Privacy in Public: Unified Fragmentation in New York Subway Spaces

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The journey through the subterranean lines of New York City's subway system is frequently one of suspension. Within the physical confinement of a subway compartment, and an exterior world of nondescript darkness between the island stops, the sensation of immediate space is narrowed into the sealed micro-world of the carriage and its occupants. In many ways, the journey represents a suspension in time – the transport from one place to another exists as an interim between two points in daily life, and it was within this enclosure that I sought to investigate the treatment of a unique public space and the formation of private spaces within it. This interplay between personal and public space is, therefore, the framework in which this essay will attempt to understand the ways by which social interactions and detachments arise in the subway's environment of physical proximity.

I initially questioned why an explicitly public social space seemed to notoriously encourage such anti-social[1] impulses, such as the avoidance of eye contact, and conducted my research over the course of a week, taking multiple subway trips and focusing on observations of, discussions between, and conversations with the other passengers. I discovered that the social structure they presented was multi-faceted in the sense that a complex dialogue was perceptible between the differing conceptions, personal situations of the subjects, and the way these individuals related to the behavioural dynamics of the subway.

Having made subway journeys at previous points in my life, I was not expecting to undertake this one in a state of substantially increased anxiety. Yet, stepping onto the first crowded compartment with my notebook in hand brought the nature of ethnography into sharp relief: the impact of the field itself on the ethnographer's exploration and progression of interactions with participants. The space I had stepped into was occupied with passengers standing and sitting, and looking at their phones, the wall posters, out the windows showing nothing – anywhere but at each other. No one spoke. How would I begin? How *does* one begin? Up until this point I had convinced myself it would simply have to involve a combination of bravery and the phrase 'Excuse me – do you have a

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1   Unless otherwise noted, this essay will consider the term 'anti-social' to signify a lack of social engagement, as opposed to the predominant definition connoting aggression.

moment?' Being in the situation, I became uncomfortably suspicious that this supposedly polite initiation in reality bore a closer resemblance to trespass. The ultimate upshot of my trepidation was the reminder of its significance – this particular reaction to the field was important to consider in terms of the questions I had gone there to answer: why is the inertia of non-interaction so prevailing in this shared space?

Too close for comfort: resistance to physical proximity

My own preconceptions of this field centred some of my first observations in regard to what I suspected was a strong factor in defining its social codes: being in a physical enclosure with strangers. The avoidance of eye contact in the subway compartment has become a familiar trope in the perception of underground systems, and it was this particular behaviour that encouraged my initial interest. In close proximity it is, as one NYU student put it, 'intuitive to catch the eye.' Yet, she qualified with, 'you try not to, and if you do, both look away – no one wants to convey the wrong message.' Another echoed that eye contact 'intruded on privacy', a remark that eventually caused me to focus the research on the privacy of public spaces. However, it was the account of one younger teenage boy that revealed the most interesting, and different, approach to the convention:

> 'Ha! I make eye contact here all the time, sometimes just to mess with people. Try it, it's fun. This one time this dude did the same thing right back and we had a staring contest, which made everyone else wonder what the hell was going on. I won it – he blinked when he laughed.'

The 'dude' was another teenager, who joined him in the mockery of a social convention so well-known that it was the basis of this joke shared between two boys who were strangers. In terms of conventional adherence, the approach of youths will be explored later. For now, this boy's response supports the presence of a shared understanding of personal journeys as largely private.

This notion of individual isolation within a population is by no means novel, and indeed, there seems to exist a public schema of subway systems as spaces in which personal privacy is almost invariably customary. When one woman with shopping bags approached to sit down between another passenger and myself, we both hastened to clear a space, and all three of us issued an automatic, 'Sorry.' Even after sitting, the woman still kept checking that she wasn't intruding and

apologising.

Although perhaps overly displayed in the exchange seen here, emphasis on politeness appeared to be typical of the way seating spaces are handled. As most New York subway trains are equipped with benches, not delineated seats, their spatial ambiguity influences their codes of use. It is possible to see space as commoditized in an environment where it is both required for occupation and limited, and in this regard, the demonstrations of respect for another's personal space may extend to ensuring that potential spaces are available with minimal contact. Passengers showed a compulsion for courtesy that, though infrequently voiced, was perceptible in the way they moved aside too abruptly to go unnoticed. Indeed, the impulse to avoid the infringement of space was so strong that a woman's implied request to sit had incited a series of apologies from all of us involved, as though something as simple as seat occupation should not have required any semblance of interaction.

Another passenger, Carla, noted that the lack of socializing in the subway sometimes results in confusing social interactions outside of it. Over time, along her commute from Brooklyn to Manhattan she eventually recognized others that travel the same route, and occasionally runs into them in the city, leading to moments of mutual uncertainty as to how they should act when encountering one another out of their usual context:

> 'I don't know if I should wave or say 'hi' when that happens. We kind of smile or nod if we see each other in the street, but I guess you don't really go up and start talking to someone just because you recognize them from commuting.'

Curious, I asked her if this was the same relationship she had with these individuals when saw each other on the train. 'I guess. Well, it's less awkward here.' I asked her why that was. 'Because if you see each other in a store or something you kind of feel it might be rude if you ignored them, but also don't want to bug them.' And seeing them here? 'We've smiled', she pauses, 'and then pretty much walked away.'

Based on participant interactions, physical proximity creates an impulse for multiple private spaces within the public one. The obvious function of the subway means that all passengers are there for the same reason: to reach a personal destination. Individuals are therefore concerned with their

own journeys, not others', which may help facilitate the detachment from those in close proximity. If indeed this 'narrowness of space makes the mental distance' (Simmel 1950: 418) all the more perceptible, then one must acknowledge that the attempts to counter these effects of proximity represent a paradigm of seemingly oxymoronic behaviour. For example, it is precisely the acknowledgement of accidental eye contact – the fast mutual withdrawal after brief establishment – that makes the avoidance of it a somewhat paradoxical convention (Auge 2002: 34). There is awareness of it – of the crowd's shared awareness – and yet the practice is itself a pretence of unawareness. If solitude in public is to be sought, its initiation must arise from solidarity (Coleman 2009).

The cohesion of contradiction: polarities in harmonious operation

These conventions of the public subway space can appear uniform enough as a means to maintain individual privacy within its communal context. Nevertheless, discussions gradually imparted divergent conceptions of, and approaches to, the solitudes inside the subway crowd. One encounter in particular stands out in my mind. Nell, a middle-aged single mother travelling home from her job, described her daily subway journeys as respites from her demanding home and work lives:

> 'I just like to relax alone here. Work is always so busy, but here I can just be myself without needing to deal with anyone else… I've got no responsibilities until I get off it, and then I've got a lot – but until then I don't have to be anything for anyone. If you're a working single mom that's a real blessing – to rest and be truly alone.'

I found this new viewpoint fascinating, as it operated on a very simple but broadly applicable premise; without the need to adopt or perform an identity in regards to the surrounding assemblage of people, the individual becomes free from the pressures exerted by the various roles held in surface life. At the same time, I was confused that she related her fondness of this solitude in the context of a conversation she herself had struck up with me: 'Damn girl – you are one tired-looking honey.' This was the first fieldwork discussion that I had not initiated, and she spoke with the enthusiastic animation and inflections of someone who loved talking with people, and I wondered if she was not, in fact, putting on a sort of show. After a few minutes we ceased speaking and she, exhaling deeply, stared ahead of her. When I changed trains she did not respond to 'goodbye.'

To derive joy from the isolation that occurs in the midst of a populated public space incites some contention with other notions of displacement, as with Simmel's proposal that 'one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd' (Simmel 1950: 418). With this in mind, an interesting duality emerges from Nell's narrative; her declaration evokes the notion of contradiction, narrating for another the importance she placed on being alone in her subway journeys. But what I at first assumed to be inconsistency in reactions to subway space also invites a contrary explanation: that the decision to socialize with me did not happen despite her love of solitude, but as a corollary of it.

The solitude she enjoyed was, as she stated, a result of the conspicuous lack of any obligation to embody a role for others. This freedom to be what one feels, be it individual or social space, holds a Durkheimian resonance of anomie in its dissipation from sociality (Coleman 2009: 756). Without the pressure of a social duty to perform a specifically defined role for the other passengers, and temporarily free from the multiplicity of roles that govern the relationships of everyday spheres of personal and professional life, she appeared to have divined on the train the possibility of being 'truly alone' through a lack of perceived commitment to strangers. The concept is innately dichotomous in some ways, as 'integration and regulation' (Bearman 1991: 503) with a social collective may prohibit escape from it.

This notion that the lack of a significant contributory role logically permits an isolationist one also suggests an interesting phenomenon in the perception of self-placement. It postulates that an individual's role in the subway is one of constant interchangeability – the space a traveller occupies will constantly replace them, and they will continually abandon it – and the indulgence of seclusion amidst this eternal shift is therefore rendered compelling if the alternative role of 'subway rider' is considered unreality, a non-role. Such a theoretical process is evocative of Turner's concepts of liminality as a removal from usual procedures of social engagement and reassembly in a transitional stage of being (Turner 1969: 156). Though metaphor may be taken too far, it proposes the subway as a place of suspension and journey between destinations of passenger lives – and indeed a suspender of aspects, like roles, *of* their lives.

Interlocutors, interlopers, interruptions

To label certain intervals of differentiation as 'interruptions' somehow foreign to the subway is in opposition to its diversity. Nonetheless, passengers respond to different kinds of social contact and spatial treatment by distinct groups or individuals who infringe upon various generalities. I will begin with myself. It was clear from the onset that an investigator is possibly the most naturally unwelcome presence: conversations were by and large treated as interruptions, and were impossible to develop with a notebook in hand (leading to frenzied writing after every encounter). It took some trial and error to engage more effectively with the field, though no encounter entailed more error than the following. While seated next to a reading man, I made the mistake of inquiring about his book.

> 'Do you usually read on your subway trips?' I asked.
> 'Always.'
> 'Is there a reason that you do?'
> 'To avoid interlopers like you.'
> 'Ah. I see… sorry.' Pause. 'It's only a deterrent then?'
> 'Largely. It also prevents crippling boredom and usually helps me forget about everyone around me. Usually. But occasionally some idiot shows up who doesn't grasp the concept of leaving me alone.'

His frustration was understandable, as I was aware of the message that reading a book in public may transmit. Nevertheless, it was something of a shock to hear his response – largely due to my initial anxiety, but also my agreement with his sentiments. His reading was a communication of solitude, and there are consequences for violating certain signals. Perhaps that is why I kept asking.

There are less quantifiable forces other than physical space as instigators of solitude; commonplace activities, say reading or listening to music, are so frequently utilized that their social impact and solitary emphasis become inconspicuous. The mental separation and differentiation of the isolated passenger is easily exacerbated through an engagement with sensory displacement. Bull's theory of sound as a 'non-spatial' entity (Bull 2003: 361) that instead 'engulfs the spatial' (*Ibid*.) is applicable to the sensory transformation of individual space, as with the man reading. Sensory disassociation from the public environment signifies existence in another form of personal perception control. The use of books, headphones, and phones to immerse in a private world may re-allocate time by making it a 'personally possessed' (Bull 2003: 365) aspect of one's journey. Absorption in a solitary world is self-preserving, as it imparts that a condition of

mental absence has been sought – hence my encroachment on the reader.

Performance and solicitude are instinctively systems of reciprocity and exchange, yet the treatment of entertainment, economic exchange, and solicitude I observed differed largely from renditions of subway ethnographers, such as Auge. According to his findings, especially skilled performances make it difficult for others to 'avoid the feeling of reciprocity' (Auge 2002: 46). This highlights a relationship between performing and earning, as reciprocity denotes a mutual degree of enjoyment and payment. This depiction only extends to my fieldwork insofar as New York's subway riders showed little enjoyment and even less payment. I venture it is possible, if not probable, that this generally unsparing response to solicitude arises from the present economy.

Still, the entertainment performers within the subway compartment seemed to fare worse than their immobile counterparts in the station both in terms of critical reception and monetary yield. The disparity in performance skill did not, to my observation, vary the profit margin. One rather skilled guitarist left the crowd virtually empty-handed, likely apropos of the sense of quiet irritation that fills the New York subway when a performer enters. Similarly, Auge concludes that the use of a hat passed between passengers to collect money was a 'way of imposing generosity' (Ibid) by utilizing the 'enclosed space' for circulation (*Ibid*.). The single time I witnessed a man soliciting money in this way did not see his tattered baseball cap returned to him. From this, I suspect that passengers view the subway car monetary solicitors as little more than intrusions.

Perhaps the most unique of social spatial treatments I observed was the aforementioned distinction of youth groups that operate within their own coherent – if fluid – codes of 'proper conduct.' At a certain time of day, from 14:00 – 16:00, school children rush into the subway in large gatherings. The first time I witnessed this, I swung around to see what the shouting was from the platform in time to see several clusters of kids enter. One was a boy of about fifteen, who flung his shoulder bag onto the seat next to me before shouting back outside: 'Don't fucking touch me, don't ever fucking touch me or my fucking shit.'

He came back inside, where about twenty of his classmates now resided amongst the other visibly tense passengers, and collapsed into his seat to my left as two friends of his laughingly asked him 'what the hell' just happened. He said, 'That fucker touched my bag – fuck that shit, fuck him,

nobody touches me or my shit – that's disrespect – trying to invade my bag and my privacy – I'll fucking get him.' He was gesticulating as he said this, and accidentally knocked off my hat. We both ignored this, and as I picked it up he noticed I was looking at him:

'WHAT?'
'Nothing.'
'Jesus Christ, bitches be staring on this train…'

Yet, as their numbers dwindled, even the loudest gradually became quiet when only several kids remained. In this context, they became subject to a different set of social cues – the boy next to me no longer shouted but spoke quietly to his friends.

Upon their entrance, the entire environment had immediately changed. Different dynamics were set in motion, in which the rest of the population seemed to be more or less entirely disregarded. Based on the boy's conversation with his friends about the man on the platform 'disrespecting his privacy,' and the agreement of his friends, their conception of personal space corresponded to the actions of other passengers in some degree, but the execution was the opposite of what I had previously seen. With the shouting, falling out of chairs, and gesticulation, this group replaced the social norms and transformed the entire compartment. However, the few similarities between their own peer regulations and the wider-scale subway they entered suggests that the pressures experienced by both groups are understood and felt by each (Bearman 1991: 518). The kids were not fully removed from the older passengers – they still had concerns of personal privacy within the public subway area, for instance. If one considers the transitional period between the world of children and that of adults as how the 'normative dissonance experienced by the teen is the same as anomie,' (Bearman 1991: 517) there is a discernable contextualization of the group's imperfect mirroring, and conflict, with the other.

Placement: individuality as a collective motive
The subway's shared journey is comprised of multiple private journeys – indeed, it exists to enable them – and the practice of creating individual personal spaces and the codes regarding their treatment reflects an underlying dichotomy of solidarity as a means of facilitating solitude. What began as an inquisitive curiosity into avoidant behaviour soon expanded into an awed perplexity at the ambiguity of a ceaselessly transformed, multitudinous entity and its living composites.

With what I can now only suspect was supreme naivety, I had expected to discover an influence on the dictation of space and interpersonal interaction as attributable merely to uncomfortably close quarters. Instead, the subway gradually revealed a sort of uniformity in its very inconsistency; the individual passengers may view the space differently, lead situationally disparate lives, have diverse destinations – but ultimately hold a reciprocal understanding of shared purpose in their enclosed congregation: the journey to a public, and then personal, terminus. Thus my initial question of why this particular social space paradoxically incites anti-social behaviour increasingly became semantically inapplicable to the social space. The conduct is in many ways not anti-social, and the occurrence of private space in public territory should not be considered truly paradoxical. In a room full of strangers one may still inhabit a private and personal sphere by the unspoken knowledge that others are doing the very same. Thus, in the subway, solitude is often practiced communally – and with an eternal shift of participants who lend the space a versatility and variety that perhaps signify it can only ever be described, and not defined, by the aspects of its nebulous journeys.

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