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WRI330: Oral Rhetoric

Rhetorical Address II

Cities are not built for women

(Stasis: Conjecture)

For my first two years of university, I commuted four hours every day to get to and from my classes. A game I would play with myself was to list down every time I saw someone drinking alcohol on the bus, which happens more often than you'd think! One evening, as I'm waiting for the bus to leave the terminal a man walks in and gets into a little argument with the bus driver. My nosy ass overhears that he didn't have enough money to pay the fare. The bus driver finally lets him in, and he stumbles to the back of the bus where I was. He's wearing one of those coats with a million pockets and sticking out of one of them, was – you guessed it– a bottle of whisky. I quickly jot it down in my notes app. He turns to me and he asks me to come off the bus and fuck him. He says something about my pussy and asks me again. This time he says he'll pay me – 500 bucks.

First of all, my pussy is priceless. Second of all, you didn't even have the 3.75 to pay the damn fare.

But that's all beside the point.

I say, “no thanks, I'm good.” Trying to keep my cool – praying to god he gets off at a stop before mine. He calls me retarded. No one else is at the back of the bus and I'm frozen. I

couldn't stand and walk to the front, and I think many of us can relate to that. I was... I was overcome with the fear of escalating the situation¹

And that's the last time I sat at the back of an empty bus. Turns out his extra pockets were to carry all his fucking audacity.

I'm sure every woman in this room has felt that fear. I got off easy. He didn't touch me. But that fear stays with us...

A UK study found that 62% of women are scared walking through parking garages, 60% are scared waiting on train platforms, 49% are scared waiting for the bus and 59% are scared walking home from a bus stop.² The city is a scary place for women.

This is largely because cities aren't designed for women. They are full of instances of male-biased design. As a result, cities don't benefit men and women the same way. This is part of why there are no *effective* system in place to report sexual harassment. This is why up to 90% of incidents go unreported.³ And when it does get reported, the important contextual data isn't recorded.⁴

There are two reasons why cities don't work for women: the lack of data and the lack of women collecting that data.

Let's take snowplowing as an example. Pretty gender neutral right? Well, no, not really. It's an example of male-biased design. The simple decision to prioritise plowing roads

¹ Moore, Oliver. "The 'Baked-in Biases' of the Public Square: Calls Grow to Redesign Cities with Women in Mind." *The Globe and Mail*, April 1, 2019. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-designing-safer-cities-for-women/>.

² PEREZ, CAROLINE CRIADO. "Chapter 2: Gender Neutral with Urinals." In *INVISIBLE WOMEN: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, 53. S.I.: VINTAGE, 2020.

³ PEREZ, CAROLINE CRIADO. "Chapter 2: Gender Neutral with Urinals." In *INVISIBLE WOMEN: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, 56. S.I.: VINTAGE, 2020.

⁴ PEREZ, CAROLINE CRIADO. "Chapter 2: Gender Neutral with Urinals." In *INVISIBLE WOMEN: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, 56. S.I.: VINTAGE, 2020.

before sidewalks and walkways actually contribute disproportionately to the amounts of injuries sustained by women over men.⁵

Why? Well, because there are key differences between the travel patterns of men and women. Let's go through some key facts:

Men are more likely to drive than women⁶. Their route usually consists of home – work – home.

It's more complicated for women. Women are more likely to take public transportation⁷, this means they are more likely to be inconvenienced by snowy and icy walkways. They're also more likely to be elderly or handling kids. Imagine waking up early just to push a stroller through the snow.

And their route often consists of things like dropping the kids off at school – rushing to work – going to get groceries – taking grandma to the doctor's appointment – picking the kids up and then heading back home. It's no surprise women are more likely to injure themselves during the winter months on these walkways.

But why should we care? Sure, there's a gender issue present here, but these injuries also affect the economy in health care cost and lost productivity. A Swedish study found that the cost these accidents was about twice the cost of winter road maintenance.⁸ As soon as Swedish cities began to address the issue properly, by plowing sidewalks first and keeping

⁵ PEREZ, CAROLINE CRIADO. "Chapter 1: Can snowplowing be sexist?." In *INVISIBLE WOMEN: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, 31. S.I.: VINTAGE, 2020.

⁶ Pojani, Dorina, Dorothy Wardale, and Kerry Brown. "Sexism and the City: How Urban Planning Has Failed Women." *The Conversation*, October 6, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/sexism-and-the-city-how-urban-planning-has-failed-women-93854>.

⁷ Cruickshank, Ainslie. "More Women Commute by Public Transit than Men, Census Data Shows." *thestar.com*, November 29, 2017. <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/11/29/more-women-commute-by-public-transit-than-men-census-data-shows.html>.

⁸ PEREZ, CAROLINE CRIADO. "Chapter 1: Can snowplowing be sexist?." In *INVISIBLE WOMEN: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, 31. S.I.: VINTAGE, 2020.

the walkways clear, the number of injuries were cut in half, also reducing the burden on the healthcare system.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to say that cities are *deliberately* designed to hurt women. It's quite the conspiracy theory to believe that there's a group of men brainstorming ideas to make my commute more difficult. Cities are not designed for women because women are not designing cities. The group of men who *did* decide how the snow plowing schedule would be set, designed it around their needs – that makes sense. And it became viewed as the standard, as gender neutral, when in reality it isn't.

This gap in perspective affects the kind of data that gets collected, that turns into policy. It's easy for urban planning committees to say that there no gender problem entrenched in the design of cities because they can't find evidence. But you can't find evidence when you aren't looking for it.

One morning, when I was still bussing around, Brampton Transit was handing out surveys. It had a space to list down the transfers that you took. I took the 14, then the 501, then the 502..and then, well, I ran out of spaces. I still had the 110 to list down. There I was, ready to vent my horrible commute to some data analyst who would collect this little card and I couldn't even finish my sentence?

But that's half the problem – when the government *does* collect data, it isn't analysed by gender. In conducting research for this address, I came across an exhaustive report of Canadian commuting habits⁹ – no gender specific points, at all.

This long list of transfers is common for a lot of women because of their complex daily commutes. And I just had to get to school! Imagine having to drop your kid off before

⁹ "Commuting to Work." Statistics Canada: Canada's national statistical agency / Statistique Canada : Organisme statistique national du Canada, July 25, 2018. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003_1-eng.cfm.

heading to your workplace – which is systematically far from your home due to arbitrary zoning laws that deliberately separate industrial areas from residential ones, making the typical woman’s commute longer than necessary.

Bus routes are hard to navigate this way because they tend to be radial¹⁰. Which means a lot of circular routes around the centre of the city where you might work that don’t extend to where your home is near the edges. This makes many transfers necessary if you do more than the typical home – work – home thing that a lot of men do.

I wanna acknowledge that talking about snow plowing and bus routes in this way is a privileged perspective. Not having to worry whether I can get the right health care, access to drinking water or an education as a woman – well, I’m lucky compared to a lot of women and girls around the world. But just because we’ve made gains with tackling a lot of womens’ issues here in Canada doesn’t mean we need to stop pushing. And it also doesn’t mean we need to bulldoze the city and start again to serve women better. We’re resilient and resourceful - we can come up with solutions to make the city safer and more accessible.

If there’s one thing we university students are great at, it’s complaining. We need to complain about these things – tweet about it, make a fuckin’ Tik Tok for all I care. We need to look for male-biased design in our everyday lives and push forward policy that will level the playing field between men and women.

Canada’s ministry of transportation has more women than men – but numbers can only do so much. We need women in these decision-making positions thinking about these issues, women who know what it’s like to have creepy-ass men harass them on the bus. We need to bring attention to the importance of gendered data that will develop this city into one

¹⁰ “The Power and Pleasure of Grids.” Human Transit, January 22, 2016.
<https://humantransit.org/2010/02/the-power-and-pleasure-of-grids.html>.

built for everyone. Because if we don't know how cities aren't working, if we don't start looking for the right data, if we don't actively build equitable cities, ... all this "progress" – in technology, in legislation well it won't *truly* be progress, will it? Not for *all* of us.