

BIKE TO WORK VANCOUVER: EXPLORING THE EMBODIED EXPERIENCE
OF URBAN COMMUTER CYCLING IN VANCOUVER, B.C.

By

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Abstract

Committed bicycle commuters are part of a small but growing community of individuals whose embodied practice challenges contemporary assumptions about everyday mobility. My lived-experience, narrative research, based on video recordings of actual rides and in-depth interviews informed by these recordings, offers others an opportunity to “ride along” with bicycle commuters in Vancouver, B.C., and promotes a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the practice from the riders’ own perspective. By emphasizing the affective, kinaesthetic, sensory, cognitive, performative and symbolic dimensions of urban commuter cycling, I have attempted to untangle some of the experiential complexity that makes the practice meaningful to riders. This approach also enables me to consider how mobile experiences help bring to life our storied, lived-in, urban spaces. My findings are presented as part of a new website, biketoworkvancouver.com, through which I hope to contribute to a new story in which cycling is no longer considered “alternative” transportation.

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Introduction

Sustainability is a story we tell about the relationship between today and tomorrow. Viewed anthropocentrically, the story of sustainability helps us to understand how present-day human activity imposes itself upon the future – one that is ours to honour or to curse. The story of sustainability, if one subscribes to it, thus imbues even the most mundane of everyday activities with a profound significance.

As a society, we often tell the story of sustainability through a construct known as science. Using scientific tools and methods, we conduct experiments and make measured predictions about how actions today will shape realities tomorrow. As individuals, however, we tend to tell the story of sustainability in a much more informal way. We tell it through the choices we make as we go about living our lives.

When we make lifestyle choices based on the principles of sustainability, we sometimes experiment with new ways of being and knowing. These lived experiments can begin to affect the way we understand and perform our role in the story, thus changing the story itself. But this process does not play out in a vacuum. We draw inspiration from experience and from the stories we have known, heard or seen in action – both the good and the bad. In other words, the story of sustainability is one that we are writing and editing collectively. The narrative is still largely unfinished, and you and I are invited to contribute to its telling.

The growing threat of climate change, and the impotence of our current response to it, suggests that we humans need a new kind of story. A story that guides, inspires and motivates us to act; a story that draws us in and becomes our own. According to Olson (1995), we need a story that works, “at the vision level, which involves our highest

aspirations for the future and our deepest assumptions about what is possible. Changes at the vision level help guide and motivate all our other efforts” (p. 33). If we genuinely want to co-create a more just and sustainable world we must first be able to envision it. With this vision in mind, we can begin to develop our new story; one that is compelling and lucid enough to help us break free from the old one. This is as true for individuals as it is for societies, and the time to act is now. It is an interesting time to be a storyteller.

The Automobile: An Old and Familiar Story

The thing about old stories is that they are so familiar they come to be taken for granted – as if they reflect a fundamental, unchangeable reality. Over the course of the past century, the automobile has been a central motif in the modernist plotline that has driven the human story ever forward. In our culture, cars signify individualism, freedom and free-market capitalism – our most deeply held (or, at least, most commonly celebrated) values. They are shining symbols of our faith in the inherent and unquestionable good of science and technology. This blind and unjustified faith is but one product of a prevailing scientific worldview that, according to Wilber (1995), separates mind and body into a false dichotomy and sanctifies a mechanistic, objectivist, fragmented and linear way of seeing and being in the world.

According to De Quincey (2002), this split between mind and body “runs right through our science, our medicine, our education, our social and legal systems, our interpersonal relationships, and our relationships with the rest of the natural world” (p. 6). And it is our dualistic science, according to Kidner (1994), that props up the illusion that humanity and nature are separate and thus “stands accused of ideologically subverting the rootedness of humanity within the natural world” (p. 360). Encased in a carapace of steel

and glass, the modern motorist is quite literally cut off from the surrounding environment. I know how this feels as I'm often one of them.

Functionally speaking, automobiles offer us the ability to move through space rapidly and they have expanded our range correspondingly. Thanks to cars we often work at jobs and shop for groceries far from our homes, spreading our lives out over great distances. I admit to being guilty of this, too. Ironically, though cars do offer a sort of luxury of movement, they also contribute to the ever-increasing distances between the important places in our daily lives (Urry, 2004). As Urry observes, "it is through automobility's restructurings of time and space that it generates the need for ever more cars to deal with what they both presuppose and call into existence" (p. 27).

Our willingness to buy into the story of the automobile has led to widespread human sprawl, a situation that today places an impossible and increasing demand upon transportation infrastructure. Moreover, the traffic jams and stinging frustration that result lead us to view our daily commutes as an irritation. At the extreme, stressed out motorists are even said to experience road *rage*. As one of the contributors to this project commented, driving a car in Vancouver is "almost a confrontation" (Brian, personal communication, March 25, 2012). Where is the freedom in that?

The opposite of road *rage* is road *indifference*. Road indifference happens when our daily commutes become a sidebar to that "other" part of our lives when important and meaningful things happen. The journey itself – the physical and temporal experience between departure and arrival that has long been the stuff of legend – has lost much of its significance. So we spend more money to make cars faster and roads wider with the intent to shorten this 'insignificant' aspect of our lives.

Though the influence of cars on our physical realities is clearly visible, their impact on our emotional realities is somewhat more difficult to discern. But cars most certainly make us *feel* things. As Sheller (2004) argues, there is without a doubt an affective dimension to our relationships with our cars: “Emotional investments in the car go beyond any economic calculation of costs and benefits, and outweigh any reasoned arguments about the public good or the future of the planet” (p.236).

We motorists like to imagine that our cars bring us power, status, respect and admiration – at least that’s what movies and television commercials suggest. Having become symbols of ‘the good life,’ cars are often portrayed as synonymous with freedom itself. Throughout the more than 100 years we’ve shared with them, cars have occupied our culture’s dreams and aroused its desires. Or as Sheller (2004) puts it, “cars are above all machines that move people, but they do so in many senses of the word” (p. 221).

In sum, North Americans have become physically, culturally and emotionally attached to our cars, and this helps to explain why so many of us continue to drive regularly despite the fact that cars represent:

the single most important cause of environmental resource-use. This results from the scale of material, space and power used in the manufacture of cars, roads and car-only environments, and in coping with the material, air quality, medical, social, ozone, visual, aural, spatial and temporal pollution of global automobility. Transport accounts for one- third of CO₂ emissions and is indirectly responsible for many 20th-century wars. (Urry, 2004, p. 26)

Here in British Columbia, cars and light trucks account for roughly 45% of all household green house gas (GHG) emissions (B.C.’s Greenhouse Gas Emissions, 2008).

According to a nation-wide study conducted by Environment Canada, road transportation was responsible for the release of roughly 131,000 kilotons of GHGs into the atmosphere in 2009 – around 20% of Canada’s total GHG emissions that year (National Inventory Report, 2011, p. 3).

But these are just numbers. I cannot *feel* them in the same way that I *feel* that rush of adrenaline when I punch the gas at a green light or take a corner at high speed.

Numbers like these just don’t move us the way our cars do. Despite the fact that GHG emissions figures are symbolic of the human-caused climate change that threatens our very existence on this planet, these numbers just can’t seem to compete with the comfort and convenience of the car. How, then, do we persuade people to think differently?

The Rational Solution

For various reasons, governments, organizations and community groups in North America are taking on the challenge to decrease automobile use, particularly in and around our big cities. And whether or not these groups fully take into account the complexity and depth of our attachment to cars, elaborate initiatives exist because their creators recognize that motorists are reluctant to unbuckle themselves from their automobiles.

In British Columbia, various levels of government have introduced penalties and other monetary disincentives to discourage motorists from driving: parking taxes, carbon taxes, access tolls and environmental levies – all of which are imposed from above to make driving more expensive and thus less appealing. The logic is that if we can make driving unpleasant enough, the alternatives will eventually become preferable. Though I am not opposed to taxing cars and carbon, these methods frame the issue in negative

terms; they create animosity and draw the public's attention to what is being lost rather than what could be gained (for more on framing, see Lakoff, 2010). And frustrated motorists – who see these surcharges as a threat to their way of life (read: comfort) – can become even more resistant to change. In my opinion, a “tax the bad motorist” approach is an incomplete strategy when it comes to encouraging people to make different choices in their lives.

Another approach is to actively encourage so-called alternative transportation methods, such as cycling. Pro-cycling campaigns are often designed to appeal to our rationality, presenting the bicycle as a mode of transportation that is good for our health, our environment and our pocketbooks (Cupples and Ridley, 2008, p. 254). Cupples and Ridley point out that, “cycling is repeatedly presented in these spaces as a win–win situation, or almost as an economic, social and environmental panacea” (p. 255). In many ways, I agree with this assessment. In my view, a city where cyclists outnumber motorists is one that is happier, healthier, more livable and more sustainable. It's possible that people first take up cycle commuting with these rationally preferable outcomes in mind, but based on my experience working on this project the promise of the future cannot alone motivate cycle commuters to make the ride a part of their daily lives.

As a regular cycle commuter myself, I choose to ride not because a car is too expensive, nor because a bicycle is the rational choice where the future of my grandchildren is concerned. I ride because of the way I experience the world from the saddle – because of the way cycling makes me *feel*. But what exactly is this feeling? Where does it come from? And how might we persuade others to take up the practice of cycling if the experience itself is the most effective motivator?

(Re)Visioning the Story

Nordhaus and Schellenberger (2004) suggest that if we want to effect change, we need to create a positive vision of the future – a meta-narrative to which we can all aspire in our work and our lives. The authors suggest, “a positive, transformative vision doesn’t just inspire, it also creates the cognitive space for assumptions to be challenged and new ideas to surface” (Nordhaus and Schellenberger, 2004, p. 31). But who gets to write this story? According to Moser (2007), “a grand positive vision may well be something that no one creates but eventually emerges out of a myriad of images, stories, and on-the-ground efforts in developing alternatives” (p. 75). This research project is one such effort.

Literature Review

As I struggled to understand how I might convert my lofty intentions into action, I met regularly with my thesis supervisor, Dr. Bob Kull, to develop a plan. Motivated by our lively and sometimes far-out discussions at the Cornerstone Café in Vancouver (our regular meeting place), I delved into the existing literature in search of answers. My review was focused primarily on two interrelated fields of study: mobilities research and cycling research. Initially, I immersed myself in all of the available scholarship on cycling, especially research that approached cycling as a lived experience. Within this body of work, I began to encounter references to *mobilities* research – a field I was not familiar with at the time. As my review expanded, I discovered that contemporary mobilities research offered a wealth of insight into the experiential side of mobility. Furthermore, I concluded that the branch of cycling research that most interested me could be classified under the mobilities banner. Below, I offer a brief summary of what I discovered during my exploration of these two fields of study.

Mobility Theory

The stories of the cyclists in this research project and the story of urban cycling in general are set within the story of mobility. Broadly speaking, to study mobility is to explore the movement of people and things through space. I was drawn to mobility theory because of my keen interest in the movement of people through Vancouver, the city I call home.

In 2006, Sheller and Urry published an article in which they refer to the “mobility turn” within the social sciences, a turn that emerges at a time when, “all the world seems to be on the move” (p. 207). Indeed, we live in the era of globalization where the movement of people, culture, capital, goods, jobs and information makes up a huge part of human activity on this planet (Sheller and Urry, 2006, p. 208). Spinney (2009) reminds us, however, that while the mobility “turn” may be new, the study of mobility itself is not; in fact, “transport geography has long explored people’s daily mobility” (p. 817). That said, it was not the novelty of the subject matter that led Sheller and Urry (2006) to conclude that a “new mobilities paradigm” was emerging; rather, it was the new methods and perspectives being used to understand mobility that were responsible for breathing new life into the field. A new trans-disciplinary approach to mobility studies opened up the research agenda – drawing from fields as diverse as anthropology, geography, cultural studies, transport and social science (Sheller and Urry, 2006, p. 207). Most interestingly for me, this new approach to mobility begins its explorations from a hermeneutic, experiential perspective. As Spinney (2010) notes:

The mobilities turn has shifted the focus of what counts as legitimate and necessary phenomena for social enquiry. Whilst previous research on everyday

mobility has focused on understanding the more representational and readily articulated aspects of movement (such as time, cost, safety, weather) under the rubric of transport, emergent theorizations of mobility suggest that an understanding of the less representational – those fleeting, ephemeral and often embodied and sensory aspects of movement – is vital if we are to fully understand why and how people move around. (p. 162)

Cycling in Academia

Until quite recently, transportation geographers were some of the only academics conducting cycling research (see Heinen, et al., 2010, for a detailed review of this literature). Their studies are by and large quantitative and tend to oversimplify the complexities of human motivation and behaviour through a focus on measurable “determinants” like time, cost, and distance (Spinney, 2009). Disregarding the importance of lived experience, much of this research reduces human behaviour to the outcome of instrumental-rational calculations. As Cupples and Ridley (2008) observe, however, “the cycling practices of most cyclists emerge in an organic and spontaneous way” (p. 257).

Fortunately, there is an emerging branch of cycling research that explores motivation and behaviour from a different perspective. This new research “shift[s] attention from cycling to cyclists, and from numbers to experiences” (McKenna and Whatling, 2007, p. 450). *Cycling and Society* (2007), edited by Horton, Rosen and Cox, compiles the work of a number of scholars who approach cycling from a sociological perspective. Of particular interest in this volume are: Fincham’s exploration of bicycle

messenger subculture; Skinner and Rosen's comparison of the identities of cyclists and motorists; and Spinney's essay on the construction of meaning in a mobile environment.

Cycling is a complex phenomenon that means different things to different people in different places. As Horton, et al. (2007) note in the introduction to *Cycling & Society*, "the term cycling tends to homogenize a remarkable plurality of lifeworlds, histories, structures and cultures, and a vast range of sometimes parallel and sometimes interwoven activities" (p. 1). This plurality is reflected in the range of approaches that are now being used to shed light on the social, cultural, physical and emotional aspects of cycling.

For example, Horton (2006) writes about the relationship between cycling and environmentalism, placing the bicycle within a historical context as both tool and symbol of social change: "the bicycle's importance to environmentalism, as to earlier social movements, is not only as a symbol, but also as a concrete materiality with specific cultural and political effects" (Horton, 2006, p. 54).

In their 2008 study, Cupples and Ridley uncover some of the deficiencies in current cycling advocacy strategies, which tend to, "ignore the embodied and affective dimensions of transport practices" (p. 254). Jones' (2005) article describing his own embodied experience as a cyclist in London was particularly influential to my planning for this project. In reflecting on the performative aspects of his experience, he notes that, "urban texts ... are written as much by their users as their architects" (Jones, 2005, p. 813). In translating his cycling experience to the page, Jones grappled with "the problem of transferring this embodied, non-representative understanding into a printed representation" (p. 815). His work inspired me to begin thinking more creatively about how my own methodology could help me to overcome this same challenge.

Reflecting on Methodology

In distilling life down to the page, as it seems academics are destined to do, linguistic accounts all too often lose the context that makes experience meaningful, and that is the experience of being, of living through the body. (Brown and Spinney, 2010, pp. 132-133)

Immersed in the literature, I continued to seek out answers to my questions. Not yet committed to any one research direction, I had the freedom to let my review take me where it would. My openness led to a number of dead ends, but it also enabled me to make some interesting discoveries. At just the right moment in my process, I came upon a highly exciting, emergent branch of mobilities research that would suit my project perfectly: mobile video ethnography (Spinney, 2011).

Before I get into the specifics of mobile video ethnography, I should remind the reader that the use of the video recording devices as tools for capturing ethnographic data is not new. In fact, the practice is almost as old as the technology itself. As Ruby (1996) notes of the earliest adopters, “anthropologists, like everyone else, were fascinated with the technology and its promise to provide an unimpeachable witness” (p. 1347). Felix-Louis Regnault is often credited as the first anthropologist to use video recording in his research, producing a film on life in Senegal as early as 1895 (Ruby, 1996). The technique was further popularized several years later by famed researchers [Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson](#) (Ruby, 1996). While the notion that any method for collecting data could be considered an “unimpeachable witness” would arouse suspicion in most circles today, I believe the video camera’s potential as a tool for capturing a unique type of data makes it a highly valuable addition to the researcher’s toolkit.

Video recording technologies have come a long way since the time of Regnault, Mead and Bateson. Cumbersome, reel-to-reel film cameras and their batteries, canisters of film and other equipment are today replaced by miniscule, fully digital recording devices capable of recording and storing hours of high definition video. And while costly filmmaking equipment was for many years accessible to only a minority, today many of us carry around cutting edge video recording devices in our pockets. What's more, the film editing process – a task that at one time required highly specialized knowledge and access to a professional studio – can today be performed with a downloadable \$15 software bundle. This leveling of the technological playing field, coupled with advances in digital technology, has made it possible for researchers to begin using video in new and exciting ways.

In a 2011 article that proved to be hugely influential to my project, UK cycling researcher Justin Spinney describes how he mounted video cameras to participants' bodies and bicycles in order to capture video data of their cycling experiences. As he observes, "video enables the researcher to access aspects of the journey which were previously beyond reach" (p. 167). Spinney goes on to use his video data as the basis for in-depth interviews with his participants, interviews that explore the experiences captured by the camera.

Spinney's 2011 study offered me my first glimpse into the power of video as a tool for unearthing the meanings of people's mobile experiences. His two-step technique, in which video data is incorporated into the interview process, avoids disrupting the original experience (interviewing during a ride-along) or losing sight of the contextual richness that makes it meaningful (interviewing without the support of video data).

Perhaps most interestingly, the method *invites participants to play a role in the analysis of data*. In so doing, Spinney's technique helps curb the researcher's tendency to impose their own meanings on data, while allowing for a richer and more nuanced exploration of the experience at hand. As Spinney describes it rather eloquently, "video becomes a bridge between embodied practice and language, enhancing the ability of language to express the ephemeral and embodied" (p. 172).

In another article that influenced the course of my research, Murray (2010) refers to the interview technique described above as "film elicitation." The technique, she argues, "produces a new set of emotional responses to the journey as well as giving some insight into more direct emotional and sensory responses" (p. 19). Furthermore, she notes, "the different contexts provided different layers of data to be made sense of" (p. 18). Murray's captivating study uses video cameras to capture the daily journeys of school children making their way to and from school.

As excited as I was to have discovered the work of Spinney and Murray, I must admit that their published reports left me wanting. Though both researchers offer a number of remarkable insights, neither allow readers the opportunity to view video data for themselves. I do not fault them for this oversight, as the printed page is obviously very restrictive when it comes to mixing media. For his part, Spinney (2011) does include some still captures of his video data – but still I wanted more. I wanted to see the video, to feel what it was like to ride the streets of London with one of his study participants. This impulse inspired me to think about how I might present my data differently. How could I take these ideas one step further and truly bring readers along for a ride?

One day as I reread Murray's research report I decided for whatever reason to type her name into YouTube, not expecting to find anything much. To my surprise, I happened upon a [short film](#) presenting some of her data backed by an evocative musical soundtrack. It stuck with me.

At my next Cornerstone meeting with Bob, I tried to describe for him the film I had seen. It was during this discussion that we first began to grasp the possibilities of what I might ultimately do with the data I meant to collect. By layering audio data captured during film elicitation interviews on top of the video data collected during the participant's cycle commute, I could provide viewers with a dynamic, multi-perspectival look into the body/mind world of each participant, as (always) viewed through the interpretive/constructive lens of the researcher. Even as the idea was emerging, I could tell by our shared excitement that it was indeed a good one. By making a series of films, we concluded enthusiastically, I could invite readers to ride along with study participants, to feel what it would be like to ride the streets of Vancouver for themselves. And, we thought, that feeling might even inspire viewers to choose a bicycle for their next ride to work.

Satisfied that this was indeed the project I wanted to pursue and informed by the literature described above, I formulated a series of research questions that would help me to plot out a course for the project in a more formalized way. The way one stakes out the measured perimeter of a new house before beginning to dig the footings for the foundation. With a bit of effort, I was able to imagine what my new house was going to look like built up around these questions, and it felt right.

Research Questions

Main Questions

- What does the embodied practice of bicycle commuting mean to Vancouver's cyclists? How can our lived experiences as cycle commuters contribute to an emerging metanarrative that normalizes sustainable forms of urban mobility?

Sub-Questions

- What are the particular affective, kinaesthetic, sensory, cognitive, performative, and symbolic experiences that encourage a rider to commit him or herself to cycle commuting?
- What aspects of a ride do cycle commuters experience negatively? Why? How are these negative experiences negotiated within the context of a commute?
- What aspects of the built urban environment allow for or encourage playfulness on the part of riders? Which ones constrain or threaten the free movement of riders? Does cycling through urban spaces create new meanings of place for committed bicycle commuters?
- What is the nature of cyclists' perceived relationship with other road users (including other cyclists)? How do particular riders experience these relationships in practice, and what do they mean in the context of a cycle commute?
- What is the nature of cyclists' perceived relationship with the rules of the road? How do particular riders experience these rules in practice, and what do they mean in the context of a cycle commute?
- What is the most effective way to present the answers to these questions and to evoke for readers the lived experience of bicycle commuting?

Study Design

With a clear set of research questions in hand, I began to consider the methodological framework that would enable me to answer them most effectively within the scope of my project. The approach I settled upon combines aspects of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), and autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Ideas from each of these schools of thought are folded into my orientation as a researcher and thus influenced the design of the study and the selection of methods for collecting data.

When I considered the project from a narrative inquiry perspective, I could see that a cycle commute is indeed a narrative – an embodied story that unfolds in space and time. To gain access to these mobile stories, however, I would need to get close to the experiences without disrupting them; this is where an ethnographic approach would be invaluable. And as a cycle commuter myself, I was convinced that my own story and experiences would no doubt form a part of the inquiry. To this end, I employed an autoethnographic approach that Ellis and Bochner (2000) refer to as reflexive ethnography. As they put it, “reflexive ethnographers ideally use all their senses, their bodies, movement, feeling, and their whole being . . . to learn about the other” (p. 741). From this solid methodological footing, I developed a study design that would enable me to achieve my goals.

Composing Field Texts

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe one of the tasks of narrative inquiry research as “composing field texts” (p. 92). Composing field texts is a dynamic process that, as a phase of research, has the most in common with what is traditionally called data

collection. However, to refer to the work as “collection” is a misnomer because, “[field texts] are created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 92).

To tell as true a story of lived experience as possible, I worked closely with participants to compose field texts through a variety of methods, including participant observation, video recording, interviews, and journaling. Following the advice of Clandinin & Connelly (2000), these field texts are grounded in, “temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third” (p. 50). Specific research methods are described in greater detail below.

Participant Observation.

I met with each participant for an informal pre-screening conversation, and rode along with him or her on at least one cycle commute to work. These encounters helped me to build rapport with participants and gave me an opportunity to gain their trust as an insider. In addition, my direct experience of each participant’s cycle commute route and routine enabled me to use my own body as a research tool to gain a richer understanding of their embodied experiences. I used my recollection of these experiences to create what Geertz (1973) refers to as “thick descriptions,” creating detailed journal entries to record my perception of the sights, sounds, smells and ‘feel’ of these experiences immediately after they had taken place.

Video Recordings.

Given my intention to explore how meanings are made out of embodied experience, it was critical that I get as close as possible to the actual lived experiences of my participants – as they were happening. However, as Spinney (2010) points out:

One of the key problems with researching these often fleeting aspects of mobility is that mobility is always on the move [...] it is often difficult to apprehend, record and analyze the multiple and transient contexts and experiences of subjects. (p. 164)

Cycling the busy streets of Vancouver often requires one's full concentration, and it is impossible to be simultaneously a fully attuned observer and a safety-conscious cyclist. Conducting an interview while on the move is simply too dangerous. Moreover, chattering at participants while riding had the potential to disrupt the very experience I was investigating.

One solution to this problem is the video camera. The use of video cameras to record mobile experiences has been endorsed by a number of mobilities researchers (Brown and Spinney, 2010; Laurier, 2010; Murray, 2010; Spinney, 2010; Pink, 2007). Video recording technologies create data in which both context and the continuity of experience are preserved, providing, as Spinney (2010) notes, "a way of linking together seemingly unconnected moments to understand how the journey becomes meaningful" (p. 168).

Film Elicitation Interviews.

Video recordings were used as a backdrop for a film elicitation interview with each participant, giving riders the opportunity to offer their own interpretations of the commute experience. Involving participants in the data-analysis process is an ethnographic technique referred to by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) as "respondent validation" (p. 227).

As Spinney (2010) reflects, “video enables the researcher to access aspects of the journey which were previously beyond reach” (p. 167). The ability to pause, rewind and even watch a specific event in slow motion certainly offers possibilities that a live observation never could. Significantly, video allows much of the original context and detail of the lived experience to remain salient while the meaning of the experience can be reflected upon and discussed in a safer environment.

Journaling (sort of).

I kept a journal throughout the ride along and interview phases of the project. My first impressions, interactions with participants and reflections on experience were all recorded informally in a journal. I’ve never been able to fully commit myself to the journaling process, and this time was no different. Following my interviews I slowed down and then eventually stopped journaling altogether. Nonetheless, some of my early journal entries offer an interesting perspective on my thinking during the early stages of this project.

Camera Selection & Setup

As a newcomer to filmmaking, selecting the right tools for the job was particularly challenging. In terms of camera features, I wasn’t sure which ones were absolutely critical and which ones I could do without. In the end, I decided to work with GoPro cameras for a number of reasons: I was already familiar with them thanks to their popularity within mountain biking and snow sports communities. I knew that they were tough, waterproof, easy to use and designed specifically for recording mobile activities. I also knew that there were a number of available add-ons that would allow me to mount

the cameras on the head, chest, or to a rider's bicycle handlebars. GoPro cameras also happened to be the most affordable HD cameras that offered the versatility I needed.

Next I needed to figure out how I meant to use the cameras. Spinney (2010), Brown (2008) and Murray (2010) all used single video cameras to collect their data, but I was determined to capture each ride from a range of perspectives. I decided that my goal would be to record with three cameras simultaneously: 1) rider's point of view (captured via participant's head-mounted camera); 2) view of rider's whole body moving through the cityscape (captured from behind via researcher's chest-mounted camera); and, 3) view of rider's face (captured via participant's handlebar-mounted camera). I purchased three GoPro cameras and proceeded to train myself in their use and functionality.

The first two angles were easy to achieve, as GoPro sells special camera mounts designed specifically for these purposes. However, the third was much more difficult to get right. The bicycle mount I purchased was not providing the camera angle I desired, so I decided to rig up an extension using PVC piping and some questionable (and probably dangerous) power tool techniques. The result, while still not perfect, offered a slightly enhanced view of the rider's face. It would have to do.



The Field

My research was carried out in Vancouver, British Columbia. Vancouver serves as a rich backdrop for this project as there is a significant and growing bike culture here.

Vancouver has a relatively well-developed cycling infrastructure: the circulatory system that carries cycle commuters to and from their destinations. The only missing element is the critical mass of cyclists needed to tip the scale toward sustainable, active mobility.

I contacted potential study participants through a friend at a local bicycle advocacy organization where I volunteer occasionally. My invitation to participate was generously circulated through the organization's electronic mailing list, and I received an overwhelming number of responses. With far too many volunteers to include in the project, I screened out those whose commutes did not pass through Vancouver, and I also decided not to work with those who used electronically-assisted bicycles or "e-bikes."

With my initial screening complete, I still had more volunteers than I had time to work with, so I arranged to meet up with each one for a brief chat and bicycle ride-along. These conversational first encounters helped me to determine whether or not the volunteer in question was a good 'fit' for the project. I sought self-reflective riders with an ability to express their metacognitive insights, and, perhaps more importantly, riders with whom I felt I would be able to develop a close working relationship. Following these meet-ups, I journaled about the experience and subsequently used these journal entries to help make my final decision. The result: a non-random sample of six cycle commuters, half men and half women, travelling between five and 25 km and ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. Their routes pass through a variety of Vancouver neighbourhoods.

The cyclists who participated in the study are bicycle commuters of varying levels of commitment. Four are 'hardcore' cycle commuters who ride to work every day rain or

shine (Brian, Julie, Ruth and Kieran); the other two are fair weather cyclists who avoid riding in the rain or snow (Donna and Aaron).

Ethical Considerations

All of the riders in the study granted me permission to post their commute films online and present study findings at the 2012 Velo-City conference here in Vancouver. All participants but one gave me permission to use their real names in all materials. Given participants' understanding that commute films were to be published online, I believe their consent with regards to name usage says a lot about the level of trust that was attained. I take this trust very seriously and I continue to honour and respect it at all times.

Testing the equipment

To ensure that my live field research would be as productive and efficient as possible, I spent a significant amount of time testing my new equipment and fine-tuning my camera setup. I mounted cameras to my own bike and body and proceeded to pedal around town. It may have been my own self-consciousness, but I was quite sure that people on the street were staring at me. As a cyclist, it's far more common to feel as though you are invisible to everyone else, so this feeling was something new. In reality, most of the people I cycled past probably didn't even notice me. I was clearly invisible to the city bus driver who nearly hit me during one of my test rides.

Near-death experiences aside, I was determined to get the positioning of my cameras right, as I knew that when it came time to record a live commute I would need to be sure of my setup so as to not waste anyone's time. I also wanted to make sure the cameras were not disruptive to the rider's experience – not too heavy or cumbersome.

Once I was satisfied that I had optimized camera positioning, I moved on to the second phase of testing.

I was acquainted with the participant named Aaron (yes, another Aaron) prior to beginning this work, and I knew he would be willing to help me test the equipment in a dry run scenario. His commute is also relatively short, making it perfect for testing. The first practice run was a truly exhilarating experience, as I was not only experiencing the fruits of my labour, but I was also able to observe, live in front of me, how the theory I had been reading applied in the real world. An excerpt from a journal entry written immediately after the first ride:

So much planning and work culminated in this one brief ride; I felt a great release to be on my bike with the cameras rolling. Everything seemed to be set up properly: my bike mount was working and now it was all about the ride. I realized today how different it is to follow someone on a bike at a consistent distance as opposed to just riding. I'm not used to having to think about this. I caught quite a rush as Aaron changed lanes in front of a big truck to make a left hand turn. This isn't something I normally do, but in that split second I just stuck out my signal arm and followed him. I realized in that moment that I would likely get into more situations like this as I ride with others. New routes always hold surprises – and that's one of the things I love about riding a bike. (Aaron Dolan, journal entry, Feb. 10, 2012)

I did four practice runs with Aaron, and they proved invaluable. They allowed me to practice mounting my cameras under pressure and also helped me understand what I

would need to do physically to be able to capture the footage I was after. Following my final test ride, my camera angles and ride-along strategy were set. I was ready to go live.

The Rides

All of my live rides took place in February and March of 2012. I met each rider outside their home prior to their departure for work; I set up my cameras and delivered the cliché researcher line: “Try to forget that I’m here.” As we rolled out on our bikes I settled in quietly behind, only speaking when spoken to. I tried to keep a distance of about 15 metres so as to keep the rider’s body within the frame of the camera, though this proved challenging at times, particularly when riding downtown or in heavy traffic.

From my perspective, each ride-along was extremely satisfying – even those in the pouring rain. Looking back, my data analysis began out on the road as I watched each rider’s commute unfold before me. But I wasn’t just watching: I was feeling, hearing and smelling the ride as well: every texture of the road, every incline, every bird chirping and wood fire burning. I was soaking it all in, using my whole body and all of my senses to gather experiential data.

Once we got out onto the road, beyond the stress of camera setup, I became very contented (as I often am when on my bike). I felt lucky to have been invited into another’s world, permitted to share an experience more as a confidant than a voyeur. And many of these rides took me to parts of the city I had never seen. On several occasions I caught myself gawking at the scenery rather than focusing on the task at hand.

As I followed behind, it was fascinating to witness each rider’s habits and idiosyncrasies as they revealed themselves to me. The body has a way of telling truths

that language cannot adequately convey, and I was trying to absorb it all. More than a hundred kilometres and dozens of hours of video later, my ride-alongs were complete.

The Interviews

A week or two after each ride along, I conducted an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview with the participant in question. Prior to these interview sessions, I provided the raw video data to the participant. I asked them to preview the footage prior to our meeting and take note of anything significant. I intentionally made this request in a very open-ended way, careful not to define what I meant by “significant.”

During the interviews, which took place at the central branch of the Vancouver Public Library, each participant and I re-watched raw footage of their video-recorded journey. I chose the library because I sought a quiet, neutral space. As I discovered, however, the library is not an especially quiet place on the weekend. Some of my interview recordings tell this story in background noise. In hindsight, I should have invested in proper microphones or found a more private location for the interview process.

Despite the noise, the participants and I spent most of their interview reviewing chest- and helmet-cam footage simultaneously, toggling between the two perspectives whenever interesting situations presented themselves. At the beginning of the session, I asked participants to narrate the video for me, walking me through what was going on onscreen. Some participants seemed to take to this task more easily than did others, offering rich descriptions throughout the ride. With some of the less talkative participants, I had to do a bit more prompting: “Could you tell me a bit about what we just saw there?” or, “How are you feeling here?”

By encouraging participants to reflect on and respond to the video data we created together, interpretations emerged co-creatively and the line between researcher and participant often faded away. The dynamics of this mutual space also prevented my preconceptions and biases from running amok, as the rider could immediately validate or reject any idea or explanation I put forth. Murray's (2010) use of film elicitation in her study of children's walking trips to and from school "allowed a step-by-step re-making of their mobile experience" (p. 16), and it was this task the participant and I worked on together.

Following our review of the commute video, I asked a series of more general questions (see Appendix). These were crafted to give me more insight into the participants' self-image and perspective on a range of topics, from the environment to the rules of the road. In some cases, interviewees' answers to these supplemental questions were used in the cycle commute films.

The Films

Inspired by Richardson's writing on creative analytical practice (CAP) ethnography (2000), I analyzed my data by engaging with it creatively. To prepare myself for the filmmaking process, I watched and re-watched every ride from all three camera angles – to the point where I had memorized sequences of action and could anticipate what was coming next. I loaded the interviews onto my iPod and listened to each one over and over again on the way to work. I spent several months *internalizing* all the data.

The next step was the editing process. I cut and pasted together video clips to create sequences that intertwined footage from all three camera angles, careful to

preserve the flow of each ride. I then layered audio from the interviews over the visuals I was creating. (Working with interview data as a visual sound wave is an extremely useful exercise, as the researcher can clearly see the “shape” of the sound: the participant’s pace and volume are easily observed, and changes over the course of the interview can be noted and considered.) As the films began to take shape, Richardson’s CAP technique informed my efforts to “deploy [filmic] devices to re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses” (2000, p. 931). I began to add musical pieces to the films, chosen to match the ride and the rider’s personality.

During the many hours I spent constructing the films, I became ever closer to the data. As Richardson notes of the CAP technique, “trying out evocative forms, we relate differently to our material; we know it differently. We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences, and so on” (2000, p. 931). I cannot speak to whether or not I related any “differently” to the material, as I didn’t know it any other way. But I do know that my approach and methods enabled me to become very intimate with the data, a closeness that led to insights that may not have emerged otherwise.

Each of the six films I created stands alone as a self-contained analysis of one person’s cycle commute. But I alone am not responsible for these analyses. As I mentioned above, my film elicitation interview method invited participants to join in the analysis of their own data, to offer their own insights into the experiences we had lived together. Each film therefore offers layers of data to be peeled away by the viewer: there is the video and audio of the ride itself; there is the participant’s verbal analysis of their ride; and there is my analysis of both their ride and their analysis (the films and film

editing process). I fully expect viewers will add their own analyses to the mix, to engage with and interpret the work in their own unique ways. If this happens, I'll consider the films to be a success.

Reflections on the Filmmaking Process

Making these films would have been an altogether different experience were it not for the fact that I lived every one of these rides as it was happening. A rich set of data remains stored within me as memory, and I was able to draw upon it throughout the filmmaking process. I also drew upon my own extensive experience as an urban cyclist. My background allowed me to adopt an empathetic stance towards the material, and I believe this comes through in the films as well. My familiarity with the subject matter also enabled me to clue in on significant moments that I likely would have missed were I not attuned to the nuances and ambiguities of the cycling experience. Given that I was already fluent in the “language” of cyclists (both physical and spoken), I was able to get more out of the time we shared.

One of my goals for these films, and indeed, one of the reasons I was inspired to create them, is to offer an integral perspective on the cycle commute experience. They are but a humble offering in support of the essential effort to repair the fracture that has come to falsely separate mind and body, reason and emotion (Wilber, 1995) – if only within this one small domain of understanding. As I described in the literature review above, a majority of the cycling research I encountered reduces our motivation for cycling to a rational calculation – ignoring the other dimensions of human experience and motivation. With these films, I mean to offer an interpretation that avoids falsely separating the rational, affective, kinaesthetic, sensory, performative and symbolic aspects of

experience. All these are facets of a person's unified and complex perception of reality, and to divide them or weight them differently is, in my view, at best incorrect and at worst intellectually dishonest. But this is not to say that I avoided all reductionism. Every analysis is also necessarily a reduction, and these films are no different. In constructing them, I made choices about what to put in and what to leave out.

Far from presenting universal truths, each commute film is a construction. Each ride is presented evocatively and it is left to viewers to reach their own conclusions about what they see, hear, and feel. As Murray (2010) notes, "mobile research is ... not about finding 'truth' but about investigating placed narratives" (Murray, p. 23). If I could offer an analogy for my filmmaking efforts, I would liken my role to that of a tour guide: I have spent enough time in this space to be able to offer something of value in my interpretation of these bicycle commutes. But mine is not the final word: the films truly come to life in the infinite number of potential interpretations that others bring to them.

Delivering the Films

When I began this work, I had every intention of doing a traditional research project. I would capture, as data, the cycling experiences of participants, I would analyze and interpret that data and then write everything up in a report. Driven by my passion for cycling, and perhaps more acutely, by my eagerness to share that passion, I sought a deeper understanding of the motivations of my fellow cycle commuters: Do they ride for the same reasons I do? What do they get out of the experience? How does it make them feel? What does it *mean* to them? I imagined that the answers to these questions could be useful in some way, but I wasn't sure how.

As the project evolved, I began to think about the people who would ultimately engage with it in its completed form. What effect would the work have? What effect did I *want* it to have? In seeking answers to these questions, I realized that what I truly wanted to do was effect change – not within academia, but on the streets and roadways we use everyday. Completing the coursework for this master’s program made one thing abundantly clear: if we hope to halt (or at least slow) humanity’s tragic slide toward catastrophe and widespread system collapse, we need to engage our neighbours in the change process.

As I considered this larger purpose driving my efforts, the notion of contributing a new and unique type of research to my field became less interesting to me, and I became focused on the difference the project could ultimately make in people’s lives. I wanted to take it that extra step – beyond simply “fulfilling requirements.” I wanted the results of my effort to be put into action... now. I wanted to contribute to the change that everyone I’ve encountered in the Environmental Education and Communication program at Royal Roads University so desperately wishes for this world.

As I came to terms with this realization, I began to see myself as a conduit: someone who could translate the experiences of cycle commuters into an evocative form, packaged to be both engaging and highly accessible. I wanted to reach out to the would-be cyclists in my community: people who might consider cycling if only they could *feel* the experience for themselves. I was confident that my films could be useful in this regard, but how could I deliver them to the people?

Last summer, I presented some of my preliminary findings at the Velo-City conference here in Vancouver. At the time I had created a single film and it was the focus

of the talk. Going into the conference, my plan was to create five other films that would be appended to my final written thesis report. The talk itself went moderately well, but, looking back, it was what happened afterwards that set the project on the course that has led me to where I am today. As I was packing up my things, several audience members approached me to ask if I would give them permission to post my film on their own advocacy websites. They were confident that it would encourage people to get out and try cycling. These people saw the project's true potential long before I did.

It wasn't until several months later, when I sat down to begin writing up my 60-80 page report, that the idea finally slammed home: I would create my own website, post my films there, and deliver them directly to the people I created them for. And so, months after a handful of astute individuals suggested how I might make best use of my commute films, *Bike to Work Vancouver* was born. It's interesting how a perfect stranger can unintentionally alter the course of one's life.

Limitations & Delimitations

By focusing my research in Vancouver, British Columbia, my research was limited by the particulars of this locale and may not be representative of the realities of cyclists living in other cities or communities. Vancouver's relatively well-developed cycling culture and infrastructure certainly played a role in determining project outcomes. The research was further limited by the technical capabilities of the instruments used: GoPro cameras for recording video, iPod for recording audio and Final Cut Pro X for editing the films. My own biases and preconceptions, which inevitably influenced the project as a whole and would have had a particular influence on the filmmaking process, also acted as a limitation.

The research project was delimited by the choices I made in selecting research participants. Obviously, my findings would have been completely different had I chosen a different set of cyclists. The project was also delimited by my decision to focus on the intimate and personal lived experiences of bicycle commuters. These experiences, while they may be similar to those experienced by others, are unique to the individuals in the study and cannot be used to make generalizations about the cycling community as a whole. Finally, this work was delimited by my decision to analyze my data creatively, through filmmaking. Clearly, the results would have been different had I used more traditional methods. However, I stand by the choices I made throughout this process and I am convinced that the methods I employed helped me to create a unique and thought provoking piece of research.

Credibility

As I discussed briefly above, I attempted to use my commute films to represent, without judgment, the lived experiences of participants. While I acknowledge that my own subjectivity makes this goal an impossible one, I intentionally offer the commute films as open-ended pieces within which viewers may come to their own conclusions and find their own meanings. My project findings, presented as films, are credible insofar as they enable the viewer to *connect with* and *relate to* the human experience of cycle commuting.

Findings

One of the challenges I set out for myself during the early stages of this project is contained in one of my primary research questions: *How can our lived experiences as cycle commuters contribute to an emerging metanarrative that normalizes sustainable*

forms of urban mobility? My attempt to answer this question can be found online at biketoworkvancouver.com. Rather than try to explain the site's design and purpose here, I will allow it to speak for itself. In the simplest terms possible, Bike to Work Vancouver (BTWV) is the channel through which I have chosen to share my findings with the people who need it most.

To experience these findings for yourself, please find a computer with a good internet connection and navigate to biketoworkvancouver.com. Once there, click on the RIDERS tab at the top of the page. You will now have in front of you photos of the six generous individuals who volunteered their time to participate in this study: Brian, Aaron, Julie, Donna, Kieran and Ruth. Click on the rider of your choice to navigate to their personal page; there you will find their cycle commute film.

Each film presents study findings in narrative form, as a story that unfolds through space and time. The lived experiences that make up the minute-to minute content of these films become meaningful to riders when experienced as embedded within the rich context of a cycle commute; this context includes both internal and external dimensions and is an integral feature of the rider's whole experience. With these films, every effort has been made to honour that contextual embeddedness. Each film is meant to be taken in as a whole, as a stand-alone portrait of the ride experience – as one attempt at answering my final research question: *What is the most effective way to evoke the lived experience of bicycle commuting?*

Other than the two research questions I've just re-stated, all remaining questions inquire in some way into the lived details of the cycle commute experience. Before you engage with the films on biketoworkvancouver.ca, please take a moment to review the

complete list of research questions included above. As you watch the films, you will hear each of these questions answered in a number of strikingly different ways.

I described earlier how my commitment to cycle commuting has everything to do with the way the ride makes me feel. The simplest yet most profound finding I can report today is that the other commuters I have come to know ride for the same reason.

When you're ready, please take the time to view one of the films on the site. If you like you can go ahead and watch them all, but bear in mind that the total run time for all six is nearly two hours.

Bike to Work Vancouver

BTWV's design was inspired in no small part by Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development" (1978), which is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving ... in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The simple idea is that novice cyclists will learn faster and have an easier time adapting under the tutelage of a veteran.

BTWV was also inspired in part by the work of Rosemary Randall, who writes about the internal and external challenges associated with climate change adaptation. In a 2009 article, she describes the need for support structures to help individuals navigate the choppy waters of change. According to Randall, "we need to create support structures that facilitate the process of mourning and provide containment for the anxieties that will inevitably be revealed" (p.126). Though she is referring specifically to climate change adaptation here, I believe the same sort of support structures have the potential to be immensely valuable to anyone seeking to introduce significant change into their life. In

any case, it's not much of a stretch to view cycle commuting through the lens of climate change adaptation.

The Bike to Work Vancouver site invites new and inexperienced cyclists to participate in an online community that includes seven veteran riders (including myself) who act as guides and mentors – we are Vygotsky's "more capable peers." Site visitors have the opportunity to experience six different cycle commute films, and they are encouraged to connect with the riders in these films via functions built into the site and through the satellite [BTWV Facebook page](#). The Facebook page also serves as a space where issues of concern can be raised, discussed and resolved where necessary. By nature of their interactivity, The BTWV site and Facebook page act as Randall's "support structures." They encourage problem solving and knowledge sharing in an environment that supports growth and learning – they enable visitors to pool strengths and discover solutions together.

Dominant Themes

While the findings presented within each cycle commute film on the site are meant to stand alone, as I have said, it is interesting to explore some of the experiences the riders in the study seemed to share. Below I describe several themes that emerged during this study.

I intentionally have not included any of this thematic material on the BTWV website, as I am convinced that visitors to biketoworkvancouver.com will relate to riders in their own unique ways. They will likely discover things about the rides and riders that for me remained hidden, or just beyond my grasp. They will find meaning where I did not. The themes I describe below became apparent to me in part because I can relate to

them. They represent aspects of experience that I have known or felt myself, and there is therefore a little bit of me in each one. Perhaps you will recognize yourself in here as well.

Competition.

Julie, Donna and Kieran all reported experiencing some level of satisfaction and pleasure around competition with other road users. Kieran refers to the practice as “commute racing,” which he describes as a game played among cycle commuters (see Kieran - 3:50). Julie describes the boost of energy she feels when passing another rider, and she remarks that she is particularly fond of passing male cyclists riding expensive bikes (see Julie - 4:45). Donna talks about her tendency to size up other riders, categorizing them by age, fitness and equipment as she attempts to assess whether or not she will be able to overtake them successfully (see Donna - 9:15). In these cases the competition is body vs. body, with equipment playing a secondary role.

Some riders also alluded to competitiveness in their relationships with cars – though this form of competition is experienced in a slightly different way. Both Aaron and Donna describe the act of breezing past cars stuck in traffic as enjoyable. Here the sense of satisfaction seems to be related to a desire to prove to both self and others that a bicycle, ridden skillfully, can be faster than a car. Aaron suggests that motorists overtaken by a cyclist might find cause to begin considering alternative modes of transportation (see Aaron - 16:40). Here the competition is mode vs. mode, with the winner earning bragging rights – if only for that brief moment. This “commute racing” – a physical game played out in a social space by perfect strangers – is an interesting

phenomenon deserving of further inquiry. The competitive leanings of some of the riders in this study suggest that the allure of competition might be used to attract new cyclists.

Connection with weather/seasons.

Several riders described feeling a heightened sense of connection with weather and seasonal patterns. Beyond simply reporting this to me, these riders seemed to take pride in and draw pleasure from this perceived enhancement of their sensitivity. During a discussion about people who make weather-related excuses for not cycling, Ruth suggested that anyone who bemoans the constant Vancouver rain simply doesn't have an accurate perception of the reality of the weather here (see Ruth - 4:40). Following our ride along but prior to our interview, Brian was keen to tell me about a tree along his route that had recently blossomed. I had completely forgotten about the comment, but he mentioned it again as we arrived at that part in his commute video (see Brian - 17:05). Clearly the changes happening in the tree had impacted him in a significant way and he felt the need to share. Julie, as we were reflecting during the interview on the bitter cold of the morning we rode together, mentioned that she takes pride in being an all-weather rider and even feels an affinity with other cyclists she encounters on those less than perfect weather days. Later on in her ride, she eloquently describes the closeness she feels with weather and the shifting seasons – a closeness that she believes sets her apart from the average person and seems to bring her happiness (see Julie - 10:04). Could it be that the pleasure derived from this sense of connection arises in response to the stirring of some primal instinct, from an awakening of one's awareness of the cyclical patterns that sustain us? And what might this sense of connection have to do with sustainable behaviour? According to Light (2003), "a direct participatory relationship between local

human communities and the nature they inhabit or are adjacent to, including urban natural areas, is a necessary condition for encouraging people to protect natural systems and landscapes around them” (pp. 58-59).

Productivity.

All of the riders in the study in one way or another considered their cycle commute to be a productive activity. Most seemed to take pride in the fact that their ride provides an opportunity for them to multi-task and get more than one thing done at once. In most cases, riders talked about combining the need to get to work with the need to exercise (see Kieran - 11:08). Others spoke of their taking the time during a commute to run through their day, consider their next meal or plan their weekend. In our culture, productivity is highly valued and time is short, so it is not surprising that riders gained some sense of satisfaction from this sense that they were completing multiple tasks at once. One of the things that frustrates me most as a motorist is the overwhelming sense of ineffectiveness I often feel when sitting in traffic – the sense that I could and should be making much better use of my time. The commuters in this study all tended to value their ride as time well spent.

Physical Exertion.

A few riders described a sort of rush they experience during segments of the ride where the terrain offered an opportunity to push their bodies. Julie, for example, described her enjoyment of a particularly long hill that she always rides up as quickly as possible. She seems to truly enjoy the way her muscles begin to ache towards the top of the climb (see Julie - 6:45). Kieran also very much enjoyed the physically demanding aspects of the ride, to the point of racing through certain sections in an imagined time

trial challenge (see Kieran - 6:07). Enjoyment of physically demanding activity is something I also experience in my own riding. When I'm pushing my body's limits, there's something about the burn I experience in my lungs and muscles that makes me feel truly alive.

“Me Time.”

Some riders commented that their cycle commute is perhaps the only part of their day that can be enjoyed completely alone: a brief chance to escape the demands of work and family life to allow one's mind to wander carelessly – or to think about nothing at all (see Julie - 3:45). Kieran became quite animated when trying to explain how important this time is to him, describing it as something he can find nowhere else (see Kieran - 10:50). Living in a culture where “time is money” it can be very difficult to find space in one's life to unplug, so to speak. A regular cycle commute, however, presents us with an opportunity to unplug ourselves twice a day. And whether it is the absence of distractions, the fresh air, the repetitive, cyclical motion or some other force working upon my consciousness, a ride will often induce a deeply enjoyable, semi-meditative state in me.

Feeding the Senses.

All of the riders in the study commented on the numerous ways in which they experienced the ride through their senses. Ruth adores the cooling sensation that washes over her as she passes a glacier-fed creek near her home (see Ruth - 3:30). She feels a sense of community when she catches the scent of wood stoves or barbeques on the air (see Ruth - 8:20). When Kieran smells fresh bread baking, he feels as though he is “part of the world waking up” (see Kieran - 0:55). Kieran also draws inspiration from the

beauty he witnesses as he passes through Stanley Park (see Kieran - 6:34). Brian loves the rain – he *really* loves the rain – in part because of the way it makes everything smell so fresh (see Brian - 00:30). And Julie begins to crave her breakfast as she passes by a sweet-smelling pastry factory on her way to work (see Julie -14:00).

There is nothing particularly extraordinary about the sensations described by the riders in the study. In fact they were altogether normal. But that didn't make these experiences any less meaningful to the people living them. When we drive a car, we close ourselves off and often miss out on sensory experiences like these. We use our eyes to see the world, to be sure, but behind our shield of glass we are voyeurs – not participants. When we ride a bicycle, on the other hand, we open ourselves to the world. There is no barrier. This openness can make us feel exposed and vulnerable, but it also makes possible a deep and meaningful communion with the sights, sounds and smells happening all around us.

Efficiency/Self-Reliance.

Several riders in the study associated their cycle commuting with efficiency, a connection that seemed to arouse in them feelings of pride and satisfaction. Aaron described this notion of efficiency as being a part of his overarching philosophy (see Aaron - 6:10). Cycling, he explained, delivers the greatest return on one's investment of energy, which makes it the most economical way to move around. Like a penny-pincher pleased to have discovered an incredible deal on some essential item, Aaron gets a kick out of maximizing the energy he uses. Brian, too, takes pride in the efficiency of cycling – particularly the fact that cycling is a self-powered activity that places very little demand on resources (see Brian - 7:13). Brian even considers the efficiency of other vehicles on

the road and goes out of his way to ensure that they, too, may operate as efficiently as possible (see Brian - 2:35). The fact that bicycles require very little in the way of resource inputs clearly inspired a sense of satisfaction in some of the riders in this study.

Social Connection.

The majority of riders described their enjoyment of the impromptu social encounters they experienced along their route. Brian, probably the most social of the group, spoke about how much he enjoys striking up conversations and joking with other cyclists on his commute (see Brian - 10:20). As we watched his video, he pointed out specific spots where he would normally expect to run into familiar faces – all people he had come to know through his daily cycle commute (see Brian - 14:50). Ruth told me a story about how, during cruise ship season, she loves to pause at the top of the Lion's Gate Bridge to wave at the people passing beneath her on the decks of the massive cruise ships (see Ruth - 17:39). Julie told me all about an older man she passes everyday along her ride. Though the two of them hardly interact, coming into contact with a familiar face seemed to make her feel happy: "I love him!" (see Julie - 13:30 & 14:58). Several of the cyclists in the study reported striking up spontaneous conversations with other cycle commuters, amicable exchanges that would last a few blocks and often end abruptly as one or the other turned off the main route toward his or her destination. In my experience outside of cycling, this type of interaction is becoming increasingly rare, and our single occupancy motor vehicles are not helping.

The "Dominant Themes" outlined above are not meant to be an exhaustive list. They are simply the themes I felt myself identifying with most readily. My hope is that, in watching the open-ended films I assembled, viewers will find inspiration in the themes

and ideas that resonate with them personally – whether or not they match my own. I would also add that the next time an organization is considering strategies for encouraging cycling, this list of themes might be a good place to start.

Conclusion

Bike to Work Vancouver is a dynamic website that will continue to evolve well beyond my time at Royal Roads. I've created it because I intend to use it as part of a real-world campaign to inspire the would-be cyclists in my community to take up riding for themselves. By encouraging beginner-to-veteran interactions around the six cycle commute films found on the site, I mean to create a space for the kind of discussion and dialogue that I believe will support the growth of cycling in Vancouver. My own voice is added to this discussion via the BTWV blog also housed on the site, which I will use to share some of my own insights and experiences related to cycling in and around Vancouver.

Following project approval from Royal Roads, I intend to pursue partnerships with the City of Vancouver and with HUB – Metro-Vancouver's leading cycle advocacy organization. With partnerships in place, I plan to soft-launch the site in the coming weeks. During the initial push to deliver BTWV to its intended audience, I will be printing biketoworkvancouver.com stickers and affixing them wherever I can along the most popular bike routes in the city. My hope is that a strategic but relatively inexpensive guerilla marketing campaign can help draw attention to the URL and generate the initial traffic I will need to get the site off the ground.

Ultimately, the true measure of this project will take place outside of Royal Roads, in the community for which it was intended. I am keen to see how the project will

evolve over time, and in that sense, I suppose this is more an anti-conclusion than a conclusion.

Future Applications

When it comes to change making, today's economic, social, political and environmental activists have their work cut out for them. Human beings face significant challenges, many of them symptoms of deeply rooted and often invisible flaws in our belief systems and ideological structures. These challenges threaten our collective ability to lead peaceful, happy, healthy lives. So how can we empower people to embrace change and overcome these challenges? Bike to Work Vancouver represents my attempt to answer this question within the scope of sustainable transportation. I believe there are two aspects of the BTWV project that have potential applications in a range of different areas: 1) Real people and real stories, and, 2) The power of technology to connect.

First, I am convinced of the transformative power of storytelling. I believe that stories are some of the most powerful tools at our disposal when it comes to building a more just and sustainable society. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1990), "stories function as arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life or community as lived" (p. 8). When presented artfully, whether through film, the written word or some other form, a human story can encourage understanding and inspire empathy.

Stories help us to connect with others in deep and meaningful ways because they enable us to see the world through the eyes of another. By stepping outside of our own perspective for a moment, we begin to see ourselves in new ways. That opportunity to think metacognitively about and be critical of our own perception of reality is priceless,

as we can find in that space the inspiration to try something new or face some challenge that previously felt insurmountable. We can use our new understanding to reconsider the way we lead our lives, and we can imagine ourselves living differently, living *better*.

I hope that other change-makers will find in my project the inspiration to enfold storytelling into their own efforts. Whether they seek change in our political systems, or want to inspire people to stand up against a pipeline or become more active in their communities, I hope they will embrace the power of stories to make a difference in people's lives.

Second, I believe the Bike to Work Vancouver project demonstrates one of the ways technologies can be used to explore and share human stories. I made use of GoPro cameras, voice recorders and video editing software to produce the films on the site. 15 years ago these technologies would not have been accessible to me as an unfunded researcher. Today, just about anyone could feasibly duplicate this project. I hope change makers who come into contact with BTWV are inspired to think of new ways to incorporate modern technologies into their own efforts. With a few pieces of relatively inexpensive technology, a creative mind and the will to try and make a difference in the world, there really is no limit to what we can accomplish.

As a web-based support group, BTWV also demonstrates how online technologies and social media can be used to help people connect around a given topic of interest – particularly where some form of personal or collective change is the goal.

Given the reality of climate change, it is imperative that we develop new strategies for living through and adapting to change – strategies that enable us to embrace change as an opportunity rather than fear it as a threat, and ones that make it easy for us

to pool our resources as we work toward a common goal. Because they create a space for dialogue and the sharing of experiences and knowledge, I believe that online support groups like Bike to Work Vancouver can be particularly useful in this regard. I would be very interested to see other such projects develop around other areas of climate change adaptation. If run with integrity and real hopefulness, I believe such efforts could be hugely powerful.

Above all else, I hope this project inspires people to think creatively about new ways to make a difference in the world, to think about how they can contribute to a new positive vision of the future. As Moser suggests, “a grand positive vision may well be something that no one creates but eventually emerges out of a myriad of images, stories, and on-the-ground efforts in developing alternatives” (2007, p. 75). Be passionate and be a part of the change, and let us build a new and better future *together*.

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Appendix

Follow-Up Questions (post-film elicitation)

Experiential

- Can you tell me about how you settled on your cycle commute route?
- Can you tell me about a negative experience you've had while cycle commuting?
- Can you tell me about a positive experience you've had while cycle commuting?
- Can you tell me about what you see as the drawbacks of cycle commuting?
- Can you tell me about what you see as the benefits of cycle commuting?
- Can you tell me a bit about your relationship with the rules of the road?
- Can you tell me a bit about your relationship with other road users?

Past, Present, Future

- Can you tell me about how you first came to cycle commuting?
- How do you see yourself as a cycle commuter?
- Can you tell me about your relationship with environmental sustainability?
- Are there actions you take in your daily life that are directed toward living more sustainably?
- How do you see yourself fitting into Vancouver's plan to be the "greenest city in the world" by 2020?
- As a cycle commuter, do you ever think of yourself as setting an example for others?
- How do you think other road users see you? How would you like them to see you?
- What do you think it will be like to be a cyclist in Vancouver 50 years from now?
- How do you think your cycle commute today relates to that future scenario?
- What is it like to watch your cycle commute on video like this?
- Is there anything that we haven't covered that you think I should know about your cycle commute experience?