

# SUBTEXT IS SCIF 2



# POWER

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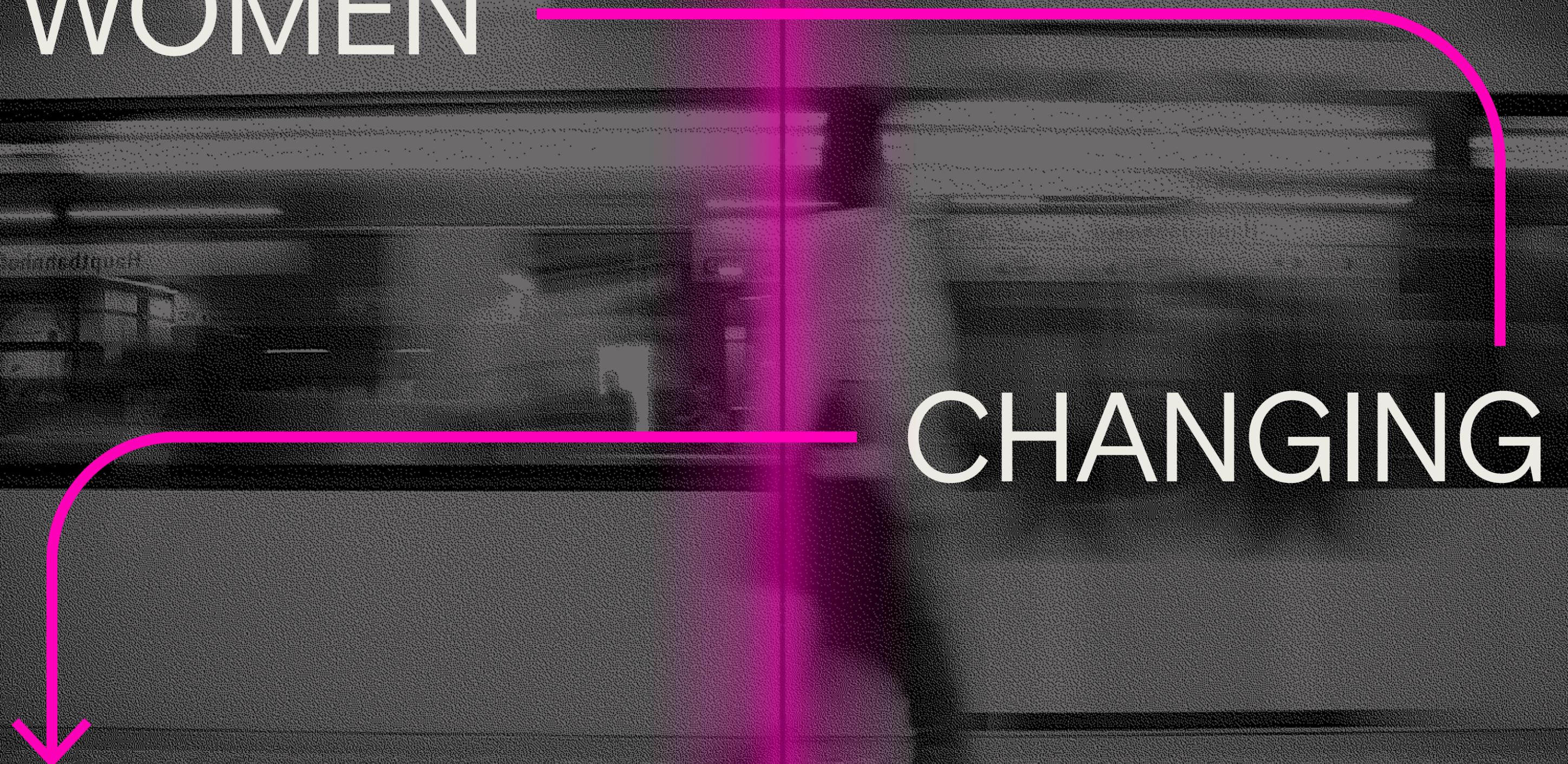
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CONTRIBUTORS

WOMEN

CHANGING

TRANSPORTATION



## → WCT

Women Changing Transportation (WCT) began in 2019 as an effort to foster community among women in the transportation field, recognizing the shared challenges of misogyny faced in a field dominated by men and masculine-normative ideals of success. We envisioned WCT as a space where the power of shared experiences could be recognized, healing could occur, and shared solutions and actions could be developed.

As the program grew, we recognized that its goals and parameters also required growth. The program needed to acknowledge the context in which we live, how identities shape experience, and how that forms a basis for relationships.

In our initial desire to create a space for women, we overlooked the need to start by listening to the experiences of the women in the group. We needed to explore how their experiences were defined by differences, and to ground the group in a shared understanding. We particularly missed the need to center the voices of Black and brown women, who cannot extricate those identities from what it means to be a woman working in transportation, and moving in the world. As driven as we all were to fix a flawed field, interrogating how our group was complicit in advancing ideologies—particularly relating to work—that establish racial



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and social hierarchy and “masculine-normative” ideas needed to be the foundation of any collective action.

2020 came and threw us for a loop, forcing us to interrogate these larger questions, and what it means to be “othered”. When we started the year, we hoped to rectify what we had missed in setting the foundation of the 2019 cohort, but we now had to navigate creating a virtual community during a global health emergency. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 brought the legacy of America’s structural racism into full focus and accentuated the importance of centering the voices of Black and brown women in our own group.

This project is an effort to hold space for those voices. We were inspired by the zine tradition, rooted in counterculture and social justice, and grounded by low-fi DIY style. This project attempts to honor and respect that tradition by creating space for women to share stories of/experiences in/reflections on the field in their own words, through the mediums that most resonate with them.

Ashley Pryce

Stephanie Lotshaw

04

## → Issue 2

As we try to change the world around us, it's not unusual, especially now, to feel overwhelmed at how broken things seem. It's happening in many facets of society—from education to healthcare to housing—nothing is spared, including transit and transportation.

While the systems are broken for everyone, the disparities we see across racial, gender, and economic lines, is striking. These are a direct result of how the systems and institutions were designed: the lack of representation in decision-making was present in the creation of the systems and still persists today, fueling unequal access and entrenching inequality. In transit, we see a divergence between “who decides” and “who rides”, and important decisions are entrusted to leadership and staff who do not reflect the diversity of riders and the experiences of communities most affected. This then affects the outcomes we see.

There has been an effort across the field over the past several years to rectify this disconnect—many transit agencies and transportation departments have established diversity, equity, and inclusion departments and/or stated an intention to prioritize equity. Some have even prioritized hiring diverse candidates as senior leadership positions transition. Despite this, we still see 66% of managerial and

leadership positions in transit held by white people and of the top 24 transit agencies by ridership, nearly 60% of all CEO/General Managers are male and white. This gap in representation impacts decisions about how service is run as well as how transit agencies/transportation departments function. Transit routes and schedules ignore women's travel patterns, which are often linked trips all throughout the day, and failures to implement policies like open strollers on buses, limit transit as a viable option for many women. Internally, lack of women in leadership positions creates workplaces with limited or minimal parental leave policies or lack of facilities for nursing mothers, for example. The inability to retain female employees only exacerbates the impacts on decision-making about service provision.

Even more, community engagement practices, which are meant to center the voices of transit riders and communities, fail to truly do so. Opportunities for transit riders to influence decisions are limited, tightly controlled, or obscured. Sometimes from a lack of public discussion at all about a decision; sometimes because public comment periods or engagement sessions conflict with common work or family obligations; or sometimes because of lack of trust between government and community.

As a result, these processes fail to actually gather a plethora of diverse voices needed to truly design systems for all.

In order to truly create a system that benefits all users, we need to fundamentally look at who holds power and what those decisions result in. In this issue, the contributors discuss the intersections of space, gender, and power; obscure decision-making processes and political inequity; and tokenizing community engagement processes. As the cracks in the system are laid bare, each piece asks us to consider and envision a new way of operating.

EQUITY

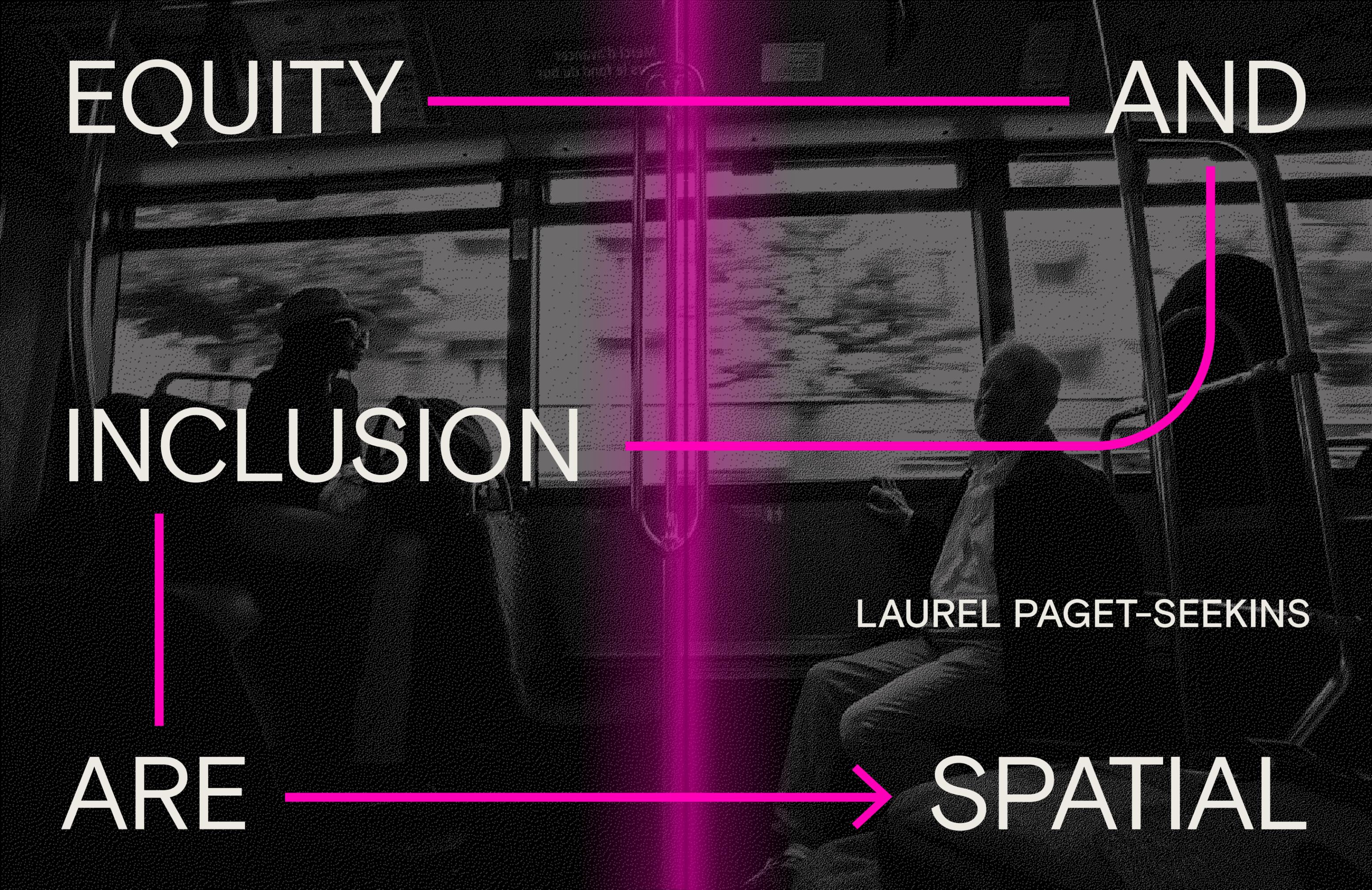
AND

INCLUSION

LAUREL PAGET-SEEKINS

ARE

SPATIAL



## → We often use the phrase ‘make space’ in talking about inclusion;

Public transit is fundamentally about allowing people to navigate physical space. It is one tool of many to create social inclusion, the ability of everyone to participate in society, by providing access to places and activities. To achieve the goal of social inclusion, transit must provide access in a way that is equitable, safe, and accessible for all people.

I took a job at a transit agency to work with the community we served to increase transit equity and social inclusion. It became increasingly clear to me that any changes to increase equity and inclusion for the community were entwined with increasing equity and inclusion for employees inside the transit agency. (I think my experience

as a white person is why it took me a little while to figure this out.) We can only get equitable and inclusive outcomes through equitable and inclusive decision-making processes. Inclusive internal decision-making allows employees to bring both their professional and lived experiences to improve agency decisions impacting themselves and their larger community.

Knowing transportation infrastructure can be used to thwart or to facilitate equity and social inclusion, we use spatial measures to evaluate outcomes of transportation decision-making. Less discussed is how equity and inclusion in the decision-making process are spatial. Even in this increasingly virtual time, we use metaphors of rooms and tables to talk about decision-making, because decisions happen (or are “tabled”) in physical places. Like other employers, the ways that employees interact in and with the physical workplace at a transit agency shapes equity and inclusion.

The reality of how power plays out in office space came into focus for me when I was promoted. After 4 years of working to create a welcoming and joyful team space floors away from the seat of power, I (reluctantly) moved into an office in the C-suite. From my new office, I could observe how people interacted in the space.

A position of power is often associated with being busy, so people in these positions often have a person sitting in relative proximity whose responsibilities include acting as a gate-keeper or time-protector. These time-protector roles are often gendered in who usually fills the role. In this case, the General Manager (a man) had a woman executive assistant who sat outside his office.

I could see how generally women and people of color would approach the woman gate-keeper and ask if they could schedule a meeting or leave paperwork to be signed. And I watched as some men (usually with positions of power) would just walk past her and approach the General Manager’s (GM) office. My theory is that people who are socialized as women and/or those who experience the world in an ‘othered’ identity respect the role of the gate-keeper because they have been taught to not take up space in a way that assumes access to power or disregards another’s authority. In some cases, this is due to the ramifications of acting otherwise and being told to ‘know your place’ in subtle and direct ways.

As I told the GM at the time, “...who has access to decision-making is limited by who feels like they have that level of access. Just walking into your office without an appointment is counter to how I take up space in the world...

informal access leaves out women and people of color because of the things we are told all our lives.”

The consequences of this gendered and racialized access to power are layered. The person in the power position doesn’t receive information and problems to solve in a strategic or triaged order (part of the role of an experienced gate-keeper or Chief of Staff). Instead they are prioritized by the way the individuals who have the problem or information relate to and access power. This, in turn, shapes the outcome of decisions as people without access aren’t included in the decision process.

Another layer is that the people who respect the role of the gate-keeper still have problems to solve on a short notice. Most of the problems in an organization as large and complicated as a transit agency never reach the GM’s office suite. But the suite was

## we need to create that space physically. ←

a place where senior managers went when they had problems they needed help solving or decisions made. I would watch as people would come in and find a closed door or a gatekeeper. And given my welcoming open door some of those folks would end up in my office. (Also I was one of a few women, LGBTQ+, or people of color in the suite.)

It wasn't in my official job description, but I became an ad-hoc organizational strategist and therapist. I helped people strategize how to get decisions made, we exchanged critical information with each other, and we shared our stories of the indignities small and large we faced. I had been developing these skills back in my office on the other floor, but now this role was embedded in the physical space of the agency. When the GM's suite later moved floors, I was assigned an office just outside the door to the GM's executive assistant. I called it the 'emotional buffer office' and explained to the GM why I couldn't sit there and have time for my actual job.

Helping people, for whom the existing decision-making and support systems aren't working, get the access they need to do their literal jobs took a lot of emotional labor. There were others doing this work, but when an organization doesn't have a diverse leadership the labor falls on those few. The support was only half the labor, the other half was trying to explain

why the system isn't working to the exact people for whom the system was working just fine.

I wasn't in the emotional buffer office for long before the COVID pandemic turned the C-suite into a remote workplace. (It is worth mentioning that frontline transit employees didn't have this safety measure.) When remote work took away the physical location, I found it exacerbated the access problems. Without a physical gatekeeper, the people with prior relationships and access retained their ability to go directly to senior executives to get issues resolved. (I suspect remote work further reduced the strategic triaging of problems for leaders to solve.) And those without existing access didn't have the option to go to a physical place to try to get assistance or decisions made. Thus, increasing their stress and sense of powerlessness in an overwhelming time. And remote work made it harder for the time-protector to find a way to 'squeeze you in' as they had less visibility into the principal's day.

As an outsider in a physical workspace, you can generally observe the ways that you are not being included or granted access; in a remote workplace it is harder to know all the ways. Some might experience this as an emotional relief, even while it impacts their ability to advance.

Existing physical places for needed emotional labor were disrupted. It was still happening, but it was even less accessible and visible. I worked with colleagues to create virtual places for the type of emotional work needed to respond to the pandemic, police murders of Black people, anti-Asian hate, and all the trauma that 2020 brought. I do think remote work allowed me to create a safer space for my team to process these events than we would have felt in the physical office.

A particular constraint in a public agency for emotional labor outside of physical places is that generally all written communication is considered a public record. It is easy to feel like texting and online chatting is 'conversation,' but this isn't true for public sector employees. An awareness of this risk limits the virtual workspace for emotional work.

I am sure many others have insights into how the design of workplaces impact equity and inclusion. As employers are discussing 'the future of work,' changes must increase the equity and inclusion of physical and virtual workplaces. We often use the phrase 'make space' in talking about inclusion; we need to create that space physically. In professional development we use metaphors of pipelines, pathways, and ladders to indicate

career progression over time and space. What needs to be done to make sure equity for career development is designed into our workplaces?

Emotional labor is a critical part of creating and maintaining healthy and inclusive workplaces. It needs to be done intentionally, not by office placement. We need to reduce the unnecessary labor created by racism, sexism and other forms of exclusion in the workplace, acknowledge and compensate the remaining labor, and spread it out more evenly (in part by having more diverse leadership teams). We need to understand where people currently go for help outside of the existing organizational structure so we can fix problems and create places inside.

We know we have to measure the equity and inclusion of transportation networks spatially. We also need to consider the spatial component of who is included and valued in decision-making processes. Hopefully the common solution of more equitable decision-making can help employees and riders work together to increase transit's role in the social inclusion of society.

# PLAN HOW

AMBAR JOHNSON



# WE WORK

## → If you want to go fast, go alone.

Sitting down, in the office...at home, I hear my heart beating fast...

Running from meeting to meeting

Fingers running from key to key

Time running from hand to hand

Running out of time

In the world of transportation, with tasks constantly arriving, deliverables departing, work is a bustling train station with schedules that constantly need to be met.

When projects run like clockwork there are no complaints and everyone is happy. However, it's only when things are delayed are there complaints. To be sure, schedules, timeliness, and punctuality are essential for many (in)visible day-to-day operations. However, for many human processes, like project and team management, that deny necessary space to recoup and recalibrate to maintain our work, teams, and our selves, we must ask—what is the cost?

What is the cost of this convenience?

I find it ironic that a practice that works towards “livable” cities, our internal processes to achieve those goals do not live up to those rendered standards.

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For example, when people think about cities they love, they instantly think of infrastructure. Not just the rigid roads that move people through a place, but infrastructure like parks, street benches, bus shelters, and shaded trees, the essentials that facilitate people to stay—rest—and take in their environment.

Think about a project you're managing. If the process were a city that you and your team had to visit, what would it look like? How would you experience it?

To me, I see many people zooming through the streets, playing touch-and-go with the brakes, using stop signs as suggestions, trying their hardest to meet a deadline they might be late for.

Rushing towards the finish line, sometimes the cost is not just a few days of delay, but also things that take longer to recoup from as an individual and a team, like burn out, stress, resentment, and relationships.

If these processes were built into cities, they wouldn't be a place we would claim we designed let alone desire to be in for any time.

But what if we were to lead projects the way we lead bike rides?

Do you sweep? Not the chore, but the role. A “sweep” is assigned as one of two leads. Opposite of line leaders, sweeps travel as fast as the last person in front of them, behind the pack, so no one gets left behind.

When I'm working on projects, I think about it like designing a bicycle ride. How can I lead, how can I sweep? How do I ensure we're also enjoying the journey while not rushing to our destination?

As professionals, as we're trained to have attention to detail to our work products, the attentiveness towards teams can fall away to the wayside.

How would the quality of our products look differently if, instead of powering through, we planned for more rest stops to build energy to get to the next place?

Instead of going “the right way,” what if there was time to wander?

## If you want to go far, go together. ←

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What would it feel like to work in a way  
that's mindful that even with directions,  
sometimes people get lost?

How would we feel if we had the space  
to make a U-Turn, to recalibrate, and  
consider taking a different route (or  
mode) to reach our destination all  
together?

What if it turns out that we can go  
further, not by speeding up, but  
by slowing down? What if we were  
sweeping along each part of the  
process?

My favorite proverb says, "If you want  
to go fast, go alone. If you want to go  
far, go together."

As I pedal to the metal in the streets  
I hear the power  
700 horses.

And

As I pedal to the metal at home  
I hear the hum of  
one billion bytes.

I stop.  
Everything  
I am  
doing.

I once heard someone say, "The sun  
does not get up when it feels like it."

It helped me keep me on schedule.  
Like my computer:

Bright.  
Always  
On.

As much as I stay up all hours of the night.  
As I try to stay on all the time  
As much as I want to operate like  
clockwork  
I realize we are not celestial  
We are not machines  
we are mortals.

I hear the softness of  
my two lungs  
I hear the pattering of  
my one beating heart.

I am not the sun.  
And I will pace myself  
as such.



WOMEN

ON

THE

TONYA ABERNATHY  
ORQUIDIA FLORES  
THEJOAL HOPE  
ALICIA MICHELLE SMITH

FRONTLINES

## → Women operators must navigate the challenges of a system that is most often white-male led.

Across the U.S. transit agencies are grappling with a shortfall of operators. These operators—frontline workers that keep buses and trains running are essential to a functioning transit network that actually gets riders where they need to go.

But being an operator is no simple feat. There are long hours, and often for more junior employees, irregular shifts, and shifts at very early hours. There are long routes, sometimes without well scheduled breaks or access to restrooms. And there is the stress of day to day interactions with riders, sometimes involving altercations between passengers, or disagreements over fare payment. A recent piece in the Washington Post chronicles the harrowing experiences of one woman bus driver in Denver. In New York City, bus driver harassment accounts for nearly 75% of all transit worker attacks.

As cities continue to deal with economic and health crises, transit often becomes a go-to transitional space for those facing homelessness, or experiencing mental health episodes. Drivers, many of whom are ill equipped to face these challenges on their own, can find themselves in challenging, uncomfortable and sometimes unsafe situations.

Many of the challenges of being a frontline operator seem to become more acute for women.

There is of course the fact that women already comprise such a small percentage of the frontline workforce: In 2018, only 20% of operators at SFMTA were women, at the time short of the national average of 37%. At the MBTA just 30% of operators are women, at VTA just 16% of operators are women, at TTC also 16%, and at SEPTA in 2020 women account for just about 20% of the positions in management.

In addition to often being one of few or the only female in the depot, women operators must navigate the challenges of a system that is most often white-male led. Women make up just 15% of the transit workforce overall, and even with intentional efforts to hire more women (in leadership and as frontline staff in particular), many agencies still fall short. Women in operations roles confront pay gaps, even with unions. At MBTA, for example, women earn 89 cents for every dollar that men earn.

Despite the myriad of challenges that operators face, many still put on their uniforms everyday and do the work of keeping their cities moving. This photo essay is dedicated in particular to the women on the frontline, many trailblazers in their roles who are laying the groundwork for building more fair

and inclusive workplaces. The women in these photos share with us a bit about the challenges they face as operators, but they also share what it is that keeps them in the work.



## → Tonya Abernathy

Bus Operator, King County Metro, Seattle, WA

### AS A WOMAN, HOW IS A PUBLIC-FACING OPERATIONS ROLE REWARDING AND CHALLENGING?

I love driving the bus, I'm an outgoing person, I love the communication I get with the passengers. The rewarding part is when the passengers appreciate what we do. When passengers come up to me and say, thank you for your service—it makes me feel like I'm in the military! Some passengers thank us daily; one man gave us a gift card to buy coffee at Café Fiore. I appreciate that.

It can also be difficult. You have maybe 2000 or more passengers in a day, but there might be one passenger that has negative energy which you have to take the negative and turn it into positive. Taking care of yourself and your mental health is important. As a female it's harder, because some passengers treat you differently because you're a woman—they see what they can get away with. Or they think they can use unwanted advances towards you. They wouldn't treat male operators like that. In addition to being an operator, I am also a Chief Shop Steward, and a leader at the base. I try to educate other operators, and tell them: When we go outside, is your shadow different than my shadow? I use that all the time when I talk to people. We shouldn't treat anybody differently.

The other challenging part—we must deal with passengers who are mentally ill. If you turn around and give mentally ill passengers eye contact, they will respond in a positive manner. I wish we could have more training for that. I was a security officer before, so I know how to deal with the public. I also wish we could get training with role playing to help operators with assaults. I want all operators to self-care which is making sure they get proper sleep, exercise and eat right. I've been practicing self-care. I also get a Himalayan salt stones massage to help me with my self-care.

I'm a proud King County Metro Transit Operator and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 587 member. As a female, I honor the uniform, I love my job.



## → Orquidia Flores

Bus Operator, Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago, IL

### AS A WOMAN, HOW IS A PUBLIC-FACING OPERATIONS ROLE REWARDING AND CHALLENGING?

It's amazing how serious customers look when they're approaching the bus, but then when I open the door and get a smile, it's like, "Wow, that's great. Have a good day." That's what I look forward to every time I go to work. It feels like I'm giving my family member a ride to work. What motivates me is making that ride memorable. I'm not just a driver. I'm not a robot. I'm here to get you there safely and give you

a great experience. I've had so many different passengers tell me, "You're the first person that's asked me how my day is going."

A lot of people think traffic [is the most challenging part of the job] but that's the least of our worries. It's what's happening inside the bus. [We have to] multitask to keep everybody safe.

Sometimes we have passengers that are just not having a good day. And that's okay, we're all human. But as the driver, I have to feel out the situation and deescalate if it's getting borderline trouble. I start with, "Hey, you doing okay back there? Let's just have a little quick chat." And then, "Hey, are we all right?" And then they tell me what's going on, and then that's it. They grab a seat and I drop them off. Sometimes all we need is to hear them out.

And while I'm doing that, I have to make sure everyone around is comfortable, to let them know without words, "Hey, it's okay. I got this. Don't worry. You're in good hands."

My advice for this job is to be yourself and treat others the way you would want to be treated. This is a great job. You're going to get taken care of when you enter this job. So, take care of others. Give them that great ride. Give them that smile of yours.

When I come home so tired, my kids are like, "You're always doing too much." But I don't do it because, "Oh, I'm trying to get so tired today." I tell my family: "it's tiring, but rewarding."

And for my passengers, that's what they value. They're like, "Oh my God, you're so kind." I just hope that by me doing this, that person can get out of my bus and be kind too when they get to work.

I wanted to work for CTA because I love my city. I'm just so proud to be driving that bus. It's like I'm the face of the company. With my career here, I hope that I can motivate others to be who you are when you're at work. I want to help CTA be recognized more for our drivers, women, whoever you are. And maybe one day be somebody important at CTA, not just the driver that everybody sees.



## → Thejoal Hope

Bus Operator, Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago, IL

### AS A WOMAN, HOW IS A PUBLIC-FACING OPERATIONS ROLE REWARDING AND CHALLENGING?

Being a female Bus Operator has its rewards and its pitfalls.

You have customers who appreciate you coming to work. They will say, "Oh, thank you so much for coming to work because, man, I needed to get to work, and I'm so glad that you're here. I can get to work on time." So that motivates you for the day. You may be thinking, "Oh, I'm so tired. I just don't feel like

being here." But once you get that one customer who voices appreciation, that'll wake you right on up."

Some people don't talk to you respectfully. Especially being a woman, you get a lot of disrespect, and you got to learn how to deal with that... You got to learn to hold your tongue because all ignorance does not deserve a response. So for me, over the years, I've just become very prayerful. It's not easy working with the public being a bus operator because you have to wear too many hats and still be aware of your surroundings. Let me not forget the long hours doesn't help, they can be draining so getting plenty of rest isn't an option. But once you get your niche, it gets easier.

If you have managers that are observant, spiritual and motivators it helps. Having an open-door policy is much-needed in a business like this. Some managers are good about that—you can talk to them and let them know where you stand for that day. They say on paper that "customers are always right," but in reality, that's not always the case. So you need managers to be more understanding, good listeners and open to giving suggestions that are not printed in the book.

This past year has been really rough for me, but I had a Manager, GM M. Akindele, that was very supportive

and understanding of what I was going through at that time. It's imperative to have good people in positions that not only make sure you're doing the right thing but also be supportive, motivating and encouraging. Ones who you can talk to, who can see when there's something wrong and say, "Hey, what's going on? How can we fix this? Do you need some time off?"

The rewards and benefits have been amazing for me, being a single mom. There's some good to it all. You get to take care of your children with providing more than just the basics. Opportunities to advance within the company is of great magnitude.

I've met a lot of good people over the years working here at CTA. Managers, Supervisors, Instructors etc., some of which were operators with me. Some people have met their husbands and wives here, even if that's not what they came here for. You want to be in an environment where everyone is respectful, communicative and compassionate towards one another because this is your family for most of the day.

My advice for a new female Bus Operator would be to have a great support system, stay strong and prayerful.



## → Alicia Michelle Smith

Customer Service Representative, 32 years at the Chicago Transit Authority

My original title was Combined Rail Operator. We were cross-trained as a ticket agent, operator, conductor, tower or switching, and flagging.

Then I became a Customer Service Representative. You don't have enough time for me to tell you all that I actually do. CTA has a safety-first model, so the safety of the passengers takes precedence over everything. While I'm interfacing with passengers in the station, I carry a radio, and I'm monitoring the entire time. If things are chaotic, I assist where I'm needed.

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I might be on the trains assisting the operator, I might be on the platform, so it varies from day to day. Also, I work with instruction, and I train new hires. I'm a line instructor.

The people are the reward. I absolutely love my passengers. When people come to Chicago, and they want to go to a Cubs game, or they want to go to the Blues Festival or the Taste of Chicago, I really enjoy helping them. We meet people from all over the world. The other reward is the men and women that go to work every day that don't give up in our current political climate.

There are several challenging things, especially right now. The violence gets in our way of doing our job. There [used to be] a lot of respect for us as transit workers. The boldness that we see right now has never been a part of our world. And homelessness, I've never seen it this bad before. When you look at our history of how we, CTA, resolve issues to get you to your destination, it's never been a problem—we're trained to resolve an issue in 10 minutes. But when we have these real hard problems, like homelessness or fighting, and our train's not moving, that's hard.

Each generation has its own challenges, and new hires have challenges that we did not have.

My advice to them is you're more than capable and give 100% without harming yourself. I like that management is now making a commitment to new hires that if you stay with CTA full-time, we will give you full-time benefits. Men and women need to take care of their families.

And you have to love the passengers. Our job is all about transporting people. Whether you're operating a train, driving a bus, or you're in the station, everybody is dependent on you to lead them to safety. It's a responsibility that I would say—take seriously. I've always worked those busy stations. And I knew that my responsibility was to be the face of CTA, and to get the passengers to their destination because that's what we do.

When I started working for CTA, I became a fan of the Cubs fans because they were die-hards. When the Cubs won the World Series, I was happier for the fans than I was for the Cubs. In my 20-something-odd years transporting the fans to games, I saw they carried every generation with them to that game. So, the sweet spot for me has been transporting Chicagoans to events that bring us together, and I love the pride that we carry for our city. As an agency, CTA, is in the middle of that. That is what we do—transport people. If we stop, the city stops.

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# TRANSIT

# IN

ANGELLE BRADFORD

→ LOUISIANA

## → We don't have to choose between cars and transit.

"It can't be an electric train! Are you crazy?!" Maybe we were. I slumped down in my chair while on a phone call with my fellow organizer, Margie, and reflected on how badly this call was going. We were chatting with a leader who had been a part of the development of the plans for passenger rail between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, here in Louisiana. It was probably conversation number 100 with yet another stakeholder. And it felt like we were going in circles.

In February of 2020, me and Margie and others, as a part of the Delta Chapter of the Sierra Club, formed a transit equity team, borne out of the national Transit Equity Days events.

The one thing we were sure of was that we wanted Louisiana to get serious about the development of a multimodal, statewide, public transit system—one that was truly

public owned, not a private interest boondoggle. We wanted to work toward a transit system run with integrity, one that would be attractive for Amtrak to engage with and support insofar as rail, one that would be affordable and frequent for riders, and one that offered union labor.

Our team was also on a hunt for answers, because so many Louisianans appeared poised to accept the public transit system we envisioned, yet transportation decision makers refused to act upon those desires and continued to force highways and roads projects that we cannot afford to maintain.

It was Henry Ford who said, "if I would have asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses". For our team Henry Ford's sentiments really rang true—outdated beliefs maintain a stronghold on the status quo. This adherence to the status quo has created a transportation system with less options, more expensive standards of living, and less opportunities to connect with one another. It is a default setting that benefits and enriches few but leaves the rest of us with very distorted understandings of what change is possible here.

Perhaps the most difficult part of trying to make any difference in the

current state of transit in Louisiana is identifying who the decision makers actually are. The overall transportation system, with its agencies and transit services, is a conglomerate with elusive leadership. Interestingly enough, this leadership often arrives at the same answers as the largest developers and contractors and chambers of commerce.

Our team decided that our first step was to create a white paper highlighting the importance of frequency, affordability, and public good within the public transit system; demonstrating examples of best practices that could be replicated across the State; and highlighting potential challenges to consider.

We also got involved in public meetings and open houses—meetings touching on everything from local and state level highway projects to Bus Rapid Transit projects that were "BRT" in name only. We made public comments on our state's highway priority program, and met with hundreds of stakeholders, legislators, and officials.

We didn't receive much indication that our comments were being placed into the public record, or any follow up that allayed our fears that our concerns would not be addressed. A lot felt futile, scary, and amorphous, with our team

lost in the shuffle of outdated websites, public hearings that we stumbled upon without sufficient or consistent notice, and comments and letters to entities we weren't even sure existed.

Despite this uphill battle, we weren't discouraged. But we recognized that it might be prudent to focus our efforts on a single, large project, or two, with a long history. It seemed that if we could trace those steps and leave some breadcrumbs for others on future projects, we could start to knock down some of the barriers.

Naturally, we chose to tackle the decades-old battle to reinstate the

## But we do have to prioritize transit if it is ever truly going to work. ←

Baton Rouge to New Orleans rail and the Dallas-Shreveport-Monroe-Atlanta rail (aka the North Louisiana line).

From the moment we began involving ourselves in this project, it was clear we were ruffling feathers. The people actually allowed in the room have their quotes directly published in the largest newspaper and yet those statements rarely have a paper trail easily accessible to the public. We also came up against many of the same problems we faced at the beginning of our advocacy, namely we couldn't figure out who to ask or what documents to request just to get an update on the projects. Furthermore, we realized that many of our questions couldn't even be answered because the project had never gotten through the basics of the planning stage. There wasn't a complete scope, schedule, budget or environmental assessment done for the rail lines. And that truly makes you question: amid all the Louisiana government's press conferences and IJA funding announcements, why were there no deadlines, timelines or expectations for when folks would actually be able to board a train?

Our team regrouped once more and shifted to co-drafting a bill that would require Louisiana's Department of Transportation and Development to move on completing some of the beginning project milestones.

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The bill, Senate Bill 467 of the 2022 Regular Session, passed and requires a legislative hearing on the progress of the scope, schedule, budget, and environmental studies prior to the next session in 2023. This is a huge step forward. Prior to the bills passing, advocates and the public were mostly in the dark.

The coalition continues to build, and our transit family continues to grow. We also have a planning and transit summit ahead of us in October, with the hope that we can pull together the challenges, barriers, and opportunities and lay out a road map for the state's public transit over the next decade.

As our team continues to take on more local fights or statewide ones, we are constantly reminded that it is our job to ground one another in why we do this: because public transit should in fact be public, first and foremost. For everyone and with full transparency. Safety and security of any kind in Louisiana are scarce. Financial safety, safety from hurricanes and disasters, or even our brutal criminal justice system. We live a beautiful lifestyle, one that is internationally revered with some of the best food and best traditions, but one that is always teetering on the edge of uncertainty.

Louisianans perform for the world; we give so much love and so much

joy. And yet our systems do not take care of us, the soul of the Deep South. While cars provide an illusion of freedom for all Americans, having cars as the standard for everyone, always, all the time, also compromises our safety and security. Maybe we don't have to build our lives around having to save up for a car and the requisite insurance. Maybe we should be able to trust the broader systems to have our back, whether riding home from a long day's work, drinking at a party and not wanting to risk that DUI or harm to ourselves or others, or not being able to drive yet. We have already advanced beyond horses and buggies, and now, instead of cars and traffic, we can give people a little stability by just honoring their need to continue having beautiful connections with one another, more time to breathe and reflect on their day, more job opportunities, and yes, safety.

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# GOODBYE

RICHA POUDYAL



# LETTER

## Saying Goodbye

Goodbye to 'will you please sit on this committee, we need your voice' when what they really mean is  
We need your brown face  
Give me that brown face  
Show me a smile on that brown face  
The same brown face that as a child you tried to scrub off in the shower  
After kids at school called you dirty, stinky  
After your uncles drunkenly laugh at a family picnic, asking 'didn't you ever learned how to shower properly??'  
Maybe then you'd be closer to white

Over the years, with each moment you let yourself lay in the grass, let yourself bathe in the sun  
You grow to love that brown skin, to cherish those who passed it down to you  
An honor to inhabit the armor of mothers before me, it was certainly a fight  
To lean against grandmother trees and feel an embrace, a connection you hadn't noticed before  
Clearly you belong here  
Years its taken to learn where to look for those reminders that you, too, deserve to live and flourish  
Now they want your sweet brown skin plastered, alongside logos, in elected offices, hosting backyard fundraisers in wealthy parts of town  
Parts of town with green bike lanes, rosemary and bees in every front yard  
Parts of town with young white families and big front porches  
Parts of town with flags, statements, signs, promising you are welcome there  
Parts of town you avoid eye contact  
Because you know they are staring, assessing, sexualizing  
I begin to wonder  
Is it my voice they seek, or do they simply seek to claim my skin as theirs?  
For me to shed this skin for them, to give it away freely  
As the rest of me, my voice, disappears

Then I wonder  
Am I going to let them?

Goodbye to the fight of proving your worth  
Of proving your belonging  
To bosses, relatives, to yourself  
As though your light doesn't glimmer each moment  
When you pour your coffee, comb your hair  
Walk in the rain  
Look for rocks  
Pick a flower for your love

As though it stays hidden, invisible  
When you lay in bed for an extra hour  
Or when  
You spend all evening watching the sunlight travel across the bedroom ceiling  
Closing your eyes with a smile  
Asking sleep to take you softly

How hopefully we convince ourselves  
If only there were more brown faces  
On posters, on tv, sitting in closed door meetings  
Asking for community feedback  
The brown faces will save us  
In roles that were specifically designed  
To keep us stuck.

Goodbye old world  
It's not that you didn't teach me anything  
You did  
From you i learned  
How easily we delude ourselves into believing  
The same systems that were designed to bring us into this moment  
Are the ones that will save us

Goodbye to the idea that it's a 'privilege' to imagine new, different, magical futures for ourselves, for our youth  
It is our birthright.  
Is that not what our ancestors have instructed? To lean into our sovereignty?  
I rush to check the stars as the heat fades, perhaps I misunderstood my task

Feet in the dirt and grass, midnight, amongst my fond friends [the dandelions] who  
always make time for my questions and a field of space for my exhaustion  
Teeth of the lion, as they open to the sun they remind me of courage that can still be  
tapped  
Gazing up on these hot August nights, I know they want more for us than this  
Somehow this night  
Is the most productive moment  
I've had in months  
I know we've laid some roots  
In the old way  
But this moment demands us  
To summon the courage  
To get our hands dirty and  
To dig the roots up fully  
And start anew  
A freer world cannot be born out of seeds planted  
By those who dreamt of  
Ownership

The seeds we plant will, must, be different  
We'll sing to them each night  
The dreams we have for a world where  
People are free, safe, fed, housed  
We'll whisper sweet secrets  
We haven't even shared with our closest family  
Our wildest desires  
Paint a picture in colors we don't have names for yet  
Finally asking for our wishes  
The ones we haven't wanted to curse by speaking them out loud

Goodbye to  
The stories that have raised us  
That tell us nothing  
Beyond what we see before us  
Is possible

Goodbye to the idea that anyone else besides us has the power  
We are it  
Everything we want, we must create ourselves.

Everything we want  
We must  
Create  
Ourselves.

*Author's note:* Goodbye letters are a tool used in grief therapy to process individual trauma and grief, and to sit with it fully, in our bodies, before letting it go. It allows for all the complexities of grieving something old and entering someplace new: the sadness, the resentment, the memories. Grief is not linear, and a tool like this can be used whenever it surfaces. As we build towards a new + entirely different world, we need a meaningful set of tools to move past the attachments that keep us stuck in doing things the old, familiar way.

## → Contributors

### AMBAR JOHNSON

Ambar is an urban and transportation planner and oral historian who creates at the nexus of connection, culture, and memory. She has experience as a consultant, advocate, and podcast producer to delicately dissect something that connects us all—how we get around. Her work has been featured in the [Boston Globe](#), [Boston Magazine](#), and [VISIBLE Magazine](#). You can find her on her website: [www.ambarjohnson.com](http://www.ambarjohnson.com) or newsletter [the \(e\)motional city](#).

### ANGELLE BRADFORD

Angelle was born and reared in Baton Rouge, and upon return to Louisiana after university, she has spent much of her time reconnecting with her love for the people and the land there. Named this year's Emerging Changemaker of the Year for the Sierra Club, Angelle has served on the Delta Chapter's executive committee for 4 years now, and has led the Transit Equity Team through legislative sessions and wins, campaign development and, most recently, the first Louisiana Transit and Planning Summit this past month. Her commitment to advising HBCU students and college students in their own ecological and environmental awakening continues on through the Sierra Student Coalition at Southern University and other partnerships with community groups and universities. A volunteer at heart in this work, Angelle

is a formally trained cardiovascular physiologist and medical scientist, expecting to graduate in 2023 with her Doctor of Philosophy degree.

### LAUREL PAGET-SEEKINS

Laurel Paget-Seekins works in the intersection of data, community, and policy to increase transit equity and quality. She uses her experience as a community organizer, researcher, and an agency employee to strategically champion and implement change. She spends a lot of time thinking about how to increase government capacity to address the urgent challenges of climate change and structural racism.

She received a 2021 Leadership in Government fellowship from Open Society Foundations to do a project on transit equity in the recovery from COVID. In her project she explored how to make equity change through the relationships between staff and community organizers. She also made a board game to illustrate the complexity of project implementation at transit agencies.

Laurel spent six years at the MBTA/MassDOT working on fare and service policy, new fare programs, data analytics, performance metrics and tools, and new service pilots. She facilitated internal and external stakeholder processes to develop and implement new policies and programs.

Laurel earned a BA from Oberlin College and a master's in City and Regional Planning and a Ph.D in Civil Engineering from Georgia Institute of Technology. She is the co-editor of *Restructuring Public Transport through Bus Rapid Transit*. You can read more of her writing at her website [www.laurelintransit.com](http://www.laurelintransit.com).

### RICHA POUDYAL

Richa is first generation Nepali-American, an advocate, friend, sister, writer, and facilitator. They strive to bring care, love, and justice to the work they do, and love to write, cook colorful dishes, and dance. They are currently the Policy Director at the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), working to empower and learn alongside APIs in our community to push for policies that bring us into a world that values people and planet over profit. She facilitates several cohort programs at APANO that bring together BIPOC friends and neighbors to learn and take action together. They also facilitate workshops with their own communities around internalized racism, power and privilege, and in local organizing spaces in Portland, Oregon.

#### ASHLEY PRYCE

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York Ashley has long been motivated to work with community to build the spaces they need and deserve.

She has a background in Urban Planning and over 10 years of experience spanning Local Government, Public Health and Real Estate. At Transit Center she works with advocates across the country to fight for better transit through co-development of advocacy strategy; grant-making; direct-action; and training facilitation.

Prior to joining the TransitCenter team she worked to create more equitable transit in the greater Boston area.

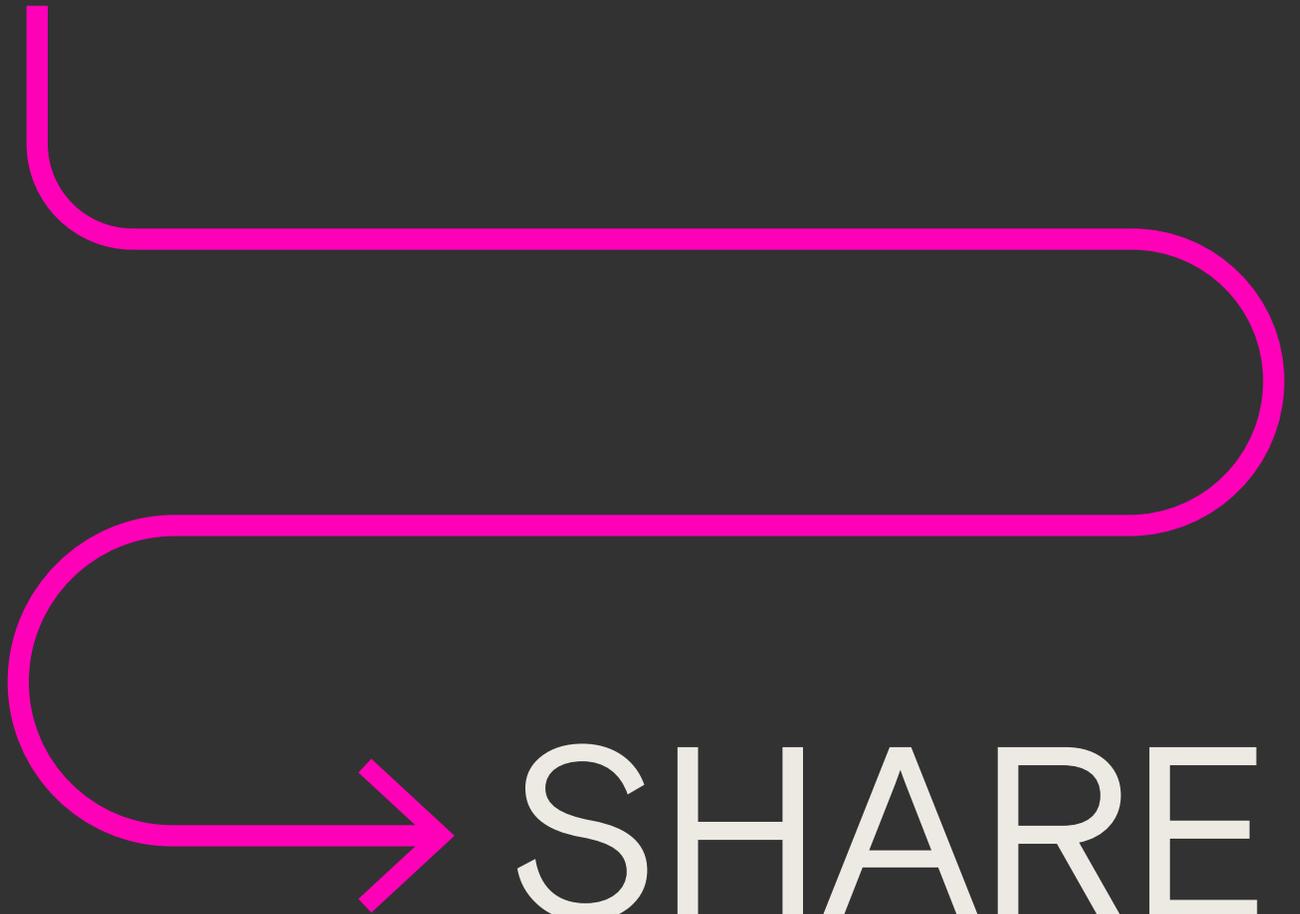
Ashley holds a Master's degree in City & Regional Planning from Cornell University and a B.A. in Urban Studies from Hunter College.

#### STEPHANIE LOTSHAW

Stephanie is a Program Director at TransitCenter, leading the Agency Practice team. The team advocates for changes to systemic issues inherent in how transit agencies are governed and operate. She oversees the team's research and practice synthesis, direct assistance work, and program-related grant making. The program aims to uplift, inspire, and assist those working in the field and ensure that riders are represented and at the core of all decision-making. Prior to TransitCenter, Stephanie worked at the Institute for Transportation & Development Policy (ITDP) on Bus Rapid Transit projects in the U.S., Kenya, and Uganda. Stephanie has fifteen years of professional experience in the transportation and international development sectors. She received a Masters of Social Science, Honors from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Colorado College.



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