

WITHOUT A CAR IN THE WORLD

100 Car-less Angelinos Tell Stories of Living in Los Angeles

Essay by Diane Meyer

Los Angeles is the epitome of car culture: a horizontal city connected by freeways, where personal freedom is defined by the automobile. It is a megalopolis where store entrances are accessible through parking lots rather than sidewalks and city residents spend over ninety hours a year in traffic. Despite it all, in the first weeks of 2008, I made the least L.A.-like decision possible. I got rid of my car.

For the first 20 minutes after selling my Volkswagen Jetta to Car Max, I was overcome with fear...and curiosity. Exactly how would I navigate the city and do everything I need to do—in Los Angeles, of all places!—without an automobile? My initial assumption that I could rely on the car-sharing company Flex Car proved incorrect. The day after I ditched my car, Flex Car announced that it would merge with Zipcar, and would then only provide service to USC and UCLA. That day also marked the arrival of a January storm and eight straight days of rain. Hence, my belief that I would be able to get anywhere, at any time, by bike seemed similarly misguided.

Perhaps I had not thoroughly thought this out. Perhaps I had acted a bit impulsively. But then I experienced a new feeling: relief. No longer would I set my alarm clock to remember to move my car from one side of the street to the other for street cleaning, or suffer another parking ticket. No longer would I arrive home at night only to drive for an additional ten minutes looking for street parking in an over-crowded residential neighborhood; nor would I be taking anyone to the airport at six in the morning, or feel self-conscious about always having the dustiest car in the parking garage at work, no matter how many times I had it washed. No more buying gas, pumping gas, caring about gas prices, counting the miles down to my next oil change, paying \$900 per month in car-related expenses or sitting in traffic.

What started as a temporary lifestyle adjustment, originally planned for a few months at most, has freed me from any desire to own a car ever again. The experience has also truly opened my eyes to the joys of living in this city. While saving money, transcending traffic and reducing my environmental impact were easily anticipated benefits, many unexpected benefits came from de-car-ing. I found that my life and what I could accomplish in a day, changed surprisingly little. Whereas in the past I avoided driving east of the 405 on weekdays, I now regularly attend events in downtown L.A. during the week. The Wilshire Rapid bus is pretty fast and costs \$1.25—way less than gas and parking. Plus, I can get things done on the bus. Answering email is much easier, and safer on the bus than while driving (doubly true for reading—not that I often read while driving).

Walking, biking and riding the bus have completely changed my psychological and spatial relationship to the city. Our freeways bypass the city's incredibly diverse neighborhoods, as drivers consider only their originating and terminating points and

neighborhoods become divided and isolated. By being out of my car, I interact with the city and other Angelinos in a way that I never did before. L.A. now feels more like an urban space than a series of loosely connected suburbs. When biking, one becomes intimately acquainted with the topographical features of the city. Areas that seemed flat while driving can now be recognized as hilly. Cyclists know the uphill grades of the various streets much as New York City cab drivers must be able to map out every pothole.

The city also seems to have shrunk in scale. Now that I can bike from Santa Monica to Los Feliz in 75 minutes, the amount of time it sometimes took to drive, makes the city's sprawl feel more manageable. I used to use "I'm too busy" as a euphemism for "I'm too lazy" when excusing myself from exercising, whereas now I am more physically active and in much better shape. Climbing the single flight of stairs to my apartment no longer leaves me out of breath, and I've lost about a third of my body weight. Transporting large items has not been an issue either—almost all large stores deliver, and most do so for free. Additionally, without my car trunk, which had become a cluttered graveyard haunted by the ghosts of buyer's remorse, I am now careful to buy only what I need. Finally, I enjoy a palpable feeling of independence that comes from living in Los Angeles without a car, but with the confidence that I can still get absolutely anywhere.

Of course, there are drawbacks. Buses are not always reliable. They are often late, crowded and confusing. On most lines, neither the driver nor an automated sign indicate what the next stop will be, forcing riders to carefully study the unfamiliar views out the windows in hopes of finding clues that might indicate their location. Similarly, bus stops are frequently unmarked. More than once I've wondered "Is this a bus stop, or just a random bench?" Sometimes this thought occurs after sitting for quite a while, only to discover that it is, in fact, just a bench. I am often warned that public buses are dangerous and populated exclusively by crazy people. Since there are probably more crazies in my immediate family than could fit on a double-sized "red bus," I am unfazed by this warning. I have been roped into many strange, uninvited conversations, which mainly make me nostalgic for New York. Many buses and all Metro lines stop running before midnight, so I've had to plan accordingly, sometimes cutting activities short. I've been caught in the rain on my bike. And going anywhere in Orange County, Ikea and most of the Valley is pretty much out of the question. And it is inevitably awkward when I tell people that I don't have a car, whether it's the parking attendant asking if he can validate my non-existent ticket or a new friend trying to make plans to meet up. This is often a clumsy exchange which leaves me wondering if I am missing out on an essential Los Angeles experience.

In July of 2008, I received a grant from the California Council for the Humanities California Stories Fund to interview and photograph 100 other car-less Angelinos. My initial interest in the project came from a desire to share resources and stories with other car-less people. According to the 2000 Census, L.A. County residents are more than twice as likely to have three or more cars than zero cars. When I gave up my car, I only knew two other people who didn't have cars, even though L.A. County has the second-most-active bus system in the U.S., with a daily ridership of almost 2 million people. To

find participants, I searched the Web, polled friends and friends of friends, put ads on Craigslist, answered ads by car-less people in search of rides, wrote to various transportation agencies and approached strangers on the bus.

I want to use this project to dispel the myth that one has to have a car to lead a productive life in L.A.—or any other major city. I originally chose to get rid of my car to save money, having been overwhelmed by inflated lease payments, insurance, parking tickets and gas prices. But I ultimately found that my car-free life was so much better that transportation alternatives became a very important issue to me.

For the first two photo shoots, I rented a car to carry my equipment, but couldn't bear the irony. So I experimented until I came up with a way to pack my equipment so that I could carry everything by myself onto the bus. My gear consists of a 4x5 camera, a medium-format camera, a tripod, two light stands, two strobe heads, two umbrellas, a power pack, a light meter, a tape recorder, film and a book to read on the bus. Sometimes these expeditions make me think of the 19th-century photographers who lugged their gear through mountain passes to document the expansive and mythic Western landscape. Interesting that those expeditions eventually led to the contemporary West, in which the manmade landscape depends on the car culture that created it.

My shoots took me everywhere from the South Bay to Boyle Heights, from the Valley to Altadena. The fact that I was able to get to all of these places relatively easily by bus, carrying almost 150 pounds of equipment, demonstrated again how accessible L.A. is by mass transit. I met people from a wide range of backgrounds, socio-economic levels, occupations and heard an amazing range of reasons for not driving. I met single moms, teachers, writers, consultants, comedienne, actors, urban planners, computer programmers, analysts, bakery workers, students and unemployed. I met people whose physical disabilities kept them off the road, and people who did not drive because of firm ideologies about the detrimental effects of car culture. Others had been in accidents, their cars had blown up, they were afraid to drive, they lost their licenses after receiving a third DUI, they preferred bicycles, or they were simply tired of spending so much money on a car. Many could not afford to have a car—the average Angelino spends almost \$9,000 a year per vehicle.

In a city notorious for being difficult to meet new people, I met a hundred. Many have become friends that I see socially or at transportation-related meetings or events. One of the great joys of the project has been to excitedly share observations, experiences and frustrations with other car-less people. The positives and difficulties stemming from not having a car are real and universal. Despite great differences in the backgrounds of my subjects, a number of themes emerged from the interviews: Car-less single men had high levels of anxiety when it came to dating. Car-less children of immigrant families faced disapproval from their families, as if choosing not to have a car was a rejection of the better life their parents sought in coming to the U.S. Geographical biases abounded: Santa Monicans, for example, were often assumed to be environmentalists, while people from less affluent neighborhoods were rarely given credit for making the choice for reasons other than financial. With a few exceptions, those who had willingly given up car

life were not raised in Southern California, but had lived in dense cities in the Midwest or the Northeast. Almost everyone cited not having a car as being easier than anticipated. Most called for more bus and train lines that run 24 hours. Some people felt embarrassed about taking the bus, enough to hide it. However, for others public transportation was the norm in their peer groups. Many were repeatedly warned of the dangers of mass transit by people who had never tried it. And some reported being passed over for jobs because they did not have a car.

I am lucky to have had the option of giving up my car. While I initially got rid of it due to financial need, I probably could have figured out a way to keep it. Many of the people I interviewed, however, never had a car, or the option to choose. Their views of being car-less in L.A. often skew negatively, since choice never came into play. Based on these interviews and my observations, it is clear to me that this city—and others—can sustain their independence from car culture. The stresses of driving in traffic detract from our quality of life. Almost everyone reported a sharp decrease in feelings of stress after they stopped driving. A recent study by the American Heart Association found that persons prone to heart disease were 3.2 times more likely to have a heart attack if they had been stuck in traffic early in the day. One interviewee told me of a co-worker with whom it is immediately obvious which days she drove and which days she took mass transit—she is much more relaxed and social on the days that she does not drive. In addition to the mental and physical tolls of driving, air quality is a major issue facing the city, as is the worldwide impact of global warming. Twenty percent of greenhouse-gas emissions in the U.S. come from personal automobiles. It is logically in the best interests of L.A., and the entire world, to explore transportation alternatives and to improve current transportation systems.

Mobility is freedom, and it should be a right of all citizens equally. Unfortunately, this is not the case in L.A. When bus service essentially shuts down at midnight, how are car-less workers on the graveyard shift supposed to get home? How are people who don't feel safe walking in their neighborhood, even to the bus stop, supposed to access other parts of the city? How should disabled people get around when many of our sidewalks are in grave disrepair, the supply of wheelchair ramps does not support demand, and one has to cross busy streets for bus transfers that are poorly timed and sometimes many blocks away? How do people bicycle safely when bike lanes suddenly stop, depositing cyclists on a crowded street with cars zooming passed? Who will feel encouraged to try taking the bus when buses don't provide maps or notification of the approaching stop?

I hope that the stories recorded here will encourage others to consider using their cars less and to experiment with alternatives to driving. I hope to see improved transportation options, and increased mobility and access to the city. To that end, putting more riders on the bus and more cyclists in the street will hasten needed improvements. The 100 people featured in this project prove that the city can be enjoyed, productive lives can be led, and lifestyles can be maintained, even improved, without a car. At the same time, the universal difficulties faced by car-less people clearly indicate that Los Angeles has a long commute ahead.