Philosophy of the City

D. R. Koukal*

Detroit Bike City and the Reconstitution of Community

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Abstract: In recent years a burgeoning bicycle culture has reanimated the city of Detroit. The following essay analyzes this reanimation through the themes of embodiment, mobility, spatiality, and the inter-subjective creation of place, using the techniques of phenomenology. The description that emerges is an evolving social ontology with implications for cities like Detroit. In such cities any plan for re-urbanization must re-conceptualize both transportation schemas and public space on terrain once dominated by the automobile. The provisional phenomenological description on offer here should be thought of as just one tool in this project, as Detroit and cities like it negotiate the reconstitution of their communities.

Keywords: phenomenology, embodiment, mobility, spatiality, place, bicycling, streets, ontology, transportation, urban

1 Introduction

In recent years the city of Detroit has become home to many large and informally organized bicycle rides comprised of anywhere from dozens to hundreds of bicyclists. These rides or “jaunts” depart from a multitude of starting points and venture into every crevice of the city. Aside from major annual rides like the University of Detroit Mercy Midnight Ride, Tour de Troit, Bike the Bridge, J-Cycle, the MLK Jr. Memorial Ride, and Bike the Blizzard, there are scores of weekly jaunts organized by the Eastside Riders, Grown Men on Bikes (GMOB), Grown Ladies on Wheels (GLOW), the Belle Isle Bike Club, and the Palmer Park Ride, among others. But the largest ride of all is the Slow Roll, which every week from the start of May to the end of October gathers thousands of riders from every point of the compass to collectively suffuse the streets of Detroit.

In what follows, I want to explore this phenomenon using the techniques of phenomenological reflection. This will involve an analysis of collective embodied motility moving through space as mediated by bicycle technology which is changing the meaning of what it means to move through a city, with a focus on the particular situation of Detroit in its present circumstances. This reflective analysis will be augmented by the thinking of various philosophers of the environment and urban estheticians who have done much fruitful work on urban space and the way embodied subjects navigate it. My intention here is take up this work and redeploy it in a way that reveals the larger sense and significance of Detroit’s robust biking culture, and how it is enabling a reconstitution of place. The narrative that emerges describes an evolving social ontology with implications for other cities like Detroit. In such cities any plan for re-urbanization must re-conceptualize both transportation schemas and public space on terrain once dominated by the

* **Corresponding author: D. R. Koukal**, University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit, United States of America, e-mail: koukaldr@udmercy.edu

automobile. The provisional phenomenological description on offer here should be thought of as just one tool in this project, as Detroit and cities like it negotiate the reshaping of their communities.¹

2 The rise and fall of Detroit: a microhistory

Before my philosophical work can begin I must shed some historical light on Detroit so readers have a sense of what it was before becoming immersed in its present circumstances. Detroit has come to be seen as a signifier of urban blight, economic dislocation, and civic dysfunction, at the national if not a global level, but it was not always thus.

Founded in 1701, Detroit became an important industrial hub during the 19th century and eventually grew to be the fourth largest city in the United States. By 1920 the burgeoning auto industry drew a massive influx of African-Americans escaping the Jim Crow south in search of economic opportunity. At end of the Second World War and with the advent of the G. I. Bill, the city became the central birthplace of a prosperous, unionized (and largely white) postwar middle class, and possessed the largest concentration of single family dwellings in the nation. Detroit and its suburbs expanded rapidly, with the city proper reaching a population of almost two million in the 1950 census.²

However, Detroit suffered huge job losses due to restructuring in the auto industry in the late 1940s and increased suburbanization heralded by the start of the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System in the early 1950s. Middle class whites began relocating to the new suburbs in the late 1950s, leaving less economically mobile blacks behind in the city. This worsened already tense race relations in the metropolitan area and deepened the city's economic crisis during the 1960s and 1970s.³ These trends continued throughout the 1980s and by 1998 79% of the population in Detroit was African American, while 78% of the population in the surrounding suburbs was white.⁴ In 1988 no building permits were issued in Detroit.⁵ During the 1990s the city lost 1% of its housing stock each year to arson, and in 1990 alone the city spent \$25 million on the removal of abandoned houses and other structures.⁶ In 1993 Detroit's own Ombudsman proposed that the most vacant areas of the city simply be abandoned. City services to these areas were to be discontinued, and their residents relocated. The empty houses would then be demolished, and the empty areas fenced off to be allowed to return to nature.⁷ By 2000 the population of Detroit stood at just over 9,51,000 – roughly half of its 1950 population.⁸ Struggling under the burden of an estimated \$18–20 billion debt, in 2013 the city filed the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history.⁹

Detroit is presently surrounded by prosperous suburbs with a collective and predominately white population of over four million while the city itself has a still shrinking and mostly black population of roughly 670,000, unevenly distributed over its sprawling 143 square miles. Despite experiencing somewhat of a renaissance in some quarters over the past twenty years, the city remains de-industrialized,

¹ A version of this essay was presented at the annual Philosophy of the City conference held in Detroit, MI, USA on 3–5 October 2019. The author is indebted to conversations on this topic with Terry Berg, Helen Marie Berg, Michael Einheuser, Ben Place, and especially Henry Ford II, master builder at Detroit Bike Company, leader of the Palmer Park Ride, and a regular “sweeper” on the Detroit Slow Roll. The author is also grateful to editors Sanna Lehtinen, Katarzyna Tempczyk, and an anonymous reviewer from *Open Philosophy* for their encouragement in bringing this essay to fruition.

² For the definitive account of postwar Detroit, see Sugrue, *Origins*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau.

⁵ Hoffman, “The Best.”

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The Ombudsman, Marie Farrell-Donaldson, was merely following the recommendations of a report called the “Detroit Vacant Land Survey,” which had been authored by the Detroit City Planning Commission in August 1990. See Waldheim and Santos-Munné, “Decamping,” 104.

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau.

⁹ Davey and Walsh, “Billions.”

impoverished, and racially segregated. In many parts of the city, in the place of once-thriving neighborhoods with bustling street life, one can now encounter sweeping vistas of empty land. Some parts of Detroit's system of alleys are so overgrown that they are impassable to even humans on foot. There are large tracts of the city where buildings of all kinds – houses, schools, churches, shops, factories, etc. – stand empty and in different degrees of collapse, burned out or reclaimed by aggressive urban vegetation. In many places you would be forgiven for thinking you are passing through an impoverished Appalachian hollow dotted with two or three ramshackle lean-tos ensnared in a wild, unkempt landscape, until you recall you are in the middle of a metropolitan area of over 4.5 million people. In the midst of this multitude the cracked, pitted, and crumbling roadways in such places are empty and lined with thick brush, and have taken on an alien, uncanny appearance.

I would like to caution that this historical account of Detroit's decline, culminating as it does with this focus on the city's blighted landscapes, risks the impression of a voyeuristic indulgence in what most Detroiters disdain as "ruin porn,"¹⁰ thereby reinforcing the distorting and unfair stigma of the city. In all fairness, Detroit cannot be reduced to its blight, and in fact it is not difficult to find many neighborhoods animated by what Heidegger would call a nurturing attitude of caring-for [*Fürsorge*] that stand in stark contrast to the sense of abandonment in other parts of the city.¹¹ Nevertheless, I felt it was necessary to give a vivid account of the city's economic devastation and its consequent depopulation because it is a fundamental part of the Detroit cycling experience I will be attempting to describe. Indeed, the now relatively empty streets of the city are a necessary condition of these large rides, which, I will argue, are themselves instances of *Fürsorge* that are contributing to a different sense of Detroit.

3 Embodiment, motility, and the generation of place

Riding a bicycle, of course, involves a body, and so I must give at least a thumbnail phenomenological sketch of embodiment in general, which lies at the center of human experience. Phenomenologically, the body is not just experienced as any other spatial thing subject to physical laws [*Körper*] but rather as something lived [*Leib*]. The lived body is a synthesized, indivisible, reciprocal, and intentional unity of sensory powers and experiential modalities that is dynamically oriented toward the world. In its various modalities the lived body communicates with this beckoning world through mute gesture, opening itself to new kinds of conduct while at the same time reorganizing and transforming that aspect of its world through a particular manner of taking up that world. The lived body is the bearer of felt sensations and is always co-given in experience as a center of orientation. From this center all else is understood in terms of near or far, in front or behind, within or beyond reach, etc.¹²

This points us toward the phenomenon of bodily motility, which is a central aspect of the present investigation. Through its intrinsic capacity for motility the lived body can reposition its center in space in order to bring things into its kinesthetic horizon, so that it may then grasp something that is now near. This motility is at the root of all action, perception, and expression,¹³ all of which takes place within space. All spaces have a "near" and a "far," and the lived body perceptually distinguishes between a "here" and possible "theres," with potential paths between these spatial dimensions. Each space is also experienced as more or less open, and the lived body becomes aware that each space has its edges or horizons which it may

¹⁰ Doucet and Philp, "Detroit."

¹¹ See Koukal, "Detroit," especially 21–3. I should add that what I am referring to here are areas *outside* the heavily capitalized and gentrified development zone that now stretches along the Woodward corridor between Jefferson Avenue and West Grand Boulevard.

¹² The distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* comes from Husserl, and much of the phenomenological literature on embodiment builds on Merleau-Ponty's development of this distinction. See Husserl, *Ideas II*, 159–60, 165–7; and Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 98–153. Also see Pietersma, "Merleau-Ponty," 458.

¹³ Husserl, *Ideas II*.

move toward or retreat from. If it moves toward these edges it will inevitably encounter “thresholds” of various kinds that are experienced as more or less permeable, and which announce a new space.¹⁴

But this is to conceive of space as abstract and featureless. It is vital to remember that the lived body encounters space which has already been inscribed by various cultural expressions in manifold ways, making it already rich in meaning. Space is not a sterile void. Rather, it is always space in a lived and living world that is made even more meaningful by the body’s regular traversing or inhabiting of particular spaces, rendering these spaces more familiar and less alien. In this way, an environment once regarded in primarily spatial terms becomes a lived, meaningful place. As we move into the strange and unfamiliar, “we spread our existence over certain parts of the cultural world in which we are” and make environments our own until we feel “at home.”¹⁵

4 Embodied motility and the typical encounter with the urban

Much could be said at this point about the city: its origins, its historical evolution, how it is defined by social scientists, census bureaus, and other government officials, etc.¹⁶ But in order to keep our focus on the matter at hand, allow me to suggest that in the twenty-first century we typically encounter urban spaces as a center comprised of a series of increasingly hard edges, borders, planes, and byways compressed to various degrees and among which our bodies percolate in different ways, seeking out meaning, rest, and encounters with those Heidegger calls in one context “near-dwellers.”¹⁷

The lived body is always in dialogue with the topography and geography of its environment, and cities are no different. Cities presuppose human motility even as they enable it,¹⁸ but the nearness of things and others in the center of the largest cities call us to move in certain ways and not others. On the one hand, our movement is informed (as always) by perception, but within the tangle of the city our view is never panoramic and always partially obscured by various edges and vertical planes, and this hiddenness draws us further into the urban milieu to explore and “take up” new places.¹⁹ On the other hand, urban environments often exert something like a friction upon us, as crowded pavements, built structures, and temporary barricades co-shape our movements. At other moments of deep urban immersion our bodies quite literally get tangled up in the city: densely packed throngs sweep us away; unavoidable queues force us to near stasis; escalators and other automated walkways hold us on their tracks until the end of their run. This is but another illustration of the tension intrinsic to the human condition, the one that obtains between facticity and transcendence. Just as gravity always exerts a pull on a body attempting to achieve an upright posture,²⁰ the city, like all environments, exerts to some degree an impersonal hold on the prerogatives of a

¹⁴ The term “motility,” according to the *OED*, refers to a capability or power of moving as it relates to an organism; “mobility,” by way of contrast, refers to an ability to move or be moved from one place to another, and is sometimes enumerated among the properties of matter. Throughout the early parts of this essay the former term is employed in the service of what Samuel Mallin calls an essential feature of embodied subjectivity – the body region of motility (See Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty’s*, 45–6). The reason for this is because the current analysis is centered on cycling, where bodily “motility” is so manifestly implicated in bicycle “mobility.” In the latter part of the essay the term “mobility” is deployed in connection with automobility, where the embodied subject is experienced as more akin to inert matter [*Körper*] – though I would argue that even in automobility bodily motility is implicated, albeit to a lesser degree. The two terms might have distinct meanings, but in experience they are intertwined.

¹⁵ Haapala, “Aesthetics,” 40, 44–6. Also see Lehtinen, *Excursions*, 64–7; and Maskit, “Urban Mobility,” 46.

¹⁶ See, for example, Mumford, *City*.

¹⁷ See Heidegger, “Building,” 146–7. Though it should be noted that given Heidegger’s antipathy toward cities it is not clear he would deploy this term in reference to an urban experience. See Heidegger, “Provinces,” 27–30.

¹⁸ Bader and Bader, “Bodily other,” 96.

¹⁹ Crippen, “Intuitive,” 129.

²⁰ Straus, “Upright,” 166–74; Casey, *Fate*, 224. It has been noted that Straus’ essay is sorely deficient in addressing differences of ability and gender, but this fundamental insight still serves our purpose here. See Abrams, “Everyone;” and Young, *Female*, 27–45, respectively.

lived and moving body. But just as the dancer can appear to temporarily defy gravity in her graceful leaps, so can the lived body momentarily escape the pull of an urban environment to take part in an elaborate but in many ways spontaneous dance²¹ that transforms far-spheres into near-spheres, alien-worlds into home-worlds, and unfamiliar places into familiar places,²² all for the sake of cultivating a sense of being “at home”²³ in the city.

There are number of modes of motility available to a lived body traversing a city: on foot, via public transit, as a passenger or driver in an automobile, or on a bicycle or some other form of non-motorized or low-powered form of transport. Each of these modes is worthy of its own phenomenological analysis,²⁴ but before I turn to my main focus – the encounter between cyclists and automobiles in Detroit – it is first necessary to explore the chief geographical features of a more typical North American city.

5 The institution of the street and the primacy of auto-motility

All encounters occur in dialogue with a geography already structured before we encounter it. This is true of city landscapes as well, and so it is necessary to give an account of such landscapes. The chief geographical feature of a city typically takes the form of the street. Generatively, streets emerge from the movement of bodies. Body-subjects, by the very manner of their being, collectively inscribe traces of their movements into the landscape that beckons to them, resulting in narrow forest paths and wandering by-ways, rustic trails and tracks, and eventually country lanes. It is from these initial inscriptions that cities evolve, with more elaborate street systems. As a result, within a population of any density one encounters streets as sign systems that structure space and constitute place, generated by various and complex relationships between individuals and social institutions. Streets express a collective will intended to order a lived world in a particular way, thereby endowing it with intersubjective, social meaning.²⁵

This ordering moderates in various ways the assorted relationships between different body-subjects and their activities, particularly in terms of their motility. In this streets themselves become social institutions that manifest concrete signs of authority. It is in mute dialogue with these authoritative signs that we come to passively defer to them. Thus, the authority of the street is not only established by body-subjects; it is also maintained by the body-subjects who subject themselves to it, which only increases its hold on us.

In many developed countries the predominant manner of motile inscription is the largely linear and geometrically arranged systems of streets designed to accommodate automobile technology. In fact, roads, highways, and street systems are now largely considered extensions of this technology in many parts of the world. The authoritative signs that mark this technology are experienced as edges, borders, and boundaries and factually take the form of curbs, signs and signals, traffic police, street markings, and so on.

The degree to which these have marked the geography of our lifeworld is hard to overstate. In fact, in North America, these authoritative signs protect the imperatives of automobile travel. Even in the continent’s most densely populated cities enormous space is devoted to these imperatives, and then place is created or re-ordered around this space, erecting hard edges that ward off other modes of motility. Pedestrians must walk to the side (on *sidewalks*) and can only cross a street (at *crosswalks*) in deference to legal statutes that privilege auto-motility. In the United States in particular, the further west one goes, away from the older cities in the east, it is harder and harder to find public spaces designed for pedestrians to congregate and rest. All of this is to say nothing of the enormous spatial resources devoted to stationary automobiles in the form of curb parking and large parking lots or structures. The rise of the automobile

21 Jacobs, *Death*, 50–4; Kingwell, *Concrete*, 38–46; Crippen, “Intuitive,” 131.

22 Husserl, “World,” 245–50; Steinbock, *Home*, 179–82; Casey, *Fate*, 224–5.

23 Seamon, *Geography*, 143–52; also see Heidegger, “Building,” 143–62.

24 Jonathan Maskit has done some very important work in laying out a typology of urban mobility and subjecting it to phenomenological analysis. See his “Lifeworld” and “Urban Mobility,” from which I will be drawing as I move forward.

25 Schutz, *Phenomenology*, 15–20.

heralded the decline of public transit in the much of the United States,²⁶ resulting in what might be called the “automutation” of its urban centers. Where bicycles belong in such a geography is ambiguous, because oftentimes there is no “place” for them on the street, at least in a typical North American urban environment.

6 Cycling

Given this automatized urban landscape, it is difficult to recall the pure experience of what it means to traverse space on a bicycle. In order to recapture this experience, I would suggest the recollection of our childhood encounters with a bicycle, after our mastery of the basics but before the authority of the street had a hold on us. I am not interested in describing the complicated biomechanics of riding a bicycle; rather, I seek to reveal the overall *sense*²⁷ of what it means to ride a bicycle, experientially. I think recalling the lived worlds of our youthful selves can help us achieve this end.

In order to move, the modern bicycle typically requires us to lift one foot from the ground and place it onto a pedal, and then the other. And then, in order to maintain our balance, we must move forward in space. A soldier can stand post at attention for prolonged periods of time without walking, rooted to the spot. But from the very moment our second foot leaves the earth on a bicycle the machine urges our body-subjectivity into forward motion, and we must quickly respond to the call or return to earth. We learn that more than anything else it is speed that keeps us upright on our machine. Whether seated in the saddle or standing in the pedals, so long as we continue to pump our legs through the cycle at regular intervals we will remain upright on the machine. Our lived bodies, when fully engaged and intertwined with this technology, want to *go*, and *go forward*. After all, bicycles are not designed to go backwards.²⁸

In accepting this insistent invitation, we leave behind the distinctive rhythmic bipedalism of walking or running. There is still a rhythm on a bicycle, but the cadence of our moving legs is “rounded out” by the series of interlocking gears and wheels of the technology that now mediates our relationship to the earth beneath us. This smooths out the transversal binary of more typical forward human movement on foot, especially as our speed increases. On level ground our sense of being bound by gravity is lessened; our visual center is more highly placed on a bicycle, and beneath us many of the irregularities of the surfaces we traverse are cushioned by the wheels beneath us and the curvature of our tires; we flow into our horizons more smoothly. A bicycle at speed requires that turns be executed more gradually, and these are experienced as a smooth, graceful maneuver we can lean into, like a bird dipping its wing. As the blurred but solid ground passes beneath our wheels we are fleetingly reminded that a surface imperfection, a suddenly appearing obstacle, or an operational error may bring us harshly down to earth again; the cyclist is at least as exposed to these hazards as the pedestrian, if not more so. But caught up in our flowing momentum we maintain the sense of autonomy of a bird in flight through open skies and continue on our way.²⁹

²⁶ Prior to 1950, the United States had a higher rate of public transport trips per capita than Germany. In 2010, Germany’s per capita rate was about seven times higher than the US. Even after accounting for demographics, socio-economics, and other factors, the rate was still five times higher. The low level of public transport usage in the United States compared to other developed Western nations has been relatively consistent. A 2012 comparison among fourteen western countries found the US in last place in annual public transport trips per capita. Reasons for the United States having a lower demand for public transport than Europe include lower density cities, tax policy, and the relative freedom of automobile use in American cities. See Buehler and Pucher, “Demand,” 541–67, and also Mathur, *Innovation*, 1–20.

²⁷ On Merleau-Ponty’s reading, “sense” [*sens*] denotes the trajectory emergence of the lived meaning of a whole that is not reducible to its parts. See Merleau-Ponty, *Structure*, 50.

²⁸ Maskit, “Urban Mobility,” 54.

²⁹ See Maskit’s remarks on autonomy, reliability, and safety in “Lifeworld,” 235, 238.

This sense of flight is augmented by the fact that we typically ride bicycles outside, beneath the sky and in the wind, and (at least in most cities) on relatively flat and even surfaces. In still weather we are allowed to build up speed and then coast for several feet, alternating motion and rest while still maintaining forward movement – a kind of “motion on credit.”³⁰ In the phenomenon of coasting, the bicycle-at-speed grants us a sense of soaring a few inches above our earthbound body-subjectivity, even though strictly speaking we remain “grounded” via the machine. Maximal speed is not necessary to achieve this sense of flight; what is required is just enough speed to maintain steady forward motion in a seemingly frictionless gliding grounded in the roundness of our wheels. On a bicycle we enjoy a larger degree of motile autonomy, and reduced speed and openness to the environment permits us to survey our surroundings more closely, allowing us to slow down further and even stop to explore, like a bird landing to inspect a branch in the shade.³¹

Of course, on rising inclines and in the face of stiff breezes gravity and friction reassert themselves, but adept adjustments of gearing can help us maintain an even and easy cadence even as our exertion increases. If a grade is steep enough we may be called to leave the saddle, stand in our pedals, and gear into the hill. Here our cyclized bipedalism is unmuted to a degree, though the more vigorous pumping of our legs is still absorbed into the cycles of the crankshaft. We struggle higher like birds rising through thin air, but then on the far side of the hill we can tuck ourselves behind our handlebars, drop into a high gear, and streak downwards like a falcon intent on its prey. Or we can resume our seat, rest our feet on even pedals, and coast like an albatross on a long glide down from riding the thermals – and remember, there is air beneath us, in the tires that carry us – enjoying the wind on our skin until gravity and friction slowly return to reclaim us.

On the bicycle – or more properly, *with-the-bicycle*, so long as the technology disappears into its function³² – we encounter not only new spatial horizons and places but also other lived bodies, with which we co-constitute place through bodily gestures that generate what could be called a kind of “social attention.”³³ This attention begins in the simple recognition of others, and in this connection Schutz and Luckmann make a useful distinction between what they call “you-orientations,” whereby we perceive another as another in a face-to-face encounter, and “we-orientations,” when there is a *mutual* recognition of another in such an encounter.³⁴ Given the visibility of the lived body with-the-bicycle there is usually little problem in achieving you- and then we-orientations between cyclists through friendly nods or the ring of a bell. In these encounters there is a degree of intimacy that opens up the possibility of further engagement. So constituted, our cyclized body-subjectivity is another kind of unity that transforms the way we encounter the world by significantly altering our manner of motility. In this unity we maintain a human-scale level of openness and intimacy with the geographical and intersubjective dimensions of our experience while gliding and rounding out our traversal of space in a manner that shapes it differently, thereby re-making place through a kind of “grounded flight,” if you will.

7 Cycling and the typical automotive encounter

In the last section, I temporarily bracketed the presence of automobile traffic from my analysis in an attempt to capture the essence of cycling in- and by itself. It should be obvious that this omission distorts the typical urban cycling experience, but this is part of a strategy of juxtaposition. In this section, I want to “overlay” typical automotive encounters onto the experience of cycling just described in order to show how this experience is altered, while bearing in mind the institution of the city street and the primacy of automotility I described in Section 4.

³⁰ Straus, “Upright,” 175.

³¹ Maskit, “Lifeworld,” 235, 238; and “Urban Mobility,” 50–1.

³² Haapala, “Aesthetics,” 49. Wherein bicycle and lived body have been successfully integrated in a mode of “ready-to-hand,” as Heidegger might say. See *Being and Time*, 69–70.

³³ Bader and Bader, “Bodily other,” 94, 98–102.

³⁴ Schutz and Luckmann, *Structures*, 62–3. Also see Maskit, “Lifeworld,” 231.

In some cities, where automobile ownership is low, automobiles are the second-class citizens of streets predominated by pedestrians, cyclists, and other forms of self- or low-powered forms of transportation. In these and other places there seems to be a broad cultural understanding that both bicycles and automobiles share the same road.³⁵ In denser, more prosperous cities where auto ownership is higher but still not the norm (e.g., in Shanghai and Beijing), streets have been significantly redesigned to accommodate the mass of cyclists that traverse the pavements on a daily basis.³⁶ In many cities bicycles and automobiles cohabitate with a minimum of conflict because these municipalities do a better job of managing these motilities than others. For example, in Amsterdam and other parts of Europe there are dedicated or protected lanes that are designed to safeguard the cyclist from auto traffic, despite the relatively high rate of auto ownership.³⁷

But no matter how well an urban street system is organized, it is inevitable that these two modes of transportation will cross paths. I want to suggest that when a cyclist comes across a moving automobile, even in more hospitable circumstances, it is a significantly different experience than encountering another cyclist or a pedestrian on the street because there is no face-to-face encounter. In encountering an automobile we are only encountering an other by inference through (often ambiguous) signs like brake lights, turn signals, different rates of speed, or the sounding of a horn. The technology of the automobile veils the lived body within, not only for cyclists but for other drivers as well. We might be able to sometimes catch a glimpse of a driver's head and shoulders if the distance, light, and the reflections off the windshield are just right, but more often than not our attention is drawn to the relative mass of the automobile itself, and the manner in which it is moving. This typically prevents a you-orientation, which in turn prevents a we-orientation. This results in a diminishment of bodily intersubjectivity that renders cyclists in particular vulnerable by virtue of a kind of environmental instability.³⁸ In the absence of you- or we-orientations the retentive–protentive dynamic of experience is disrupted by the ambiguous intentions of mostly invisible drivers, which in turn disrupts our own immediate intentional field.³⁹

But in North American cities, and particularly in the United States, there are far more automobiles than bicycles, and, as a consequence, fewer dedicated bicycle lanes like those in other parts of the world.⁴⁰ In such circumstances the rider's sense of rounded, free-flowing flight at low altitude vanishes; exposed to the menacing movement of automobiles, we must surrender our nimbleness and maintain a predictably straight line of travel along the automotive edge, remaining ever alert for potential dangers emerging from multiple vectors. The hyper-presence of automobiles on the American city street disrupts the motile, bodily intersubjectivity of the cyclist to a much greater degree. This is because a cyclist in an American city is not only denied we-orientations with drivers; they are also denied we-orientations with other kinds of subjects. For safety's sake we must still pay careful attention to the pavement in front of us, but must also be constantly vigilant in regard to the heavy masses of shifting metal moving around us at relatively high speed, all while reading the various sign systems meant to structure this movement. All of this shifts the attention of the cyclist away from other cyclists and pedestrians and works against intersubjective recognition, rendering the cyclist alienated within an inhospitable space. In fact, I would argue that in the US most motorists experience riders as interlopers into a space designed exclusively for automobiles – which, in most cases, it is.

³⁵ For example, when I was an American undergraduate studying in Oxford I remember being amazed that cyclists could casually signal their way into busy automobile traffic, even in front of massive London-style double-decker busses.

³⁶ See Wetherhold, "Bicycle."

³⁷ Poushter, "Cars."

³⁸ Maskit, "Lifeworld," 239. It should be obvious that this anxiety is also experienced by pedestrians and drivers, and that pedestrians likely experience it to the same degree as do cyclists. For another, more provocative account of encountering an other, see Sartre, *Being*, 254–8.

³⁹ Husserl, *Ideas I*, § 77.

⁴⁰ In 2015 88% of households in the United States owned an automobile while only 53% owned a bicycle. By way of contrast, roughly 80% of households in the European Union owned both an automobile and a bicycle. Poushter, "Cars."

While fully protected bike lanes sometimes provide some measure of security, these lanes still take their design cues from the primacy of auto-motility and are meant to keep bicycles in “their place,” “out of the way” of the flow of automobiles. Though now more safe, the bike lane-bound rider’s open sense of a lived geography is narrowed and flattened out as they are forced to mirror the track of automobile traffic. Whether inside or outside a bike lane, however, our movement is governed by the rules of the automotive road, which is experienced as a more profound disruption of our travel since such rules often dissipate the power generated directly and bodily into our forward movement. It is likely for this reason that we are often tempted to illegally coast through stop signs to maintain our momentum, much to the chagrin of motorists. Motorists stopped at traffic lights also seem to resent our ability to (legally!) pass them on the right and make a (legal!) right turn.⁴¹ Such instances of irritation speak volumes about a deeply sedimented sense of automotive privilege, and such situations only become more fraught as the density of the city increases.⁴²

8 Detroit Bike City, the collective cyclized body, and the re-enunciation of Detroit

But what happens when the population of a large North American city is greatly diminished? What happens to the institution of the street in such a city, especially in regard to the relationship between bicycles and automobiles? What sort of meaning is emerging from these altered transportational circumstances, and how are they altering the meaning of the city in a full and lived sense? These are the questions I am most interested in exploring, in regard to this city, (now) my city, Detroit. In fact, my entire analysis up to this point has been a preparation for taking up these questions. Still employing a strategy of juxtaposition, it is my hope that the description in this final section will begin to tease out some answers.

Answers begin to emerge by returning to our childhoods and recalling the silent spatial invitation that any child whose street is closed for a summer block party instantly recognizes. The flat and open pavement by its very appearance announces a suspension of the primacy of auto-motility. It calls children to it, and they immediately respond by moving over and across it on foot and bicycle, unbound by the rules of the road and soaring like birds uncaged to fly freely into an open sky. In its closing, the street is still “lived” by way of being transformed from a thoroughway for automobiles and reconstituted as a temporary gathering place, and in this transformation it is being “cared for.” The closed street is not empty but is the site of new possibilities, created through this mode of care.

Detroit has a street system designed for two million people but has less than half that population today, leaving many of its streets empty or near-empty, but they have not been temporarily closed. This is a different kind of emptiness, born of a different kind of care – “caring about.”⁴³ This less nurturing and more aversive kind of care has rendered large portions the city devoid of inhabited buildings and viable street life by way of withdrawal. There are fewer lived bodies, and in the most desolate neighborhoods the absence of their movement, bodily gestures, and faces deprives us of the social cues we normally rely on to help us navigate an urban landscape. This all amounts to an erosion of social attention where the decomposing landscape moves to the fore of our attentional field.⁴⁴ The absence or near-absence of bodily co-presence gives these neighborhoods an eerie, uncanny appearance, and the lack of crowded sidewalks

⁴¹ It should be noted that some states have adopted versions of what has become known as the “Idaho stop” law, which allows cyclists to treat stop signs as yield signs and stop lights as stop signs. See League of American Bicyclists, “Bike Law.”

⁴² As a consequence, bicycle riders in the United States often escape the attention of motorists, resulting in uncountable near-misses and sometimes serious injury or death. In 2018, 857 bicyclists were killed in traffic accidents in the United States. See National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

⁴³ The reference is again to Heidegger’s care structure. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 191–6; and Koukal, “Detroit,” 18–23.

⁴⁴ Bader and Bader, “Bodily other,” 102–3.

deprives inhabitants the opportunity of engaging in the spontaneous and elaborate urban choreography that takes place in more vital cities.⁴⁵ The relative lack of body-subjects means fewer “eyes on the street,”⁴⁶ which further reduces the viability of the city. Such streets are like empty stages, with no one left to appropriate and enunciate the space.⁴⁷ Yet as the population has decreased so has the number of automobiles, opening up large areas of the city to the possibility of alternative modes of traversing it, opening up new avenues of spatial – and more importantly, social – enunciation. Detroit Bike City has engaged this newly available space and is re-inventing its meaning.⁴⁸

An informally organized bicycle ride in Detroit starts in a way similar to the summer block party – with a gathering, a meeting-up, an intersubjective *encounter*. However, in the case of the block party this encounter is comprised of nearby neighbors, is confined to a relatively circumscribed area, and is a relatively private affair involving friends or at least acquaintances. By way of contrast, in the larger Detroit bicycle rides cyclists come from across the metro area to prepare their machines for a round-trip through a portion of the city – they are decidedly mobile and public affairs. Cycling *can* be a private affair, but in Detroit gathering for a bicycle ride is more akin to gathering to board a city bus. Detroit Bike City is analogous to public transit in that one moves in space not only with friends and ride regulars, but also complete strangers. Communication through speech acts, sign systems, and bodily gestures indicate that distinct streams of subjective consciousnesses are at least temporarily coming together.⁴⁹ Acts of reciprocal attention bring all of us into more intimate involvement with each other, and these streams of disparate consciousnesses eventually become synchronized and, through social interaction, interlocked.

This simultaneity is the essence of the social relationship, and forms the foundation of intersubjective understanding, partnerships, and other modes of shared activities with our contemporaries. Just as bus passengers heading to a football match become more familiar with each other because of their shared allegiance to their team, so do the cyclists who gather for Detroit Bike City become familiar with each other by virtue of their shared motile activity. As cyclists, we attend to each other as social agents that share a world through which we can coordinate activities.⁵⁰

What emerges from these coordinated activities is a *collective cyclized body*, which may vary in extent depending on the number of riders. As this collective cyclized body starts to move it becomes increasingly synthesized, dynamic, and meaningful. Each person is one with whom we share a community of space and time, our experiences flowing side by side. Each lived body within this gesture, by virtue of being its own center of orientation, is aware of the proximity of other lived and cyclized bodies, of possible tactile contact with them, the direction of their movement and the focus of their attention, all of which it shares.⁵¹

Each part of the collective cyclized body synchronizes itself with the whole in a way that is reminiscent of a school of fish, where each aquatic organism seems hardwired to move in unison with all the rest. Yet within this collective cyclized body the self is not lost but amplified; the “I” becomes a “We.” There is a kind of transient intimacy in this synchronicity of wills that moves in a unitary way with a constantly changing cast of strangers,⁵² crossing thresholds, filling spaces, generating replicated gestures, and swarming around

⁴⁵ Jacobs, *Death*, 50–4; Kingwell, *Concrete*, 38–46.

⁴⁶ Jacobs, *Death*, 35.

⁴⁷ de Certeau, *Practice*, 97–8.

⁴⁸ Detroit Bike City is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting cycling in the city of Detroit. Through weekly rides, tours, bike-in theater, and events/shows, Detroit Bike City is continually contributing to the growth of bicycle culture in the city with a goal to further bicycling not only as a health initiative, but also to help improve Detroit's image in order to repopulate it (see Detroit Slow Roll). Here I am using the name to denote Detroit's biking culture more generally. It should be noted that the organization is more social than political in nature, and should not be thought of as another version of Critical Mass, which at least in its germinal stages took the form of direct action on behalf of the rights of bicyclists (see Critical Mass and Garofoli, “Critical mass”).

⁴⁹ Maskit, “Urban Mobility,” 46–8, 53.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Also see Bader and Bader, “Bodily other,” 99; and Schutz, *Phenomenology*, 102–18.

⁵¹ Bader and Bader, “Bodily other,” 99; and Schutz, *Phenomenology*, 163. The description is reminiscent of the peloton in a bicycle race, though what motivates this collective cyclized body is community rather than competition.

⁵² Maskit, “Urban Mobility,” 53.

objects. This new kind of motility is marked by a heightened sense of vulnerability whereby the bodily welfare of individual riders is safeguarded by this synchronicity – one does *not* suddenly brake to retrieve a dropped water bottle, which would risk a breakdown of this synchronicity not to mention scrapes, cuts, and bruises. Indeed, the collective cyclized body actively seeks to maintain this synchronized movement, calling out stops and turns and shouting out warnings of obstacles (“Car up!” “Pothole!” “Glass!”) so the body can flow gracefully around these hazards. At the same time, in cases of mechanical breakdowns or spills, a portion of the collective cyclized body rushes to the scene like red blood cells moving to heal a wound in the body, and then rejoins the whole when it is able. These are all the ways in which this body gestures in reply to the beckoning streets of Detroit, opening itself to new kinds of conduct while at the same time reorganizing and transforming the city through its particular manner of taking it up.⁵³

But as I’ve already mentioned, not every street in Detroit is empty. Though it is possible for large bicycle rides to go miles without encountering any significant automobile traffic, they do routinely encounter such traffic in the more populated parts of the city. This, at first, appears as a restriction to the movement of these collective cyclized bodies⁵⁴ because they are encountering an edge of the sign system attached to the predominant mode of auto motility. Such intersections can appear more or less “thick,” depending on the number of automobiles traversing it. Furthermore, this sense of “thickness” is intensified when we recall that the motorized body-subjects are integrated into this technology to such a degree that the bodily gestures with which they typically commune with their environment are almost entirely muted. As already noted, body-subjectivity is ensconced within this machinery and more inferred than apparent, and the mass, metal, and relative speed of an automobile presents as a form of dehumanized menace, which forestalls the emergence of you- and we-orientations.⁵⁵

Yet the collective cyclized body – as a *collective* – has its own kind of “thickness,” which, unlike a single rider, commands the attention of motorists, and not just because of its extent. The more obvious vulnerability of the riders comprising it presents it as more of a living, humanized body, a humanized body with a multitude of faces which can be pointed toward motorists, affording the possibility of social recognition and perhaps even announcing the presence of a human obligation.⁵⁶ Collectively, the cyclized body has a façade in a way that collective motorized body-subjects do not, and in this façade there is an implicit appeal to the humanity hidden within such motorcades. The bodily gestures of the collective cyclized body are also significantly more visible, and so in such encounters the communicative initiative falls to this body. A typical ride includes a crew of “sweepers” who shepherd this body along its route, and so at intersections with automobile traffic it falls to them to act as agents on behalf of the collective cyclized body. Here the sweepers wait their turn, then proceed into the intersection to engage the stopped motorists at the cross-street, as if negotiating to allow a third party to pass through a door. After the negotiation is complete the sweepers wave the rest of the ride through, and the motorists wait while the ride passes against the signal.

Two facts should be mentioned at this point. First, recall that many of these rides have hundreds of participants, with the Slow Roll occasionally exceeding 4,000 riders,⁵⁷ so sometimes it takes a while for the cyclists to pass. And secondly, most of these rides regularly transgress traffic laws, and motorists are not legally obligated to surrender their right of way to these collective cyclized bodies.⁵⁸ Yet I have never witnessed these rides being received with anything other than forbearance on the part of motorists, establishing an at least temporary synchronicity between bicycles and automobiles in the midst of a spatial culture hostile to such transportational cooperation.

⁵³ Matthew Crippen offers some very vivid examples of dynamic group coordination in both the biological and the social spheres. See Crippen, “Body Politics,” 93–4, 98.

⁵⁴ Husserl, *Ideas II*, 159–60, 165–7.

⁵⁵ Schutz and Luckmann, *Structures*, 62–3.

⁵⁶ Levinas, *Ethics*, 85–92.

⁵⁷ Ford, private correspondence.

⁵⁸ Only after the Slow Roll reached a certain size did the city require it to obtain a parade permit and a police escort. However, it began as an “unofficial” ride, with no permit or escort. Ford, private correspondence.

From whence does this forbearance come? It is not the same as waiting for a funeral procession to pass, out of deference to the deceased and their mourners. And it doesn't feel like the tolerance that obtains when encountering a street parade like those in New Orleans, though it might be closer to these in spirit. In order to shed light on this phenomenon I would like to return to Michel de Certeau's provocative assertion that the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language,⁵⁹ and extend this notion to the encounter between Detroit Bike City and the city's depopulated streets, as well as to who still drive automobiles within its environs.

Linguistically, a speech act is an appropriation of an existing language system through a performative enunciation which brings its parts together differently for those sharing the same language.⁶⁰ Analogously (and ontologically), street systems can be performatively appropriated in different ways that change or at least gesture toward different meanings. Detroit Bike City is precisely such a performative appropriation, and one appropriate to its concrete situation. It would have struck a discordant note in the Detroit of the 1940s and 1950s, when there were no vacant streets to call it into existence. But in the present moment the empty and eyeless streets that mark vast portions of Detroit provide a necessary counterpoint to the city's burgeoning biking culture. Rides as large as those that regularly permeate the city would not be met with forbearance in cities like New York, Toronto, Chicago, or Los Angeles; these are only possible in shrinking cities⁶¹ like Detroit, where care (in the Heideggerian sense) has been radically withdrawn. In appropriating these streets and venturing into areas of the city shunned by many in the region, Detroit Bike City is a re-assertion and expression of care whose speed and fluid movements at least temporarily reanimates areas which one could mistake for the countryside if one didn't know they were in the midst of a multitude.

Detroit Bike City, as a performative spatial "speech" act, brings together hundreds and sometimes thousands of diverse people to ride together through neighborhoods forgotten by society at large on an astounding variety of (mostly) two-wheeled means of non-motorized transportation, many of which are imaginatively customized and decked out with lights and sound systems delivering hip-hop, Motown, soul, and punk. These factual details may suggest similarities between Detroit Bike City and a street parade, and to be sure, there is an exuberant, festival-like quality to these rides, both in the way they are articulated and the way they are received by the citizens of these desolate communities. In this regard, these rides could be seen merely as a playful somesthetic pandemonium that affects a kind of urban catharsis through an at least temporary liberation from the primacy of automotility.⁶² But I would like to suggest that they are also supremely social acts in their synchronicity, and gesture toward the possibility of lifting a small bit of the weight of the world from the shoulders of those who bear too much of it, just as the well-rounded speed of the bicycle allows riders to elude the whole pull of gravity and friction. In political terms, Detroit Bike City models cooperation and solidarity by constituting the simultaneity that lays at the center of the social relationship. In ontological terms, it is an act of world-building.⁶³

9 A concluding remark on difference and Detroit Bike City

It would be audacious to claim that bicycle rides are all that is needed to revitalize and heal this long-suffering city. Detroit Bike City draws not only suburbanites and inner-city hipsters, but also native Detroiters, auto workers, professionals, and civil servants, citizens from the east side and west, men and women and children, gay and straight, bourgeois and working poor, etc. But between motion and encounter there is rest, and for the most part the diverse peoples of the metro area rest their heads in

⁵⁹ de Certeau, *Practice*, 97–102.

⁶⁰ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 5.

⁶¹ Oswald, *Shrinking Cities*.

⁶² Crippen, "Body Politics," 97–102.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 95.

different places at night. This is most manifest in connection with the most salient social fact of American life: racism. In this analysis I have focused mainly on just cyclized bodies and their immediate environment, and left this and other socially constructed differences to one side. This was not a totally arbitrary decision on my part; when I immerse myself into the experience of Detroit Bike City it appears to me that these differences (including race) recede to the background to form a kind of Gestalt for the riding itself. I understand this to be a resituating rather than an ablation of these differences – though I am acutely aware that my own situation as a white, male, bourgeois university professor is likely distorting this dimension of the experience, at least to some degree. Only when we rest together, at a broader social level, can we plausibly claim that the city and its environs are on the mend. Detroit Bike City only announces a possibility, and much more work – both theoretical and practical – needs to be done before it can become an actuality.

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