develop community. These findings connect to Chapter 2 of this dissertation as I focus on how the Riverwest 24 literally forces social interaction between neighbors in hopes of building community. I also discuss how the organizers manage the event but my interviews and observations suggest that creating an event where *every*

neighbor is encouraged to participate is paramount to this community-building framework.

This dissertation grapples with how racial and classed-based tensions embedded in bicycle advocacy can have a detrimental impact on communities. Is it possible that a diverse group of people will always struggle to co-exist—even in established, strong communities such as Riverwest? Deborah Martin (2003) and Lindsay Hoffman and Osel Appiah (2008) argue that diversity in community does not impede community-building. In her exploration of place-based neighborhood organizing, Martin's (2003) findings "obviate[s] diverse facets of social identity in order to define a neighborhood-based polity" (p. 730). In other words, she finds that diversity of neighbors *does not* impede community building. This is an important caveat because my case studies involve diverse neighborhoods in which some neighbors work to expose racist constructions of their community. Research suggests that racial diversity does not predict a low level of community interest or involvement. Hoffman and Appiah (2008) study how attendance at church can impact Black people's civic engagement. They contend that communication scholars who are invested in studying political participation do not often take race into account. Hoffman and Appiah (2008) argue that the "Black religious experience is a unique cultural component and deserves attention" when discussing social capital (p. 335). Their article draws attention to unique cultural and structural elements that potentially influence Black political participation and civic engagement. This research informs my project in that race and ethnicity prove to be major factors in how bicycle advocacy is taken up in various neighborhoods. Communication Studies research shows mixed results about whether a person's ethnicity impacts their engagement with the

community (Hoffman & Appiah, 2008). What Martin (2003) and Hoffman and Appiah (2008) find is that a person's ethnicity does not predict their level of community involvement. This is an important finding for my research because of bicycle advocacy's role in different communities. I argue throughout this dissertation that bicycle advocacy can be exclusionary and uphold the needs of people in power (i.e. city government, upwardly mobile white people). I do not and cannot argue that the lack of involvement in bicycle advocacy of people of color has to do with their ethnicity. In other words, there is nothing about being white that increases one's desire to be involved in the community. In fact, as will be made clear in Chapter 3, Black residents are very outspoken about community needs—the difference is in whose voices get heard by those in decision-making positions.

The case studies found in this project are based in working-class neighborhoods—places that scholars assume to not be beacons of community organizing. Communication scholars have studied the validity of assuming that lower-class people are not interested in community building. One way to test this is to look at whether inner-city and low-income neighborhoods lack social capital. Temkin and Rohe (1998) find that strong “sociocultural milieus” is a better indicator of building community, than the incomes of the community members. The sociocultural environment variables that Temkin and Rohe (1998) track include whether residents refer to their neighborhood by a specific name, have loyalty for their neighborhood, work and/or shop in the neighborhood, borrow items from neighbors, and help neighbors with small tasks (p. 66). Temkin and Rohe (1998) conclude,

Neighborhoods with strong sociocultural milieus would be more likely to begin defensive measures in the face of potential threats. Residents in such neighborhoods will be more likely to view their neighborhoods as unique spatial communities (p. 69)

Overall, their study shows that “social capital plays an important role in neighborhood dynamics” (p. 84) and should be included in any analysis of neighborhood stabilization or revitalization. Throughout this dissertation, strong sociocultural milieus materialize in various ways. In Riverwest, loyal residents see their neighborhood as unique whereas in Portland, the various understandings of sociocultural milieus creates tension between neighbors as residents literally see *other* residents as a threat and try to defend their space. In Minneapolis, economic growth of specific neighborhoods appears to be more of a concern for city leaders and residents than creating strong bonds with neighbors. When researching community, it is important to remember that neighborhoods may have various markers of strong sociocultural milieus that do not resonate with all residents. In other words, we cannot assume that a neighborhood that appears to have social capital, pride, or friendliness is necessarily in solidarity with all of its neighbors. There are power dynamics in creating and working towards a neighborhood vision—someone has the power to decide what that vision looks like.

“Neighborhood” is a term not often theorized as “community,” but there is plenty written about how community is understood within neighborhoods. Pierre Mayol (1998), in *The Practice of Everyday Life Vol. 2*, defines neighborhood as:

[T]he place where one manifests a social ‘commitment’ ...the domain in which the space-time relationship is most favorable for a dweller who moves from place to



place on foot, starting from his or her home. ‘The walk’ is very important to the understanding of neighborhood (p. 8, 10).

Mayol’s reference to the pedestrian element of the neighborhood is important in understanding bicycling’s ability to foster community. Bicycling, like walking, can be utilized as a slow and autonomous technology to traverse a neighborhood. As interviews in Chapter 2 will showcase, the bicycle is purposefully chosen by the Riverwest 24 organizers as a community-builder due to the connection a rider has with their surroundings and passers-by. The simple act of speaking to the people you pass by and being visible to others makes the bike a special tool in fostering community. On the other hand, traversing the neighborhood by bus or automobile makes conversation outside of that object more difficult to achieve. Moreover, one could argue that the increase of mobile technology used while walking (e.g. smartphones, ear buds) makes bicycling a potentially superior community-building technology, because fewer cyclists use these technologies when they ride. Of course many bicyclists ride with destinations in mind and do not necessarily meander through their neighborhood, but the *ability* to hear and see your surroundings are immensely greater on a bike than other forms of mobility.

Although neighborhood and community are not synonymous terms, there are connections between the two, including that they are both vague and non-static terms. To Martin (2003), neighborhoods are socially constructed in “particular times and places, and therefore they are not fixed and specific” (p. 732). In-line with other research on community, the neighborhood can be seen by residents who might otherwise see themselves represented by “alternative identities based on race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or household type” as a “universal, common interest” (Martin, 2003, p. 733). In

other words, place is prioritized over other social identities. Neighborhood organizing can be seen as a social movement and Martin (2003) pushes the understanding of social movement theory by analyzing “micro-level neighborhood organizations” (p. 739). In my case, place and face-to-face interaction is the focal point to understanding the triumphs and tribulations of bicycle advocacy in urban spaces. My research shows that the history of particular places impact community reaction to bicycle amenities.

Many scholars agree that neighbors that internally organize themselves is a productive approach to build community (Etzioni, 1993; Schmidt, 2008; Martin, 2003; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). One theoretical model for building community is “whole community organizing” (Aigner, Raymond, & Smidt, 2002). This model is a critique of and response to local leaders and the elite taking charge and initiating planning efforts to develop the community; with the whole community organizing model, “everyone has a stake in the community.” (Aigner, Raymond, & Smidt, 2002, p. 93). One of most productive aspects of the whole community model is the focus on building reciprocal social relationships that cut across typical barriers. Whole community organizing is committed to crossing barriers of race, class, ethnicity, and gender (Aigner, Raymond, & Smidt, 2002), which have worked to historically reproduce homogenous communities. The Riverwest 24 organizers approach their event from a whole community organizing model that includes their concern to approach people holistically rather than based on a specific issue and their volunteer model that encourages everyone to contribute to the effort. The way that Riverwest 24 organizers communicate their whole community organizing model is two-fold. One, rhetorically, by referring to the event as the “people’s holiday” and explaining, on the Riverwest 24 website, that it’s an event

that all people in Milwaukee and beyond can enjoy by participating in, volunteering for or by cheering on...this is an event for anyone who wants to participate...there is no way a few people talking about a bike race in their back yards [sic] could have come up with this. *A whole neighborhood made this.*

(emphasis my own)

And two, by their simple actions of allowing anyone to help during the event. “Pop-up” volunteers emerge throughout the event by watching for traffic or handing out cookies and water that they procure themselves. No one is turned away from helping, which creates a welcoming environment for the entire community to contribute to the ever-growing annual event. In Portland, longtime residents insisted on “whole community organizing” after they felt alienated from the bicycle lane planning done by elite leaders in the bicycle advocacy sector. In Minneapolis, a public meeting about a new bicycle path proceeded tensely as residents expressed concern that the project would move forward without community input. Whole community organizing appears to be important to residents, no matter the stakes they hold in the urban bicycle community. Communication among residents is paramount for this organizing model to be successful.

One critique of the romanticization of “community” is that it privileges face-to-face communication. The small, decentralized unit that this ideal promotes is “an unrealistic vision for transformative politics in mass urban society” (Marion Young, 1990, p. 300). Face-to-face communication also privileges immediate space and place, thus devaluing and denying “difference in the form of temporal and spatial distancing” (Marion Young, 1990, p. 302). Yet scholars such as Martin (2003) argue that “place provides an important mobilizing discourse and identity for collective action” in

neighborhoods (p. 730). Place is important because “neighborhoods are socially constructed in particular times and places, and therefore they are not fixed and specific” (Martin, 2003, p. 732). Socially constructed neighborhoods have “real, material consequences for people who live in them” (Martin, 2003, p. 732). By combining social movement theory with urban geography, Martin (2003) develops the concept of “place-based collective-action frames” to highlight the relationship between activism based on an idea of neighborhood and the material experiences of that place. Collective-action framing highlights a “collective set of values, beliefs, and goals for some sort of change” (p. 733). The case studies in this dissertation are representative of “place-framing” collective-action because of my focus on community members’ ideas of what the neighborhood *should* be and how they experience their neighborhoods. For example, residents of the Albina neighborhood in Portland have divergent ideas about the neighborhood and how they materially experience the space. There is also a sense of divergent “place-framing” collective action as bicycle advocates pushed for a refurbished bicycle lane and longtime Black residents pushed for recognition of decades of community displacement and gentrification.

This review of community and/as communication scholarship has shown that communication and community are deeply intertwined in a plethora of ways: communicating what community *is*, the ways that social constructions of space communicate things about a community, who is given power to communicate the needs of a community, the productive elements of giving power to leaders or the entire community to solve local issues, and how personal identity markers impact community involvement. Community as/and communication is a broad theme that rides along

throughout this dissertation; I also specifically investigate a specific community and their impact on bicycling—the creative class. This demographic has proven to be powerful in determining when and where bicycle amenities are placed in specific communities.

### **The problems with the creative class**

My research suggests that cities are beginning to court specific communities of bicyclists. Bicycle advocates and city officials are interested in catering to bicyclists who fall in the “creative class” demographic.<sup>5</sup> A term popularized by Richard Florida (2002, 2012), members of the creative class are characterized as being young, educated, upwardly mobile, and working in the creative sector of labor such as architecture and graphic design. In the post-industrial U.S., this labor encompasses any job outside of or above the manual and service labor sectors. Although it is important to understand *who* these people are, what is most relevant to my project is understanding why cities desire these people to move to their urban hubs. Florida (2002, 2012) argues that cities that actively recruit the creative class will see improvements in their economies. This has shifted the way cities compete with each other. Instead of touting low income taxes, big sports arenas, and up-to-date malls, cities are encouraged to construct “a people’s climate,” full of spaces that are hip and tolerant of a diversity of lifestyles—which usually means just being tolerant of queer creative class members (Florida, 2002).<sup>6</sup> A more thorough discussion of the creative class appears in Chapter 4 where I argue that the City of Minneapolis is focusing its marketing and planning of bicycle infrastructure to

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<sup>5</sup> Not to ignore the coincidence that these bicycle advocates and city officials are largely *from* the creative class.

<sup>6</sup> The “Gay Index” is part of Florida’s (2012) diversity measurement of cities; measurements that provide “powerful support for the basic notion that diversity and creativity work together to power innovation and economic growth” (p. 246). This diversity is specific to queer populations and does not extend to racial or class diversity. In fact, Florida (2012) found a *negative* correlation between creative class jobs, such as high-tech firms, and “the nonwhite population” (p. 246).

recruit the creative class. Here I want to review some new literature on the creative class because I believe the myth of economic growth vis-à-vis this demographic has shaped bicycle advocacy writ large across urban spaces. The privileging of the creative class—an undeniably white demographic—helps to reproduce whiteness in bicycling communities. The privileging of particular groups of bicyclists, and the power these bicyclists hold, will be a reoccurring theme throughout this dissertation.

In 2012, Florida published an updated version of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, originally published in 2002. The *Revisited* edition swaps out data from the 00s and is replaced with new data—still supporting Florida’s theory. If anything, creative class affects cities much more than he predicted. “So many of the things that seemed shockingly new and outlandish when I first wrote about them—and that sent my critics into such a lather—are now seen as the norm” (Florida, 2012, p. viii). Florida (2012) continues by listing such “ludicrous” revelations as: “talent” favoring cities over suburbs, creative people not wanting to work in suburban industrial parks, and “older cities” regaining ground with the help of the creative class—ideas that now, according to Florida, “aren’t even controversial” (p. viii). Critics of Florida are politically diverse, but are isolated mostly on the fringes of the political sphere. For example, conservatives accused him of “attacking traditional family values, of promoting a gay agenda, and of undermining the foundations of Judeo-Christian civilization” (Florida, 2012, p. 316). Leftist radicals, such as Jamie Peck (2005), critiqued Florida for encouraging the “gentl[e] lubricating [of] the gentrification process” (p. 760). Other critics were skeptical that things such as bike amenities “would deliver an economic turnaround” (Ryan Avert as quoted in Florida, 2012, p. 317). Florida (2012) responds to the critique that his theory

is a tautology, resulting in talent clusters or clumps of people that are closed off to new entrants, by saying he does not believe in favoring the creative class over others. Yet in his conclusion, “Every Single Human Being Is Creative,” Florida (2012) insists that the creative class members are “natural leaders of the twenty-first century” and if only the Creative Economy would expand to the “lesser skilled” and service work sectors, then the “worsening class divides” would be eased (pp. 383-385).

Though Florida (2012) fought long and hard to defend his economic theory about the creative class, in January of 2013 he appeared to concede that his theory may be seriously flawed. With his Martin Prosperity Institute research team, Florida (2013a) looked into the effects of “talent clustering,” a term that refers to the creative class flocking to specific cities for specific lifestyle amenities. Florida (2013a) found that talent clustering does not produce trickle-down benefits to those who fall outside of the creative class: “Its benefits flow disproportionately to more highly-skilled knowledge, professional and creative workers.” “Less-skilled” service and blue-collar workers tend to earn more money in talent clusters, but “those gains disappear once their higher housing costs are taken into account” (Florida, 2013a). As Florida (2013a) says, “Housing costs rise as good jobs and more highly skilled workers gravitate to these places...exacerbated by restrictive zoning regulations.” Rebecca Diamond (2012), an economics graduate student at Harvard, reports that because “low skill workers are more price sensitive,” increasing rent discourages these workers from living in talent cluster cities (p. 39). Florida’s theory that the creative class can impact the economy of cities seems accurate in part because of the class’s ability to raise rent to be affordable only to the creative class and those above them. As critics point out, Florida has never been

interested in the working class's quality of life (Peck, 2005). After all, these "less-skilled" workers get to feed off the scraps left behind by the creative class, including recreational trails and refurbished downtowns. Interestingly, Florida (2013a) does not align his recent findings with his decade-long work on the creative class. Others see the connection clearly, as one online comment reads, "Here's the shorter version of Florida's article: 'I was wrong'" (Florida, 2013a). Or take urban development Professor Joel Kotkin's (2013) response to Florida's (2013a) article, titled, "Richard Florida Concedes the Limits of the Creative Class."<sup>7</sup> Kotkin (2013) reads Florida's recent findings as Florida admitting to what his critics "have said for a decade: that the benefits of appealing to the creative class accrue largely to its members" (par. 4).

He can run but cannot hide—Florida does have creative blood on his hands. His Creative Class Group has a list of clients—city governments for example—that have paid Florida to assist them in turning failing cities into the next Portland, OR or Austin, TX. Gleaning what I have from Florida's research (2013a) and his critics, there appears to be a correlation between displacement of poor people and creative class hubs. Florida has marketed a theory that works to isolate and push out anyone below the raced and classed marker of being a "creative." This theory is racially coded and indicates a new form of red-lining. Florida's newest research concerns my project because of the direct link between bicycle infrastructure and the creative class. In some ways, bicycle infrastructure planning is implicated in the destruction of the working class enclaves in cities; this implication will be investigated in detail in Chapters 3 and 4. Florida (2012) is insistent

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<sup>7</sup> Florida (2013b) responded a day after Kotkin's article was published with his own rebuttal, "Did I Abandon My Creative Class Theory? Not So Fast, Joel Kotkin," which ends up being an exercise in argument analysis and ad hominem attacks. "Kotkin likes to distract people and play to class and other prejudices with inflammatory language" (Florida, 2013b).



that any critiques levelled at him about culture or diversity will be difficult for him to manage. “I am not a student of [culture and diversity]...I have only a cursory understanding of them” but he finds them “fundamental to the process of economic growth” (p. 319). Florida’s creative class theory rests on culture and diversity; he argues that cities need a people’s climate and enough diversity to make the city desirable to the creative class. But he also insists he is ignorant of issues *about* culture and diversity. For someone to promote the necessity of culture and diversity yet claim to only have a “cursory” knowledge of connected issues is, to me, troubling. It is also a convenient position to dodge critiques about how the creative class materializes across the United States. His approach, or lack thereof, to demographics and cultural variance helps reproduce the whiteness inferentially embedded in his creative class theory. Florida does not question the whiteness of his theory, as represented in the creative class and its people’s climate. Race is not a variable in *who* the creative class is, despite the fact that the industries (education, graphic design, architecture) and social spaces (art galleries, cafés, recreational trails) that Florida sees as desirable to this demographic are overwhelmingly white spaces. This class has also fared substantially better in the post-2008 economic downturn era, especially in regards to housing. Rates of foreclosed homes continue to be higher in poorer neighborhoods, including in Minneapolis (Furst, 2012)—a shining example of what the creative class can apparently do for a city’s economics.

### **Studying the bicycle and its culture**

This dissertation is a response to what I see as a lack of intersectional, critical, and political bicycle scholarship. Literature on bicycle culture tends to begin from standpoints such as gender, social movements, history, advocacy, and technology The focus on one-

dimensional (e.g. gender), celebratory, and apolitical research has created a body of work that has ignored major cultural and socioeconomic factors that impact what bicycling looks like in various spaces. Furness's (2005) dissertation, "Put the Fun Between Your Legs: The Politics and Counterculture of the Bicycle," contends with the differences embedded in different cycling groups. "These differences essentially boil down to...those of cultural identity and political enfranchisement" (p. 19). Discussions of working class bicyclists and bicyclists of color are absent in contemporary and historical scholarship. It is a challenge, then, to discuss *why* particular people are excluded from a social space when their existence is not acknowledged in research. To understand how the bicycle is currently wrapped up in white, upper class privilege, we must look back to some of the bicycle's initial moments in the United States.

When bicycle companies began to mass produce bicycles in the last 19<sup>th</sup> century, the technology allowed particular groups (i.e. wealthy, white people) access to *more* mobility. Conversely, scholarship about bicycling in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests that people utilized the technology to *slow down* their mobility. A gap in historical understandings of the bicycle appears most notably when the automobile began to be mass-produced in the West and again during the post-Civil Rights era in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Despite the gap in historical understandings, there is a saturation of research done on 19<sup>th</sup> century cycling, especially with a focus on gender (Carse, 1994; Dando, 2007; Garvey, 1995; Horton, 2006; Lapinskiene, 2008; Mackintosh & Norcliffe, 2006; Mackintosh & Norcliffe, 2007; Marks, 1990; Strange & Brown, 2002; Zheutlin, 2007).

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<sup>8</sup> One of the few exceptions to this include Nicholas Oddy's *Cycling and Society* chapter, "The Flaneur on Wheels?" (2007), where he discusses how, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the working class was "exploited" and sold obsolete bicycle designs for very low prices (pp. 102, 104-105).

The connection between women and cycling in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is of interest to scholars because of the debates and panics about upper class women riding bicycles at that time. For example, “The Bicycle, Women’s Rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton” (Strange & Brown, 2002) is oft-cited by bicycle scholars for its succinct summary of how women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century used the bicycle for liberation from the home while they combated fear mongering techniques to keep them off the bicycle. Strange and Brown (2002) also expand the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century feminism beyond the suffrage movement by illustrating how the bicycle was a space for women’s rights to flourish. The article summarizes the moral and medical panics<sup>9</sup> and the response to such panics through suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s rhetoric. This article also is exemplary of the *white* feminist understanding of the bicycle because of its focus on the panics put upon upper class women and responses to those panics by well-known white suffragists. Strange and Brown chose to represent the radical response to the cycling panics through one white woman—Stanton. The authors conclude their article by arguing Stanton transformed the debate over women’s cycling, omitting other women’s voices, such as Francis Willard who in her book, *How I Learned to Ride a Bicycle* (Willard & O’Hare, 1991), argued the bicycle allowed women to *maintain* family values and their femininity. Stanton refused to accept a debate framed around women’s natural femininity, and pushed women to challenge the “prudes” in hopes that all women would one day ride without embarrassment or fear. Strange and Brown (2002) do not complicate Stanton’s known

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<sup>9</sup> Moral and medical panics included how the bike would lead to women becoming “loose” if given the freedom to ride with strange men, their being unable to bear children, their destroying the family by spending more time bicycling than on housework, their masturbating with their bicycle seat (to the point that manufacturers made “hygienic seats” that left a gap in the middle of the seat), their developing an ugly and concentrated “bicycle face,” and losing their femininity. Doctors and women argued against all of these panics in the popular press. For more on this see Lapinskiene, 2008 and Strange & Brown, 2002.

racism and the obvious privilege she possessed as an upper class feminist (Davis, 1983; Furness, 2010); regardless, her privilege allowed her and women like her to be able to speak out for women's mobility with apparently small consequences in their everyday lives.

Rhetoric from other prominent white feminists from this era, including Susan B. Anthony,<sup>10</sup> is continually re-published with excitement by bicycle scholars who have no critical insights as to how class and race allowed these women to push for bicycle mobility. Although Stanton represented a small minority of feminists pushing for radical usage of the bicycle, the rhetoric was powerful and is still used as encouragement for women to take up the bicycle for its “empowering” effect. But bicycling for leisure and for political reasons is still a privileged use of the bicycle, one reserved primarily for middle class, white people. Although people who fall outside of this demographic can certainly take up the bicycle for leisure and political motives, my observations suggest that working class and poor people are more likely to take up the bicycle as a *necessity*. In my archival research of 19<sup>th</sup> century press about women and cycling, the press exclusively covered the lives of upper class women cyclists. Many articles focused on the panics around women and cycling, articles that read as absurd today but also suggest a privileged position. There is privilege in having a woman's main concern be about upholding (or not) her femininity and commitment to her housework. A critical look at the political history of the bicycle perhaps helps explain the perpetuation of well-off white women's relative ease in riding a bicycle.

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<sup>10</sup> One of the most popular women and bicycling quotes comes from Susan B. Anthony who said, "I think [the bicycle] has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world" (Garrard, Handy & Dill, 2012, p. 214).

It is worth repeating that upper class, white social spaces were panicking more over the loss of women's femininity than in working class and/or Black social spaces. After all, Black women were often denied even the possibility of being seen as feminine in the public sphere. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes controlling images of Black women during the slave era as "ugly and unfeminine" (p. 27). During the slave era, the first controlling image inflicted on U.S. Black women was the "faithful, obedient domestic servant," or the mammy (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 72). Sojourner Truth's rhetorical question, "Ain't I a woman?" asked by her in the mid-1800s, reflects the status of Black women at the time. Truth said, "The man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches...Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles" (Lowenberg and Bogin, 1976, p. 235 as quoted in Hill Collins, 2000, p. 14). To the white majority, Black women were ugly, unfeminine, and *not women*. Therefore, if Black women were already understood as not-feminine, it is unlikely that society worried that a bicycle would future masculinize them.

Late 19th century history illustrates how different African American women's lives were than well-to-do white women. In the mid-1800s, U.S. Senate Republicans were trying to pass the 13th Amendment, making slavery illegal. In 1900 Ida B. Wells was covering the lynchings of her fellow African Americans and probably not remotely interested in combating myths of women's health and cycling. In her book, *Victorian Working Women*, Wanda F. Neff (1966) details the lives of women in the 1920s who worked 16 hour days and had health problems from working in factories; for example, pregnant women were worked so hard that some miscarried. Therefore I suspect that that African American and working class white women did not have time or energy to focus

on the feminist potential of the bicycle. As bicycle scholar Dave Horton (2006) notes, “Prior to the First World War the bicycle was still not a vehicle of the working classes” (par. 17). I bring together the divergent histories of U.S. Black and white women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to show how privilege permitted conversations about women’s morality as they rode through the countryside. My dissertation similarly explores how particular conversations about bicycling—such as refurbishing a bicycle lane in Portland, a city that remains a challenge to traverse as a pedestrian (such as a lack of curb cuts in sidewalks)—remain to be about privileged concerns.

Historical scholarship about women and bicycling adds to my dissertation because it shows how the bicycle has always been a politicized technology. For example, Dave Horton (2006) engages in a more longitudinal analysis of the politicized bicycle in his article, “Social Movements and the Bicycle.” Horton investigates how social movement actors have used bicycles to promote their politics. To do so, he looks at what he refers to as two “former” Western social movements, First Wave feminism and socialism, and two “current” social movements, anarchism and environmentalism. Horton’s discussion of the intersection of feminism and the bicycle mirror the other literature on 19<sup>th</sup> century bicycling. Horton explains that socialists in the 1890s and 1900s used bicycles to transport literature about their political platform, trying to “convert the masses” and often travelling to working class communities. The bicycle proved to be “an ideal means of spreading the message of socialism to far-flung places” (Horton, 2006, par. 21). After many decades of automobility being the dominant form of transport, some social movements worked to disrupt this hegemony vis-à-vis the bicycle. “Contemporary anarchism and environmentalism are complexly interconnected, and perhaps nowhere

more than in the politics of transport” (Horton, 2006, par. 39). Both groups have generally opposed car culture and embraced bicycle culture. Although these are not mutually exclusive groups with their “driving” ideologies, Horton (2006) sees anarchists using the bicycle as a form of protest and environmentalists (also engaged with the anti-car politics) as everyday users of the bicycle to mark their “green credentials.” These historical descriptions suggest that this technology has always politicized mobility. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the goal of bicycle advocates was to increase mobility and exposure to various communities, whereas more recently the goal of bicycle advocates has been to *contain* mobility and integrate bicycling in a person’s everyday life. Although his discussion of socialist and working class reactions to the bicycle is an anomaly in bicycle scholarship and an important addition to bicycle history, Horton’s work largely fails to be intersectional because his discussion of gender ends when he talks about feminism and there is no discussion of ethnicity or race within any of the movements he studied.

Beyond theorizing the bicycle as a conceptually and material political form of technology and mobility, scholarship has also dealt with the bicycle’s political intersection with automobility. In *One Less Car: Bicycles and the Politics of Automobility*, Furness (2010) explores the politicization of the bicycle as it intersects, struggles, and triumphs within car culture. Furness (2010) argues that the bicycle cannot be studied in isolation, because it is always connected to power dynamics, the largest being those of automobility in Western culture. Furness’s (2010) argument that bicycle culture cannot be studied in isolation from power supports my dissertation’s argument that bicycle advocacy is always wrapped up in its cultural, spatial, and political surroundings. It also supports my argument that the bicycle is a rolling signifier—as the

bicycle moves in and out of different places, its relationship to power and meaning changes.

Now that I have discussed pertinent literature that frames my overall argument, I will shift to discussing how I constructed the methodology of this project and the embedded ethics of researching communities.

### **Methods and ethics**

The case studies found in this dissertation are an assemblage of multiple methodologies due to my commitment to community engagement, social justice, and feminist research methods and ethics. I approach my research from a feminist standpoint that reflects a method of learning crafted by scholars in response to ethical quandaries in studying people's social space, identity, and community politics. My research reflects a desire to challenge dominant academic epistemologies while also struggling to push against and not reify imperialist ethnographic fieldwork.

### **Ethical considerations**

The academy, long dominated by white, heterosexual men, greatly influences knowledge production, including research about marginalized communities. Feminist scholars continually attempt to transform knowledge production in the academy, fighting for openness of what is accepted by other scholars as respectful work (Bondi, 2002). One way feminists have attempted to transform knowledge production is through non-positivist research with a conscious political purpose. Participant-observation ethnography is one way to approach non-positivist research; it is not uncommon for ethnographers to get involved with the communities they study, often turning into advocates for their informants or co-researchers.



Broadly speaking, ethnography entails face-to-face interaction with the people, places, spaces, and things being researched. Historically, ethnography was focused on in-depth explorations of cultures other than the researcher's. The explorations require researchers to live within that culture for an extended period of time. The researcher takes detailed notes while living within that culture and organizes their research in various ways because there is not a model of reproducing ethnographic knowledge. They gain information through observation, talking with the people in the community, and interpreting this with their personal reactions to the community. More recent ethnographic projects have focused on the everyday lives in communities that are familiar in geographical region and culture; thus the point is not for a researcher to explore an "exotic" culture but to study communities in closer cultural proximity to them. Feminist scholars remain concerned that imperialist research can be produced studying subjects on the "inside;" spatial or cultural proximity does not guarantee a privileging of the subaltern.

Ethnography is intersubjective because the method requires the researcher to be self-reflexive about their positionality and their research. There are complexities with negotiating the "self" and studying the "other" and this ethical concern contributes to researchers' uneasiness with the ethnographic method. But even in more "inward" explorations of culture, colonizing research is still possible. Feminist ethnographers are especially attuned to this. For example, feminists of color have thoroughly critiqued ethnography done by white women for its lack of self-reflexivity that comes from doing research in non-white spaces. If a white researcher's everyday experience is positioned in the West then there is risk in bringing embedded racialized discourse into their research

(Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This is what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) calls research through “imperial eyes” where

Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 56).

My research runs the risk of being written through “imperial eyes,” as I study the impact bicycle advocacy can have on people of color in mostly working class neighborhoods. I try to avoid seeing these case studies through imperial eyes by writing extensively on the histories and viewpoints of people of color communities. I lay out in detail the marginalization expressed by people of color about bicycle infrastructure planning and do not defend the “colonizing” bicycle advocates.

The ethnography I engage in is focused on the everyday lives of communities I am familiar with and I chose my case studies based on this familiarity. This choice illuminates the rather simplistic issue of ethnographers’ insider/outsider status. Is it better to already be involved in the community or culture we study? Or should we come to the project with very little experience for whom and what we study? Hill Collins (2004) offers a more nuanced understanding in her discussion of being an “outsider within:” a person who does not belong to any one group. Hill Collins (2004) points to Black women as the quintessential outsiders within: being doubly marginalized (by their community and academia) and also traversing various communities. Diane Wolf (1996) describes this position as being in two different, incompatible worlds. The marginalization I encounter as a white, feminist academic exploring urban bicycle culture is palpable but not nearly

as intense as other marginalized scholars. I find the “outsider within” framework helpful in my longtime immersion in urban bicycle culture mixed with my fairly recent position as a critic of this culture. Feminist researchers who do fieldwork often argue being an “insider” ethnographer is more acceptable than being an “outsider.” For example, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that “outsiders” tend to produce research that seeks to be positivist, objective knowledge. “Most research methodologies assume the researcher is an outsider, able to observe without being implicated in the scene” (p. 137). Still, there is a need to be self-reflexive in researching one’s own community, especially when the academy can erect an invisible wall between the people studied and the research the scholar produces.

Regardless of whether one is an outsider, insider, both or neither, the ability to research and write about other people’s experiences is laden with unequal power distribution. One of the biggest issues feminist scholars have doing fieldwork is the power dynamics that are inherent in the research and how disruptive the dynamics are for feminist notions of working relations (M. Wolf, 1996, p. 216). In short, feminist scholars want to avoid exploiting those they research by any means necessary, but sometimes scholars are initially unaware of how the exploitation will operationalize. For example, a young, white, U.S. ethnographer doing fieldwork in Asia may have trouble dealing with the privilege her ethnicity and nationality give her during her research (M. Wolf, 1996). Feminist ethnographers have to negotiate with studying issues of power and avoiding reifying the unequal power distributions that they critique. It is important for these negotiations to continue and to not allow them to “paralyze” us (M. Wolf, 1996, p. 217). Margery Wolf (1996) argues that exploitation of those we research does not

automatically happen due to power inequality, it happens when fieldworkers use their advantages to gain goals at a real cost to the people they are studying (p. 217). Feminist researchers would not be studying communities were it not for the inequality with their informants; the findings are unfortunately only as important as the places we take the research to (e.g. academia, publishing houses). Ideally, feminist researchers use the information obtained from their informants to analyze structures of inequality that will hopefully benefit many more people than those originally studied (M. Wolf, 1996).

I structured my ethnography to privilege the people and communities that I studied because I believe the people I spoke to and observed harness knowledge that is just as, if not more, important than the knowledge I bring to this project. The people I interacted with undoubtedly impacted, changed, and influenced my research. This materializes in this project in two connected ways: one, including long-form quotes from people I interviewed; and two, striving to have a balanced approach to allowing the people's ideas speak for themselves and contextualizing the interviews for reader clarity and analytic rigor. This research ethic also highlights the privilege *I* possess in my ability to “let” people speak. “‘Letting’ women speak suggests First World feminists are wielding their hegemonic power over Third World women by allowing them an audience” (D. Wolf, 1996, p. 26). I am complicit in this exercise of hegemonic power but I do not see my work as a gracious allowance of the Black voice; I see their voices as a necessity to this project.

It is common for ethnographers to encourage the people they study to shape their research. I engaged in this concept by sharing my dissertation chapters with everyone I

interviewed and asked them for edits and feedback.<sup>11</sup> Ethnographers are also concerned about how they refer to the people they study. For example, activist-oriented ethnographers suggest people should be called “co-researchers” instead of the common terms “participant” or “informant” (Greenwood & Levin, 2006). Although I understand the political and ethical reasons for referring to people as “co-researchers,” I do not feel comfortable using that term to refer to most people I interviewed and worked with. I have chosen to refer to the people who agreed to be interviewed and/or shared their “insider” knowledge with me as informants. This is because despite my best intentions, many people did not engage with me during the writing and editing process.<sup>12</sup> As I discuss in detail in Chapter 5, I received feedback from only a few informants. Even though I hoped and strived for more interaction, it would feel misleading to call the people I interacted with co-researchers or collaborators.

In-line with my desire for community-based research, I utilized the participatory action research fieldwork model. With this methodology, researchers are actively involved with the communities they study, including being a part of local activism. This form of labor on behalf of the researcher not only helps the community but also lends itself to groundbreaking research. Participatory action research attends to unequal power dynamics between the researcher and what they study. Diane Wolf (1996) believes that “we must decenter ourselves from the ivory tower and create more participatory research practices” (p. 31) and suggests that, in light of our failures to engage the community, we

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<sup>11</sup> I discuss my informants’ reactions to my research in Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> Exceptions to this would be Steve Whitlow from Chapter 2, Drew Meisel from Chapter 3, Michael Gross from Chapter 4, and Nicholas Hengen Fox, a rather invisible source for Chapter 3. These people either continued to send me information after our formal interviews and/or offered to help do further research for my project.

should continue confronting and integrating these failures, striving for politically meaningful research coalitions and projects. Throughout this project I have remained involved in bicycle advocacy and activism work in Riverwest and Minneapolis.<sup>13</sup> It is through this action-oriented model that researchers and participants can “instigate meaningful and needed change that is defined endogenously” (D. Wolf, 1996, p. 28). Additional characteristics of action research include developing a fluid epistemology both in gathering evidence and presenting findings. Action research values significant community issues which makes the research a changing and developing process, “as those engaged deepen their understanding of the issues to be addressed” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, pp. 3-4). In other words, community-based action research is necessarily deductive and guided by the community and the fluidity of their issues and concerns. Action research is not a top-down model of scholarship where the research determines what is and is not important to study.

Although most research is done with a plan in place before execution, ethnographers can and should implement a more fluid research plan. Media ethnographer Elizabeth Bird (2003) encourages ethnographers to be flexible and be aware of the impact an ethnographic methodology can have on the research outcomes. The fluidity of my research plan created a unique approach to studying bicycle culture. I wanted to experience and interact in the spaces of my case studies and remained open to inspiration and surprising sources. For example, the rich description in Chapter 3 of N. Williams Ave. in Portland was directly inspired by Robert Topinka’s (2012) work on the rhetorical power of walking in a commercial suburban space. The interview in Chapter 4 with

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of my volunteer labor are discussed in Chapter 5.

Michael Gross, a Minneapolis realtor, happened when a friend dissuaded me from analyzing property values and gave me the idea to talk to people who sell houses near popular bicycle infrastructure. Had I ridden into this project with an already formulated research methodology, I would have been resistant and unable to integrate these methodological visions. This fluidity makes sense, though, because the core essence of ethnography is inductive, to allow informants and the environment to dictate where your research travels.

Another important aspect of ethnography is describing the mundane. These details, no matter how insignificant they may seem, can drive the research of ethnographers. Geertz (1989) argues we need to paint a detailed picture of whom and where we study so that readers feel as if they have been there and if they would travel to the space, they would see similar things. Bird (2003) suggests that ethnographers should reach beyond participant-observation so that we can understand how people's experiences are impacted by larger societal forces. This is why I spend ample time in this dissertation describing the surroundings and detailing the history of the spaces I study. The bicycle advocacy that I study does not exist in a bubble; I believe it is important to understand the cultural and economic conditions surrounding the advocacy. Rich descriptions of place and harnessing emotions of people are important in this project, as influenced by feminist ethnographers.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> H. L. Goodall Jr. (2000) attempted to refer to these characteristics as "new ethnography," but the editors of *Women Writing Culture* (1996), Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, argued that the development of "new ethnography" was written by and for white male scholars. Behar and Gordon insisted that "new ethnography" attempted to validate personal experience in ethnography despite it being typically undermined when used by women researchers. Feminist ethnographers have been pushing for emotional and experience-based research long before Goodall called for such scholarship.

## Mapping of methods

True to feminist ethnography, the research methodologies I utilize in this dissertation are non-traditional and interdisciplinary. I did not constrain myself to any traditional methodology structure, which allowed me to utilize methods that seemed most appropriate for what I wanted to explore. The methodology structure I utilize in Chapter 2 consisted of long-form interviews, historical research and years of participant-observation to generate a grounded theory of how a 24-hour urban bicycle event builds community. Grounded theory research gave me guidance on how to organize hours of interviews about a phenomenon that has not been studied before. Existing research on community did not resonate with the phenomenon I was studying so developing my own theory allowed me to speak directly to community-building in the Riverwest 24. What I appreciated the most about the grounded theory method was the way it forced me to theorize about community using only my interviews and observations. This stopped me from theorizing what *might* be going on or what I would *hope* to be going on. I developed a community-building theory using only the ideas of Riverwest 24 organizers and participants, which downplayed the privilege I hold as a researcher and writer. To collect these ideas, I was fortunate to be able to interview the Riverwest 24 organizers and some participants over a long autumn weekend in 2011. My involvement in the event since its inception allowed me unique access to the event. The space that I conducted the interviews influenced my access to people as well. Fuel Café is a mainstay in Riverwest and remains a meeting ground for residents. I stationed myself at the café for a weekend and was able to interview people “on the fly” as they came into the café. In my six-year residency in Riverwest, I spent a lot of time at Fuel Café and I capitalized on my familiar



face to chat with people about the event. My residency in Riverwest gave me access to historical research on the neighborhood, both in text and oral histories I have heard over the years. Five years of participant-observation during the Riverwest 24 as both a volunteer and participant gave me a generous amount of additional history and context to work with in developing a theory of community-building.

In Chapter 3 I struggled with researching a place largely inaccessible to me and again deployed hybrid methods. I relied on an informant in Portland to keep me updated on an ongoing neighborhood dispute about a bicycle lane in the Albina neighborhood. Over the course of a year, I was fortunate to be able to spend roughly a month in Portland. In this time I stayed in the neighborhood I was studying and spent as much time as possible on the street where the bicycle lane dispute centered. This allowed me some ability to get a “feel” for the neighborhood and the political context for the dispute. I visited Portland three times over a year and my absences made the gentrification of the neighborhood even starker. Towards the end of my research, a friend of mine moved to Portland and it was helpful to see his reaction to the Albina neighborhood with fresh eyes. Because I did not live in Portland, I relied on a bike news blog, academic articles about Portland, and mainstream news stories to keep me updated on the fast-changing neighborhood and related bicycle infrastructure. During my stays, I interviewed numerous people involved in Portland bicycle advocacy, including a journalist who covers bicycle news and a long-time resident who has made multiple films about Portland bicycle culture. I wanted readers to understand the space-based juxtapositions present in Albina so I took the time to painstakingly describe what N. Williams Ave. looked like in May 2012—something I believe was paramount in understanding my argument. In this

chapter I support my ethnography with theories on haunting and neoliberalism to discuss the raced and classed repercussions of bicycle advocacy.

The research I conducted to write Chapter 4 was possible due to my four-year residency in Minneapolis. I was able to use the bicycle infrastructure I studied daily, easily keep track of bicycle infrastructure projects, and have access to bicycle advocates and city government officials. For example, the interview I conducted with Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak occurred during his monthly open office hours, where he allows residents to speak with him about any issue for 10 minutes. I was able to attend a public meeting in North Minneapolis with less than a day's notice after I stumbled across the announcement online. By living in Minneapolis, I was also able to track the growing amount of bicycle infrastructure and its impact on the surrounding communities. More than any other chapter, my positionality was immensely helpful to gather the research I did. As my research progressed, I became more and more wary of the ways in which Minneapolis's government and bicycle advocacy groups utilized bicycle infrastructure to build a "better" city. Despite my growing critiques of urban bicycling in Minneapolis, the bicycle advocates I spoke with talked with me as an ally. This was clearest when the mayor told me he used the marketing of bicycle infrastructure to recruit people like me. Unintentionally, I "passed" as a mainstream bicycle advocate and so people told me things as if I was celebrating the infrastructure and systemic arrangements that made this infrastructure possible. I did not intentionally mislead my informants<sup>15</sup> but had to remind the informants who reviewed Chapter 4 that I *was* critical of Minneapolis bicycle advocacy. Similar to Chapter 2, the Minneapolis case study is based on my ethnographic

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<sup>15</sup> I told interviewees that I was doing research on urban bicycle advocacy in three U.S. cities and described the focus of each case study.

work. But to explain some of the phenomenon about biking in Minneapolis, I bring in theories on the creative class, environmental gentrification, and media studies work on the power of representation.

I approached my research methodologies with care, self-reflexivity, and fluidity. I believe my creative approach to qualitative research produced a unique dissertation project. I was inspired by many scholars and community members, but the methodology is mine alone. It would be difficult to recreate this methodology elsewhere if only because the nuances of my research gathering were unique to the people and places I analyzed.

To conclude this introduction, I want to paint a picture for readers to illustrate the subjectivity embedded in bicycle communities. By this I mean, the bicycle and bicycle culture are concepts that do not have static definitions; I argue that the meaning changes according to who you are. Following this discussion I will present an overview of the successive chapters.

### **The bicycle as a rolling signifier: a narrative**

#### **What is a bicycle?**

Upon first glance, the bicycle may seem like an object with little symbolic meaning. It is a two-wheeled vehicle, human-powered, and pedal-driven. It is a mode of transportation, a technology, and a tool for exercise or leisure. The “discursive concept” of the bicycle is more involved than what Stuart Hall (1996) calls the “formal understanding” crafted by those in power. As Hall (1996) suggests, discursive concepts mark how ideas and knowledge about a subject/object organize people’s practices. Just as I have argued that bicycles are absent from any scholarly discussion of community, a

discussion of the bicycle as discourse is also absent. The following is a narrative I have constructed about what it is to be a bicyclist and what “bicycle culture” discursively represents. This narrative is based on my personal experience being an urban bicyclist for over 10 years, media representations of bicycling, and my observations of bicycle culture living in cities that privilege a particular type of bicyclist. This narrative lacks scholarly support if only because bicycle scholars are only beginning to have conversations about what it means to be a bicyclist or be a part of bicycle culture.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the clearest examples of the “discursive bicycle” form along identity lines of class, race, and gender. Poor and working class riders utilize the bicycle in very different ways than does the bicycle commuter—at least in media images.<sup>17</sup> Although both groups use a bicycle on a daily basis, the *necessity* of the bicycle is divergent. The working class and poor may have no other choice than to ride a bicycle. A car is simply too expensive and if there is reliable mass transportation, the increasing fares may also be unaffordable. For example, in Minneapolis, a month of rush-hour bus fare would cost a worker \$90. Monthly upkeep of a bicycle, barring any major malfunction, costs close to nothing.<sup>18</sup> The “bicycle commuter,” on the other hand *chooses* to ride to work. The middle-upper class, often white, commuter has the resources and time to take other forms of transportation. It is not unusual for a bicycle commuter to also own a car. The bicycle

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the Bicultures Roadshow academic conference in April 2013 included sessions titled, “Is There a Bicycle Culture?” and “The Relationship Between Bicycling and Culture.”

<sup>17</sup> Although not scientifically sound, a Google image search for “winter bicycle commuting” comes back with an overwhelming number of images of white men barreling through snowy roads.

<sup>18</sup> A purchase of a bicycle is often an investment for future transportation savings. In other words, the initial cost may be at least 100 dollars. For many people, it is hard to imagine spending that much money on a bicycle. Many cities have community bicycle shops that encourage people to trade labor in the shop for a free bicycle; some even loan out bicycles long-term for people in need. See for example, Cycles for Change in St. Paul, MN.

becomes not only a form of transportation but also a lifestyle choice and a marker of personal pride.

Media coverage of “cyclists” paints a clear picture of who a bicyclist is and is not. Journalists love to cover the lives of urban cyclists. Take for example *The Boston Globe*’s “Through the eyes of a city cyclist,” a firsthand account of bicycle commuting by Ty Burr. It represents a common frame for such stories: recounting of the commuter’s route to work and the risks they take to get there. Pictures of white, male-bodied Burr riding his bicycle show him on an expensive road bike, and so we already know he is not an “invisible bicyclist.”<sup>19</sup> Burr’s premise is that his 10-mile commute to the *Globe* offices is risky and a form of “hardcore urban bicycling.” And that he loves it. The reader is encouraged to respect his choice and congratulate him on riding 10 miles to work. Although never explicitly stated in the article, privilege underlies his story. In fact he possesses so much privilege that he actively and *proudly* takes risks in commuting, despite being a father and two recent bicycling deaths in Boston. On the other hand, many people who use a bicycle as transportation have no choice but to take risks. They do not get the space to write about their harrowing journey to and from work. There is privilege in being able to *choose* risk instead of having no option but to take the risk.

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<sup>19</sup> An “invisible bicyclist” refers to people who ride bikes in a different way than those involved in mainstream bike culture. According to Koepfel (2006), writing for *Bicycling* magazine, invisible riders are often day laborers and undocumented workers—riding to work because it is the cheapest option. They ride to work on “equipment most of us wouldn’t touch and under the most adverse conditions: at the height of rush hour on the busiest thoroughfares.” Koepfel continues, “I don’t know a single rider who commutes more than [invisible riders], who do it purely out of necessity, and who do on bikes that...are stripped of so many essential engineering details that we’d consider them unreliable.” Throughout his article, Koepfel maintains the division between invisible riders and readers of *Bicycling* through the use of “we” and “they.” *We* would never ride the bikes the day laborers do, *we* do not commute as much as *they* do. Also, see Mohan (2011) who describes “invisible cyclists” in part as undocumented workers, “low-income individuals who can’t afford cars; those who’ve had their licenses revoked...or residents of communities where public transit infrastructure is poor or nonexistent.”

There are few exceptions to this observation—one being a feature article on “marginalized cyclists” in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Jake Mohan (2011) follows the bicycling lifestyle of Mike “Gizmo” Johnson, who amassed his fleet of bicycles by working with a local bike shop dedicated to helping low-income people. Mohan (2011) reflects, “Johnson doesn’t fit into any of the stereotypes that contemporary culture—with generous assistance from national and local media—has perpetuated about urban bicyclists” (par. 3). The bicyclists who are often rendered invisible in bicycle culture and mainstream media are understood as poor, people of color. Jason Tanzman, outreach director for Cycles for Change in St. Paul, understands invisible cyclists to refer to people who are unseen by “the white cycling world...but it’s potentially problematic as a term because it’s putting front and center all the ‘normal’ cyclists, the non-invisible cyclists” (Mohan, 2011).

This discourse about the bicycle being a choice and marker of pride conflicts drastically with how young people of color understand this form of transportation. To many youth, bicycles denote poverty. For example, in my interviews with Riverwest 24 organizers, who are also public school teachers, they talked about how youth of color who grow up poor see the bicycle as only a necessity when one is out of money. The goal from them is to escape poverty, escape the urban city center, and get enough money to buy a car to facilitate such an escape. In my interviews with Riverwest 24 organizers, almost all of them told me the same story about their personal experience interacting with youth of color about bicycling. When the organizers would ride into work as public school teachers, the kids would talk with them about why they did not have a car to get to

work.<sup>20</sup> Although this may seem like an innocent story about the conflicting cultures in urban spaces, these polarized discourses about the bicycle actually have a detrimental effect. A lot of time, energy, and resources are spent trying to encourage people to bicycle. I argue that this encouragement largely goes to waste in communities of color because of what the bicycle signifies to them.

There are specific issues that impact people of color and the working class and poor who are largely overlooked by well-intentioned bicycle advocates. For example, in many apartment buildings, there are no places to store bicycles and when left outside, are often stolen or ruined by the weather (“Understanding Barriers to Bicycling,” 2010). Additionally, people of color often feel anxiety when using transportation, a phenomenon known as “driving while Black.” To some, the fear of racial profiling and/or deportation is a barrier to riding a bicycle. For example, in a 2002 issue of *Mother Jones*, an article aptly titled “Biking While Black” reports on a lawsuit filed by 21 Black cyclists who proclaimed they were stopped on their bicycles by police due to their race. After a rash of bicycles were stolen in a Detroit suburb, the police targeted Black youth and questioned them on the thefts. One cyclist explained, “‘I thought, so why is he stopping me?’ Then, a white kid pedaled by. ‘I was mad,’ Davon says. ‘This Caucasian kid rolled right in front of the cops. For all they knew he could have been stealing that bike and taking it to Detroit’” (Rusch, 2002). Thus, a person of color may be reluctant to use a bicycle as a form of transportation, especially in the face of racial profiling, threats of deportation, or if they are simply unsure of the rules of the road as a cyclist which could, in turn, get you

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<sup>20</sup> Examples of this are recounted in Chapter 2.

pulled over. This anxiety is simply not felt by most bicycle advocates and rarely addressed when trying to get more people on bicycles.<sup>21</sup>

Individual cities may also have specific cultural dynamics that require advocates to reframe their approach to encouraging people to bicycle. For example, in Minneapolis there is a large Somali population whose cultural norms can impact the way Somali women bicycle. On March 30, 2013, I worked with Nasser, a Somali woman, at a Learn to Ride (a bicycle) teacher training workshop in St. Paul. Nasser highlighted many barriers that are specific to Somali women including how to wear a bicycle helmet with a hijab, how to ride a bicycle with a long skirt, and how to handle the possible need to segregate by gender when learning how to ride a bicycle. When these barriers are compared to the ones stressed by mainstream bicycle advocacy (i.e. more bicycle lanes, more off-street trails), there is a noted erasure in the mainstream of culture, race, gender, and class-based barriers. It is worth the time to reframe the discussion of barriers to bicycling not due to our car-dependent culture but due to differing discourses about what a bicycle means to a person. Bicycle advocates may start with the simple exercise of asking people “what is a bicycle?” to discover how different people see this technology.

Lastly, the bicycle has specific meanings along gender lines, and this too is rooted in historical understandings of identity and transportation. The bicycle has held significant political meaning for women since the traditional bicycle was invented. There are two such lasting discursive understandings that carry through to today. One is the historical context of the panic over women bicycling. Today there are similar discussions happening based on what bicycle infrastructure women desire for safety reasons and what

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<sup>21</sup> An exception to this is Portland’s Community Cycling Center and its 2010 “Understanding Barriers to Bicycling” report.



clothing is appropriate for women bicyclists to wear. There is ongoing research trying to find out how to get women on bicycles because women ride at significantly lower rates than men (Anderson, 2008; Baker, 2009; Garrard, Handy & Dill, 2012). In this context, it is unwise to ignore the historical discourses of the bicycle for women because it is a discourse that has prevailed for over a century. The second discursive understanding is rooted in *what type* of women rode the bicycle in the late 1800s. In my extensive archival research of news articles about bicycling in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, all of the articles focused on elite, white women. The bicycle was expensive at first and women needed the resources to purchase one. According to Oddy (2007), the bicycle did not become the “poor man’s transit” until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Images from the 1890s of women on bicycles show elaborate outfits and are placed in settings such as rolling farmland or private cycling clubs. To put it another way, there were no news articles about the working class, poor, and/or women of color riding the bicycle. In fact, there is very little research that references working class bicyclists and no research that focuses on women of color.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it is almost impossible to know, without a large oral history project, how people of color, for example, have understood the bicycle.<sup>23</sup> Not only do women, people of color, and the lower classes approach the bicycle against a history that excluded their participation and attention, but they may also lack a connection to the discursive understanding of the bicycle. Moreover, some people may see bicycling, especially for commuting purposes, as a marker of whiteness and may not want to associate with that identity. Through this discussion of what a bicycle is to different people, we can begin to

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<sup>22</sup> The same could be said about men of color save for mentions in Furness (2010), Dan Koeppel’s (2006) article on invisible riders, and Andrew Richie’s (1996) book about the first African American bicycle racer, Major Taylor.

<sup>23</sup> Exceptions to this include Koeppel (2006) and Mohan (2011).

see how the bicycle has been classified as a technology for white, male, upwardly mobile people. This classification may be hidden under the championing of the “bicycle community” in urban spaces.

### **What is a bicycle community?**

The terms “bicycle community” and “bicycle culture” are references by bicycle advocates, bloggers, and journalists as an attempt to utilize an all-inclusive descriptor of everyone who rides a bicycle. But it is more commonly and erroneously used by these people to describe a very specific type of cyclist. As blogger Isa Hopkins (2013) affirms, “If I asked you to picture a prototypical cyclist, you’d probably conjure an image of a lean white guy rocking a snug, Spandex-Lycra blend racing suit.” Hopkins (2013) then links readers to images of Lance Armstrong and a caricature of a white “hipster”<sup>24</sup> bicyclist, with the connected text, “You know, this guy, or maybe this one.” I am interested in exploring who is this urban bicyclist people tend to think of when they talk about bicycle culture or community. They are very visible cyclists. The bicycle is their main form of transportation. They are usually white and comes from a middle-to-upper class background. These cyclists find their usage of the bicycle to be political. They have not been driven to use the bicycle for economic reasons, but rather actively choose to sell their car as an environmentally political move. They know of their legal right to ride on the street with traffic, and may inform aggressive automobile drivers of this right. They may demand space on the road and expect city planners to attend to bicycle infrastructure with repaving of roads and new pathways throughout the city. They usually socialize with other visible cyclists like themselves. They may participate in “bicycle community”

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<sup>24</sup> As defined in the *Hipster Handbook*, a hipster is “one who possesses tastes, social attitudes, and opinions deemed cool by the cool” ([hipsterhandbook.com](http://hipsterhandbook.com); Lanham, 2003).

events such as Critical Mass and alleycats (urban, non-regulated bike races). They may dress in clothes that are designed for cyclists, such as sturdy canvas shoes, tight legged pants, and a coat made for winter cyclists. They typically use a backpack designed by and for cyclists. These clothes and accessories are not cheap, but are often the focal point of their consumption. They may have more than one bike for different types of cycling and weather. They are overtly proud of their cycling and overtly angry at the car traffic that impedes their travel time. They actively encourage other people in their peer group to ride a bicycle. They are often unconvinced of the excuses people use to not ride a bicycle.

The type of cyclist I just described is understood by small groups of bicyclists *as* bicycle culture, but by no means is this an authoritative definition. These cyclists have a certain amount of privilege in urban bicycling spaces and, as BikeSnobNYC (2010) explains, “since there is no official governing body of cycling to regulate the term, they get away with it” (p. 131). There are detrimental effects to having such a definition of bicycle culture. “It’s discouraging to want to join the bike culture only to discover it’s a bunch of people with custom messenger bags sitting around in a bar watching their buddy doing [bicycle] tricks. That’s not bike culture” (BikeSnobNYC, 2010, p. 131).

Even though this bicycle culture is largely a myth, this remains the culture people refer to when they research, write, praise, and complain about bicycling. When studies forecast an upswing in daily bike trips, they reference the type of cyclist I describe here. Is there an upswing of day laborer cyclists, too poor to even afford bus fare? We actually do not know because almost no one researches them<sup>25</sup> because they are the invisible

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<sup>25</sup> I have been researching bicycle advocacy, bicycling communities, and the history of the bicycle for four years. In my extensive research, and networking with other bicycle scholars, I have found almost no research focusing on poor, working class, and/or people of color and bicycling. I have also combed through

cyclists (Koeppel, 2006). I have lived in working class neighborhoods for many years and have observed these invisible cyclists riding around the city. Because I have connections to mainstream bicycle advocacy, I also hear white, privileged cyclists' reactions to these rather rebellious cyclists. The invisible cyclists—or the cyclists that white, middle-class cyclists refuse to see—often ride on department store bikes, travel on sidewalks and down the wrong way in bike lanes, and wear clothes that can hinder the cyclist (or so the dominant bicycle community would say). They literally try to stay invisible, unlikely to use bicycle lanes and off-road paths like the more vocal and visible cyclists do. Invisible cyclists often live in the poor areas of town and are disproportionately people of color (Koeppel, 2006; Mohan, 2011). They do not participate in bicycle community events, buy expensive bicycle clothes, or attend city planning meetings about bicycle infrastructure. They appear to be uneducated about their rights to the road or choose not to exercise that right. They are even the neighborhood kids riding about on their bikes. They certainly are not a part of “bicycle culture,” right?

Thus, we have a problem. How can we talk about bicycle community or culture when the very terms denote racist and classist assumptions? How can we, for example, applaud the increase of women cyclists in Minneapolis when we are really just talking about white, middle-class women (Marcotty, 2011; City of Minneapolis, 2013b)?<sup>26</sup> Yet simultaneously the very people who are known as the invisible cyclists are the demographic targeted by community bicycle shops and affordable rental programs. These

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many quantitative studies about bicycling and while they often have gender as a variable, class and race are rarely listed as variables. I will discuss this lack of research further in Chapter 5.

<sup>26</sup> For example, the 2012 City of Minneapolis Bicycle and Pedestrian Count Report shows that 24 percent of Minneapolis bicyclists are women but no other demographic data are included to nuance this report (City of Minneapolis, 2013a).

bicyclists and community organizations yearn to use the bicycle to teach people specific skills and values. They may employ homeless youth, encourage participation of people who have never ridden a bicycle before, or use the bicycle to get youth out of problematic urban spaces (i.e. gangs and drug circles). They use the bicycle in political ways, albeit in ways that divert from those that demand bicycle lanes and the abolishment of freeways (Blue, 2011). The collusion and collision of these two spaces: bicycle culture and community-bicycle culture is the driving narrative of this dissertation. I believe that important cultural and political moments have emerged from both spaces, and certainly these spaces are not binary.

### **The difficulty in critique**

With most objects of cultural study, there are some elements that are easier to critique than others; within transportation research, this is certainly the case. The automobile, driver, and freeway are the easiest targets for the critic to analyze. Public transit is also a common object for critique, but transportation scholars criticize those who control the transit, not the actual vehicle or the people who ride. The bicycle, its rider, and related amenities are assumedly “off limits” for critique because of the way that bicycling is framed in the media, by advocates, and some city governments as a positive, progressive, and good thing for all people. Yet Furness (2010) reminds us, “technology is never neutral, space is never empty, and mobility is never disconnected from power” (p. 11). People avoid critiquing the bicycle and connected cultures for a few reasons. First, the bicycle is seen as positive and progressive. Riding a bicycle will make one healthier and help curb vehicle pollution. Second, bicycle advocates seek to promote the positive and progressive elements of bicycling. Well-intentioned bicycle advocates

spend a lot of time making urban spaces safer for bicyclists. Third, the crafting of bicycle infrastructure has very low impact on the existing urban landscape. Not only are bicycle lanes easy to construct (paint and reflective tape), bicycles have almost zero-impact on the road conditions. Bicycling makes few demands on public funds such as cost of infrastructure construction and maintenance (Aldred, 2010). And fourth, the bicycle is seen as “helping to promote a safe and pleasant local environment” (Aldred, 2010, p. 36). For example, an increase in bicyclists decreases the amount of space transit uses on the roads (you take up less space riding a bicycle than you do driving a vehicle). Unlike with vehicles, it is extremely hard to injure someone as you bicycle down a street.<sup>27</sup> Bicyclists often report the calmness and happiness they feel bicycling, leading to less stress-laden commuters on the road.

For all of these reasons, it is hard to see what there is to critique about the bicycle and the bicyclist. It is true that the ways in which the bicycle impacts communities is not as obvious as a freeway running through a historically Black neighborhood. But it is because of the subtle, problematic impacts the bicycle has had on various communities that warrants a discussion about how bicycle infrastructure can reaffirm existing societal inequalities. There is nothing about bicycle technology that lends itself to race and class divisions. It is largely an equal opportunity form of transportation for people with able-bodies. This dissertation in part traces a burgeoning directive of city governments handling bicycle infrastructure and advocacy. There are certainly positives to this directive (mainly financial), but by focusing on bicycle infrastructure that will please an

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<sup>27</sup> Although not impossible. In March 2012, a San Francisco bicyclist ran a red light, plowing through a stream of pedestrians, killing one (Wollan, 2012).

already privileged demographic, many marginalized bicyclists will inevitably remain in the margins.

### **Chapter Overview**

To support my argument that the bicycle is a rolling signifier that deeply and variously impacts people and communities, I have organized my dissertation into three case studies. The following chapter explores the community-building potential of the Riverwest 24, an event that the organizers started in hopes of strengthening their neighborhood community. Through participant-observation and interviews with Riverwest 24 organizers and participants, I argue that the race successfully builds community through visibility, self-empowerment, and forced interaction. The Riverwest 24's success in building community is certainly impacted by Riverwest's long history of activism. In fact, Schmidt (2008) argues that Riverwest's community activism history reinforces an "activist neighborhood identity" that remains in place today (p. 487). In Riverwest, activism such as the Riverwest 24 is not exceptional, but "a regular expression of local politics and culture" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 480). I argue that this stable activist neighborhood identity is a core reason for the Riverwest 24's existence and success. Despite the activist culture embedded in the neighborhood, Riverwest has also struggled with racial segregation for many decades, as it sits on an unofficial segregation line—N. Holton St. I discuss the issues of diversity in the Riverwest 24 beside the tenuous history of the neighborhood racial makeup, suggesting that the dominance of white, liberal organizers may impact who participates.

The potential consequences of white, liberal people dominating bicycle advocacy spaces are fully explored in Chapter 3. In 2011, the City of Portland and bicycle

advocates—a majority white demographic—started pushing for a bicycle lane to be reconstructed on N. Williams Ave. to make biking easier and safer on that street. Longtime Black residents responded in anger, citing issues of racism and gentrification. Chapter 3 is a case study of this conflict and the neighborhood history that informed such an emotional reaction to a bicycle lane. Located in the Albina neighborhood, this bicycle lane and its supporters exist within a violent, race and class-based history of displacing Albina residents and businesses through construction projects. In this chapter I argue that Albina’s Black residents and its history rooted in Black culture produce haunting within the reconstruction of the bicycle lane. I support this argument through rich descriptions of N. Williams Ave., a retelling of the neighborhood’s conflict with neoliberal urbanism, and participant-observation of the final public meeting about the bicycle lane. The N. Williams Ave. bicycle lane conflict was the first time that residents had publically conflated bicycle infrastructure and gentrification, and the hyper-gentrification already happening on the street added to the tensions between neighbors.

The Black residents of Albina claim that bicycle infrastructure is connected to larger systemic issues of gentrification and racism—but does this claim hold any weight? In Chapter 4 I attempt to answer that question through a case study of Minneapolis and the city government’s hijacking of bicycle infrastructure planning and marketing. I argue that the city’s desire to recruit the creative class through bicycle infrastructure signals a shift in how bicycle advocacy interacts with political power and, through this power, disregards how this infrastructure can negatively impact residents that do not fit the “creative” demographic. Interviews with Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, two board members of the Twin Cities Greenways, and a Minneapolis realtor reveal troubling



rhetoric about the purpose of bicycle infrastructure. The aftermath of a recently constructed bicycle path and plans to build another one in a Black, working class part of the city suggest that people can indeed be displaced through bicycle infrastructure construction. In addition to the local interviews, I support these findings by personally utilizing Minneapolis's bicycle infrastructure, attending a public meeting about a new Greenway, and by framing this argument around the collusion of the creative class and environmental gentrification.

This dissertation tells a fascinating and worrisome story about how the burgeoning popularity of urban bicycling is trailed by systemic issues of racism, classism, and displacement. Particular bicyclist demographics have proven to increase economic vitality to urban spaces and the privileging of these bicyclists not only confirms the odd conflation of city profit and bicycling but also marginalizes groups of people that advocates ironically ask about (e.g. where are all the Black women bicyclists?). Although I have found many problematic aspects of urban bicycling culture and its connected advocacy, there are glimmers of hope where people earnestly try to bring their community together through bicycling. So to start off of our tour, let's ride by my favorite example of bicycling and community—the Riverwest 24.

## CHAPTER 2

### **‘A community hug disguised as a bike race’: The role of an urban 24-hour bicycle race in community building**

#### **The Vanguarders:<sup>1</sup>**

Ann: RW24 checkpoint coordinator, main role in race: checkpoint 2 manager

Wendy: RW24 organizer, main role in race: volunteer coordinator

Christopher: RW24 organizer, main role in race: organizing food for the racers

Paul: RW24 organizer, main role in race: scoring

Jeremy: RW24 organizer, main role in race: start/finish line (checkpoint 4) manager

Mike: RW24 organizer, main role in race: race marshal

Steve: RW24 organizer, main role in race: internet and technical labor, checkpoint 1

Brian: RW24 racer

Matt: RW24 racer

Mary: RW24 racer

Charles: RW24 racer

Most interviews took place at Fuel Café in Riverwest, which has been a neighborhood staple for decades and an integral space for the Riverwest 24.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann, one of the interview participants for this chapter, referred to the people who rode in the first annual Riverwest 24 as “vanguards.” Being a vanguard is to be at the forefront of an action movement. I feel this is a fitting description of all the people I interviewed. Unless noted, interviews took place on the following dates. Christopher and Ann on October 8, 2011; Paul, Wendy, Charles, Mike, and Jeremy on October 29, 2011; Steve, Brian, Matt, and Mary on December 28, 2011.

## Introduction

*I would describe the Riverwest 24 as not a ride, it's not a race, it's a community organizing event in which we use bicycles.* –Steve Whitlow, Riverwest 24 organizer

In Riverwest, the Riverwest 24 is known as the “people’s holiday.” Unlike other holidays where neighborhoods tend to disperse and the streets become quiet, the people’s holiday does the opposite—neighbors come to together and the streets are full of life for over 24 hours. Every year, Riverwest teems with nervous energy a few days prior to the event, as if neighbors are waiting for a visit from Santa Claus. On the day of the 24-hour race, participants line up on a residential street. The organizers, who already look exhausted, encourage people to stay behind a giant Start/Finish sign that is suspended in the air with rope tied to trees. At 7 p.m. racers awkwardly attempt to start the race as hundreds of people jockey for positions. Some rush past everyone, trying to compete with the few other people determined to win the race. Others look behind them, swerving down the street, wondering where their friends went. Most people leave the start line with a giant smile, full of hope that the next 24 hours are going to be the best of their lives. During the second annual Riverwest 24, as a participant myself, I managed to journal towards the end of the race.

July 25, 2009. 6:20 p.m. Slept two hours in the past 36. Loving life. My knees are cashed but I have a tattoo, shaved hair, and a brain full of awesome memories. My knees gave up before my energy level did, but it just hurts so bad...30 minutes till the race is over but I’ve been done since noon. But I did all the bonus checkpoints!

Yes, during the race I got a tattoo and a “barber’s choice” haircut. I rode my bike for so long that my knees gave out and I was definitely delirious from not sleeping. Yet I had not a sour word to say about my experience; instead I marveled at my neighborhood filled with people as crazy as I was to partake in this people’s holiday. *This* is community.



**Figure 1: Start/Finish line at the Riverwest 24, 2009**

In this chapter I explore how citizens of Riverwest, a small neighborhood in Milwaukee, have crafted and utilized the Riverwest 24 to build community. Through ethnographic participation-action, historical research of the neighborhood’s political geography, and interviews with race organizers and participants, I grapple with a theory

of community building developed within the race and the potential consequences of such a theory. I connect this chapter to my larger project by further expanding the understanding of the bicycle's role within community spaces while also problematizing the concept of community through cultural, ethnicity and class issues emerging in this case study. I utilize literature on gentrification, authenticity, and community to talk through some of the potential consequences (both positive and negative) of the theory of community building developed in this chapter. Prior to my analysis of the Riverwest 24 I will describe the race, the neighborhood, and my positionality to the research.

### **The Riverwest 24**

The Riverwest 24 is an annual 24-hour urban bicycle race in the Riverwest neighborhood of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The race has quadrupled in size from the inaugural year in 2008 to include 883 racers in 2012.<sup>2</sup> The race always occurs on the last weekend in July, starting at 7 p.m. on Friday and ending at 7 p.m. on Saturday. Racers ride a non-controlled 4.6-mile loop around the neighborhood, stopping four times each lap at designated checkpoints to stamp their manifest which is a sheet that tracks how many laps a racer has done. A well-coordinated crew of volunteers operates the race, some volunteering for a full 24 hours. Participants can ride solo or with a team of up to six people. During the race, bonus checkpoints pop up, where racers go to designated spots around the neighborhood to do an activity to earn bonus laps. For example, racers could get their faces painted like a corpse for two extra laps. Other bonuses include getting a "barber's choice" haircut, participating in a film shoot, doing tai chi, taking a

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<sup>2</sup> In 2008, 188 people registered; in 2009, 302 people; in 2010, 546 people; in 2011, 673 people; and in 2012, 883 people. For the 2013 race, the organizers are planning to cap the registration on May 1 at 1000 people.

walk with a well-known Riverwest inhabitant, and the most coveted: getting a permanent Riverwest 24 tattoo from a round-the-clock tattoo artist.<sup>3</sup> Prizes for the top three teams and solo riders are minimal.



**Figure 2: Riverwest 24 manifest and bonus checkpoint sheet**

For example in 2011, winners were given sculpted ice trophies and small gifts from local businesses. At a meeting for the 2013 event, organizers discussed not giving prizes to the winners at all. As a participant in the race my sense is that no one races to win prizes, which is significant in light of typical competitive events where prizes are a huge impetus

<sup>3</sup> Each year, roughly 40-50 racers are scheduled for the tattoo in 20 minute slots. Racers frantically have to find a specific volunteer before the race starts and hand over twenty dollars to guarantee a tattoo. In 2011 the amount of people who could get tattoos sharply increased. The tattoo artist did not make it to the event and so organizers instructed racers to go to any tattoo shop and get the designated tattoo done. The tattoo artist reappeared in 2012, but racers were allowed again to go to tattoo shops to complete the bonus.

for involvement. Before, during, and after the race hundreds of people from the neighborhood and greater Milwaukee come out to support the event. People line up lawn chairs along the course, give out water and cookies, throw impromptu parties, and help racers through busy intersections. Riverwest businesses that sell food and beverages extend their hours to accommodate the racers, volunteers, and onlookers.

The race has become so popular that organizers have had to limit the number of racers able to register. Until 2011, out-of-towners were able to register online, but the 2011 race sold out before online registration even started. For the 2012 event, people had to wait outside of the Riverwest Public House (a cooperatively-run bar in Riverwest) to register on May 1, 2012. People lined up hours before registration opened and many people who stood in line did not get a spot in the race. Getting a spot in the race is becoming so sought-after that spots are raffled off at local community events and, for 2013, volunteers who helped at the 2012 event were given an automatic spot without needing to register in-person on May 1, 2013.<sup>4</sup> Although the Riverwest 24 is a race, the organizers are very clear that the intention is to celebrate the community, not to ride as fast as possible through the neighborhood. In fact, organizers designed elements such as the bonus checkpoints to slow people down during the race. Participants do not look like typical bicycle racers, a feature that the organizers have also intentionally fostered. The Riverwest 24 website specifically states “This is an event for anyone who wants to participate... This race is for people who enjoy biking, want to push themselves, or just want to participate in an event that is like nothing else you have encountered.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The registration date of May 1 is intentional. May 1 is celebrated in Riverwest and other communities as a workers’ holiday.

<sup>5</sup> “About,” *Riverwest 24*. <http://Riverwest24.com/about/articles/overview>



## The Riverwest neighborhood

Riverwest is a working-to-middle class vibrant neighborhood, known for its better-than-usual racial integration<sup>6</sup> and quirky inhabitants. Elders, radical activists, families, renters, home owners, a food co-op, locally-owned businesses, college students, a punk coffee shop, a smattering of bars and liquor stores, and street art have all set up shop in a neighborhood with a five mile radius.



**Figure 3: Fuel Café, Riverwest**

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<sup>6</sup> In a 2011 interview with the urban bicycle magazine *COG*, Riverwest’s Alderman Nik Kovac said “We all take credit for being the most racially diverse neighborhood in the city.” The pride in being racially diverse is rooted in Milwaukee being a segregated city. Various organizations used 2010 Census Data to calculate Milwaukee being the top segregated city in the United States. For news reports and graphics see: Denvir (2011) and Tolan & Glauber (2010).





**Figure 4: Riverwest Food Cooperative, Riverwest**

Riverwest is also host to a slew of criminal activities. For example in early July 2011, a group of youth, mostly of color, attacked people in a Riverwest park. The local news dubbed the criminal activity as “barbaric” and a “mob attack” (Jones, 2011). Muggings, shootings, robberies, vandalism, and petty theft are all common occurrences in the neighborhood. This sort of crime record and subsequent media exposure focused on crime over the years has fostered a tarnished reputation for the neighborhood that prides itself on diversity and neighbor camaraderie. During my time as a Riverwest resident it was clear that Riverwest community members feel a lot of pride in their neighborhood. People work tirelessly to fight the stereotype that Riverwest is a dangerous neighborhood. Community members are proud that they have kept corporations and condos out and instead put their support behind local businesses such as a child care co-op and an affordable yoga studio. I will engage in a more thorough discussion of Riverwest’s

history and current composition, as it directly informs the Riverwest 24, after I establish the chapter's thesis and framework.

### **Positionality**

I approach this research through my direct participation in and volunteer work with the Riverwest 24 from 2006-2013 and my time as a resident of Riverwest from 2003-2009. I participated in the Riverwest 24 long before I had conceptualized this project. It was not until the race of 2010 that I knew I was going to write my dissertation partly on the Riverwest 24. The first three years of the race, I participated as a solo racer, winning second place in the women's solo category in 2010. In 2011 and 2012 I volunteered for 24 hours, focusing my efforts on managing many of the bonus checkpoints. In late 2010 and early 2011 I began my interviews and more intense ethnographic research behind the scenes. All of the people I interviewed I have either known in Riverwest for many years or became friends through the race. Although for me it is more important to have the organizers and racers speak about their experiences, I weave my experiences in when I feel it adds to the points being made by others. The Riverwest 24 organizers have been extremely generous with their time and resources for this project, handing over one of the only copies of a Riverwest 24 documentary, lending me a personal collection of thank you letters, and giving me various media artifacts they thought would help this project. I also relied on my long-standing friendships with some of the Riverwest 24 racers to get their experiences on tape. Although it is not my intention to exploit my relationships with the people I interview for this chapter, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that these relationships allowed me access to information that would be hard for any "outsider" to gain.

## Research questions and thesis

I offered the research questions that drive this chapter to the Riverwest 24 interviewees. I did this for two reasons. One, although I am involved in the race I wanted people to answer these research questions themselves. I told them that the questions I asked may seem obvious to someone like me who has seen the race evolve over the years and I know my answers to these research questions would differ significantly from those I interviewed. Two, I do not claim to have a privileged approach to this research and thus my answers are not better or more educated than those I interview. I consider their answers before mine.

The two main research questions for this chapter are: How does the Riverwest 24 build community?<sup>7</sup> And how does the bicycle allow or assist in building such a community? These questions are very simple, but their simplicity allowed interviewees to develop their own theories, unveiling a host of themes and patterns about community building. This chapter's argument builds from my experience, interviews, and an application of grounded theory.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately I argue that the Riverwest 24 builds

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<sup>7</sup> "Building community" is a vague statement. I rely on Miranda Joseph's (2002) definition of community. Skeptical of the very notion of community she writes, "Community is almost always invoked as an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging... Communities are frequently said to emerge in times of crisis...or joined through some extraordinary effort" (p. vii). This chapter will reveal the ways in which people involved in the Riverwest 24 invoke community as creating a sense of belonging within the neighborhood. And no doubt, this community is meant to flourish as people are joined through the "extraordinary effort" of putting on the Riverwest 24. Joseph also warns us not to "fetishize" community because that makes us blind to the domination and exploitation that can come with the goodness of community. Although I see the concept of building community via Riverwest 24 as a site of hope in a difficult world (Joseph, 2002), I also take the time to discuss the domination and exploitation that makes its way through the race.

<sup>8</sup> Grounded theory is a qualitative research method used to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon, in this case the Riverwest 24. This method of analysis allows me to look at the interactive nature of the Riverwest 24. I specifically use the "paradigm model" of axial coding. Axial coding is a set of procedures whereby my ethnographic research generates categories and connections between these categories. The paradigm model, in a simplified way, looks at the following: the causal conditions that produced the phenomenon, the actual phenomenon, context for the phenomenon, the intervening or structural conditions, the action or interactional strategies to manage and carry out the phenomenon, and the outcomes or consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I have organized this chapter according to the

community through visibility, self-empowerment of participants, and forced interaction between the racers, race volunteers, and the Riverwest community. The bicycle as a technology is imperative for this approach to building community, as I will make clear throughout this chapter.

Paring down hours of interviews to a succinct chapter is an arduous job and inevitably I had to leave much content on the cutting room floor. In my attempt to paint a broad picture of both the race and the neighborhood, I focus on themes discussed by most interview participants that I believe expands upon and informs the Riverwest 24's theory of community building. After a detailed summary of Riverwest's history, Riverwest 24 organizers tell their story of how the race came to be. I then present a theory of community building that came from repeated themes found in the interviews. I expand upon this theory by discussing a few key characteristics crucial to understanding this moment of bicycle activism and community building through the event's: (1) success with "non-bike" people; (2) interrelated issues of lack of ethnic diversity and the neighborhood's place in urban gentrification; and (3) impact on other forms of neighborhood activism. I conclude with a discussion of why this bicycle race is worth studying and how it deeply impacts participants and residents alike.

### **The spatial importance of the Riverwest 24**

#### **The history of Riverwest**

To fully understand the Riverwest 24 it is worth knowing the history of Riverwest. Much of this history is documented in Tom Tolan's (2003) *Riverwest: A Community History*, which traces the neighborhood's population, economics, and

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paradigm model. For example, I first tell the background story for the Riverwest 24, then historical context for the race, followed by existing structural conditions (such as racism and gentrification), and so on.

community organizations from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 2000s. An introductory essay from Tom Schneider, executive director of Children's Outing Association (COA) in Riverwest, defines neighborhood as "a sense of community, and in a strong community, residents care about each other, and they participate in protecting, growing, and strengthening their neighborhood" (Tolan, 2003, xi). As for the neighborhood itself he says, "Riverwest is a unique and vibrant part of Milwaukee. Riverwest is politically active, artistically alive, [and] racially diverse" (Tolan, 2003, xi). Tolan's book stresses two themes: the flow of different populations moving through Riverwest and the ways in which people conceptualize community within Riverwest.

Riverwest's population, although fairly steady since the 1980s, changed many times in the last century. In the 1890s, rich Germans lined the Milwaukee River as the area was not developed and resembled countryside where people could escape (Tolan, 2003). By 1920 Riverwest was a "complex mixture of people" as the rich Germans moved east, working class Germans moved in, and a burgeoning Polish community expanded around local parishes. Riverwest was, and continues to be, sandwiched in between neighborhoods that have completely different ethnic backgrounds (Tolan, 2003, pp. 43-44). In the 1960s, African Americans moved into the area from the Southern United States. In 1960 only 79 African Americans lived in Riverwest, compared to over 16,000 whites and this ratio stayed relatively constant throughout the decade (Tolan, 2003). African Americans resided west of N. Holton St., which is the east-west dividing line between Riverwest and Harambee (Swahili for "pulling together") neighborhoods. By 1970 N. Holton St. was known as the "Mason Dixon Line" of Milwaukee (Tolan, 2003, p. 78). Tolan (2003) explains that the racial divide maintained itself because white

people did not move out of Riverwest and actively kept Black people out by not renting or selling to them. In 1967 there was a significant increase in Puerto Rican residents who made an easier transition to Riverwest because they were deemed “preferred tenants” over African Americans. According to Tolan (2003), the Puerto Rican population was marred by gang activity. After a fight with a white gang that resulted in a white gang member’s death, the Riverwest community rapidly developed organizations to help the neighborhood from devolving into total crisis (Tolan, 2003). The Puerto Rican gang that was held responsible for the white man’s death wrote a letter to the *La Guardia* newspaper that said in part, “Making us think that our nationality and culture are the problem when the real problem is the upper class who rule this country” (as quoted in Tolan, 2003, p. 119). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, “freaks and hippies” moved to Riverwest. These middle class, often white, inhabitants shared “the streets with blue-collar workers [which] expressed a rejection of their middle-class backgrounds” (Tolan, 2003, p. 136). Tolan (2003) argues that in the 1980s Riverwest “became the neighborhood it remains to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (p. 146). This included a diminishing number of Polish families as Hispanic and African Americans began to outnumber them. Riverwest solidified itself as a “stronghold of free spirits—a place where people from outside the mainstream could find a home” (Tolan, 2003, p. 147).

Plenty of interviewees I talked with discussed how Riverwest, and its known history of encouraging “free spirits,” almost guaranteed the success of the Riverwest 24. Christopher Fons, an original Riverwest 24 organizer spoke about this.

I think it’s unique to Riverwest. There’s a Riverwest centism, there’s the nationalism there that we’re the coolest neighborhood. They make shirts...I have

one, I was wearing it. The neighborhood [has existed] since at least the 60s and 70s and that tradition is living on through the new culture that exists now—the biker culture, the hipster culture, whatever it is—so I don't think it can happen in any neighborhood.

A long-time Riverwest 24 racer, Matt, describes the neighborhood's eccentric qualities that, in turn, foster a welcoming space for an idea like the Riverwest 24 to flourish.

It's a weird neighborhood that I have never really experienced anywhere else I have been in that it is insular and self-defined and accepting at the same time. The closest I have ever been is like places in California where nobody ever tells you whatever crazy thing you are gonna do is a bad idea because they just wanna see you try it.

Wendy, the Riverwest 24 volunteer coordinator argued, "I think it also helps where the race is. Not that other neighborhoods couldn't pull it off. But it wouldn't be the same." Riverwest community members suggest that the Riverwest 24 is unique to the neighborhood *because* of the already existing culture. The values and ideas behind the race's development illustrate how the organizers capitalized on Riverwest's longstanding, communal encouragement of non-mainstream ideas.

### **The ingredients: outside inspiration and living next door**

Personal relationships and other events that focus on neighborhoods and community involvement inspired the organizers of Riverwest 24. Christopher had first pitched the idea of a 24-hour bike race to Jeremy and they both turned out to be among the original organizers of the Riverwest 24. Ann, a manager of one of the checkpoints, recalls that moment:

So [Christopher] said I think we should have a bike race in our neighborhood where they go from point to point, like a 24-hour bike race, or not a race, a ride... So I'm watching the wheels turn. And then he calls Jeremy. Jeremy, we should have a 24-hour bike race, and Jeremy's like, whatever man... And on it goes.

A short time after that, Jeremy and Paul (another original Riverwest 24 organizer) went down to Mexico for the Baja 1000, a motorcycle race that spans the length of the Baja peninsula. Jeremy and Paul were part of the assistance crew for the Fuel Café team. Although the Baja 1000 and the Riverwest 24 do not resemble each other in visible, tangible ways, Jeremy believes there is a lesson learned in both races. About the Baja 1000 he states, "The lesson that was learned from it was the community was so excited to have you... When I would talk to the white people, the Americans, it would be dropped to me, 'Hey I'm so and so.' I don't even know who that is." He continues to explain that to the Mexicans, *he* might as well been a famous motorcycle racer—but the residents could have cared less. What the local Mexican communities seemed to care about was participating in the race and being able to connect with the race participants. Jeremy continues,

In fact I would have to say our crappy team was a little bit more liked because we went out of our way to talk to the people and invite them into what we were doing. But driving through the desert through Mexico and then running across a party. 'Heeeyy woooo!' Every one of them. 'Wooooo!' Every motorcycle that went by—'woooooo!' And they don't care who wins, just to finish. Just to be a part of it.



Jeremy's recollection of his Baja 1000 experience is tantamount to understanding how the Riverwest 24 operates. The outpouring of support from the local community and the pockets of cheering onlookers is *exactly* what happens in the Riverwest 24. Every bicycle that goes by, people are "wooing." Most onlookers do not track who is winning the Riverwest 24, they are just happy to be a part of it. So after Paul and Jeremy came home from Mexico "wide-eyed," Jeremy visited Christopher.

I came home, I was having a beer with [Christopher] and he said, you should do a 24-hour bike race. We were on his porch. He was like, just imagine a 24-hour bike race going through here....I envisioned it. I actually saw it in my head. I saw a phantom group of riders, I phantomly clapped. I was like, yeah!

Beyond inspirations found as an adult, Christopher spoke about his childhood experiences with community bicycle events in the New York area and how they inspired his idea for the Riverwest 24. Like all of the organizers, he explains that his concept of the Riverwest 24 was not strictly a *race* but more of a *ride*, like the New York 5 Borough Bike Ride he participated in as a child.<sup>9</sup> Christopher, like Jeremy's Baja 1000 experience, stresses the communal, excited, vocal community as inspirational. Christopher recollected,

It was the most amazing thing I had seen in my whole life. And my parents took us into the city all the time, we went to street festivals, I loved those things. And we were on bikes and there were all these people who were like 'Yeaahhhh!'

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<sup>9</sup> The organizers made the distinction between "race" and "ride" to discourage competition. The Riverwest 24 is constructed as a race via its start/finish line, the counting of laps, and prizes being handed out to the top three winners in every category (solo male, solo female, tandem, etc.). As much as it is constructed as a race, the organizers try very hard to discourage competition during the event. For example, a recently designed ticket stub for the 2013 race includes the warning, "No Jerks Allowed!"—the general consensus being that competition breeds jerks.

because we were riding through their neighborhood. It was an eye opener to me.

Because I lived in suburban New Jersey and people are very disconnected there. And so, working off of Christopher's original idea of a 24-hour bike race, teamed with Jeremy and Paul's experience with community events, the Riverwest 24 was conceptualized. Christopher describes the original vision as "some sort of endurance type of thing that you have to work with other people together to accomplish and it's in our neighborhood."

Beyond the organizers' shared experience with events focused on community, they all were spatially connected in the neighborhood, too. Mike, an original Riverwest 24 organizer, lived with Paul, who lived next door to Jeremy. Christopher and Jeremy work in the same public school and Mike is also a public school teacher. Wendy, the Riverwest 24 volunteer coordinator by the second year of the race, explained the way location to Jeremy impacted her involvement. "Well how I got involved with the Riverwest 24 is the first year I lived across the street from Jeremy. So, you know. It would be hard not to be involved." The organizers' proximity to each other both at home and in the workplace expedited the brainstorming needed to create the Riverwest 24. Mike recalled the time spent at a local bar, where Jeremy worked once a week. "We would after work, or every Monday we were basically like Paul, Jeremy and I, 'the compound,' would go shoot the breeze and drink with Jeremy. Again a lot of those ideas...came out of silly drinking ideas."

In fact, Jeremy had plans for Mike's involvement before Mike even moved in with Paul. Jeremy was set on pitching Mike to get involved in the event in whatever way worked for him. Mike "could have been a Dungeons and Dragons guy and I would have

pitched a Dungeons and Dragons idea, because I think I pitch a lot of ideas to people.” But it turned out Mike was a “bike guy.” Jeremy recalled, “Mike was a bicycle guy. With Mike I said, there’s two things I wanna do when you move in. I wanna do a 24-hour bike race and I want to do a flat track fixed gear race, which hasn’t happened yet.” Mike reaffirmed this moment saying,

I became “the bike guy” because Jeremy had been doing community organizing stuff, I had been doing community organizing, Paul same thing. But [the other organizers said] ‘Mike will get the bike people. They’ll trust us because Mike’s involved. Mike loves bikes and knows the bike community in Milwaukee.’ So it snowballed from there.

### **Theorizing community building**

My interest in how the race builds community is the impetus for studying the Riverwest 24. I asked Riverwest 24 organizers and racers how they thought the Riverwest 24 built community. I noted three themes: visibility, forced interaction/intentional community, and self-empowerment.

#### **Visibility**

Visibility came up in two distinct ways: the technology of the bike and the spectacle of the race. First, the literal technology of the bicycle makes riders visible and makes the surroundings more visible to them. Mike argued the bicycle helps build community through visibility by saying,

You’re out, you can see everything that’s happening, you can talk to people... You see people riding by on the bike, it’s not just their car, you can see their face.

When you are walking or when you see them out at a pub or restaurant, you know they are your neighbor.

Scholars concerned with public space, such as Ray Oldenburg, argue that this simple act of being out and about and visible in a neighborhood is in dire need of being resurrected. In “The Problem of Place in America” Oldenburg (1995) traces how the rise of suburban life has taught generations of people to invest in homes rather than communities as suburbs rarely encourage interaction among neighbors; for example, the lack of sidewalks in some subdivisions. This shunning of community life is amplified when people learn to live fragmented lives: you shop in one space, live in another, and work in another (Oldenburg, 1995). If there are any pleasures to be had, in cities, Oldenburg (1995) argues, it has been reduced to consumerism. He continues, in the “absence of an informal public life” we have learned to “glorify our freedom *not* to associate” with our neighbors (pp. 114-115). Mary, a Riverwest 24 racer, commented on how Riverwest is set up to *curb* fragmentation of a person’s life. She described how people who do not live in Riverwest understand the neighborhood’s non-fragmented model.

It’s the biggest complaint from people who don’t live in Riverwest is that people who live in Riverwest never leave Riverwest. They won’t go anyplace else. I think it’s great that it’s self-sufficient that you can get everything and be served in one neighborhood which is awesome.

Mary’s comment references the assumed “normal” way to live life (moving constantly to different spaces) and the more rare ability for a neighborhood to be able to commandeer “third spaces” distinct from home and work. Oldenburg (1995) suggests the solution to

this problem of space in America is to instill “third spaces,” a “generic designation for a great variety of public places that house the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 118). The third space can be as simple as a neighborhood filled with people, public spaces being used, and allowing for plenty of places to sit and socialize (Oldenburg, 1995). Steve, a Riverwest 24 organizer, spoke directly to this desire for a third space and the ways in which Riverwest 24 helps build that space.

You have to see your neighbors. You have to see there are humans. In my mind I've always wanted the ability to snap my fingers and then like every wall around us is made of glass because if I could do that, I think everybody would be like there are way more people around me than I thought. There's more people here than I realize. So I think everyone hanging out on the street or at the checkpoints bring some of that where you are like, oh all of these people! Where otherwise we are just in our house, or car, singing on the way to work and there are these walls. Not when there's bagpipes playing at the start line. There are no walls. You can hear the bagpipes for blocks.

Although the bicycle is theorized as a surefire way to make the community visible to one another, the consequences of this visibility extends much farther than the 24 hours of the race. This visibility reads almost exactly as Oldenburg envisions third spaces.

Beyond the race reinforcing the neighborhood's “informal public life,” the race's construction of a spectacle also produces positive consequences for the neighborhood. Paul argued that the race's success hinges on it being a spectacle.

So much of this is spectacle-based that the very first year if we didn't have people riding bikes in a circle, there wasn't a reason for the rest of the community to do everything else. So we needed that core group of people that were willing to ride.

And now, that the group has expanded to include a lot more different people.

Mike explained how the growing spectacle of the race has encouraged a wide variety of people to become involved.

I think it's not just people who ride bikes, it's become an event where people come to watch. And want to be part of the spectacle, too. So it's not just bike people, not just people who sometimes ride bikes, it's people who wanna come watch and see what's happening.

Wendy talked about how the popularity of the race, despite the organizers' desire for people to concentrate less on the race and more on the community, has created a lot of energy.

Because you know people were gonna camp out [in 2012] for registration. And so as much as we want people to concentrate on the rest of it, there is something about the spectacle of that fact that it sold out right away. It gets the energy going.

This type of spectacle encouraged participation and worked to foster what Stephen Duncombe (2007) calls an "ethical spectacle." In *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* Duncombe (2007) defines the spectacle as "looking beyond reason, rationality, and self-evident truth and making use of story, myth, fantasy, and imagination to further" agendas (2007, p. 124). Duncombe isolates fascism and consumerism as two strong examples of spectacle. Thus he calls for an ethical spectacle, which demonstrates the more productive elements of a spectacle, suggesting

that “the spectacle” is not inherently unethical, and would “meet people where they are, draw upon preexisting desires, then redirect them” (2007, pp.124-25). Duncombe (2007) argues that progressives understand that neighbors are responsible for each other. Just like the RW24 organizers insist on the community contributing to and participating in the race, Duncombe (2007) states that “the collective is made stronger and more vibrant through the inclusion of and discussion among many differing voices” (p. 126). The ethical spectacle “demands a different sort of participation. The people who participate in the performance of the spectacle must also contribute to its construction” (Duncombe, 2007, p. 127).

Unlike other types of spectacle, the Riverwest 24 operates with very little financial support. The need for neighborhood participation is a necessity for the Riverwest 24 to happen. Duncombe (2007) solidifies this need by saying, “[the organizers] must create a situation in which popular participation not only *can* happen but *must* happen for the spectacle to come to fruition” (p. 129). Steve and Mary discussed the impossibility of the Riverwest 24 without popular participation. Steve said, “my proudest thing is if I went to an event planner like a multi-million dollar PR firm and said listen I want to do this and this and I wanna have riders, bicycles, bonus checkpoints, they’d be like, it’s gonna cost 2 million dollars. Hell no.” Mary then added, “between the checkpoints and bonuses and the people, Truly Spoken [a Riverwest bike shop] comes and sets up, people bring out food, everyone just brings it. If you’d have to pay for it, it’d never work. Never.” If this “ethical spectacle” then requires population participation, how do the organizers foster an environment where anyone can participate? One way the organizers have framed this participation is the idea of forced interaction.

## **Forced interaction/intentional community**

There are many ways the race forces people to interact with other participants and the community. Organizers theorized about how the bicycle itself allows for and creates the forced interaction. For example, Paul explained,

You're more connected to your surroundings than you are in a vehicle. You aren't locked inside. And so just like that combination of ability to move but forced interaction with your environment, I think is what's really so great about it.

Jeremy echoed Paul stating, "Every time you ride a bike, you're part of the community. It's like walking but only faster. You're forced to be part of the community. I have to say hello to the people on the porch, to the people walking."

Not only is the bicycle itself a surefire way of interaction, the organizers also meticulously designed the race to foster *forced* reaction. From a racer standpoint, Ann explains "there's this real sense, no one can do it themselves even if you are signed up to do solo. You have to get off your bike and come talk to us. And you have to stop and get your card punched." Later in our conversation she brought up forced interaction again.

There are some people who don't ever want to get off their bike and deal with anybody else. But the race makes them get off their bike and you deal with us, which is good, for those kind of people. Those type A kind of people.

These "type A" racers tend to stick out in the Riverwest 24 for their incessant push to race instead of engaging with the neighborhood or the bonus checkpoints. For example, when I volunteered at one of the first bonus checkpoints in the 2011 race, I watched a racer wait very impatiently in line to complete the bonus activity of playing a card game. The organizers suggest that the unique Riverwest 24 set-up may encourage "type A"



people to rethink their participation in the race by forcing them to participate in a competitive event that often includes waiting or doing a drawn-out activity. And it forces these racers to engage with the community by replacing race time with visits to Riverwest establishments. In fact, a specific strategy the organizers use to ensure forced interaction is through bonus checkpoints at local organizations. Christopher explained, “it certainly is something we’ve thought about a lot is more bonus stops so that people can go to see COA or go to the Riverwest Artists Association, or a local bar, or the local quickie mart, or whatever. So that they can see what’s going on.” Paul talked a lot about how the race forces people to interact with each other, more so than other neighborhood events.

From the very beginning the race was about meeting your neighbors. It was about combating the only summer neighborhood events [which] were block parties where you basically show up, wander around, run into mostly people you already know, hang out, drink a bunch and go home...[In the Riverwest 24] you are forced to interact with people and you are constantly moving around the neighborhood. So it's constantly shifting your comfort zone. Like you're forced to interact. And through that you know, I have been living in this neighborhood for 10 years and every year I meet people who have been living here just as long that I've just never interacted with. And it's a great event for that. So we're trying to force people to meet their neighbors and through that create a culture where it's ok to talk about problems with the neighborhood.

The organizers built a framework that is focused a lot on, as Paul puts it, shifting people's comfort zones. Whether it is getting your manifest punched by four different people in one lap, performing bonus stop activities that are inherently uncomfortable in front of

people, or dealing with emotions of staying up for 24 hours *while* managing interpersonal interactions—the breaking down of a person’s comfort zone helps build relationships. The option of acting smug and mingling only with your clique does not and cannot exist in Riverwest 24.

One way to understand this forced interaction is by theorizing it as an intentional community. Intentional communities are “those consciously formed with a specific purpose in mind” (Love Brown, 2002, p. 3). Scholars who study intentional communities often look to those that incorporate shared living space such as housing co-ops. Kozeny (1996) defines an intentional community as “a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values” (par. 3). Spirituality and religion are the most common inspiration for intentional communities but Kozeny (1996) notes secular intentional communities are “based on bold visions of creating a new social and economic order” (par. 15). The goal of the Riverwest 24, to strengthen the neighborhood by creating stronger bonds within the community, is a very bold vision of a new social order. Similar to Oldenburg’s (1995) idea of a “third space,” Love Brown (2002) argues that intentional communities “strengthen bonds that tie people to one another, enabling them to overcome isolation and alienation” (p. 4). In her research Love Brown (2002) discovered that intentional communities are often based on revitalization efforts.<sup>10</sup> To revitalize a neighborhood is to necessarily critique the culture it exists within. Revitalizing a neighborhood requires internal forms of cultural critique, which in its “indigenous” form,

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<sup>10</sup> The term revitalization here means to bring new life into the community, internally. Love Brown is not referring to the more problematic usage of the term in “urban revitalization” that demands a great amount of work from external entities.

produces a fairly non-elitist form of critique, furthering the relief of alienation (Love Brown, 2002). The juxtaposition of the “old way” of life with the newly envisioned way becomes a tool to analyze culture and society (Love Brown, 2002).

I understand the Riverwest 24 as an “intentional community” in its most simple definition. The organizers are attempting to maintain a community they formed with a specific purpose in mind: to strengthen neighborhood bonds. Members of the Riverwest neighborhood have sought to revitalize their community through this event. The “non-elitist” form of critique that comes with revitalization is a crucial element in Riverwest 24’s ability to stay alive. When Steve was talking with me about how the organizers force people to participate, Matt noted his simultaneous understanding and surprise of Riverwest 24’s continued existence.

Steve: If somebody has an idea, like one time [someone said], you guys should really have fireworks. Everybody has an idea. Everybody tells us what we should have done.

Matt: [Laughs]

Steve: Or what we didn’t do right or what we can do next year and so a lot of the time we will turn that around on them. ‘You should really do fireworks, you should have fireworks at the start of the race!’ Fine, you are fireworks manager. What do you want to do? You got an idea? I have the purse so I’ll give you a budget. There’s a little bit of play, so that’s the fun part of it. Like making people get involved. No whining.

Matt: This grew out of the neighborhood without anyone from the outside having anything to do with it which is interesting and sort of rare for something to happen like that more than once.

Mary: [Laughs]

Matt: There's a lot of first annual but not second annual things. As a participant, from my perspective it's really interesting.

Looking at this micro-example, someone in the Riverwest 24 intentional community decided that the community would benefit from fireworks. Steve's attempt to decentralize his power as an organizer allowed this community member to take ownership over a fireworks display. Because no one has to deal with "outside" influence, the ability to critique and adjust this community is fairly direct. Steve could be seen as an "outsider" or an elitist to those not actively organizing the race. But his immediate response and that of the organizers to any suggestion is "ok, *you* do it" shows that there is little interest in controlling the various elements of the race. And that is a lot of control to give up in such a chaotic space. Both the lack of hierarchy and outside pressure works to instill a non-elitist approach to critiquing the existing culture. It is hard to imagine a community that would not bat an eye at a suggested fireworks display *and* hand over the duties and resources to the person who suggested the idea. But this sort of "utopian" community certainly exists in Riverwest during the Riverwest 24, if not throughout the year.

As I interviewed people involved with the Riverwest 24 and noticed the term "forced interaction" come up over and over, I started thinking about what that term means for community building. Within this race, forced interaction is understood as constructing the race to make people talk to community members about fairly innocuous

things: punching the manifest card, communicating what a racer needs to do to complete a bonus checkpoint, or asking whether a racer needs food. The race is not forcing people to come together and talk about difficult topics such as racism, crime or gentrification. But of course the hope seems to be that this race will form networks where those conversations would one day take place. My point here is that although the word “forced” may raise red flags in theorizing about bringing people together, it is clear that the ways people are being “forced” together is really about *intentionally* bringing people together. It is interesting to think about why people in the race need to be forced into interacting with each other. Bicycle races (or any race for that matter) are typically a space where there is very little non-competitive interaction with other participants and organizers. So the Riverwest 24 organizers had a huge task to not only break down the competitiveness inherent in racing but also encourage people to talk and work with one another.

With that said, the preceding paragraph illustrates how I have grossly underestimated the power of storytelling before, during, and after the Riverwest 24. I have just suggested that because the event does not produce intense conversations about racism, for example, that the conversations are less meaningful or less productive. But scholars like Fisher (1989) argue people reason and express their values and decisions through stories, thus “mundane dialogues become meaningful bases for community building” (quoted in Nam, 2009, p. 6). Moreover, a string of scholarship explores the Community Infrastructure Theory (CIT) which seeks to identify “local communication resources that are used to construct community and foster community identity” (Nam, 2009, p. 6). The Riverwest 24 is a “local communication resource” and, if nothing else, creates an enormous amount of communication—verbally, physically, through image,

and in written word. It is in fact these sorts of mundane communications that float around Riverwest at the end of July that scholars take seriously and predict will foster community discourse and a sense of belonging.

Organizers see a connection between forced interaction and the self-empowerment built into the race. The organizers told me that they are as hands-off as possible, allowing anyone to add to the event. They vocally tell people to work on the race without guidance from the organizers, when people approach them with ideas (as the above anecdote about fireworks has already suggested). The conversations also suggested that the race structure itself is set up to allow for self-empowerment. In the following section I discuss the organizers' role in engaging the neighborhood by encouraging everyone to work on the race.

### **Self-empowerment**

*We don't work on consensus, we work on empowerment* –Paul

Riverwest 24 organizers are proud of the 'empowerment' framework built into organizing and working during the race. The organizers want to decenter their power and encourage anyone in the neighborhood to add positively to the race—but this certainly is a struggle. Every year, organizers try to give their power away to community members, but as Wendy explained, there are challenges in getting community members to contribute to the race. "That mentality is really hard to get through...the empowerment that people get when they realize they can just do stuff." Not only are the Riverwest 24 organizers trying to get community members to change their mentality about their ability to contribute, the organizers are simultaneously using this form of power to give their power away to others. Community involvement is necessary for the community building

to be seen as a success to the Riverwest 24 organizers. The ways by which power is exercised with the Riverwest 24 is murky, especially given the fact that when Riverwest 24 organizers get community members to do something they would not otherwise do.

Although the race itself acts as a way to build community, specifically in the myriad ways people are pushed to interact (racer-to-racer, racer-to-volunteer, racer-to-community member, etc.) the organizers have cultivated a DIY<sup>11</sup> approach to contributing to the race. Every organizer I interviewed referenced conversations they have with people eager to contribute ideas to the race. Every organizer had the same response: do it yourself. Jeremy reaffirmed this mode of organizing, explaining the hands-off approach from the main organizers. “You’re an adult, I trust you to judge what you wanna do. ‘Can I give out free massages?’ Does it contradict what the mission statement says? ‘No.’ Well then do it.” Jeremy likened this organizing approach to his preferred involvement at a dinner party.

If someone makes me dinner I don’t want to be in the living or dining room waiting for the food to get ready. I’ll do the dishes and now we’re communally working together. And that’s what the race is. Get me involved. ‘You mean I can just get involved? I can just spray bikers with a hose and I’m part of it?’ That’s awesome.

Paul and Wendy also spoke to this DIY approach.

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<sup>11</sup> Do-it-Yourself, or DIY, is an idea developed within the punk subculture of the 1970s. People committed to DIY eschewed mainstream means of production and distribution and instead crafted self-released records, handmade books or magazines (zines), and various fashion elements (studded belts, safety pin jewelry). In this use of the term DIY is not referring to the more recent commercialization of the idea through, for example, “DIY” home improvement shows. For more on DIY within punk subcultures see Hebdige (1979) and Duncombe (1997).

Paul: That's one of the big things about everything that we're doing, great do it.  
Don't tell us about it, do it.

Wendy: You can tell us about it, but don't tell us about it like we're gonna do it for you.

Paul: One of my favorite responses to anything that anybody approaches us with, is 'that's a great idea—you're in charge!' And then eighty percent of the time it never happens....

Wendy: But when it does, it's awesome.

Paul: But people make it their own, that's what this is about

The framework of letting the Riverwest neighborhood be a part of the race in whatever way they want, within the confines of the mission statement, seems to be inspired by the neighborhood's alderman, Nik Kovac. Paul recalled contacting Kovac to get a sense of what the city leaders' response may be to a 24-hour bike race.

Paul: Our first year we did the race when we were like, trying to set up. And we called Kovac the alderman, 'hey we're gonna do this, like do we need to talk anybody?' He said, 'they're your streets.' Just the empowerment that came from that is what we want to put on everyone else. Can we do this as part of the race? It's your race. Of course you can do that. Do your own thing!

Melody: It's not a structure many people are used to.

Paul: And that's another thing, dealing with a lot of different organizations; we don't work on consensus, we work on empowerment. If you wanna do something, do it. We don't have to all agree on it but if you're gonna put your time into it, then it is worth doing. So it's just like a framework of a time and a place and



anything that happens, you can't blame us if no one shows up to the thing that you're doing. We just created the time and the place.

Wendy: We count the laps.

Paul: We count people going in circles.

Paul and Wendy's understanding of their role in the Riverwest 24 is one of simply providing the framework. The Riverwest 24 is merely an occurrence happening at a defined time and within a defined space, but the details of what happens within those limits is up to the neighborhood. One of the most visible ways this DIY framework materializes is through "pop-up volunteers." It is very common for neighbors to come out of their houses and control traffic for the racers and give out food and beverages. In a thank you note to the Riverwest 24 organizers,<sup>12</sup> a racer wrote, "Naked bike riders, friendly people, cool bikes, free beer...I really appreciate all the help from volunteers at intersections and the cheers from the sidewalks...I LOVE YOU ALL."

Although this framework opens up space for "anyone" to contribute to the race, I have noted some flaws in this approach. When Ann was discussing the possibility of diversifying the race she recalled, "there are many people who approach Chris, Jeremy, Paul saying we need more diversity in this race. Great! Start the committee, start the diversity committee, you go figure out how to do it."

This comment by Ann admittedly made me pause. Although my intention here is to focus on how the race runs on a DIY ethic, one needs to think through the

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<sup>12</sup> During the 2010 race, a bonus checkpoint had racers write a thank you note to the organizers. The notes were compiled in a bound book—one for each organizer. Steve graciously lent me a copy for this chapter. These notes tell a lot about why people are involved with the Riverwest 24 and what the race has accomplished for the neighborhood. All racer identifying elements of these notes have been omitted in this chapter.

consequences of this individualistic approach. To be clear, the organizers *do* feel responsible for select elements of the race, and thus retain responsibility, namely keeping the riders safe and alive.

Steve: We've had discussions about what would we do if we didn't get a permit or what if Mary got killed mid-race. Do we stop racing or not?

Mary: But even so, how would you be liable? Is it really a liability?

Steve: A lawyer can make anybody liable for anything and talk to a judge about anything.

Melody: It's more about self-liability. Jeremy would say of course, I wouldn't be liable but I would still feel liable. It doesn't take away how I feel.

Steve: If some lawyer looked at the paperwork, it's me and Prach, that's where the names—it's me and Prach. So if something were to happen it's mine and Prach's house on the line. Like if somebody gets killed, if you get killed and you're Mary maybe your spouse doesn't care and wants to sue somebody. So we sweat a little bit but not enough to stop.

This approach suggests that the organizers do not focus on issues that are less than life-or-death. But of course by not attending to broader issues, they simply transfer the responsibility to community members, avoiding critique that the organizers do not care about diversity, for example. In *Against the Romance of Community*, Joseph (2002) tells a similar story about her work at a queer theatre company. One organizer mentioned that the company had not discussed including bisexuals in the theatre's mission. Two other organizers responded together, "That's right. Let them start their own theatre if they want one" (p. xvii). This moment, Joseph (2002) argues, was "frightening" and articulated that

the invocation of community within the theatre company prioritized “gayness” over other identity features.

The Riverwest 24 organizers never argue that people of color should start their own race, but by suggesting they cannot deal with diversity issues, they work to prioritize particular identities by default. This “implicitly exclusionary deployment of community” (Joseph, 2002, p. xviii) is masked by the self-empowerment rhetoric that defers making systematic changes to the event onto people outside the organizing committee. To be clear, all of the organizers I talked with about diversity issues in the Riverwest 24 had thoughtful comments and strong opinions about how deeply embedded racism is in our society.<sup>13</sup> Although the organizers could be seen as conceding to diversity issues, they also know that it will take a lot of effort to change the demographics of the Riverwest 24—time they simply do not have when organizing the biggest bicycle race in Milwaukee. Therefore, Ann’s request for a diversity committee does not mean she is avoiding “dealing” with the issue. In some ways she is suggesting that the concern for a more diverse event is large enough to warrant its own committee, not just another thing to put on the organizers’ to-do list. And once again, it is clear how much trust the organizers put into the community to solve internal problems.

Even though the Riverwest 24 struggles with being inclusive to all neighbors, one population that the Riverwest 24 particularly prioritizes, and makes the race accessible to, is non-typical bicycle riders. This is an important aspect of the event to discuss because,

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<sup>13</sup> I am still wary of all of the organizers’ approaches to diversity. For example, during the 2013 planning meeting on April 28, 2013, an organizer joked that to recruit Black people we should have a soul food breakfast.

in my experience, it is rare to have a bicycle event be dominated by people who are only marginally interested in bicycling.

### **How the race succeeds with atypical bicyclists**

*Well I think right from the top we've never coddled to [the serious racers]. We've always ribbed on them, if you will. -Jeremy*

One of the reasons I continue to participate in the Riverwest 24 as a racer and volunteer is due to the race's accumulation of "atypical" race participants. Bicycle races, even those that occur in urban spaces, are usually filled with "pro" bicyclists who compete aggressively. "Alley cats," a popular form of urban racing among bicycle couriers, have swelled with people who are not couriers, who attempt to race through uncontrolled race routes, often taking great risks. Mike noted the issues with what he calls "super" bike people racing with "non-super" bike people.

Sometimes [an alley cat] can be really separating, like super bike people don't wanna hang out and do things with non-super bike people. And being a courier and doing courier races I felt that. These non-couriers are going to get hurt. They shouldn't be here.

But Mike noted that in the Riverwest 24 this sort of separation does not occur. "The super duper bike dudes are still hanging out and shooting the breeze and giving food to people who are just hanging out, the commuters, or people who ride their bike just for the Riverwest 24." Mike argued that the race being 24 hours is a direct effect of this communality. "I think that kind of exhaustion, being up all night, breaks down the cool-kid barriers." And Mike explained that part of the reason the organizers stuck with the idea of a 24-hour race is because during Jeremy and Paul's Baja 1000 experience "they

loved the delirium and emotion that comes out when you are delirious and you work together for a long time.”

Still, being up for 24 hours does not guarantee that a bicycle race would be free of “super bike people” accustomed to racing. The ability for the Riverwest 24 to discourage “super bike people” from overwhelming the race is even more perplexing when the organizers explain their use of them to make the first year a success. Although Paul explained that the original vision included the Riverwest 24 “being an amazing community event where people are able to interact with each other and build relationships,” the organizers focused on making the race happen, period. And so their thought process included asking, in Paul’s words, “how can we bring in people that will race to make this event happen and then let it grow into the community?” Paul continued, “The first year was definitely more bike community, messengers, that type of crew that we really focused on and were able to build excitement through that.” To attract the young, hip bicyclists in the first year the Riverwest 24 also included “Bike Olympics” where contests were held that hinged on having a fixed gear bike. Early in the event, two people were injured (one with head trauma) in the Olympics and the contests ended early.

Of course one could interject here and argue that relying on “typical” bicycle people to ride in the Riverwest 24 the first year assumes that people in the neighborhood were incapable or unwilling to ride for 24 hours. Encouraging the hip bicyclists, many of whom Mike knew personally, to ride in the first Riverwest 24 lowered the risk of it failing. In an untitled Riverwest 24 documentary,<sup>14</sup> Mike is amping up the organizers about an assumed low turnout. “Don’t be upset if there’s 75 [people], that’s awesome.

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<sup>14</sup> This documentary is not available online or for purchase. Copies of it have been passed around the Riverwest community.

For a first time race at this scale?” In the next scene, Paul sits under a tent next to Jeremy’s house right before the race starts. He explains to the camera, “Yesterday I think we had 35 [people] signed up. By the time I went to bed, we had 101 [people]. So we didn’t make enough shirts. Well we made way more than we thought we were gonna need but we’re already out.” Roughly 200 people, part of 13 teams, rode the first year—many more than the organizers expected.

In my experience, there were a lot of “typical” bicyclists in the first year’s race. But Ann reminded me that a very non-typical bicyclist, Xav, won the first year’s solo category. “You can be Xav and win the damn race in your flip flops, without a shirt, on a mountain bike, and go act in a play after.” Xav did not fit the demographic of who the Riverwest 24 organizers attempted to recruit the first year. Ann’s example suggests that although hip bicyclists were encouraged to participate, other types of people stood out as exemplars of the Riverwest 24 vision. Ann took a different view on what type of person signed up the first year, those who she argued really developed the Riverwest 24 culture. “The [type of] people willing to be involved the first year, it took some courage. Ok I’ll ride my bike for 24 hours, and the kind of people who sign up for that beating are interesting people in the first place. They really developed that culture.”

The Riverwest 24 organizers deployed specific strategies to make sure the demographic of the first year did not multiply too greatly. Paul often referred to this as “sabotaging our own race.” In my conversation with Paul and Wendy I asked about the seemingly impossible feat to market to the urban bicycle community the first year but decentralize them all subsequent years.

Melody: It's interesting about how you used the urban bike community to kinda get the Riverwest 24 going, but somehow what's fascinating for me is somehow it didn't get taken over by them. Which is hard to do, right?

Paul: We constantly, constantly struggled with that and every single year we you know, have to repair relationships with people that are upset that this isn't always just about a race. Like you have to look at it from the bigger picture. Every single year we you know it's not that we are trying to make people angry. But it happens every year. But it's a matter of balancing a race technically but in spirit it's not, so you are riding that line all the time

Wendy: Yeah like trying to figure out the bonus checkpoints. You aren't gonna win if you don't do the bonus laps, you know what I mean. It's just how it is now and it makes a lot of the "big R" racers totally annoyed that they gotta do it. And so although we're not, like you said, while we're not trying to make them mad we're not going out of our way. It's a little funny that we know that some of this is gonna make them mad.



**Figure 5: Riverwest 24 2012 racers completeing the bonus checkpoint of playing *Michael Jackson: The Exerience* at Lala's House in Harambee.**





**Figure 6: Riverwest 24 2012 racers completing slip-n-slide bonus checkpoint at Kilbourne Park in Riverwest**

Christopher affirmed the use of bonus checkpoints to slow the race down and the pleasure the organizers have in watching “big R” racers get frustrated.

The bonus stops are trying to slow the riders down. So that they cannot race as much. And they get pissed right? Jeremy has a little bit of a stick in the eye mentality. And he likes that irritation that they get from that. And you could take that too far, but it certainly is something we’ve thought about a lot is more bonus stops.

As a 24-hour volunteer at the bonus checkpoints, I witnessed racers try to rush through the activities needed to earn the points. For example, one activity was to find vegan food, bring it back to a fellow volunteer and me, and eat it in front of us. I caught numerous people taking the food the *volunteers* were eating and try to pass it off as their own. Like Wendy said, the Riverwest 24 cannot be won by doing everything as fast as you can. This

counterhegemonic approach to a race framework sends a clear message to “typical” bike racers: the tactics used to win in other races will actually make you lose here.

The Riverwest 24 definitely succeeds in encouraging a wide array of people to volunteer and race. Mary recalled her first year racing with me. “And we agreed to do it because [Melody] liked to bike a lot. I had a bike but I’m not a bike person. But it has turned into my form of transportation. But at the time it wasn’t so, yeah it would be fun.” Here Mary directly compared me being “a bike person” and her not being a bike person. She seemed to argue that *because* I was a bike person I would propel us into participating, which confirms the organizers’ tactic to get people involved the first year. Yet Mary found that even though she was not a “bike person” that was not considered a barrier for her to race for 24 hours. But, the Riverwest 24’s success in encouraging the entire neighborhood to participate includes one drawback—a lack of ethnic and class diversity.

### **Diversity in the Riverwest 24**

Although the Riverwest 24 has great potential to change the neighborhood for the better, long standing class and racial divisions in both Riverwest and the urban bicycle community are affirmed in the race. Most racers, volunteers, and onlookers are white, liberal, educated, middle-class people. The Riverwest 24 certainly fosters a space for “anyone” to participate but it runs the risk of being understood as just another thing “white people like.”<sup>15</sup> My discussions with racers and organizers will explicate more of this tension.

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<sup>15</sup> This is a colloquial term made popular through the *Stuff White People Like* website, which lists 136 things white people like including organic food, diversity, public radio, and gentrification (stuffwhitepeoplelike.com).

Riverwest seems suspiciously “authentic” when I consider it beside Sharon Zukin’s (2010) thoughts in *Naked City*. In “hipster” neighborhoods, Zukin (2010) argues that authenticity is a “consciously chosen lifestyle and a performance, and a means of displacement as well” (p. 4). Particular residents of Riverwest *do* perform; we perform a Riverwest identity. In my own life, this identity is easy to pick out once I am plucked from my Riverwest origins. For example, when Mary came to visit me in Minneapolis, my Minneapolis friends said, “Oh we see where you get your fashion from, you both look the same.” Friends who have traveled to Riverwest for the Riverwest 24 see the identity all the more clearly. As much as Riverwest pushes its uniqueness, creativity, and inclusionary energy, we would be kidding ourselves not to realize that the hippie-punks dominate the cultural capital in the neighborhood. One potential consequence of this is that authenticity means a potential displacement of multi-generational residents—mostly those of Puerto Rican, African American and Polish decent. After a discussion with organizers about diversity in the race, I will situate this discussion within Riverwest’s larger gentrification history so readers can understand the full effect diversity has had on the neighborhood and, in part, the Riverwest 24.

The Riverwest 24 is an eclectic race. Although racers may proudly display haircuts reminiscent of a runaway toddler with scissors and tattoos on the verge of infection, this sort of counterculture representation is a limited form of diversity in the race. The lack of ethnic diversity is worthy of interrogation given Riverwest already is ethnically diverse and sits on N. Holton St.—a historically segregating road. Even if I momentarily forgive the gentrification that has already occurred in Riverwest under the performed “innocent” integration of liberal white folk since the 1960s, Riverwest still

maintains a high level of ethnic integration compared to the rest of the surrounding Milwaukee neighborhoods. Alderman Nik Kovac told *COG*, an urban bicycle magazine, in an interview about the Riverwest 24, “[Riverwest] should be a model for how the rest of Milwaukee functions racially and socio-economically” (Trusky, 2011, p. 13). But the Riverwest 24 simply does not represent such diversity in its race. The race is organized by white people, is raced by mostly white people, and is supported by mostly white volunteers. When I spoke to Mary specifically about the diversity of its organizers and volunteers, she could only think of two annual bonus checkpoints run by Black residents: going to community member Lala’s house (west of N. Holton St. even) and Trim-Me-Up (an African American-owned barber shop that closed in 2012). Mary could not think of any other Black Riverwest residences that help with the race. Riverwest 24’s ethnic makeup is not lost on the organizers. When I asked Christopher what he would like to see more and less of in the race he responded,

Less racing, more race-ing. I hate to be kitschy. It’s a pretty white event. It doesn’t represent the community as much as it could. My parents come and they’re not black, but they are like, you guys are talking about diversity all the time, where is it? So that’s definitely a weakness.

Christopher is aware of the larger social implications of ethnicity and bicycling saying “there’s a lot of hostility towards bikes in the Black community.” Ann agreed saying, “it’s a manifestation of the class and racial struggle that’s happening.” Christopher said there has been very little interest and involvement from people of color. When I suggested the paradox with the lack of interest within a diverse neighborhood Ann responded,

I think that it's difficult for, because everyone's white on the organizing team, it's difficult to reach out. Yes it's a diverse community but it's so segregated, where people hang out. It's very white and black still. So I think it's hard to figure out how to reach out.

Ann and Christopher also theorized that Riverwest 24 organizers' adamant refusal to do advertising or promotion (for example, declining to be covered by FOX News) has a consequence of not reaching a more diverse audience through such marketing. Charles, one of the few Black Riverwest 24 racers, suggested ways to get a more diverse race participation going, although he saw flaws in his own suggestions.

Go to the neighborhood, go talk to people with fliers and suggest to them to get a group of people and you know just ride. Hey you guys wanna ride a bike for 20 bucks a piece? Each one of you guys, c'mon. But you know what? I think if you start doing it that way people wanna see something out of it. They want a cash prize. But that would be fun if it was just strictly neighborhood Milwaukee people you would have to live in Riverwest or off Holton or in Bay View. It would be more fun if it was like that. That's just a little much right now I think, it's just telling them about it and going to the city, going to the schools. There would be some young kids that would just be totally into it, too.

Ann and Christopher also have a developing strategy to get more young people of color involved. Ann explained,

It's a matter of figuring out who can you tap in, and a lot of it I think would be with younger kids, like tap our high school students about this kind of stuff and

getting them thinking about it. They won't be riding in it yet but thinking about it, planting the seed and then they talk to people.

This strategy seeks to challenge the value system of urban youth that prioritizes escaping the urban setting, which according to Christopher, Ann, and Mike, does not include becoming bicyclists. As Christopher described his students,

They don't necessarily aspire to the fixed gear bike, that's a subculture. And there are a few Black skateboarder kids, those kids who go into that culture. But the dominant culture is not into that. Their goal is to reach the middle class and get out of the city.

Encouraging their students to participate not only in the Riverwest 24 but also just riding a bicycle in general appears to be a huge challenge. As mentioned earlier, four organizers are public school teachers. I found it fascinating that all of them, without any prompting from me, described their students' reactions to riding to work on a bicycle. Mike described his experience bike commuting to his high school.

Man as a teacher, when I ride my bike to school, they're like, 'You ride your bike to school? Don't you have a car?' Yeah I got a car. 'Well why ride your bike?' Because I like riding my bike. 'You got a car though, right?' I'm like, yeah. 'Ok. Ok, then you're ok. You're not doing it because you *have* to, right?'

This interaction points to larger racialized and classed social symbols of the urban bicycle culture.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Mike has the privilege of choosing to ride a bicycle without peer scrutiny, his students question why someone with such privilege would choose the bicycle over a car. This interaction also represents "outside problems" Ann referenced as

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<sup>16</sup> For more information about the intersectionality of race and class in urban bicycling, see Chapter 1.

a blockage to a more diverse race: “I think everybody recognizes it’s an issue, but no one knows how to fix it or even if it’s possible to fix just because there are so many outside problems.”

When I mentioned my conversation with Ann and Christopher to Mike and asked him for his take on whether ethnic diversity is a problem in the Riverwest 24, he argued that the diversity is not going to happen from inviting particular people to get involved in the race.

That’s the thing. I don’t know if it’s a problem. I guess I don’t know if you go out and say it’s a problem. It’s like how do you make it attractive, I think, like make it more attractive to people of color and people in the neighborhood? We need more. You just see a couple people and it’s intimidating, right? Man there’s like 700 white people riding bikes and then there’s 20 young African American men basically too. And that’s about it. How do you make it attractive without, how can I work it, with the people in Harambee and not have it be like, ‘hey guys come ride bikes with us. Bikes are cool.’ Um, so that’s tough. And I don’t know. I would like to see more diversity but the bigger it gets...that more people come out and watch and then hopefully people will be like, ‘I want to do that next year. I want to be involved, how do I get involved, how to volunteer, be a bonus check point.’ They see what’s going on. I think it can happen and it can grow but it’s not gonna be because we go and talk to people. I think that sort of feels like then it would be racist. It’s such a hard line to walk. I think we just need to make it inviting to everybody.

## **Gentrification**

*One generation was passing down its values and its wisdom to another. In that respect, members of the counterculture resembled a community with much longer tenure in [Riverwest]. –Tim Tolan*

Earlier I presented a brief history of Riverwest, and with the knowledge of population shifts and the Riverwest 24's lack of ethnic diversity, those concerned with gentrification may be quick to accuse certain neighbors of gentrifying the neighborhood. White, middle-class, educated community members are building community *their way*. Does this inherently leave other populations alienated? Does this race illustrate the power white people have in the neighborhood, despite decades of struggle to maintain diversity in Riverwest? Is the race reaffirming and solidifying class and race divisions that run rampant in most bicycle cultures (e.g. road racing, mountain biking, couriers, urban commuters)?

I believe the answers to these questions are complicated. There are many ways in which the Riverwest 24 community building can be alienating. The Riverwest 24 is built from the middle-class artist and activist enclave of Riverwest. Because of this, the organizers' interests and lifestyles inevitably influence the race. A discussion about the power of white people in Riverwest must be informed by its history with gentrification. In short, Riverwest exists somewhere in between neo-bohemianism (Lloyd, 2006) and gentrification. Lloyd (2006) states "bohemia old and new are nested communities, embedded in initially poor or working class neighborhoods where the bohemian participants are a minority in the overall population" (p. 38). In past decades, bohemia was seen as marginal and subversive. Now, in its 'neo-bohemia' phase, it "enhances



profit-generating strategies” (Lloyd, 2006, p. 239). Although this is a fairly accurate representation of the neo-bohemians’ role in Riverwest, the difference is that the profit-generating strategies are not capitalized on—or are strongly resisted. And that is largely due to Riverwest’s continual fight to avoid gentrification in many ways and in many spaces.

In my personal experience living in Riverwest I have been witness to numerous moments of anti-gentrification actions within the neighborhood. These moments include two major acts of vandalism against condo construction, multiple discussions about the Riverwest Food Cooperative dealing with booming business and a “no expansion” clause, and oral histories of all the ways Riverwest kept out big businesses. I have even seen a few hipster businesses capitalize on Riverwest’s bohemian aesthetic (one business produced arty Riverwest-themed shirts) but abruptly leave after they accumulated enough cultural capital to move to a more expensive area of town. In Riverwest, small corner stores, a co-operative bar, dingy cafes, and a small bicycle shop appear to be the most successful businesses in the neighborhood. But even Milwaukee-based businesses struggle to find a way into Riverwest. It took many years for Alterra, a Milwaukee coffee company, to build a new coffee shop on the edge of Riverwest. Fights ensued over competition with Fuel Café because of suspicions that Alterra was heading for a more corporate framework. Not surprising to the people paying attention, in 2010 Alterra sold its distribution rights to Mars Inc. The Riverwest Alterra location, although capitalizing on Riverwest’s “grit as glamour” (Lloyd, 2006), makes it clear that the owners do not want the typical Riverwest coffee shop customer. Fuel Café customers, like in most independent coffee shops, tend to hang out for many hours, often on their laptops, and the

workers could not care less. At the Riverwest Alterra, when a customer signs onto the free wireless network, a giant image pops up on your laptop screen asking you to, essentially, not sit on your laptop all day so as to allow *other* customers spaces at the tables: the customers who will spend more money.<sup>17</sup> Riverwest residents have not appreciated this bait and switch from Alterra. In my time spent at the Riverwest Alterra, it appears that many customers come from the neighboring Shorewood, an upper class community to the north of Riverwest's limits.

This small example shows that people living in Riverwest are concerned with keeping their purchases local and supporting businesses that, in my opinion, would never survive outside of the neighborhood. The few condos that exist still seem like awkward additions to a neighborhood filled with poorly constructed Polish flats.<sup>18</sup> As condos usually signal a richer population moving in, Tolan (2003) argues that "Riverwest's belief in diversity is so strong that many residents saw rich people as the greater threat" than poor people (p. 165). Riverwest residents quickly sent a message to developers that building new, upscale housing in Riverwest was not welcome. To most developers, the existing housing is not worth rehabbing. Yet in early 2012, an apartment company attempted to turn an old warehouse into housing exclusively for the local university's undergraduates. On the Riverwest Neighborhood Association listserv, Wendy wrote about the emotionally-charged response to this news,

I have seen this neighborhood fight or discuss to fight many developments...the more we rationally discuss things and come together the stronger our

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<sup>17</sup> Since the writing of this chapter in 2011, the image no longer appears when you sign on to Alterra's wi-fi.

<sup>18</sup> Polish flats are two-family duplexes with the units on top of each other. This housing design remains popular in Milwaukee.

neighborhood will become. We know better than the corporations do, we know better than the city council...this is our neighborhood. (February 8, 2012)

Riverwest has all the markers for rapid gentrification: a visible artist population, affordable housing, high cultural capital, and close proximity to yuppie areas of Milwaukee. Tolan (2003) confirms, “In other cities, the cultural ferment so apparent in Riverwest has often been an early sign of gentrification” (p. 149). But the neighborhood’s loyalty to its unique community history and aesthetic has created an impenetrable wall that has kept out all corporations and most developers for as long as Riverwest has existed. Although Tolan (2003) suggests that the poor housing construction is a crucial reason for the lack of gentrification in Riverwest, there are many other ways to gentrify besides housing. But Riverwest continues to show it wants “more integration rather than less” and remains “distinctly bohemian but proudly diverse” (Tolan, 2003, pp. 186-87). As explained by Tolan (2003), Phillip L. Clay (1979) presents an alternative understanding of a neighborhood that is alive despite its internal struggles with crime and poverty: alive enough to encourage gentrification but seems to stop short. “Incumbent upgrading” is when the “lower-or working-class ambience of the neighborhood is not changed, and the physical investments reflect greater confidence on the part of owners-investors in the neighborhood” (Clay, 1979, p. 7). In *Neighborhood Renewal* Clay (1979) looks at how incumbent upgrading has developed in Cleveland, Detroit, and Newark, and he focuses on the cities’ physical upgrading as supported by a vibrant “civil class” and active neighborhood organizations. Clay (1979) defines the civil class as:

The degree to which neighbors are concerned for one another...the degree to which self-discipline and the discipline of children are reinforced in social

interaction...degree of active concern for the integrity and image of the neighborhood...willingness to administer positive reinforcement and negative sanctions against neighbors and outsiders who violate norms...willingness to help integrate new people into the neighborhood. (p. 37)

Clay (1979) argues that neighborhoods with a dominating civil class hold much internal strength and are more likely to cope and survive. Although Clay (1979) understands that the opposing “uncivil class” may seem to be an insensitive binary, he says “all segments of society...believe that uncivil behavior threatens the survival of community” (p. 38).

What does this have to do with the Riverwest 24? For one, Clay’s concept of incumbent upgrading is useful in exploring the grey area between pre and post-gentry and how a neighborhood can stay in that grey area indefinitely. Riverwest and the Riverwest 24 superficially appear to have gentrifying qualities, but they are able to maintain an incumbent upgrading status nevertheless. There is much scholarship about the gentrification of urban cities with painstaking details of the transitions (Checker, 2011; Freeman, 2006; Ley, 1996; Smith, 1996; Lloyd, 2006; Makagon, 2012; Zukin, 2008, 2010). The moments of transitions, although familiar across the examples, did not resonate with the overall characteristics of Riverwest or the Riverwest 24 as a potential gentrification vehicle.

Now that I have discussed how ethnic diversity and threats of gentrification impact the ability for Riverwest 24 to build community, I want to shift gears and talk about how the race has been able to build community outside the scope of riding bicycles.

## **Community activist modality**

When I asked the organizers how the Riverwest 24 is a form of community building, most of them mentioned how it has helped develop other community events in the neighborhood. The most repeated example cited was the group of people who walked from Milwaukee to Madison—a 90 mile trek in March 2011. The group of about 50, spearheaded by some Riverwest 24 organizers, walked to Madison to bring even more attention to the uprising over Gov. Scott Walker’s anti-collective bargaining bill that stripped public unions of their right to bargain over their working conditions. Utilizing the network of such a dedicated group of neighbors to a community event and applying it to another community building event is possibly the most spectacular consequence of the Riverwest 24. As Paul explains, “I think one of the best things that has come out of this bike race from the organizers’ perspective is the neighborhood infrastructure that we’ve created from doing other things, besides the bike race.” The infrastructure illustrates how, within Riverwest, “those with strong motivation to live their values ‘full time’ often seek to join or create intentional communities” (Kozeny, 1996, par. 2). In other words, the same values that propelled neighbors to create a race based on their values of a strong community did not waver in the middle of the winter. Instead they took advantage of the intentional community they had created through the Riverwest 24 and capitalized on how those values intersected with anti-Scott Walker political beliefs.

Christopher and Ann also told me about how the race ensured a successful walk to Madison due to the neighborhood’s communal trust.

Christopher: With the events of Wisconsin with the elimination of collective bargaining and things like that, we walked to Madison from our neighborhood.

And I'll tell you this. We thought of the idea on a Wednesday. That day we had a flier and we left the next Friday. I would say that 80% of the people were from our neighborhood because there's a trust there. We're gonna walk to Madison.

Ok, sure!

Ann: I think that trust has evolved from the race

Christopher: We created a 24-hour bike race. If we hadn't done that, people would be like [in a skeptical voice] 'yeah, we're gonna walk to Madison.' That was the pudding for me...the people in our neighborhood walking to Madison, yes. There was not a lot of twisting of arms on that either. Those were the people who came, our neighborhood.

Ann: Our people who are committal to the race as well.

Ann's understanding of how trust operates in the community built from the Riverwest 24 is reminiscent of intentional communities. These communities "create an environment of familiarity and trust sufficiently strong that doors can safely be unlocked" (Kozeny, 1996, par. 16). Ann argues that enough trust had been built that neighbors did not think twice about walking 90 miles in the winter.

Beyond the trust that has been fostered through the Riverwest 24 into the community, Paul discusses how the internal organization of the Riverwest 24 specifically helped create the walk to Madison.

Within 12 hours we had the entire infrastructure built because everybody fell into their roles that they had organizing the bike race, they did that role they already knew how to do. And within 12 hours we had press releases sent out, we contacted 1500 people, we had a website up, we had an email list, all out of one

meeting because...everybody knew how to do it. Those types of things like once you have an infrastructure built for neighborhood organizing, and community organizing, it's just so easy to just plug that framework into an issue, any event, any topic. So I think that's one of the most important parts. And then the network of people that you can reach through the bike race. We were like, alright now I've got this list of people in the neighborhood that are into doing wacky exciting things or, remove politics, people who are active in their neighborhood. And you are able to be like, hey you were into this, are you into this? And you get this immediate response because you already have this relationship created. You're not starting from scratch every single time you wanna do something.

The Riverwest 24 organizers stumbled upon a community building framework that, when tested out in the Madison walk, worked to build community outside of the race. However, the framework was not entirely accidental. As Jeremy theorized about the impact the first year of the race could have in 2008, he told other organizers that although he hoped to build a movement, it was very possible there would be no movement. Yet four years removed Jeremy told me about his hidden agenda with the race.

Jeremy: It's in preparation for the end of capitalism. And I really mean that. Boom the power goes out in Riverwest. For three days. No explanation why. There's no TV. I don't think it's that outlandish. We're ready. I show up at Wendy's door. Wendy, what's going on, what do you need? 'Well I need milk for the kids.' I got it. Can you do this? And we got this. And I feel like I could do that with most anybody in the neighborhood.

Melody: That's a really good point. When the conversation had gotten more serious about peak oil and I was like, when I lived here, I was like, that's fine.

We're fine because the community is so good here.

Jeremy: Secretly you call it Hamas on wheels.

In January 2012, I spoke with Paul at the Riverwest Public House when I was purchasing political prints he made. The print I chose was bright teal with a black and white image of Father James Groppi<sup>19</sup> holding a sign that read "BLACK POWER." Paul told me that when he was walking to Madison, Groppi's widow, Dr. Margaret Rozga, met them to give out food and water. When Paul produced the Groppi prints, he dropped off a stack with Rozga. Paul recalled how excited she was to have the prints. It is stunning to think that a bicycle race conceived of five years ago led to the meeting of Riverwest residents with Rozga and Paul's art of her husband being put in her hands.

In this chapter I have explored many themes, ideas, opinions, and theories that have come out of a handful of neighbors' attempt at turning a bicycle race into an inclusive community building vehicle. Characteristics of the race such as making fellow neighbors more visible to one another, encouraging these neighbors to interact through this visibility, and allowing any neighbor to add to the race have all contributed to this unique form of neighborhood and bicycle activism. Riverwest's history and current status as a counterculture haven seems to be a strong variable in why this race has succeeded. Beyond the race's impact on the Riverwest 24 neighborhood, this race appears to impact

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<sup>19</sup> Father James Groppi, a white man, travelled to Selma, Alabama in 1965 to support the civil rights movement. In Milwaukee he also became known for his civil rights activism, specifically housing rights for African Americans (Tolan, 2003).



individual people in profound ways. I conclude this chapter by discussing how Riverwest 24 participants understand the race's importance to their personal lives.

### **Conclusion**

Not lost on me is the potential insignificance a bicycle race can appear to those outside the Riverwest neighborhood. Through my research I have shown how broader social issues, such as gentrification, inform the event. I have also made connections between cultural and historical complexities and the Riverwest 24 such as the activist history in the neighborhood. Through interviews with the organizers and participants, I illustrated how this event is transformative for Riverwest and its inhabitants. One way that the Riverwest 24 is transformative is through the raw emotional reaction people have because of the event. I am not speaking of the irrational emotional explosions that come from staying up for 24 hours. I am speaking of the emotions that arise from just talking about the race. In the untitled Riverwest 24 documentary, there is a scene of the beginning of the first year's race. Bagpipes fill the air with music and the camera pans across the riders lined up to start riding. The excitement, passion, love, and support the neighborhood pours out during those 24 hours is felt intensely minutes before the race begins. During my interview with Steve, he teared up multiple times telling me stories about the race. Towards the beginning of our conversation he was telling me about what happens on his block during the race.

Steve: My block this past year we got two 10-by-20 pop-ups and we made them into a long corridor because we had that one year it was really rainy, heavy rain, so we wanted to at least have one stop where the riders weren't in the rain. We don't mind abusing the riders a little bit, but you know, so we had a nice pop-up.

One of my neighbors gives me all the pop-ups, another one of my neighbors gives me tables... So two big tents, tables with food and fruit. A number of years, neighbors who are not involved with my checkpoint—I'm gonna start crying—bring out a bunch of food and stuff and I don't ask them to do anything, but I think that's also what they mean when they say it runs itself.

Melody: Yeah, yeah, yeah definitely.

Steve: I'll try to get through the rest of this without water-working.

Melody: No, no, uh it's a very I think that's what Riverwest 24, like that's why it's really important to write about it because—

Mary: Who else, what other race organizer gets teary eyed when they talk about, and then this happens, like—

Melody: But it is really powerful when it happens during the race.

Steve: It is, it really is.

Mary: It is really powerful the relationships that get connected.

Another emotional moment in our conversation came when we were talking about why people participate in the race. Some of the racers I was talking to along with Steve talked a lot about pushing themselves more than they thought they could. Steve recalled a person who rode the Riverwest 24 after they found out they had cancer. A thank you note to the organizers reads, "Last year I loved riding in the Riverwest 24 then last winter I found out I have brain cancer. One of the things I had to get better for was riding in the race again. Here I am doing it for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time and enjoying the hell out of it!" People suffering from illnesses, such as cancer, often participate in endurance racing as a marker of survival. Going back to one of the Riverwest 24's inspiration, the Baja 1000, Jeremy

recalls the community support akin to endurance racing via illness. “They don’t care who wins, just to finish. Just to be a part of it. I guess like a marathon is like that, or a breast cancer run or a diabetes run.”

This community support and emotionality is in part why I include the Riverwest 24 in my research. It was not much of a choice but a given. The Riverwest 24 inspired my thinking about how bicycles are being used in new and unique ways to build community. I take these moments seriously because I can see that, unlike other forms of activism via bicycles, this is more than about the bike. It is about celebrating a neighborhood, meeting your community, and improving your quality of everyday life.

## CHAPTER 3

### **‘Bike lanes are white lanes!’: The role of haunting Black bodies in Portland’s gentrifying bicycle infrastructure**

#### **Introduction**

I get to Ristretto Roasters before the sun has risen. The coffee shop is on N. Williams Ave., a one-way main drag running parallel to N. Vancouver Ave., in the Albina neighborhood. It is a predictably cold, rainy, winter day in North Portland. I arrive early to prepare for my first interview concerning bicycle lanes and gentrification. Laura, the now former program manager for the Cycling Community Center, requested to meet here and I am surprised by her choice of café. It is that type of coffee shop that reeks of hipness, intelligence, and superiority. High vaulted ceilings intersect with stainless steel detailing. The impeccably fashioned barista asks me what I was doing with my day. I told him that I was in town doing research on the very street we were on, especially focusing on the bicycle lane issue. “Yeah, gentrification,” he replied.

I learned about the Portland bike lane issue when a colleague of mine was preparing to move to Portland from Minneapolis. He told me that some community members in North Portland were upset that bicycle advocates were pushing for a new bike lane on N. Williams Ave. Community members who were critical of the bike lane conflated the infrastructure with racial inequality and, according to my friend, proclaimed that “bike lanes are white lanes.”<sup>1</sup> The North Williams Traffic Safety Operations Project run by the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) sought to use a small amount of

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<sup>1</sup> In my extensive research into the North Williams bike lane history, I have never found this quote attributed to anyone nor published in any blog or news article. But Paige Coleman, director of Portland’s Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods, told the *Portland Mercury* in 2009 that “some communities call the bike lanes the ‘white stripes of gentrification’” (Mirk, 2009).

funding, \$250,000,<sup>2</sup> to “improve the safety for all people on N. Williams Ave.” (Swart, 2012). The Bureau of Transportation had previously referred to this project as a “bikeway development project” (Maus, 2011a). Bicycle advocates such as blogger Jonathan Maus hypothesized that the shift in focus from bicycle safety to *all* forms of transportation safety may have to do with PBOT’s “fears that bicycling is seen as a symbol of gentrification” in a once thriving African American community (Maus, 2011a). It did not take community members long to realize that the majority of the changes proposed on N. Williams Ave. would benefit bicyclists the most. Community members’ outpouring of both support and anger was enough for PBOT to create the North Williams Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) composed of community members invested in the issue. The advisory committee included subgroups, such as the Honoring History Working Group that strived to bridge cultural gaps and educate community members about the history of the N. Williams Ave. area (PBOT, March 2012).

When I got to Portland in March 2012, I was surprised to see that a decent bike lane already existed on N. Williams Ave. The lane was bright white, clearly marked, and ran the entire distance of N. Williams Ave. I could not see why advocates would be asking for an even better bicycle lane. A bit selfish, I thought to myself. But when I returned to Portland in May—when the rainy season has been traded in for sun—I saw the problem. There are *a lot* of bicyclists who use this street. In my travels to other big “bike cities,” such as New York and Chicago, I have never seen this many bicyclists, continually, on one street. As I sat at various cafés along N. Williams Ave., bicyclists rode by constantly. I also marveled at bicyclists almost rear-ending each other, akin to

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<sup>2</sup> In March, 2013 the Oregon Transportation Commission granted the project \$1.47 million (Maus, 2013).

stressed out commuters on the freeway. When I rode down N. Williams Ave. during rush hour I was surrounded by other people on bikes, some trying to pass me without a word. Two full lanes of vehicle traffic hovered to my left and bus drivers tried to negotiate for space, merging in and out of the bike lane. According to PBOT, 3,500 bicyclists are estimated to ride on N. Williams Ave. on good weather days.

The conflict about N. Williams Ave.'s transportation infrastructure has emerged between two sets of Portland citizens and can be explained bluntly: a lower-income community dominated by people of color is being told by white bicycle advocates that they would benefit from bicycle lanes. And although there is not much debate over the impact bicyclists are having on N. Williams Ave., some community members are upset about the *newfound* concern about safety for particular people on N. Williams Ave. The PBOT project manager Ellen Vanderslice, now retired, said, "We're looking at Williams because we now have enough people riding on that [street that] there are some issues from a safety point of view" (Maus, 2011b). Sharon Maxwell-Hendricks, a SAC member, argued early on, "You say you want it 'safe' for everybody, how come it wasn't safe 10 years ago?...we wanted safe streets back then; but now that the bicyclists want to have safe streets then it's all about the bicyclists getting safe streets." (Maus, 2011b). It is this disjuncture about safety and the history of the neighborhood that spurred claims of racist urban planning. Michelle DePass, a SAC member and Honoring History Working Group leader, was one of the first people at PBOT's public meetings to speak of this racism. "We have an issue of racism and of the history of this neighborhood. I think if we're trying to skirt around that we're not going to get very far. We really need to address some

of the underlying systemic issues” (Maus, 2011b). In this case, bicycling had become the stand-in for these systemic issues.

In this chapter I argue that the neighborhood’s Black residents and its history rooted in Black culture produce haunting (Gordon, 1997) within the reconstruction of the N. Williams Ave. bicycle lane. Past residents haunting a particular space is common at sites of gentrification. Inferential and overt markers of this haunting include abandoned lots soon to be developed into lofts or the few remaining businesses of the “past” trying to hold on. The haunting also transpires through community meetings about the bicycle lane and the everyday living in Portland. The N. Williams Ave. bicycle lane has complicated bicycle advocacy’s role in urban spaces, bringing with it what Freud calls an “uncanny” feeling (cited in Gordon, 1997). An “uncanny feeling” is a strong feeling that “has shape, an electric empiricity, but the evidence is barely visible, or highly symbolized” (Gordon, 1997, p. 50). In this chapter I also suggest that where gentrification goes, bicycle infrastructure follows quickly behind, often leaving unhappy neighbors to contend with the results. Thus, more broadly this case study suggests that in many cities, Portland included, bicycle infrastructure is an emerging tool for the gentrification of neighborhoods. This tool, utilized by city governments, bicycle advocates, and business developers, paints a new image of a street while silently working to erase any culture or community that does not relate to the bicycling community. This tool works best when the bicycle lane is a reflection, not a clash, with the current street make-up. To be clear, I am not arguing that bicycle infrastructure in itself is a form of gentrification; rather I argue that bicycle infrastructure can be easily swept into larger projects working to cater to the upwardly mobile, creative, white demographic.

I support my claims using a mixed-method approach. I engaged in an ethnographic study of N. Williams Ave. for three weeks in May 2012. I spent as much time on N. Williams Ave. as possible, which often took the form of working in cafés. When biking south to north, I chose to take N. Williams Ave. even if it was out of my way. I attended the last of many open houses about the N. Williams Ave. bike lane at the end of May 2012. I walked a large portion of N. Williams Ave., taking detailed notes on the characteristics of buildings, plots of land, housing, and businesses. I borrow this method from Robert J. Topinka's (2012) theory of "the walker" as a rhetorical agent. Topinka (2012) argues that walking can reclaim time in hegemonic spaces and can transform some of the forces of capitalism in everyday life. This embodied interaction in everyday spaces "can lead to a more thorough understanding of both the rhetorical choices available to everyday actors and the possibilities for resisting, altering, and extending these choices" (Topinka, 2012, p. 67). Topinka's argument stems from Roxanne Mountford's (2001) definition of rhetorical space: "the geography of a communicative event" shaped by "cultural and material arrangement" (p. 47). I also conducted interviews with people invested in bike advocacy in Portland, each of whom brought a unique perspective to the controversy. Much of the general narrative of the N. Williams Ave. bike lane reconstruction that I share here was compiled from *Bike Portland*, an "independent, daily news source that covers the Portland bike scene" (bikeportland.org). To make sense of the conflict surrounding bicycle infrastructure and to address what is at stake outside the confines of my analysis, I integrate theories of neoliberal urbanism and Avery Gordon's (1997) concept of haunting. I understand the bicycle lane issue to be connected to gentrification and transportation injustice and use



these concepts to explore the neighborhood's reaction to an seemingly innocuous urban project.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Gentrification**

Some longtime Albina residents understand the reconstruction of the N. Williams Ave. bicycle lane as a form of gentrification. Urban geographers have written extensively on gentrification including its process, actors, and lived experiences.

Neil Smith (1996) defines gentrification as

the process by which poor and working-class neighborhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters—neighborhoods that had previously experienced disinvestment and a middle-class exodus. (p. 32)

Smith (1996) visualizes the gentrifying city as a “new frontier” for business developers and middle-class residents. These “urban pioneers” seek to “scrub the city clean of its working-class geography and history” (Smith, 1996, p. 27). Urban pioneers are often imagined by the media, urban planners, and urban geographers as artists who move into inner-cities to capitalize on cheap rent and underutilized spaces. Richard Lloyd (2006) refers to artists as “vanguards of a distinctive sort of gentrification” (p. 7). These artists enhance the profit-generating strategies embedded in previously poor and working class neighborhoods (Lloyd, 2006). As the neighborhood shifts or gentrifies, new residents are able to feel the “grit” of the neighborhood without having to deal with the reasons for the grit including poverty and prior disinvestment of the neighborhood. Lloyd (2006) explains,

Increasingly detached from the reality of more upscale residence and commerce, gritty accents remain a feature of neighborhood character. Moreover, the gritty aesthetic...is imprinted on the aesthetic representations produced by cultural creators, representations that evoke the glamour of urban instability, available to be consumed at a safe distance. (p. 98)

The grit of gentrification is present on N. Williams Ave. as residents and visitors frequent brand new establishments and live in eco-friendly lofts while boarded-up houses and lots lined with barbed wire fence compete for attention. This “urban instability” is undeniable but works to keep the neighborhood hip as the “gritty aesthetic” is such an appeal to the growing young, white, educated population in Albina.

An underlying assumption in critiques of gentrification is that the process harms longtime residents because of its potential to displace and erase marginalized communities. Black residents in Albina have spoken to this experience by deriding a transportation project as gentrification, as they too assume that more displacement and erasure is in their future. But the assumption that gentrification inflicts harm onto longtime residents may not be accurate. In Albina, vocal longtime residents courageously showed up to public meetings about a bicycle lane and presented a racialized and politicized argument that is rarely heard in the bicycle community. But by focusing on political contestations, the experiences of everyday residents may be muffled by the din of the conflict (Freeman, 2006). In Lance Freeman’s (2006) work about the lived experiences of gentrification, he argues that “the most active and vocal residents are not necessarily representative of the entire neighborhood and are likely different, perhaps most concerned about the changes taking place—hence their activism” (p. 7). It is

important to understand this caveat, as the most vocal critics of the project may not best represent the majority of the residents.

Although not always talked about in tandem, gentrification can impact access to transportation. Case studies suggest that transportation funding, including bus systems and light rail, prioritize the needs of the middle-to-upper class (Bullard & Johnson, 1997; Bullard, Johnson, & Torres, 2004). Although counterintuitive, those less dependent on public transportation are often privileged with better transportation resources. Classism and racism are embedded in transportation programs, and unfortunately transportation injustice has also made its way into bicycle infrastructure.

### **Transportation injustice**

Little has been written on how racism and classism reveal themselves in bicycle advocacy; most research on transportation justice and planning tends to focus on freeway construction, public transit, and related pollution. This literature focuses on the intersection of transportation, social equality, and civil rights. In *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race & Class Barriers to Mobility* (1997), Bullard and Johnson argue, “if a community happens to be poor, inner city, or inhabited by people of color, chances are it will receive less environmental protection than an affluent, suburban, white community” (p. 9). Transportation injustice research looks at how communities are impacted by transportation-based projects including social and psychological, physical, land-use, economic, mobility and access, public service, safety, and displacement impacts (Bullard & Johnson, 1997). The measurement of these impacts assumes motorized transportation projects, whereas projects *based* on bicycling or pedestrian traffic are absent from these

discussions.<sup>3</sup> The contributors to *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism & New Routes to Equity* compile an impressive amount of research that makes it difficult to conclude that transportation decisions are anything but decided consciously to minimize the needs of low-income people of color.

One of these studies discusses the difficulty of people's everyday concerns being heard in transportation planning. Furthermore, grassroots organizers can also run into problems when people's values about transportation clash. Cohen and Hobson (2004) studied transportation activism in San Francisco, reflecting many of the same concerns that were raised in Portland's public meetings about the bike lane. Tensions built because one group of activists was composed of white environmentalists, which brought up fears by people of color that their expressed issues "would get lost in the shuffle" (Cohen & Hobson, 2004, p. 101). Conversely, the social justice activists were loud, confrontational, and "completely changed the tenor of the discussion" (Cohen and Hobson, 2004, p. 102). Cohen and Hobson (2004) reflect on San Francisco's transportation planning: "in an arena in which nearly all the players are white, the vocal presence of people of color had a powerful impact" (p. 102). It is clear that the tensions between the activist groups are reminiscent of the tensions in Portland. The difference between the two case studies is the focus on *bicycle* infrastructure in Portland, which suggests that transportation injustice has found its way into bike lanes as well.

Transportation reform is a natural connection between social justice and environmental interests. "If we are to create a truly sustainable transportation system that is so crucial to

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<sup>3</sup> Bullard and Johnson (1997) pose many questions that help gauge community impact such as "Will noise or vibrations increase?"; "Will the proposed action increase or decrease the likelihood of accidents for non-motorists?"; and "How does the action affect non-motorist access to businesses, public services, schools, and other facilities?" (p. 13-14).

the future sustainability of our cities where the majority of people now live,” then transportation reform is a must (Holmes, 1997, p. 32). My project complicates this notion because it is the sustainable transportation of bicycling and its infrastructure that is now a site of social injustice.

The conflict about perceived transportation injustice on N. Williams Ave. is between longtime residents of color and newly arriving white bicycle advocates; this is not unique to Portland, but a pattern seen across the United States. In many cases the bicycle advocates are experiencing resistance from residents who do not necessarily prioritize bicycling over other forms of public transportation. This has startled bicycle advocates who have battled with city government over infrastructure for decades, but never assumed that their own neighbors could also stall or stop bicycle infrastructure projects. Paul M. Davis (2011), editor of *Shareable Magazine*, writes in “Are Bike Lanes Expressways to Gentrification,” “Cycling advocates, who have struggled for decades to be included in infrastructure decisions...[are] the ones who must listen” to the community (par. 9). Thus a paradox exists within bicycle lane construction in historically non-white areas of town. The bicycle lane construction could potentially be seen as a welcome shift away from the transportation injustice (e.g. unequal distribution of transportation resources such as bus lines) that has prospered so long in these areas; if North Portland struggles to get *any* improvement in transit options then this could be seen as a productive move. But the bicycle lane appears to further marginalize the surrounding community. That is, PBOT’s current focus on improving the bicycle lane on N. Williams Ave. does not speak to the experience of longtime residents. People who have lived in the area for decades declare that they do not use bicycle lanes but they know who does: those

rich white people. To some residents, bicycle lanes mean their community will have even less power in neighborhood decisions about urban planning and infrastructure. “Some low income and neighborhoods of color worry that singular, and seemingly broader *public interest* changes such as bicycle lane additions...may foster gentrification, further diminishing their voice, rights and roles in the community” (Aqyeman, 2012, par. 2).

There is little scholarly research on the intersection of bicycle infrastructure and transportation justice. The work that has been done focuses on who has the power in bicycle infrastructure planning and which bodies are seen utilizing the infrastructure. In “Planning for Diverse Use/rs: Ethnographic Research on Bikes, Bodies, and Public Space in LA,” Adonio E. Lugo (2012) argues that “extending transport justice to the bike movement means searching for ways to support cycling in diverse communities” (p. 50). In her ethnographic work, Lugo (2012) unearths tensions between bike advocates “obsessed with building bike infrastructure” (p. 50) and community members who do not hold such enthusiasm.

As bike advocates, we would not overcome the racial order of the city with our bike lanes...even as we believed that making our urban neighborhoods more bike-friendly would benefit all residents, we might be seen as unwelcome symbols of gentrification and change. (p. 51)

Lugo is the only scholar who has published specifically about how the development of bicycle infrastructure may be seen as another manifestation of transportation racism and gentrification.<sup>4</sup> But bloggers invested in bicycle advocacy have begun to develop this

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<sup>4</sup> A forthcoming article focuses specifically on this issue in North Portland. Thaddeus R. Miller and Amy Lubitow. “Bikes, Race and Gentrification in North Portland: Tensions between Environmental Justice and Sustainability.” *Environmental Justice*, forthcoming.

literature more acutely by discussing the unequal distribution of bicycle infrastructure in urban cities. Bike scholar and geographer Bill Lindeke (2012), for example, discusses the poor construction of bicycle lanes in a low-income Minneapolis neighborhood, populated mainly by people of color. He generalizes that “places with well-connected residents get traffic calming, good bike lanes, and other amenities. Places without connections or political clout get dangerous roads” (par. 10). The *political* power disparity found between residents connected to city government and those without a connection in urban spaces directly impacts the quality of bicycle infrastructure. In other words, if you are poor and Black you will likely harness much less power to pressure local government about transportation infrastructure than if you are upper class and white. The street is indeed a place where political power, or lack thereof, manifests itself. Blogger Angie Schmitt (2011) argues in her post, “On Gentrification and Cycling,”

Changes to our streets are often the most visible signals of government power in most of our lives. As such, infrastructure decisions are inherently political, and those with greater resources have always held an advantage in seeing their wishes enshrined in concrete and pavement, or whatever the case may be. (par. 1)

Transportation injustice is also evident in bicycle infrastructure when analyzing *who* utilizes bike lanes and bike paths. In my observations riding in many urban areas, white, middle-to-upper class people utilize bicycle infrastructure more than any other group of bicyclists.<sup>5</sup> Some bicycle advocates spend a lot of time trying to ascertain why

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<sup>5</sup> Anecdotal photographed evidence posted on *Bike Portland* suggests a high density of white bicyclists on N. Williams Ave. (Maus, 2012). One reader comment reflected the subtle race politics in the bicycle community, saying, “#30: At first glance, is that Barack Obama?”, as if any dark-skinned, male-bodied person in a business suit is Barack Obama. The rest of comments were critiques of people’s bikes such as low tire pressure and racks installed wrong.

people of color do not bike more *and* do not use bicycle infrastructure (“Understanding Barriers,” 2010). Others have noted that people of color bike just as much as, if not more than, white people.<sup>6</sup> People of color are just “invisible” because of when and where they bike (Mohan, 2011; Koepfel, 2006). An invisible bicyclist is, for example, the day worker who travels to work before sunrise on a rundown bicycle. As Dan Koepfel (2006) observes:

The men who pedal the streets at daybreak...are invisible in so many ways. Some are here without permission and must hide from the official world. They are not noticed by the cars and buses that roar past, sometimes to tragic effect. They're not even seen by those of us who claim to love cycling. We'll pick out a sleek Italian racing bike from across an intersection, but a dozen day laborers on Huffys dissolve into the streets. (p. 2)

Blogger Sara Zewde (2011) understands people of color bicyclists not as invisible but instead as the “silent, underground bike population.” She argues “people of color and lower income people are probably a larger cohort of bike riders than many people might imagine, but their relative absence from the biking advocacy world renders them invisible” (par. 1).

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<sup>6</sup> Current U.S. survey data about bicycling trends and behaviors rarely accounts for ethnicity, and when it does, the data is hard to discern anything from. The Women’s Cycling Survey conducted by the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals surveyed 13,000 people but did not address ethnicity or race; summaries of the data *never* mention the terms “ethnicity” or “race.” The 2002 National Survey of Pedestrian and Bicyclist Attitudes and Behaviors did set “race/ethnicity” as a demographic marker to determine the percentage of people who biked in the “past 30 days” and “total number of bicycling trips on most recent day.” The United States Census Bureau’s American Community Survey for 2009-2011 asked people about how they travelled to/from work but the rates of bicycling are hard to discern. Data is available, for example, on how Black people in Portland, OR commute to work. But, the category that includes bicycling also includes taxicabs and motorcycles. So it is impossible to know what percentage of people were bicycling to work. Overall I have struggled to find basic statistics such as what percentage of bicyclists are people of color and what percentage of women bicyclists are people of color.



Transportation justice scholars suggest that the racial makeup of transportation users directly impacts the funding and attention city governments allocate for the upkeep of the infrastructure (Bullard & Johnson, 1997; Bullard, Johnson & Torres, 2004). It is not a coincidence then that in moments of urban revitalization urban planners started paying attention and catering to the urban, white, educated cyclist with little regard to the needs of day workers, food deliverers, and third-shifters who use bicycles to commute to work. “With demographic changes taking place in the American urban core, biking has come to symbolize white re-population” (Zewde, 2011, par. 5). Allison, a self-identified person of color, commented on Schmitt’s (2011) piece “On Gentrification and Cycling,” saying,

Bike lanes don’t have to mean gentrification, but when they only serve white, affluent cyclists, rather than being striped specifically for low-income communities regardless of having a white, affluent population, they signify gentrification to non-cyclists of color.

These comments suggest that bicycling has the *potential* to gentrify neighborhoods. The N. Williams Ave. bike lane controversy creates a double jeopardy when paired with the disastrous history of working class, people of color in the N. Williams Ave. area—a double jeopardy, I argue, rooted in neoliberal urbanism behind the mask of urban renewal.

### **The History of Portland and neoliberal urbanism**

*In an overwhelming white state with an ugly history of discrimination against blacks, Albina was a haven of sorts. And then it was all destroyed* –Sarah Goodyear

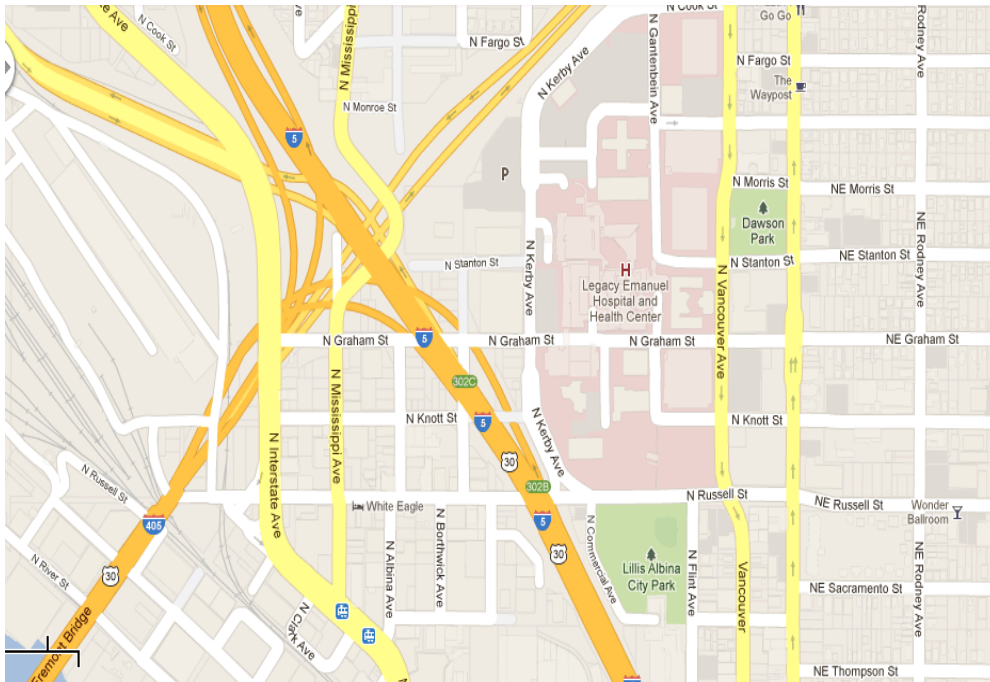
Longstanding community members, especially people of color, have good reason to be upset with the N. Williams Ave bike lane project. To them, it is yet another project

that benefits white people and displaces those who have lived in the neighborhood for decades. This is merely history repeating itself. The Black population in Portland has hovered around 5-7% since at least the 1940s (Gibson, 2007), but the Albina area has historically been a Black neighborhood. Two disastrous urban planning projects plague the memories of people of color who remain in Albina. In the mid-1950s, a period with a large increase in freeway construction across the nation, the Albina neighborhood was severed by Interstate 5 (I-5).<sup>7</sup> Then, in the late 1960s, Legacy Emanuel Medical Center construction began, which “destroyed the heart of the Black community” in Lower Albina (Gibson, 2007, p. 13). Eleven hundred housing units were lost and the Black population in the area decreased by two-thirds (Gibson, 2007, p. 13). To make matters worse, a federal plan was developed to build a veteran’s hospital next door to Legacy Emanuel Medical Center, clearing another 76 acres of land. The plan never materialized and most of that land remains vacant. This was a “bitter pill to swallow” for those who watched the destruction of their neighborhood (Gibson, 2007, p.13). Beyond major urban planning that displaced many Black residents, the neoliberal urbanism that spread across the country found its way into the Albina area. Neoliberal urbanism involves a process of “creative destruction that remakes the city physically and discursively...a different kind of city emerges—a city imagined by someone else, and not for the people who remain there” (Pedroni, 2011, p. 206). In the map below, I-5 runs diagonally across the middle of

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<sup>7</sup> This interstate continues to cause problems for the neighborhood. Not only is it a source of immense traffic congestion on N. Williams Ave. due to the on/off ramps, but the city is developing its “N/NE Quadrant Project” which is slated to make changes to the I-5 interchange through the Albina neighborhood. Community members are worried about how this will impact their neighborhood, given the destruction the original I-5 construction had on the area. There is also a brewing fight between car drivers who need the freeway to get to work and pedestrians and bicyclists who see the freeway entrances as a nuisance (Antonio, personal interview with author, May 16, 2012; Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, “N/NE Quadrant Project Overview,” City of Portland Oregon. Aug. 9, 2010. <http://www.portlandonline.com/bps/index.cfm?c=52841&a=312603>)

the map, Legacy Emanuel Medical Center sits directly east of I-5, and N. Williams Ave is two blocks east of the hospital. The hospital takes up roughly 24 square blocks.



**Figure 7: Google map of Lower Albina**

In the 1980s, Albina hit rock bottom. Home values dropped 58% and the population thinned out. Some residents felt that predatory lenders did more to hasten the deterioration of Albina than did drugs dealers and gang members (Gibson, 2007). By the 1990s, the Albina area saw an increase in population. White people moved into neighborhoods that they largely deserted decades ago. For the first time since the 1960s, Black people were not the majority in Albina. Charles Ford, an Albina resident since 1951, argued that the government subtly assisted white people in the revitalization of Albina. “We never envisioned that the government would move in and mainly assist Whites. They came into the area, younger Whites. [The Portland Development Commission] gave them business and home loans and grants, and made it comfortable

and easy for them to come” (Gibson, 2007, p. 19). Ford also claimed that white people came in with an attitude of “we’re in charge” instead of “we want to be a part of you...it’s like the revitalization of racism” (Gibson, 2007, p. 19). The Portland Development Commission never explicitly offered home loans to *just* white people, but Ford’s recollection is couched in a discriminatory history of inner city neighborhoods being hugely impacted by redlining.

This purposeful destruction of a Black neighborhood followed by an intense reinvestment in the area for white residents is a common neoliberal urbanism narrative. Neoliberalism champions the free market and moves people, businesses, and organizations away from utilizing government assistance as neoliberal policies work to shrink government functions. Thus, changes in neighborhoods are often driven by capitalist projects and not public investment. In essence, the free market decides what a city will look like, not its residents. Just as Charles Ford suspected, neoliberal urbanism “reproduces and intensifies inequality and exclusion along lines of race, class, and ethnicity” (Pedroni, 2011, p. 206). Rachel Weber (2002) argues that the concept of blight has been used historically to justify the first stage of neoliberal urbanism—the clearing out of inner-city housing. Weber (2002) claims that in the 1950s, close to the time 1-5 and Legacy Emanuel Medical Center were constructed, “urban renewal pulverized the inner city” (p. 181). When areas were condemned with blight, it was easier to justify the redevelopment for projects that were already planned (Weber, 2002). Not surprisingly then, in 1966 Portland applied for federal urban renewal funds claiming “there is little doubt that the greatest concentration of Portland’s urban blight can be found in the Albina area encompassing the Emanuel Hospital” (Gibson, 2007, p. 11).

This urban renewal in Albina continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Joe Biel, director of the documentary film, *Aftermass: Bicycling in a Post-Critical Mass Portland*, explained how urban renewal moved incrementally closer to N. Williams Ave.<sup>8</sup> Starting in 2001 the City of Portland started focusing its efforts on N. Interstate Ave., a street one mile west of N. Williams Ave. N. Interstate Ave. was originally the road into Oregon for truckers; many hotels lined the street. Once the freeway system was installed, N. Interstate Ave. lost its trucker business and the hotels turned into spaces for what Joe called “seedy business,” allowing hourly room rentals for sex work and the drug trade. Joe said that the public-private partnership of The Portland Development Commission (PDC) “quickly earmarked these things as a way to rapidly move gentrification through.” eerily similar to the N. Williams Ave. narrative, Joe attended neighborhood meetings about the upcoming changes on N. Interstate Ave. and noted tension and anger among the citizens.

In initial meetings, we met with the PDC and they showed us finished plans [of Interstate Ave.] but the guise of the meeting was we’re going to *develop* the plan for what we are going to do to your neighborhood...The property owners, none of them knew about this, the planned demolition of their buildings. They were told in a public meeting. There was obviously conflict... For the residents, this was too much shock to be told in a public meeting amongst your neighbors, it was too easy to band together and be angry.

Joe explained that this rapid development moved eastward to Mississippi Ave.

I felt like I went out of town for a month and came back and it was all redeveloped store fronts and then they started pushing eastward. And so Williams

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<sup>8</sup> All quotes from Joe come from personal communication with author, May 26, 2012.

and Vancouver were the next major streets. And so those got developed. It was basically every piece of real estate that didn't have some kind of red tag or whatnot would be kind of flipped in a matter of a few years.

As the businesses were going in on N. Mississippi Ave., N. Interstate Ave., N. Vancouver Ave. and N. Williams Ave., there was an accompanied increase in people moving into the neighborhood. Joe explained that if new residents did not know the city, it would appear to be the hip neighborhood to move to; in the mid-00s, it would have been the cheapest place to live in the city. Joe referred to this urban renewal as “all one puzzle piece,” arguing “that’s why the residents are so frustrated because they are like, ok so first you come in and develop these store fronts and then you move into our neighborhood and now you want to take away our street. What next?”

Just as ghettos are not accidental (Gibson, 2007), neither is the redevelopment of the ghetto. Neil Smith (1996) writes of the carefully planned gentrification as the “new urban frontier:”<sup>9</sup>

The economic geography of gentrification is not random: developers do not just plunge into the heart of slum opportunity, but tend to take it piece by piece... The new urban pioneers seek to scrub the city clean of its working-class geography and history. (pp. 23, 27)

Urban planners see Portland as one of the most “livable cities” (Gibson, 2007, p. 3), but Black residents wonder, livable for whom? And Smith (1996) validates this question,

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<sup>9</sup> Smith (1996) argues that the urban frontier ideology works to “tame the wild city, to socialize a wholly new and therefore challenging set of processes into safe ideological focus” (p. 18). In practice, embarking on the new frontier results in “hostile landscapes [being] regenerated, cleansed, reinfused with middle-class sensibility...so what's not to like?” (p. 13).

answering that gentrification is marketed as “making cities livable” meaning “livable for the middle class” (p. 89). To show how bicycle lanes connect to such “livability,”

P. Davis (2011) argues,

Improvements such as bike lanes increase the perceived ‘livability’ of a neighborhood, serving as a sign to developers and housing speculators that a neighborhood is open for business. In this way, bike lanes play at least an indirect role in making neighborhoods too expensive for low income residents. (par. 8)

In taking a look around at the landscape along N. Williams Ave. makes clear that the goal is to make the area livable for the white, upwardly mobile population. The street is in an obvious state of transition as plots of land with overgrown grass butt up against newly developed high-end businesses. Black-owned businesses struggle to stay in business while customers for high-end restaurants spill out onto the street. The proposed bike lane is just one tool in Albina’s urban renewal toolbox. The city is still working on washing N. Williams Ave. of its previous Black residents and this is made apparent by recognizing what businesses and housing remain and what businesses and housing are being developed. It is important to remember the sordid history of the Albina neighborhood when considering what is and is not present on N. Williams Ave. today.

#### **Walking tour of N. Williams Ave.**

*This place looks like a crime scene* –new Portland resident, Djordje, visiting N. Williams Ave.

The juxtaposition of old and new on N. Williams Ave. emerges as a polarity.<sup>10</sup> A lot of the new development is happening on the north end of N. Williams Ave., closest to NE Alberta St. where efforts to cater to the bourgeoisie have already resulted in a full conversion of the street.<sup>11</sup> Most remarkably, Laura from the Community Cycling Center (located on NE Alberta St.) told me that while they used to serve low-income residents within a five-block radius of their shop in the late-1990s, they now have to go beyond a five-mile radius to connect with low-income residents (personal communication, March 15, 2012).

N. Williams Ave. seems to be going through what I call “hyper-gentrification.” By this I mean that the area essentially skipped a typical step of gentrification. The migration of artists and students is usually a dependable predictor that an area will undergo gentrification in the near future, but in this case the artists and students never came.<sup>12</sup> Instead, much of the land is “virgin territory, an open land” (Pedroni, 2011, p. 212). On nearly every block along N. Williams Ave. stands an empty lot. This is especially true of the south end of the street, near Legacy Emanuel Medical Center,

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<sup>10</sup> As a methodological note, in May 2012 I walked up N. Williams Ave. and took detailed field notes on what I saw on each block. I made notes of the condition of the buildings and lots, what types of businesses existed, and what type of people were around the businesses.

<sup>11</sup> Joe Biel explained to me that one of the first successful gentrification projects near Albina was NE Alberta St. “Alberta twenty years ago would have been, well a friend of my owned a business called Thorn. She said, ‘no one would come to my business because they were afraid to come to Alberta.’ Now it’s a default destination.” NE Alberta St. is lined with creative class-based businesses including the vegan bakery Back to Eden, Alberta Co-op Grocery, the vegan bar The Bye and Bye, the “fresh-made” ice cream store Salt & Straw, an expensive gourmet vegan restaurant called Natural Selection, and a slew of fashionable cafés.

<sup>12</sup> A few Portland residents have told me that N. Williams Ave. has gentrified much faster than the surrounding blocks. When I asked Joe about this I said, “correct me if I’m wrong but it seems that Williams missed that moment in gentrification where the punks and the artists move in.” He responded: “It’s still there, they are just blocked off... You watch the gradual transition and in the end the punks and artists are gone. It’s just a matter of time. You are sealing your own fate by moving in...But they are still there, I do know that. And I do know they still have [loud punk shows] within two blocks of Vancouver and Williams. On weeknights.”



where there are a lot of run down businesses and empty lots. Down the length of N. Williams Ave., the state of the empty lots varies. Some are overgrown with grass, others surrounded by a chain link fence and barbed wire. Others are clearly being developed. The most contentious lot, if lots could come with emotional baggage, is a section of land that spans almost two blocks. The site of the New Seasons Market, a high-end grocery store, went from mounds of dirt in May 2012 to a quickly built green and yellow building; construction took only a few months in early 2013. New Seasons Market does not cater to low-income, people of color<sup>13</sup> and the sheer amount of traffic the store will bring worries those who traverse the already jam-packed street. Next to the New Seasons lot is a large empty parking lot and a small Hostess Bakery Thriftshop store. In May 2012, the tall sign for the store was smashed in and a plastic banner was tied to a fence advertising that the store is open—until its anti-climactic closing in the winter of 2012.

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<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Bleyer (2010) at *Salon* described New Seasons Market as a type of market that “specialize[s] in delectables like artisanal bread, heirloom tomatoes and grass-fed beef” (par. 15). New Seasons Market is also known as a natural food store that hails “foodies, yuppies, alties and good old fashioned punks” (Kane, SHOP: New Seasons Market, 2006, par. 1). I thus argue that New Seasons can be seen as a local version of Whole Foods. It is not a stretch to argue that the “Whole Foods effect” applies to the N. Williams Ave. New Seasons. The Whole Foods effect suggests that after moving in to an area that was going upscale anyway, the new store will accelerate gentrification (Doig, 2012). A friend of mine who lives near Albina and shops at New Seasons disagrees with my sentiment here. While he admits that poor people in the area shop at Safeway (a conventional grocery store) and not at New Seasons, Whole Foods is much more expensive and exclusionary than New Seasons.



**Figure 8: Site of future New Seasons on N. Williams Ave. as of May 2012**



**Figure 9: Hostess Bakery Thriftshop signage on N. Williams Ave. as of May 2012**

On the next block is a peculiar mix of old and new. On the east side of the street is Williams Street Market, a typical corner store. The outside looks redone with a new sign for the market and fresh gray and white paint. There is a distinction between the outside of the building and what you will find inside the store. As I continue down the building there is Maui's on Williams, which looks fancy on the outside due to its outdoor patio made of new wood and framed with hanging planters filled with flowers. It fancies itself a "dive bar" but lacks the grit to be one; I figure the upgrade of the facade is because of the new condominium building immediately north of the building. In fact, a Google Street View map recorded in 2009 shows the building in much poorer condition, with chipped red and white paint. The condo building, under construction in the summer of 2012, takes up an entire block. "We need affordable housing" is painted on the For Lease sign facing south on the fence surrounding the building. For a week, a Yard Sale sign was tacked up to the For Lease sign. On the first floor of the building, the What's the Scoop? ice cream store opened up in June 2012 with ice cream ingredients such as "White Trash Toffee."<sup>14</sup> Neil Smith (1996) reminds us that the advent of gentrification has produced something quite unsettling and counterintuitive to neoclassical wisdom: middle and upper class housing can be "intensely developed in the inner city" (p. 70).

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<sup>14</sup> From the What's the Scoop website, "Coffee ice cream deeply flavored with locally roasted espresso and laced with our White Trash Toffee" (<http://www.whatsthescooppdx.com/flavors/>). When I inquired about the name of the toffee, in light of the history of the neighborhood, the company responded, "We apologize if you were insulted. It was obviously meant in jest. But...I have to say, we don't equate low income with white trash. In our minds they are fundamentally different things" (Facebook communication, July 6, 2012).



**Figure 10: For Lease sign at site of condominium building construction site on N. Williams Ave. as of May 2012**





**Figure 11: Condominium construction on N. Williams Ave. as of May 2012**

On the next block there is an upper-class strip mall (otherwise known as The HUB Building) that helps, more than anything, to make a class-based remake of this urban landscape (Smith, 1996) and is indicative of the urban renewal making its way down the street. Shops in the mall include Yoga Shala, Hip Cook, Spielwerk Toys (upscale toy store), Eat Oyster Bar, Cha! Cha! Cha! (an upscale, meat-based restaurant), Ristretto Roasters, Ink and Peat (gift shop), and Lincoln (award winning restaurant,

including *Food & Wine* magazine's Best New Chefs of 2012). Each store has a unique outside color. A large patio sits in front of Ristretto, Cha! Cha! Cha!, and Eat Oyster Bar. Dogs are tied up outside, no one smokes, and expensive bikes sit next to people. There is a side entrance to the mall where you can walk inside along the stores. Other businesses sit in the middle of the mall, including a pediatric office with hip graphic design branding. A public restroom sits in the middle of the mall.



**Figure 12: The HUB Building on N. Williams Ave.**

Two blocks north on N. Williams Ave. sits Screw Loose Studio in a plain white building whose windows are covered up with various Black culture shirts. Window shoppers cannot see into the store, which is in stark comparison to the trend of oversized portrait windows seen in the newer businesses. Most shirts on window display at Screw Loose Studio have images of Barack Obama with Malcolm X and/or Martin Luther King

Jr. This is one of the two Black-owned business left on N. Williams Ave.<sup>15</sup> Next to Screw Loose Studio is a red house set back a bit with an intensely overgrown yard. Both Screw Loose Studio and this house stand out as being more run down than the rest of the buildings nearby. There is also something peculiar about the presence of this property. They feel out of place and uncomfortable. At the same time, it is significant that one of the only Black-owned shops left on N. Williams Ave.<sup>16</sup> is structured around Black pride. Screw Loose Studio stands in as an important reminder that N. Williams Ave. was once filled with Black-owned businesses.

The unsettling feeling that is conjured up when I passed Screw Loose Studio can be understood through Gordon's (1997) insight that "the ghost imports a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge" (p. 63). It is a startling transition to pass by new businesses obviously catering to an upper class, white clientele and then run into a business that outwardly contradicts the implicit consumerist norms of the street. It is certainly strange to have a business based in Black pride featured next to a high-end optical shop. There is also something unsettling about the seemingly trendy large windows and open air shops next to Screw Loose Studio's drab outwardly appearance, including cardboard covering all of the windows so that passersby cannot see into the store. A person walking south-to-north along N. Williams Ave. are presented with refurbished buildings, new developments, fresh construction sites, and a smattering of barely maintained storefronts and houses. Screw Loose Studio restricts the

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<sup>15</sup> Personal communication with Cleo, owner of Screw Loose Studio, June 6, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> The new businesses moving into N. Williams Ave. are reported to be "almost exclusively white-owned" in the article "Developers Cater to Two-Wheeled Traffic in Portland," *New York Times*. Sept. 20, 2011

bourgeoning gentrification and forces the neighborhood to recall that this street once held a strong majority of Black-owned businesses.



**Figure 13: Window display at Screw Loose Studio on N. Williams Ave.**

Past this block, the feeling of the street changes. The uncomfortable juxtaposition of brand new businesses sitting next to abandoned or damaged property is left behind once I crossed NE Shaver Street. Instead, the street is now lined with non-descript brick buildings that take up half-blocks. Some of the buildings are marked with business



names, others with only graffiti. Houses are decently maintained. The hyper-gentrification dies out until NE Alberta St. where once again typical markers of urban renewal reappear (e.g. condo construction, high-end commerce spaces).

My descriptions here are meant to paint a picture of gentrification and Black flight,<sup>17</sup> but demographic statistics are also telling. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a nonprofit education policy think tank, released a list of the Top 50 gentrifying zip codes, based on race and population U.S. Census Data. Two zip codes in Portland made the list, 97227 at #20 and 97211 at #35. These two zip codes run right next to each other and cover a good portion of N. Williams Ave. Census data comparison from 2000 to 2010 show that the N. Williams Ave. area has seen about a 20% increase in white residents while maintaining a steady population (Petrill 2010; Schmidt, 2012).

What is currently happening on N. Williams Ave. is an example of “roll-out” neoliberal urbanism, a form of renewal that is creativity-based, in contrast to “roll-back” neoliberal urbanism that is based on destroying the urban landscape (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Furthermore, roll-out neoliberalism includes citizens who are individually or collectively “active” in their own government (Barels & Bojadzijeve, 2012, p. 63). Although the neighborhood is quickly gentrifying, the new imagined neighborhood is certainly not for the people who *have* remained in Albina throughout the destruction of what was once known as the Black Downtown—a time where roll-back neoliberalism

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<sup>17</sup> Additional demographic data from 2009 shows that 30% of residents in North Portland are African American. Black residents are transitioning to other neighborhoods, such as Cully or East Portland, where the Black population stands at 10% (City of Portland, 2012). Black flight is also represented in the *Portland Monthly* article, “By the Grace of God,” where a journalist follows a van driver going around the outskirts of Portland to drive church members to a Black church in North Portland. “‘Used to be that nobody lived past 42nd,’ [van driver Johnny Bradford] says as he turns and heads for Beaverton, 20 miles to the west on the other side of the metro area. ‘Now everybody stays out here because rent is cheap. But we’ll get God’s children wherever they’re at’” (Scott, 2012, par. 5).

would have been a more relevant term. Economically this is visible in the Black business owners struggling to stay open, despite the neighborhood’s shifting demographic as developers cash in on the new “bicycle-crazed” population (Baker, 2011).<sup>18</sup> LV’s Twelve-22, a Black-owned bar on N. Vancouver Ave., parallel to N. Williams Ave., saw business dwindle over the last 10 years. LV’s Twelve-22 often remained empty as hip new spots overflow with customers. Some of the new white residents, replacing the Black residents that have moved out due to raising property values and lack of community, said they did not want to gentrify the bar while the owners were simultaneously trying to make the clientele *include* white patrons (Parks, 2012a). LV’s Twelve-22, the last Black-owned bar on N. Vancouver Ave., closed in October, 2012 (Parks, 2012b).

### **The haunting**



**Figure 14: Steps in front of an empty lot on N. Williams Ave. north of Skidmore St. as of May 2012**

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<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the N. Williams Ave. business that reflects the “bike-crazed” population the most is the Hopworks BikeBar, a local brewery and eatery that includes a bike repair station and stationary bikes outside its front doors.

“Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in the everyday,” writes Gordon (1997, p. xvi) in *Ghostly Matters*. What haunts N. Williams Ave. is the history of abusive systems of power pushing lower income people of color out of the area. The image above is an empty lot on N. Williams Ave. that once held someone’s home, marked by stone steps that lead to nowhere.<sup>19</sup> Gordon (1997) reminds us that haunting “always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present” (p. xvi). In these steps, passersby can literally see the harm inflicted and loss sustained by intentional urban renewal and gentrification. It is unclear why the house no longer exists, but demographic data indicate a strong likelihood that this home held a family that is not represented by the growing amount of young, white, hip neighbors. And if the demolition and rebuilding is any indication, affordable housing will not be rebuilt in this space. Like a significant amount of property on N. Williams Ave. this empty lot remains ghostly: a hint that something once existed here, but which gives no sign of what is to come of it in the future.

The property on N. Williams Ave. illustrates Toni Morrison’s idea that “invisible things are not necessarily not-there” (quoted in Gordon, 1997, p. 17). Not only do the abandoned lots appear to hold nothing, thus invisibility, but also what is “not-there” is socially significant. The public meeting I attended about The North Williams Traffic Safety Operations Project invited the spirit of many ghosts. Although the ghosts were made visible during the public meeting, they quickly disappeared even when I called for their return. In this section I will describe my experience at the May 2012 public meeting,

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<sup>19</sup> When I visited N. Williams Ave. again in June 2013, these steps had been removed.

the display of Black history at the meeting, and its subsequent disappearance. Over the course of a year, PBOT and SAC held 23 public meetings about the N. Williams Ave. bicycle lane. Originally PBOT thought the planning process would take six months and include only a handful of public meetings.

On May 19, 2012 the last public meeting was held. It was designated as an “open house,” with roughly 110 people attending.<sup>20</sup> The consulting firm Alta Planning and Design, PBOT, and SAC organized the public event, held at the predominately Black-attended Immaculate Heart Church on N. Williams Ave, across the street from Legacy Emanuel Medical Center. The event organizers rented bike racks for the anticipated bicyclists. A large room was arranged with multiple circle tables in the center. On the outer rims of the room were a table of health-conscious and organic snacks, a line of poster boards containing information about the project<sup>21</sup> and history of the neighborhood, a long table with a printout of the proposed bicycle lane changes on N. Williams Ave, and a station with a Mac computer depicting a virtual tour of a future N. Williams Ave. The poster boards displayed a lot of information, including justification for improving N. Williams Ave., statistics about the amount of traffic on the street, and details about how different sections of N. Williams Ave. will change.

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<sup>20</sup> Drew Meisel, “North Williams Avenue Traffic Operations Safety Project — Open House #2 Summary,” <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/401031>

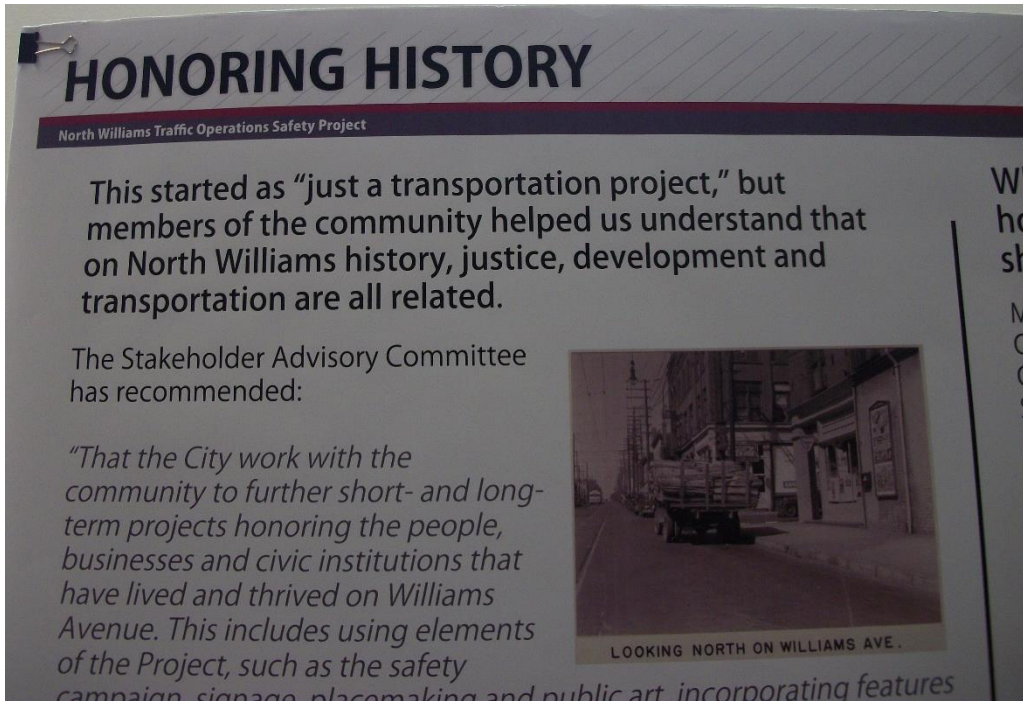
<sup>21</sup> Most of these displays are available online at Portland Bureau of Transportation, “Williams Ave Traffic Operations + Safety,” <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/53905>.



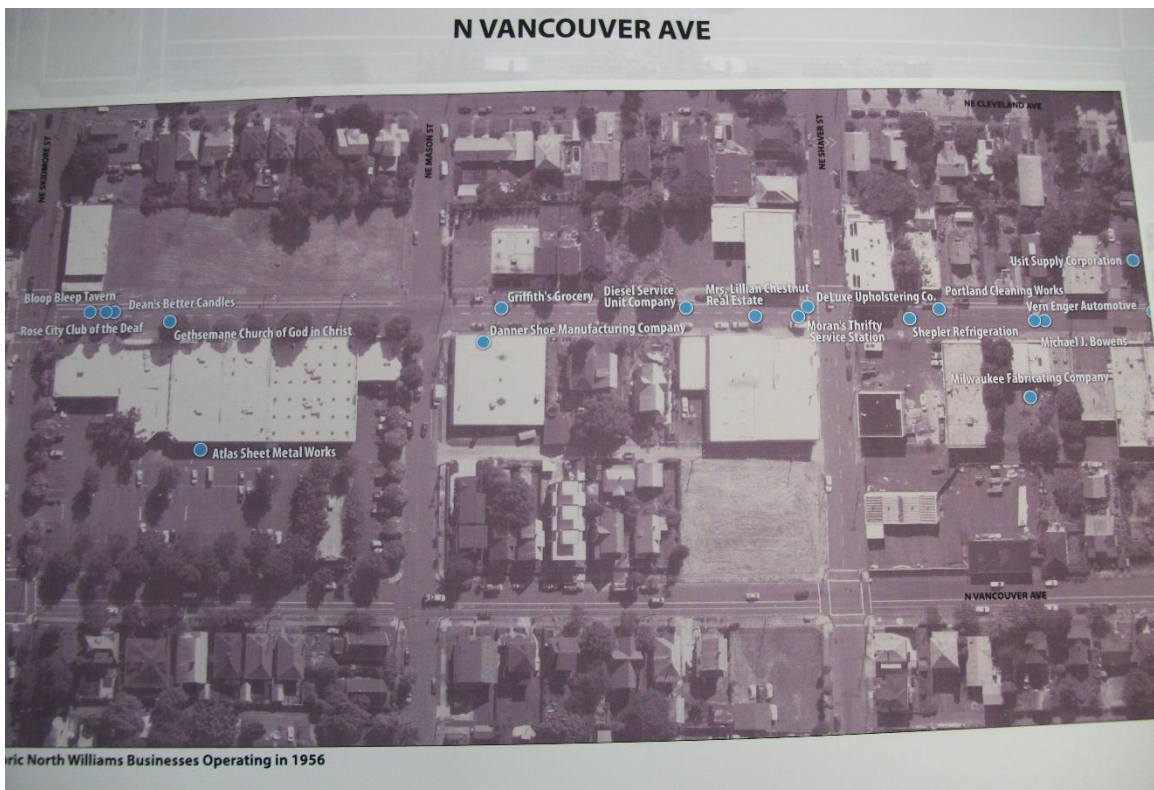
**Figure 15: N. Williams Ave. Traffic Operations Safety Project Open House**

One poster board proclaimed that N. Williams Ave. was “Once the Black Community’s ‘Downtown Town’” and included an image of a young Black couple, probably from the late 1950s or early ‘60s. A look back at the businesses that operated on N. Williams Ave. in 1956 was depicted via a collection of aerial views of N. Williams Ave. The aerial maps ran along with the printout of the current N. Williams Ave. street plan. The 1956 business maps were hard to observe because they were crowded by people, pens, and post-it notes of suggestions to improve the almost finalized plan.





**Figure 16: Honoring History poster board at N. Williams Ave. Traffic Operations Safety Project Open House**



**Figure 17: Aerial map of N. Williams Ave. businesses in 1956**

The 1956 maps interested me and I wondered what the reason was for including them alongside the new street plan. I asked a woman who worked with Alta Planning and Design, the consulting firm that helped make all the displays, about the history maps. She said she did not even know they were there and could not answer my question. She told me to talk to the people on SAC who worked on the historical subcommittee.<sup>22</sup> I had difficulty getting the attention of SAC members, so I spoke with Drew Meisel at Alta Planning and Design, who knew about the 1956 business maps. I asked him if the maps were constructed to show how many Black businesses existed in the 1950s. He said that “not all” of them were Black businesses and that the maps were made to show that streets are not “fixed”—they change, and the current street changes represent merely a new transition. The aerial maps had a divergent aesthetic compared to the professionalized and polished look of Alta Planning and Design’s poster boards and current project map.<sup>23</sup> The graphic design of the Black history boards was obviously less polished.

Drew’s response is problematic for a few reasons. One, I do not believe that these maps show that streets are merely not “fixed.” The power of these aerial maps rests in the clear juxtaposition of what N. Williams Ave. currently looks like. Two, his answer refused to let the ghosts haunt. “The ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing” (Gordon, 1997, p. 63) and Drew refused the haunting by arguing the maps merely show “change” and do not represent something that could still *be*. An Alta Planning and Design employee told me that all of the poster boards and maps at the open house would be

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<sup>22</sup> It was really difficult for me to talk to people on SAC because the open house was a very social function. SAC members in attendance kept getting pulled in by people they knew. Requests to talk to SAC people over email have gone unanswered.

<sup>23</sup> In a subsequent conversation with Drew, he explained that a student shared North Portland geographic data with him right before the open house and Drew quickly created the map to print out for the gathering.

available on the PBOT website. A few weeks after the open house I checked the website and most of the material was online—except the Black history boards and aerial 1956 business maps.<sup>24</sup>

The absence of the map and Black history poster boards from the online archive illuminates the two divergent agendas in planning for the new bicycle lane. One, education about the structural plans of N. Williams Ave.; and two, a cultural education about the history of the neighborhood of which N. Williams Ave. is a part. The online archive is controlled by PBOT and reflects the department's preferred infrastructure agenda. PBOT's agenda would not be served by including Albina's Black history in its online archive. PBOT knew the risks of proposing a new bicycle lane in Albina because it was aware of the connection residents are making between gentrification and bicycle lanes. By reframing the project as one to enhance the safety for all people, PBOT sought to avoid the potential political clash. Community members concerned with the bicycle lane's role in upholding racism and gentrification took control at many of the public meetings and demanded a discussion about the bicycle lane in context of Albina's tumultuous infrastructure history. Therefore, if PBOT included the Black history information in its online archive then the inclusion could be read as PBOT's approval or alignment with the cultural education agenda—an agenda it originally tried to avoid.

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<sup>24</sup> I attempted to track down why these images were not included on the PBOT website by contacting the project manager, Rich Newlands. Newlands did not understand my request and so I contacted Drew at Alta Planning and Design. He told me that the Black history boards were property of PBOT (even though the other displays are *posted* on the PBOT website) and left over from an earlier project. The 1956 business map file is too big to post online, Drew said, but he sent me a Google Earth version of the map. The 1956 business map I saw at the open house was a print-off and so I know a PDF-version or photographs of the map would be possible. Regardless of the reasons why these images were not put online, it is telling that the only content missing was that of Black history, a history continually struggling to exist in the present.



Moreover, the City of Portland is dedicated to being a “sustainable” city and is overtly proud of its status in being one of the best U.S. cities to be a bicyclist. In a politically liberal city, this public image is actually understood as apolitical and supported by a majority of Portland residents. In other words, bicycling in Portland holds hegemonic power and its benefits and necessity are not questioned in the public sphere; it is commonsensical in the Gramscian sense. It serves the city’s agenda to *not* align itself with any counterhegemonic understandings of bicycling, which includes overt statements about the gentrification of Albina. It is also clear that the City of Portland wants to archive specific changes being made in Albina. N. Williams Ave. changes almost weekly; a business gets a new paint job, a condominium construction job progresses, ground is broken for a new grocery store—the city sees all of these changes as productive and supported by a vibrant bicycle community. But the city and PBOT do not want to celebrate the very obvious racialized changes the street has endured over the past 60 years and finds such a reminder to be unimportant for an online archive. Of course, a most basic reading of the online archive could understand the absences as a coincidence, but the coincidence nonetheless holds powerful meaning.

### **Haunting of the future**

Avery Gordon (1997) closes *Ghostly Matters* by noting, “ultimately haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of a peaceful reconciliation” (p. 208). Gordon’s understanding of haunting points to the ability of ghosts to bring peace to a situation instead of wreaking havoc or scaring those still alive. SAC’s Honoring History Subcommittee has made a peace offering by suggesting that the city mark historical landmarks along N. Williams

Ave. At the open house, attendees suggested such landmarks as Maxey’s Better Buy, Cleo Lillian Social Club, schools, and child care centers—all of which are invisible now, but not necessarily not-there. Donna Maxey, a Black resident, has attended public meetings about the N. Williams Ave. bike lane. She is upset that “yuppies” are the cornerstone of the revival on the street. Her family history follows the familiar history of many Black residents in the 1950s as her family home was lost in 1961 to urban renewal. Maxey’s family owned Maxey’s Better Buy, a prominent grocery store on N. Williams Ave. The Cleo Lillian Social Club struggled to stay open into the 2000s, an impressive feat for a Black-owned business in Albina. After it closed amid noise complaints and threats to take away their licenses, developers began renovating it in August 2012. Some residents have theorized that the closing of the club is connected to the recently built houses across the street, where the residents are predominately white. The complaints started pouring in after these residents moved in (Fehrenbacher, 2012). One of the most striking recommendations for Black history landmarks is simply a placement suggestion: “On the side of the planned New Seasons Market at NE Fremont St.”<sup>25</sup> The planned high-end New Seasons is being held up as a stark reminder of what is happening on N. Williams Ave. Perhaps this attendee sought to haunt the customers at the future grocery store, customers who probably will not recognize any of the ghosts floating down the street.

Bicycle advocates are torn on their response to the haunting. Jonathan Maus, who runs Portland’s daily bike news blog *Bike Portland*, claims that the ghosts of the past are furthering the injustice the ghosts once endured. “At some point as a city, you have to

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<sup>25</sup> Drew Meisel, “North Williams Avenue Traffic Operations Safety Project — Open House #2 Summary,” <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/401031>

start planning to serve the existing population,” he said. “The remaining black community is holding traffic justice hostage. It’s allowing injustice in the present because of injustice in the past” (Goodyear, 2011). I disagree with Maus; the “injustice in the past”— including displacement of people and the loss of their homes—does not equate to bicycle “traffic justice.” But Maus does pose an intriguing question. Will the “remaining black community” always see bicycle infrastructure as a gentrification tool? Will cities continue to stall bicycle-focused transportation projects in areas where low income, people of color have felt marginalized? If a neighborhood has shifted populations, what population should be served? These questions are difficult to answer. Currently, most bicycle infrastructure *is* built for the white bicycling community, but as discussed earlier, bicycling is not inherently a race or class-based form of transportation. Until bicycle infrastructure feels accessible and useful to a diversity of communities, then I predict resistance to it will continue. What population should be served is an extremely complicated question that cannot be answered here. But serving *all* populations is important for any transportation project because we cannot repeat transportation injustice history that is based on ignoring marginalized communities.

When I asked Joe Biel his opinion about what is happening on N. Williams Ave., he summarized the white residents’ relationship with racial issues.

Well I mean, in Portland you are not allowed to talk about race, it’s a bad thing to acknowledge that there might ever be conflicts, that we aren’t the most sensitive white people on the planet, or you’re just not allowed to talk about these things. And if you do, people get extremely defensive. And when you get past that, they will forever talk about how maybe they could have handled things better but

probably not and we don't really talk about this anyway. And that's generally the response you get.

It is hard for some to fathom that a simple mobile technology could conjure such intense racial conflict. And perhaps this is why the N. Williams Ave. bike lane conflict erupted into such a controversy. Bicycle advocates were caught off guard and Black residents funneled their anger about gentrification directly onto repainting a street. Overtime, the public meetings about the bike lane became less hostile, negotiations were made on how to honor the Black community, and at the May 2012 open house you would never have thought there had been a conflict between the people in the room. Is it possible, therefore to find a peaceful reconciliation in this intense haunting? Or did the Black residents become resigned to the fact that they were not going to stop gentrification and decide negotiating for historical markers down N. Williams Ave. was the only way to assert a presence?

### **Conclusion**

The Black bodies and voices that haunt the N. Williams Ave. bicycle lane have disrupted many hegemonic displays of power. The construction of a bicycle lane is part of a hegemonic process that identifies some bodies as belonging in that space while other bodies are encouraged to stay out. In this instance, hegemony works so that the subtle push to accept the status quo keeps people from resisting the power found in the bicycle lane. The Albina experience reveals that bicyclists, developers, and business owners continue to capitalize on their power whereas the people who seek a counterhegemonic disruption of a bike lane have to fight hard to be heard. The haunting Black voices heard in community meetings, media coverage, and everyday conversations are disrupting the

totalizing hegemonic power of gentrification. And here we can begin to see a possible reconciliation. Because of the N. Williams Ave. controversy, the troubled history of the Black residents has been getting more attention than it ever would have without this controversy. Not only have some newly minted Portland residents been educated on what N. Williams Ave. *used to be*, but this controversy has also shifted the discussion of urban bicycle advocacy significantly. Many popular press articles have now covered the issue of gentrification and bicycling, with Portland as its initial case study (Aqyeman, 2012; P. Davis, 2011; V. Davis, 2011; Goodyear, 2011; Mirk, 2009; Schmitt, 2011; Smith, 2011; Zewde, 2011). Discussing transportation racism in context with bicycling is becoming less and less of a foreign concept.

Feminists of color invested in critical methodology remind us that it should not be the job of the oppressed to teach the oppressor of their wrongs (Smith, 1999; D. Wolf, 1996), and so the potential reconciliation of Black history on N. Williams Ave. comes at a price. What remains in Albina is a plan to create a multiple-site remembrance of what N. Williams Ave. once was. The planned landmarks, like the 1956 business map, are eerily similar to a graveyard. Historical landmarks provide a complicated form of haunting. While they remind us of what once was, historical landmarks do not require the visitor to contend with *their role* in making the space “historical.” Landmarks can separate us from the history while simultaneously confirming their place in the past. For example, if Portland physically acknowledges the sites of former Black businesses on N. Williams Ave., does that suggest that similar businesses will never again come to fruition? Will the visitors to these landmarks be encouraged to see how they may have contributed to the abrupt shift in N. William Ave.’s make-up? Historical landmarks as

tributes or recognition work to alleviate responsibility from the visitors and they can be harsh reminders, especially in a city that tends to avoid racial conversations. Yet the remaining residents in Albina who lived through decades of destructive infrastructure are not letting the neighborhood forget the struggles embedded into the cement and soil. Haunting is that moment when “things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away...” (Gordon, 1997, p. xvi).

The bicycle lane controversy in Albina has also created allies, including myself, who are reimagining what it is to be a bicyclist in specific spaces and to remember one’s privilege on two wheels. This case study teaches us that a seemingly trivial debate about a bicycle lane can be rooted in serious and detrimental decisions that, over time, work to oppress specific people. Although it is still difficult for some white bicyclists to understand their role as gentrifiers, the ghosts of Portland will make sure we do not forget—and rightfully so.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Greenways and greenwaves: Power-based sustainability in Minneapolis's bicycle infrastructure**

*I never expected the way we commute to be shaped by class, but it is* –Richard Florida

#### **Introduction**

I am writing this chapter after living and biking through Minneapolis for almost four years. It has become clear to me that this city, like Portland, is a bicyclist's utopia.<sup>1</sup> As I bicycle through Minneapolis I can usually travel in designated bicycle lanes or bicycle paths separate from any vehicle traffic. In the blustery and snowy winter months, the bike paths are often plowed before the streets. My five-mile commute to campus was done almost entirely on bike paths, save for three blocks of city streets.

Minneapolis is home to the Midtown Greenway system, located south of the Mississippi River, and runs through the Longfellow, Seward, Phillips, Powderhorn, and Uptown neighborhoods. The system is a network of 5.5 miles of off-street bike trails that runs east-west parallel to major city streets in a former railroad corridor. In some neighborhoods there are designated bicycle boulevards, which are streets that run parallel to main arteries but have large bike symbols and speed bumps to discourage vehicle traffic. The city also has posted bicycle routes that encourage and direct bicyclists to ride on streets with bike lanes. Between April and October, residents can opt to rent a bicycle from a city-wide bike share program, Nice Ride. Bike stations are placed throughout Minneapolis, most densely in the downtown and Uptown areas. Bicycle advocates and

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<sup>1</sup> *Bicycling Magazine* has a coveted “#1 Bike City” title. In 2011, Minneapolis beat out long-time winner Portland, Oregon (Friedman, 2011). In 2012, Minneapolis went back to its familiar #2 spot.

city officials are constantly proposing new bicycle infrastructure plans, such as extending the Greenway system into North Minneapolis where the rate of bicycling is rather low.

Overall, it is easy being a bicyclist in Minneapolis and this is no accident in design. Research suggests that there is a link between bicycle commuting and the social and economic status of a city. Richard Florida (2011, 2012) describes riding a bicycle as a signifier of the “creative class”<sup>2</sup> and utilized data from the American Community Survey, based on the 2010 U.S. Census, to suggest that cities where people bike commute are generally more affluent, have higher levels of education, and are negatively associated with working class jobs. He summarizes these findings adding that cities with high levels of biking are “happier and...more creative too” (2011, par. 11).

Minneapolis *wants* the creative class and their expendable incomes to make a home in this urban space, which therefore implicates bicycle infrastructure as part of the city’s economically-driven urban planning. In this chapter I explore a shift in incentive for urban areas to build bicycle infrastructure beyond the promotion of environmentally-friendly lifestyles. My research findings suggest a link between bicycle infrastructure and cities competing for young, educated workers. Throughout this chapter I show how bicycle lanes, bicycle paths, and other bicycle amenities are being utilized by businesses, property owners and city officials to encourage job growth in the *creative* industries, to increase property values, and to make the city a desirable place to live for the creative class.

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<sup>2</sup> Florida (2012) says the distinguishing characteristic of the creative class is its members “engage in work whose function is to create meaningful new forms” (p. 38). Florida (2012) argues he is also able to ascertain things about this class, such as their main values—individuality, meritocracy, diversity, and openness (pp. 56-57).



The focus on making the city attractive in strategic ways reflects another marker of the creative class: they do not move for jobs, they move for the city. In his book, *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*, Florida (2005) argues “today, the terms of competition revolve around a central axis: a nation’s ability to mobilize, attract, and retain human creative talent” (p. 3). Florida (2008) further explores this phenomenon in his book *Who’s Your City?: How the Creative Economy is Making Where You Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life* where he argues that where you live has the greatest effect on a person’s “economic future, happiness, and overall life outcome” (p. 5).

Minneapolis Mayor R. T. Rybak is aware of this shift as he explained, “our very public bike culture has been an enormous asset in attracting talented people here. Not just in the bike fields but in advertising, in financial services, the arts, politics.”<sup>3</sup> In an interview I conducted with Rybak, he discussed the economic potential for bicycle infrastructure by proclaiming Minneapolis to be a frontrunner in re-envisioning the city scape:

It’s completely clear to me that we’re in a midst of a total revolution in the way we get around. Most public governments haven’t quite gotten anywhere nearly where the public is at on this. We [the city government] have. So, I recognize that congestion is up, global warming, gas prices, all add to the fact that we’re reinventing the American city that’s going to be much more pedestrian and bike-oriented.

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from R.T. Rybak come from personal communication with author on May 20, 2012.

Rybak seamlessly conflates increasing sustainable transportation with competing with other city governments and appears proud that his government is keeping up with public demand for a less car-centric city. Rybak's sentiments also reflect perhaps the most genius part of utilizing bicycle infrastructure to promote economic growth in specific industries: the ability to hide it behind "sustainability" messaging. This sustainability messaging is successful in part because of the threat climate change has on large cities and the political identity connected to the concern. Progressive, middle-to-upper class residents transfer their concern for the environment into visits to shops purporting to sell "green" merchandise and purchases of such commodities. Florida (2012) argues that the "Creative Age" has ushered in new respect for livable and sustainable cities. "The quest for clean and green is powered by the same underlying ethos that drives the Creative Economy" as both agendas value conserving resources—be it natural, human, or talent (p. x).

Examples of this green consumerism in Minneapolis include luxury apartments, such as the Blue apartments in Uptown, with the tag line "luxury and sustainability in harmony," exemplified through the building's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification.<sup>4</sup> Michael Gross, a Minneapolis realtor,<sup>5</sup> commented on LEED certification in an interview with me saying, "being LEED certified and having sustainable design is hugely marketable and [luxury apartment companies] are not doing it for any other reason. I mean, it's just that it's marketable."<sup>6</sup> Gross's reflection on LEED

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<sup>4</sup> Blue apartments, <http://move2blue.com/>

<sup>5</sup> Michael works for RE/MAX, lives in Uptown, targets his selling in Uptown and near the University of Minnesota, and does not regularly bike.

<sup>6</sup> All quotes from Michael come from personal communication with the author on January 31, 2013.

certification marketing comes from his best friend's experience as an architect in Minneapolis, who is dealing more and more with LEED certified building design.

Rybak is not shy about how the “total revolution” in sustainable city living is connected to economic competition with other U.S. cities; if the goal is to be the most “green” city, then Minneapolis is certainly trying to win. His support for bicycle infrastructure allows him to build up his environmental credentials and simultaneously use these credentials as a sales pitch for why Minneapolis is hip, eco-friendly and thus a great place for the creative class. “Greening” cities is “part of neoliberal competition between global urban centers,” but this wave of greening comes at a price because sustainability is “experienced in gender, raced, regional, and classed ways” (McDonogh et al, 2011, pp. 113-14) that ensures its benefits are distributed unequally. Geographer Erik Swyngedouw (2004) reminds us that sustainability practices “negatively affect some social groups” and so we must always consider “who gains and who pays” (p. 11, quoted in McDonogh, 2011, p. 114). My concern, then, is that there is a high likelihood that sustainability marketing via bicycle infrastructure will be a gain for some and a loss for others—likely a loss for people of color and the poor and working class. In Minneapolis I see this happening in two ways: one, the placement of bicycle amenities in areas that already have a burgeoning bicycle culture; and two, if bicycle infrastructure *is* placed in areas with fewer bicyclists, the primary reason is for economic growth *not* to support marginalized people who are interested in bicycling. The bicycle then becomes a rolling signifier of environmental friendliness and bourgeois leisure, doing economic work that has little to do with progressive bicycle politics such as increased mobility for *all* people regardless of class position.

## Thesis and Research Questions

In this chapter I argue that bicycle infrastructure planning and marketing is being coopted by the Minneapolis city government to recruit educated, upwardly mobile people with little regard to the infrastructure's impact on residents who fall outside of that demographic. This cooptation is wrapped up in power relations that allow the city government and "creative class" to define what a sustainable and livable city looks like. The ability to produce meaning about bicycling in Minneapolis is based on who is in power. And, as Hall (1997) argues, *who* is represented (e.g. in bicycle infrastructure planning) has everything to do with power.

The question of the circulation of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power. *Who* has the power, in *what* channels, to circulate *which* meanings to *whom*? Which is why the issue of power can never be bracketed out from the question of representation. (p. 14)

The creative class has been granted power within political channels to circulate meanings about bicycling to all residents. Catering transit and leisure bicycle options to the creative class, largely white and middle-to-upper class, has helped maintain unequal power distribution based on race and class. City government leaders, real estate companies, and businesses are helping create a "people's climate" (Florida, 2002, 2012) that is attractive to the creative class community. Unlike in the Riverwest 24 where its goal is to improve the place where community members already live, the creative class community grows in places that they are hailed. They have no loyalty to any place but rather seek out cities where their community is being or is already established. Moreover the creative community is structured around consumption such as art galleries, luxury

apartments, and hip restaurants. There is no connection to maintaining a strong community outside of having a cool place to live. Therefore, the creative class is undoubtedly a community but its reliance on material goods and capitalist enterprises demonstrates a rather shallow understanding of community.

This chapter's argument is supported by interviews with people involved with bicycle infrastructure planning in Minneapolis, an interview with a Minneapolis realtor, my personal use of Minneapolis bicycle infrastructure, participant-ethnography at a public meeting about a new bike path in North Minneapolis, and research on the history of bicycle advocacy in urban spaces. This research is contextualized through theories and concepts of the creative class and environmental gentrification. Although bicycling as a form of transportation has been perceived as a radical political act historically, bicycling's politics are being realigned with more neoliberal governmental and economic interests—not progressive re-visionings of the city scape (despite Rybak's proclamation). The research questions that frame this chapter include: what explains the shift in how the Minneapolis city government interacts with bicycle advocates? What are the city's incentives to build bicycle infrastructure? How do these incentives materialize into actual infrastructure? And do these incentives affect people and neighborhoods differently? Before discussing what is currently happening with Minneapolis bicycle infrastructure, I will review the history of bicycle advocacy in the U.S. and contextualize its current incarnation using concepts and critiques of the creative class and environmental gentrification. My discussion of Minneapolis bicycle infrastructure will focus on the growing Greenway system and its impacts on property values, personal finance, employment and access to different parts of the city.

## History of U.S. bicycle advocacy

The idea that bicycle infrastructure can be a recruitment tool to bring in hard working, smart, young, hip people, does not reflect how bicycle infrastructure has historically been viewed in the United States. It was only a few years back that urban bicycle advocacy still signified radical environmental politics, destined to represent the bicycle as a tool to make cars the minority on the streets. Bicycle advocates have not always held the power they do in cities like Minneapolis, largely because of *who* the advocates have been in the past. These bicyclists also did not have access to political power because city government was resistant to the needs and wants of the cycling community. In the 1970s “dissident city planners” joined activist groups in order to agitate for bicycle lanes and parking (Furness, 2010, p. 62). During the same time, activist groups deployed the strategy of enlisting support from city officials, politicians, and other public figures—especially those who were known bicycle riders (Furness, 2011). For example, politicians like Rep. Jim Oberstar often lobbied for bike trails and was the driving force behind the SAFETEA-LU Act:<sup>7</sup> a \$286 billion transit equity measure that included funding for bicycle amenities. These urban bicycle activist groups and political allies focused on the environmental arguments for more bicycle infrastructure with little regard to economics or investment.

Bicycle advocacy history also has deep roots in social movements and countercultures. Hippies, anarchists, and environmentalists have made up the core of bicycle advocacy in the last 40 years because in the U.S. bicycling as an adult, especially

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<sup>7</sup> Which stands for the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users. This act is responsible for funding most of the bicycle infrastructure improvements in Minneapolis after 2005. The advocacy group, Transit for Livable Communities, has been running a pilot program with these funds to study how to increase rates of bicycling and lower rates of driving.

as one's main form of transportation, has been viewed as a countercultural activity. This is important to note as, in my experience, bicycle advocacy in major urban cities is now mostly composed of privileged white men who look like they work in office cubicles. Although white, upwardly mobile people have always been a major part of bicycle advocacy, in my experience there has been a noticeable absence of counterculture bicyclists, such as bike messengers and direct action bicycle activists, in city-sanctioned bicycle advocacy groups. This is not surprising, given the sordid history of bicycle activists and police (Biel, 2012; Furness, 2010; *Still We Ride*, 2005). I also believe that with the absence of counterculture bicyclists, the white, upwardly mobile bicyclists are able to present a more "respectable" platform and image to the city: race and class privilege almost guarantees these "respectable" cyclists entry to Minneapolis's urban planning.



**Figure 18: 2012 City of Minneapolis Bicycle Advocacy Committee**



**Figure 19: 2007 Minneapolis Critical Mass arrests**

Why is this shift happening? One explanation is the sheer political power middle class, straight white men have in city government. The Minneapolis city government, currently run by a straight white man, may feel more comfortable meeting with conventional male cyclists rather than passionate bike punks (who once made up most of the radical bicycle activism groups). Moreover, city planners are listening to the white men who want to work within the government system. Yet, even in the 1970s, advocates were using “formal political channels” such as lobbying and meeting with urban planners (Furness, 2010, pp. 67-68). This early bicycle advocacy helped craft a specific political and cultural bicycle culture through its work with local officials and also in its more creative direct actions such as Critical Mass. Furness (2010) argues that this activism made bicycling a “meaningful social issue,” not just an individual choice (p. 69).

The most prominent form of bicycle advocacy in the last 20 years is Critical Mass, a self-described anti-authoritarian movement that seeks to show what urban streets could look like if bicycling were the dominant form of transportation. Critical Mass is a monthly bike ride at which bicyclists converge in downtown rush hour to ride the streets



together, with the goal to outnumber the vehicles on the street.<sup>8</sup> While Critical Mass is fading away in some cities, the *need* for Critical Mass is also fading. Now that bicyclists have, theoretically, gained rights on the street, their attention can shift to pressuring the city for better bike infrastructure. In Minneapolis, Rybak credits “an ongoing partnership between the city and county governments, the country’s best coalition of nonprofits and tens of thousands of active bikers” for a steady improvement of infrastructure (Kambitsis, 2010, par. 4).

Many of the bike advocates working with city governments could be considered “vehicular cycling advocates.” Vehicular cycling is an approach to riding a bike that insists bicyclists be treated as any other automobile on the road, as reflected in the Critical Mass tactics. These advocates have at times even eschewed the construction of bicycle lanes, claiming that bicyclists can traverse roads without special treatment (Epperson, 2012). Vehicular cyclists choose to ride on the road rather than off-street bike paths and the roads they choose to ride on are often the most convenient for quick travel, regardless of traffic or safety concerns.<sup>9</sup> Furness (2010) argues that “vehicular cycling advocates” have a tendency to ignore socioeconomic, physical, material, and cultural factors that influence people’s transportation choices (p. 73). “The idea that the street is somehow a space of equality, or neutrality, that one accesses by simply disciplining and ultimately demonstrating one’s cycling skill is a premise that holds true only if one decontextualizes, if not totally ignores” these factors (Furness, 2010, p. 73). In an

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<sup>8</sup> For a more complete history of Critical Mass see “Critical Mass and the Functions of Bicycle Protest” in Furness (2010).

<sup>9</sup> We can see this attitude materialize in Portland, where bicycle advocates are demanding better bike lanes on N. Williams Ave. despite the fact that numerous side streets run parallel to the busy street. When I asked one bicyclist why he did not take a side street he said “it would take too long, too many stop signs.”

interview, Bill Lindeke, bicycle scholar and member of various bicycle advisory boards in the Twin Cities, told me that critical conversations about how race and class impact and are affected by bicycle infrastructure are never taken up by the Bicycle Advisory Committee in Minneapolis or St. Paul. In these meetings, Bill says that “bike lanes are always seen as good.”<sup>10</sup>

The pattern of white men making up the majority of bicycle advocacy organizations is a pattern I have yet to see change in my experiences with advocacy work. Bill reported that the City of Minneapolis re-organized its bicycle advisory committee to appoint people from different wards in Minneapolis. This process decreased the amount of vehicular cyclists, or “old white guys,” on the board. Bill said that the board has a bit more gender equality now and includes younger men and one person of color. So although this board is not composed of *all* white men and attempts have been made to democratize the organization, white men still are the majority and it appears that their interests are still prioritized in Minneapolis. The dominant group’s approach to bike advocacy is important to understand when considering the neighborhood conflicts that have emerged from proposed bike infrastructure planning. Typically, bicycle advocates have to lobby their cities hard to get money allocated to improve the roads for bicyclists—from fixing potholes to getting a bicycle path built. In some cities, just getting a bicycle lane installed is a challenge and funding for public transit and bicycle infrastructure can be denied or reallocated in partisan battles about whether state and local government should accept federal funding.<sup>11</sup> The disparity between cities and their

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<sup>10</sup> All quotes from Bill come from personal communication with author on January 5, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker not only cut spending on bicycle infrastructure, but when he was Milwaukee County Executive, denied federal funding for various public transportation projects. These

bicycle infrastructure is still quite wide but in some cities there appears to be a new era in bicycle infrastructure lobbying: many city officials appear to be just as eager as bicycle advocates to begin infrastructure projects. These eager cities, including Minneapolis, utilize bicycle advocates to lobby for infrastructure funding. Although cities do not say “yes” to every request made by bicycle advocates, city governments are teaming up *with* instead of *against* these advocates. These bicycle advocates are mostly privileged white men who have the power to put their interests before others. The advocates may also deploy their paternalistic tools to push for bicycle infrastructure in communities where there is no vocalized need for such amenities.<sup>12</sup> This chapter’s case study will show how, even in communities where bicycling is not a priority, infrastructure is being built for economic reasons.

### **Recruiting people like you**

Most Minneapolis cyclists would agree that one of the biggest cycling advocates in the city government is Mayor R.T. Rybak. Even within the general population, Rybak is known for being extremely supportive of bicycle transportation. For example, he was responsible for creating a bicycle coordinator position in the city government, a position that Rybak implies was an anomaly in city governments.<sup>13</sup> He also rallied to bring a bike share program to Minneapolis: a bicycle amenity popular in Europe but not present in the U.S. until Minneapolis’s program. The program, known as Nice Ride, distributes thousands of bicycles, docked at stations, across the city for people to use for a rental fee.

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federal funds were accepted by Minneapolis and are credited with the city’s expansive bike infrastructure (Held, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Michael, the Minneapolis realtor I spoke with, put it this way: “With the North Greenway, [there is] the paternal aspect, we know what’s good for you. Do really poor people tend to be avid bike riders? Usually not.”

<sup>13</sup> This job position created controversy in Minneapolis because Rybak had recently laid off ten firefighters, citing budget issues (Roper, 2011).

When Nice Ride launched in the summer of 2010, Rybak often live tweeted his whereabouts on his Nice Ride bicycle.<sup>14</sup> He also heavily promoted Nice Ride during a “Policy and a Pint” event on June 17, 2010 at which an all-white male panel, including David Byrne from The Taking Heads and author of *Bicycle Diaries*, discussed urban cycling.<sup>15</sup> Rybak is an anomaly of a mayor in his dedication to bicycle infrastructure, crowd surfing (Fischer, 2012a), and proclaiming an official “Doomtree Day” named after a local hip hop crew (Fischer, 2012b). Rybak has also found international recognition for his innovative leadership in being nominated for World Mayor in 2012.<sup>16</sup>

Minneapolis tends to value people like Rybak, committed to eco-friendly initiatives and “hip” culture, more than traditional representations of power (e.g. bankers, conservative CEOs, old money families). This is illustrated in the *Minnesota Monthly* article, “Power and the New Establishment,” that ranked the Twin Cities’ 75 most influential people.<sup>17</sup> Tim Gihring’s (2013) prologue to this list includes the sentiment that Minnesotans are not impressed with “power.” “We talk instead of community, which stokes our civic pride and our sense of equality” (p. 44). Someone is in charge and it is no longer the “guy with the biggest cigar. It’s the woman with the website, *the dude on a bike*, the student in a wheelchair, the punter with balls” (emphasis my own, Gehring, 2013, p. 44). Rybak ranks #8 with the caveat “it is hard to imagine Minneapolis without him” (Gehring, 2013, p. 46). Shaun Murphy, the “Minneapolis cycling czar” (actual title

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<sup>14</sup> Rybak is currently a Nice Ride board member.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Richard Florida (2012) cites Byrne’s *Bicycle Diaries* to make the argument that bicycling is a creative endeavor.

<sup>16</sup> “Testimonials for R. T. Rybak.” *World Mayor*. [http://www.worldmayor.com/contest\\_2012/comments-minneapolis.html](http://www.worldmayor.com/contest_2012/comments-minneapolis.html)

<sup>17</sup> Besides who I list here, the list also includes Minnesota Vikings punter Chris Kluwe who, with candor, has been vocal about gay rights, the president of the University of Minnesota, a slew of progressive CEOs, an anti-bullying activist, NPR darling Garrison Keillor, local female hip hop artist Dessa, and few choice politicians.

is Minneapolis Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator), comes in at #74 partially described as the “archnemesis to Portland” (Gehring, 2013, p. 52). An inset to the list includes a collection of people that art groups would “never fail to invite to galas.” A part of this collection is a list of Twin Cities *Creative Class* members. An asterisk next to the list denoted a need for definition of this class; pulling from “one arts org,” the creative class is described as “well-networked creative and artistic professionals who add fabulously to any event” (Gehring, 2013, p. 50). This list of influential people suggests that not only are the creative class and the “dude on a bike” desirable people to have in the community, but they also wield a new form of *power* in the city. But is it possible that people like the mayor are *strategically* trying to bring in these people who add fabulously to any event?

In my interview with him, I asked Rybak why he invested in bike infrastructure and he was upfront about who he hopes is attracted to Minneapolis through the infrastructure. “Attracting people like you from other communities to bike culture,” he said to me.<sup>18</sup> He made this point twice in our interview and when I asked him what he meant about attracting particular people he said,

The key to economic growth is attracting talent. Especially in the creative field, talent is very mobile. [Our bicycle infrastructure] has attracted this wide swath of people to get something they can’t find in a freeway-oriented place like Houston. Even in a city with a great reputation like Austin, for attracting cutting edge talent, they are not even in the same league as Minneapolis on bike culture. That gives us a huge competitive advantage.

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<sup>18</sup> I do not know Rybak personally. All he knew about me was that I rode a bike year round and was writing my dissertation on bicycle advocacy.

Rybak clearly sees a link between building bicycle infrastructure and competing with other U.S. cities for creative talent, or the creative class.

Rybak echoes a popular theory, pushed by Richard Florida, that the creative class has high economic value to businesses and cities. Creative class professionals engage in knowledge-based labor include engineering, research, education, and science. In the post-Fordist city, jobs are more concentrated in creative endeavors than manual labor, meaning the creative class is often the key to regional growth (Florida, 2002, p. 221). But the creative class, as workers, behaves much differently than other classes. Florida (2002, 2012) highlights a few significant, interconnected changes in how cities, businesses, and potential creative class employees interact. One, companies are moving to where the skilled people live. Florida (2010, 2012) found that initially businesses that tried to “lure” creative workers from other cities failed. Businesses began moving to where creative talent was, starting in the mid-1990s.

All too often the technologies, the companies, and even the venture capital dollars flowed out of town to places that had bigger and better stocks of talented and creative people. I was finding that companies were moving to or forming in places that had the skilled *people*. (Florida, 2012, p. xxii)

Two, potential employees are choosing where to live based more on lifestyle potential than employment options. Florida (2012) reports that

Virtually all the creative workers I talked to...and my empirical studies underline the fact that location and community are more important than ever. My interview subjects continually recounted their desire and *need* to live in places that offer

stimulating, creative environments...[some] picked the place they wanted to live and then focused their job search there. (pp. 75-76)

The ability for these workers to move to “stimulating, creative environments” is bound up in class privilege. Few people can afford this sort of mobility nor have the option to move around to different cities, with less regard to gaining employment than finding a cool place to live.

Three, cities are focusing less on “typical” recruitment spaces (i.e. sports arenas, malls) and more on a people’s climate which includes investing in lifestyle amenities, such as parks, bike paths, and street-level culture, that the creative class will want and use (Florida, 2002; Florida, 2012). Florida’s (2002, 2012) research on the creative class is important to the discussion about bicycle infrastructure because it is this class that is creating demand for the bicycle lanes and paths. Florida (2002) mentions this when he talks about creating a people’s climate based on lifestyle amenities, arguing that this approach to improving city spaces, such as adding bike lanes and off-road trails, can benefit a larger swath of people because the spaces will last a long time and are open to a larger population (p. 294). Florida (2002) mentions bike lanes and off-road trails as examples of the people’s climate’s longevity and universal-usage, suggesting that the bike lanes are built *for* the creative class.

In fact, Florida (2002) mentions bicycling and bicycle infrastructure many times as signifiers of the creative class’s lifestyle. For example, he finds that because creative class workers tend to work long, undefined hours, they often want to take an extended break in the middle of the day. Thus they desire “just in time” get-aways such as bike rides, so “they require trails or parks close by” (Florida, 2002, p. 224). At its most basic,

the creative class wants a “street-level scene” to be a part of which includes coffee shops, street musicians, and bookstores (Florida, 2002, p. 183). The quality of place is also important to the creative class, meaning that what’s there, who’s there, and what’s going on are all measures of quality. To Florida, this does not mean that a person must interact or participate with every element of the people’s climate; rather, the climate sets a general energy that is attractive to the creative class. This includes bicycle infrastructure; a city with ample bicycle lanes and paths is simply a signifier to the creative class that the city is a high quality place to live. I asked Minneapolis realtor Michael Gross whether his clients convey a desire to live by the Greenway, regardless of their desire to *utilize* it.

Michael: Yeah, very often. And when you look at how things are advertised, if they are within four or five blocks from the Greenway it usually ends up on the advertisement. So yeah, so I’d say for sure.

Me: Can you get a sense of people who want to live around the Greenway but not really utilize it, they’ve just heard its cool?

Michael: Yes, definitely. The majority of the developments in Uptown are right along the Greenway and it’s totally the latest thing, in the last five years. But even if you look at the last 12 months the biggest thing is buying up land along the Greenway on the North side... My best friend lives right on the Greenway, he doesn’t even own a bike but it’s a high property value.

Through urban development such as the Greenway and conjoining luxury apartment buildings, Minneapolis appears to be emerging as the blueprint in recruiting the creative class, and my interview with Rybak echoed many of Florida’s sentiments about the creative class lifestyle. In fact, Rybak sounded so Florida-esque that I wondered



if Minneapolis was one of his clients.<sup>19</sup> For example, Florida discussed what he calls “horizontal hypermobility,” meaning that the creative class tends not to stay with jobs for very long. Instead creative class workers hop around to different companies in search of what they want, often dismissing potential for promotions within a company. Florida (2002) cites Austin, Texas as an example of a city that has recruited a lot of creative talent via its strategic recruitment of the creative class. Rybak brought up Austin in our interview a few times as a clear competitor for attracting the creative class. He even alluded to creating a people’s climate, which is not necessarily based on creating things for people to do, but rather on establishing an aura of a vibrant street-level culture. Thus even though Rybak loves riding his bike and benefits from the infrastructure, he admitted that “it’s more about what kind of city we want.”

The theory that the creative class can lead to economic growth has been operationalized by many U.S. cities’ governments without much thought to the consequences that may come from catering to this demographic (Peck, 2005). Many people, from all sectors of labor and politics, have critiqued Florida’s work, so much so that he responded to many of the critiques in his 2012 revision of his bestselling 2002 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How it’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. Many critics are housed in politically conservative circles including anti-immigrant and homophobic groups that see Florida’s ideas as an assault on big business, suburban living, and family values (Peck, 2005). In “Struggling with the Creative Class,” urban geographer Jamie Peck lays out the Leftist critique of Florida. Peck (2005) is most interested in exploring the ways power and privilege allow the

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<sup>19</sup> Although I could not find out whether Florida was a consultant for Minneapolis, he did claim that the Twin Cities are a “world leader” in attracting creative people (Combs, 2005).

creative class to be understood as the “Chosen Ones” and thus be catered to and lured in by urban cities: “as the source, apparently, of all good economic things, the Creative Class must be nurtured and nourished” (p. 743). Strategies to build a strong creative class population are predicated on a neoliberal agenda, “framed around interurban competition, gentrification, middle-class consumption and place-marketing” (Peck, 2005, pp. 740-741). Florida concedes that the creative class can help speed up the process of gentrification, erode the diversity that this demographic wants and admits that the most creative places often have the highest socioeconomic inequality (Peck 2005; Florida, 2005). Florida (2002, 2012) suggests to the creative class that they should *show the way* to the lower service class, by illustrating how to pull themselves up by their creative bootstraps (Peck, 2005). “Florida exhorts his fellow creatives to show others the path—indeed portraying this as a moral duty” (Peck, 2005, p. 757). This may be tricky at first because Florida (2002) believes the creative class is “virtually unaware of its own existence and thus unable to consciously influence the course of the society it largely leads” (p. xi).

If the creative class is “virtually unaware” that they exist, then Florida’s overuses his own prescriptive creative class terminology. Florida’s representation of the creative class is constitutive to its meaning. The meaning of something depends on how it is represented (Hall, 2007). Representation is part of an object and “it is one of its conditions of existence. Therefore representation is not outside...not after...but within...it is constitutive of it” (Hall, 2007, p. 8). Florida is in a unique position because he crafted the concept of the creative class and then used his authority to define,

represent, and prescribe its meaning. The manner in which Florida represents the creative class is rigid and inflexible.

Through Florida's prescriptive representation of the creative class, he endows it with privilege and power—especially with his contention that it largely leads this society. Florida suggests that this moral superiority gives people of the creative class the green light to demand a lot from a city and the privilege to move on if the city fails to meet their standards. Florida (2012) charged the creative class to literally *lead* the poor and working class out of their doldrums. The poor and working class are largely invisible in the Creative Era, save for the fact that their labor helps support the success of the creative class (Florida, 2012). Still, Florida has argued that the creative class needs special accommodations because of their unique work schedule. Working class people do physical labor, Florida says, and so they do not want to exercise for fun; the creative class is, on the other hand, “cooped up” behind screens and canvases all day and need an escape (Florida, 2002, p. 174). Florida must have forgotten that working class jobs also include telemarketing, toll booth operations, temporary work in offices, and other sedentary labor. Not to mention that some workers, such as day laborers, are *forced* into the flexible work structure that the creative class *covets*. But for those working class laborers who need an escape, all is not lost. Florida (2002) reminds people that one “benefit” of the people’s climate the creative class demands, such as off-road trails, is it is “open to a larger population” (p. 294). Or as Peck (2005) puts it, the creative class generates growth and others live off the spoils. Thank you, creative class.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the shift in who makes up bicycle advocacy groups, a composition of mostly creative class people. I also noted a shift in bicycle

advocacy becoming apolitical or at least more in line with city government politics. Peck (2005) suggests, through his reading of Florida, that this class has “little concern for the wider social consequences, maybe little concern for wider society” (p. 758) Florida (2005) himself believes that building a creative society is a “nonpartisan, nonideological issue” (p. 245). Here we can see parallels between the vision of a “nonideological” creative society and the current apolitical nature of urban bicycle advocacy. Knowing that Minneapolis works hard to recruit the creative class, it makes sense that the planning of desirable bicycle infrastructure would be politically modest, not revolutionary (Peck, 2005). Undoubtedly, the power and privilege the creative class holds has helped produce bicycle infrastructure as Peck’s (2005) summary of a city’s shift from “old” to “new” development in the Creative Age reads,

The competitively induced overbuilding of malls and convention centers morphs into the creatively impelled overbuilding of bike paths and artistic venues (as if this could grow the aggregate supply of creativity). (p. 766)

In the subsequent section, I will explore how the Midtown Greenway morphed from a homeless and youth hangout into a bourgeois leisure space. Harnessing the latter image, the city is constantly finding new areas to develop bicycle infrastructure, as is the case in North Minneapolis, where the economic benefits of a new Greenway appear to outweigh the needs and values of current residents.

### **Minneapolis’s Greenway system**

#### **Bicycle infrastructure and environmental gentrification**

*Melody: Are property values higher near bicycle infrastructure?*

*Michael: Well, the answer is yes.*

If you are Rybak, a bicyclist, or someone who lives near it, you may view the Midtown Greenway as your pride and joy in Minneapolis's alternative transit amenities. The Midtown Greenway is certainly impressive in quality and efficiency because not many U.S. cities have bike paths that allow you to travel for miles in high-density areas without having to interact with vehicle traffic. The Greenway, as most people call it, includes two lanes for bicyclists and one lane for pedestrians. It is the site of a former railroad corridor, and runs east-west for 5.5 miles in South Minneapolis. The Greenway is popular because of its location (it connects a large swath of neighborhoods both poor and rich) and its lack of vehicular traffic. In only a handful of places does the Greenway run perpendicular to an actual street. Along the Greenway, users will run into a community garden, a lively soccer field, No Trespassing signs, many displays of sanctioned public art, a bike shop, a smelly factory, painted-over graffiti, and newly planted trees. Over the four years I have traversed the Greenway, I have observed a diverse collection of Greenway users including a Latino father pushing his toddler on a tricycle, old white men in spandex on expensive road bikes, a young couple out for a leisurely stroll, a few middle-aged white women swerving around on Nice Ride bikes together, a group of Black kids happily taking up all the lanes on their bicycles, a young woman jogging in neon-colored Nike gear, and a grimy bicyclist hauling a trailer full of coffee. The Greenway is a style of bicycle infrastructure that is argued to be most effective in attracting new people to bicycling because of its segregation from street traffic (Baker, 2009). Because of its multiple-usage potential, the Greenway is an easy sell for diverse lifestyles and is not an obvious marker of environmental gentrification.

Environmental gentrification works by building upon the successes of the environmental justice movement and appropriates tenants of the movement, such as to serve high-end development and displace low income residents (Checker, 2011). Environmental gentrification is marketed through sustainability rhetoric about “green lifestyles” which is attractive to affluent and “eco-conscious” residents (Checker, 2011, p. 212). Melissa Checker’s (2011) research on environmental gentrification in Harlem bolsters my observation that this type of neighborhood improvement is typically presented as “positive and politically neutral” and may thus mask “unequal urban development.” (p. 212).

In Minneapolis, this narrative continues with new plans for expanding the Greenway system. Twin Cities Greenways, a non-profit organization, is run by volunteers who promote the construction of “greenway-quality trails” to better connect the Twin Cities. I argue that the proposed Greenway in North Minneapolis is a form of environmental gentrification, as exemplified by residents’ reactions to the project, the reasons given for constructing the Greenway, and the benefits assumed to come from the Greenway. My interviews with two Twin Cities Greenways board members, one white male and one woman of color, suggest divergent views on building bicycle infrastructure in a diverse, working class neighborhood. I also explore how the existing Greenway system, and its impact on property values, produces concern about the future of North Minneapolis.

I was introduced to the North Minneapolis Greenway proposal through a public meeting announcement in the local Black newspaper, *The Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder*. On September 26, 2011 I attended the first of ten public meetings in North

Minneapolis about the proposed Greenway path. About 15 people attended this meeting. Only three white people were in attendance; the rest were people of color. The meeting was run by Carrie Christensen, a white woman, from Community Design Group, a consulting group involved in many local bicycle projects.<sup>20</sup> The main purpose of the meeting was to present information about and justification for a Greenway and three different proposed designs;<sup>21</sup> the plan for the rest of the meeting was for a brief question and answer period to be followed by meeting attendees being broken into small groups and asked to write down their opinions on the three designs. The planned structure of the meeting was derailed fairly quickly. When Christensen got to the point in the presentation where she presented the three designs, she was peppered with attendees' questions. Many people did not understand the designs, if only because none of the proposed street designs existed in North Minneapolis.

This break in the planned presentation left room for people to ask questions about the larger project. Robert Woods, a community organizer in North, asked about the consulting group. "Where is this information going? How diverse is your staff?" Christensen admitted that Jose, a Latino man, was the planned presenter but he had to go to Peru. She reported that the group employed three white people and two Latinos—two of these employees lived in North Minneapolis. "That's good," Christensen said about the group's demographic. A Black woman attendee responded, "It is?! For you, maybe." Woods continued, "Listen, I'm trying to be cute about [talking to a white person about race issues]." A Black woman confirmed, "We are looking for ethnic diversity and

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<sup>20</sup> Community Design Group. <http://www.c-d-g.org/>

<sup>21</sup> The three designs were a bike boulevard, "half and half" where one lane is a greenway and the other lane allows one-way vehicle traffic, and a linear park where the entire street would be turned into a greenway with no vehicle traffic allowed.

people who live and work in North Minneapolis.” Another attendee tried to calm the conversation by reminding people that this was their “chance to add value to the project.” Without much group discussion about the Twin Cities Greenways organization, board member Matthew Hendricks offered up his promise to add more diversity to the board. Woods verbally accepted this and dropped the issue in the large group setting.

Other participants pressed Christensen on the funding for the project, who would be hired to build the Greenway, and the current state of bicycle infrastructure in North compared to their public works necessities. An attendee argued, “it’s an insult to throw [bicycle lanes] down on uneven roads. We can’t even get our streets plowed, how will the bike paths be maintained?” Another attendee referenced the new bicycle lane on a busy street, N. Fremont Ave., reporting that the street is down to one lane with bus traffic. “Who did you ask about that?” she asked Christensen. Overall, it was obvious that Christensen was not prepared for an alternative meeting structure to take place as she tried many times to get back to her presentation. She also appeared unprepared to answer the critical questions posed by attendees. In his discussion of power, Steven Lukes (1974) argues that to those in power, the hegemonic understanding of something may be so omnipresent that they do not even think that there are alternatives. He writes, “defenders of the status quo may be so secure and pervasive that they are unaware of any potential challengers to their position and thus of any alternatives to the existing political process, whose bias they work to maintain” (p. 21). The “disruptions” at the public meeting reflect this power distribution well, from the residents pushing against the established political process to those in power (i.e. Christensen) seemingly unaware there could be resistance to her proposal.



In my small group I worked with Woods, an older Black woman, and a young white woman. We were given a large sheet of paper with a visual of the three designs and asked to put post-it notes with comments on each design. The older Black woman immediately began questioning the necessity of this project due to larger issues, saying, “If you take my street, and don’t plow my alley like usual, then what?” The young white woman questioned the linear park design because in her experience in a neighboring city with a linear park, it was “deserted by the city, trashed, and soon was known as a place to buy drugs.” I talked with Woods in more detail about the criticisms he shared with the large group. He told me he majored in urban studies in college, which he summarized as studying “how to control populations.” He also argued that city planners’ ideas and “our ideas” do not usually match. Woods said that city planning can be used to drive people out. I offered up my own critique to Woods saying, “I think that these sorts of bike trails can be used to push people out, to clean up certain areas. I mean that is my cynical answer.” Woods, nodding along and looking at me with intense, focused eyes responded, “yeah, but you are right.” Checker (2011), who witnessed similar “drama” at a public meeting about a Harlem park’s planned improvement, argued that this sort of challenge creates a difficult paradox: “Must [low income] residents reject environmental amenities in their neighborhoods in order to resist the gentrification that tends to follow?” (p. 211). The paradox that Checker (2011) presents is unanswerable at this moment, especially in light of sustainable urban development following such a predictable, profit-driven pattern. But it is a question that should be at the forefront of discussions with those who are committed to building a more environmentally-conscious, just, and equal city. Those in power, and those seeking to challenge that power, need to talk about how to integrate

environmental amenities into neighborhoods without economic incentive and whether eco-friendliness can ever be separated from gentrification and profit.

When I sat down to talk with Matthew Hendricks of the Twin Cities Greenways, his response to some of my concerns about his organization's proposed North Minneapolis Greenway suggested that he is asking people to think through the ways lower income people will truly benefit from the new bicycle infrastructure. "I think the questions that were asked [at the public meeting] were certainly valid and they were concerns we had as well," Matthew said.<sup>22</sup> I shared with Matthew my observation that the current Greenway can be overrun by affluent white men on expensive bicycles, who take up a lot of symbolic space by speeding past more leisurely riders. I asked him if he thought this could be an issue in North Minneapolis and perhaps spur gentrification.

Matthew responded that gentrification was a concern the board had as well. He added,

Gentrification is such a complicated issue because there are pieces of neighborhood improvement that everybody wants. Everybody wants to live in a neighborhood with less crime, with property value that is stable, so if you invest in a home it's actually an investment not a mistake... You can still want good things for the neighborhood, you just want to make sure everybody has a part of it, it's not displacing a lot of people who live there.

Matthew reframed our discussion about gentrification by suggesting that someone who lives in a poor neighborhood is not necessarily averse to improving their surroundings. But, one of the "benefits" of improving and/or gentrifying a neighborhood is the increase in property values. This of course is typically only a concern for property owners.

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<sup>22</sup> All quotes from Matthew come from personal communication with the author on November 29, 2011.

According to Randy Furst (2012) of the *Star Tribune*, North Minneapolis has seen a sharp increase in foreclosed homes that are then bought up by investors and turned into rental properties. The number of owner-occupied houses is declining in North Minneapolis and so if property values rise, investors are the ones most likely to benefit.

As for the impact the Greenway could have already had in South Minneapolis, Matthew pointed out that “along the Midtown Greenway there’s still a lot of diversity as well. It’s not like Phillips has suddenly gone completely white.”<sup>23</sup> While his insight is true, it is worth noting that condominium construction is happening further east on the Greenway at the Bryant Street exit and that numerous high-end businesses line the bicycle path near the Uptown neighborhood. Michael had a similar observation noting, “I can say the Greenway really raised property values for Uptown but it didn’t raise property values for the Phillips neighborhood, which isn’t a good neighborhood.” Phillips still struggles with its poor reputation, to the point that the section of Greenway that passes through the neighborhood is perceived as a dangerous. Michael recalled, “the Greenway, at least the perception that I have received over the years, is that if you go on the Greenway at night [from Uptown], it’s ok to go west but don’t go east [towards Phillips].”

The racial coding in Michael’s reflections is worth unpacking. Phillips, east of Uptown, is a poor and working class neighborhood with large Native American, Somali, African American, and Latino populations. The neighborhood is *perceived* to be dangerous because of its lack of white dominance. But the Midtown Greenway Coalition has never isolated a section of the Greenway as being most dangerous and worthy of a

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<sup>23</sup> Phillips is a neighborhood known for its cultural diversity, crime, and low rent. Drug and gang problems have plagued parts of the neighborhood (Hobbes, 2011).

Trail Watch. The *entire* trail is patrolled at night. Michael is right that Uptown has seen the bulk of property value increases. Is it possible that people drawn to Uptown would not move to Phillips because it is a “bad” neighborhood? It may be the case that a neighborhood’s racist and classist reputations are strong enough to keep property values low.

Another concern I shared with both Michael and Matthew is the discordance between Twin Cities Greenways touting the raising of property values as a positive outcome of building more Greenways and the issue of rent then being raised for those who do not own houses. Matthew responded with two points. One, property values are already so low in North that if the Greenway led to an increase in property values, it would still be affordable. “I mean there are homes that are going for 10, 20, 30 thousand dollars that are under foreclosure, that need work, but that’s a very affordable home today. Even double that or triple is very affordable.” Matthew’s second point was if community members begin using the Greenway to commute to work and to run errands, they will be saving money. “If your transportation bill goes down by 300 or 400 bucks a month because you can bike downtown easily then you can afford, when your rent goes up by 100 bucks a month, you are still ahead. And you live in a nicer neighborhood.” When I told Michael about the planned North Minneapolis Greenway, we started to discuss its impact on downtown access. Michael reflected,

So maybe it does allow for easier access to downtown and maybe for a certain percentage that really does benefit them in their options for jobs, you know? So the economic status is increased. It’s not necessarily the case that a poor person

remains a poor person always. If they just don't have a car and it takes an hour to get to downtown and now with a bike it would take 20 minutes.

I asked Debra Stone, the only person of color on the Twin Cities Greenways board, about the proposed incentives for building a Greenway in North Minneapolis and she shared some thoughts that complicate Matthew's position. Debra made it very clear that the reason this Greenway is being proposed is to increase access to downtown (a reason not stressed at the public meeting I attended). Like many neighborhoods with a high density of poor people of color, North can only be accessed by a few streets. A newly constructed Minnesota Twins baseball stadium has made access to and from North Minneapolis even more difficult. As a seasoned bicyclist, even I am nervous biking to North, because the only route is on high traffic, multi-lane streets. There is an assumption that those in North who have access to downtown would then be able to commute to *work* downtown. I asked Debra if this assumption had merit and she responded that not only does North have the highest unemployment rate in the Twin Cities but also "where they want to put the Greenway is the most economically challenged area and I would argue not all those people who live in that community, in that neighborhood, in those blocks, are working downtown. If they are working at all."<sup>24</sup> She qualified her statement by explaining that there are pockets of North that have upper-income African Americans and white Europeans and so it is a mixture of different incomes across North. Michael theorized about the potential economic benefits and parallel consequences to North Minneapolis's primary residents: the poor, working class, and people of color. "Maybe it's true that not only does it increase property values but it also increases socioeconomic

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<sup>24</sup> All quotes from Debra come from personal communication with the author on August 8, 2012.

health of a community, not by pushing [North Minneapolis residents] out. I would hypothesize that it more pushes them out.”

I asked Debra if people in North were talking about the gentrification potential of the Greenway. She said,

We see the gentrification happening right now. I mean North Minneapolis is very close, it’s an ideal situation for downtown Minneapolis so it definitely is a concern for residents up in the North side and I think rightly so... research shows that with bikes and Greenways, neighborhoods become safer. They certainly would become more appealing, especially as being so close to downtown, yeah. Who has the jobs downtowns? Not people of color.<sup>25</sup>

What Debra’s comment illustrates is not only a literal link between a North side Greenway and jobs downtown, but also a concern that the people who have been living in North Minneapolis would not all benefit from this economically-driven plan. Debra alluded to a future vision of more affluent people moving up into North due to its increased access to downtown. Michael also hypothesized about potential displacement based on what happened in a nearby neighborhood once bike paths were constructed along the Mississippi River.

Minneapolis has done a fantastic job just in terms of, not morally, but in terms of how efficiently they moved poor African Americans to one completely set apart area of the city. I mean it’s really tragic. They are on the other side of I-94, they are hard to get to. It’s just an isolated, poor area with really high crime which the

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<sup>25</sup> To be clear, there are plenty of people of color who *do* work downtown—as janitors, food workers at the stadiums, construction workers, and bus drivers. But interestingly Debra’s comment suggests that these workers are not the ones coveted by the supporters of the North Minneapolis Greenway project. Here Debra seems to be referring to the creative class sector of labor that is largely void of people of color.

rest of everybody can forget about. And that's totally what happened. And then as soon as they start to change it, the gentrification continues. So when the river was developed in the late 90s, early 2000s, the riverfront developed around the new Guthrie Theatre and all that area. That's really cool and it has energized Northeast a lot. Northeast has become trendy and whereas before it wasn't. But all those areas were really kind of poor areas on the North side and now it's just moved straight up into Columbia Heights...the lower income stuff was pushed right north up Central and University [Avenues]. So, I guess that's great for downtown but not so cool if you live in Columbia Heights.

If the planned Greenway has potential to contribute to gentrification, then should people who are against such changes be supporting the vision? Although Debra says gentrification is a concern, she also said "I don't think it should stop us. What it should do is make us more pro-active in making sure that we get our say about what the Greenways are going to look like." Debra's point reiterates that those in low-bicycling neighborhoods do not stand idly by while bicycle advocates come in and plan bicycle infrastructure. Rather, they work to complicate the planning and remind advocates that not everyone sees bicycle paths as a priority or a desired urban adjustment. The Greenway does have potential to positively impact the neighborhood, as long as the neighbors are part of the planning process. The initial community meeting I attended represented some of the tension that occurs when outsiders come into a neighborhood and plan *around* the community members. Will the Greenway expedite gentrification in North Minneapolis? The answer will be unclear until the Greenway is constructed. But by

looking at the transition that occurred when the original Greenway was built, some clues about the future emerge.

### **From homeless encampment to spandex-wearing cyclists**

Bicycle paths, such as the Greenway, have the potential to “clean up” blighted areas of a city and this certainly was the case for the Midtown Greenway in Minneapolis. A longtime Minneapolis resident and avid bicyclist, Spencer Haugh, described the space that existed before the Greenway construction: “Urchins and hooligans. And graffiti writers. And awesomeness. I like the greenway, but it makes me sad. It was a five mile long art gallery” (personal communication, July 11, 2011). The Midtown Greenway Coalition describes the same space as once “a trash-filled trench that was a disgrace to our city” ([midtowngreenway.org](http://midtowngreenway.org)).





**Figure 20: Railroad tracks with graffiti in late 1990s at the site of the current Midtown Greenway**



**Figure 21: Graffiti artist working on a wall in the late 1990s at the site of the current Midtown Greenway**

I spoke with Katrina Knutson, art teacher and muralist, who spent a lot of time in the corridor before it was the Greenway. She described the space as it was in the 1990s before construction started.

When I was a teenager, it was railroad tracks. I lived right by there and went to high school right by there...And it was a place to go for kids to drink, smoke weed, and probably sell drugs, too, or just hang out. And it would be a mixture of high school kids and homeless people—I would say a mix of that. But then there's like tons of graffiti and it was basically...the graffiti hall of fame that I would go to. And there were other legal walls or almost legal walls but they were further away and it was never legal to paint under there but it would stay there forever. Actually there was graffiti the whole length of South Minneapolis, but

especially right under the Sears Tower, that's where the best people went and all those people painted. So that's what I remember about it.<sup>26</sup>

I asked Katrina about the safety of the area in the 1990s, considering the safety problems the Greenway has had since it opened.<sup>27</sup>

It was a place that shady people hung out and to some extent it was enclosed.

Although it is interesting because in some ways it's more enclosed now whereas, and maybe it's because I am older, but like sometimes I don't like biking on it alone late at night because it now feels very closed in. When I was a teenager I knew all of these ways to get out. Now that it's all fenced in, it feels more enclosed. That's my perspective on safety. Like I'd rather be around lots of people and not caged in.

Katrina's comment about not feeling safe on the Greenway struck me because of the stereotype that the railroad corridor was once a "disgrace" and presumably unsafe. To Katrina, the city actually made the space *more* unsafe by "caging" people in and making it difficult to escape.<sup>28</sup> Her comment also reflects a theory of safety—that being around a lot of people is safer than being alone. By displacing a large population on the corridor and constructing a space that is "made for" bicyclists, Katrina not only argues the space became more unsafe but also infers that the *people* are not what makes a space unsafe.

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<sup>26</sup> All quotes from Katrina come from personal communication with author on October 2, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> The crime did not follow immediately after construction, but by 2009, bicyclists were encouraged not to travel on the Greenway alone. There was a sharp increase in muggings and people throwing things at bicyclists from bridges above the path. The crime was frequent enough that the Midtown Greenway Coalition formed a nightly Trail Watch safety patrol ([midtowngreenway.org](http://midtowngreenway.org)).

<sup>28</sup> In April 2013, a cyclist was almost hit by a Molotov cocktail on the Greenway, hurled by someone on a bridge above the trail (Nelson, 2013). In casual online conversations, many Greenway users started suggesting to put up tall fences in hopes it would keep people from hurling things onto the path (JanNastix, 2013).

The concept of safety in numbers has been artificially reproduced with the Midtown Greenway's Trail Watch—a group of bicyclists that ride the Greenway at night.

People who hung out in the corridor knew changes would be coming when their graffiti, that usually never got touched, started to be painted over. Katrina reflected on losing the space.

I remember being really, really sad when they were starting construction. They had been painting over stuff periodically and it was getting smaller and smaller and then when they painted over everything under the Sears Tower it's like oh my God that is so much history.

To many, the tall brick walls and overgrown bushes created a hideaway and an autonomous space on the train tracks. The space was highly accessible, running east-west through the city, including poorer areas of town. By no means was this type of space desirable in the eyes of a city government. While the underground inhabitants were largely left alone day-to-day, a plan was taking place that would quickly oust them. Construction for the Midtown Greenway was completed in 2007.

I moved to Minneapolis in 2009 and used the Midtown Greenway twice daily in my commute to the University of Minnesota. At that time, crime was a huge concern along the Greenway and police were a common presence. From my observations over a year, the police engaged in classed and racial profiling along the Greenway. Men, usually American Indians, enjoyed sitting under the bridges along the Greenway, sometimes drinking alcohol while they did. They kept to themselves and never uttered a word to me (which cannot be said for many men I ride past). They did not seem to be a threat to me or to the Greenway. The areas where they sat were in close proximity to the Phillips

neighborhood, with a vibrant American Indian community including a Native community center and art gallery. A bicycle and pedestrian trail that connects to the Greenway, called Little Earth, runs along the only urban American Indian reservation by the same name. I observed that the police talked to these American Indian men on numerous occasions, and soon thereafter these men disappeared from the Greenway. What struck me most in my observations was that these men had bicycles with them; they used the Greenway just like a lot of people. My observations also made me wonder whether these men could be among those that Katrina described as part of the pre-Greenway scene.<sup>29</sup> Through the construction of the Greenway, a communal space was taken from the poor, marginalized, and defiant and given to a more “civil” group of citizens. It is clear that there were transitional problems, as people who once used to hang out on the tracks learned they were not allowed to any longer. It was a “disgrace to the city” for some, but a place to sleep and socialize for others.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have woven together the histories and happenings of bicycle advocacy, city government, and real estate trends to argue that the planning and marketing of bicycle infrastructure in Minneapolis has been coopted by the city government to recruit the creative class. I want to end this chapter with another story about bicycle infrastructure in Minneapolis; this one being about the placement of Nice Ride stations, the groundbreaking bike share program launched in 2010. Rybak is proud of his accomplishment in getting financial support for Nice Ride’s production. But,

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<sup>29</sup> David Hugill, Fulbright scholar and geographer, is currently researching the history of radical American Indian activism in the Phillips neighborhood. He told me, anecdotally, that the American Indians he has interviewed told stories that involved hanging out in the pre-Greenway space. (personal communication, March 6, 2013)

critiques were quickly leveled at him about how the bike share program was only available in already bicycle-dense places. This story further reinforces the practice of using bicycle infrastructure to recruit upwardly mobile people while alienating and ignoring many Minneapolis residents.

When Nice Ride rolled out in Minneapolis *zero* stations were installed in North Minneapolis. Rybak explained that Nice Ride could not be installed in North Minneapolis immediately because of funding and risk. In fact the stations in North Minneapolis were financed through grants. Rybak said it takes “more risks to put racks that may not be used as much in locations where there wasn’t as much of a bike culture.” I asked Debra, resident of North Minneapolis, what her initial reaction was to the lack of Nice Rides in her neighborhood. She said,

It was a concern of mine because they should have did it in the neighborhood but I also understood it was a pilot program, they wanted to try it out in areas that already had high bicycling activity. North Minneapolis does not have a high bicycling activity. But now that people have rallied around Nice Ride and spoke their mind to the mayor and to the Nice Ride officials, we have Nice Ride in the community.

Debra’s retelling of how Nice Ride eventually made its way to North Minneapolis reflects who has access to bicycle infrastructure and who has to pressure the city to get infrastructure that most of the city already has. This situation is a racialized power struggle because the white parts of town received Nice Ride stations and the Black parts of town received nothing.<sup>30</sup> Why did the City of Minneapolis not work on its own to

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<sup>30</sup> As referenced in Chapter 3, Washington D.C.’s bike share program initially had the same classed and racialized distribution (V. Davis, 2011).

install Nice Rides in a neighborhood that has a dearth of bicycle infrastructure? Why did North Minneapolis residents have to rally to get Nice Rides? There is not necessarily one person to blame for the decisions on where to place Nice Ride stations, but rather the bias of the entire bicycle infrastructure system. Lukes (1974) argues, “the *bias of the system* can be mobilised, recreated and reinforced in ways that are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of particular individuals’ choices” (p. 21).

One of the many benefits of the Nice Ride system is the increased economic vitality near the stations. A study done by the Center for Transportation Studies (CTS) at the University of Minnesota found that Nice Ride users spend an average of \$150,000 at businesses near Nice Ride stations over one season (CTS, July 2012). Nice Ride stations include a map of the area, with suggestions for places to visit, thus funneling riders to particular businesses and influencing economic growth. At the public meeting about a North Minneapolis Greenway, a participant interrupted the planned presentation to inquire about people of color being involved in the labor of the Greenway construction. Which led to another participant to chime in, claiming that Nice Ride maps did not include any North Minneapolis businesses at the outset, and when businesses were added there were no local businesses. “So local businesses need to be heavily integrated into this bike path,” she argued. A current map of Nice Ride stations shows roughly 10 stations in North Minneapolis and they are widely dispersed. In the Uptown area, where there is a more developed “bicycle culture,” there are many more stations available within shorter distances. When I talked with Rybak about Nice Rides in North Minneapolis I was struck by the matter-of-fact approach he took to the criticism. It was a purely economic move, a move that increased the chances of Nice Ride’s success. And he

was not bashful about conflating North Minneapolis with other risks. When I asked Rybak to respond to criticism about a credit card requirement in conjunction with the lack of Nice Rides in North Minneapolis, he said:

[Grants are] where all the North Minneapolis [Nice Rides] came from. Then we worked a lot with the insurance folks about what they required because they anticipated so many bikes would be stolen.

Melody: But none did [get stolen].

Rybak: Zero.

Because there have been no Nice Ride thefts, Nice Ride officials stopped requiring a credit card for payment. The system still does not allow cash payment, but Nice Ride has stopped putting a \$250 hold on cards in case of theft. This way, debit cards with balances of less than \$250 can be utilized. The system is still cost-prohibitive—costing six dollars to rent for 24 hours—but Nice Ride has made small steps to make the bicycles more accessible to residents.

This situation also reflects the class-based power operating in Minneapolis. Because of North Minneapolis's systemic poor financial situation and lack of "bicycle culture," the residents were deemed an improper fit to pilot the Nice Ride program. North Minneapolis would have been a perfectly fine place to pilot the program *because* of its lack of bicycle culture. In this case the classic economic model of supply and demand seemed illogical. Why put bicycles where there is a lack of them? In this instance, for purely economic reasons, bicycles were placed where there were plenty of them already. Once again we see the unequal power distribution to the creative class operationalized to marginalize the poor and working class.



This narrative about a bike share program in Minneapolis exposes some of the subtle yet materially significant consequences of placing bicycle infrastructure in strategic parts of the city. North Minneapolis residents not only noticed the absence of the neon green bikes but had to demand them, and remained disappointed in the lack of local businesses advertised on Nice Ride maps. In his discussion of the power of representation, Hall (1997) argues “*absence* means something and signifies as much as presence” (p. 15). The Nice Ride program has also developed a reputation of being for tourists, business men in expensive suits, and those already involved in “bike culture.” This reputation is reflected in Nice Ride’s 2011 Annual Report that shows the largest increase in users has been in downtown, at the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis campus, and Uptown (p. 15). The report singles out “students, bankers, and politicians” as representative users (p. 16). The Annual Report includes a page with only this text: “Young Professionals and Urban Developers Use Nice Ride Bikes Regularly to Make Commuting Easier and Exploring Their City More Enjoyable” (p. 19). North Minneapolis is mentioned once in the report as a place where Target sponsored an “introduction-to-cycling” event (p. 10). This demographic representation is disappointing because it signifies to North Minneapolis residents that Nice Rides are not for them—both the lack of stations in their neighborhood and the stereotypes about who uses them. In other words, as the Nice Ride bikes roll through North Minneapolis, residents may not identify with them as much as Uptown residents would. Although I do not see this sort of strategic placement of bicycle amenities ending anytime soon, I do want to suggest some approaches to bicycle infrastructure planning that may alleviate some of this tension and

disappointment for city residents who have overlooked in the bicycle infrastructure planning process.

Bicycle advocates involved at the governmental, non-profit, or individual level need to consider alternative visions of what bicycling could look like in Minneapolis. Advocates often get frustrated when their plans are not accepted without critique. In some communities, trash collection and snow removals are more of a concern than a bicycle path. There is a significant amount of race and class privilege associated with bicycle infrastructure and its place in urban planning. As was obvious at the public meeting in North Minneapolis, bicycle advocates need to be acutely aware of how identity markers affect residents' relationship to bicycle infrastructure. It is problematic that white people are awkwardly coming into North Minneapolis and suggesting very intensely that people need a Greenway. According to Matthew at Twin Cities Greenways, no one asked for a Greenway in North. Michael described this approach to urban development by saying, it's "this kind of paternalistic tendency that we know what's good for you, here it is." Bicycle advocates argue that bicycle infrastructure will help solve problems residents currently have: abandoned buildings, low levels of home ownership, unemployment, and poverty. But before advocates go into communities that lack bicycle infrastructure and present three different bicycle paths for residents to vote on, it would be worth talking through the beneficial side effects of bicycle infrastructure with residents. The residents may buy the arguments or they may not. Bicycle advocates have a hard time accepting "no" for an answer and in some ways this stubbornness is positive: their perseverance has produced some excellent bicycle amenities across town. But can bicycle advocates accept that a community has no desire for bicycle paths and then walk away? What is the benefit

in forcing bicycle infrastructure onto a community? When considering the race and class politics embedded into this practice, it can be read as a violent move in its ability to displace people.

Alternative visions can be as simple as taking into account residents' ability and desire to attend meetings. Public meetings are the spaces in which bicycle planning is presented to neighbors but these are typically lengthy and held in the evening. Is there a way to present planning that is not in the form of a dinnertime meeting? One alternative vision in presenting the idea of bicycle infrastructure happened recently in St. Paul. The Friendly Streets Initiative was spearheaded by Envision Minnesota, a non-profit dedicated to promoting development that creates healthy communities while conserving natural resources ([envisionmn.org](http://envisionmn.org)). This initiative focused on Charles Avenue in St. Paul and presented neighbors with the idea of turning the street into a bicycle boulevard. Envision Minnesota presented this idea to the community through multiple block parties that people could come to on their own time.<sup>31</sup> The block parties not only allowed organizers to present infrastructure ideas but neighbors were able to talk with each other. The block party report-back was presented at the Creative Placemaking and Equitable Development roundtable I attended in December 2012. During the question and answer section, I asked the organizers if they had addressed the role bicycle infrastructure can have in raising property values and potentially gentrifying neighborhoods. This question was pertinent because one of the roundtable's stated goals was to discuss how creative placemaking can happen without "displacing residents and businesses" (Alliance for Metropolitan Stability). The organizers told me they had not thought about gentrification

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<sup>31</sup> An earlier and identical presentation of this project is summarized in Mazullo, 2012.

and another attendee suggested that displacement and gentrification are different things. This differentiation was astounding to me because a key characteristic of gentrification *is* its displacement of people. Joan from Transit for Livable Communities, a non-profit that handled millions of dollars in federal grant money for pedestrian and bicycle amenities (including the Friendly Streets Initiative), responded to my question by saying she had never heard of bicycle infrastructure increasing property values. It troubles me that bicycle advocates and community organizers have not thought through the negative impacts bicycle infrastructure can have on a community. But, it is not a surprise given my introductory suggestion that bicycles are often off-limits for critique. What could possibly be negative about bicycling in urban spaces? This chapter suggests much about it can be negative, particularly for residents whose needs do not seem to be considered in the planning process.

Checker's (2011) article, "Wiped Out by the 'Greenwave': Environmental Gentrification and the Paradoxical Politics of Urban Sustainability," asks two important questions. One, "what happens to environmental justice activism when it meets state-sponsored sustainable urban development?"; and two, is this activism enabled or disabled in the context of "consensual politics and seemingly a-political language of sustainability?" (p. 211). My case study in Minneapolis suggests environmental justice activism is seriously muffled in state-sanctioned planning. When residents insist that bicycle infrastructure is a radical political issue, those in power are made uncomfortable. Unfortunately, the "creative class" reaps the most benefits from bicycle advocacy and its results—upwardly mobile power wins again. But those who lack political power, such as the residents in North Minneapolis, are reminding bicycle advocates and the city that

everyone has a right to a “sustainable urban future” (Checker, 2011, p. 225). The genius in environmental gentrification and green commodification is that the implied goal is to improve the environment, with the profiteering minimized or hidden. So, might I interest you in a condo on the Greenway?

## CHAPTER 5

### Riding into the future: The possibilities of urban bicycling spaces

#### Introduction

It was only an hour into the 2012 Riverwest 24 when two young men took off with bikes that were not theirs. When the men started riding against the flow of the race, participants started to notice and soon thereafter shouts of “stolen bike!” filled the muggy air. Three participants, one with a handlebar-mounted camera, followed the young men and recovered the bikes within minutes. Although the thievery is not a particularly unique story, the response by the event’s organizers *is* as it interrupted the typical reaction to petty crime in urban spaces. Steve Whitlow sent me a text message two days after the race ended asking if I had seen the camera footage of the bikes being recovered.<sup>1</sup> Steve told me about a comment left under the footage —“death penalty for bike thieves” — that spurred his response to criminalizing the young men. He texted to me:

I don’t think anything more needs to be done. Cops? Another couple black kids pushed into the system?...I think they learned the lesson of nabbing a bike from a bike race...duh. We will catch you, and as long as the bikes were recovered I don’t see a punitive measurement required... No need to ruin someone’s life over a stolen carbon frame, you know? (personal communication, July 31, 2012)

His response suggests that the Riverwest 24 participants had the *power* to ruin someone’s life, all over a bicycle. A few hours later, Steve called me as I was arriving back in Minneapolis. He told me that a local TV news station wanted to do a story on the bike

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<sup>1</sup> rjdDBA, “RW24 Thieves,” *YouTube*. July 28, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdjSjnbuAPw>

recoveries and he was very concerned about how the station would frame the unfortunate event. His concern was that the reporter would paint the young men as criminals and essentially sensationalize the occurrence. If only to control the message, Steve decided to accompany Lisa Desmond, who recorded and caught up with one of the young men, for the TV interview. The news story that aired did not overtly sensationalize the occurrence and included this sound bite from Steve: “I think it was just a misunderstanding by some kids of taking a bike from a bike race” (“Bike chase caught on handlebar cam,” 2012). Five hours after Whitlow had called me and the story had aired, he texted me, “I was concerned that it didn’t turn into a ‘fuck the niggers’ story and it didn’t. So I win, I guess” (personal communication, July 31, 2012).

There is further significance in Steve’s participation with the news broadcast because the Riverwest 24 organizers decided many years ago that they would not encourage or participate in local or national news stories about the event. Why? Because of the continual challenge to keep the event small and local, organizers believe media coverage simply spreads the word further than they feel comfortable with.<sup>2</sup> A silver lining to the bike recoveries is the way it represented the very reason the Riverwest 24 was started: to build community. As Steve told the local reporter, “That forced community kind of thing is what we wanted to do” (“Bike chase caught on handlebar cam,” 2012). Steve understood the reclaiming of the bikes as a form of forced community

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<sup>2</sup> The concern about keeping the race a manageable size is a serious one for Riverwest 24 organizers. The popularity of another 24-hour bicycle race, Faster Moustache 24, caused its demise. What changed over its 5-year run was “the size of the event and the world around it...this increasing exposure is a pandoras [sic] box that has already opened and, if we go any further, will ultimately consume itself” (24.fastermoustache.org).

because without question fellow bicyclists sprang into action to help. The organizers' goal is for this support to be available all year in Riverwest.

I find this story especially compelling because it brings together the core concepts that I have explored in the preceding chapters: community, racism, and gentrification. The intentional community built by the Riverwest 24 participants is complex in the support of both their immediate and surrounding community. Race relations are poor in Milwaukee and the city continues to top the lists of most segregated U.S. cities.<sup>3</sup> Riverwest runs along one of the unofficial segregation lines, N. Holton St., and the bike recovery that happened on-camera was on that street. The people whose bikes were taken and those who chased the young men are white; the young men are Black. In this case, it would have been easy to slip into the typical narrative in Milwaukee: young Black men are criminals. But Steve, representing the Riverwest 24 community, is acutely aware of the racial tensions that run along Riverwest and the repeated vilification and criminalization of young Black men. As Steve said, we do not need more Black men in jail. This was a rare opportunity to purposefully *not* criminalize these men and to control the message about Black-on-white crime in Milwaukee—and it worked. Yet, the reporter had a difficult time receding from the traditional news framing of crime. At the end of the story, the reporter reiterated that the situation was not reported to police because “the crime didn’t actually happen” but still got a statement from Milwaukee Police who said “they’re checking into it” (“Bike chase caught on handlebar cam,” 2012). In an almost identical situation at the 2012 Powderhorn 24 in Minneapolis, participants tackled a Black man who tried to take a bike, dragged him down to the race start/finish line,

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 2.



participants swarmed him, and someone called the police. A picture of the man posted online shows him in distress and a participant holding him back with zip ties in his hand (“Attempted Bike Theft at the Powderhorn 24,” 2012).

### **Intentional inclusion**

These incidents remind about us who participates in these community-building events and the consequences of isolated participation. In Chapter 2, I took care to highlight the ways in which the Riverwest 24 seeks to build community through forced interaction, spectacle, and self-empowerment. Simultaneously, I problematized this concept of community by exploring race and class assumptions about who is a worthy participant in the event. Riverwest 24 organizers are especially sensitive to the critique of racial inclusion but maintain that if the goal is to become more racially diverse, then participants must empower themselves to reach that goal. My critique that the event recreates identity-based divisions in an already white-dominated bicycle community does not include much of a solution. A week before the 2012 Riverwest 24 I gave a talk with Steve about some of my more critical findings about the event. During the talk, Brian Rothgery, a Riverwest 24 participant and community organizer, offered one solution to the lack of diversity in the Riverwest 24—intentionality.

It's on us, the organizers and participants to address the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the Riverwest 24. It's not going to fix itself, and we can't expect Black folks or Latino folks or anyone else to come to us and say ‘we want to be included, you should make room for us to participate.’

Brian’s solution is based on the political and community work he has done, as a white male, in predominately people of color neighborhoods. He suggested how his solution

could materialize during the event: “Instead of featuring some of the unique or out of the way parts of Riverwest in the bonus checkpoints, let’s feature some of the businesses owned by Black or Brown folks, even if they are the more everyday places.” As he continued, Brian reminded the audience of the misperception that people of color do not ride bikes as much; they just ride them *differently*. “It does seem like there are lot of young Black kids in this neighborhood that are out on their bikes all the time, and including the kids would be a great way to get the larger community more involved in the Riverwest 24.” To many white people being intentional about diversity is uncomfortable because we have to admit at the same time that racial, ethnic, and classed diversity is currently an issue. Although it may not occur to white bicycle advocates (and other white activists in general) to include organizations and businesses run by people of color—when they do, it has the potential to speak volumes.

### **The consequences of bicycling with political tunnel vision**

The stakes in intentionally diversifying the Riverwest 24 are high because of the neighborhood’s unique political geography. Intense forms of segregation and a history of liberal political activism create an unusual climate in Riverwest to try to curb further systemic racial violence. But in some cases, such diversification comes too late or never comes at all. I argue that racially-motivated debates, as seen in Chapter 3 would not have been so intense had the Black community felt even slightly in solidarity with the white bicyclists. This case study also exemplified the dangers in white bicyclists never grappling with the politics of their mobility beyond their own insistence to urban space. Like Milwaukee, Portland is another city that has sensitive racial politics that are easily irritated. White bicyclists need to start seeing how our mobility and insistence to urban

space has the very real potential of displacing people or simply pissing people off. And we cannot get defensive about this reaction. Although we sometimes see ourselves as marginalized bodies, perhaps for the first time in our lives, we are most often blind to the power we have as bicyclists to radically change the make-up of a street. As we push local governments for safer accommodations on the streets, other forces push with us, such as anticipatory businesses and eager urban planners.

There is a colloquial theory about gentrification that once the punks and artists move into a neighborhood, then there goes the neighborhood. I do not claim that any of these identities are mutually exclusive but, as Chapter 3 and 4 suggest, the appearance of hip and young white bicyclists is an emerging predictor of pending gentrification. Over the past ten years, gritty urban bicyclists have slowly created an identity for themselves that is entirely exclusionary. To be an urban bicyclist you must ride a certain quality of bike, wear particular cycling clothes, and use your bicycle for particular reasons. This identity is heavily policed by other urban cyclists.<sup>4</sup> Because working class and/or people of color neighbors tend to not fit the meticulously crafted urban cyclist bill, the urban cyclist has become marked as upwardly mobile and white. Thus it is not outlandish to see why Black residents in North Portland balked at the suggestion that a bicycle lane be refurbished. Particular populations in Portland feel like outsiders to the bicycle community, and because the community is dominated by white people, they see both no use for a better bicycle lane and no place for themselves at the urban planning

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<sup>4</sup> One clear and documented example of this policing occurs often on *Bike Portland's* "People on Bikes" series, where Jonathan Maus posts snapshots of bicyclists mostly around Portland. Commenters (Maus, 2012) unleash critiques including, "I will never understand the preponderance of backpacks. At least they're all wearing their helmets correctly this time," (Anthony) "How can you ride like that with the drop [handlebars] and brakes facing that way...eating dude, needs some air in those tires, wont [sic] talk about the angle of the rack," (scaryseth) and "Sad. Only one who does not need a new bike or a fitting is #27" (steve).

meetings—except to remind people of their outsider status and history. And so the Black residents, both past and present, continue to haunt the reconstruction of the N. Williams Ave. bicycle lane, leaving white bicyclists defensive and upset. The North Portland residents who resisted the bicycle lane on the grounds of potential gentrification were certainly on to something. They argued something that urban cyclists refused to admit they were doing—displacing people for their own mobility comfort.

### **Put your money where your bike is**

The idea that bicycle infrastructure can displace people, raise property values and be a factor in gentrifying urban spaces is not often talked about in bicycle advocacy. In my experience, questioning bicycle advocates about the correlation between bicycle infrastructure and rising property values has resulted in blank stares. How could something as innocuous as a bicycle lane work to displace residents? This economic phenomenon is based on who utilizes the bicycle infrastructure: white, middle class people, whose positions of any number of things have been normalized, naturalized, and unmarked as racialized and classed. As I explored in Chapter 4, cities such as Minneapolis construct bicycle infrastructure to lure particular people to specific neighborhoods. The bicycle infrastructure is built alongside other attractive amenities such as high-end restaurants and luxury, “sustainable” apartments. The strategic construction of creative class neighborhoods is meant to attract a demographic with expendable income. This demographic does not necessarily need to bicycle—they will already be attracted to the street life that this bicycle infrastructure creates. Sadly, this trend has the ability to push out residents and businesses. In Minneapolis, Sunrise Cyclery, an affordable bicycle shop, was pushed out of its prime location in the Uptown

neighborhood—a neighborhood energized by the Greenway. The landlord of the Sunrise Cyclery building raised the rent to an astronomical amount and when Sunrise Cyclery inevitably moved out the landlord immediately sold it to Spill the Wine, an expensive downtown restaurant. Sunrise Cyclery moved a few blocks away, tucked into a little-trafficked street. Plenty of high-end and/or not locally-owned bicycle shops remain in the immediate area, but the one bicycle shop that sold affordable and used bikes was pushed out.

In a country where bicyclists continue to be marginalized, threatened and killed on the streets, critiquing a city for promoting bicycling through economic growth may seem trivial. And it is true that having miles of bicycle trails and a bicycle advocate for a mayor are certainly anomalies in the United States. I believe that it is precisely *because* of the rose-tinted glasses worn by urban bicycle advocates that we have produced a significant sociopolitical issue about bicycle infrastructure. It is because the Twin Cities’ bicycle committees see bicycle lanes as only a “good” thing, because bicycle organizations refuse to see the correlating property values rising, and because we have told ourselves that simply adding more bicycle amenities will lead to greater levels of bicycling that I have a significant concern in the role bicycle infrastructure can play in gentrifying neighborhoods.

In some ways, this dissertation acts as both a celebration and a warning. It is important to recognize the hard work that goes into community-building through bicycling and the positive outcomes of such organizing. It is also just as important to signal a warning to bicycle advocates that the power we hold allows us the right to define what a “good” community looks like; our privilege has created an exclusionary space

which can be used to obscure *and* reify systemic oppression vis-à-vis transportation infrastructure. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the implications of my research both in and outside academia, reflect on my unique methodology, and suggest future research projects.

## **Implications of research**

### **Inside the academy**

During a research talk at the University of Minnesota in October 2012, ethnographer Mark Pedelty said that interdisciplinary research is about taking what you want from where you want to produce the strongest research project you can—and that is exactly what I did. I believe my choice to primarily use ethnographic methodologies lent itself to an interdisciplinary approach. I developed this dissertation feeling unconfined by any discipline, yet highly influenced by my time in Media Studies and Communication Studies departments. In my review of community research in Communication Studies I was disappointed in the lack of rich description of the communities that the scholars were studying. In my review of bicycle scholarship based in Cultural Studies, I was disappointed that most researchers did not discuss the intersectionality between transportation, race, class, and gender. I attempted to address these issues by utilizing long-form interviews with community members, detailed research into neighborhood history, and a focus on how bicycle advocacy is deeply impacted by/impacts race, class, and gender positionality.

Broadly speaking, the most significant implication of my research is its utilization of a form of mobility—bicycling—to discuss the sociocultural issues of community-building, gentrification and racism. There has been some research done on how race and

class inequalities impact access to public transportation (Bullard & Johnson, 1997; Bullard, Johnson, & Torres, 2004), but very little done with the bicycle as the object of study. In the U.S., the bicycle continues to grow in popularity as a form of transportation, leisure, and pop culture artifact. Therefore, it is important to maintain a line of research that examines how bicycling and urban spaces affect one another and even have a mutually constitutive relationship. My research exemplifies the importance of taking an intersectional approach to studying bicycling by examining how social status, ethnicity, and/or class can impact one's experience with the bicycle. Perhaps the importance of intersectionality is made clearest in my failed efforts to track down any meaningful statistics on how many people of color ride a bicycle. This dissertation has also argued that despite its positive impacts on the environment and people's health, the act of bicycling can have detrimental effects on populations. Thus, scholars should be aware of the tendency to over-celebrate the two-wheeled machine and think seriously about how varied people's experiences can be with urban bicycling. This is important for scholars to recognize because currently ideologies about bicycling in the United States are rooted in progressive politics and radical utopian visions of car-less cities. While critical cultural scholars are quick to critically analyze almost anything, we are also quick to celebrate moments that appear to be counterhegemonic. As this project has suggested, being a bicyclist in urban spaces is not always a counterhegemonic act.

My dissertation is an important intervention in Communication Studies in part because of the way I expand community-as-communication scholarship to include bicycling and the importance of place. I began this dissertation by asking readers to understand the bicycle as a rolling signifier and to understand that the bicycle

communicates different things in different spaces. One reason advocates work tirelessly to promote bicycling is because of the community they build with fellow bicyclists. There is a clash when particular groups of people resist or do not experience the same enthusiasm for bicycling and community. This solo form of transportation has helped build many tight knit communities, such as seen in Chapter 2. There is something unique about the bicycle in its ability to allow the rider a direct connection with their surroundings, especially in urban spaces dominated by the hustle and bustle of automobility. By focusing on the bicycle as a communicator and community-builder, I add an important entrance to discussing community and communication. In other words, I argue that by starting with the bicycle, scholars can analyze community and communication *through* this technology. Although there are myriad technologies that intersect with communication and community, I found the bicycle to be particularly important to consider because of its burgeoning role in urban spaces. In the U.S., adult bicycling rates continue to increase and so it is wise for Communication Studies scholars to pay attention to the communicative role of this form of mobility, exercise, and leisure. It is a timeless technology that has no signs of removing itself from the urban landscape.

To build upon community scholarship in Communication Studies, I stressed the importance of place—specifically neighborhoods. Communication scholars do not often discuss neighborhoods as community but in my research I illustrated why neighborhood history and politics are imperative to understand alongside bicycle advocacy. In my case studies, place and space have been prioritized over other social identities. Martin (2003) has made similar observations about activism within neighborhoods, noting that people see their neighborhood as a common interest despite differences in ethnicity or class. I



have sought to create a research framework that sees the bicycle as a community-builder and identifies neighborhoods as community. In my understanding of community-building and neighborhoods as community, activism is not a necessary qualifier. I am not interested in how activism manifests itself nor am I interested in understanding bicycle advocacy as a social movement. I think the more interesting question is how the bicycle helps or hinders community. This is an important contribution to existing research on community, cities, and connected sociocultural issues because when discussing communities, scholars often focus on *people*: the existence and movement of people, people's behavior and decisions, and the interactions between people. I argue that we also need to consider *objects* and their impact on community. Scholars interested in gentrification often focus on the shifting aesthetic of neighborhoods, such as new construction and refurbishing decrepit buildings (Makagon, 2010; Zukin, 2010). This dissertation has illustrated how the existence of an object (e.g. the bicycle, a bicycle lane, a bicycle trail) in particular spaces constitutes different meanings, responses, and effects. Therefore, I suggest scholars interested in community broaden their view of community to theorize how objects impact particular spaces.

The implications of my research go beyond the Communication Studies discipline. I found the large collection of Urban and Cultural Studies work done on gentrification especially helpful in Chapter 2 (Smith, 1996; Zukin, 2010). My work enhances this line of research by focusing on how a specific cultural spectacle can impact and/or hinder gentrification. Much of the gentrification scholarship tends to map the ways gentrification comes into a particular neighborhood; a before and after snapshot of sorts. I have contributed to this scholarship by modeling an approach that highlights a specific

potential source of gentrification and then crafting a larger picture of how a neighborhood's history could intersect with that source. Riverwest in itself is an important addition to gentrification scholarship because of the neighborhood's unique ability to stave off the yuppies and high-end businesses that inflate property values and change the character of working class spaces. Although Riverwest is a textbook example of a space just waiting to be gentrified, it manages to avoid the transition.

The implications of Chapter 3 are based on the discovery that bicycling, as a form of transportation and source of urban planning, can wreak havoc on a neighborhood as much as other forms of violent construction, such as freeways built through neighborhoods. In this chapter I strayed from Communication Studies to integrate work on neoliberal urbanism, transportation studies, and sociological understandings of haunting. Through this medley of concepts and theories, I isolated a contentious issue in bicycle advocacy—the ubiquity of white privilege. I utilized Avery Gordon's (1997) theory of haunting to explore how the history of North Portland, as embodied in and told by its longtime residents, is a form of control over the present. This case study is one of the first highly publicized conflicts rooted in racism that occurred between bicycle advocates and residents. As I noted in Chapter 3, this case study has opened up a difficult discussion about how bicycle infrastructure can reproduce white power. To support my claim that the Black residents of North Portland were haunting the N. Williams Ave. bicycle lane construction, I chose to do a rich description of the street in question. During my three-week visit to North Portland, I began to see that the retelling of the street's aesthetic would be an undeniable marker of the haunting. Although scholars such as Robert Topinka (2012) have argued that geography is a form of communication and

holds rhetorical weight, rich description of space as a form of ethnography is still undervalued in Communication Studies. Scholars who write about gentrification often get permission to describe a neighborhood in detail but outside of urban geography, rich description is hard to find. For these reasons, Communication Studies should be more open to ethnography as a form of research in conjunction with theoretical support. Rich description will add *context* and it will assist readers in conceptualizing the community being studied. Describing the space and place of a community can also act as additional evidence to one's argument.

In Chapter 3 and 4 I suggest the need for Transportation Studies to focus on the bicycle as a new tool that can perpetuate transportation injustice. It is an unfortunate implication of my research, but one that is crucial in understanding the evolution of disenfranchising people through forms of transit. There is an obvious link between transportation and communication; a link embedded throughout this project. I advocate for Transportation Studies to take on communication as a rhetorical tool in exploring the ways in which the bicycle and other forms of transit convey particular messages in particular spaces. In Chapter 4 I utilized Sociology and Urban Studies research to explore how the creative class is implicated in the bicycle culture of Minneapolis. The consequence of this connection is the displacement of people and rising property values. My research has exposed a hidden economic strategy behind promoting bicycling that reaffirms power in the white, upwardly mobile demographic. The creative class and city government have gained control in crafting what "livability" and "sustainability" look like in Minneapolis. Through this research and following Stuart Hall (1997) I argue strongly that representation *is* meaning. So, when bicycle culture is represented through

expensive Nice Ride bicycles and well-maintained bicycle paths, this creates meaning for what it is to be a bicyclist in Minneapolis. As Hall (1997) reminds us, those who hold power in society control what gets represented. Thus it should be no surprise that the creative class, already connected to unequal power distribution, has been able to maintain hegemonic control over bicycle culture in Minneapolis with little regard to how this representation marginalizes those who are not in power. My research in Chapter 4 is an important addition to Communication Studies because it takes a popular Media Studies methodology — “interrogating images” (Hall, 1997) – and applies it to urban ethnographic work. At face value the booming bicycle culture in Minneapolis appears to be inherently “good.” But through my interviews with different stakeholders in community development, I learned that not everyone in the city sees this as “good.” Interrogation is always important, especially with representations that seem too good to be true.

### **Outside the academy**

Coincidentally, this project happened because I began to interrogate myself and the bicycle culture in which I participate. Through this interrogation, I developed a growing concern that my bicycle community was reproducing systemic racism and classism that we *thought* could be erased through bicycling, or that we thought simply could not exist in the confines of a bicycle lane. My sneaking suspicion that something was not quite right catapulted me into a critical-cultural studies project on bicycle advocacy in three urban cities. My training in Critical Media and Cultural Studies gave me the tools to see the steady morphing of bicycling from a poor man’s car to the hippest way to get the food co-op—and we were given many clues of this transition. For

example, Furness (2010) explores the racialized response to bike messengers in New York City. In 1987, Mayor Koch proposed a daytime bicycling ban in Manhattan. At the time, the majority of bike messengers were people of color and the majority of bicycle commuters were white people. The proposed ban would only be in effect during conventional work hours—essentially after and before the commuters took to the streets. A class action lawsuit stopped the ban’s implementation, but this example suggests that non-white bicyclists have been vilified for many decades.<sup>5</sup> And so, the hunch I had about racial inequality in the bicycling community in fact has historical roots.

Collecting information, insights, interviews, and theories that supported my suspicions came easier than I expected, but I was still left with the question: why is this happening? Why does the Riverwest 24, in all of its strategically executed community-building, lack the diversity that fills its neighborhood? Why are there fights about bicycle lanes based on race and gentrification? Why are cities exploiting bicycle infrastructure to recruit upwardly mobile people? I think the answer can be found in the neighborhoods where these moments occur. During my research I realized quickly that this dissertation is about neighborhoods as much as it is about bicycle advocacy. I found it difficult to tell the stories I wanted to tell without contextualizing the spaces where the stories unfolded. One lesson that bicycle advocates can take away from my research is that bicycle activism does not exist in an apolitical bubble. Like any form of urban planning, it is deeply political and will affect populations in different ways. Bicycle infrastructure is *not* inherently good, no matter what bicycle advocates say in a neighborhood meeting.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the ban, see “Two-Wheeled Terrors and Forty-Year-Old Virgins” in Furness (2010).

I can tell that bicycle advocates are tired. It has been a long journey in exercising our rights to the roads. After decades of lobbying mostly unsympathetic and unhelpful city governments, we are finally dealing with politicians who want to help create bicycle infrastructure. But one victory has paved way for another battle—with our neighbors. A collective eye roll has rippled through the bicycle advocate circuit, with many dreading having to deal with NIMBYs (Not in My Backyard)<sup>6</sup> and angry poor people. The combination of ignoring the negative effects of bicycle infrastructure and an annoyance for those who bring the issues up has created a perfect storm for fighting. This project reminds people that bicycle activism is not outside the sociocultural and sociopolitical elements of a neighborhood. Bicycle advocates and urban planners should approach neighborhoods with this in mind, lest the neighborhood arguments described in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 continue. It is also worth reiterating that these bicycle advocates have been and remain mostly white, upwardly mobile men. It seems obvious that a change in the advocacy demographic would ease some of the tensions and possibly put an end to the paternalistic approach to bicycle planning. And so with sympathy for a burned out activist do I suggest that bicycle advocates shake the attitude and intentionally recruit people of color and women to their organizations.

### **Being accountable to communities**

In Chapter 1, I discussed the diverse methodology contained in this dissertation. There are aspects of my methodology that are invisible because, as part of my commitment to be accountable to what I research, they were will implemented within the communities I studied. This materialized through distributing drafts of my chapters to

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<sup>6</sup> This is a pejorative term to refer to residents who are resistant to any new development in their neighborhoods. These residents often express sentiments such as, ‘anywhere but in my backyard.’

those I interviewed, creating self-published magazines (zines) composed of my interviews, volunteering at various bicycle events, giving a public talk about my research, and donating money to bicycle projects.

For every chapter, I sent copies to those I interviewed and, in doing so, received mixed reactions from the participants. Disappointingly, some participants did not read my drafts and/or send me feedback. Others offered detailed and constructive feedback, for which I am grateful. The critiques of my work that participants offered me were based on me not fully contextualizing their ideas. For example, Ann was deeply concerned that in Chapter 2 I trivialized her approach to dealing with diversity in the Riverwest 24. She believed that the way I quoted her and analyzed her thoughts led to an implication that she was “giving up” on the diversity issue. She was concerned that I did not give enough voice to the long conversation we had about systemic racism. In my discussion about self-empowerment of Riverwest 24 participants, I offered up the critique that this model allows organizers to shove off big issues, like diversity, onto volunteers. Again, Ann was concerned with this observation because she sees the model as a way to decentralize power amongst the organizers and allow anyone interested a chance to improve the event. Ann and I discussed her critiques and I offered to disconnect her interview from my “white flag” theory about the organizers. She responded by saying that the reason she is so concerned about how I use her interview is that she does not want her students to read it and think she is giving up on diversity issues when she teaches her students to never give up on discussing power structures in our society. Christopher, of the Riverwest 24, critiqued Chapter 2 for two correlated things: one, not talking to a diverse group of people in the neighborhood about the event; and two, not contextualizing the race beyond

our “insider” status. He reminded me that as much as I harped on the organizers for not fostering a diverse event, I also failed to include a diversity of voices in my chapter. I spoke only with people deeply involved with the event, not with “ordinary” community members—especially those who may not enjoy or respect the Riverwest 24. Because of this omission, Christopher believes I may have missed a chance to explore whether the Riverwest 24 is as important as we all think it is.

I received constructive criticism for Chapter 3 from Drew Meisel and Joe Biel. Drew was skeptical of my conclusions and argued many times that bicycle lanes do not cause gentrification. He also suggested that I came at my research from a bicycle advocate’s position and was buying into the conflict over the bicycle lane and ignoring some of the other improvements to the street, such as ADA compliant sidewalks. Drew does not agree with my premise that bicycle lanes and shifting demographics are connected, noting that the lanes are not built because “hipsters” move in. Although I worry that Drew may have generalized some of my arguments, his critiques helped me clarify my claims. I expressed my gratitude for the time he took to respond to my controversial argument. Joe sent minimal comments, alerting me to some typos and wanting to reiterate his point that the racism in Portland is not perpetuated by the “usual” factors (e.g. greed) but is really about the white citizens not wanting to *talk* about racism.

I sent Chapter 4 to three of my informants. Debra Stone of North Minneapolis reflected on my work by saying I did a nice job “capturing the issues of bicycle culture and the inequalities inherited in this system; hopefully there might be some lessons learned” (personal communication, February 22, 2013). I did not hear back from Michael Gross (the realtor I spoke with) and Matthew Hendricks of Twin Cities Greenways



informed me that he did read the chapter but did not have the time to respond. From my conversations with Ann and Christopher in Riverwest, I learned to alert my informants if I make critical arguments utilizing their ideas. I told Matthew that I developed a critical response to our interview to perhaps lessen his surprise of the critique. I also shared my draft of my chapters with people working in the transportation and health fields outside of academia to essentially “check in” with the real world—it is easy to stay up in the ivory tower and lose touch with what matters. Beyond sharing drafts of my chapters, I also self-published some of the interviews I conducted.

I crafted two zines about my Riverwest 24 research in an effort to hold myself accountable to the communities I study, share my research outside of academia, and to make my research accessible. The zines are collections of my interviews with Riverwest 24 organizers and participants. The first issue, “The Beginnings,” collected interview excerpts describing how the event started. The second issue, “More or Less,” collected interview excerpts about what people would like to see more and less of at the Riverwest 24. These zines were distributed in Riverwest, available at the Riverwest Co-op, and given out as prizes at the 2012 Riverwest 24. For the 2013 Riverwest 24 I plan on distributing a condensed version of Chapter 2. It was important for me to let the interviews speak for themselves, so I did not offer much commentary in the zines. In “More or Less” I included an excerpt from Chapter 2 to illustrate how my academic research intersected with the interviews. Making the zines was important to me because I wanted to give away my research, especially the interviews, because I could not include all of them in this project.

Another way I stayed accountable to the communities I studied was to donate my labor. I started volunteering for the Riverwest 24 in 2011 and continue to do so. My participation in the event has clearly impacted my research and accessibility to the event organizers. I decided to capitalize on my “insider” status, well aware of the downfalls of this approach. For the past two years I have volunteered for the full 24 hours as a bonus checkpoint volunteer. My job is to record the racers who have completed the bonus checkpoints. For the upcoming 2013 Riverwest 24, I was asked if I could help coordinate the bonus checkpoints. I am grateful to have access to the organizing framework and permission to shape it in ways that I believe will diversify the event. Even though I am committed to my volunteer work, I felt like I missed an opportunity to talk with the Riverwest community at the 2012 Riverwest 24. I knew that my work lacked the voice of people of color from the community and in some ways I tried to speak for them and their connection to the event. I had the intention to talk to the community as the event unfolded, but I quickly got wrapped up in my volunteer duties and the exhaustion from being up for a full day. My audio recorder got buried deeper and deeper into my backpack as the hours wore on. I also failed to write down field notes when I worked with a bonus checkpoint at Lala’s House—a home to a Black family that has always been involved with the event.

During my time in Minneapolis I have been working with various organizations that encourage women to bicycle. In 2010, I helped produce an all-women’s bicycle calendar, “Minneapolis Presents,” with all of the proceeds going to Grease Rag, a women-trans-femme bicycle shop night. In 2012, I participated in a bicycle-themed cabaret and developed a character that highlighted the panics surrounding women

bicycling in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. And in May of 2013 I worked with both Cycles for Change and Project Homeless Connect to teach underserved populations how to ride and fix-up bicycles. Beyond volunteering for and participating in bicycle-related events, I have been committed to presenting my research outside the confines of the academy.

A week before the 2012 Riverwest 24, I gave a public talk with Steve at the Riverwest Public House about my Riverwest 24 research. After our talk we screened an unreleased Riverwest 24 documentary. The talk was well attended but I was disappointed that the question and answer session turned into an “inside baseball” discussion. I had posed many provocative questions about the Riverwest 24’s role in gentrification and exclusion of our neighbors. Many attendees took the time to ask Steve logistical questions about the event, such as how many people will be allowed to participate in 2013. Only one participant, Brian Rothgery, spoke to my concerns about gentrification and diversity, as quoted earlier.

The use of monetary compensation in ethnography work is a contentious tactic in attempts to give back to the community one studies. My research on the Original Scrapper Bike Team in Oakland, CA did not make it into my dissertation but I donated money to the organization many times. The founder of the team, Tyrone Stevenson Jr., was well aware that journalists, photographers, and researchers gained a lot from interviewing him and his crew. At one point he asked me what he would gain from my research. I told him that my research would highlight a Black bike crew and that bicycle scholarship does not tend to focus on non-white spaces. At the same time, I knew that my research would assist me in graduating from a doctoral program and establishing a career in academia. For these reasons, I donated money to his team as a form of support and to essentially pay

him for his time and insight. I also donated money to *matireal*, a Riverwest-based project that seeks to use discarded tires to build a bicycle and pedestrian path on an abandoned railroad track. I learned about *matireal* when I worked a bonus checkpoint at the 2012 Riverwest 24 that had participants begin the grueling work of cutting up the discarded tires. In Portland, author Elly Blue has been publishing zines on women and bicycling and I have assisted in funding the production costs. Donating money to these projects was the least I could do as I harnessed many elements of bicycle culture to construct my dissertation. I value work that blends research and activism and so it was important for me to support bicycle projects monetarily if I was unable to help in a more concrete way.

Being accountable to the communities I studied was a concern of mine through this project. I spent the majority of my time giving back to Riverwest, my home for six years. It was easy to find ways to be accountable to Riverwest because I already had an established network to plug into. At the same, being accountable to Riverwest was the most crucial because I capitalized on my insider status to produce unique research. If I exploited any neighborhood during my research, it would be Riverwest. I wish I gave back as much to North Portland and North Minneapolis. I have no excuse for that, just an acknowledgement of my desire to work closely with the neighborhoods in the future.

### **Rolling out**

Because this project is nestled in a small collection of bicycle scholarship, the possibility of future research seems unlimited. There is a dearth of research about bicycling and people who fall outside of the white, middle-class demographic. Not only is there a lack of qualitative studies on how, for example, Black women interact with bicycling, there is also no meaningful quantitative data on bicycling and ethnicity or

class. There is plenty of data on the rates of bicycling in cities and the percentage of women who bicycle. For example, a study was released in February 2013 that showed bicycling in the Twin Cities has increased by 56 percent over the past six years. There was a separate set of data about women cyclists but not people of color (Bike Walk Twin Cities, 2013). Gender is the only identifying marker used in tracking the rate of bicycling. Amber Collett, a former employee of Transportation for Livable Communities in Minneapolis, explained in an email to me why there is a lack of identity-based quantitative data by explaining the process of counting cyclists.

It would be nearly impossible to accurately track ethnicity/race in the Bike-Walk counts. First, the counters don't really interact with bikers-walkers. The counts are line counts (an imaginary line is drawn through an intersection and anytime a biker/walker/etc. passes that line, they get counted) so the counters have no interaction with the people they are counting. Without directly asking a person what their ethnicity is, we'd have no real way of gauging it—short of making assumptions based on skin color (which is dubious at best)... It gets hard for counters to tell if it's a man or a woman in those situations let alone what their ethnicity might be. (personal communication, December 14, 2012)

I am not sure how people doing bicycle counts decided that gender was easier to ascertain than ethnicity, but the lack of data supports my argument that people of color are frequently left out of bicycle advocacy discussions. Scholars interested in quantitative research need to put more effort put into tracking ethnicity and possibly social class in bicycling counts. The data that show women bicycle at a much lower rate than men has

been extremely useful in showing a need to address women's issues with bicycling; having access to data based on other identity markers would be just as helpful.

I believe that the only way bicycle scholars interested in qualitative research can address the dearth of research on non-white, non-middle class people is to continue doing ethnography and oral histories. Because there are no histories of how people of color have utilized bicycles, the stories are passed around anecdotally. For example, people who live in neighborhoods with drug dealing know that dealers have utilized the bicycle to hide the drugs in the actual frame and as a low-risk transportation for the drugs. Histories like this are not recorded anywhere. We must continue to do ethnographic work based in positionalities that fall outside of the creative class. Due to time and location constraints, I was unable to include my research on the Original Scrapper Bike Team in this dissertation. I plan on continuing this research by spending time with the group. It is one of a handful of Black bicycle groups in the U.S., and one that I find especially intriguing due to its use of street culture to entice young men to join.

More generally, I would like to see more scholars integrate ethnography into research about community. As my project has demonstrated, the complexities of a community directly impact its ability to build a strong network. It is hard for me to see the usefulness in making generalizations about community-building without a rich description of the communities scholars draw findings from. Communication Studies scholars can find inspiration in urban geography literature that privileges the description of place to further one's argument.

This dissertation was a challenge to write for all the obvious reasons but also for more personal ones. I chose to do research about my daily life. I knew I wanted to shift

research on bicycles away from the celebratory approach that permeates a lot of the scholarship. My research was a critique of myself, fellow bicyclists, and some of my favorite places in the United States. I took a risk in doing a critical project about things I love. And I had to contend with telling the people who see me as an ally for their advocacy work that what they were doing was wrong. I had to tell them that they were being classist and racist (and sexist, but that is another project). Dismantling white privilege is a life's work and unfortunately I have shown why this work needs to be embedded in the urban bicycling world. In this dissertation I chose to ally with the people who do not ride bicycles like I do, or do not ride bicycles at all. I chose to expose the conflict between residents needing basic public works service and bicycle advocates pushing for a bicycle lane. I chose to side with the people who used to live on the Greenway, who cannot get their alley plowed, who do not understand the point of a bicycle lane, and who ride their bikes on the sidewalk (a bicycle advocate's favorite rage inducer). This project argues against my own interests in many ways. One of my gracious reviewers alerted me to a potential critique of my project—that I am arguing poor people are always right and what they have should not be taken away from them. That would be a fair critique to level at this project, but in actuality I am critiquing the neoliberal, capitalist structure of our cities that allows something as innocuous as a bicycle to be harnessed by white people in power to further marginalize people. I am not interested in producing policy suggestions or demanding reform in bicycle advocacy circles. I wanted to show what 24 hours of a hopeful bicycle utopia looks like and how easily this vision can materialize into race and class-based alienation. Because I can pass as a creative class bicyclist, I used this privilege to expose the narrow thinking going on behind the scenes

with some of the most cutting-edge U.S. bicycle activism and urban planning. In the end, if my research and arguments make a few bicycle advocates rethink their positionality and support a few marginalized neighbors then I will gladly off ride into the sunset.



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