

NOAM SHOKED

Hanging Out with Cyclists

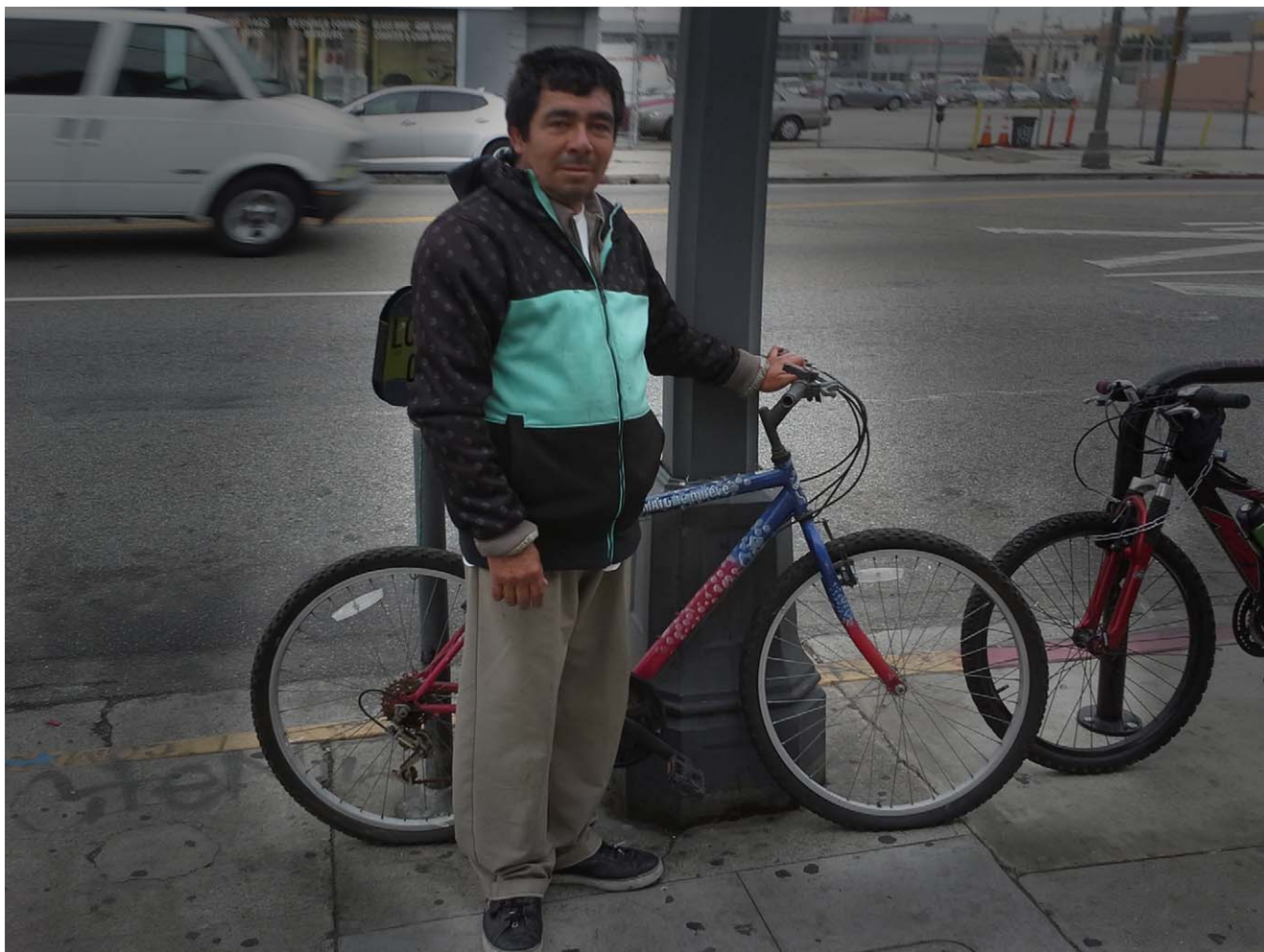
Editor's Note: In 2014, architecture Professor Margaret Crawford and Associate Professor of Art Practice Anne Walsh taught the first University of California, Berkeley, Global Urban Humanities Initiative research studio course, called No Cruising: Mobility and Identity in Los Angeles. Then a Ph.D. student, Noam Shoked traveled to LA as part of the class to study bicycling communities there.

When we asked Crawford to tell us a little bit about the class, she wrote that “while preparing for the course, we spotted a photograph of a roadside ‘No Cruising’ sign, which opened our minds to the possibility of an ambiguous and open-ended understanding of mobility in LA and aided our investigation. *Urban Dictionary*’s two definitions of cruising both emphasized nonproductive mobility: first, ‘just driving around with no clear destination’; second, ‘trying to pick up someone for anonymous gay male sex.’ We added the subtitle ‘Mobile Identity and Urban Life’ to underline mobility as a social and human condition rather than a traffic problem to be solved.

“The adaptation and appropriation of words and concepts used to define ‘mobility’ opened doors to additional varied and unexpected interpretations as ten students majoring in art practice, art history, architecture, and performance studies, each selected a dimension of mobility they sought to identify on our field trips to LA. One goal of these field trips, or research studios, was to get students out of their comfort zones to explore new approaches and methods. We encouraged students to draw on each others’ disciplines, so art students undertook archival research while architectural history students, like Noam Shoked, used interviews and photography to investigate contemporary conditions.”

Los Angeles, known for its uncompromising car culture and unending urban sprawl has in the past year added more than one hundred miles of bike lanes, and intends to add forty miles more this year. In addition, with more than 100,000 participants, the car-free biking event CicLAvia takes place three times a year

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and is the country's largest event of its kind. These initiatives are supported by multiple nonprofit organizations and bike co-ops such as the Bicycle Kitchen, Bikerowave, and the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition.

I made my first visit to Los Angeles to study this emerging culture in the context of the global urban bicycling movement, including that of my home country of Israel. I met with activists young and old, as well as officials dedicated to transforming much of the city by promoting a multimodal model, if not a car-free one. I was ready to leave the city and start analyzing the data I gathered, but on my way out of town, waiting at a gas station on Spring Street in the downtown area, I noticed someone riding slowly on the sidewalk. In heavy clothes and an old hat, he didn't look like the young cyclists in spandex shorts and glossy helmets that I'd been interviewing. His bike was not as fancy as theirs and carried storage baskets on both sides. A few seconds later,

I noticed another cyclist. Like the first, he was also riding on the sidewalk and wore a large hat that made it near impossible to see his face. It didn't take long before I noticed that the sidewalks were crowded with cyclists. Most of them seemed like they were in their forties, maybe even fifties. All were men. Their lived experience of biking in the city was so different from what my research had led me to understand was the norm in Los Angeles. I had to learn more.

By the end of my second trip, my research project, my assumptions, and my view of bicycles in the city were turned inside out by a series of conversations with bicyclists who were part of no particular movement or organization, but who depended for their livelihood on their two-wheeled vehicles.

On my second visit to Los Angeles, I went to the area where I last saw these men and stumbled upon the Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA)

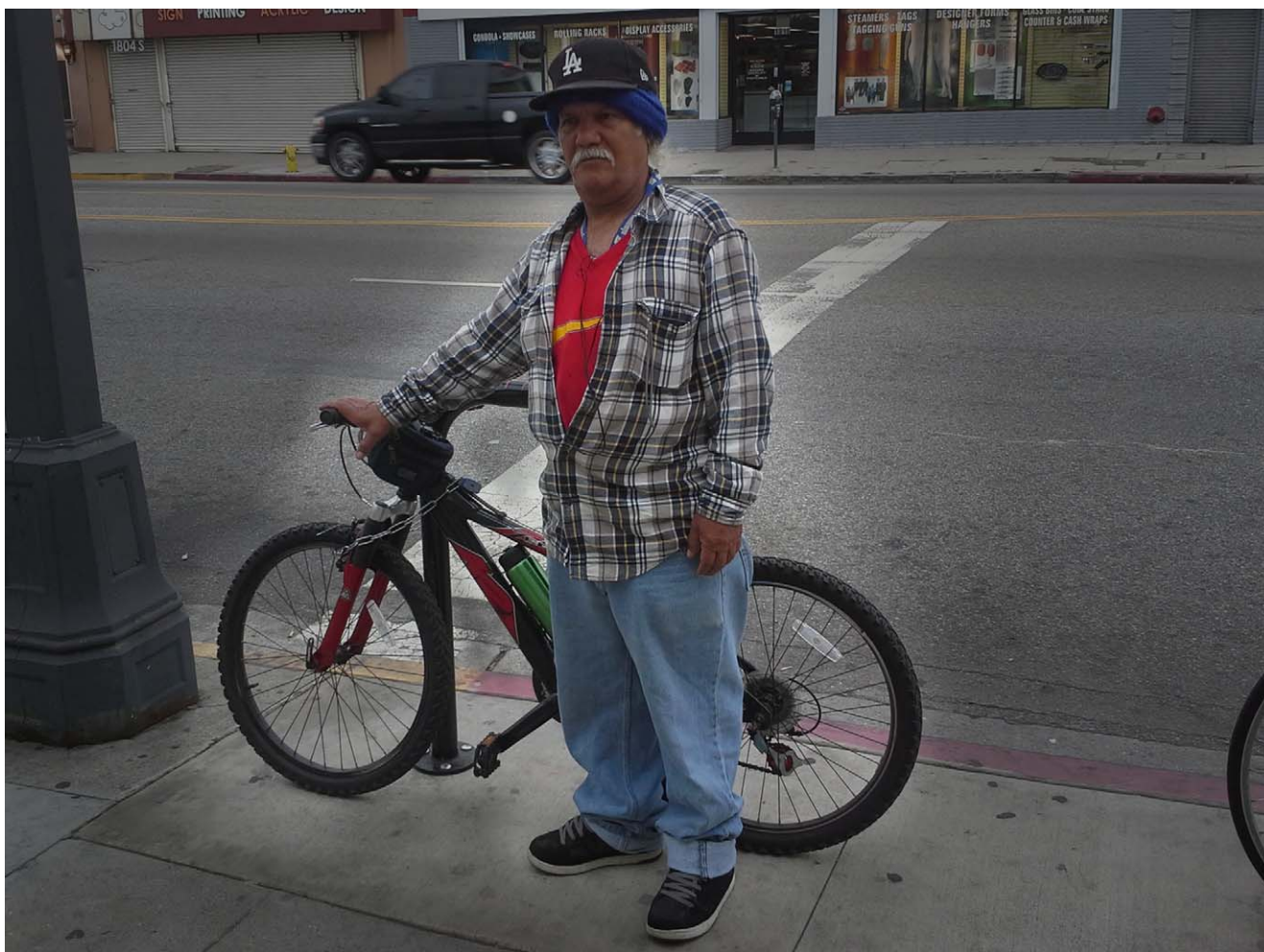


Downtown Community Job Center on Main Street, a facility that helped day laborers find work. Many bikes were tied to the bars by the entrance, and I assumed the men who came to the center looking for work rode their bikes from home each day. Inside I met José, a short man, probably in his forties. José was born in El Salvador and moved to Los Angeles a few years ago. His bike was in good shape—painted red and blue, and on one of his wheels there was a light refractor. He told me that when he was a kid in El Salvador, he also rode a bike.

José said he got to the day labor center by bike, insisting that he rides only on the sidewalk. He explained he was afraid of getting hit and complained about the merciless car drivers in the city. Accidents, he told me, can also happen on the sidewalk, and so he rides very slowly. I asked José if he used to ride on the sidewalk in El Salvador. José was amused. He said it was simply impossible in El Salvador,

where the sidewalks were narrow and too crowded with people, vendors, and other obstacles.

Trying to understand his regular commute to the day labor center, I asked José where he lived. He wouldn't tell me. At that moment, another worker, Miguel, intervened and announced, "He is homeless!" José seemed uneasy with Miguel's comment and explained to me that he owns a cart and a bike, and stays near the intersection of Spring Street and Cesar Chavez. He even invited me over and said he would love to show me his place. By any standard definition, José was homeless, but not according to him. According to him, he owned some property—a bike and a cart—and had his own spot on Cesar Chavez Avenue. The bicyclists I met last time I was in Los Angeles saw bikes as a matter of mobility, but for José, his bike was the opposite. It gave him a sense of belonging, a way to put down roots.



I was curious to learn more about why it was important for him to declare that he owns a bike and a cart. José pulled a receipt from his pocket and explained that he usually doesn't get jobs through the day labor center. Instead, riding his bike, he collects cans and bottles, and sells them to the Downtown Metals & Recycling Center on Alameda Street. José's receipt indicated he received \$11.23 from the recycling center. He said he rides his bike to different areas of the city on different days of the week. He usually goes to the area around Temple and Glendale on Wednesdays, and to Skid Row on Saturdays and Sundays. Sometimes, he makes a big loop from Cesar Chavez, south to Washington Boulevard by way of MacArthur Park, and then back up Alameda to the recycling center, where he gets paid for his haul. Mobility, then, for José, was also a matter of inserting himself into the city's economy.

Through José, I met Diego, who was younger and seemed rather stylish. Four years ago he moved here from

Colima, a small city south of Guadalajara. Diego explained that he lives on Third and Los Angeles streets. It wasn't clear to me whether Diego actually had an apartment there. I wondered if perhaps, like José, he was also homeless. By now I realized such designations were irrelevant to those at the day laborer center, and I worried about imposing my own norms on Diego or, worse, causing him discomfort, and so I didn't ask him to clarify this point. A more definitive study might have required such information, but I was after something else. I wanted to learn about the city through Diego's terms. Diego then told me that in order to get to the day labor center, where we met, he rides on Third Street and then takes a left turn onto Broadway. Sometimes he goes from the center to the main branch of the Los Angeles Public Library on Fifth Street.

Like José, Diego also collects recyclable material across the city, though he has his own route. He starts near his

home and bikes eastward on Third Street. Along his route, Diego passes by the jewelry and wholesale stores downtown, a Buddhist temple in Little Tokyo, as well as the art galleries and lofts in the Arts District right before going up on the bridge and crossing the LA River. Along this route his attention is divided between looking down at the sidewalk and up to the urban landscape. Once on the east side of the river, Diego stops at Hollenbeck Park where he can rest and relax for a short while. Then, cycling westward, back toward downtown, he stops sometimes by Mariachi Plaza before crossing the bridge again. From here, he turns to Alameda Street and goes straight to the recycling center at 1000 North Main Street.

Diego's route traverses multiple landscapes and social scenes in six different neighborhoods. Riding on his bike, he sees difference, not sameness. While on his bike, even though inequality is not erased altogether, urban segregation is diminished. His freedom is limited only by how far his legs and two wheels can take him.

And they can take him far. He prefers riding even longer distances just for fun, and he belongs to a cyclists' group with whom he goes on long rides once a month, usually from Montebello to Whittier and around Rose Hills Memorial Park—a twenty-seven-mile ride. He rides for necessity, but not unlike those young men whom I talked with on my first visit, he also biked for the love of it.

Before leaving the day laborer center, I also met Pablo, an undocumented immigrant who was born in El Salvador and moved to the United States seven years ago. He first lived in Las Vegas, where he worked for a furniture company; but early in 2016, he lost his job and moved to Los Angeles with the hope of finding another. For the time being, he registers every morning at the day labor center on Main Street.

Pablo told me he lives in Boyle Heights, not far from Mariachi Plaza. In order to get to the center, he rides his bike on First Street, crosses the LA River, and then turns onto San Pedro Street. When he gets a job through the center, he can ride his bike to almost any location in the city where there is work. One time, Pablo recalled, he biked all the way to La Cienega Boulevard. At another time, he even made it to Santa Monica. On his bike, Pablo covered an expansive geography.

At one point, while we were talking about the city and how different it was from Las Vegas, I asked Pablo what

would he change in the design of the streets of LA, if he could. After a few seconds of silence, Pablo replied saying, "Not to have bicycles on the streets." After a few more minutes of talking, I learned Pablo didn't really want to eliminate all bicycles from the city. It was bike lanes he didn't like. He didn't want the visibility that came with riding on city streets. When riding on the sidewalk, he felt invisible to most passersby. When riding on the newly painted bright green bike lanes, he was just too visible. I am accustomed to thinking that visibility is a source of political power. For Pablo, invisibility is a tactic, or a means through which he can insert himself into the social fabric of the city without attracting the notice of anyone who might not want him there.

Before our interview ended, I asked Pablo about his income: How much money was he making every month? Was he getting a lot of jobs through the center? Or, was he relying on other sources of income like José and Diego? Pablo, who, unlike José and Diego, did not collect recyclable materials, explained to me that the day labor center to which he biked every day was not a source of reliable income. Instead, it was an institution that provided him with care, a form of compassion and friendship. Away from his family and home, the center was important for his emotional well-being.

On my way back to Berkeley I realized how much my understanding of biking culture had changed over the course of these two visits to LA. If, originally, I intended to learn more about an obvious problem—the lack of bike lanes—I was now faced with a completely different set of problems. Biking was not just a healthy and green mobility alternative in Los Angeles. It was also a matter of social mobility, citizenship, and visibility. In addition, while the biking activists I intended to study had a straightforward outcome in mind, the cyclists I ended up documenting resisted neat solutions.

And instead of finding a solution, through listening to these few cyclists, I found an alternative landscape. This landscape of cycling paths, economic activities, and squatting spots seems to exist almost secretly, despite taking place out in the open, right on the city's sidewalks. **B**

Note

Photographs by Noam Shoked.