Aurora Avenue:
Highway Culture in Transition

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Abstract

As one of Seattle's most dynamic areas, Aurora Avenue is representative of a variety of social, cultural and economic issues that operate within an urban space. As the preeminent birthplace of highway culture in Seattle, ethnography based in the visual analysis of Aurora aids in the understanding of these issues. In analyzing the iconic highway signage that dots the strip, an official and unofficial history of the area emerges—that is, a history of both the literal and practical information that these signs proffer, as well as a history of the socio-cultural associations attached to this medium. As such, it is possible to understand Aurora and its signage in the broader context of American highway culture, as well as through the personal histories of citizens engaged in this transitioning urban space.

Most people living in Seattle have taken a trip down Aurora Avenue at one time or another. A trip to Beth's Café, shopping for a car, a game of miniature golf—all are among a variety of reasons for taking a drive down the busy thoroughfare. But for those who do not live or work there, a prolonged stay on Aurora usually is not on the agenda. To outsiders, Aurora is largely associated with kitsch[1] value. The infamous neon signs that line the road mesmerize and provide an effective throwback to times gone by—they mark Aurora as a place with history and character. Yet the era that originally conceived of these neon "sites" is over, and the influx of traffic that was once the area's boon has become a source of crime and decay. The kitsch and dilapidation that now characterize Aurora give a superficial impression of the area; such aesthetics only point to part of a complex whole. Indeed, it is only by looking *into* Aurora's signs and images—evaluating both their literal visual information, as well as their ideological socio-cultural associations—that we can arrive at a deeper understanding of one of Seattle's most important and richly debated spaces.

Research Questions and Methods

In researching Aurora, we have tried to reflect the wide diversity that marks the area as a whole. With that in mind, our very status as researchers puts us at an unavoidable distance from our subject. Much like the voyeuristic positioning of photography as a whole, examining Aurora from the outside requires a certain sensitivity and an expectation that that, as researchers, we are indeed approaching from the *outside.* This same idea is reflected in Susan Sontag's analysis of photography: "essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality" (57). It is with these ideas in mind that we developed our research strategy; in addition,

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[1] The use of "kitsch" in describing Aurora is an interesting convention in itself. It is important to recognize not only the "official" definition of the term (embedded in "bad taste" and overwrought Americana) but also its status as a word which is connotative of a certain class judgment.

these principles allowed us to ultimately reflect on our successes and failures, which will be discussed further later on.

"Rich detail is of limited value if it is not articulated in meaningful conclusions," (58) states Malcolm Collier in his essay "Approaches to Analysis in Visual Anthropology*."* We as researchers have analyzed our data in an attempt to draw parallels and interpret the patterns arising from our research as meaningful and provocative. In viewing our data within a theoretical framework, we have found it useful to group the content of our data into *connotative* and *denotative* spheres of meaning. Using the work of Roland Barthes in *Image, Music, Text*, we define these two terms as: "a *denoted* message, which is the *analogon* itself, and a *connoted* message, which is the way in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it" (17). This theoretic framework will allow us to draw out the "objective" information which our data denotes, as well as other ideological inflections associated with it.

Our research methods seek to place contemporary socio-cultural issues relevant to Aurora into the greater perspective of the area's history. Our guiding framework of analysis views the iconic signage along the avenue as an entry point for understanding these issues—by viewing Aurora's signs as entities with both connotative and denotative meanings, the complexities of the area are allowed to surface. This theoretical approach allows both "objective" information and "subjective" accounts to enter the analysis; furthermore, it allows a recognition of Aurora's "official" history (based in city and mainstream media analyses), and the area's "unofficial" history (examined through personal accounts and marginalized points of view), as well.

Our specific research questions included: What roles have signs played in American history and culture in general, and how can this information be applied to Aurora's own cultural and physical development? How can these signs help us understand individual and community identities (including views of the area from the inside and outside), and how are they characteristic of Aurora's "sense of place"? What social, economic and political issues exist within this community today, and how are

these conflicts tied to Aurora's historical conception and development? Any one of these questions could constitute a thesis on its own, but by combining select aspects from each, it is our hope that the "larger" picture of Aurora will be gleaned.

In our analysis of Aurora Avenue, we used a wide range of research methods tailored to mimic the diversity of the area. We collected a variety of images from different sources, including personal collections and city, historical and academic archives, in addition to taking our own photographs of the area. One trend we noticed in taking our own images was that we tended to focus our photographs on Aurora's signs exclusively[2]; images from personal and archived sources allowed us to examine visually those perspectives which were not immediately available to us. In addition to these visual methods, we examined written historical accounts of the area from the Seattle Municipal Archives, the Shoreline Historical Museum and various other published sources. We also collected oral histories from business owners and residents throughout the area in an effort to further draw out the variety of experiences representative of Aurora. Newspaper articles and statements from community organizations also allowed us to differentiate between "insider" and "outsider" perspectives, as well as provided current information on relevant social, economic and cultural issues in the area.

By first examining the history of Aurora, a better context will be given for

Figure 1 - Marion Rogers and Rogers General Store, 1911, photo courtesy Shoreline Historical Museum

[2] This characteristic of our data set is especially interesting; on a meta-level, it points to a common view of Aurora that tends to exclude the social and human components of the area and focus in on the presence of inanimate objects and infrastructure. This particular issue is further echoed throughout our analysis.

the "current state" of the area. Our historical analysis will expand to include a specific

cultural context that we feel is essential for a thorough understanding of the area,

namely, American highway and automobile culture. This particular approach allows an

effective entry point into an examination of the operations of Aurora's signage by

creating a theoretical scaffold that supports both connotative and denotative

interpretations of the visual "markers" that serve to identify the area. Our analysis is

one that privileges the importance visual culture and interpretation, and as such,

photographic analyses will be provided throughout the study in order to give a better

"picture" of the complexities that permeate Aurora Avenue.

The History of Aurora Avenue

The history of Aurora Avenue is a rich one—the strip itself is iconic of several

important historical shifts in the development of Seattle and north-lying areas. Before

foreign settlement began in the area, much of the land was occupied by Native tribes;

for instance, the Duwamish tribe was active in the area that would become Licton

Springs (Sheridan 1). Much of the land was initially settled for farms, agriculture making

up a significant part of the area's economy (Fiset 2). Aurora itself began as North Trunk

Road in the late 1800s. The road itself mimicked the wagon trails used by settlers and

developers new to the Northwest. Some of the area's earliest businesses were built

Figure 2 - E.E. Rogers General Store and North Trunk Road, 1913, photo courtesy Shoreline Historical Museum

along North Trunk, one of the most prominent being the E.E. Rogers General Store, built in 1911. The proprietors of the store, Marion and Earl Rogers, witnessed the development of the dirt road into a paved and plumbed thoroughfare. In a photograph provided by the Shoreline Historical Museum (Fig. 1), one can see the Roger's store before North Trunk Road was even paved. This photograph was used

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as a postcard, which Marion Rogers sent to her mother, writing:

> You wouldn't believe there are seven families living within sight, and many more out of sight of our store, would you? This picture was taken before they cleared the stumps and trees away. In front, you can see the electric cars go past the store. It's a forty minute run to Seattle.
> (Historical information and transcription courtesy Victoria Stiles, Shoreline Historical Museum)

In another photograph (Fig. 2), it is apparent that North Trunk Road has become a viable road—the plumbing lines are visible and the road itself has been widened, sure signs of a developing transportation infrastructure in the area. But what else can these pictures tell us? One component of these early photographs is a pastoral, "undeveloped" quality of the physical space. The photographs give us certain "objective" knowledge of what existed before the strip was developed; a comparison between the 1911 and 1913 helps the viewer acknowledge the pace and extent of the development that occurred. Yet these images also provide another level of complexity, a subjective level emboldened by our knowledge of the sentiments Marion Rogers chose to attach to her photo. This interpretation yields a more personal view of the development—connotative meaning embedded in Marion Roger's pride in having a business where families where settling and modern amenities like the Seattle-Everett Interurban were accessible. It is only by combining the visual "information" the photograph offers with such subjective associations that we can begin to understand Aurora's official *and* personal history.

The road itself would spell the demise of the Roger's business in 1928 when the road was extensively developed and widened—one can see Sontag's characterization of the photograph as "sublimated murder" (Sontag 14) as a relevant statement concerning the documentation of Aurora's history and development. Such events established a lasting tension in the area, highlighting conflicts between local business and residential interests and the need to accommodate transportation throughout the area.

Aurora's story is inextricably linked with the appearance of the automobile in America, and the subsequent development of car and highway culture. Before the highway, the area was serviced by the Seattle-Everett Interurban, a trolley line that, by 1910, made possible a ninety-five minute commute between the two cities (Sheridan 3). The Interurban closed in 1939, and remains a testament to the forms of transportation that were rendered anachronistic by the advent of the automobile. One can even see echoes of this phenomenon today, as debate rages over whether Seattle should institute "greener" options like light rail service, or continue to privilege cars and road development. The late 1920s and early 1930s mark the beginning of the cult of the car in Seattle—a cultural phenomenon that will be discussed in greater depth below--and the transformation of Aurora from a primarily residential street to bustling thoroughfare.

With the end of WWII and economic prosperity on the rise in America, automobile consumption and highway culture reached their zenith. The fifties and sixties marked an era of extensive business development along the strip. It was during this time that many of Aurora's infamous motels were built, and development of the area seemed to reach critical mass during the early 1960s (Ryan 3). The construction of Interstate 5 and the "faltering economy in the 1970s" (Ryan 3) marked a period of decline for Aurora, ending in the 1980s with an improved economy. Even so, Aurora's status as a bastion of modernity and car culture was over. Strip malls flourished and crime increased, contributing to the socially and economically complex characteristics that mark Aurora today.

American Highway Culture and the Strip

The designation of the Aurora thoroughfare as Highway 99 in the early 1930's brought a new mentality to the area, colored by the emergence of car and highway culture. The cult of the highway marked an important shift in American culture: city planners were now required to consider the needs of a mobile society, as well as issues like population concentration. Here, it will be helpful to take a closer look at highway culture in America and on Aurora. By examining the car's impact on culture and

economy, we will be better able to describe the functions of highway signage in communities at large.

In the 1920s, the automobile became an increasingly popular mode of transportation for American families both for everyday and recreational purposes. Businesses began locating themselves outside traffic-clogged city centers, instead choosing positions along arterial routes or highways (Gudis 40). Advertisers quickly took advantage of the "increased speed of vision" of passing motorists, which demanded larger and brighter signs, to utilize electricity and newly-available neon (Gudis 133).[3] Lower real-estate prices and the new fashion for "tourist camps" (also referred to as "auto courts," the earliest form of auto-oriented motels) brought the advent of the free-
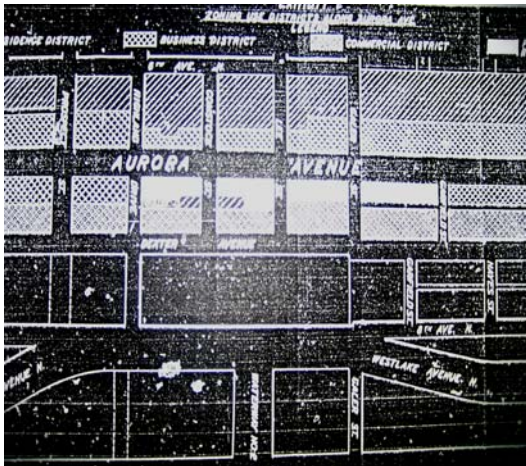

Figure 3 - City zoning plan for Aurora Avenue, 1945, photo courtesy Seattle Municipal Archives

standing sign, a type still widely in use by motels and other businesses today (Mahar 12). As early as the 1950s, some American city planners were recognizing the drawbacks of auto-oriented commercial areas along highways. To them, "this unplanned arterial growth forecasted nothing less than an endless 'roadtown' based on the prioritization of the automobile and commerce over social and communal facilities" (Gudis 159). The

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[3] According to Gudis, regional sign committees and electrical sign makers associations heavily promoted the use of electrical and neon signs during this era (Gudis 133). The first neon sign appeared in Paris in 1912; however, neon did not become mass-marketable until the late 1920s and 1930s. From the 1950s on, backlit plexi-glass became the preferred look in advertising, neon being considered "old-fashioned." Neon enjoyed a resurgence in the 1970s and 80s, and continues to draw on its "classic" reputation for new signage today (Stern 28).

development of the shopping center was meant to counteract this dispersion by bringing people together in single, pedestrian-oriented places[4]. However, as is observable on Aurora Avenue today, the appearance of shopping centers had minimal effect on the overall environment of the highway strip (Gudis 159).

From this general description of highway culture in America, we can proceed to the specific effects of the automobile on Aurora. For instance, the strip had its own "auto courts"—those establishments discussed above that provided all of the facilities a modern traveler might need, from gas stations to restaurants and showers. In fact, these auto courts provided some of the earliest signs of Aurora's development; in 1925, the National Auto Village opened on the strip, featuring an auto shop, a motel and restaurants. The commerce of the National Auto Village depended largely on prominent signage, as business almost entirely relied on mobile patrons. These auto courts—and later, the spread of the common motel—are iconic of the changing consumer consciousness that developed as a result of increased access to the automobile.

A look at some images from the Seattle Municipal Archives gives a good impression of the generative stage of highway and auto culture along Aurora. In 1945, the Department of Community Development drew up a zoning plan (Fig. 3) to specify the residential, commercial, and business districts of a section of Aurora Avenue. This plan was created in order to break down the construction of Aurora and potentially preserve the natural environment surrounding it. However, over the years, Aurora businesses began to boom and more social problems, such as thefts and prostitution, started to occur. It is interesting to see a cluttered environment such as Aurora so concisely broken down into anonymous city components. This city plan could be a board game or a blueprint for any city in any country, because it breaks down the urban

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[4] The shopping center was certainly still a car-oriented creation, as is demonstrated in its common design around parking lots. However, this is an effective example of the kind of negotiation that was going on between pedestrian needs and the needs of drivers during the development of car and highway infrastructure in America.

space into its most basic elements. The plan essentially translates Aurora into a "neutral" entity, a sterilized portrayal that reflects little of the avenue's true character.

Figure 4 – Taken by the city Engineering Department, March 26, 1936, photo courtesy Seattle Municipal Archives

A look at another image will help to draw out more complexities of the area, specifically in relation to the burgeoning need for infrastructure and pedestrian protection that presented itself as highway culture on Aurora developed. The photograph of Aurora and 41st street (Fig. 4), for example, depicts Aurora in 1936. While there are only two cars in the picture, the tension between pedestrian needs and Aurora's function as a thoroughfare is evident; this photograph was in fact taken by the city Engineering Department in order to depict the need for an overhead pedestrian crossing on Aurora[5]. Such information provides several layers of meaning for the photograph. On the surface, it is an image denotative of a specific time and place— Seattle during the 1930s, a time when areas outside of city center were beginning to rapidly expand. On another level, the image is connotative of a particular problem emerging in the area, the accommodation of pedestrians and automobiles in a single urban space. Furthermore, the source of the photograph—the city Engineering Department—adds yet another layer to the image, one infused with tones of the political and economic operations embedded in area's growing infrastructure.

Longtime Shoreline resident Helen Oltman clearly recalls the impact automobile's impact on Aurora and the area's subsequent development—her family owned Cox's Garage on 175th and Aurora in the 1930s and 1940s, and she has lived on the avenue at various times throughout her life. Beyond the number of years that Oltman has been in the area, her perspective is made especially unique by the fact that her mother drove

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[5] These concerns for pedestrian safety were not unfounded. By 1937--only five years after the opening of the Aurora Bridge—thirty-seven traffic-related deaths occurred on Aurora (Dorpat 26).

Figure 5 - Cox's Garage at 175th and Aurora, 1939, photo courtesy Shoreline Historical Museum

and served as the parts deliverer for the family garage (a very uncommon role for a woman at the time). Here, she recalls one particularly humorous part of driving around Aurora with her mother:

 We had a little English Austin… [My mother] would park it someplace, and she'd come out and here it was up on the sidewalk and somebody else had parked in her spot. We'd have to drive down the sidewalk to get out. It was small and people loved to play tricks.

Oltman also recalls issues of development and pedestrian safety along Aurora in its early days. For instance, she remembers the experience of crossing Aurora before there were any stop signs or traffic lights:

> They always had patrol boys up on Aurora for us. At lunchtime, they'd be up there, one on one side one on the other, with their little flags to stop the traffic…And if I went home for lunch, I had to cross with the patrol boys, or they'd be after me.

Such recollections speak to the variety of ways in which Aurora's development as a thoroughfare changed ways of life for residents and visitors. As for the development of businesses and signage along Aurora, Oltman remembers "more businesses were coming all the time and growing up along the highway." One comment her father made in the midst of all of this development particularly stuck with her: "I remember going to Everett with my folks and he said, "One of these days it's gonna be one city from Seattle to Everett, and this place, where we're in, is going to be the middle of the city." And boy, he called it." When asked what she thinks about the negative connotations that have developed around Aurora, Oltman uses a simple and honest phrase to describe these reactions: "Growing pains."

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Having established Aurora's historical context, it is now possible to proceed to a more focused examination of the implications of the highway sign. Just as the images already discussed point to a variety of denoted and connoted meanings—an official and unofficial history, in parallel terms—so, too, do Aurora's array of "iconic" signage. This examination will help to establish a transition to the current social and economic issues related to Aurora and the "future visions" for the area.

Highway Signs and Aurora

The commercial highway strip and neon signage are historically and visually linked in order to help visitors to the highway strip identify it as such. Here, signs act as more than denotative markers of businesses. As Lisa Mahar asserts, "[m]ost simply, signs address basic commercial needs: identifying the name and type of business, marking the location, and attracting customers. But signs also fulfill a more important need: making the unknown familiar" (Mahar 12). This familiarity is achieved through what John Jakle and Keith Sculle term "categorization," a crucial task in an observer's assessment of his or her surrounding environment or "landscape":

> Not only are specific objects named or labeled (identified through word association), but they are also sorted out and named according to the patterns that they create as ensembles. At the macroscale is landscape: the all-encompassing surrounding assessed in terms of broad patterns … (Jakle and Sculle, xxii)

Aurora's signs help the passer-by translate the visual information proffered by signs and other visual markers into the idea of something familiar: the American highway strip.

A more general preliminary example of our approach to the highway sign will be instructive in drawing out pertinent theory—both the connotative and denotative associations attached to an individual sign.

Figure 6 - Villia Del Mar Motel, photo by authors

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Take, for example, the image of the Villia Del Mar Motel (Fig. 6). From the design elements and general look of the sign, one may be able to infer certain denotative information from the image—its status as an artifact from a certain era (the 1950s) and the fact that the sign is no longer kept in good repair, for example. But beyond this visual "information" lie subjective, or "connotative," associations. In *Route 66*, Mahar glosses this very idea:

> Signs orient people in unfamiliar landscapes, functioning not only as physical markers but as cultural, political, and economic ones as well. …Signs also convey, in three-dimensional form, strongly held beliefs and desires: this is where their beauty lies…The ways sign makers approached the generation of form are of paramount importance. (11-12)

If we apply the relevance of such "beliefs and desires" to the Villia Del Mar sign, other inferences—beyond the objective information and "official" status as marker inscribed in the sign's presence—emerge. For instance, the conditions of the sign's disrepair point to the socio-economic decline apparent throughout Aurora. To certain individuals, the sign may represent housing issues and a source of transitional housing some are forced to seek during hard times. The variety of social and economic implications that any single sign on the strip creates are each as important as the visual "information" they offer.

Change Along the Avenue and Current Social Issues

Figure 7 - Puetz Golf sign, 1960s, photo courtesy David Puetz

We can now combine our understanding of Aurora's history, the characteristics of highway culture and the operation of the highway sign in general to look at a specific example of Aurora's change over time. The changes on Aurora in the last fifty years are

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readily apparent in a comparison of two photographs of the Puetz Golf sign: one taken in the 1960s and one taken in 2006. Taken from the lot just north of the sign, facing south down Aurora Avenue, the early photograph shows empty lots to either side of the Puetz Golf Range driveway, though the appearance of lack of development in the area may be accentuated in the image by the presence of the Evergreen-Washelli Cemetery across the street. The cars in the photograph point to Aurora's by now lengthy existence as a highway, though the traffic level appears much lower than it is now (in addition, the highway itself does not have as many lanes).

One of the most important details visible in this early photograph is the lack of sidewalks along Aurora Avenue. In the photograph from 2006 (Fig. 7), narrow sidewalks can be seen, indicating that there has been some effort to provide areas for foot traffic during the past forty years. Another photograph (Fig. 8), however, taken to the south of the Nites Inn Motel, shows a better view of these sidewalks, which are uneven and obstructed by electric poles. The issue of pedestrian accommodation remains one of the most significant problems in the area, as is demonstrated by the current Department of Transportation underway to widen the sidewalks along Aurora.

Figure 8 - Puetz Golf sign, 2006, photo by authors

Most noticeable in the newer photograph of the Puetz sign is the general development which has occurred on either side of the driveway. To the south, the Nites Inn Motel has sprung up; to the north there is a paved parking lot which serves the commercial buildings which stand out of the frame to the left, and are represented by the dark, square sign now standing to the right of the Puetz Golf sign. The visual effect of the large, three-story Nites Inn Motel and the addition of signage, both for the motel and for the businesses to the north, downplay the monumentality the Puetz sign possessed earlier when it was surrounded by empty

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grass lots. In the earlier photograph, the sign dwarfs the large American car parked beside it; now it almost blends into the landscape. In the third photo we can see how the Nites Inn Motel sign has blocked the southern view of the Puetz sign, something which Dave Puetz mentioned in his interview as unfortunate (Puetz).

The difference in the visual effect of the sign itself in the 1960s versus today is thus clearly visible in the comparison of the two photographs, and it illustrates the connoted shift which occurred in the character of highways over the course of the 20th century. When land was affordable along arterial routes, detached signs like Puetz' were the norm and advertisers and businesses favored large, bright signs which would catch the motorist's eye (Mahar 13). As arterial routes such as Aurora become engulfed by urban development, the growth of visual clutter begins to obscure the former visual importance of signs like Puetz', which become, instead of highly-visible landmarks, simply elements in an urban-highway landscape crowded with visual information. Still, Puetz insists that his sign constitutes one of his most important forms of advertising, and he relies on its status as a "landmark" to bring him new business

Figure 9 - Sidewalk near Puetz Golf, photo by authors

(Puetz).

When approached with questions pertaining to the unique issues facing Aurora Avenue, the responses of local residents and business owners were representative of a diverse body of opinions. Some neighbors have joined together to form advocacy groups in order to better address the area's issues. This is not to say, however, that a broad consensus on these issues exists in the area. This is to be assumed, as Jakle

and Sculle intimate in their analysis of the social implications related to highway signage:

> …Signs…provide one of the most important means by which social discourse is brought to and inserted into social life. Signs…stand in landscape to influence thought, if not action. More so in some settings and less so in others, signs are what the managers of a place rely on in asserting social control. Through signs, social agendas can be imposed and maintained. And, of course, social agendas can be challenged (xxix).

In light of the "social agendas" implied by highways signs, we chose to also research current social issues and sentiments connected to Aurora Avenue. We investigated local newspapers and community press and talked with business owners and community groups. The primary concerns for these groups revolve around the improvement of Aurora as a safe and attractive place for residents and businesses. According to a recent Saturday issue of the Seattle Times, "About 45 percent of all Seattle homeowners live in the area, and it's where 34 percent of the city's crime is committed" (Sullivan). Various organizations have joined together as Greenwood Aurora Involved Neighbors (GAIN) "formed specifically to address problems of increased crime in the neighborhood" (GAIN website). Business owners and members of the Aurora Merchant's Association have also offered negative views on the topic of criminal activity (Puetz), and many have created prohibitive signage of their own in response to crime happening in the area (Fig. 10). Both organizations have taken steps to curtail crime. The Merchant's Association has had signs posted on corners marking them as High Prostitution Areas. They use video cameras to record license plates of cars picking up prostitutes and have a 24-hour hotline for people to call and report prostitution (Romero). GAIN holds community patrols during the evening and some weekends, organizes monthly clean up events, and initiates community building projects to help make the area appear well-tended to in order to shy away criminal activity.

As part of our research, we solicited the opinions of individual GAIN members through the format of open-ended questions dealing with future visions, distinctions

Figure 10 – Hand-painted sign in response to loitering and criminal activity along Aurora, outside the Sun Hill Motel, photo by authors

between the Aurora neighborhoods and others in the Seattle Area, the overall impact and identity of Aurora Avenue, and insider versus outsider images of the area. When looking at the responses, we can see that some highly individualized concerns are addressed, but a commonality in response does emerge on one theme: aesthetics.

When listening to the perspective of one living among the objects being addressed, such as signs in our case, the subjectivity of the individual must be somewhat magnified. The sentimentality of case and point under these circumstances need to be recognized by us as researchers. However, a question arises: If, on four different occasions, the same questions are raised and the answers fall into a pattern, what does this mean for the establishment of fact? For instance, in each interview conducted, mention was made of the fact that Aurora is viewed by the neighbors surrounding it as, "visually UNAPPEALING," "embarrassing," "an ignored cesspool," "ugly," and "broken down and tired."[6] Gudis' mention of outdoor advertising failing to create the image of "Prosperity Avenue," (Buyways, 40) as dreamed up by entrepreneurs is especially relevant here. What we make of the local resident demographical view of the area is highly subjective and based on denotations apparent in Aurora's visual whole, businesses and the signs they display contributing a major portion of this whole. The claim that Aurora's unsightliness

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[6] These comments come from a group interview conducted with members of GAIN on February 23, 2006.

is based in ignorance and neglect, if taken purely by the opinions of these interviewed few, is one very important denotative aspect of Aurora's character. Furthermore, such views of Aurora must be viewed as equally legitimate as any "objective" or "official" view if an honest and effective analysis of the area is to be made.

The commonality of the groups' concerns, however, does not imply that there are not tensions and conflicting views present among those seeking to address and eliminate Aurora's problems. One area where these conflicting views converge is around the proposed transit plans for the area. Business owners fear the loss of what denotes a car-friendly area of commerce (i.e. parking lot space and right-of-way for cars) (Puetz). Homeowners and residents, on the other hand, support the city-approved project to widen Aurora Avenue by twelve feet, which would add an additional lane for buses and create wider, more attractive sidewalks (City of Seattle). This friction between interest groups creates problems and stands to create a hindrance to a solution for a longer-standing, larger, issue: the crime which they all face.

Future Visions for the Strip

Viewing the post Interstate-5 Aurora Avenue, and its apparent dilapidation, its apparent things have changed and continue to change. However, in this city decay is the opportunity for well-intentioned rebirth. The city of Seattle is interested in giving Aurora a greater sense of community, and is working to create residence-friendly city décor, as well as attempting to avert focus from the area's highway character. One such plan of action is the "Aurora-Licton Neighborhood Plan" (created in March of 1999).   It was drawn up to create the potential for community, emphasizing its residential appeal. This plan includes Licton Springs Park, Wilson-Pacific school site, and areas east and west of Aurora Avenue including businesses from NE 85th Street to NE 110th Street. Through the description of the current conditions of this area presented in the plan, Aurora Avenue is seen as a barrier in the city and a haven for crime and traffic. The city blocks are not conducive to pedestrians and the bad traffic flow and constraining lanes make even transportation difficult. However, Aurora is looking forward, hoping to create

Figure 11 – Way West Motel, currently closed and for lease, photo by authors

smaller city blocks and safer, more convenient pedestrian crossings. Within the next twenty years, there is also the hope of revamping Aurora's aesthetic, which could very mean ridding it of its signature neon signs and iconic businesses (Fig. 11). The plan proposes replacing the dingy, stagnant motels with livable and affordable apartments and condominiums. Development of light rail transit would also provide more accessibility to the area, truly bringing it into the 21st century.

When constructed, the Aurora and surrounding areas never really had a chance when it came to city planning. Because of its bizarre emergence along with Highway 99, there exists a vast array of changes that are necessary to make Aurora a thriving area once again.

Research Reflection and Concluding Comments

We as researchers (and as humans) are inhabitants of our own spatial and cultural design; we contribute to our own sociology. The varying perspectives which comprise any impression associated with a culture are personal, private and public, and are fluidly interchanging. These perspectives fall within a multitude of approaches, including but not limited to: historical, photographic, scholarly, anthropological, commercial, administrational, analytical, residential, transient or observational. We have tried to link what we have found from each of these listed fields as cohesively as possible within the constraint of the forever conflicting, yet consistently coupled, text and image. As researchers, the place best to stand is perhaps at the intersection, being careful not to create an impasse as we do so. Just as this place in the middle is most ideal, the surrounding areas and complex regions are unavoidable in any attempt at retrieving detailed and accurate data.

We, as photographers, take our use of the photograph as our middle-- our "objective"-- ground. We can stand solidly behind a camera, at the desired distance

from our subject, and choose what it is we would like to frame and take home. The photographs are our captured and frozen moments, our silenced messages. The fact that contextual noise and movement has been stripped, we must realize, will leave that space empty for the viewer. The subsequent "filling-in" of this space will be the unknown part of the whole of this picture we attempt to fully create. We will not always be certain of the message we convey, for as Roland Barthes says, "…whatever the origin and the destination of the message, the photograph is not simply a product or a channel, but also an object endowed with a structural autonomy" ("The Photographic Message," 15) In many ways, this finding alone confounds any effort at a thorough understanding by us, or by the many who view our visual data.

In this, we must not only be concerned with the viewers' judgments, but also confront the delicate topic of privacy preservation while conducting our research. It then goes to be said that the voyeurism often attributed to the photographer or interviewer, even when he or she is not attempting any affront, is in some ways a valid assessment. Investigation may be easily taken to be interrogation; both photography and the collecting of oral histories and interviews are mediums requiring a conscientious application. As in any situation, gauging the comfort level of others', while simultaneously maintaining an appropriate amount of poise as to properly convey one's intent, has proven quite challenging.

Regardless of the paradoxical behavior of photographs, we can still be led to a certain sociological discourse. Yes, it is true that a framed photograph has been chosen for a reason that often adheres to an assumption of ideological norms, never allowing the subject to reach its "zero degree"(*Camera Lucida* 12). But does the photograph not still "furnish instant history, instant sociology, and instant participation" (On Photography, 75), as Sontag suggests? Here we, as viewers, are given an opportunity to allow for new questions to evolve from those which the photographer and photograph itself may be asking us to explore. This is the challenge, but whether we

assume the position of photographer, ethnographer, researcher, or one who stands before the product of the data, it may be a fortunate obstacle to confront.

As researchers utilizing photographic data, we make use of our abilities to ask questions, to frame in a photograph that which we may feel is a representative part of an existing whole, or as Barthes may view as producing a "certificate of presence." (Camera Lucida, 87)   This is not to say that we are purveyors of absolute truth. As Madison states in *Critical Ethnography*,

> If the cultures, communities, and the lives we strive to understand are in some way divinely connected, we must keep in mind that what we witness will always have deeper, more layered, and broader implications, consequences and contexts that we could ever grasp or interpret in the space of our lifetime. (86)

We have taken pieces of data and have placed them together so that they may create a depiction of Aurora Avenue the way we have come to understand it. We do hope that this work will both raise new questions, and advance a greater understanding of the area as a whole.

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Images courtesy of The Seattle Municipal Archives and the Shoreline Historical Museum.