

EXPLORING BICULTURES

A new research network focuses on the cultural life of bicycling

BY ADONIA E. LUGO



Adonia Logo (center) with participants of the Bicultures Roadshow in Davis, Calif.

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THERE ARE MANY BIKE CULTURES IN DIFFERENT PLACES AND
AMONG DIFFERENT GROUPS OF PEOPLE.

We may ride our bikes individually, but we build meanings around bicycling together.

That's why we talk about "bike culture." With our friends who bike, we share tips about gear, routes, and even specialized language. Bike research in planning and engineering tends to focus on road design, and those disciplines' quantitative methods translate well into the language that advocates use to show the benefits of bicycling to decision makers.

But what about the social and cultural components of bicycling? If we want to build a bike movement that reaches a wide swath of Americans, we should — and are beginning to — consider how culture impacts bicycling.

A growing number of qualitative researchers in the social sciences and humanities are studying bicycling as it happens in everyday social life. We're showing that there's not just one bike culture; there are many bike cultures in different places and among different groups of people. We think that investigating the multiple meanings of bicycling can shed light on why people do and do not choose to bike.

As an anthropologist finishing a dissertation about bicycling and culture change in Los Angeles, I'm one of these researchers. Last spring, inspired by another scholarly network, the Cycling and Society Research Group based in the UK, I pooled my research contacts with two other graduate students studying the social life of bikes — Sarah Reboloso McCullough and Lusi Morhayim — and we started an email listserv called Bicultures.

As the Bicultures list expanded to more than 100 subscribers, it seemed we should meet in person. We knew the Cycling and Society folks have a research symposium across the pond every year — what if we held something similar in California? With the support of Dr. Susan Handy, the director of the Sustainable Transportation Center at UC Davis, Sarah and I started planning our own experimental conference. Could we



Jenna Burton, founder of Red, Bike and Green, presents at the Bicultures Roadshow.

connect bike research, community, and advocacy?

This April, the Bicultures Roadshow took place in Los Angeles and Davis and showcased local bike scenes for visiting researchers. We started on April 10 with a tour of the L.A. Eco-Village, an intentional community that has fostered the growth of the L.A. bike movement since the 1990s. On April 12, I led 11 scholars on a bike tour of central Los Angeles neighborhoods along Seventh Street, which is a backbone of the CicLAvia open streets event. We had a great time, and that evening, with the help of Ron Milam, the founding executive director of the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, we held an event that brought together scholars and advocates to share stories and create a timeline of key moments in the L.A. bike movement. Sixty people participated in the event, which sparked some conversations that are sure to continue.

After presenting our work at the Association of American Geographers conference in L.A., the conference organizers headed up to Davis, where more scholars and advocates joined us for the first Bicultures research symposium on April 16 and 17. Our 18 speakers presented about gentrification, bicycling as a teaching tool, social theory about the experience of bicycling, the attitudes of

e-bike users, efforts to create city-wide bike networks, using GPS to bring commuters' informal routes into city bike plans, the history of mountain biking and women's racing, community-based bicycle promotion, whether commuters think of themselves as "bike people" at all, and much more.

Then, after our first day of panels at the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame, the 50 or so conference attendees headed out on rides led by local bike advocates and professionals, followed by a bike book reading at Avid Reader and a party hosted by the Davis Bike Collective. Getting out and exploring that great bike town enriched our intellectual debates, and the social events gave us a chance to learn about the projects of conference attendees who did not present.

Based on the enthusiasm we saw during the conference, we're excited to keep connecting qualitative research with bike community and advocacy. The more we recognize that culture impacts why and how we ride, the more we can foster the growth of bicycling that reflects American diversity. ■

VISIT OUR WEBSITE, BICULTURES.WORDPRESS.COM, TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR WORK. THE BICULTURES ROADSHOW TALKS WILL BE AVAILABLE ONLINE THIS SUMMER. TO SEE THE COLLABORATIVE TIMELINE OF L.A. BIKE MOVEMENT HISTORY, VISIT LABIKEMVMT.ORG.