LA METRO: THE DICHOTOMY IN PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
by Michael Lui (with Pushpa Iyer)

Imagine you live in a large metropolitan city in a foreign country. Your parents moved to this city from a distant land and settled in an apartment on the outskirts of town, just within the city limits. You were born and raised in this city. It's all you know. Your parents have full-time service jobs and have chosen to forgo purchasing and owning a vehicle to put you through school. They are able to do this thanks to an extensive and affordable public transportation network. Your parents take a light rail and a bus to get to and from work. You take the bus every day to your local community college. You're the only one of your friends who is going to college. Inspired by the transportation system that has served your family your entire life, you aspire to become an engineer to create a brighter future for your family and the world. You return home one day after a long day of school and there's a public notice on your family's apartment door: you're being evicted in 90 days. A new Metro line is coming to town. This is a common scenario for the citizens of Boyle Heights, a neighborhood in East Los Angeles where a new Metro line (Gold) was constructed in 2009.

Metro, like any other public transportation, was developed to assist those who cannot afford personal vehicles to travel efficiently and affordably to and from work. Public transit strives to eliminate distance and economic barriers for rural lower income persons to higher paying and available city jobs. The Metro in Los Angeles began in 1993 out of a merger with the Southern California Rapid Transit District. It currently provides rail and bus services and sees an average daily traffic use of over 1.3 million commuters. The Metro's mission statement is “the continuous improvement of an efficient and effective transportation system for Los Angeles County.” Metro is committed to providing “safe, clean, reliable, on-time, and courteous service” for their customers and has the integrity value of relying “on the professional ethics and honesty of every Metro employee.”

In Boyle Heights, Metro is seen as the agency leading gentrification. When the Gold Line came to Boyle Heights, residents admit (sometimes grudgingly) that their town center, the Mariachi Plaza, received a facelift. Along with it, though, came rules based on which part of the plaza belonged to the city and which belonged to the county. This impacts where the community market can be set up and where the mariachi bands can play on Friday evenings. Further, Metro has purchased large areas of land in Boyle
Heights. These lands, currently fenced off, are empty lots that are nothing but an eyesore – an eyesore for a community that has absolutely no say in how to develop these properties. Metro’s “land grabbing” is a sentiment expressed by residents of Boyle Heights and it drives their frustration and desperation as minorities.

In recent years, Metro has sold these empty lots to the highest bidding corporations, whether they are real estate developments or corporate chain restaurants, to develop the land as they see fit. Metro is planning to sell the aforementioned lots in similar fashion, excluding an important factor: community input. These bids are back door deals that are only revealed to the public in their near-implementation stages via scrupulous investigation by wary community members. Nico, a storeowner in Boyle Heights, tells us (members of the 2015 “Praxis of Conflict Transformation” course) that the affordable housing, combined with a conveniently located Metro station, a new and nearby hospital, and a Starbucks, is attracting wealthier Angelenos to come take up residence. He reiterates that this is the beginning of Metro-orchestrated gentrification. Wealthy outsiders come in, attracted to the housing and mainstream chains. Businesses tailor their products and prices to their wealthier clients and slowly prices become unaffordable for original locals and traditional services are changed. This is a positive feedback loop, attracting additional wealthy outsiders and before you know it, the neighborhood has been transformed. Currently, over 95,000 people reside in Boyle Heights, most residents being predominantly Latino/Hispanic. 60% of residents here have less than a high school education, influencing the high percentage of residents working in the service sector.

A community member, Mynor, put it best when he said “we are all for development, but we want investment and not gentrification.” Residents want community generated development to see their neighborhood improve: to be safer, to have better schools and public services, and to aesthetically represent who they are as a community. A tangible example of the Boyle Heights community struggling for development input is a fenced off lot across the street from Mariachi Plaza. This Metro-owned lot was in the process of being sold to a housing development without the consent or knowledge of the Boyle Heights community. In a campaign effort to stop the proposed plans and provide their input on developing the space, community members wrote on colored ribbon what they would like to see the empty lot turn...
We need a process where RESIDENTS don’t only voice their opinions but are at the table to make DECISIONS.

LESS CAPITALISM

Listen To the Opinions

Internships for Impact

Graffiti art program

Libraries

Skate park
into and tied the ribbons on the fence, spelling out the word “SAVE.” On these ribbons were ideas such as a park, a gym, extremely affordable housing, a skate park, and even a mall and a Starbucks. The latter two suggestions convey that not everyone in the community is against Metro’s ideas for development. Some welcome these plans because they wish their community to mirror other developed/upper-class neighborhoods in L.A. Community activists term it as “shadowboxing” to illustrate these different perspectives and clashes in the community. Despite the differing viewpoints, activists of Boyle Heights were able to delay housing development plans for this empty lot and talks are currently taking place among community leaders, public officials, housing contractors, and Metro representatives to decide the lot’s future.

Seeking community input in development plans is a struggle that many activists undergo in many parts of the world. The additional challenge though for the residents of Boyle Heights is that most of the property is rented. The owners of the property live in wealthier areas of L.A and are the ones making decisions on behalf of the “real” residents. According to Boyle Heights resident Xavier, less than 25% of residents here own their home despite rent being cheaper (25% of income) than the city average.

Another worrying aspect of Metro presence and vision is the invariable tie it brings as a public agency to law enforcement. In LA, Metro has a history of collaborating with law enforcement to push its agenda. As such, residents point out the large police presence in Boyle Heights as intertwined with Metro’s growing presence in the area. Boyle Heights is home to a “sub”-police station that is 54,000 square feet and cost $31 million to construct. This station, according to Xavier, houses around “300 personnel who serve nearly 200,000 people over a 15.8-mile radius that covers Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, El Sereno and other neighborhoods.” Xavier informs us that most crimes in Boyle Heights are property crimes and the construction of the police station was intended to reduce crime and protect the community. Our group witnessed the regular fly-overs by police helicopters and counted 12 different patrol vehicles pass through an intersection within 35 minutes. However, with historic experiences of law enforcement’s discriminatory treatment of minorities and Metro’s partnership with law enforcement in LA (an example is when Metro and the city declared a “war on graffiti,” criminalizing artists, which then resulted in police heavy-handedness against artists, many of whom were
minorities), the Boyle Heights police station is seen by residents as a threat and brings no feeling of security.

In Boyle Heights, not surprisingly, the Metro is viewed as an advocate or a tool of the wealthy classes of lighter skin tone to displace minorities. In contrast, according to a May 2014 LA survey, over half of the Metro users are Latino while 20% are Black. 13.5% are White and 9% are Asian/Pacific Islander. As we traveled throughout the week taking both the bus and light rail, I can attest that the vast majority of Metro users are Latino and Black minority groups. However, I observed only a handful of White riders and the largest group I saw were Russian tourists. Additionally, I observed riders to usually be either young (teenagers and early 20’s) or older (60+ years old). I can only assume that the minority workers had taken public transportation to work long before we woke up each day.

The main White working class seemed to be traveling by car as we saw thousands of vehicles on the highways and on downtown streets clogging up these roadways. Since our group traveled predominantly on foot and via public transit within underdeveloped areas, the expensive vehicles we encountered seemed like a cruel joke. The irony of the expensive vehicles is that usually in the United States, you can travel more quickly by car, but in LA, traffic is so bad it usually takes longer than the Metro to travel somewhere. So why don’t White populations use public transit? And yet it is the wealthy, white population that the Metro is advocating for and supporting with its actions – beginning the process of gentrification.

“The poor bear the burden of progress but rarely benefit from it.”
— Xavier

Praxis of Conflict Transformation: A Field Course

The Praxis of Conflict Transformation is an academic field course in which students examine deep-rooted structural conflicts and the practice of transforming the conditions of conflict and relationships of those involved in these conflicts. The field component of this course is organized during spring break (March) and is usually focused on a city in the United States.

Stay tuned for an announcement inviting applications for the March 2016 course.

Will it be Detroit? New York? New Orleans?