

**Sikivu Hutchinson**

Sometimes you could smell it. A block, an intersection away. A dirty bug splat on a windshield on the horizon growing bigger and bigger in the vector of your arms spitting lightning bolts as you run to get to the bus stop, hopping fire hydrants, bagging no parking signs, flaming past the sleep walkers that flashed by out of the corner of your eyes, leaping over fat meridians of crosswalk to make it, in a dripping, panting, tongue-lolling, frying-warthog-in-a-skillet hot flash, just to make it. The doors would flop open and suck you into the juniorhighschool-back-of-the-bus-blitzkrieg-A.M. adrenalin-deficit crush. Made it. Riding was a low-tech marvel, a wallop of windows sputtering open and greasy poles to hang onto and roaches thieving in the house of the stop button as the bus slammed north down La Brea Boulevard between Stocker and Rodeo Roads, past the dark houses of Nod on the hill; or headed east through the big, fat, yawning six-laner stew of Venice Boulevard; or surfed the sleepless ruckus of Crenshaw, 6 P.M. Sunday, as the police put up their barricades to keep out the joyriders readying their retro souped-up Chevys, a two-gas-station habit jonesing every corner of the street as far as your eyes drove you. At 7 P.M. it is black outside and everybody is trying to get a seat. And even then the vision of the bus was always receding into a daydream of way cool behind the wheel. The reek, the jiggle, the strange encounter of flesh to flesh on the bus so alien to Los Angeles, amnesiac about its streetcar past.

On weekends when my best friend Heather (now a lawyer with the L.A. city attorney's office) and I caught the bus from the southerly town of Inglewood to Hollywood to record conventions at the Roosevelt Hotel or to Aron's Records on Melrose Boulevard, we savored our Beatle bootlegs in the frenzy of other vinylphiles and daydreamed a season when the rhythm of our afternoons would not be governed by the lurch, rumble, and stall of the 210, the 105, the 33, the 212 passing us up like pachyderms, trunks twined around each other's tails, as we waited on the street and rolled our eyes at the catcalls of mashers skanking by in their 280Zs and tricked-out Camaros, dice fur bouncing off the rear mirror. We lusted for the day when we'd be the apprehenders behind the tinted glass, swooping down on male prey, riding up the downbeat of their hips as they crossed the street, stood on the corners; watching them invisibly behind the wheel,

as we jammed through the yellow lights. We'd build a bonfire with our bus schedules and take an afternoon's voyage into the "unmarked," patrolling the Santa Monica freeway, tip to tip, long into the night.

If riding a bus in Los Angeles "is to know a city . . . different from its enduring image of uncircumscribed freedom"<sup>1</sup> then it is somewhere in the language of city space that the ride imposes itself on the body. Riding the bus in L.A. is a parallel city. It is the purest expression of L.A.'s one-hundred-year dialogue of urban and antiurban, a bridge to the city's streetcar past and an *epitaph* to its car-addled future. Riding enables another mode of looking, seeing, hearing, and smelling that "eludes the discipline" of automobility even as it reproduces it.<sup>2</sup> The street plans of this parallel city skirt the edge of automobility. They flow in quiet asynchrony to the virtual city beyond the car window, enclosing the women who wait with their packages in front of hospitals, grocery stores, check-cashing places, day care centers. From Los Angeles to New Haven, the bus is a city of women. While buses in mass transit-oriented cities like New York, Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., reflect a more racially and economically diverse ridership, working-class women of color form the backbone of bus riders in intensely exurban cities like L.A. The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy estimates that only 4 to 5 percent of trips in the United States utilize public transportation.<sup>3</sup> Yet this figure does not adequately account for rates of use in communities of color, where women depend heavily on buses and subways throughout the day for trips to the workplace, public agencies, and the homes of friends and relatives. The elliptical nature of women's journeys through the city is the underside of exurban capital. The postwar decline of Los Angeles's central business district and the creation of suburban commercial districts were not only sponsored by decades worth of inner-city tax dollars but by the limited mobility of an unskilled urban workforce.<sup>4</sup> In Los Angeles, where transfers cannot be used to travel back and forth on the same bus line and express buses are few, moving from "point a to point b" requires the strictest increments of time. Waiting, the exact fare must be counted out, the bus pass must be accessed, the body must be primed to spring from the doorway and through the crowd. The digital display on the front of the bus becomes an index of being. And each click of the green light bears new possibilities, traffic, false moves to the curb to check the street.

Every now and then—like now—Los Angeles is reminded that there is no such thing as a functioning city without mass transit. With near-pornographic glee, the Adam Smith boys have been of late trashing the very idea of publicly supported mass transit as not only unnecessary, but an economic catastrophe. The automobile and paratransit, claim these hyper-free marketeers, left to

their own devices, can out-perform public transit. . . . Tell that to the half-million and more commuters left stranded Monday morning by the . . . walk-out. . . . Standing in bewilderment on corners where no buses came, they confronted the Gordian knot of Los Angeles transit history—from which there is no escape.

—Kevin Starr, “Ultimate Car Culture Was Built on Public Transport”

Waiting in the torrid August sun for a northbound 210 bus on Crenshaw Boulevard during the 1994 bus strike, I vividly recall the frustration and outrage of neighborhood riders who almost universally regarded the bus system as the bane of the predominantly black Crenshaw district’s existence. Boarding an L.A. bus after a six-year hiatus in New York City was a surreal experience. The plodding lurch and tumble between bus stops, the dark, cave-like interior, and the seamy odor of the bus conjured a flood of associations and memories from when a bus ride had literally been a lifeline to the city. The bus was perhaps the most indelible symbol of public space in my daily encounters, stitching together the crazy quilt of L.A.’s communities for an eighty-cent fare. In this regard, it was a window onto an “alternative” L.A., one that, though true to its rigid social boundaries, was nonetheless evocative of the urbanism that the city had ostensibly left behind. On the bus, L.A.’s streetcar past was a delphic black-and-white reel. Its influence on the layout of the city was like a rumored wisp of lore and legend so at odds with the ubiquitous skein of road arteries and auto traffic that it had the odor of science fiction.

Up until the 1950s the Pacific Electric Railway and the Los Angeles Railways provided transportation to all of Greater L.A., extending as far east as Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. Established in 1901 by transit mogul Henry Huntington, the Pacific Electric had the distinction of being the most extensive railway system in the United States from its inception in the teens to its postwar decline.<sup>5</sup> Like most streetcar companies during the period it became a crucial player in real estate development. Streetcar lines were often established in sparsely populated areas to spur further settlement.<sup>6</sup> This strategy was the cornerstone of the politics of development in early L.A. It continued the pernicious tradition of land speculation begun by railroads in the nineteenth century and in many ways set the tenor for what Mike Davis has characterized as the city’s manifest-destiny-driven “dream of becoming infinite.”<sup>7</sup>

Almost every major street in L.A. had a trolley line. The L.A. Railway ran local service and the Pacific Electric ran interurban express service. The original map of the Pacific Electric boldly touts “one thousand miles of standard trolley lines” and “2,700 scheduled trains daily.” The network was part of what some historians have called a “transportation palimp-

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sest” that was originally inscribed by the colonial trails of the city’s settlement in 1781, and extended through the railroads, the railways, and finally the freeway system.<sup>8</sup> The streetcars helped write the map of modern L.A. and every thoroughfare in the city bears their imprint. As transit historian David Brodsky observes, “The freeways were designed to cover the same territory of the trolleys. They could not have done otherwise; as it was through the electric streetcars, especially the interurbans, that a metropolitan Los Angeles first suggested itself.”<sup>9</sup> To walk, ride, drive in the city is to perform this contradictory, oneiric heritage.

If the freeway system is the latest overlay in the palimpsest then the bus system rides darkly in its margins. Coming from the culture of the New York subway in 1994, the cultural and kinetic rhythms of the bus and the working-class and elderly women who filled the majority of its seats were a stark reminder of why the racial landscape of mass transit is absolutely central to L.A.’s conception as posturban city. Over the past two decades transportation politics in L.A. has suffered a sea change. In the early 1990s a voter-approved 1980 initiative to fund rail came to fruition with the creation of the Blue Line, the first light rail system in the city to be developed after the Pacific Electric and L.A. Railway era.<sup>10</sup> In 1993 the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority (known hereafter as the MTA) was revived, merging the defunct Southern California Rapid Transit District (the agency that succeeded the MTA in the 1960s to manage the bus system after the streetcar system was dismantled) and the Los Angeles Transportation Commission. The organization manages the largest bus system in the country and, with the development of the Red Line subway, is currently overseeing one of the largest and most profligate public works projects in U.S. history.<sup>11</sup>

The 1994 bus strike centered on the mechanics union’s opposition to private maintenance contracting.<sup>12</sup> The MTA also came under fire for its failure to mete contracts equitably to its own employees. While the strike was resolved a week later, the issues that it evoked encapsulated the furor that erupted over public transportation in 1990s L.A., as policymakers egregiously maneuvered to recuperate its conflicted metropolitan heritage at the expense of urban bus riders.<sup>13</sup>

The disparity between bus and rail in L.A. County cuts to the very heart of the city’s schizoid identity. While the city spent fifty years selling out the ethos of its rail heritage, it now looks to rail for redemption. In a 1997 *L.A. Times* article on the boondoggle of L.A. rail politics, historian Kevin Starr—conferring the subway with the same rarefied cultural symbolism as the pyramids of ancient Egypt—laments that the project’s demise is as much a “matter of idea” as it is of politics.<sup>14</sup> For boosters such as Starr, the subway symbolizes the city’s reach for civic greatness. It

suggests the utopian promise that feeds the myth of the “California dream” Starr has chronicled in his breathless trilogy on the state’s history.<sup>15</sup> Bowing to the MTA’s self-serving hype on the revivifying powers of the Red Line, Starr waxed that it “bespoke a vision of Los Angeles as a unified metropolis, possessed of a discernible, if subtle, civic unity and centered, more or less, on a downtown.”<sup>16</sup>

The issues and alliances that have sprung up over the course of the MTA’s downward spiral are so byzantine that they have shifted the political ground of the city, making strange bedfellows of longtime foes.<sup>17</sup> The colossal arrogance of the MTA board and the agency’s mismanagement have renewed serious debate not only on the bus system’s importance to the livelihood of scores of low-income riders but also on alleviating the tremendous environmental and social burden that the city’s overinvestment in the private automobile has imposed:

In their panic about getting to work, commuters left high and dry by public transit did not have the luxury of the Adam Smith crowd’s comparative statistics. . . . They were discovering, among other things, that the vaunted automobile culture of greater Los Angeles is dependent on public transit. Put another half-million people on the road—as the MTA strike did—and the already overloaded freeway system edges toward gridlock.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the 1994 strike was climactic because it illustrated, with a vengeance, for policymakers, municipal government, and diehard drivers heretofore indifferent to the city bus system, that public transportation was indispensable to the region’s economy. Yet 1994 was also a turning point because of a groundbreaking civil rights lawsuit filed against the MTA by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and community activists such as the Bus Riders Union. Going from bus to bus wearing yellow T-shirts that exhorted riders to “fight transit racism,”<sup>19</sup> the union organized disgruntled black and Latino riders into one of the most visible multiracial political coalitions in the city. After watching the MTA lavish millions of federal dollars on rail, it joined with the NAACP, the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the federal suit. The suit charged the MTA with creating a two-tiered transit system that discriminated against predominantly low-income “minority” bus riders in favor of white-collar rail commuters. The union’s mobilization efforts were rewarded by a 1996 federal consent decree requiring the MTA to upgrade bus service and put a cap on fare hikes.<sup>20</sup>

The victory was historic, not only vis-à-vis the trajectory of Los Angeles transportation politics but also because of its implications for post-civil rights era organizing, which has sought to address how institutional racism and sexism inscribe urban public space. The union’s insis-

tence that “improving the transit system is a civil rights issue because most commuters are minorities and have low incomes” goes to the heart of how denial of transit access, attendant to the increasing privatization of public space, “others” communities of color. The implications of this trend for working women are clear.

Critiquing the inequity of transportation planning that privileges male travel within the city (where men, whether riding the bus or driving, typically make a round-trip journey to work), Dolores Hayden notes:

If the simple male journey from home to job is the one planned for, and the complex female journey from home to day care to job is the one ignored, it is easy to see how women’s time disappears when they attempt to overcome the separation of home and work.<sup>21</sup>

Although Hayden’s analysis counterposes the daily linear travel of men with that of the “triangular” journeys of women, I would contend that it is imprudent to characterize all men’s travel as linear or “planned for.”<sup>22</sup> Certainly the journeys of day laborers, service workers, or displaced workers would hardly qualify in this regard. However, in a culture in which women of all classes overwhelmingly provide for the majority of child care and social services, the downsizing of public transit has undoubtedly reinforced gender hierarchy. For both middle-class and many working-class women, the burden of providing family transit has caused their hours on the road to quadruple since 1983.<sup>23</sup> The monster popularity of sport utility vehicles and minivans has been driven in part by an exurban explosion of women behind the wheel. Schlepping children, groceries, elderly parents, or simply, like myself, riding alone to work and on errands (mindful, to varying degrees, of the “ecological footprint” stamped out by the gas-guzzling trip around the corner and back), women are increasingly putting more miles on the road than men.

Yet the ostensibly liberating temporality of SUV-dom is well out of reach of working-class women for whom high sticker prices, redlining by insurance companies, and inflated prices at the pump make the “American dream” of auto ownership virtually impossible. In L.A. the romance of speed, privacy, and efficiency that drives this economy of space is written in the transition from my grandmother, who rode L.A.’s streetcars in the 1950s to her job as a domestic, to the first and second generation El Salvadoran women, who have taken her place in the global economy, riding the 33 down Venice to clean homes on the westside. Outside the window of the bus, the streetcar tracks gleam under the streetlight, then disappear.

When the city’s last streetcar line gave its final ride in April 1961 it was a shadow of what had once been the largest urban railway network in

the country. Flaming out during the civil rights era, amid the revolution in public space in the Jim Crow South, the decline of the streetcar hastened the maturation of the West's own regime of spatial apartheid. Restrictive covenants and job discrimination laid the foundation for the de facto segregation of blacks into what has come to be known as South Central L.A.<sup>24</sup> And the internal combustion engine's postwar resurgence played a key role in transforming black neighborhoods into poster children for American "inner city pathology."

African Americans contributed to the founding of L.A. in 1781 and had established venerable communities in the city as early as the 1920s. Yet it was not until World War II, encouraged by job opportunities in the war industries, that they began arriving in more significant numbers from southern states such as Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas. Confined to the Watts, Willowbrook, and Compton communities of South L.A., blacks were crowded into substandard housing, barred from moving further west by powerful white homeowners associations. These associations joined with local real estate companies to enforce deed restrictions that effectively acted as "private Jim Crow legislation."<sup>25</sup> The legacy of the city's racial cleavage along westside/eastside boundaries stems from the racial landscape established during this period. From World War I to World War II South Central was a largely white bastion, and as more blacks settled in the area it became ground zero for the war to preserve white property rights and a white suburban ideal.<sup>26</sup>

During World War II segregation in South Central was exacerbated by erratic streetcar service.<sup>27</sup> Marginal transit access deepened Watts's isolation from the rest of the city, undermining workers' efforts to keep jobs outside of the community. The most prominent case in point was that of workers at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard. One of the largest employers of blacks in Los Angeles (and the model for the "Atlas Shipyard" depicted in Chester Himes's novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*), the Long Beach shipyard was a focal point for families in South Central. Most black workers were hired to work the graveyard shift from twelve midnight to eight o'clock in the morning. The timing of the shift was especially difficult because streetcar and bus service was not scheduled for South Central communities late at night, making it necessary for workers to find other means of transportation for the ride to the plant.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, white bus, jitney, and taxi drivers would not go to the area out of fear of crime.<sup>29</sup> The absence of local black-owned businesses, large universities, and government offices in the community made the situation in South Central even more desperate for black residents tethered to public transportation. Indeed, the surge in migration to the area caused overcrowding on the U car line, leading to half-hour service lags that further compromised work-

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ers. Although another train—the D car—was put on the line to alleviate service lags, increased demand for service in the area was never addressed.

While 1942 represented a turning point for black employment, limited black mobility mitigated these gains. Because most black residents did not own cars, middling streetcar service reinforced the city’s boundaries of exclusion and containment.

Though blacks fought tooth and nail to hold on to tenuous jobs at the war plants, many were replaced by returning white GIs at war’s end. By the late 1950s overcrowding, housing shortages, and worsening transportation conditions reached a fever pitch. Most streetcar lines had been replaced by buses. Slow, frequently missing in action, and inadequate to the task of connecting riders with the unwieldy sprawl of L.A. and its many suburbs, city buses were a constant source of frustration for residents of South Central, Southwest, and East L.A. Although blacks had won a handful of pivotal legal battles against restrictive covenants during the 1940s—allowing the middle class to move to more westerly neighborhoods—the majority were still confined to older communities with substandard housing.

Inadequate transportation was often cited as a catalyst for the 1965 Watts Rebellion. And while West Los Angeles and emerging satellites such as the San Fernando Valley enjoyed unprecedented growth fueled by highway construction and a postwar housing boom during the 1960s, eastside communities of color languished from a lack of capital investment. Indeed, the succession of the railway system by the SCRTD was a culmination of public policy that effectively subsidized suburban and exurban growth, job export, and commercial development via the segregation of communities like South Central.

Thus the fifty-year downsizing of urban transit has allowed the bus to function as a mere adjunct to the private car, rather than a fully viable option to private transportation. The bus’s adjunct status highlights the gender inequity of waiting, walking, and traveling in a city where public space is under seige. The spatial reorganization that accompanied the urban postwar shift to buses—with their largely open-air stops and irregular arrival times—has been inhospitable to women riders, who are faced with the potential hazard of waiting for the bus at night in environments where what little pedestrian “city life” or “street culture” there is has been siphoned off by the automobile. In Los Angeles, this dynamic is further intensified by what Mike Davis has termed the “paramilitarization” of public space, in which the movements of “others” are increasingly policed and regimented under the guise of maintaining a “rationalized” urban landscape.<sup>30</sup>



Yet the interface between the early dominance of the automobile and the city's streetcar history rendered the relationship between public and private, urban and suburban more complex than in older industrial cities that developed around a strong urban core. In many respects, the eerie flatness of L.A., its droning horizontality, has always defied the shopworn dichotomy of suburb and inner city. From affluent to poor neighborhoods, single-family homes, lawns, driveways, and streets that beat a seamless path to the highway have been emblazoned in the American popular imagination as the city's signature spaces. These spaces evoke the ideal of the "good life" that so enflamed World War I-era white midwestern settlers (for which L.A. was dubbed the "port of Iowa"), who set out to cleanse the city of its multiracial heritage. They mark the racialization of private space, the retreat from the burdens of urban being played out in the embodying regime of race and caste.

The isolated cell of the single-family postwar home was sustained by the figure of black female labor waiting for the bus at 6 or perhaps 7 A.M. when the morning papers fly through the air and onto the lawns, hot off the presses. For black women, public transportation has historically been a site where the intersection of public and private highlighted the racial subtext of Anglo-American notions of femininity. From trolley to highway, bus to subway, mass and private transit have been spaces of protest and desire for black female subjects. When Rosa Parks boarded the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956 she was part of a long legacy of working black women who protested the terroristic conditions under which they were forced to travel everyday. In the 1990s nearly sixty years of state and federal policy subsidizing automobiles, highways, parking, and state highway patrols have made the United States' auto industrial complex the greatest obstacle to mobilizing transit-dependent "inner-city" women bus riders. Behind the wheel I am temporarily removed from "them," unmarked, made over by the road, the chromium steel of the bumper raging forward. My gaze is transfixed by the yellow and white lines of the road in a cyborg fantasy of omniscience, eating lanes, eating streets, eating corners in one great, big, ten-minute V-6 gulp. It is a fantasy that is interrupted by the specter of Rodney King sliding down the offramp of the Simi Valley freeway exit, rolling. It is a fantasy ratted out by the specter of Tyisha Miller, gunned down by the police in the front seat of her vehicle, in "sleepy" Riverside, California, the desert town that ex-urban blacks run to to get out of the city. It is a fantasy derailed by the "phenomenon" that even *Newsweek* magazine has assigned the acronym "dwb" (driving while black); it is a fantasy unraveled by the itchy trigger-finger slickness of a white policewoman's hands over my body after my friends and I are ordered at gunpoint out of a car driven by the older brother of one of

them and surrounded by five police vehicles one evening on Hyde Park in Inglewood. He is ordered to lie face down on the ground. The car's backfire was mistaken for a gunshot we are told.

On the 210 I watch as the traffic throbs on the Santa Monica freeway, and a patrol car skims by, hunting for dark meat.

The marking of the black female body as racial space was enacted on a daily basis within the context of the city bus during the World War II and postwar eras, as more and more women entered the workplace. The schism between black and white femininity, so critical to the Jim Crow economy of public and private space in the South, also deeply influenced the dynamics of public transportation in the West. This schism was powerfully reflected in the ad campaign of privately owned jitneys during the teens in Los Angeles. First introduced in L.A. in 1914, the jitney was a forerunner of the bus, designed to carry large numbers of passengers for the same nickel fare as the streetcars. Jitneys entered the breach between railways and automobiles just as the struggle for the soul of urban rapid transit was getting underway. Considered to be quicker and more convenient than streetcars by many passengers, the jitneys were nervously viewed by street railway officials as a potentially dangerous competitor for their already waning ridership.<sup>31</sup> The success of the jitneys led to the creation of the first interurban bus lines between L.A.'s central city and its suburbs.<sup>32</sup>

The racial politics of transportation in early Los Angeles are neatly illustrated by a 1917 jitney ad campaign to convince white patrons to vote against the regulation of jitney service. Appealing to white "common sense," the ad inquires

To our jitney patrons:  
Why should you vote for the jitney?  
. . . Because your wife and daughter are  
not compelled to stand up while Negro men (*sic*)  
and women sit down.<sup>33</sup>

Although Los Angeles's African American community was still a relatively small presence among the waves of white midwestern newcomers and Asian and Mexican residents, black civil rights groups successfully challenged a city ordinance that allowed the whites-only jitneys to pose as public transportation.<sup>34</sup>

The racial *mise-en-scène* evoked by the jitney ad foreshadowed the trajectory of public transportation in the city bus era. As under Jim Crow, white entitlement in the public sphere was represented by the specter of the white woman in need of protection from the encroaching black horde.

Here, the preservation of white rights of access, and white insulation from those baser elements of the body “public,” secured whiteness as racially unmarked space. By yoking the comforts of jitney transportation with the unmarked white body (and by extension unsegregated public transit on the streetcars with the debasing/marking of the white body) the jitney ad underscored how public space was racialized. By using the white female body as its “selling point” the ad traded on the historic connection between white femininity and the maintenance of white racial purity. White femininity—and whiteness by extension—was produced and validated through this hierarchy of spatial relationships, wherein the indignity of white women having to stand while black men and women sat threatened the very edifice of white subjectivity. Exploiting the white passenger’s sense of entitlement, the jitney ad vividly deployed the language of antiurbanism—a language that has been so crucial to the construction of American national identity. It was within this climate that the automobile overtook Southern California.

Insofar as it teeters between a stentorian private transportation system and an inequitably developed rail system the Los Angeles bus system effectively enforces the racial and gender hierarchies that underlie suburban “manifest destiny.” Historically, the figure of the bus, with its lumbering rhythm of stop and go, has been the stepchild of modern transportation technology. Devoid of rapid rail’s elemental seductiveness and ostensible ability to transfigure time and space, the bus is a largely reviled figure within the American cultural imagination.<sup>35</sup> In a social landscape that has condensed and “conquered” time via the language of the expressway, the interchange, and the diamond lane, riding the bus is a symbol of ontological fixity.

Thus, the bus system—conveyance of the raced body, the transient, the low-income, the immigrant—has metamorphosed from being the model of “modern” transit infrastructure in the 1930s and 1940s, into an emblem of the postapocalyptic vision of Third World dystopia.<sup>36</sup> Driving along from corner to corner, the buses are a pale reminder of the city’s schizoid history of walker-flushed streets, bursting-at-the-seams trolleys, and downtown shopping on Broadway, that hallowed icon of urban pleasures. Driving past the MTA bus stops on an early weekday morning, “they,” the riding public, are invisible to the street traffic, testament to the otherworldly economy of L.A.’s sidewalks, to the now clichéd observation that “nobody” walks in L.A. Despite sixty years of the streetcar, to be carless in L.A. is to be faceless, possessed of an unenviably intimate knowledge of the rhythms and cadences of the city’s streets, of the grinding commerce of each intersection and transfer point. The city bus imposes a

certain burden of consciousness on the individual rider, one that is manifest in an “unnatural” familiarity with one’s fellow passengers. During the streetcar era this familiarity implied an onerous breach of class, race, and ethnic boundaries. In the highway era, the auto has strenuously protected against this threat. For, as much as the convenience of being able to “go where one wanted, when one wanted,” the buyer of the automobile was buying private space in a fraction of the time of fixed path transit, fulfilling one of the most important rights of American citizenship. In transit, behind the wheel, alongside the center divider, the racial boundaries of cityhood could be preserved.

Walking to the bus through Leimert Park, there is no street quieter than Bronson Avenue in summertime where the living is “easier” than fifty years ago when blacks were barred from owning homes in this suite of well-manicured lawns and village avenues designed by Frederick Law Olmsted’s boy. The quiet of the streets is all that’s certain in this version of the suburban heritage blacks have built in L.A. It is a “bulwark” against the recalcitrance of Crenshaw Boulevard, the street that borders the community to the west in six cruising lanes.

Crenshaw—the main artery of the Southwest black community, the westside street that has been transformed into eastside in the language of L.A. imperialism. Speed is the medium here, egging you on to beat the light in a toxic flow. Sundays the police swoop down to block the boulevard off to the joyriding young black and Latino men and women who converge from all over in clubs to display their vehicles in a car orgy unequalled throughout the city. Residents, buses, through traffic negotiate the side streets in a series of detours that leave Crenshaw largely empty for a one-mile stretch during dinnertime, like a phantom of time-lapse photography. The buses run late, scream past the houses rattling the walls, and all the passengers who would have normally picked up the bus on the streets between the barricades have to trudge several blocks north or south. It’s a spectacle unimaginable a handful of neighborhoods to the “real” west where the myth of California dreamin’ pulses in the 24–7 of the Santa Monica freeway, knocking past the empty bus stops to the sea.

“Soon we’ll be away from here, step on the gas and wipe that tear away.”<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

1. Erin Aubry, “Hell on Wheels,” *Los Angeles Weekly*, 18 July 1997, 25.
2. Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 157. De Certeau speaks of the

everyday practices of being in the city that escape the transparency of regulatory control.

3. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, *Alternatives to Sprawl* (Cambridge, Mass.: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1995), 14.

4. Simply put, if people can't get to jobs, they can't compete. Moreover, mobility has emerged as one of the egregiously unmapped issues in the ongoing debate over the "successes" of Welfare Reform. Time and again, low-income women working at jobs in the "exurbs" must deal with the hardship of finding reliable transportation.

5. George Hilton and John F. Due, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1960), 3.

6. David Brodsky, *L.A. Freeway: An Appreciative Essay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 71.

7. Glen Yago, *The Decline of Transit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 50–55; Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1981), 12.

8. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecologies* (Los Angeles: Harper and Row, 1971), 75; Brodsky, *L.A. Freeway*, 2–4.

9. Brodsky, *L.A. Freeway*, 3.

10. The trajectory of rail development in the city was typically complex. The decline of state and federal gas tax revenue and highway construction in the 1960s and 1970s precipitated reconsideration of the desirability of rail, both to reduce the effects of smog and traffic congestion and to revive L.A.'s old central business district (CBD), which had been increasingly eclipsed by suburban commercial centers. Moreover, according to Martin Wachs, "by the 1970s images of modernity in transportation had changed dramatically. . . . Rail transit was becoming symbolic of progress and municipal accomplishment." See Martin Wachs, "The Evolution of Transportation Policy in Los Angeles: Images of Past Policies and Future Prospects," in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Edward Soja and Allen Scott (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996), 136–38; Sy Adler, "Why BART but No LART? The Political Economy of Rail Rapid Transit Planning in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Metropolitan Areas, 1945–57," *Planning Perspectives* 2 (1987): 171.

11. William Fulton, "But Is It a Matter of Rich (Rail) vs. Poor (Bus)?" *L.A. Times*, 31 July 1994, M1.

12. Kevin Starr, "Ultimate Car Culture Was Built on Public Transport," *L.A. Times*, 31 July 1994.

13. See Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, "Tug of War," *California Journal* 28 (July 1997): 30. L.A. mayor Richard Riordan has been at the forefront of this movement; James E. Moore and Peter Gordon, "MTA's Obsession with Rail Knows No Bounds," *L.A. Times*, 25 July 1999, M6.

14. Kevin Starr, "What MTA Debate Is Really About," *L.A. Times*, 7 September 1997, M1.

15. See, for example, Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1990.

16. Starr, "What MTA Debate Is Really About," 1.

17. These bedfellows include ultraconservative city supervisor Mike Antonovich and the progressive Bus Riders Union.

18. Starr, "Ultimate Car Culture," 6.
19. "Riding Momentum," *L.A. Times*, 31 December 1996, B1.
20. The MTA is now attempting to appeal the issue of whether the courts have the right to determine how it will implement the consent decree in a stonewalling tactic that has delayed the purchase of new buses. See "More MTA Bumbling," *L.A. Times*, 4 October 1999, B6.
21. Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 152.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back* (New York: Crown, 1997), 22.
24. *South Central* is an extremely mobile, totalizing, and ghettoizing designation that has come to be associated with any community that has a significant black population regardless of its geographic location. The racist misuse of this term foregrounds the process through which the language of containment conflates blackness with urban space.
25. Davis, *City of Quartz*, 161.
26. See *ibid.*, 160–64, for a detailed discussion of the legacy of homeowners associations.
27. *California Eagle*, 9 September 1943; Alonzo Smith, "Blacks and the Los Angeles Municipal Transit System," *Urbanism Past and Present* 6 (winter–spring 1981): 25–26.
28. Keith Collins, *Black Los Angeles: The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940–1950* (Saratoga, Calif.: Century Twenty-One, 1980), 56.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Davis, *City of Quartz*, 223–36. Davis cites downtown L.A. as an example of the ways in which state power converges with the design of public space. Of course, for people of color in L.A., public space has always been informed by this governmentality of course as the city's legacy of segregation and police brutality attest. The 1999 murder of Margaret Mitchell, a middle-aged, homeless black woman, by the LAPD in broad daylight on La Brea Boulevard—in a section that has become a precious yuppie haven—was further confirmation of this.
31. Lawrence B. DeGraaf, "Negro Migration to Los Angeles, 1930–1950" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1962), 14.
32. *Ibid.*, 16.
33. *Ibid.*, 21.
34. Susan Anderson, "A City Called Heaven: Black Enchantment and Despair in Los Angeles," in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Edward J. Soja and Allen J. Scott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 341.
35. Buses have been dubbed "loser cruisers"; see Kay, *Asphalt Nation*, 37; see also Jim Klein and Martha Olsen, *Taken for a Ride*, Point of View Documentary Series, PBS (WGBH, Boston, 1996). Klein and Olsen document the dismantling of the Pacific Electric and riders' attitudes toward the substitution of buses on streetcar lines.
36. Wachs, "The Evolution of Transportation Policy in Los Angeles," 106–59.
37. John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "You Never Give Me Your Money," from *Abbey Road*. Apple Records PCS 7088.