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Rites of Passage Proposal
Cycling and Society Annual Symposium
Trauma and Cycling Workshop

About ten years ago I took up riding a bike in Philadelphia, which forever changed my perspective of the city, how I move through urban spaces, and the way I describe my life in the city to outsiders. Soon after I started riding, however, I was hit by a car while on my bike. The incident had a profound impact on my biking experience, and led to a change in how I understand my relationship with urban transportation. My perception of traffic took on new meanings, and in particular, that my body on a bike is traffic. While the experience of riding a bicycle provided me with a new way to interact with the city, the experience of being hit changed the way I understood cycling safety in the urban environment.

These experiences and changed perspectives shaped an overarching question that came to fruition through my experience. I have been interested in how the experience of city cycling change the way people understand, interact and construct perceptions of safety within existing urban infrastructure. I did an ethnographic examination of the practice of cycling and how it is related to perceptions of risk, safety and agency in Philadelphia. I found that the commonality of problems with safety and harassment that cyclists face has become part of the culture of cycling in Philadelphia where cyclists often undergo rites of passage and I show how these cyclist rites of passage are their way of claiming the rights to the city. The rites of passage for these cyclists have pushed them to develop tactics and strategies to deal with traffic violence and harassment. The city and its streets belong to cyclists, just as they belong to pedestrians, drivers and all other

modes of transportation. For cyclists to go through these experiences and continue to ride a bike means to claim a right to the way the city is changed and reshaped.

For this workshop, if selected I am going to describe how the theoretical concepts of Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja are useful to describe various types of individual agency cyclists have before and during their navigations through urban space. I am going to offer some accounts from some informants I have talked with who regularly ride bicycles in Philadelphia. I will also base those accounts on my own experience as a cyclist in Philadelphia. By doing this I will try and explain the idea of a “Specter of Safety” is lurking in the background of all decisions that cyclists make when heading out on a ride. Cyclists are reshaping how we think about urban transportation in a radical way. They are willingly and knowingly putting themselves in harm’s way to do something they truly believe in and accepting the consequences. Their tactics of cycling etch a new way of transportation into the urban fabric claiming the rights to the city through their rights of passage.