

Stephanie Syjuco

Resisting Monoculture

By Rebecca Solnit
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Entries from San Francisco artist Stephanie Syjuco's 'Bedazzle a Tech Bus' project.

When people have to misrepresent you or focus on trivial details to score points against you, you know your main argument actually is doing just fine. But it was dismaying to be attacked in *Grist*, a site I like and hitherto admired (and where my work from Tomdispatch.com has occasionally been reposted). In Ben Adler's "Hey Protester, Leave Those Google Buses Alone" the site published an awful piece—not because it's hating on me while distorting what I wrote in the *London Review of Books* last February, but because it's grossly misrepresenting the situation in San Francisco—the growing class divide fueled largely by an influx of wealthy Silicon Valley workers and the crises of space and housing it's creating—and San Franciscans' response to it. And because in it, a site that's supposed to be environmental is loving up a bunch of corporations with terrible environmental impacts.

That Adler's spewing fiction and distortion is clear from his opening:

"If you hear the words 'luxury travel,' what comes to your mind? A private jet, perhaps? A massive, gas-guzzling SUV, like a Lincoln Navigator? A chauffeured limo? Whatever it is, I bet it's not a bus. And yet, remarkably enough, that humble, shared mode of transportation has become a locus of class antagonism. To add further to the irony, the people complaining about the buses—private buses that take employees of tech companies to suburban campuses—are the residents of San Francisco, an unusually rich city. The techies are said to be destroying the city with their lame, materialistic ways. And it's all the fault of the buses rented by their employers."

First, the buses in question are in no way humble. Most of them are sleek, tinted-window, Wi-Fi-equipped gleaming white *private* coaches, and at times they're crowding actual funky public city buses out of the

public bus stops. And the denizens complaining about them—and recently, blockading them, and demonstrating against evictions and against evicting landlords—do live in a rich city, but that doesn't make them rich people. By eliding the two Adler is pretending that the protestors are rich people with no environmental sensitivity who hate carpools and public transit. Actually the not-so-rich people I know value public transit, but hate what these private luxury coaches represent: the increasing class divides globally and locally, here in San Francisco the squeezing out of people at all levels below extremely affluent, and the threat of transforming a once-radical and diverse city into a bedroom community for employees of technology corporations.

And thus come the well-paid engineers to San Francisco, and thus go the longtime activists, idealists, artists, teachers, plumbers, all the less-well-paid people.

Most people (including Adler at one point in his all-over-the-place piece) wonder why people who work 40 miles away should travel those 80 miles daily down and back one of the more congested freeways around. The buses encourage them to pursue this geographical ridiculousness. And thus come the well-paid engineers to San Francisco, and thus go the longtime activists, idealists, artists, teachers, plumbers, all the less-well-paid people.

On the surface, perhaps, any ride-sharing program may seem green and community-building, but the effects of the Google bus on the ecosystem of San Francisco are complicated. One of the organizers of the Google bus blockade last month just wrote me, in response to Adler's piece, "The idea that all of the techies would choose to live in SF and drive to Silicon Valley if not for the buses is a total exaggeration. Half the techies surveyed by the San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency said they wouldn't drive by themselves (only 3% would carpool) & 31% said they wouldn't be able to make the trip at all according to info I found in SFMTA's Private Commuter Shuttles Policy Draft Proposal. The proposal also notes the 'Google' buses' average dwell time [at bus stops] is 3x that of the Muni." So the buses aren't creating greener transit for people who'd live here anyway. They're also enabling long-distance commuters who wouldn't live here otherwise.

For many of the kind of modest-income radicals who surrounded the Google bus in a peaceful blockade a month ago, San Francisco has been their home for decades or all their life, but they see no future here. Evictions are exploding, of the old, the poor, the frail, the long-term tenants who've given their lives over to idealistic pursuits rather than lucrative ones. I am watching many of my friends and acquaintances—urban farmers, musicians, teachers, muralists, historians, children's rights advocates—be evicted or live with the knowledge they're one eviction away from being banished from their hometown. The evicted are replaced with people who can pay exorbitant sums: about \$4000 for a two-bedroom is normal now.

Communities have been disbanded. Many of the displaced are moving to Oakland, where they then displace others. Rents are rising all over the region. It's creating real suffering and hardship—and fear—for a lot of people at every level below upper-middle class (and maybe there: the two doctors I'm close to had trouble finding housing last year too).

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I'm seeing the town that gave birth to the Sierra Club and Rainforest Action Network and seminal movements for human rights, a town that produced great insurrection and antiwar activism and idealism and new social ideas, become a place where you can't afford to live unless you're doing something incredibly lucrative and time-consuming—and probably involving technology corporations. A young human rights activist is not so likely to be able to afford to live here, or a nurse's aide, or a baker, and so the biodiversity of the city is being laid waste, and in its place springs up a monocrop of technology workers. If this continues, the contributions San Francisco has given the world will not be given any more.

People who like green transit need to consider that when a place becomes the economic equivalent of a luxury resort, the urban equivalent of Jackson Hole, the laborers who really keep the place running—the people who clean and cook and drive and build and care for the old, the young, the frail—need to come in from far away. And no luxury coaches come to fetch the home healthcare worker from Richmond or the construction worker from Tracy. It's unhealthy when firefighters and teachers can't afford to live in the community they care for, and San Francisco was already tough that way: it's now, thanks to the Silicon Valley incursion, getting a lot worse.

(In 2000, during the last big boom, the mayor of San Carlos in Silicon Valley resigned to move to Sacramento, where he and his schoolteacher wife could afford to buy a home: the boom had created a town too expensive for its own mayor to afford to live there. That's an urbanist autoimmune disorder.)

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As I said in the *London Review of Books* piece that Adler decided to attack, we're becoming akin to a mining boomtown: a place overwhelmed by an influx of mostly young, mostly male people from elsewhere who are not committed to this place and don't know it well and are transforming its culture to suit themselves. Monocultures aren't healthy in nature; they're not healthy in culture, either. And booms, when they go bust, leave a vacuum behind. It's not about hating "techies"; there are two delightful computer engineers in my immediate family, and software people are everywhere now, including the Sierra Club online and Tomdispatch.com, my main online outlet, and Anonymous and Wikileaks. It's about disliking this monoculture and its impacts on the city's many other cultures.

The Brooklyn-based Adler's proposals for "fixing" San Francisco are not apparently drawn from local knowledge—or reality. "To house more people, which is what San Francisco must do to accommodate the new tech workers and the lower-income immigrant families and artists who live there now, it must build upward." He blames San Francisco for not being as dense as Manhattan, the densest major urban area in the country. San Francisco is actually pretty dense, more so than any other major city in the West and most cities in the US—and it's already pretty fully developed: you can't erase most of what's there and

start over. There's no practical way to turn it into a land of mega-highrises anytime soon when the unparalleled transit, water, power, and other systems that run under Manhattan would also have to be developed to accommodate such a boom. Finally, a nanosecond of reflection might reveal that Manhattan is not exactly a Shangri-la of affordable housing. Most of the island is exorbitantly expensive.

And the mechanism whereby excellent new housing will be built here for lower-income families? I think it's called socialism. I'm for it, but it's not on the horizon, and it's not what a corporate boom is bringing, especially not one headed by libertarians with little sympathy for the poor. By the way, the Homeless Youth Alliance, which served 5000 needy kids a year for a dozen years, was evicted over the holidays, so the landlord could rent to a richer customer. No newly minted billionaires stepped forth to pay to rehouse this vital service for young people on the streets.

And what *is* Silicon Valley, the former land of vast apricot and plum orchards to the south? Adler, who lives about 3000 miles away, apparently seems to think it's just one green lovefest we should all fall in line with down there. He never questions what is happening in Silicon Valley, at the other end of what he imagines as his green, green carpools. Five minutes of web searches can shed some light on how Silicon Valley affects the region and the larger world:

Here's Forest Ethics on Facebook's CEO's new political action committee last spring:

"Zuckerberg's FWD.us emerged on the scene a few weeks ago, then shocked many of us when it paid for a TV ad criticizing President Obama for failing to approve the Keystone XL pipeline. Soon, ads appeared, endorsing the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline, opening the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge for drilling, and expanding oil drilling across the country."

Here's US News and World Report on Google:

"It may be time to pronounce Google's famous 'Don't Be Evil' motto dead, the victim of political cynicism. Today, Google is promoting a prominent speech by Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who denies the reality of climate change and held the government hostage for weeks in a failed attempt to kill universal health care. Cruz, who has received \$12,500 in campaign funding from Google, is the main attraction at this year's American Legislative Exchange Council summit in Washington, D.C. The council, known as ALEC, is a shadowy lobbying group that helps companies and conservative foundations write model bills for Republican state legislators. The summit agenda this year includes efforts to fight EPA limits on greenhouse pollution, to roll back the Seventeenth Amendment, to block food-origin labeling and to eliminate public unions."

Google just joined ALEC, perhaps the greatest enemy of climate-change activism and legislation this country has. Has *Grist* been covering ALEC's new endeavor to charge fees to homeowners with solar panels and label them "freeloaders" in order to keep us all on fossil fuels? I know nice people work at some of these corporations, including Google, but people who choose to work for corporations that attack the environment bear some responsibility for those attacks. Maybe they're organizing from within; I hope so, but there's no sign of it.

Here's *The Guardian* on Apple:

"Apple has come bottom of the most comprehensive green league table of technology companies because of its heavy reliance on 'dirty data' centres. The list, which is compiled by Greenpeace and released in

San Francisco on Thursday, shows that the company relies heavily on highly polluting coal power at the sites that house its banks of servers.”

Apple seems to be cleaning up, but the only green that counts in much of Silicon Valley is the color of money.

Casey Harrell, a former technology-and-toxics analyst at Greenpeace cautions me that these flashy transgressions above are not the biggest environmental problems with Silicon Valley; he says those problems include “how they build their hardware—toxics, labor and energy issues galore, how their power their cloud—energy choice as many are still sourcing with coal/nukes, taxpayer giveaways from tax-depressed states to build large data centers, and finally how they dispose of their e-waste (horrific, largest source of hazardous waste worldwide).”

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I don’t like Silicon Valley. You can go to *Mother Jones* to see how dismal its race and gender proportions are. You can go to Edward Snowden to see how blasé they are about our privacy and how much they are merging with the worst of the government into one Big Brotherly entity. You can look at the trail of antitrust lawsuits to see Google’s Godzilla footprints and total-information-control ambitions. You can go to a toxic-waste map to see what the first generation of Silicon Valley firms gave the Valley: the largest collection of Superfund sites in the country. (Now all that dirty work is done overseas, so the toxins stay there but the profit comes winging back.)

The culture of Silicon Valley is undoubtedly varied, but the face it often shows is hostile and arrogant. The things that the tech boom’s golden boys said last year—said about the city in particular—are examples of privilege at its most reprehensible. In August, Peter Shih at Celery, a credit-card processing startup, posted “Ten Things I Hate About San Francisco.” I hate how the weather here is like a woman who is constantly PMSing.” He hates “49ers” too. “No, not the football team, they’re great. I’m referring to all the girls who are obviously 4’s and behave like they are 9’s. Just because San Francisco has the worst Female to Male ratio in the known universe doesn’t give you the right to be a bitch all the time.”² (This isn’t isolated: things techies say can be so loopy there’s a Facebook page devoted to them called “Dispatches from Entitlementistan.”) Shih then went on to hate on bicyclists and homeless people.

In December, Greg Gopman, whose company organizes hackathons, raged: “The difference is in other cosmopolitan cities, the lower part of society keep to themselves. They sell small trinkets, beg coyly, stay quiet, and generally stay out of your way. They realize it’s a privilege to be in the civilized part of town and view themselves as guests. And that’s okay. In downtown SF the degenerates gather like hyenas, spit, urinate, taunt you, sell drugs, get rowdy, they act like they own the center of the city.” He apparently thinks people like him are too good to even have to see “the lower part of society.” That’s not the sound of democracy. Or compassion. Or insight. Or the best future for San Francisco, the city named after the saint who devoted himself to the poor and the outcast.

Dear *Grist*, I hope you go back to publishing splendid and brilliant well-thought-out articles. And I hope what's valuable to a lot of us in San Francisco survives this siege.

Best regards,

Rebecca

¹The critics of Google are legion. Here's a recent one: "If you step back and look at the bigger picture, it's not hard to see that Silicon Valley is heavily engaged in for-profit surveillance, and that it dwarfs anything being run by the NSA. I recently wrote about Google's Street View program [7], and how after a series of investigations in the US and Europe, we learned that Google had used its Street View cars to carry out a covert—and certainly illegal—espionage operation on a global scale, siphoning loads of personally identifiable data from people's Wi-Fi connections all across the world. Emails, medical records, love notes, passwords, the whole works— anything that wasn't encrypted was fair game. It was all part of the original program design: Google had equipped its Street View cars with surveillance gear designed to intercept and vacuum up all the wireless network communication data that crossed their path. An FCC investigation showing that the company knowingly deployed Street View's surveillance program, and then had analyzed and integrated the data that it had intercepted. Most disturbingly, when its Street View surveillance program was uncovered by regulators, Google pulled every crisis management trick in the book to confuse investors, dodge questions, avoid scrutiny, and prevent the public from finding out the truth. The company's behavior got so bad that the FCC fined it for obstruction of justice.

²Actually San Francisco is 49.1% female, according to the census, and a lot of the males here are not girl-chasers, to say the least. Shih's apparent bad luck may be due to other factors.

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