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## Throughlines: Exposing Activism and Social Justice Issues in Los Angeles Transportation History

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Protesters' shouts of "no justice, no peace" ring out over the rows upon rows cars forced a standstill on the 405, one of Los Angeles' busiest highways, on a July night in 2016. This recent protest by Black Lives Matter is notable and representative of an emergent social movement strategy. More than more than half of the 1400 protests relating to Black Lives Matter movement in nearly 300 U.S. and international cities from August 2015 to November 2015 effectively shut down transportation infrastructure (Badger, 2016). This contemporary activist practice can be seen as a logical tactic that shares roots with the historical occupations of schools, restaurants and administrative offices that occurred during protests in the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, as an earlier generation of activists rallied against racial segregation. Our proposed project makes accessible for the first time the history of transportation in Los Angeles and demonstrates through interactive maps, archival documents and audiovisual materials, as well as recorded oral history interviews why Los Angeles highways have become a productive site of protest. Contemporary highways are historically situated sites of contestation in which previous generations of racialized communities have paid the high price for Los Angeles' development into a renowned center of both commerce and culture.

Historian Eric Avila's (2014) *Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* focuses on the racist highway projects that targeted and sought to isolate minority communities. With origins in the Jim Crow South, he argues, "federally funded highways were instruments of white supremacy, wiping out

black neighborhoods with clear but tacit intent" (p. 43). Post-War Los Angeles, like many American cities, saw a rise in the prosperity of white, middle-class Americans who racialized desires and fears led them to towards suburbia in Los Angeles county and beyond. Redlining, restrictive covenants, and other practices of racial discrimination kept the dream of suburban home ownership out of reach of racial minorities. The new American dream came hand in hand with another new phenomenon, traffic. Highways, according to urban planning historian Joseph DiMento (2009), were recommended by urban planners as "the greatest single element in the cure of city ills. The federal government had stepped in by 1956 to cover the construction costs for highways by up to 90 percent. Much of this federal funding was also used by cities to rebuild and "redeem" urban areas (Semuels, 2016). New highways were not only placed not only as to move residents easily into suburbs and to other cities in the region, but were strategically planned and right placed by cities to eradicate what were termed "slums" and "blight," areas heavily populated by persons of color and the poor (Semuels). Thus highways came to break apart rich and long-standing communities of color in Los Angeles and throughout the United States.

From the Chicano artists' depictions of the highway in East Los Angeles to second-line jazz parade in New Orleans, Avila illustrates how performative activities pleasure and protest by inhabitants remediate the spaces near highways to promote and reflect their own diverse perspectives, practices, and lived realities. East Los Angeles serves an important example of a racialized working-class community threatened by the construction of freeways. In the 1960s, the 60, 10, 101, 710, and 5 Freeways were all extended to cut through the East Los Angeles neighborhood. This environment spawned what Raul Homero Villa has coined as East LA's "expressway generation," from where some of East LA's finest muralists emerged. Throughout the 1970s, ASCO, one of the area's most important Chicano art collectives, used the walls of the freeways as a canvas to paint political slogans, like "Pinchi Placa Come Caca" (Fucking Pigs Eat Shit), "Gringo Laws = Dead Chicanos", "Kill the Pigs", and "Comida Para Todos" (Food For Everyone). ASCO turned these geographical sites of state power, the freeways, into forms of communication that expressed the relationship between spatial formation and racial tension.

The Black Lives Matter movement in Los Angeles has strategically returned to freeways. The press release for a December 23, 2015 protest that shut down

a significant section of the 405 Freeway in the Westchester neighborhood explains the reasoning behind blocking freeway traffic. It states, "On one of the busiest travel days of the year, Black Lives Matter is calling for a halt on Christmas as usual in memorial of all of the loved ones we have lost and continue to lose this year to law enforcement violence without justice or recourse" (McReynolds, 2015). Pete White, an organizer with Black Lives Matter and the L.A. Community Action Network, told local news, "In this Christmas season, we're saying there is no mistletoe in our neighborhood, and it's not going to be business as usual" (McReynolds, 2015). Black Lives Matter actions in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 have all resulted in successful and strategic blockages to major thoroughfares, clogging the arteries of the city, and bringing major media and popular attention. The tactical retaking of freeways in a notoriously automobile-driven city is symbolically and materially significant.

We will develop an online interactive repository to provide new access to a descriptive and underrecognized history of political contestation including the urban renewal movements of the mid-20th century, the activism of the expressway generation, and today's Black Lives Matter protests. The necessity of creating and animating this history is most clearly highlighted by the fact that there exists no consolidated archive of the historical images, dates and events related to this phenomenon. Our goal with this project is to provide a resource that would first, document the intersections of freeways, racial justice, and urban social movements in an easily-accessible website and second, promote sustained research and activism relating to this topic. Users are able to curate their own path through the repository, for example, by navigating through the map, or scrolling through archival records linked to particular subjects arising within an oral history. This history will be illuminated through the activation of archival documents, video footage, and oral history interviews with individuals who have been involved in the historical development and issues of access intertwined with Los Angeles highways.

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