Strangers on a Train:
Stories of Contemporary American Train Travel

by

Kapish Singla
Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Anthropology

Middletown, Connecticut
April, 2011
Contents

List of Photographs ii

Acknowledgments iii

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: Trails and Tales 11

Chapter 2: Slowing Time 44

Chapter 3: Neighbors on a Train 74

Conclusion 99

Bibliography 105
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my advisor, Betsy Traube, who was accessible, patient and constantly engaged with me through this process. She excellently edited and knowledgably provided many ideas that enriched my thesis.

I thank Daniella Gandolfo for guiding and pushing me to creatively engage with anthropology. I thank Greg Goldberg for his motivating words and for checking up on me during the year. I also thank Anu Sharma and Joseph Drury for their early support and advice.

I thank Laird Gallagher for providing excellent criticism on early drafts of my chapters. I also thank Sam Katz for his willingness to engage me in conversation about ideas, even at my most inarticulate.

I am indebted to the Wesleyan Anthropology Department for its aid in funding my fieldwork research on trains during the summer of 2010. The department allowed this thesis to be of the wide scope that I dreamt it to be.

This thesis started while traveling on the railroad and I thank those that shared their stories with me. I especially thank Abby Halpern for giving me a supportive home in Chicago – where all American trains are based.

I thank Julius Berman for being on board, at my side, throughout this journey.

I am deeply grateful to my mother and father, Roji and Surinder Singla, for their blessing and nurturing love. And to my sister, Charul Singla, for her continual comradeship.
Introduction

My project is an examination of time, space and place. It is about routes, roots, and routines. It is about community and communitas. It is about liminal periods, hours and days spent betwixt and between. It is about solitude. It is as one person calls it, about “social hooking up.” It is about the body at rest and in motion or what another person calls terms: “being mobile while mobile.” It takes place on the iron horse. It is of places and non-places. It is about the private sphere, publics and counterpublics. It is about narratives and myths and counternarratives and countermyths. It is about romance and romanticisms, memory and making memories. It is an examination of ways of seeing – a survey of sights and sites. It is a look into seeing and listening – a survey of sights and sites. It is about terrains and places and placing. It is about maps and itineraries. It is about consumption and production. It is about the camera, the cell-phone, and the wristwatch. It is about networks and being networked. It is about strangers on a train.

In undertaking a multi-sited ethnography of contemporary long-distance train travel in America, I responded to contemporary calls in anthropology to examine identity through travel and flows: “routes” in addition to “roots”; a challenge to the boundedness of place and fixity of identity and culture traditionally invoked in ethnographic literature (Clifford 1997). The American railroad is an appropriate ethnographic site at the intersection of routes and roots. Deeply rooted in American history, the railroad and is also one of the foremost, large-scale technological innovations in the social means of mobility.

Long-distance train travel is not the most time efficient or commonly used mode of travel in America today. It remains, however, a culturally valued mode. The railroad in
its ascendency captured American imagination and shaped American national identity in important ways. It propelled and supported such values as social and physical mobility, independence, development and civilizational progress. George Douglas writes, “More than anything else, colonization was the great railroad contribution to the far West” (1002: 163). The railroads helped realize the American belief in its Manifest Destiny. The railroad has a split relationship to the land despite its role in the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny. It was simultaneously depicted as a destructive force that disrupted the landscape as well as one that gently conformed to the natural contours. Nonetheless, Amtrak actively markets the role of the railroad in national history through their route guides and, in advertising, and through a partnership with the National Parks Service in a program called Trails & Rails. The historicity remains powerful as passengers on the train invoked history and spirituality as reasons that motivated their decision to take the train. In this study I examine how Amtrak circulates nationalistic discourses remain and how actively passengers consume them. I argue that the railroad becomes a way to participate in forms of citizenship.

A focal theme of my study is how the train journey is socially experienced with reference to oppositions between public and private space. The railroad advertises itself as a more personal, homey way of travel, one that preserves certain comforts of domesticity, while also providing social pleasures of public life. I argue that the railroad is unique in allowing for an elective community of sorts to take shape. A few conditions specific to the railroad include, but are not limited to: the communal dining car, the panoramic sightseer lounge, the extended time spent within confined boundaries and the rotation of passengers at each stop. Short friendships are formed in performing the same rituals – having a meal, laughing together, observing the scenery in the presence of
others. The space vacillates between offering solitude and encouraging conviviality. People remarked that it was a good time for personal thinking and relaxing, but the fleeting formations of community among strangers were also welcome. The lengthy ride of the journey has the potential to be converted into personal time, free from the demands of work and home, as well as a space to meet and socialize with strangers.

Conservative journalist George F. Will in a recent *Newsweek* column entitled “High Speed Solvency: Why Liberals Love Trains” writes that (high-speed) railroads are a liberal scheme to diminish American individualism in favor of collectivism. “Automobiles encourage people to think they – unsupervised, untutored, and unscripted – are masters of their fates,” he writes. He continues, “The automobile encourages people in delusions of adequacy, which make them resistant to government by experts who know what choices people should make.” He extols the automobile as a technology that lets people talk back to systems of power. I argue against him and suggest that the communities constructed on the train are not necessarily passively receptive to bureaucratic controls, but also can be critical communities. My interest in railroads examines it as an apparatus that allows for individuals to creatively act. The train space is created and performed in unanticipated ways. It is a space where people’s complaints about delays are heard and sometimes compensated for. It is a space where dominant myths of America can be heard alongside local knowledge and stories. It is a space where passengers spontaneously organize in unanticipated ways such as having parties.
**Ethnographer’s Background (Pre-fieldwork orientations)**

Train travel, for me, seemed to be a reasonable choice because prior positive experiences had largely fulfilled my romantic expectations of it. I offer an anecdote that chronicles my first train experience (prior to conducting intensive fieldwork) – one that colored my subsequent interests and experiences:

> “Hi,” John said, as I threw my bags hurriedly on the seat across from him. I had chosen this seat because numerous sources claimed that the south-facing windows would have better views. And the promise of consuming striking views of the county is precisely why I wanted to ride the Amtrak route from New York to Seattle. I stared down the rows of matching blue chairs, curtains and carpeting. This was my new home, and I chose a seat on the side of the train that reviews on the Internet proclaimed would be prettier. I later found out that there were snowy flatlands to the south and snowy flatlands to the north.

I had not returned John’s greeting. As cheesy as it may sound, I was preoccupied with thoughts of how my trip so far was not feeling like the life-altering experience I had been led to expect. Nevertheless, I had a lingering expectation that my trip could be like the film, *Before Sunrise*. I have a general, perhaps not uncommon fantasy of leading a life that resembles the magic of film. And like the protagonists in *Before Sunset*, I desired to meet a stranger on a train with whom to spend a simply enchanting day discussing things like spirituality and politics.

> “Hey, can I snap a Polaroid of you?” I boldly asked John as he furtively and unsuccessfully tried to light the small joint pressed together between his lips at a smoke
stop. It was my overdue hello from the previous day. We had traveled through four states without any conversation. In that moment, I overcame my ordinary sense of reserve. And as a result, this particular interaction became a catalyst in infusing the trip with meaning I had anticipated. John, a Michigan-bred, Seattle transplant, had shoulder-length copper-colored hair, brown-tinted prescription sunglasses and a distinct Midwestern swagger. I would later learn that he was a graduate from an instrument repair trade-school on Vancouver Island and that he was reading Carlos Castaneda and carrying twenty pounds of deer meat in one of his suitcases.

John and I moved to the sightseer lounge when we re-boarded the train after the smoke stop. The sightseer car with its panoramic windows offers extraordinary, picturesque views of the flatlands and the mountains. I began to feel satisfied with my choice to take the train out west as John and I enjoyed the views together.

On a moving train, one’s depth perception is addled. John and I played visual perception games, testing each other to see if we could distinguish between the horizon line and expanses of snow, which had collapsed in the terrain. The whiteness of the sky and the snow collided in such a way that one’s eye would have to spot the alpenglow left by the sunset; a rare visual phenomenon for a suburban-bred boy like me. Deer and casinos were recurring visual motifs. And more than once John managed to spot the rare Bald Eagle. He would always ask me if I had spotted the eagle as it flew away; I would always answer yes, even if I had not, to maintain the sense of camaraderie. As time passed, John began sharing small details of his life. He had recently lost his job fixing harpsichords at an instrument shop in Seattle. The twenty pounds of deer meat he carried had been obtained in a hunting expedition conducted by his father and brothers. His current house was only three blocks away from the friend I was planning on visiting.
in Seattle. We would continue to talk through the night, through delays due to snow. Our interaction evoked for me, the memorable, but similarly transitory relationship in *Before Sunrise*.

The railroad then became for me one of those moments that “structures [my] capacity to reminisce about the past, to day-dream about what might have been, or to recollect about how [my] own life has intersected with those of others” (Urry 2000:137). In short, I believe that I meaningfully dwelled in that space; it evokes an affective memory. President Barack Obama significantly chose to travel by train rather than the expected jet to his inauguration in 2009. His affective referent was to emulate the last President from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, who rode to the 1861 inauguration by train. Freudendal-Pedersen writes, “Choosing one transport mode over another is not merely a rational reflection on factors such as distance, travel times, costs and regularity etc. The choice is also influenced by a wide range of factors, embedded in everyday life’s complex compounding of purpose and priorities” (2009: 8). We are not totally rational actors looking to constantly accelerate our lives. Sometimes, we hope to resist rational logic and slow down time in order to (re)connect with ourselves and others. There are other logics that operate in our understanding of the world; an act of choosing is not always wholly a conscious or free one to make. The past can literally penetrate us and push us in directions that resist rationality. Many other passengers had expressed that family and friends expressed utter confusion when they tried to explain to them why they had decided to travel to waste so much time traveling by train.
Methods

I traveled on a 45-day USA rail pass, which allowed for eighteen segments of travel. I engaged in the classic ethnographic method of participant-observation. This method involves active engagement in one’s field site. The sightseer lounge of the train was my main site of inquiry. It was a space where I had more or less formal conversations and observed the activities of others. It is a unique car to American trains and is advertised as a space where one can observe the scenery, grab sacks and beverages, or meet new people. I froze up and was unable to get myself to converse with anyone of my first trip from New York to Chicago. On subsequent trains, I tried to initiate social contact in a variety of ways. I offered to buy dinner for seatmates. I talked to people at the smoke breaks. I chatted people up in the train station while waiting on the train. Most of my conversations began informally, after which I told people that I was conducting research on the train. I answered questions about myself, what my itinerary was and other personal facts and opinions to my informants.

Itinerary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Departure</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Arrival</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Train</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-Jun</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
<td>7-Jun</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>Lake Shore Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-Jun</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>9-Jun</td>
<td>Austin, TX</td>
<td>Texas Eagle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Jun</td>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>15-Jun</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Texas Eagle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-Jun</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>16-Jun</td>
<td>Flagstaff, AZ</td>
<td>Southwest Chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-Jun</td>
<td>Flagstaff</td>
<td>20-Jun</td>
<td>Lamy (Santa Fe), NM</td>
<td>Southwest Chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-Jun</td>
<td>Lamy</td>
<td>23-Jun</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Southwest Chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-Jun</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>25-Jun</td>
<td>West Glacier, MT</td>
<td>Empire Builder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Origin</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Destination</td>
<td>Train Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-Jun</td>
<td>West Glacier</td>
<td>30-Jun</td>
<td>East Glacier Park, MT</td>
<td>Empire Builder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-Jun</td>
<td>West Glacier</td>
<td>1-Jul</td>
<td>Seattle, WA</td>
<td>Empire Builder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Jul</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>5-Jul</td>
<td>Emeryville (San Francisco), CA</td>
<td>Coast Starlight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Jul</td>
<td>Emeryville</td>
<td>9-Jul</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>California Zephyr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Jul</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>13-Jul</td>
<td>Portland, OR</td>
<td>Empire Builder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-Jul</td>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>14-Jul</td>
<td>Emeryville</td>
<td>Coast Starlight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Jul</td>
<td>Emeryville</td>
<td>16-Jul</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>California Zephyr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-Jul</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>17-Jul</td>
<td>New Orleans, LA</td>
<td>City of New Orleans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-Jul</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>20-Jul</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Crescent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Planning a one-week vacation can be a tedious task. Planning a constantly mobile trip is even more tedious. Planning to get around on Amtrak is even further tedious. Most of my routes had to be re-routed through Chicago. Chicago remains a hub and gateway to the West. The *California Zephyr* out of Chicago represents the longest train trip and follows the first transcontinental route most faithfully. A visit to other national parks is notably absent from this list. Glacier National Park is the only park that is steps off a main Amtrak line. There are bus shuttles or other private rail companies that provide access to the Grand Canyon or Yosemite.

**Chapter Outlines**

In Chapter 1, I discuss the construction of America on the train in both Amtrak’s official discourse and in response of passengers. Amtrak through its advertising, printable route guides and *Trails & Rails* program relays a dominant narrative of American history. In this chapter, I analyze the Amtrak literature and compare it to more local forms of storytelling by regular passengers on the train. I use Marc Auge’s theory on *Non-places* to construct the train as a non-place in the way it might commodify American history, but I also view the train space as a place due to its connection with history, memory and identity. I explore how this gaze onto to the American landscape provokes storytelling.
tendencies and expressions of national pride as passengers teach other passengers how
to correctly gaze. This chapter also explores the history and construction of Glacier
National Park and its relationship to the railroads.

In Chapter 2, I discuss how time is constructed on the train. I explore notions of delay
and memory. The railroad was transformative in its ascendency as it played an important
role in re-orienting time with the introduction of time zones in America. Additionally, I
examine how the experience of time is also social. I explore why one might decide to
travel by train, as it is ostensibly irrational due to its relative slowness. I argue that the
time is not mere “dead time” and thus the ways in which time is being remade and used
are of interest. I argue that the multiple understandings of time can co-exist. It is “free”
time to relax, but also made into productive time to continue working. Time is always
negotiated. This chapter explores the disciplining effect that time has in relation to the
train schedule. I argue that train travel creates a condition that orients us as consumers to
make demands and ask for compensation from Amtrak. I also use more current notions
of time where time is flexible instead of disciplined. New technologies like cellphones
allow for readjustments and delays to be experienced. Further, I use Heidegger’s notion
of “nearing nearness” to discuss affective relationships between the past/present/future
which shapes home/journey/destination.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the inside world of the train and its potential to stimulate
engagements among strangers. The railroad has historically been seen as a social
equalizer in the sense that the early depots became gathering grounds where people
could interact across class lines. I use Victor Turner’s theory of liminality to describe
how passengers are “between and betwixt.” The train allows for the suspension of everyday norms, which allows people to break social boundaries that normally separate people. The railroad is an anti-structure that allows for groups to form in spontaneous ways. I explore this mainly through a “Fourth of July” party that occurred on the *California Zephyr*. I explore the narrativizing nostalgia that occurs after such moments of *communitas*. I also explore how the relaxation of identity allows for the self to inhere trust and be intimate with other passengers. It is important to note that passengers are at varying degrees of being betwixt and between as some passengers choose to withdraw and isolate. Further, I investigate the tensions between home and away in a public-private space of the train. The train encourages one to feel at home, but it is not without its own internal boundaries.
Chapter 1: Trails and Tales

…Narratives of many kinds cannot help but allude to place in the form of “settings,” so journeys themselves – whether migrations seriously undertaken or mere pleasure trips – are place bound and place specific. - Edward Casey, Getting Back into Place

Introduction

American train travel is distinct from train travel in European countries and from other modes of travel (airplanes, buses, automobiles). The distinct and variegated geographical terrain of America coupled with the slower nature of American trains together encourages an idea of the train trip as a “scenic” ride. This vast country is widely reputed to offering an unparalleled variety of magnificent natural resources. Amtrak heavily advertises the views with magnificent landscape pictures of sites visible from the train. The railroad is interested in perpetuating American historical myths such as the representation of the West as the frontier. Amtrak route guides incorporate this mythic history in promoting train travel. Amtrak advertises itself as a company that does more than transport people. It asserts a nationalistic component to the trip. Additionally, Amtrak partners with National Parks Service (NPS) during the summer, when ridership is highest, with a program called Trails & Rails. The joint partnership program includes trail guides who dress and speak like park rangers and discuss national parks and sites nearby or visible from the train route. Through these programs, Amtrak continually asserts and performs the railroad’s importance to history and relevance in contemporary society. Many riders evoked the historical significance of the routes as at least a minor
motivation for traveling by train. foreigners on the train said they rode it because they wanted to see America. These dominant myths and the beautiful advertising that invokes them unconsciously informed my feeling that I needed to focus my project on trains in the Western United States. I implicitly attributed importance to seeing those parties sites and hearing the stories associated with them.

Through their layout, especially in the inclusion of a sightseer lounge, American trains lend themselves the tourist gaze – a mode of contemplative looking promoted by tourist industries. Inside the lounge, the windows are larger than coach car windows. The seats face outward and to the windows, in contrast to the forward-facing seats in the coach section. This lounge is where the NPS guides narrate their scripts. The train is a site for national memory as it has a deep history in the development of the nation as well as within songs and other folk discourses. Storytelling is not limited to officially sanctioned state discourses, but is also taken up by passengers who construct unofficial narratives. The train opens up a dialogue of personal and national memories, identities and histories. The sightseer is a locus of collective, participatory experience through gazing and storytelling. As a mobile site, the railroad is a place (in quasi-opposition to what Augé calls a non-place) – one that places and situates the nation and people. A relationship to and understanding of a territory is key to the ways that citizens experience national belonging. Though, this construction of narrative and place is not always deliberate and the gaze is not always made total sense of. The train is also an experiential space where travelers do hope to experience awe. In this chapter, I explore notions of place, myth, community and history to explore the contemporary relevance of the railroad. The railroad, I argue, becomes simultaneously a site that promotes a master discourse as well as a space for counter (though not necessarily oppositional) discourses.
The gaze is shaped by the traveler’s preconceptions, but it is also organized by Amtrak’s official discourse and may be challenged by the discourses of other riders. Following Certeau (1984), I examine storytelling on the train as a “spatial tactic” that resists reduction of the train to merely a means of transportation. Certeau uses the metaphor of map and itinerary to explore how citizens create their own spaces in opposition to state planning. Itineraries render maps less abstract. The train offers itineraries in the form of printed route guides as well as through its ability to provide a public forum where people can voice their memories, histories and fictions. I also argue that these place-making tactics may also inadvertently convert places to be non-places (devoid of history and memory) in a commodification of national histories. I also challenge both of Certeau and Augé’s characterization of travel as uncreative, solitary and incarcerating. I use the words of Kathleen Stewart and Alphonso Lingis to phenomenologically explore the sensations and perceptions while on the train. It is through gazing, narrating and other tactics of meaning-making that the railroad maintains a contemporary significance and purpose for passengers, citizens and the nation writ large.

Non-places, travel and tourist gazes

The Amtrak-produced route guides establish train travel as a service to be consumed for reasons other than getting one to one’s destination. The interspace between origin and destination points is established as being an important and possibly aesthetic journey. The guide describes stops on the train as places with histories and identities, unlike mere airport abbreviations or highway exits. The guide contains trivia such as famous persons
who were born in or famous films that were set in a particular town along the route. It also provides historical information about a town’s founding or its function in important national history as well as information about the national landscapes encountered.

Amtrak uses aerial, landscape photography with mottos such as “The American you can only see by train” to declare the train’s unique access. The *California Zephyr* advertisement description appeals to American history and mythology. It contains allusion that many Americans would be familiar with. It reads: “Your journey also brings the history of the Wild West to life. From Winnemucca, NV, where Butch Cassidy once robbed the local bank, to Glenwood Springs, CO, the burial place of the infamous gunslinger Doc Holliday, this route is rich in sights immortalized in 19th-century American lore and 20th-century Hollywood westerns.” The railroad actively asserts its place into a shared history and memory. The railway prides itself on providing views of the American landscape that are exclusive to traveling on the train.

In *Non-places*, Marc Augé speaks of this world as increasing in the number of non-places, or places devoid of identity and history. These non-places are economized spaces designed for rational transactions. They are sites of circulation – the circulation of goods and consumption. Augé classifies the world of travel as a non-place because tourist sites are commodify and aestheticize history. The 2010 Amtrak guide is partly complicit in this commodification. The *Texas Eagle* guide declares that one’s visit to Dallas would be incomplete without “snapping pictures of the Pioneer Plaza Cattle Drive, a series of bronze sculptures of longhorns and their cowboys.” The advertisement collapses the visual with the photographic; the seeing eye and the camera. These advertisements attempt to *place* the reader, but it can have the effect of being read as inauthentic or rather – lacking meaning and context.
Augé writes: “Travel constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape” (1995: 86). He means, by fictional, that the train can only offer quick renderings of the outside and is therefore depthless. Early accounts of railroad travel expressed a similar concern. Wolfgang Schivelbusch quotes a French writer who writes in 1840: “They [railroads] are of no use whatsoever for the intervening spaces, which they traverse with disdain and provide only with a useless spectacle” (45). Places get commodified before we are able to meditatively explore them for ourselves. His invocation of the word “fiction” is also interesting because he perhaps inadvertently alludes to the narrative relationship between the landscape and the person – an issue that I will return to later. Augé continues: “From time to time the flight captain makes this explicit in a somewhat redundant fashion: ‘The city of Lisbon should be visible to the right of the aircraft.’ Actually there is nothing to be seen: once again, the spectacle is only an idea, only a word” (104).

The referent gets lost in these accounts. It was similarly not uncommon for Trails & Rails guides or conductors to give information about the establishments or historical grounds that were not visible from the train. The Trails & Rails guides also gave NPS stamps for people with NPS passport, which validates their visit to a place. In this case, the visit to a place might be said to have been fictitious. They had not, after all, stepped off the train.

Augé’s analysis relies on his notion that we travel in a “solitary contract,” with no real ability to interact with others. He assumes that touristic spectatorship is an individual and passive experience. Moreover, he denies an the tourist’s imagination as a powerful tool of consuming places. Sharon, an elderly Black woman from Los Angeles, described the train trip as an affirmation of what she knew about American history. The scenery,
she said, had a “historical component. It put a face to what you’ve read in history books. You see these towns, see the countryside.” Furthermore, she added, “There is something spiritual. It reinforces my faith to see God’s creation. You don’t get the miraculous mountains and trees in New York or L.A.” She reiterated this overwhelming feeling throughout our conversation. “It’s so corny,” she admitted. “But when I look out, I realize that we are all apart of God’s creation and connected to the animals and trees. I’m a part of this and everyone’s connected to the Earth and to everyone else. We are all apart of a big puzzle – the puzzle of life.”

The gaze from the train is not determined by the official discourse. Sharon had not just been sold a narrative that she simply regurgitated to me. She would direct my attention outside the train window and emphasize her point. She evoked the early metaphor of the rail as the “iron horse” to say that taking the train is like traveling through America on horse. “It is like we are apart of the landscape.” She actively shaped her own understanding of the landscape with her understanding of American history, which she also shared with me. She engaged me in such topics as German prisoners of war being transported by train around the country during World War II. She told me of her awareness of the history of black porters as well as the importance of Chinese in building railroad tracks. The objects of the tourist gaze represent more than a mere itinerary that one expects to see because of advertisements.

Tactics

Michel de Certeau’s section, “Spatial Practices” in The Practice of Everyday Life contains a curious chapter entitled “Railway Navigation and Incarceration.” In other chapters in
the section, Certeau reflects on tactics (walking and storytelling) that citizens use to reclaim space from planners. Certeau, similarly to Augé, claims that the railway is incarcerating because it distances the traveler from the places he views and passes through. He writes: “The train generalizes Durer’s *Melancholia*, a speculative experience of the world: being outside of these things that stay there, detached and absolute, that leave us without having anything to do with this departure themselves: being deprived of them, surprised by their ephemeral and quiet strangeness” (1984: 112). His analysis evokes criticism of early train travelers whose gaze had to be reoriented due to the high speeds of the train. This new orientation was in contrast to earlier, slower modes of transport like the stagecoach, which allowed travelers to linger at the passing scenery. For Certeau, the bathroom offers the only respite within the railway system where the passenger can feel agency. Certeau assumes mobility and body movement as necessary components of agency. The paralyzing effect of the train is the double immobility: (a) of the passenger and (b) of the sites outside. In contrast to the French trains that Certeau describes, which require passengers to remain seated, American trains allow for mobility around different spaces. He concedes, however, that even the seated passenger is able this gaze to imagine and dream; in other words, the gaze draws memories forth. He compares this doubling effect to that of “the isolation of the voting booth that produces thoughts as well as separations” (1984: 112). He does not expand on the potentialities of imaginative travel. I use his other writings on spatial practices to describe tactics used by travelers on Amtrak that would not render the railway as a restrictive space that disallows personal agency. He seems to render agency only in spaces that allow for physical movement. I see agency in the imagination and memory of the seated subject.
In the following section of “Spatial Stories,” Certeau writes that places get transformed into spaces as individuals create stories through personal movement.\(^1\) He differentiates places from spaces by comparing places to maps and spaces to tours. He writes: “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (1984: 129). Stories organize places and create itineraries. Modern maps erased the itineraries from earlier maps that marked potential stops and their potential value to the traveler. These earlier maps told stories of previous travelers. The modern maps reflect State interests of colonizing places to make them legible and rational. Riding on Amtrak instilled an understanding of the Continental Divide and its function in separating the watersheds in America. The Divide was not some lifeless and meaningless representation on the map. It has particular importance on the train because the Great Divide runs at high elevations through the Rockies Mountains. Crossing this Divide had been a challenge to attempts by railroad tycoons to expand West. Certeau cites a study that finds that most New Yorkers would be more apt to give a description of their home along the lines of an itinerary than a map (1984: 119). Enunciating a map of your apartment would be something like: “There are two bedrooms and two bathrooms.” An itinerary of one’s apartment would sounds like: “When you walk into the second bedroom on the left, you will discover the second bathroom.” Places are the given dimensions as created by the likes of city planners, which everyday citizens make into spaces by textual poaching, or their own practices and stories. Space is place practiced. Spaces “create a theater of actions” (2001: 123) which establishes space as a site with the potentialities of creative action and agency. They are

\(^1\) Certeau defines place as that which has been planned and regulated by the State. He uses space to define what citizens do to counteract official representations. I use the words place and space interchangeably in this text unless in specific reference to a theorist who works with distinguishing between the two. Most other theorists and philosophers tend to define space as abstract and place as lived space. Certeau assumes a social body in his definitions and sets aside the historical and philosophical discourse on space.
also “frontiers and bridges” which allow people to create their own boundaries and limits. Stories help people create their own itineraries and map those onto maps; they allow connections to happen. My informant, Sharon, pointed out that the train in contrast to planes and buses allowed you to be “mobile while mobile.” Others similarly appreciated not being confined to one’s seat. This mobility, I argue, contributes to conversations between travelers.

“All you see is Chili’s and Home Depot on highways,” an Indianapolis based tattoo artist deplored. “You get to see the backroads from the train,” he added while pointing his Maya Angelou book toward the window. The automobile and its companion, the highway, do not afford this access. He continued his comparison of automobile and railway: “We drive around in little bubbles. The train is a narrow pathway. You bump shoulders. There is a good cross section of those traveling – single mothers, cowboys, rabbis – meeting people in the middle.” The train creates a public that organizes relations among strangers that engage in (im)personal speech (Warner 2002). The train space also emerges as a “space on the side of the road” (Stewart 1996). It is an alternative public that enables a collision of talk, ideas, signs, truths and everyday stories. Everyday stories talks back to essentializing notions and narratives like progress and order. The pleasure in seeing back-roads and all that has not been properly furnished denies that the only arresting views are progressive ones. Marc Augé laments this aspect of progress of high-speed rail in Europe: “The railway, which often passes behind the houses making up the town, catches provincials off guard in the privacy of their daily lives…trains used to go slowly enough for the curious traveler to be able to read the names on passing stations…” (1995: 99). The informant who takes pleasure in seeing the graffiti on the sides of trains challenges cleanliness and order. The informant that
expresses disgust towards such graffiti also demonstrates its sensorial power. Michael Taussig in *Defacement*, a work primarily about the power of secrecy, explores the attraction in repulsion; awe in entropy. *Defacement* exposes and mystifies. I was forewarned before I left New Orleans by my host that he hated the New York-bound train I was about to embark on—it went through ugly parts of the South for the first few hours. It is not a pretty landscape, as Amtrak brochures would have you imagine.

**Storytelling through The Gaze**

Storytelling is an important way of affirming one’s identity and sense of place. The train provides a platform where one can expatiate at great length with people outside the proximity of one’s hometown. Passengers in the sightseer lounge often took it upon themselves to loudly explain things to everyone, one person, or no one in particular about the region outside of the train. Such people are reminiscent of Nineteenth-century American theatergoers. Lawrence Levine in “Shakespeare and the American People”: “…more than an audience…they are participants who can enter into the action on the field, who feel a sense of immediacy and at times even of control, who articulate their opinions and feelings vocally and unmistakably” (44). The train is a way to come by narratives of local knowledge. These storytellers explicate local knowledge that would not be featured in the same discourses by the National Parks Service and Amtrak. It is used to “talk back” to dominant codes (Stewart 1996). Kathleen Stewart says there is a: “constant narrativizing of things, the culture privileges not only memory, but mimetic memories. In stories, memories of details just come and memory itself seems to take on
a life of its own at precisely the same moment that is tied to the image of concrete things and the following of events” (quoted in Molino 2004: 151). Sharon, the woman from Los Angeles, narrativized earlier Amtrak trips to me. She made a passing reference to a trip to Alabama with her mother as a very young girl as one of her earliest life memories. We continued to talk for another hour and discussed the scenery, the service, airplanes, history and her childhood in New York. She excitedly returns to her memory of that early train ride to Alabama with more details. She recalled an image of a food basket containing grapes that her mother had prepared. She thanked me for helping her evoke the image.

“When two people meet and stand around talking they always face in the same direction, looking out at the hulls or at whatever there is to see, instead of facing each other,” says Kathleen Stewart of storytelling practices in the hollers of West Virginia (cited in Molino 2004: 153). Subjects and objects create the grounds for which intersubjective scenes emerge. The subjects are enraptured by the world and exchange stories. Conversation and storytelling on long-distance Amtrak trains operates in much of the same way. Most of the seats in the observation car line the sides of the car and face out to the passing scenery. The shared gaze creates an implicit connection between the viewer and those seated around him. The outside object is “common ground” that naturalizes the act of conversing between two or more subjects. This outward orientation also naturalizes any lull in conversation. In their stories, people often digressed from the landscape, but their gazes remained directed outward. They continued to gaze outward even as time enshrouded the scenery in darkness, at which point, the windows served as mirrors to the interior space. Kathleen Stewart reflects: “Modes of attending to scenes and events spawn socialities, dream worlds, bodily states
and public feelings of all kinds” (2007: 10). The shared gaze stimulates conversation. Conversation transforms the shared gaze, teaching us how to properly consume. Some people publically solicited information about the exterior world on view. Others offered unsolicited commentary about it. Narrativizing is a way to affirm our imaginings, memories and histories. The outward gaze on to the landscape allows us to project these perceptions. Narratives are also prone to digressions and breakdowns. Things don’t add up and our knowledge can be challenged in conversation. Such breakdown is not necessarily experienced as paralysis. We are complicit and search for overwhelming awe in nature. The landscape projects on to us. This enigmatic character of the view sustains the mystique of natural wonders I, therefore, view the gaze and storytelling through two perspectives: (a) as satisfying prior knowledge and (b) as also contesting these prior conceptions. Narrative is about losing and reconstituting the self; it is about weaving through the multiple selves.

Josh directed my attention outside as we traveled through Iowa. Josh was reminded of his home state – South Dakota. He said the landscape looked the same. I trusted him – I had never seen South Dakota. South Dakota and Wyoming are the only states in the contiguous United States where Amtrak does not have passenger rail. He mused while looking out to the landscape, “Our perspective reflects on something within ourselves,” he proclaimed. “As the landscape changes, so does your mind. The dirt roads remind me of driving down them and doing whatever I wanted to do. They are environmental triggers.” Josh could imagine and feel close to his home despite the legal issues surrounding his relation to it. The train enables him to reminiscence, to be nostalgic…to return to familiar territory for the first time. He posits the train as a trigger – an activator of memory. The notion of a trigger shows there can be a lack of our
control in what stories the landscape evokes. We are not in total control of our sensations and they can overwhelm us. Josh’s perspective takes him beyond the immediate scene visible from the train – he extrapolates about the region. His affective state was affected by the landscape. I joined his emotional landscape. Being a recipient to his story was not an affirmation of my identity or a confirmation of some idea of the area. I did not take away facts about the area that I could then narrate to someone else when I rode that same train the following week. Instead, I felt the nostalgia in his narrative construction of the home he had been displaced from. Lingis writes in a piece about the imperative of responsibility to others: “Perception, that seeing-through which penetrates to apprehend the depth, does not see the suffering…It is in my eyes whose direction is confounded, whose focus softens, whose glance turns down in respect” (1994: 30). I felt like Josh was telling me something important, despite its objectively inconsequence to my own life or project on American trains.

Kathleen Stewart writes on nostalgia: “Nostalgia is a painful homesickness that generates desire, and not, in itself, ‘seductive’ or debased.” (1989: 228). I pressed Josh on why he had not been home to Salem, South Dakota for a few years. Josh had committed a crime. Friends advised him to leave the state. He was effectively barred from being within three states’ distance from his home state. He would be extradited if found within the radius. He settled further West. He ended up in Oregon – Salem, to be exact. It was not hard to imagine that he might be a felon. I mean he looked like a pirate. Pirate, n. 1. a. A person who plunders or robs from ships, esp. at sea. He did not plunder a ship. He
held up a liquor store.
He wore a blank bandana underneath a cowboy hat on the train. Wood trinkets dangled from the brim of his hat. He bought one during the journey at a train rest stop in Colorado. It was of a bear. Maybe. The hat itself was also purchased on this journey – at a layover in Sacramento. His hair was a mass of dreads. Rings hung on the end of some of his dreads. A peacock feather plumed from his head. He wore a short-sleeved black tee, which displayed his heavily ornamented arms. On his right arm he wore a heavy chainmail armband. On his left arm—a Hot Topic pyramid studded leather band. A link silver chain that hung that was attached to his wallet. He counted the receipts in his wallet. He spent upwards of one hundred dollars on alcohol on the trip. He bought Mountain Dew-Vodkas every hour. We spoke mainly from hip length having spent most of our time on that train together at one of the sightseer lounge tables. I remember fewer details about what he wore on his lower body. He wore baggy blue jeans.

He carried a large knapsack that seemed to be the bulk of his luggage. In it was a portable DVD player, a folder with papers relating to the trip and series of health pamphlets sent by his mother—a nurse. I also had a knapsack, but I never felt distrustful of leaving it with him when I needed to step out of the lounge. It included books, my IPod, my expensive DSLR camera, and travel papers. It had been a couple of years since Josh robbed that liquor store. He and his accomplice successfully got away from the scene. But his accomplice bragged around town about the hold-up. The nephew of the store’s owner overheard his bragging. Naturally, it was time for Josh to leave home. I learned about specters in Salem, Oregon before learning about his specters from South Dakota. He was one of the only people to approach me first on the train. His launched into an uncanny story of a sighting from his past mode in introducing himself to me. He had once seen a
mysterious man in a black trench coat lurking in the trailer park where he resided when he first moved to Eugene. He followed the man for a short while. The man eventually metamorphosed into a black cat. He has since seen the cat around town. He emplaced me in Salem with one of his first visceral impressions and truths of the city. Alphonso Lingis writes: “Truth means seeing what exceeds the possibility of seeing, what is intolerable to see, and what exceeds the possibility of thinking” (199).

He said he was glad to have taken the train, partly, for the scenery afforded by the sightseer lounge. He said the train definitely does offer different scenery than the one offered by cars. It was not uncommon for others to cite the scenery was a fairly motivating factor to those who decided to travel by train. He described watching the passing scenery as watching the “conveyor belt of a cherry factory…that visual movement that goes left to right.” “Looking outside can be exhausting,” he consented. “But you can still zone off and meditate,” he countered. He observed that this dizzying visual orientation followed on cigarette breaks off the train. Travel is a kinesthetic experience and getting off the train is often disorienting. Armed with knowledge from his medical brochures, Josh said that people could “straight up get vertigo.” Vertigo is sensorial experience. Josh carried a digital camera like most other travelers. He incessantly took photographs of every passing scene during the daytime like others I had spent an extended amount of time with. His camera gaze was rarely turned inward into the activities of train space, but was instead pointed outwards to the places we passed.
The railroad is historicized as a source of national pride. George Douglas writes, “More than anything else, colonization was the railroad’s contribution to the far West” (1992: 163). The rail industry was deeply involved in extending the geographical boundaries of the nation and was complicit in the paradigm of Manifest Destiny. The owners of the different railroad lines had an active interest in developing the West because they realized that it was in their best, financial interest to imaginatively expand. There were barely any settled communities in the West and the railroad literally blazed the path and created a string of railroad towns. The railroad continues to be an industry that is invested in the protection of these borders. David Glassberg writes on the importance of identity-making and historical understanding: “A sense of history locates us in society, with knowledge that helps us gain a sense of with whom we belong, connecting our personal experiences and memories with those of a larger community, region and nation” (2001: 7). There is a fear of the other that threatens an American sense of identity and its borders. This was definitely an issue in the summer of 2010 when Arizona’s SB-1070 became an issue.

*A Blue Moon* beer in hand, Bob studied the landscape from the observation car on the *Empire Builder*. He spent sixty dollars on beer that evening. One of his ambitions in life is to grow a beer belly. As a fit-looking young twenty-something year old, he still would have a ways to go. He has a camera around his neck. I asked if he had photographed anything interesting on this trip. “Not really,” he replied, “but I have some from the previous trip in Albany.” Another life ambition of his is to be a
photojournalist. He spends half of the year working on ranched in Arizona by the US-Mexico border. He has seen many illegal immigrants collapse from dehydration near the ranch. He hopes to photograph and report on what he has seen. He said that he knows he should not let his personal politics affect his work. He confided in me, however, that he believed that Arizona was correct in enacting an immigration law that authorized officials to demand documentation proving citizenship. I was slightly surprised by his view, never having personally met anyone who agreed with the illiberal proposition. I remained ambivalent in my attitude towards him, partly, because his opinion challenged my opposing view of the issue. Amtrak with Border Patrol has a similar policy to that of Arizona, randomly asking passengers to answer questions about their citizenship. Border Patrol did a quick scan of the entire train while Bob and I waited to de-board at Havre, a designated service stop, to stretch out our legs. Havre is just forty miles from the Canadian border. They typically ask what country you are a citizen of and move on. I experienced this first aboard at the Rochester stop on the Lake Shore Limited. I was not questioned further on either occasion. A part of me wished that I had been further questioned. Perhaps, I was never surer of my American identity and place than in those moments. I was performing a rite of passage in traveling and discovering my country as a natural born American.

The question posed by Border Patrol is peculiar in that it seems implicitly to suggest that American train travel is only for Americans. A Trails & Rails guide told me that they escorted Mexican people off the Empire Builder just last week. Places include and exclude and some persons are potentially subject to greater questioning. The American railroad is thus established as a national place and activity. We chuckled over this bizarre interaction with Border Patrol prompted, along with two other young male
passengers waiting in the corridor – Russell and James. The four of us convened in the observation deck after pulling out of Havre, MT. Russell and James had their respective beers as well. Blue Moon, Heineken, Miller Lite. The train had passed the Miller Brewery in Milwaukee the day before. Milwaukee was originally a city settled by the French, but made notable by the beer of German immigrants. A French guy on a later trip aboard California Zephyr was insistent on drinking rounds of only American beers – namely Budweiser. His playlist for the trip was Bob Dylan; his IPod contained mostly metal music. His predilections inscribe the train as an American place within which there are suitable ways to consume. Bob, Russell, and James laugh as I furtively pour Jameson whiskey into a cup of ginger ale. It is illegal to bring alcohol purchased outside onto the train. I was not troubled, though. The train has always been a site for illegal alcohol consumption. The Great Northern Railway built the Prince of Wales Hotel in the Canadian portion of Glacier National Park to cater to Americans during the Prohibition Era.

Bob works the other half of the year on ranches in Montana. He was on his way to Kalispell, MT via Whitefish, MT. He had recently come from a six-day excursion in Guatemala where he was visiting a friend. He found it stifling and booked an earlier flight back home. “It was all jungle,” he said. It had been his first journey outside of the country. He declared there was no reason to leave America as we had everything there is to see – different geological structures, climates and types of environments. He looked up and exclaimed that he had missed the big sky – invoking a common alternate moniker of Montana. His visit outside of the country affirmed his ideal and attachment to an American place. The train trip reinforced that sense of place. He said that he could never get tired of the scenery that outside of the train windows. He remarked that it was great resource that the train stops at Glacier National Park upon learning that this was my
destination. He had already been to Glacier a few weeks ago and he asked me what hikes I planned to do. Somewhat defensive, I replied that I had mapped out a few hikes. I was afraid he saw me as some mere tourist. I realized that he was genuinely trying to help me thoroughly enjoy my visit. He suggested that I make up to the interesting community at Polebridge, Montana, some thirty miles north of the West Glacier entrance at Glacier National Park. Lori, the owner of the Vista Motel that I stayed at in West Glacier warned that while Polebridge was interesting, the highway to Polebridge was not in the best condition. She suggests that I hitch-hike up there. It seemed like a viable option – the nicest people I encountered were either from Michigan or Montana. Though tempting, my East Coast sensibilities kicked in – I felt like a tourist from a different place. I did not take her advice.

James was en route to Seattle to return to his wife and his child. The train trip was his time-space for personal indulgence. He had come from being a helping hand on his father’s farm in eastern Montana. His previous work experience was in the restaurant business. A talented chief, he had worked at the Nordstrom restaurants in Portland and later, as a manager in Seattle as a very young twenty year-old. He had also owned his own restaurant, which was successful until disputes with another partner dissolved it. He attributed his success to the classic American values of discipline and perseverance. He used his experiences at both restaurants to typify the characteristics of their locations, representing Seattle as the more uptight counterpart to the laxity in Portland. Russell was on his way to his hometown of Coeur d’Alene, ID by way of the train stop in Spokane, WA. He too had been doing agricultural work in Savage, MT. He had boarded at the first stop in Montana – Wolf Point. The similar agricultural background of the three guys led to discussions beyond my comprehension about horseshoeing. As Montanans, they
discussed how eastern Montana was still like the “Wild West.” They discursively cast Montana as a place where tension persists in the region between Indians and whites. The “rez” or Indian reservation wields a lot of power and local authorities are hesitant to try to prosecute Indians for crime, according to them. The boundaries of places are fluid and never fixed. Indians are placed in the Othered place of reservations. Boundaries are fluid, though, and places rub up against each other; transgressions and friction ensues.

Indians played a large part in the early advertising for the *Empire Builder* (previously known as the *Oriental Limited*) and it premier destination – Glacier National Park. The initial marketing of Glacier was different from the wilderness treasures in the West – Yellowstone and Grand Canyon. Glacier’s focus was of being a national and American attraction. Yellowstone and Grand Canyon, conversely, were marketed as mystical and exotic rather than necessarily patriotic (Shaffer 2001: 59). Marguerite Shaffer writes: “…the Great Northern used the See America First slogan to incorporate Glacier Park into a national geography. More than any other transcontinental railroad, Great Northern succeeded in linking the tourist experience with national identity and popularizing a national tourism” (2001: 61). It was the Great Northern Railway that proposed that the land to be officially designated as a park. Louis Hill, the second son of James “Empire Builder” Hill, made the park an attraction by building roads and chalets through the park. Shaffer writes: “By 1915 Glacier had two rustic luxury hotels, nine chalet complexes, three tepee camps, and a series of roads and trails that stretched throughout the park connecting the hotels, the chalets, and the scenic vistas” (2001: 62).

Blackfeet Indians who had sold part of their land to the Great Northern Railway were hired by the company to dress in traditional garb and greet visitors to the park. Blackfeet artifacts were used to adorn the interior of the lodges and Native American
names appropriated to name the sites within the park. One way in which the train tries to assert itself in history is in the names of the trains.\(^2\) Casey writes about the power of place-names (1993: 23): “A locution such as Roanoke or the Great Plains acts both to designate a particular city or region and to institutionalize this name in a geographic and historical setting (e.g. the history of Virginia or an account of Plains Indians). The names are derived from former glory trains or have direct reference to the land like Adirondack train from New York to Montreal that goes through the Adirondacks. I had had to travel on “Going Down the Sun Road” which got its name according to a press release in 1933 from the Department of Interior, which cites local legend saying that a deity from the sacred sun realm taught Blackfeet techniques of survival and hunting. Before he left for the sun – this deity imprinted his face on the top of Sun Mountain. It is alternately rumored that it was a white explorer who created the name and corresponding legend.\(^3\) Only two of the chalets remain today – Sperry and Granite Park. Susan Olin’s guide to Glacier National Park explains that the other seven chalets were wooden structures that time eroded. The two left standing are made from lasting “native stone” (2008: 42). The local resources of the region are sustenance for these structures; they belong. Bill Taylor, my instructor, for the course/tour “One Hundred Years of Riding the Rails: Railroad History and Folklore in Glacier National Park,” said that even the main hotel – Glacier Park Lodge – faced a threatened existence in the 60s and 70s. The building fell into structural disarray and there was uncertainty as to whether or not funds should be directed towards its conservation efforts. It still remains stands today.

\(^2\) The official website provides a “toponymy” of the different train names: http://www.amtrak.com/servlet/Satellite?c=WSArticlePage&cid=1248542886769&pagename=WhistleStop%2FWSArticlePage%2FBlank_Template

\(^3\) The history of the name can be read about here: http://www.nps.gov/glac/planyourvisit/gttsrfaq.htm.
The atmosphere inside the observation car of the *Empire Builder* livened as the train begins its journey through Glacier National Park. Bob laughs at the pastoral image blighted by a row of satellite dishes. It is ironic that the “iron horse” is not seen as a technology that disturbs the landscape; it is antiquated technology. Others congregate to listen to a mother from the area who had worked some summers in the park. Her young daughter excitedly points out to every passing bear poppy plant. A complete rainbow arc is visible and this complements the view of the park. An additional fainter fairly full visible rainbow appears later. The sights of the physical terrain and the rainbows warrant expressions of awe. A woman exclaims: “This must be God’s country.” Indeed, there must be pot of gold in the depths of Glacier National Park. The only stop between East and West Glacier is in Essex, MT on the Southern edge of the park to bring visitors to the railroad-built Izaak Walton Inn.\(^4\) The inn has a daily tradition of waving to westbound trains in the evening. The inn is mainly for train history enthusiasts as there are no accessible paths into the park from the inn. The *Empire Builder* runs on the BNSF main line and a pedestrian overpass in Essex serves as an important ground for train enthusiasts to track the passing passenger and freight trains. I was fortunate to have once stood on it while a freight train passed underneath. The vibrations jostled my body to produce electric vibrations. It is a cliché, but the common trope or image, in part, allows for the catharsis to work. There is a shared experience and a shared learning of what to look out for.

\(^4\) The Izaak Walton Inn was named after a popular British writer who wrote manuals on fishing. The spot where the inn stands was originally thought to be a good spot for fishing, but this is not the case.
A Visit to Glacier (A Brief Venture off the Train)

The status of that westbound *Empire Builder* had been uncertain from the start. A rockslide in Libby, Montana loomed over the train trip. The train would continue to Montana from Chicago, but might possibly terminate before it reached its final destinations of Portland or Seattle. The rockslide derailed a freight train carrying frozen meat and corn syrup. In the 1980s and 1990s – these tracks would have been littered with grizzly bears that were attracted to a huge corn spill that had not been cleaned quickly enough. They would keep returning to the site for years because bears have good memory. This slide destabilized tracks that the Empire Builder and thirty-five other trains pass through daily. It was unclear when the tracks would be usable again. This is the type of parochial news that one would only have known about being a passenger on the Empire Builder. There was no official train announcement until hours after boarding, as Amtrak did not want to create an unnecessary panic, but the car attendant had personally notified us. My original destination of Seattle would be affected if the train terminated at Libby, so I preemptively change my destination to stay at Glacier National Park – a stop before Libby.

*I was bewildered at the end of my hike to Avalanche Creek at Glacier National Park. The lake was a resplendent jade color. The glacial silt run-off refracts the light to create the color. It was late June and it was warm enough for there to be a run-off from the avalanches that surrounded the lake. It was finally warm enough for the snow to melt and trails to be cleared for the main tourist season in July and August. Most hikers got distracted at the first sight of the lake. But the path continues to another edge of the lake. There were a few others who had set up camp at this edge. I sat down on a piece of*

5 The *Empire Builder* splits into two trains in Spokane, WA – one bound for Seattle, one for Portland.
driftwood to eat the peanut butter sandwiches I made, using materials from the lodge I stayed at. The translucent water was an affirmation of physical pain of feeling sick, toll of trying to bike and bike.

Going Down the Sun Road was a narrow road for bikers if there was too much car traffic. Other parts of the bank were accessible if one desired to cross a series of streams. I was contented on the safe bank until a mother and her two children crossed over. The tactile sense of hitting the sharp shards…the cold stream had a good numbing effect from the walking on the sharp rocks…pains in my feet. I strategized. It was better to walk on the wood part rather than the sand/rock.

Places Gather, the *Southwest Chief*

The railroad differs, in part, from airplanes, buses and cars in that there is more variance to the passengers’ destinations. Therefore, the destination and place of origin of others passengers on a long-distance train is a more salient starting point of discussion. Casey writes that “Where are you from?” can be an unintentionally deep question which generates a myriad of responses (1993: xiv). The question had initial strategic interest for me in many cases, in trying to ascertain whether I might have both seats to sprawl on for the night. I boarded the southbound *Southwest Chief* on June 15 from Chicago, IL for Flagstaff, AZ. Flagstaff had no particular significance for me and merely served at the closest stop on the train before my final destination of Phoenix, AZ. The railroad is also distinct from other modes of that in that layovers along a train journey are real places that have connections to the rail station – the station exists as part of the city. A train depot represents more of its locale than an airport would. An informant of mine, Nick, had left his spectacles behind on the train. It made sense to email him to tell him that I would be passing through the Kansas City station again and that he could meet me
trackside. This potential meet-up would not have been remotely a possibility if I were
traveling by air. Most train depots in America are nothing more than a one-room building with bathrooms and a ticket counter. Augé defines a non-place as lacking the same identity, historical and dwelling processes that individuals negotiate while in places. My experience of Flagstaff was at once like a non-place and a place. The places I consumed in Flagstaff were not specific places, but national chains such as Pita Pit, Greyhound, and Denny’s. Augé writes: “A paradox of non-place; a foreigner lost in a country that does not know (a ‘passing strangers) can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorway, service stations, big stores or hotel chains” (1995: 106). We do not constantly seek to produce and socialize spaces (as in Certeau 1984 and Lefebvre 1991). There is agency and comfort in these moments of being liberated from history and identity. The Flagstaff depot, however, also emplaced me in Flagstaff. Many depots, including the one in Flagstaff, richly weave American and railroad history together with commemorative plaques, maps and old train advertisements. The station also serves as a welcome center to the city of Flagstaff. The station credits the railroad industry with forming the town in the 1880s; Flagstaff became a place due to the railroads. The décor of the depot includes old Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway advertisements for the Super Chief line that ran through Flagstaff before passenger rail was nationalized. The depot can be identified as having regional specificity as it used local red sandstone that is found at the nearby national treasure – the Grand Canyon. The geology feeds the structure.

Nick, my first seatmate on the Southwest Chief departing on June 15th, was traveling to Kansas City, Missouri. I checked my itinerary to discover that he would not be riding overnight with me. I was relieved, though, that he was allowed to stay in his seat when the train attendant began moving people’s seats around. He was a light-
skinned, medium-built Peruvian doctoral student in psychology. He was traveling from his parent’s place in Michigan to Kansas City to finish up his dissertation at the University of Missouri: Kansas City. His research is about the psychology of Internet addiction. He immediately began to qualify Kansas City as a place that did not necessarily define his identity as a liberal. He assured me that he supported people of all sexual orientations, perhaps sensing that I was queer. He hangs a rainbow-colored flag outside his Kansas City home. He says his neighbors are confounded by his lack of attendance at church because he is a “nice person.” He was interested in my places tied to my identity to confirm some of his imaginations. He was interested in New York City as a place and was interested in the clean of the city in the 1990s by Mayor Rudy Giuliani. He was also interested to know if Slumdog Millionaire was an accurate portrayal of conditions in India.

I invited Nick to have dinner on my tab as the stewards came around asking for dinner reservations. He hesitantly agreed and remarked that he was lucky to have been seated next to me. We took a reservation for two. The dining stewards tend to pair reservations of one or two with a corresponding reservation of the same size. We were seated with an elderly couple from Michigan who had met during a USO dance during World War II. I immediately bridged the distance between the couple and us two by mentioned that Nick was also from Michigan. The three of them talked about a now-defunct amusement park in Canada that was a short ferry ride from Michigan – Boblo Island Amusement Park. They reminisced about local, popular Michigan ginger-ale soda called Vernors. After dinner, Nick and I continued our conversation in the sightseer lounge where we were approached by an elderly regal woman traveling with her granddaughter from Kansas City. She was originally from Missouri, but now lived in the
Kansas part of Kansas City. She located her place by reference to Jean Harlow’s family mansion, which was near where she grew up. She narrated herself into other local history. She spoke of a creepy, but harmless Mexican man in her neighborhood who once crept into her house. Her young husband shot him. She expressed remorse, but she said this occurred when the BTK Killer who had committed ten murders in Kansas in the 1970s and 1980s had surfaced in the news again. An essential trait of places is that they gather animate and inanimate things (Casey 1996). They gather material objects as well as “experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts” (Casey 1996: 24). Places have agency. They gather people. The place of Michigan and of Kansas City provided a structure of thought amongst these conversations. Places provide discussion from popular histories and memories down to personal ones. We do not come from, go to or invoke places. Places are evoked and the train provides a context to draw out these stories.

**Conclusion**

The significance and mystique of the railroad are maintained through the preservation of its traditional and historical connection with American land, imaginations and dreams. Amtrak promotes this history and connection through glossy advertisements, route-guide brochures and National Parks Service programs. They use the tactic of Certeau’s stories to transform the “map” into a meaningful “itinerary.” The space allows for a public of strangers to express personal narratives and offer local knowledge that would not appear in official printed discourse. These narratives are not always coherent, but this suspension of continuity or rationality contributes to experiencing the wonder of the
country. Places are not always invoked, but also evoked. The gaze invokes conversation, but this conversation has lulls. The collective gaze teaches how to properly consume the landscape. The space emerges as an experiential, sensory and social site. I explore discourses of sites like Glacier National Park and the *Empire Builder* through historical background, through other people’s narratives and the myths of place-names. The train is not a *transitory* non-place.
Chapter 2: Slowing Time

And so, people will now have to marry and die by railroad time. Ministers will preach by railroad time, and banks will be required to open and close by the same time. The sun is no longer the boss of the job. - *Indianapolis Sentinel*, November 1883

“Any second could be the second.” In mid-2010, the mobile technology company, AT&T, ran a television advertisement introducing the 57th President of the United States sometime in the future. The camera pans from the future President to his elated parents and flashes back into their relationship history. They first meet when the future father spots an attractive woman on the train gazing out of the window. He is waiting for a different train on the opposite platform, but their eyes meet and it is love at first sight. Without hesitation, he uses his mobile phone to change his ticket reservation. His request is confirmed and we see him enter the train just as the doors close and sit down next to the woman. They smile at each other and the tagline appears: “Any second could be the second.” This representation reinscribes notions of the train space experienced temporally as a space for chance, romantic encounters. AT&T promotes itself as providing a service that has the potential to redirect fate. Despite being an ad for mobile phones, the commercial also alludes to the benefits of flexible scheduling offered by the train, as well as to the current state of the intersections between time and technology. A new sense of time (as opposed to clock-time consciousness) emerges at this intersection whereby scheduling can be individually re-negotiated and re-directed. It combines the romantic fantasy of fateful encounter with the fantasy of flexible control.

---

6 The commercial can be viewed online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xAJmdhQxj4.
Introduction

Time is negotiated and valued through different lenses at different ‘times’: clock-time/social time; public/private; work/leisure; slow/fast; linear/varying; past/present/future. In this chapter, I explore how time is negotiated on long-distance trains, a period when travelers are neither at home nor on vacation, one that does not fit in the categories of constraining work time or flowing leisure time. The long-distance train or non-commuter train is here understood to be inter-state rail networks in opposition to commuter/metro/subway trains that are centered within or around a particular city; the usage of “long” implies that a single trip on these trains takes more time than commuter ones. I approach the train as what liminoid time-space what Victor Turner (1982) calls a liminoid time-space in that it is a break from the normal structures of daily life. Conventional norms of sociability can be transcended and an “experience” can be forged with others on the train to create a sense of intimate sharing and solidarity in liminoid moments. The train time-space allows for chance encounters with strangers to be properly developed. This capacity is in part why I envisioned the train as an appropriate site of fieldwork; I reasoned that people would be freed from temporal restrictions and be looking for interaction to fill that time. That not everyone was in fact willing to talk to me is consistent with the idea of the train as liminoid (as opposed to liminal). The distinction between the two is that not everyone is “coerced” to participate in a liminoid setting; liminality, by contrast, was initially and primarily used to designate the obligatory transitional stage in passage rituals in “primitive” societies.

The “in-between” time of the journey operates partly as a “forced” downtime where notions of productivity that structure everyday life are relaxed. The American train
is a potential site of “slow time” (in tension with dead time) in an increasingly accelerating world. Travel time is not necessarily experienced as a waste of time; it can be used to recoup pressure of time. However, narratives of slowness are also precisely what frustrate and dissuade people from riding the railroad. The train has historically been implicated in processes of time consciousness as it implemented the creation of different time zones in America. We demand that it operates on some form of a schedule and code extra time spent on the train as a delay. We never fully exist outside the framework of clock-time even if we can momentarily suspend it (Adam 1990: 107). I hope to show the syncretic nature between the two views of time as travelers operate and switch between them simultaneously. We, at once, hope to relax on the train, but too much time spent can become stressful. We depend on both modes of time to give meaning and structure to our lives, occupations, and relationships.

It is curious to markedly separate notions of time from notions of space. After all, temporal and spatial processes are typically described in conjunction with one another. No other phrase seems to typify modern life better than the “compression of time-space” (Harvey 1989). Time is what gives meaning to space and vice versa, and the railroad was seen as simultaneously shattering conceptions of both. The time between spaces shortened and other spaces became more accessible than ever. I understand that there is no way to isolate time from space and that my discussion of time will simultaneously evoke space and spatial processes as well. However, as Larsen, et al. notes: “[there] seems to be a spatial tendency to think about travel in writing” (2006: 57). The dominant travel narrative emphasizes the travel destination and the sites seen. I often found that my own ethnographic experience could be reduced to merely relaying the cities I stopped in when friends asked me what I had done in “the field.” Narratives
of travel often get reduced to homogenizing generalizations (“I had a wonderful time!” or “I had a horrendous time!”). Thus, I hope to recoup and give proper attention to the temporal dimension of travel. In the following pages I reflect on the multiple processes of time by combining history, theory, fieldwork, and personal narratives. These processes include: the historical relationship of the railway with standard time; the subsequent disciplining of the individual to the schedule; delays in schedule that enable the traveler to make demands on Amtrak; delay as orienting the traveler to notions of current logic of time as flexible; and the train as integral, present time that links past origins and future destinations. My overarching interest is to elucidate why people still ride the train (if it is not the most time-effective mode of travel) and what experiences it (can) offer travelers.

**Pre-trip Imagination: Train Travel as an Affective and Slow Form of Travel**

The most utilized modes of transportation for traversing long distances are airplane, car, train and bus: each as its pros and cons. A major con of train travel in America is its relative slowness, which makes for long travel times, compounded by Amtrak’s poor on-track performance, and contributes to the general consensus that American trains are poor in service. The train is redeemed as an appropriate mode of travel, however, through narratives that construct it as an optimal way of seeing the country, without having to deal with invasive security measures or, the stresses of road traffic. The slowness of the train entails for a slowing down of time that enables travelers to focus their energies on “slow elements” like romance and play. (Freudendal-Pedersen 2007:
These elements – romance and play – are often disregarded in everyday life when time demands us to be productive citizens.

Imaginative travel (Urry 2000, 2007), the travel offered by public representations (especially film and television) and private memories (photographs, postcards) form an integral part of our future desires and hopes. These representations shape our expectations of destinations or modes of travel. A traveler at the Flagstaff station evoked cinematic representation as he told me of his travel plans on the *Lake Shore Limited*. He said it reminded him of old Rock Hudson films. Another couple told me that they had recently seen a program on the History Channel called *Extreme Trains*, which chronicles the current journeys of different North American trains. My seatmate on the *Empire Builder* offered me clippings from her local newspaper about train journeys around the world. I joked to Kurt, an informant, who was waiting in the dining car for twenty minutes for his partner Kate that he should check to ensure she had not met a similar fate to that of the elderly woman in Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes*. Kate appeared in the dining room shortly thereafter and commented that perhaps my thesis would be richer if she had vanished. She was jokingly complicit in sacrificing herself to realize my “expectations” of the train ride that would enrich my ethnography. Similarly, I could not help but project the narrative of the bickering Asian couple in Jarmusch’s *Mystery Train* onto the bickering Asian couple on the *California Zephyr*. A mother of five young children said that her youngest ones were enjoying the ride and thought they were on the Polar Express.

Other passengers took it upon themselves to recommend books to me like the works of travel writer, Paul Theroux, as I explained my interest in the railroad to them. In addition to film and literature, the railway is an important trope in American folk
music. One woman quizzed me as to whether I knew who performed the song for which the *City of New Orleans* train is named: Arlo Guthrie. Although it may not be the most time-efficient mode of travel, train travel is not simply irrational “dead time.” The decision to travel by train might signal a prioritization of social/personal time over the logic of clock/mechanical time. Vacation is an important form of reconstituting and sometimes challenging identity, and there are many motivations for travel decisions. One motivation for traveling by train is the hope of realizing ideals of relaxation, personal fulfillment and romantic connection. In his monograph about the train system, James McCommons defines train time as “the opportunity to unwind, read newspapers, write on my laptop and zone out on the landscape” (2010). It is time to decompress and may become time for personal recuperation.

No one directly spoke of choosing the train because it was slower. However, the desire to “slow down” in life became apparent in people’s portrayals of taking the train to escape stress in their everyday structural lives. A college junior said that stress from having taken care of his grandfather for the previous weeks cemented his decision to reach his destination of Portland, OR by train. He said he needed some “rest and relaxation.” It would give him time to focus on himself. A single mother, Amy, said that she imagined the train to be a great way to travel and make memories with her daughter. Family travel is often in reaction to the guilt of not fully attending to personal relationships in everyday lives (Shaw 2001: 126). She finally had the time after spending five semesters in school while holding down a job. Traveling by airplane would not have been an adequate means of travel as it connotes continuing to be in pace with everyday stressful experiences. Amy went way out of her way to travel by train, as she had to be driven by her boyfriend from Fort Myers, FL to the station in Sebring, FL to reach her
train destination of San Antonio, TX. The ride to the train depot is one hour and forty minutes away. Furthermore, getting to Texas from Florida required her first to go Washington DC, where she boarded a different train to Chicago and then yet another train down to Texas.  

A Brief History of Time in the 20th Century

Social scientists such as Durkheim, Gurvitch and Sorokin have understood the concept of time as broadly divisible into social time and mechanical/linear time. In Durkheim’s view, social time was a product of members of a society having a shared “temporal consciousness” (1912). Mechanical time is the quantitative measure of time through industrial instruments like the clock and is not dependent on social events. The two maintain a relationship, nonetheless, in that societies that value mechanical time will adjust social time accordingly, according to Sorokin (cited in Hassard 1990). We also value the standardization of time to put us in sync with others. This is perhaps best exemplified by the annoyance we feel when planned events (such as trains) are delayed or cancelled altogether.

Furthermore, the cancellation and delay of scheduled and ticketed train rides will be a source of irritation, despite recognition of their possibility. There is a certain faith invested in the printed schedules as they help us organize our social obligations. A complaint about a delay is more likely to be expressed in terms of its impact on a subsequent social event rather than as an abstract notion of arriving after the official

---

7 This trip would have been an easier one before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 when the Sunset Limited traveled from Los Angeles, CA and Orlando, FL. The Sunset Limited currently stops in New Orleans. This truncation also means that there is currently no true transcontinental (from sea to shining seal) in the Amtrak system.
arrival time of 6:30pm. It is as if one’s frustrations are more justified if they are missing an impending meeting or event rather than sheer fact of arriving “late.” This frustration is due to “time embeddedness” or “the fact that all social acts are temporally fitted inside of larger social acts” (Lewis and Weigart 1990). A single event is situated between events that precede it and that which follows it and delays inevitably affect future plans. Human beings look towards and anticipate the future and look backwards to the past and rarely “live” in the present. This social-time future consists of our longings, distresses and vulnerabilities (Lewis and Weigart 1990). The boyfriend traveling to meet his girlfriend’s parents for the first time; the recent high school graduate running away from his hometown and high school sweetheart; the aspiring engineer returning home after losing her apartment; the separated husband picking up his kids for the summer; the almost thirty-year old with a short summer contract to train with the Indianapolis Colts in hopes of being picked up; the Evangelical Lutheran Church hosting a convention to pray and volunteer in New Orleans; the newly hopeful Idaho girl who spent a fruitful summer coming off the US Social Forum.

The present does have significance in how the past and future are experienced. Heidegger writes that there is another temporal dimension that holds the past, present and future in relation – “nearing nearness” (quoted in Lewis and Weigart 1990: 80). It is first defined spatially, as the experience of being able to see something drawing near to us, subsequently passing and finally receding. This is temporally experienced as the relationship of instances in the past and future to the present feeling of the individual. Lewis and Weigart write: “Heidegger conceives of the present as reaching out in both directions to embrace the past and future, not as an instantaneous razor’s edge on which we are perched” (80 – 1). The present time on the train links people’s past experiences to
their hopes and future destinations. The high school graduate (Tristan) remains nervous on the train, doubting his decision to bolt from his hometown. He justifies his present by recalling how hopeless he had felt before leaving home, and by looking towards a hopeful future somewhere else. He simultaneously evades his present situation of having potentially given up a future with his girlfriend. The length of time spent on the train for him is more than a measure of the number of hours that pass. The anxieties that are structured around the notions of delay involve more than just the fear of losing quantitative time.

**Layover – Breakfast in Sacramento**

Tristan’s anxieties were not apparent to me until I had gotten to know him when we killed some time together in Sacramento during a layover. It emerged that underlying what he had been anticipating in the past day was a Facebook response from his girlfriend. He had not told her in person about his plans but sent her a Facebook message right before he left. Roland Barthes writes that the “amorous phenomenon” is always an episode with a beginning and an end – that end sometimes being travel” (1978: 193). I was unaware of Tristan’s anxiety, having first gotten to know him in the context of celebrating Fourth of July on the train with him and a few others; he was momentarily allowed to forget. We had a formed a party that became an absorbing social activity in which any sense of mechanical time was suppressed. As we tried to find “brekkie” in Sacramento together, he made it known that he would prefer to find a place that also had Wi-Fi access so that he could check his Facebook messages. Our hunt for a food
establishment on the 5th of July became an adventure as we both quickly came to realize that the 4th of July holiday had spilled over from Sunday and many businesses were to remain closed. We did not need to be explicitly told that this was a continued observance of Independence Day. The linear/business time is subordinated to this collective time.

Tristan’s Facebook message indicating that he was leaving the city had been met with obvious irritation from his girlfriend. He is the mobile, male bastard, the one who leaves, and she’s the girl who waited behind. Tristan portrayed himself to me as someone whose past was marred by such episodes. He was afraid of commitment – he had messed up with another girl a few months ago. He shared spoken word poetry about that previous relationship. This conjuring of a prior episode was evoked to help the two of us to make sense of his current predicament. His pain and my desire to empathize with him brought back my own set of painful memories that made the morning take on a new significance. Lewis and Weigart write: “memories can manipulate events in time as if they were ordinary material objects that can be moved around at will” (1990: 81). The past is not fixed, but is still occurring. Bergson believed that the past was continuously “gnawing” at the present; it shapes our subsequent actions. Proust believed the past could come suddenly and shockingly into the present/alive (both cited in Kern 1983: 58). Proust says: “Our arms and legs are full of torpid memories” (cited in Urry 2000: 137). Tristan’s dilemma had reminded me that I needed to wish Happy Birthday to my best friend with whom I had been in very intermittent contact with since his last birthday. That day had begun with me leaving the festivities early in tears and hobbling on a sprained ankle to catch a bus home from Washington DC. He pleaded for me to stay, but I left…not without the same humbling guilt that Tristan felt that I had committed the ultimate betrayal.
The few hours that I was to spend with Tristan in Sacramento took on a new personal weight. The longer duration of a long-distance train trip allows for chance encounters to be developed and life stories to be swapped whereas the normal workday time structures and short subway rides are likely to preclude such interaction. Instead of immediately leaving him when the California State Railroad Museum opened, I waited with him until the departure of his next train was a little closer to the departure. I, therefore, allowed myself to be more spontaneous with my time, whereas the mechanical, scheduled time of the museum opening was to have governed the trajectory of my movement previously. Nevertheless, I had not totally escaped the (self-imposed) demands of needing to go to the museum. He said to me, upon my departure for the museum: “This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

**Time, the Railroad and Standardization**

The notion of mechanical, linear time also extends into the experience of the train journey. Linear time had powerful currency in the industrializing capitalist society of 1800s America as businesses sought to rationally streamline time. Time is now often spoken about as a measureable quantity in metaphors such as “time is money” (Hassard 1990: 12). Like money, time was a resource to spend or conserve. Roy Rosenzweig (1991) tracks a shift in the 19th century from artisan labor to factory labor. The former atmosphere blurred the lines of work and leisure since the workers socialized and drank on the job. In the latter economy, time was converted into productive labor time, which was now separated from unpaid leisure time. Time became something that could be wasted (Hassard 1990). The drinking that normally occurred during work hours found
new time-space after the work-day ended in the saloon. Drinking which had once been part of work activities was now found a focal activity restricted to leisure-time. The train time-space functioned similarly for workers I had met who were using the train as transportation home. Two men who that worked for Halliburton on an oil rig in North Dakota had chugged twenty beers each when I met them on the *Empire Builder*. They had boarded in Stanley, North Dakota and had a work schedule of being on the job for three weeks and being off for two weeks. The nature of their work and their authoritative employer meant that they had to live under strict rules in their work weeks which meant such things as not being able to drink. They did this train commute every three weeks and used it as an opportunity to let loose and indulge.

Since the Industrial Revolution, time became increasingly quantified in units and activities and began to be centered on schedules rather than natural impulses. John Urry writes that time in England up until the sixteenth century was organized around tasks and temporal divisions were based on such things as seasons. This shift towards clock-time occurred over the next two centuries as more people came to own clocks and new forms of cash economy necessitated counting days and rates for pay (2000: 110). The change was not only in attempts to streamline the work-world, but was also in response to new forms of leisure and travel. This pressure of time discipline extended beyond the factory floor and into “leisure, personal relationships, speech, and manners” (Thompson 1963: 401). In E.P. Thompson’s model – industrialization inculcates a disciplined work

---

8 Amtrak workers also work on non-normative work schedules. I was told an Amtrak snack car attendant that was recently officially hired that her schedule was going to be normalized as having four work-days on and four days off. She was “on call” prior and that would range from being one to six days on the job and two days off the job. She also previously worked in the airplane industry and discussed the party and drinking dynamics in lay-over stays between pilots and flight attendants.
Thompson suggests that the new orientation of time creates a paradigm whereby time is “less natural; creates a bigger distinction between work and leisure; and creates a sentiment that older orientations of time are wasteful” (1967: 60). He attributes this to such measures as fining, division of labor, schooling, suppression of leisurely activities and clock technology (1967: 90). The timetabling of train schedules was needed so that social appointments across spaces could be allowed to occur (Urry 2000: 111). When Amtrak posts their on-time performance online or offers to compensate complaining customers – they are operating under the discipline of time as a value and currency for them and their customers...

Prior to the standardization of national time, a traveler from Washington DC to San Francisco in 1870 would have to set his watch over two hundred times to be in sync with each town he passed (Kern 1983). The railroad companies quickly realized the need for standardized zones since they were in the business of transporting people and things across many state lines and therefore many different, confusing time zones. Continental America was split into its current four time zones in 1889 by the railroad and it would be thirty years before the government implemented this officially (Schivelbusch 1979). The capitalist subject understands time as an objective resource to be measured and managed carefully rather than an aspect of activities. This transformation established time as an invaluable tool of (self) regulation. John Urry writes, “The timetable is in a way the nineteenth-century innovation, bringing together the railway machine, accurate clock-

---

9 Nigel Thrift in *Spatial Formations* (1996) presents a critique of Thompson’s account. Thrift acknowledges that the Industrial Revolution was an important historical moment in creating a time shift, but contests some of Thompson’s assumptions such as that pre-industrial times were inherently more leisurely. Thrift contends that the lack of time measuring devices in pre-industrial times does not mean that there was a lack of understanding or cognizance of a sense of time. Thompson also assumes that “clock time and temporal exactitude were isomorphic” (1996: 210). Thrift’s account analyzes time consciousness development in the thirteenth century through monastery schedules.
time, mass publication and scheduling across a national system” (2007: 98). What was once an informal arrangement between the passengers and conductors became published agreement (Marrs 2008: 445). Time becomes a resource, partly divorced from space, with the ability to be used on its own.

This valuation of speed is inextricably linked to the valuation of time and is in part why the air industry eclipsed the rail industry. It is also why the future of train travel in America exclusively revolves around the project of introducing high-speed rail. The paucity of high-speed rail in America today, however, suggests that there must be other values associated with the railroad. The prevalence of the elderly and the young on these trains suggest to me that their participation in this mode of travel is linked to their ability to disavow productive time. The advertising done by Amtrak also suggests that there is an element of leisure afforded by the train in contrast to other modes of travel. The ticketing of rail passes or vacation packages to national wonders, similarly, suggests that the train harps on notions of vacationing.

Time, Anxiety and Confinement on the *California Zephyr*

“Iowa is the test,” Ross, the café attendant on the *California Zephyr* (CZ) cautioned to me. I had remarked on the good time we were making on this fifty-one hour train ride from Emeryville, CA to Chicago. The double-decker Amtrak trains contain a sightseer lounge on the top level, one half of which is filled with swiveling chair, and half with tables that face huge panoramic windows. The downstairs is a café car with a universal menu on all its routes including Ramen noodles, DiGiorno pizza,
various sandwiches, beer, wine and cocktails. There are two different layouts for the snack car. In this one, the attendant had a small counter in front of him and cabinets full of food and microwaves behind him. The rest of the car was filled with tables that were mostly empty, as most people seemed to take their food back to their seats or upstairs to enjoy the view. On this train, one would have the unique experience of seeing sights like the beautiful sandstone cliffs at Ruby Canyon, which separates Colorado from Utah and can only be seen by rafting or train. Ross and I started to talk as he sat down across from me at one of the tables during a lull in service. He was slightly chubby with a serious, but kind demeanor.

It was around lunchtime on the CZ and I decided to try the cheese and cracker tray; it would become my staple food on that particular trip and Ross would immediately assume that what I wanted was when I approached the counter. It was a delectable little tray of Carr’s and Nabisco Wheatsworth crackers served with Babybel and Tillamook cheese. Ross noted that the trip thus far has been particularly slow. He said, “I ordered a lot of food for this trip because I sold out of a lot of the menu on the previous trip.” The less food that he sold on the trip, the more he would have to unload once the train arrived in Chicago. It would mean a further delay to his weekend plans.

Iowa was the test for the CZ schedule because that is where “the freight traffic is heaviest” and where potential flooding might occur. Flooding was a major problem in the Midwest that summer; in August 2010, Iowa Governor Chet Culver referred to the flooding in Iowa as the “new normal.” I was prepared for the possibility of delay on this train trip as well, despite the progress we had made. I was also mildly concerned about the possibility of missing my connecting train from Chicago to New Orleans, which was scheduled to depart Chicago at 8:30PM on Friday night. Our train was scheduled to
arrive at 3:30PM on Friday, and both Ross and I were praying for an on-time arrival. He would only have two days off before he would have to return to work again on Monday after working and traveling five days in a row with sixteen-hour shifts. He had weekend plans with a buddy to go to a family cabin an hour west of Chicago that is in the woods and by a creek. He was especially looking forward to being in the wood in hopes of cooling down, as the heat index in Chicago was 105. I was also particularly anxious to get off the train because I had spent four consecutive nights on it and was to spend one more night on the CZ and yet another on the City of New Orleans. While in this case my anxiety about potentially missing my connecting train had a rational basis, I found the prospect of a delay stressful even on trips when I had nothing in particular to be on time for. After all, my ostensible objective was to spend as much time on the train as possible! Delays may have appeared to other passengers as a waste of productive time of other passengers, but time spent on the train was my productive research time.

We had already spent over a day on the CZ train and were close to passing Ruby Canyon and entering Colorado on that Thursday morning. According to the Amtrak website, the eastbound CZ had an on-time performance of 36.4% within the past twelve months. This was to be my second time on the CZ – the longest continuous train ride in the Amtrak system. I had taken it exactly a week prior, and that train had been delayed in the initial station for two hours and ended up reaching Chicago a few hours late. The announcers at the Emeryville train station attributed the initial delay to a drawbridge that needed to be closed by the next stop on the CZ: Martinez, CA. For me, that delay proved to be a bonding experience with a San Francisco couple in their thirties who had traveled many times by train. Kate, the wife, was a creative writing graduate with inquisitive brown eyes. Her husband, Kurt, a carpenter, had similarly striking bluish
green eyes behind oversized glasses frame. He had a toothy grin and dark, sandy hair under his Carhartt cap. Kurt and Kate had divergent plans for when they reached Chicago. Kurt was going to rent a car with his father to visit distant family, old family homes and farms in the Midwest. The father told me they had “been planning for this trip for ten years.” He had brought a GPS system and had done related research on Google. Kate was going to meet her own friends in the Midwest before reuniting with her husband. As pretty experienced Amtrak travelers, we three jokingly pretended to be angry about the delay, but we had went in understanding that traveling on Amtrak can be extremely unpredictable. “Anything can go wrong,” Kate said. “We once booked a train ticket to arrive at a funeral a day early. Also, sometimes a connecting train just does not wait. The Europeans are definitely confused about the notion of a connecting transfer leaving.” In addition to Amtrak’s unpredictability, choosing to take a long train journey presupposes that the traveler has time to spare and is flexible, perhaps being on holiday or retired. A temporal division is made between the working self and the vacationing, supposedly relaxing self who undertakes the journey. This division also falsely presupposes that the vacationing self will be able to simply dismiss self-disciplined and ingrained pressures of time.

In comparison to the train, a non-stop flight from San Francisco to Chicago takes on average four hours flying time. In that sense, even barring delays, and including travel-time to and from airport, the train is not most “rational” way to travel for very long distances. The total trip is 2438 miles, which means that the train is averaging 47 miles per hour if the projected arrival time is in 51 hours. Thus a train ride might also be slower than the average car making the same trip. People on the train would complain

10 Carhartt is a clothing company that originally made uniforms for the blue-collar railway workers in the 19th century.
loudly that it seemed the train was running slower than the cars that were riding parallel to the rails. Cars also appeal to a sense of freedom, a feeling (perhaps false) that one is traveling on one’s own schedule and not “trapped” in a vehicle one cannot control. The issue of not being able to freely smoke cigarettes also caused considerable anxiety. Smoking has been banned on Amtrak trains since 2000 as mandated by the federal government. To advise smokers, some train cars had the official timetable taped to the door with handwritten notes of which stops also functioned as designated smoke breaks. It was also routine to make announcements of which stops were smoke stops and which were not. One car attendant told me that there are frequently cases of people being behind at a short stop because they insisted on smoking a cigarette when they were warned not to or ignored the call to re-board. This can be a big problem at smaller locations as most trains outside of the Northeast corridor travel at a once-a-day frequency. People are literally stranded for at least twenty-four hours if they fail to re-board. Some passengers would also resist these impositions of the train schedule by smoking in the bathrooms, though this was apparently not common. One informant gave me advice on his to successfully smoke on the train. He said to first place moist paper towels or toilet paper in the bathroom to reduce the smoke smell. He said, “Do it as quick as you can and get the hell out.”

The second trip on the CZ did end up getting into Chicago about three hours late. We had reached Denver early on that Thursday night, but we must have been behind traffic overnight as we transitioned from Colorado to Iowa. Ross had said that there was reassurance from the dispatcher in the early morning that the train traffic was going to be cleared for our train. I joked to Ross that it seemed to be somewhat of an empty promise unless she was building new tracks that morning. And the promise was
empty as not even the dispatcher could successfully regulate the traffic. The achievement of constant motion is myth. To assuage our concerns, the conductor and attendants came around asking and providing us about our connecting train information. They also have complimentary snack packs that further bolstered my diet of cheese and crackers.

I did not miss my connecting train to New Orleans, but I missed out on the opportunity to meet up with my friend in Chicago for dinner. I resigned myself to just waiting in “dead time” in the platform waiting area having seen the surrounding area of Chicago’s Union Station many times. The waiting area outside the main hall is not that much more attractive than Penn Station, but at least there are seats. In these moments of “dead time,” I would try to look back at my interviews from my last train trip and fill in any memories and impressions that might be erased by time. Time spent off the train was always productive in re-energizing and re-inspiring myself for the next journey. This time I would be riding the historical City of New Orleans train, named after that Arlo Guthrie song.

Flexible Control and Technology

Kurt was traveling a guitar and I suggested he should play while on the train to bring back boxcar culture. He replied that he probably would have gotten kicked off. This reminded me that not all delays are due to external occurrences such as friction with the freight companies who own the railroad tracks or natural disasters like falling cliffs and flooding. Amtrak is sometimes delayed because of spontaneous events on the train. The San Francisco couple relayed a story of a couple that was thrown off the train. There was a very drunk white woman with her Native American boyfriend whom she kept cursing
at and attacking. She went up to an Amish couple and asked them to affirm that this guy was the most horrible person ever. Time was a particular preoccupation despite, or perhaps because, of the need to willingly reconcile oneself to long hours and delays when choosing to travel by Amtrak. Seasoned travelers might know to instruct people who are waiting on them to check the status of an incoming train. A seatmate on the *Southwest Chief* got hourly text updates from his wife who was constantly checking on the changing estimated arrival time into his home city of Kansas City, MO. Mastering the art of reading timetables and adjusting one’s schedule via mobile technologies is essential for those who have made mobility a regular aspect of their lives. Asking the conductor and the train attendants what the current estimated time of arrival was the most posed question by passengers.

I recalled a similar experience of a rowdy passenger being kicked off. I checked the status of the westbound *Empire Builder* an hour before I was supposed to board. It was reported to be on time, according to a phone call I had made to the automated Amtrak customer service line. Knowing the status of the train was important because it would indicate whether or not I could afford waiting for a new batch of huckleberry ice cream to be made at the diner by the Glacier National Park entrance. I would have been able to respond to disruptions in service by adjusting my schedule and enjoying Montana for a little longer. I would have converted potential wasted time into productive leisure time by being an active tourist. Mobile technologies get involved in regulating the self. I was driven to the depot on time, but within the hour that I had checked, the train had been delayed an hour due to a very drunk passenger whom they had to take off the train. According to the agent at the depot, he was creating a ruckus in the sightseer lounge. The entire train stopped at a flag-stop called Essex between East Glacier and West
Glacier. Essex is in the middle of the park, but with no amenities besides an expensive inn nearby. Thus, the train had to wait until the man was safely picked up by either taxi or ambulance. In this instance, it was a passenger causing the delay.

The train journey is a consumption that unfolds over time and there is a range of emotions that one might feel with delay. Shove, et al write: “Ironically, the consequences of failure increase the more we rely upon systems and infrastructures designed to sustain the safe and secure flows of material, resources and people” (2009: 8). Some people accept it as fate and make the most out of the journey, while others launch official complaints. Barthes in his scenography of waiting in *A Lover’s Discourse* draws up a schematic of the distressed range of emotions while waiting for one’s lover. In the prologue, the delay is a “mathematical, computable entity” measured by the hands on his watch. The delay of a few minutes does not yet have social meaning; the physiological panic has not set in. The prologue ends with him “taking it badly.” The concern sets in. Act I is a rationalization for lateness. Act II is pure anger. Act III is pure anxiety – a state of abandonment. It ends with emotional rage. The play can end at earlier points. If the lover appears in Act I, there is a calm greeting. A confrontation occurs if the lover appears in Act II. There is a relief and ultimately affirmation if the lover appears in Act III.

Knowledge of delays also allows one to “bypass” them and re-route oneself to not be as heavily affected by delays (Jain 2006). New technologies like the mobile phone have marked the 21st century as being about flexible timing and real time scheduling.\(^\text{12}\)

---

\(^{11}\) A flag-stop is a stop that is scheduled on the basis on someone having bought a ticket to that destination. It is a destination option, but not a definitive stop.

\(^{12}\) The mobile telephone is also revolutionary in that boundaries between work and leisure are beginning to merge again. We updates remain in contact with loved ones as we answer personal texts and calls at work.
Tethered teenagers who float around urban environments with loose plans best exemplify this orientation of time. Juliet Jain proposes that public transportation can be competitive with the car again in new abilities to forewarn travelers through mobile updates of potential delays. On March 30, 2011, Amtrak tweeted on Twitter: “Sometimes things happen on transit that are WAY beyond our control. Train riders can sign up for timely service alerts @capitalcorridor”.

My car attendant on a westbound Empire Builder warned us that there could be a possible delay from the onset of our ride out of Chicago as a rockslide derailed a freight train in Libby, MT a couple days prior. If the tracks were not cleared – then there would have to be a chartered bus waiting at Libby to deliver passengers to their stops. I did not think that I would quickly act on this information to change my destination of Seattle (west of Libby) to stop at West Glacier, MT (two stops before Libby). I would not have been able to bypass this service disruption without my phone to call Amtrak reservations and secure a ticket from West Glacier to Seattle a few days later. I also needed to secure housing accommodations in West Glacier for the extra nights.

Jain concedes that “bypassing” is dependent on other flexible measures such as “flexible ticketing” (2006: 98) that I had access to in riding with my rail pass. I did not have to worry about losing money since I had a package deal that let me travel for eighteen segments. My segment to Seattle would simply be cancelled without repercussions. Tristan, who was traveling on a fifteen-day rail pass, and I joked about changing our itineraries to continue riding with one another. George Will’s (2011) belief

and we check our work e-mail while off the job. Perpetual Contact by James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds) (2002) fundamentally outlines these new negotiations of new media in society.

13 Twitter is a social-networking website where users can post short messages. Businesses like Amtrak often use it to notify loyal customers of new developments. The Amtrak twitter webpage can be found here: http://twitter.com/#!/Amtrak.
that the train in its timetabling creates a less individualistic American who is passive to authority is dubious. He says that the car allows its driver to go wherever and whenever they want to go. I agree and have shown that that train time schedule can be a frustrating experience, especially on the longer-distance train routes where there tends to be only one daily train. However, this frustration, at least for me, did not make me feel of passive. The negotiation of my schedule with the train schedules felt like a logical puzzle. I felt as though I “beat the system” if I successfully bypassed a service interruption or figured out an alternative arrangement than what the Amtrak reservation system initially suggested that I do. Kate said that you have to look out for when they sometimes try to get you take a shuttle bus rather than putting you on the train. I felt an affirmation that I maximized the potential of my rail pass and spent sufficient time riding on the rails for my fieldwork. Kurt said about his wife: “She is really good at finding loopholes in the system. She changed our connection to be one for a one that was guaranteed ride by Amtrak.” In doing so, they made it Amtrak’s responsibility to put them up with housing accommodations for the night. They were both surprised that they were put up in the fancy Hyatt with a beautiful view of the city.

A woman I met in Montana told me that she was able to convince Amtrak to fly her and few others to her destination after a connecting train had just left. George Will in his article against railroad development also conflates collectivism with passivity. The end of his article reads: “Time was, the progressive cry was ‘Power to the people!’ Now it is less resonant: All aboard!” These demands are politicized as she and the others invoked their right as consumers to be at their destination as “contractually” promised. There is a feeling of agency on part of the train rider. Many train riders cited that a con to taking an airplane is the lack of agency that the airplane rider feels; they feel violated
as citizens by the increasingly invasive airport security pat-downs as well as helplessness in face of delays and missed connections on planes. The Amtrak passenger has the power to not only use the timetable as way of managing personal time, but also as a tool to gain benefits. Amtrak, the passenger and the timetable enter a discursive relationship based on rationality whereby the passenger can and sometimes does make demands. The timetabled world creates certain conditions that Amtrak is expected to meet. This does not create the standardized and homogenized individual Will imagines it.

The train has historically been seen as a technology that did not serve in the interest of “the people.” Many of railroad executives and industrialists of the Gilded Age era in the late nineteenth century were considered robber barons or businessmen who used corrupt tactics to amass their wealth. These American figures include Jay Gould, Cornelius Vanderbilt, E.H. Harriman and Leland Stanford. Equally feared and revered, train robbers (such as Jesse James) were often seen as populist heroes rather than predatory villains. Their actions were justified through Populist claims that these outlaws defended the interest of people against monopolies. It has been an arena of subversion with democratic interests. These robbers rarely targeted regular citizens traveling by train. Instead, these train robbers often targeted money that was being transported by banks across the nation and mined silver and gold from the West (Gordon 1996:163). 

In these two examples – the train gets established as an active, Populist collectivism.

---

14 The 2007 film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* opens with a train robbery scene where the train car with the safes is targeted: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dle7PfjnKA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dle7PfjnKA).
Romanticism Reconsidered

A few months after my fieldwork, Marga, a globetrotter from Spain that I met on the Fourth of July train with Tristan, contacted and queried me about the USA rail pass that I had been traveling on. She kept jokingly asked if she had told me if she loved the train on the ride that we met each other on. She even shared even sharing my affection for the *Before Sunrise/Sunset* films. Marga compared the benefits of trains over planes. She felt stuck on planes. The time on planes was described as being dead time, where she passed the time reading “stupid magazines, watching dumb movies and eating junk.” She felt a little more inspired on the train. She coded the train as a romantic and intellectual space. Marga used Turner-ian language to describe how she felt about the train: “neither here nor there.” She twice described the journey as being “no man’s land,” a territory between the time and place of the arrival and departure. She had done a lot of walking and sightseeing in Seattle and said the train was an important transition to her next destination, a time to order relax and prepare for her visit to San Francisco. It was an important transition for her as a foreigner because she said watching the landscape and seeing the region change would help her understand the people, country and surroundings.

My seatmate on my final train of my fieldwork, the *Crescent*, turned to ask me if I was ready for this long trip as she settled into her seat. I dismissed her remark and established myself as someone who had been riding the train all summer. I had after all spent six straight nights on trains the prior week. The remaining twenty hours back to New York did not seem to be a daunting task. Her question was valid, though, as I never got fully used to being on the train. The “slowness” made it a contemplative journey. My
seatmate on the *Crescent* pressed me further about my journey. I mustered the mundane response that I had a lot of thinking time. “That’s good – people don’t think anymore,” she replied. I had been interested in the train as a contemplative space during my travels. I asked a college baseball player who was heading for summer training in Kansas from California on the *Southwest Chief* about this issue. I bluntly asked: “Do you think this train trip is making you think about things more than you normally would?” He replied that he was anxious. He was insecure about his baseball skills and his role on the team. I heard him later being farewell by an older drunk man who wished him luck in training and to not worry about baseball too much. The future can be as haunting as the past.

This personal time making became particular stressful at times because I began to feel not only trapped in this confined space, but also trapped within the confines of my mind, where anxieties and insecurities would surface. This seemed to hit Marga in her rail travels after I met her. Marga bought a shorter rail pass and traveled in the fall of 2010. She texted me while on the trip: “Winter is not as much fun as the summer travels…Less people, cold everywhere, frozen tracks, delays…A lot of reading and writing so I guess that’s good – but I am slightly depressed.” Her mind was occupied with what she believed was a major missed love opportunity. She met a man from Chicago right before I met her in July in a Seattle hostel. They exchanged contact information and he visited her in Spain a few weeks after. They had a wonderful time at the beginning of his stay, but she claims to have clammed up and ruined things towards the end. She wondered if he would ever contact her again after he had not responded to some of her messages. The confined space and lengthy time of the train can exacerbate into a form of cabin fever. The conditions in a seemingly tranquil space and at leisure time can manifest itself to produce effects other than those advertised – a comfortable,
restful trip. The train time is certainly not “dead time,” but one with the potentiality to wholly absorb us.

Conclusion

The train was a historically important technology that both reflected and contributed to new valuations of time during the industrial era. The railroad implemented standard time zones in America (Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific) in order to streamline business practices and coordinate an increasingly expanding and mobile America. The railroad has since been rendered somewhat obsolete in this country by the more cost-effective bus and the more time-efficient airplane, as well as by the automobile’s promise of autonomy. In this narrative, I consider some of the pleasures of the railroad, which includes a feeling of agency and flexibility on the part of the rider over other modes of travel. Passengers use train delays to demand recompense from Amtrak for failing to deliver one to one’s destination in a timely fashion. Nevertheless, riding on Amtrak requires patience and an understanding of inevitable delay. We at once embrace the slowing down of time, but remain nervous about future commitments. We negotiate different narratives and perspectives on time – see it at once as slow and fast, while its slowness may be stressful as well as leisurely. Marga and Tristan’s stories illustrate this multiplicity. I argue that the slowing down of time is a desirable factor as it offers riders a chance to resist the everyday pressures of time for sake of relaxation. The railroad might be competitive with the automobile again as mobile technologies allow for information about delays to disseminate more quickly.
Chapter 3: Neighbors On a Train

In the end all our roads are determined by whether they take us away from home or lead us there. – Georg Simmel, “Georg Simmel’s Aphorisms”

Introduction

Long-distance train travel is not simply a utilitarian mode of travel where passengers sit patiently in their seats until they arrive at their destination. Factors such as the ability to move around on the train combined with confinement in an enclosed space over a long period of time enable modes of social experience that are precluded in everyday life.

Trains place people among a steady company of strangers for hours or days. In contrast to airplanes and buses, where it is difficult to actively engage anyone besides one’s seatmate, trains give wider access to mobile communities of strangers. Discomfort with such prolonged exposure and the desire to avoid extended gazing at strangers contributed to notion of the train as a place for reading (Schivelbusch 1979: 66). New mobile technologies including laptops, DVD players and cell phones function as additional “screens” to insulate the traveler. Nevertheless, the train was also a place for conviviality as well as solitude, where people engaged with strangers. The length of the trip made it conducive to breaking the “solitary contract” (Augé 1995), the combination of physical proximity with social distance that tends to dominate modern, urban life. The
train is a site for low-key, yet intimate encounters, conducive, as one person put it to “social hooking up.”

The train can directly encourage social interactions, as when strangers are seated together in the Amtrak dining car. The observation car, as I have shown, also allows passengers to share the “gaze” with companions other than their seatmates. People would often remark that it felt unnatural not to engage with others. The train was characterized as a neighborly site, a place where it felt safe to leave one’s belongings with others. Furthermore, through small gestures like sharing space, exchanging names, showing photos and alternately paying for drinks, strangers may be transformed friends.

In this chapter, I investigate the making of social space on the train and the sociality of train travel. I look at how material objects (cards, photos newspapers, hand-held video game consoles, phones, etc) brought onboard by passengers domesticated the train space.

The activities onboard also highlight a tension between the train as a public space that promotes transgressive acts, similar to a bar, as well as a privatized extension of domestic space. I use Victor Turner’s work on liminality to interpret the train as a setting where one can “doff the masks” (1974: 243) of social statuses. The train journey can be experienced as a time of leisure, a period of freedom from obligations (civic, work, family) and freedom to exceed limits (Turner 1979). The train can be interspace to intensify affective flow with other passengers, as I will show through describing an impromptu party I participated in on a train on the Fourth of July. Liminoid experiences, according to Turner, lead to a feeling of “communitas,” or emotional solidarity. These experiences also tend to suspend divisions (of class, age, race, gender, etc) that structure normative, everyday social behavior. The enclosed train space also allows for the
development of personal intimacy between strangers that involves neither transgressive behavior nor replication of domestic routines. The traveler also seeks companionship with others to vent about personal issues that might be subject to suppression in home life. The suspension of stable home identity can lead a traveler to shed protective buffers and to interact with someone they are unlikely to see again. Community arises on the train through elements of chance and need. This transitory, mobile community is also subject to dissolving before the train journey ends if antagonistic forces (e.g. passengers, Amtrak staff) transpose dominant social conventions onto the train.

**Spaces of Public Domesticity**

Multiple, seemingly contradictory cultural narratives mediate experiences of social spaces. In the previous chapter, I explored how passengers fluidly move between multiple narrative constructions of time without feeling a cognitive dissonance. Passengers bemoan the slowness of the train while also coding the slowness of time as leisurely. Similarly, the train space is experienced and spoken about in a multitude of ways. The train space is felt and thought of as betwixt and between such commonplace binaries as: home and away, private and public, dwelling and mobility, individual and collective. I have previously explored how the railroad differs from automobiles, planes and buses. Unlike these other modes of travel, the train provides the passenger with multiple spaces to move around in, thus offering multiple venues of sociability and entertainment. Hotels and cruise ships are salient comparisons to long-distance trains in this respect. These three sites along with department stores and photography studios, were among the earliest spaces of “public domesticity”. Amy Richter in her historical
analysis of the effect of early women travelers on railroads defines public domesticity as
the effort to reproduce values of the home onto public interactions (2005: 60). The large
saloons on steamboats also historically influenced the design of American trains, which
were roomier than French and British ones. Schivelbusch in his examination of early
experiences of the railway traces this influence to the fact that the steamboat was the
primary mode of transportation in America prior to the railroad. In contrast, the humble
stagecoach was point of comparison for 19th century British travelers (1979: 108).

All three (hotels, cruise ships, trains) are spaces that are a means of access to and
fro destinations and tourist attractions. One boards the train or ship before to reach
one’s destination and a hotel provides a base from which one can explore a locale.
However, they are also spaces occupied for extended periods of time, which effectively
makes them destinations as well. They are consumed in themselves, for the pleasure they
provide, in addition to being a means for consumption of traditional tourist sites. The
activities undertaken in these spaces are as thus a significant aspect of the culture of
travel and tourism. Visitors at the Standard Hotel overlooking the High Line in
Manhattan use it as a means to explore the rich city. Moreover, it is consumed as an end
in itself, a site for public exhibitionism – the public display of sexual acts visible for
walkers on the High Line and in the Meatpacking District. Lachlan Cartwright (2009) for
the New York Post reports of an advertisement on the hotel’s Facebook page promoting
this usage of its hotel: “We encourage you to exercise your inner exhibitionist. Please
share your intimate, and explicit photos with us – those floor to ceiling windows aren’t
just for the view…” The view of and from these windows then offers at least two forms
of consumption: 1) the tourist gaze onto New York City and 2) a very public, yet safe
space to produce and consume exhibitionist acts and impulses. Additionally, cruise ships straddle the binary of being between transportation and destination. On the one hand, they are means of visiting an itinerary of destinations, such as the various islands of the Caribbean. On the other hand, the cruise ship is itself a luxurious consumption environment, providing amenities such as casinos, gyms, pools, restaurants, clubs, stores, bars and bowling alleys. Orvar Löfgren in his history of modern Western tourism traces this understanding of the cruise ship industry as beginning in the 1890s. He writes, “The ocean liner is a floating palace with a life ‘in security and luxury.’ What once was a dreaded voyage is now a vacation itself” (2002: 162). Similarly, while the railroad transports the traveler to his destination. It also, however, varyingly offers such entertainments: an arcade car, wine tastings (for sleeping car customers), sightseer cars, dining cars and educational programs by Trails & Rails volunteers. The passenger bound for West Glacier on the Empire Builder consumes Glacier National Park twice: 1) gazing from the sightseer lounge onboard the train and 2) hiking and camping within the boundaries of the park.

These spaces negotiate between individual leisure and collective leisure. They are spaces where heightened conversation with strangers can be conducted or where one can engage in solitary acts of consumption, with most travelers alternating between the two. The hotel guest might enjoy a private swim at the hotel pool in the early evening and then head to the hotel bar later in the evening to meet others. I conceived the sightseer

15 An analysis of Sofia Coppola’s Lost in Translation (2003) would also provide insight into how the hotel operates as a site that is consumed as: home and away; domestic and public; connection and alienation. The two protagonists of the film compare the dirtiness of their separate bathrooms. They significantly spend most of their time in Tokyo within the hotel boundaries – namely, the hotel bar/lounge. The hotel is connected to, but still also emotionally alienating from home as the protagonists, both married to other people, awkwardly fail to successfully domesticate the space with their respective spouses. Instead, they are able to temporarily and intimately perform a routine with one another. This relates to the proposed notion of the train as a time-space for “social hooking up.”
lounge as a “domestic living room” where I could play cards, chat and drink with others. I saw my coach seat as the for such personal leisure activities as daydreaming, listening to music and reading.

**The Train as a Liminaloid Space: A Potential Site of Communitas**

I argue that the train is a liminoid space, or interspace, given the social conditions. By liminoid, I mean that it is a space “betwixt and between,” defined by its transitional character. The train journey, in most cases, is literally between home and away. The rules governing everyday conduct can be relaxed in favor of spontaneity. The idea of liminality, originally articulated by Arnold Van Gennep (1960 [1909]), has developed and extended by Victor Turner (1970, 1974, 1979, 1982, 1986). In his early work, Turner focuses on rites of passage in primitive societies. Such passage rites involve what Van Gennep has designated a “liminal” or “transitional” stage when the participants are betwixt and between old and new roles, a stage that Turner found to be highly developed in initial rituals. Turner went on to suggest that certain social spaces marked off from everyday, routine social display an analogous liminal or transitional character. Turner argued that the conditions of the liminal time-space lead to a sense of “communitas” among participants. Turner differentiated communitas from Gurvitch’s sense of communion where “individual distinctiveness” gets subsumed into a collective. In communities, identities do not merge and each individual contributes to the dynamic. Spontaneous communitas (which will be of most concern here) is defined as “direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities, a deep rather than intense style
of personal interaction” (1979: 45). It is a spontaneous sense of camaraderie that gives way to a sense of social solidarity, intensified emotions and hopefulness – a lack of
Communitas is, however, a transitory state that cannot last. Moreover, communitas can only be defined as such, after it has been experienced. In other words, communitas can only be retroactively remembered.

The notions of liminality and communitas were initially developed in relation to ritual systems in primitive societies. Sociologists and anthropologists, since Durkheim (1912) have looked to rituals or other performative events as a counter-force to the perceived decline in social interaction and consciousness. Turner reflexively examined how his models of liminality might be adapted to industrialized societies in comparing primitive rituals with Western theater, as forms of play (1979, 1982, 1986). He developed the notion of “liminoid” to describe communitas in Western societies. Liminoid contrasts with liminal in that liminoid occurrences are not regularly occurring, clearly defined or mandatory events. The dichotomy between work and leisure tightened in industrialized societies, and it is within leisure that liminoid moments may occur. The company outing, for example, may engender liminoid types of sociability that contrast with the dynamics within the company on a normal workday. The long-distance train is similarly liminoid potential because it allows for spontaneous, irreproducible communitas. The passengers, albeit to varying degrees, are “between and betwixt” their origin and destination points.

Turner closely aligns the notion of communitas with Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of “flow.” There are fundamental differences between flow and communitas, such as that communitas is more about the setting, whereas flow is more concerned with individual action. Nonetheless, the characteristics of flow provide a useful framework to assess how the train might be conducive to communitas. Flow is characterized by an
extreme focus that makes action and awareness become one. Turner posits alcohol consumption as something that induces a flow as it narrows attention to specific events. This is why communitas can only be retroactively understood as such. Self-consciousness breaks the flow. The train is a site that often induces in many passengers a willingness to drink more often than they would in regular, daily lives. This additional characteristic might therefore advance a notion that the train that induces flow. Communitas and flow are fundamentally linked because they both give rise to experiences characterized by heightened feelings of conviviality.

Fourth of July on the Train

I experienced the intense feeling of communitas most on a trip on the Coast Starlight on the Fourth of July. “I loved hanging out with Kapish on that amazing train ride from Seattle to San Fran. It was a wonderful experience and we ended up drinking wine and making a large group of friends thanks to our conversations about philosophy, music, movies, and literature that seemed to attract everyone in the train’s observation car…,” wrote Marga in my references on my online profile on the CouchSurfing website.\(^\text{16}\) Her remarks evoke one of Turner’s characterizations of communitas: “When even two people believe that they experience unity, all people are felt by those two, even if only for a flash, to be one” (1982: 44). I was often asked if I was traveling alone or with someone else when recounting my train journey to others. My usual response was to say that I traveled alone, but with the caveat that I was also likely to be found in the company of others. Other passengers on the train often assumed that I was traveling with one of the

---

\(^{16}\) Couchsurfing.com is an online hospitality network where travelers can find housing accommodations with a local host in the locale.
people they observed me talking with in the observation car. I took great delight in revealing that we had met on the train. Marga and I were thought to be travel companions by friends that we met later on the train. The paradox is that it was our unfamiliarity with each other that allowed for great camaraderie, which extended into shared conversation and drinks with other passengers. The limited amount of time encouraged us to condense the process of getting acquainted, by covering many topics and exchanging intimate stories. The fact that neither of us existed in each other’s “structure,” or accountable daily lives, licensed frank and personal discussion about ourselves. Conversation on the train (and in travel in general) is often less subject to social pressures of impression management. The exchange can be a reprieve from conversations with our intimates that may require us to defend, maintain or enhance their pre-existing notions of us. Alphonso Lingis writes: “…so often the most moving, the most unforgettable conversations we have are with strangers, people from another land, another age, whom we have never seen before and will never see again…We seek to be freed from the carapace of ourselves” (2000: 101).

I initially encountered Marga at King Street Station in Seattle. The confusion of the multiple lines led me to ask her to watch my bags for a minute while I tried to figure out what protocol I needed to follow before boarding the train. There is no uniform way of boarding Amtrak trains as there is in boarding a plane in U.S. airports. Some train depots might ask for identification, many do not. Some conductors might ask to see your tickets at the station; most conductors will do it while on-board the train. I made my way to the observation car shortly after the train pulled out of King Street Station to find
Marga sipping coffee. I asked if the downstairs café had been opened yet. She replied that it was and I again asked her to look after my bag while I went for coffee. She had graciously granted my requests to share her space. She was originally from Spain, but made her home in New York for the past couple of years. She was visiting Seattle and San Francisco and had decided to take the train between the two cities. Life in New York is stressful, and she imagined that the train would be a noteworthy, relaxing part of her trip. The purpose of her travels was mostly coded as “relaxation” and “play.” Conversation came easily as we shared a similar interest in travel and had just visited Seattle from the perspective of being New Yorkers.

Her clear zeal prompted me to be more adventurous in exploring the train space. I had yet to see the sleeping cars despite having been traveling on the train for a few weeks. The sleeping cars are deliberately separated from the coach cars with the observation and dining cars in between. One needs to have a sleeping car reservation to be in that space. Staff in the dining car stopped us as we tried to trespass into the dining area. We took our adventures to the arcade car of the Coast Starlight – a room particular to this train line, which had previously served as the smoking lounge before smoking on the train was made illegal. None of the arcade games worked, but I decided in the moment that Marga was a companion worthy of photographing with my Polaroid. I took a picture of her happily looking back at me while pretending to play one of the broken machines. I had previously narrated my trip thus far to her, using Polaroid pictures I had taken of the destinations I had visited to organize my story. We plopped down on the floor of the arcade room for a few minutes. Being in a speeding vehicle at the ground level is a unique perspective. The windows do not quite reach the floor so

---

17 Polaroid ceased the production of “Polaroid film” in February 2008 and I used my last roll of (expired) film on the trip.
the view outside is cut off just a few inches above the tips of the grass blades. It feels as if you are sitting on grass. It is the closest feeling to what I imagined traveling in an open boxcar on a freight train might be.

Marga and I returned to the observation car where we made new friends. We reassumed our position in the chairs in the car that we had previously occupied. It turned 7pm and we decided it was an appropriate time to start our drinking adventures. We split the price for bottles of red wine. We discovered that the chairs swiveled a full 360 degrees and playfully swung around in them. Our discovery attracted the attention of other passengers and we demonstrated to them how to pull the level to swivel around. We made friends with two Californians, Lauren and Adam, who, like us, had met on the train a couple of hours ago. Lauren approached a solitary Adam in the snack car. We asked them if they had discovered the arcade room. Upon hearing that they had not, we bought more drinks and took them down there. They too were dismayed by the broken machines and we collectively decided to prank the toll-free number on the machines. A woman answered, seriously took our complaint down, and offered to mail us alleged quarters that we had supposedly lost. We hung up the phone – the call had gotten too serious. Our group continued to expand as Jacob, a Tucson, Arizona native, asked if he could join the party. The conduction initially allowed our gathering to take place in the arcade room before telling us to move to the observation car a few minutes later.

Fireworks began to appear after we pulled out of Klamath Falls, OR at around ten p.m. when we reached the observation car. The train deliberately slowed down. Our group was completed with the addition of Jacob’s seatmate, Tristan and another girl – Courtney. Marga kept exclaiming that she loved the train. It was her catch phrase, interjected in every moment of excitement. Tristan and Chris independently disclosed
that they had seen Marga and me on the train earlier and had wanted to approach us, but they were afraid of coming off as weird. They added that they were intimidated by the fun we appeared to be having. We played musical chairs and individually got to know each other. Jacob, the youngest of our group at eighteen, had a USA rail pass and had initially been traveling with two friends from his home. One of his friends had been left behind in Washington DC and the other in New York. The circumstances of how he lost both friends were ambiguous. The one in DC had been separated from the other two – who did not bother to try to locate him. The other travel companion was being held on vagrancy charges in New York City. They had been sleeping on the steps of the United States Postal Service Building in midtown Manhattan. He boasted of the New York City shirt that he had allegedly stolen from a CVS. The observation car was a space of flows. We figuratively performed musical chairs, exchanging seats and swiveling them to face and chat with each member of the group in turn. Jacob and Courtney splintered off. Someone reported on the way back from a trip to the bathroom that noises could be heard from one of the other bathrooms. Our loud chatter continued to solicit the attention of other passengers who would chime in at certain intervals before turning in to their coach seats. We also elicited the attention of the conductor, who told us that our turning the swiveling chair to face each other “was not working for him.” We complied, having been previously advised by one of the car attendants that we could have our fun, but that we should obey every request of the conductor. The staff anticipates and promotes some bonding among passengers, though it is clear that there are ways to “surprise” staff. The same attendant had told us that he liked to pair people who would potentially hit it off. Jacob and Tristan had been placed together, perhaps because they were the youngest two in their coach car. The people that were apart of the party were
also youthful with most of us being in our twenties; this party was probably also more tolerated by Amtrak staff because of this generational component.

The experience of communitas as transgression of normative order is equally about destruction as it is about creation. Our Fourth of July festivities were not simply pure, innocent fun. We collectively stole a drink from a man. He was a twenty-something year old from Idaho seated close to us in the observation car reading a novel. He started talking to us, but no one took a real liking to him. He told me about his jobs and various big climbs he had done. He slipped out of the observation car to go to the bathroom, leaving his mixed drink. The bar car serving alcohol closed at eleven p.m. We eyed the drink and took it without hesitation. We hid the drink behind our seats and surreptitiously sipped from it. He was confused by the disappearance of his drink asking us about its whereabouts. We feigned ignorance. He reluctantly accepted his fate. He left the observation car to go to his coach seat. He returned with a twenty-four ounce can of Icehouse beer, which he said he had just found in his suitcase. He said his boss must have put it there. We went on sipping his drink.

Our group whittled down to Lauren, Tristan, Chris and I. Our drinking buzz had worn off, but we made a pact to stay up together for the duration of the trip that would end for Tristan and me first in Sacramento. Playing cards can always be found in the observation car and we borrowed a deck from a mother-daughter duo. The only game that the four of us knew how to play was Go Fish. The goal of the simple game is to collect the most sets of each card in every suit. We decided to play the game as pairs to make the game more amusing: Tristan and Chris, Lauren and me. We would have farcical “team meetings” where we showed each other our cards. We had all previously exchanged cell phone numbers, and I decided to have a little fun with the game by
texting Tristan to also create an alliance with him. Lauren and I won the game. Tristan and I revealed our further farce. The only other Polaroid I took on the train was of the three of them after the game. I told them to do a crazy hand gestures in honor of Tristan, whose own gestures were very expressive. The remaining hours was spent in exhaustion, even as we struggled to fall asleep. We shared snacks with each other. Lauren found some condiments lying around and we resorted to eating packets of honey. We played with the GPS feature on Chris’s phone to track where in Northern California we were as darkness obscured our view. The most notable sight thereafter was the biggest wildfire I had seen. It glowed like morning alpenglow.

Lauren reflected before the stop in Sacramento: “You do realize that this is the best possible thing that could have happened?” Discussion turned to whether or not it would be weird if we actually contacted each other after the train trip. We agreed it was sad that we were probably not going to see each other. Nostalgia was setting in. I suggested that maybe we were overanalyzing the situation. Perhaps, I was unconsciously trying to manage my own emotions? My statement was not a condemnation. They were being reflexive in much the same vein that this project aims to be. I was at an advantage – having been equipped with the emotional armor that comes that comes from navigating successive experiences of saying many hellos and goodbyes over the previous weeks. I knew that I would be mobile, and therefore would meet new people everyday. Nonetheless, I was also not free from anxiety about leaving the comfort of this newfound community – one in which otherwise disparate individuals had collectively come together. It was more likely than not that we would not keep contact with each other because in our mundane, regulated lives we would have been unlikely to have met and would not have necessarily bonded had we done so. Tristan and I half-jokingly
suggested that one of us change our itineraries to extend our time together. It was a semi-feasible option since we were both traveling with a USA rail pass. The party was a unique moment in my rail travels for its density and intensity.

I hurriedly texted Tristan as we reached Sacramento to my surprise: “We in da Sac.” Jacob, Lauren and Chris came off the train with Tristan and me. We had Jacob take a picture of the rest of us. And we exchanged hugs. Marga had not woken up to see me off in Sacramento. I told Lauren to send her goodbye on my behalf when she woke up. She texted me saying she was sad that she did not get to say goodbye. I remember the emotion in her message had taken me aback slightly. I communicated a little with Lauren, Adam and Tristan for a few days after our trip before communication died out. Tristan told me of his train ride to Chicago from Sacramento: “I met a gaggle of girl scouts. A carpet cleaning drug dealer and an angry old motorcycling black man.” Chris similarly updated me on the rest of the trip on the *Coast Starlight*. He said that it had been boring. The journey is not uniformly experienced as either fun or boring – often fluctuating between the two.

**Privacy, Domesticity, Technology and Community**

In *Home on the Rails*, Amy Richter (2005) analyzes the railroad as one of the first public spaces that was deemed appropriate for women. The role of early women travelers was complicated. They had to present a respectable demeanor, but they were also interested in pushing bounds of social contact. Cautionary tales warned of men who made improper advances that threatened to violate a woman’s reputation on trains because the space “freed men from the fetters of their reputation” (Richter 2005: 39).
presence of women on the train and the railroad industry’s commercial interest in marketing to them reflected and reinforced the inscribing of the train space with pre-existing norms of feminine domesticity. Women, not men, were encouraged to pack picnic baskets with food for the long journey. Men were told to endure the conditions (Richter 2005: 48), whereas women were encouraged to remake them, by bringing the comforts of home with them. The train began to be transformed into a site of mobilized domesticity. Located at the intersection of the private and public spheres, the train offered the civility of home, while maintaining some of the excitement of public entertainments. Pullman cars were furnished with lavish interiors and other amenities that one might find in a bourgeois domicile. The Baltimore & Ohio Railway advertised its women’s retiring rooms as “most acceptable to lady travelers” since they were “provided with dainty dressing tables with large plate glass mirrors, on each side of which are cosy corner seats” (cited in Richter 2005: 80). The train is therefore analogous to the department, which similarly provided a homelike consumption environment through such spaces as parlor rooms.

This domesticating of the train space continues today – especially in treatment of passengers by railroad employees. A mother traveling in the sleeping car with her husband and two children repeatedly expressed love for her sleeping car attendant. She joked that the gay attendant’s partner would definitely mind. A few minutes later, the attendant came to inform her that a wine and cheese event was taking place in the sleeping car. The mother turned to invite me before being stopped by the sleeping car attendant. It was an event for sleeping car passengers only. When she did not attend the event, the solicitous attendant to drop off cheese and crackers that she could “share with her friends.” The railroad, through a variety of services, continues to create an
atmosphere of domesticity. This atmosphere, however, was not universally appreciated. One young man and one young female complained to me that the attendants were too accommodating. They said that the attendants on European trains would never rouse sleeping passengers or make sure everyone was getting off at the right stop. They saw such attention to detail and caretaking as a burden that “softened” people.

Reading has traditionally been associated with railroad travel. It initially provided a way to cope with the novel situation of being in a confined space with strangers for hours or days. New mobile technologies allow people to enclose themselves in “screens,” just as older print technologies had. One man told me of his strategy of bringing his laptop or pretending to fall asleep to avoid talking to people. Passengers signal their desire for privacy through individualized activities. However, such technologies can also be used to create community through the sharing of resources in the otherwise limiting train space. Material restrictions become social resources. A guy on the Crescent offered to give me his copy of Peter Hoeg’s Borderliners that he had finished. I had picked up two dated copies of the New Yorker at the Denver train station. Such transactions are unlikely at a bus station or an airport. Playing cards was a widespread activity on the train and I made this observation to a fellow passenger. She replied that this was a banal observation – “This is what adults do for fun at home!” Her invocation of “home” affirmed my belief that this was a domesticated space. A woman and I bonded as she profusely thanked me for letting her use my phone charger. She said that I “connected her back to music.” Children used their Nintendo DSi consoles to play with other kids, rather than isolating themselves through such technologies. An informant, Payton, anticipated that the train ride would be boring. He was planning on texting friends from his cell phone all night. He was prepared to retreat into his being
tethered to his mobile technology and got nervous each time he lost signal as we traveled through the deserts of New Mexico. However, he admitted to me as I left that he had had fun hanging out with me, but was anticipating the ride to be boring again. He was open to meeting people, but seemed to assume that he would not. The cell phone is also a to get emotional support from the world off the train. The bathrooms in my car became extremely clogged and were closed during the first night of a trip on Empire Builder. My car attendant, upset by this development, called her husband at home for emotional support. He told her that she just needed to do the best that she could do.

Not everyone was looking to participate in such an open community. Amish people were plentiful on many of my train trips. They attracted much curiosity. A Frenchman asked me who all the “dressed-up people” on the train were. Despite the Amish community’s restrictions on the use of technology, they must see the train as a respectable space where they can replicate home life. They too played card games, though, with Rook cards. They rarely talked to non-Amish passengers and a car attendant on the Coast Starlight was impressed that I had a conversation with two of them. These two had approached me to make sure they could have the seats in the sightseer lounge next to me. They did not want to miss the view of the Cascades. They continued to talk to me about their travel plans, which included Glacier National Park and Redding, CA. A Trails & Rails guide told me that the Amish have a European sense of vacation – often spending a few weeks over the summer traveling on train to visit other communities or national parks. Another non-Amish woman said she had loaned her phone to them once as they can use phones in the event of an emergency. The Amish, therefore, also drew from the resources of the train, though, perhaps not with
the intention to further a relationship. Their relationship to strangers, like the first
two women travelers, was engagement with respectable distance.

**Suspension and Transposition of Everyday Rules**

An elderly Latina woman on the *Texas Eagle* train described the train as a social equalizer.

“People of all races unite here [on the train], but out there [off the train] they would not,” she mused. “In the streets, we might ignore and not look at each other.” To illustrate, she recounted an anecdote involving her grandsons. Two years ago, five of her grandsons were traveling from Chicago to San Antonio on a train that derailed. Her grandsons helped old couples off and across fields from the rail tracks to a road where an emergency bus was set to meet the passengers. The older passengers clung to her Latino grandsons. As our conversation came to an end, she remarked: “I’m glad you have time to talk to old people.” Her reference to our conversation implicitly characterized the train as a place where individuals interacted across boundaries of age as well as race. Her remark took me by surprise and I thanked her for her time. She was right – I was hard-pressed to imagine another public space that would have been as conducive to a casual conversation between the two of us. Both her story and her indexical comment suggest that the train is particularly contributes to such boundary crossings. She invokes the train as a moral community. The train invokes a neighborly responsibility. She herself had found a new companion on this train trip, a Puerto Rican woman who approached her at the San Antonio station in mild anxiety, never having traveled alone.
However, there were also efforts on the train to mark respectable from unruly (often racialized) behavior that suggests the limits of any notions of the train as a space for social cross-overs. The train is a break from structure, but also an extension of it. Tim Cresswell (1996) notes that space is often used to control people and things. He argues that the reaction to “transgressive acts” by marginal groups depends on the place where the act occurred. There are still limits on the train despite my previous insistence on it being a liminal place. Staff had varying views of how spaces should be used. Josh (who I introduced in Chapter One) was awakened by an attendant while he napped in the observation car during daytime. The car was crowded and the attendant reprimanded Josh for sleeping. “The observation car is for sightseeing only.” In this instance, the “correct” use of the car is specified and invalidates other purposes. Josh was pissed because it had been the first time that he had been able to fall asleep on the train.

A fight broke out one previous night on the California Zephyr shortly after I met Josh. An older white man at a different table turned around to a group of three Latino kids and told them that they needed to shut up and leave the observation car. He appeared to be in a paroxysm of anger. His face boiled up and he accused the kids of having been a loud nuisance for the entirety of the night. The presumably drunk white male had been playing cards with another man and two kids for a few hours. Neither party had been making much noise. The man continued shouting, loudly marking the Latino kids as the unruly ones who behavior violated the mood and the acceptable volume level in the car. Their mother was summoned and the white man yelled at her too. Kathleen Stewart in Ordinary Affects includes an anecdote about the surging affects in a café upon the entry of two mangled bikers. She writes, “It’s as if the singularity of an event shakes things up…As if everyone was just waiting for something like this to
happen. A ‘we’ of sorts opens in the room, charging the social with lines of potential” (2007: 11). The altercation on the train provoked a similar polarization. Josh yelled at the older man. The older man threatened to have the train stopped right then to duel Josh. It was the middle of the night and we were in the middle of a Nevada desert. I was roused in anger as I intuitively felt a racial solidarity with the kids. I yelled at the other man at the perpetrator’s table. I questioned the example that they were setting for their children. It turned out that the two men were unrelated and both kids were sons of the other man.

The bullying white man was escorted off the train...the next afternoon. He apparently had a heart attack or something. Josh and I saw it as a redemptive and karmic moment. We said “he had it coming.” It must have been the result of letting his blood boil the previous night. The bullying white man was calm in the morning, however. He was apparently a Hollywood make-up artist. He spent all morning painting kid’s faces and attracting much attention in the sightseer car. Josh and I were disgusted, but intrigued by him. Alphonso Lingis in Dangerous Emotions: “Yet we are also drawn to people who are not exemplary, who not illustrate good sense and responsibility, who are temperamental as stallions…” (2000: 55). We were in awe. I think he survived whatever medical issue afflicted him on the California Zephyr. I think I saw him a few weeks later on the City of New Orleans train. His potential reappearance was too absurd to fathom. Stewart ends her piece on the café by saying: “The chance event might add a layer of conflict or daydream to things...And the habit of watching for something to happen will grow” (2007: 12).
Conclusion

The train space is experienced in a multiplicity of tensions such as private/public and home/away. It is sometimes experienced as places where norms regulating are suspended, while at other time it is experienced as an extension of everyday spaces. The “betwixt and between” nature of the trip potentially allows passengers to transgress implicit barriers that govern public life. Trains allow for communication with strangers to develop into friendships. These friendships can often be quite intimate – even leading to experiences of spontaneous communitas. The train is comparable to ships and hotels. They are sites of mobility that are dwelled in. They are transition sites one occupies on the way to going somewhere else as well as environments of consumption in themselves. They are also among the first sites of public domesticity – spaces shaped to attract middle-class women by evoking the atmosphere of the home. The domesticating of the space entails the desire to construct it as a neighborhood where members share resources. It is also experienced as a space where one can withdraw into the self or into one’s in-group, using old and new media as methods of disengagement. Individuals manage physical proximity and social distance through a variety of tactics, constructing both community and privacy.
Conclusion

“So what conclusions have you drawn?” I was routinely asked this question during and after my fieldwork on American trains. The question seemed to be infused with expectations that I would either approve or disapprove of industry or perhaps arrive at suggestions for the future. It was a difficult question for me to answer. Mildred, a bar car attendant, was optimistic about the future of Amtrak. There was hope because of increased sources of funding and waves of new hiring. She cited environmental concerns and safety issues as to reasons why Amtrak would see growth. The issue of the environment appears in much of Amtrak’s recent advertisements. They compare the lower energy use of trains to that of automobiles and airplanes. On April 7th, 2011, Amtrak posted a press release to celebrate March 2011 as the seventeenth consecutive month of year-to-year ridership increase. The 2011 fiscal year (October 2010 to March 2011) has shown growth of almost six percent over the same period last year. Overall, ridership has increased thirty-six percent since 2000. Amtrak attributes the increase due to rising gasoline prices, effectual marketing, Wi-Fi access and general increased appeal of the train. Many passengers I met were first time riders and seemed enthusiastic about choosing the train again.

A common topic of conversation on the train was to compare it to the other primary modes of public transportation – bus and airplane. The bus (colloquially

---

Greyhound) was described as attracting a “creepy” and “dirty” clientele. The bus, unlike the railroad, would not be as conducive to conversation due to these conceptions of its users. The airplane was regarded an unattractive option due to its increasingly invasive security measures. One woman, Sharon, described the airport as a hostile environment where everyone is treated as a criminal, though, she also likened the boarding process on Amtrak to herding cattle. Security on the train or at train stations was barely existent. The only seeming sign of Amtrak security were policemen and dogs stationed by the boarding area at Chicago’s Union Station. Even demands to see identification were rare. The most common reason for traveling on Amtrak was that it was a cheaper option in many areas of the country in comparison to the plane. One passenger traveling from Albuquerque, NM to Los Angeles, CA claimed that the train was cheaper than bus by thirty dollars and cheaper than plane by fifteen dollars.\(^\text{19}\) His decision was unlikely to have been motivated by these modest differentials, but this example highlights the likelihood that the train was a significantly cheaper option in many areas. The train was also viewed as a better mode of travel because it offered aesthetically pleasing views.

The question about conclusions was difficult to answer because they presupposed my research was market-based, designed to evaluate the service Amtrak provides. My ethnography is a descriptive and prescriptive project on the way travelers interacted with the train. I also rode the railroad in the summer during Amtrak’s peak season. Mildred noted that the train is livelier in the summer because there were more kids traveling. “It is gloomier in the winter,” she added. Every train ride I took was also different from the previous one. In the third chapter, I described a party that occurred

\(^{19}\) On April 7\(^{\text{th}},\) 2011, I used online ticketing services to compare these three modes of travel for a “potential trip” to Albuquerque to Los Angeles on April 14\(^{\text{th}},\) 2011. The cheapest option for a one-way flight was $98.90. The “Web Only Fare” for Greyhound was $89.76, but a “Standard Fare” of $102 was also listed. The Amtrak fare was $81.
on the Coast Starlight on the Fourth of July. That ride had been conducive to party conditions due to the number of restless young passengers, as well as the fireworks that were visible from the train. I took the Coast Starlight exactly a week later and found the train to be emptier and quieter than the previous trip. The train has the potential to encourage passengers to organize in unexpected ways, by providing multiple cars to “hang out” and heavy advertising for liquor that was available for purchase in the snack car until it closed at eleven p.m.

I observe the train as a site of potentialities rather than a site with fixed, definitive characteristics. It is a site with the potential to allow a public to form. It is a site where local knowledge can be disseminated and stories can be shared. The train is a liminal site where the pressures of everyday life can be relaxed, where people can step out of their structured roles, meet people they might not otherwise meet, and feel licensed to engage in activities they would be unable to do normally. Such activities for some passengers included the indulging in alcohol during the day and into the night. Other passengers on the train were surprised, but ultimately unfazed by the amount of alcohol they bought and consumed on the train. One passenger, Josh, had me help him calculate the receipts for liquor and we concluded that he had already spent over a hundred dollars in about three days time.

It is a site that negotiates the divide between public and private. It offers the comfort of a domestic setting with a family friendly atmosphere, where one can spend “quality time“ with family members. It can be forced “hang out” time. One Latina mother said she would be able to spend hours and days with her daughter, which she normally could not do. It would also leave her daughter with memories. At the same time she also qualified the “domesticity of train travel by comparing the sometimes less
than ideal conditions on the train to “camping.” She jokingly said that Latino people stay in their houses once they purchase homes, but white people are obsessed with leaving their houses and camping. Her young daughter piped in to say that this was not camping and that she had been camping with her father before. “This is a train,” she said. It was a site that allowed people to be privately tethered to their technology and do work or play solitaire on their computers. But it was also a place where technology, which is often accused of promoting social isolation, could be used to create social bonding. The Latina mother asked if I wanted to watch a film with her on her portable DVD player. Young kids could be seen competing against each other on their portable, video game consoles. I found out the champions of the 2010 World Cup during dinner with a young college aged student and an older couple. The couple had bet each other on which team would win. The other young student took out his Blackberry to ascertain that the wife had correctly chosen Spain. Yet, it is also about escaping the worries that accompany everyday life at home. It is a space where time can be felt as being “slowed.” A long train ride is a respite from the pressures of domestic responsibilities, a protracted interval for spending time on oneself, in relaxation and contemplation.

It is a site where people seemed genuinely interested in helping strangers and where the pleasures of both giving and receiving hospitality can be enjoyed. Passengers offered each other rides to destinations after the train pulled into the station. A woman from Virginia offered me fresh mint that she was carrying from her brother’s house in Alabama. Josh, who had already spent over a hundred dollars on alcohol, decided to buy me a bottle of wine before we departed. I gave many cigarettes to others and was also teasingly chastised by a woman I was seated next to about the dangers of smoking. A woman from Oklahoma promised to “watch my back” as I attempted to learn and play a
game of Spades with more experienced passengers. A French man insisted on paying for most of our rounds of beer despite our limited ability to interact with each other. I do not know French and his English was limited. I simply could not argue with him. Sharon said that the train had a neighborhood feel to it at times.

The train is a site where trust and intimacy can arise. It is a site of intersections and crossings. Relationships that began on the train were not simply restricted to that time-space. Sharon had the contact information of many friends she has made on the train. She wondered what it would be like to have a “train party” and assemble all those friends she had met in one room. She wondered who would get along with whom. She added that many people she met took pictures of her, so that they could show their families back home. The intimacy that grew on the train sometimes carried over beyond the ride and I spent hours during layovers with passengers. In chapter one, I explored how the friendship between Tristan and I that seemed to strengthen at our layover in Sacramento. Likewise, Annabelle who had reached her destination decided to kill a few hours with me and have lunch at the famed food carts in Portland. The train time-space allowed for an atmosphere of human bonding unparalleled in other public spaces. A woman confided her woes to me in a single conversation during a cigarette stop about a string of deaths that occurred in her family within the past few months.

The train was frustrating in many due to delays, fights aboard the train and bureaucratic difficulties in Amtrak. Despite these annoyances, the railroad seemed to have an important function as a public where interaction and sharing amongst strangers was a fundamental aspect of the social flows and everyday routines within the time-space. The slowing down of time along with the multitude of different cars on the train created for conditions amenable to sociability and relaxation. The train experience is
distinct as a mode of transport and ostensibly public space in its potentiality for passengers to become more than *strangers on a train*.
Bibliography


