Mason McBride
3035925411
Section 106 Friday 12-2pm

My Environmental Science Autobiography

I grew up in Santa Clarita, southern California in an area called Valencia. Once an onion farming town now the home of Six Flags Magic Mountain and a Westfield shopping mall, Santa Clarita is considered by Wikipedia to be an “Edge City” or a “boomburb.” In other words, my city was built at an automobile scale. Families live in low-density residential zones, drive out to designated shopping and eating zones, park in huge parking lots, and return into their homes to nest.

I would consider the automobile to be the fundamental unit in the design and development of Santa Clarita. The city was designed to be traversed by car and nothing smaller, not even a person. Everyone gets around in a car. And in the case of my town, we ended up growing so quickly that our streets couldn’t accommodate the large commuter traffic of personal automobiles, so they ended up expanding these streets into wider lanes with limited entrances and exits. So our main streets were designed as a lose-lose combination of streets and highways, sometimes pejoratively called a “stroad.” It’s clear that when my city surged in growth, their approach to accommodate this boom involved not messing with its car-centric, low-density values. They instead believed they could just widen the roads, expand into the unused sidewalks. This further reinforced my city’s unwalkability and further congested the roads it was trying to alleviate. Since they wanted to keep Santa Clarita low-density, it made bus lanes pretty much impossible to run anywhere since the city was zoned into residential areas and shopping areas, forcing a bus line (if it were to exist) to make a stopless drive “into town” from each of the residential areas. It’s no surprise that buses just don’t exist in Santa Clarita, something I took note of early on in my life.

Fortunately, my house in Santa Clarita was conveniently located in walking distance next to my elementary school, my middle school, and my high school, so I ended up walking to and from every school every day. Most families drove their kids to school and picked them up when school was over. You can imagine a large line of cars waiting to drop their kids off at school at 8am and a line of cars waiting to pick them back up at 3pm. Home to school, school to home, then again.

I was incredibly lucky for this to be part of my daily routine. For one, I loved my exposure to fresh air and my walks through nature. By the way, it is so dry in southern California, but the nature outside has its charm (who needs water anyways). I was incredibly lucky that my neighborhood had what is called a “bike trail,” which is when you make a road for cars but instead it’s for bikes and pedestrians to use instead. It was truly an exciting discovery. I could walk to school without being inches away from the zoOOM of cars, I was actually under them. My walk also involved me hopping this wooden fence to cross a “wash” (sometimes called an arroyo) and hopping back over on the other side. This was all so I could avoid walking to

school on this thin sidewalk on McBean Pkwy where the zoOOM and WHOOSH of cars made it uncomfortable at the very least.

So I walked to school and I enjoyed it a lot. It is something I will never forget. On some level, it's because I felt like I was doing something in spite of the car-centric development that made Santa Clarita unsustainable. On another level, I loved the feeling of walking somewhere and walking back. When I got to Berkeley the first thing I noticed was its walkability. I love that Berkeley is high-density, I love that Berkeley is mixed-zoning, I love that I have a free Clipper Card that makes taking the bus free and easy.

It is this transition, the contrast between where I'm from and where I am now that has fueled my interest in learning alternative cities and sustainable development. I want to live in a city that is walkable, a city that runs public transportation 24/7, a city that makes health for its citizens a nonissue, and most importantly a city that is not a parasite to the land it lays upon. My environmental science journey has now led me to this class, Environmental Science for Sustainable Development, because I am genuinely interested in learning the foundational knowledge of building sustainable cities and sustainable farming. I wanted to be informed and knowledgeable about the decisions I make and the future that I create. I also want to know methods and projects, theoretical or existing, that transform currently unsustainable cities into morally good and amazing living ecosystems.