



Clitoral Mass: A Women-of-Color Ride Through Los Angeles

Jennifer Candipan

Every year in the summer, a group of women, women of color, and women-identified riders cycle through the city of Los Angeles to reclaim space and visibility in a city that too often ignores them and their needs. Jennifer Candipan, a participant and researcher, describes and analyzes the reasons and effects of the 2014 Clitoral Mass ride.

On a mid-August Saturday, nearly 300 bicyclists descended upon Downtown Los Angeles's Grand Park to kick off Clitoral Mass 2014, an annual 33-mile, 12-hour-long all-women and women-identified bicycle ride through the four corners of Los Angeles. Clitoral Mass's name is derived in obvious and playful contrast to the more mainstream, male-dominated and popularized Critical Mass that began in early 1990s San Francisco as a monthly political-protest ride for taking back the streets for the people. As this essay will later demonstrate, group cycling events such as Clitoral Mass carve out transcendental spaces in that they enable women, women of color and women-identified members a legitimate and newfound sense of self- and group empowerment through bodily, intense, seemingly mundane but life-affirming practices. Organizers of the event hoped Clitoral Mass would also create a safe space for participants not only in the sense that riders feel physically protected while cycling the city as a group, but also a safe space in that members can talk freely about politics, social justice and issues of identity that differentially affect women and women of color with great support.

Clitoral Mass was organized and sponsored by an all-female cycling collective whose larger membership is comprised mostly of 20- to 30-something Latina women of color. The collective's 12-person horizontally organized leadership is three-quarters Latina; it was formed in 2011 to fill a perceived lack of sisterhood and spaces for women of color in their Eastside community. In addition to the collective, the organizing committee consisted of 10 volunteers (including myself): seven women of color, one white female ally, and two male Latino allies that assisted behind the scenes. Most members of the collective and organizing committee held degrees from four-year universities.

Figure 1. Cyclists convene at the start of Clitoral Mass 2014 in Downtown Los Angeles's Grand Park



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Although ridership for this year's Clitoral Mass was ethno-racially and socioeconomically diverse, the majority of participants in Clitoral Mass were young women of color, mostly Latina, from historically low-income, minority neighborhoods in areas surrounding Downtown and East Los Angeles. Most women at the event seemed to be connected to at least one returning rider or member of the organizing committee. Clitoral Mass participants attended for diverse reasons: the opportunity to tour new neighborhoods, meet other women, learn about issues affecting communities of color, take over public streets and turn heads as an all-female brigade.

Particularly for Eastsiders, bicycling as a practice represents an oppositional mode of self-transport. For these women of color, cycling acquires its meaning particularly in neighborhoods like Boyle Heights and East LA, whose social and cultural debates have been historically framed by transportation (Avila 2014). The postwar construction of five Southern California freeways tore through the mostly Mexican neighborhoods of Boyle Heights and East LA, drawing new neighborhood boundaries, both physical and symbolic. Though Eastside Mexican-American activists initially resisted this freeway construction, they lacked the economic, political and social capital to halt development, thereby leaving residents of affected neighborhoods isolated and feeling immobile. Thus, for Clitoral Mass's women-of-color organizers with social ties to the neighborhood, the act of cycling as a mode of transportation had physical as well as symbolic motivations. The 2014 Clitoral Mass route, by design, connected riders to some of these segregated neighborhoods in Northeast, Central and South Los Angeles. Events like Clitoral Mass thus render communities of color visible in a city like Los Angeles where neighborhoods are segregated by race and class, and separated by physical and social boundaries.

Figure 2. The ride's promotional material announces that the ride is "open to all womyn-identified, queer, GNC [gender non-conforming], two-spirited individuals only!"



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The Street Theatre of Group Cycling

I view Clitoral Mass as a type of public space "street theatre" that incorporates new and creative forms of direct action employed by social movements of the past two decades (Juris and Pleyers 2009). Following an opening ceremony, riders grabbed their bikes and moved into their starting positions at the plaza entrance. Traffic-control volunteers lined up in the front, middle and back. A volunteer tapped a button on her megaphone, producing sounds of police sirens, further stirring up the pack. We took to the street, our bikes flooding into the first intersection *en masse*, blocking traffic momentarily as a patrol car looked on. Spectators across the street snapped photos as they seemed curious about Clitoral Mass's gathering. Minutes into the ride, a driver honked his car horn in support, to which cyclists cheered back. Later, a spirited chant of "Whose Streets? OUR STREETS!" erupted, causing mild stir to a few unsuspecting spectators, one of whom yelled in surprise, "Look! It's all girls!"

Another time, a volunteer charged with leading the pack punched her hand in the air, closing her hand in a fist as she extended her arm overhead. The sign was meant to communicate to cyclists riding behind that the group would be stopping at the light. But the fist-in-the-air sign is also an activist symbol of solidarity, a message imbued throughout the discourse of the ride's organizing group. Soon, dozens of fists punched upward toward the sky in mass display, a scene not lost on interested bystanders.

At one point, I cycled adjacent to a rider on a bike with two stickers that read, “Decolonize our bodies” and “*Sin mujeres, no hay revolución.*” Like many riders at Clitoral Mass, this member views her participation as a way to demonstrate ownership over her body and her movement. The latter sticker also signals the important role she views women as having in sparking social change. Indeed, many participants told me that they felt it was important to ride in solidarity, especially to demonstrate support for a ride organized *by* and *for* women and women of color.

Figure 3. Ride volunteers lead the pack through a stretch of Northeast Los Angeles en route to the first pit stop at Cerritos Park in Glendale, with Downtown LA’s skyline looming in the background



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Others joined as first-time riders to challenge themselves physically to complete the 33-mile ride and said they felt comfortable testing their limits in the company of other supportive women. Upon completion, many expressed a sense of personal empowerment.

Several participants conveyed that this particular ride provided a safe space for self-expression that countered heteronormative gender and racial ideologies. One rider noted how other group rides can “just be kinda like an unsafe environment... very male-dominated,” and so she embraced how Clitoral Mass was “a gender non-conforming ride” that offers an opportunity during which passersby “are forced to notice us” and see that women do not always conform to entrenched Western norms of femininity.

Figure 4. Riders took advantage of a temporary lane closure as they blew past orange cones (“They can’t stop all of us!”) and spread out along the open car lanes in Downtown LA’s 2nd Street Tunnel



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Connecting to Community

Clitoral Mass organizers assert that they are connecting dots among neighborhoods and community agencies in order to strengthen local activist networks. Thus, ride organizers coordinated with members of local non-profit advocacy groups at each of the four scheduled pit stops where cyclists would learn about pertinent social issues affecting Eastside communities, such as gentrification and gang injunctions, policing of people of color, and environmental justice. For ride organizers and the affinity micro-groups with whom they collaborate, reclaim-the-streets demonstrations such as Clitoral Mass serve as unifying acts of protest to longstanding power imbalances that have permeated the historical and political economic development of Los Angeles and its communities. For example, the selection of Echo Park as a pit stop tied the ride back to issue

of gentrification, as this particular neighborhood has for the past decade undergone significant redevelopment and revitalization that threatens the displacement of its long-tenured low-income, minority residents. At another pit stop, we rode past industrial areas before arriving at our destination at the Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) office in Huntington Park, where we learned about environmental racism and environmental justice that has historically shaped the lives of South Los Angeles residents. Here, the bicycle served as a symbol of health in a neighborhood of color in which a long history of toxic facilities has impacted the health of the community.

Figure 5. Clitoral Mass’s route took cyclists into sections of South Los Angeles often rendered invisible in mainstream tour guides



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Reclaiming the People’s Park

Clitoral Mass must be understood with regard to the neoliberal context in which it takes place. The privatization of public space means that public space is increasingly programmed, controlled, under surveillance and directed by capitalist imperatives. This year’s Clitoral Mass route ended at Grand Park, which at the time had programmed a nighttime outdoor movie screening targeted towards a mostly young, middle-class crowd. During Clitoral Mass’s route-planning phase, one volunteer asked, “Are we even allowed to be [at Grand Park during the screening]?” An organizer responded without hesitation, “It’s a public space. Are we *not* the public?!” Another rider added, “I like the idea... of reclaiming public space that is meant for people to, like, be at. And even though it’s not our ’hood, it’s a park, and we’re allowed to be there... and, yeah, maybe it’s not where a lot of brown people congregate, but for that reason I like it... so, we can be, like, f— yeah, we’re here.”

Figure 6. A mariachi band played an impromptu set at the penultimate pit stop at Mariachi Plaza in Boyle Heights, much to the delight of the group



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The “Right to the City”

In his classic essay about the city and social justice, Henri Lefebvre asks, “Who has the right to the city?” The “right to the city” discourse revolves around sets of actors that question whether access to the city is truly democratic; its discussion situates itself around ideas of social justice and social change. I draw upon Lefebvre’s theoretical framework to understand how this bicycle collective uses urban cycling to promote its activist agenda and create new ways of experiencing urban life for women of color. I also invoke Lefebvre’s ideas about beginning the analysis at the scale of the human body. For Clitoral Mass participants, urban cycling becomes a way of embodying space—occupying and being seen in space—to challenge gender ideologies, especially in relation to those that view women of color (particularly for Latina girls and women) as weak, domestic, and dependent.

According to Orum *et al.* (2009), public space can be viewed as a site of performance where people can express and reaffirm their collective identities, as well as resist and challenge identities imposed upon them. Such performances are also ways for people to (re)affirm collective identities (Lee 2009). Group rides like Clitoral Mass raise important questions about the dynamic and dialectical relationship between gender, race and space. Scholars have theorized how bodies become both racialized and gendered in public space (Massey 1994) and how this process reflects relations of power in the social order. But this process of gendering and racializing bodies in space can also bind groups together. Such seemed to be the case with organizers and participants of Clitoral Mass, whose shared experience as a marginalized population—as women, women of color, women-identified persons—bonded them in solidarity, and whose gathering challenged representations based on race, class and gender.

New maps, new movements

Spaces become activated through acts of rearticulating everyday movements. For Michel de Certeau (1984), the act of everyday walking becomes a way by which a space, such as the street, is activated through coordinated (and often contested) movements that have the potential to “impress a new path into the urban fabric” (Urry 2007, p. 72). Aligned with the ideas of Lefebvre and de Certeau, the organizers of Clitoral Mass put forth a program that, through the act of bicycling the four corners of the city, becomes a politics of everyday resistance to oppression and privatization. It is through the act of cycling that members construct new choreographies of selfhood and create new mental maps out of these new movements. Also useful is thinking about the sheer amount of coordination required to literally stop traffic. How much formal organization goes into collective choreographies of change? And in the spirit of everyday anarchism, what does it take not to obey the literal and figurative red light (Scott 2012)?

Lefebvre (1991) wants us to think about how we produce space and relationships of spaces that are completely contradictory to the official ways that space is produced. In the case of Clitoral Mass, its people-of-color ride allows members, through the practice of group cycling, to produce new spaces and new narratives of urban life for women of color that have been historically marginalized. The idea of cycling as a means of taking over a space in protest becomes a way by which members begin to think about how to engage in subversive acts of resistance on a daily basis. Clitoral Mass, as a case study, helps us understand how women and women of color negotiate, reframe and rethink the urban spaces in which its members live as a means for creating and/or imagining a new way of living.

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