The Ride There

Giovannie Nuñez-Dueñas

BEFORE YOU READ: Consider the word landscape. The author also uses soundscape and moneyscape. What do you think they mean?

Los Angeles tries to be hundreds of different things at once. If you have ever taken the slithering Metro Rapid 720 from one end to the other—like I have, for months and months, day in and day out—then you know its bumps, its people, its contrasting landscapes.

What am I talking about?

Jumping on the back of a crimson metal bus and heading west from the historic ghettos of Boyle Heights, you pass through downtown’s belly. The thick concrete jungle is harsh. Riding into it tests you and cracks you.

The first world you enter is familiar by name, but it drains you: Skid Row. It is a sea of homeless people in barely surviving bodies. They survived the spits and beatings of a society that scorns them. They survived despicable hunger. They survived the fear and loathing of those of us who are outside their experience, who observe them from under the shelter of our roof. Try reading a book through that ride!

It’s only been about ten minutes. But the bumps and cracks that crawl the streets, they make it hard to focus. All you can do is stare out. Now downtown begins to get eaten up by capital “C” Civilization: The Los Angeles Central Library, Los Angeles City Hall, Los Angeles Central Police Department, Pershing Square, The Hall of Records, The U.S. Bank, Wells Fargo. Men and women in suits walk at angles. Talk on phones. Hold coffees. Head to work. And you in your bus, you are off to school—to learn. But on this bus, you feel perplexed, staring out the window like it is a movie screen presenting the future to you.

Next, you see the Oaxaquena and Central American immigrants in Pico Union who sell their tamales, pupusas, and aguas frescas in broad daylight, no permit, sometimes no documentation. They feed throngs of thousands. Shopping carts align themselves, brimming with food from home; the vendor’s fanny pack hangs impregnated with singles, Lincolns, and coins. Business. Life. Your bus passes right through them, and a group of Latina/o laborers jump onto your 720 to accompany you now. For a moment, when the doors open, the cumbias blast in from the outside, along with the sound of las mujeres talking, the babies crying, the vendors selling.

And now in your 720, everybody looks a little nervous. It might be the potholes keeping everybody on edge, keeping you from your book. Maybe it’s your destination—your job, your family, your tests and assignments. Or maybe it’s the

A crowded Metro Rapid 720 bus. Photo by Josh Marks.

Mural in Pico Union
fact that more bodies will be crammed into the bus as you enter yet another ghetto—Koreatown. Now English, Spanish, and Korean scatter the soundscape. Multiple cultures crash into one another under stark poverty.

They all step into the bus at once.

Luckily you are nestled in the back, safe from the standing, pushing, grabbing, and the crowding. Another 10 minutes pass and you witness another transformation: The mayor’s mansion is also on your travel route.

The change is slow, but as you creep out of Koreatown and Windsor Square, lonely corporate buildings are steadily joined by more and more. Then you see it: the La Brea Tar Pits, where real ice-age fossils have been excavated. Fake mammoths stick out of the pits seeming to moan for survival, a second chance.

And then yet another contrast: “Urban Light,” Chris Burden’s large-scale assemblage sculpture and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The streets are scrubbed and tidy. More palm trees appear. You can focus. Outside the window, you see upscale businesses: Pierce Law Group, Maserati, Calvin Klein, Sterling, Prada, Rodeo. There are almost no people on the sidewalks now. The road stretches out and expands; you look up into the sky and see so much blue. The bus picks up speed. You are in Beverly Hills, and the moneyscape continues. The only people jumping off the bus are nannies, maids, and construction workers.

The streets are wider now. You are passing a giant golf course and then a host of towering hotels. The bus stops. The last of the laborers end their ride here.

Then it’s your turn. This school is called UCLA, one of the most prestigious universities in the country. You are surrounded by a new throng of bodies—janitors, geniuses, overworked-TAs, tenured-scientists, political-leaders, life-changers, chance-givers, opportunity-grabbers, bus-riders, policy-advisors, globe-trotters, space-explorers, time-travelers, game-changers. This time, no bus is separating anybody, any more.

AFTER YOU READ: Go back and circle examples of figurative language. How do they enhance the writing? Describe in your own words some of the contrasts that Giovannie experiences during his commute to university.

La Brea Tar Pits. Photo: Creative Commons

Downtown LA. Photo: Mai-Linh Doan, Creative Commons

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