

Engines of Culture:
Learning from the Unique Public Realm of the Long Distance Train

by

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B.A., Science in Society
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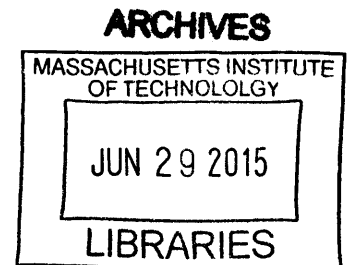
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF URBAN STUDIES AND PLANNING
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER IN CITY PLANNING

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 2015



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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
on May 21, 2015 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master in City Planning

ABSTRACT

The Long Distance American Train is a unique, meaningful, and somewhat mysterious site. These ephemeral, mobile societies exhibit remarkable qualities, including intensive interactions with strangers, conviviality amongst diverse groups, imagination and reflection, and immersion in the American landscape. I conducted participant observation research while riding seven long distance (over 700 mile) trains in December 2014- January 2015 to discover how, why and for whom long distance train travel is unique and meaningful, and whether there were lessons that could be learned regarding how to design and manage the train and non-train public spaces. In addition to my ethnographic research, I analyzed the changing symbolism of the train. My research indicates that the long distance train exhibits qualities similar to Foucault's concepts of *heterotopia*, and that though it is in many ways private and limited, it also deserves consideration a unique, national public space. The train is also an avatar of modernity, and was crucial in enacting and making possible the American social and spatial landscape inherited from the late 19th century. It is thus an important place to reflect on these conditions and imagine a new path.

I suggest that train is able to provide these unique experiences because it exhibits eight spatio-temporal qualities: Functionality, Accessibility, Visual Connection to Landscape, Human-Scale Design, Grounded Placelessness, (De)Regulation, Duration, and Autonomy. Amtrak can build upon its unique platform by improving the train through more fully realizing these conditions. Abstracted, these principles can also be applied to other, non-train public spaces. In comparing the partially successful public realm of the train to status quo of public space design in the United States, I unearth several additional principles that demand rethinking. Finally, I suggest that Amtrak and the U.S. Government can better take advantage of this underutilized platform by enacting a series of changes to great benefit of many passengers.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Before beginning her master's program in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Danya worked for seven years at Friends of the High Line in New York City, where she was the founding Director of Public Programs, Education, and Community Engagement. As a result of her leadership, the Public Programs Department now runs over 450 yearly programs and activities for all ages, which seek to build more equitable and vibrant communities supporting by the High Line. She has spoken publicly about the High Line's programming, community engagement, and equity work at the Parsons the New School for Design, the Santa Cruz Museum of Arts & History, the University of Valencia (Spain), the New York Public Library, and elsewhere. She is publishing an article about community engagement, equity, and the High Line for the forthcoming edited volume *Deconstructing the High Line*, editors Christoph Lindner and Brian Rosa, which is expected to be published in Spring 2016. She was part of the team of advisors behind the Presidio Exchange project, a proposal by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy to develop an open-platform arts and culture center in the Presidio of San Francisco.

At MIT, Danya has focused on urban theory and design, community economic development and finance, and U.S. social policy. She held the position of student council Co-President, and received a departmental BEMIS grant to develop a new course and symposium with Professor Ceasar McDowell entitled "Planners as Democratic Leaders." She has also held positions with PolicyLink, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, and MIT Co Lab.



The author aboard the California Zephyr. Source: Ben Fash.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee, whose own work I so greatly admire: to Brent Ryan, who I knew would support a creative idea and encourage it along with rigor and intelligence. Thank you to Daniel Campo and Larry Vale for your support, open minds, and helpful comments.

Thank you to Ceasar McDowell, whose support for effective and visionary action in the public realm and ability to guide students to the important and challenging things in life endlessly enriches this department.

Thank you to my family: to my mother, whose unending curiosity about, empathy for, and intuition about others inspires and encourages me to continue working in the public realm. To my father, who taught me to be an explorer of the world, both environmentally and intellectually. To my sister, brother, and sister-in-law, for keeping me in check and sending me coffee and chocolate. To Tom, whose support and generosity I admire and appreciate. To Mary, whose creativity is an unending source of inspiration.

Thank you to Ben, whose curiosity, imagination, and adventurousness meant that he already knew what was special about the long distance train when he introduced me to it. Thank you for making this project possible and for being my partner in crime.

Thank you to my DUSP family: to Kara, Lilly, Andrew, Leo, Karuna, and Callie for supporting me through this whirlwind with love and intelligence.

Thank you also to my DUSP family of generations past: to Katie, Jonah, Jess, Julie, Andy, Nene, and John, who helped me to see life beyond New York City and without whom I never would have made it to and through DUSP.

Thank you to my other family: Sonya, Amy, Sanaya, Shannon, Kate and Caitlin, whose wisdom, irreverence, and strength is an unending source of my own.

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PREFACE

I became interested in the long-distance train as a public space after taking the California Zephyr, which runs from Chicago to San Francisco in 2013. On that journey, I met strangers, had time to reflect, read, and draw—I experience a kind of break in normal thinking, feeling, and interacting with others that I found strange, exciting, and wonderful, and observed others feeling the same way. I was struck by how unusual the experience was, both personally and socially. There are so few places where strangers interact in such a respectful and convivial way; and where you can be at peace like one can be on the train - to look out at the scenery, people watch, and reflect.

My original ride on the California Zephyr interested me particularly in the context of my previous work at the High Line park in New York City. I began working there in 2007, at which point the much-anticipated park was still under construction. The park now attracts over four million visitors per year, at least half of who are visitors to the city, and has generated an increase in over 100% in the property values around the park¹. While it started as a project for neighborhood residents and by neighborhood residents, it quickly became an international symbol—as an innovative adaptive reuse for the creation of new public space, but also for gentrification and generation of capital in the tourism and real estate sectors. I became focused on how to regain some of the original mission of the park as a space for neighbors to meet. In partnership with residents and local groups, I began initiating new kinds of cultural activities based on what I observed and heard. As time went on I became increasingly focused on understanding how different groups were using or not using the space, especially with regards to race, class, gender identity, and age. We wanted the park to live up to its potential, which we saw as a linear connector of people, a much-needed space of bringing diverse groups together. Through experimentation and a deeply collaborative process, I spearheaded the development of a series of programs, including concerts (salsa and step), teen employment programs, children's art-making, and more. The goal was always to help people to utilize the space as a platform for cultural development (individual, collective, and across difference), but the more I worked on this the more perplexed I became about the complex nature of how and why specific kinds of experiences and interactions happen in what kinds of public space. I also began to question whether the existence of a new public space could help people connect across difference when the source of the inequity was so clearly related to conditions beyond the scope of what a park could fix. I wanted to better understand the relationship between the political economy of cities and the design of public spaces.

So when I took the long-distance train and observed so many of the things that I wanted to help to happen on the High Line and that so many planners and designers claim to have happen in their spaces, I wanted to understand why they were happening and whether there were any lessons that might be applied elsewhere. What I discovered was much more complex than I imagined.

On May 12, 2015, an Amtrak train traveling through Philadelphia derailed, killing eight people and injuring dozens more. This sad event brought Amtrak into the news, highlighting for a wider audience many of the dynamics discussed in this thesis. Industry experts are underscoring the low level of spending on rail infrastructure in the United States (in 2011, \$35 per person as compared to \$100 per person in Japan and across the European Union). This is to blame for America's poor safety records; by comparison, fatality rates in the United States are twice as high as in Europe.²

Much of the dialogue surrounding advocacy for passenger rail takes a nostalgic tone, urging us to think back to the good old days of the 1920's, when the train network served much more of America. But as historian Richard White notes, America has always had a "love-hate relationship" with its train network.³ We are in need of a deeper reckoning with what the train means for our society-- and as I aim to show here, there's much more than engineering and history involved. This conversation concerns deep questions about what it means to "live collectively"⁴: about equity, empathy, culture, and mobility, both in terms of rail service as well as the experience, and therefore the design and management involved in riding a train in 2015 America. As Adam Gopnik wrote, "Trains take us places together. Every time you ride one, you look outside, you look inside, and you can't help but think about the private and the public in a new way... A train is a small society, headed somewhere more or less together, with a common view and a singular destination."⁵

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. Film still from *In Transit*, Directors Maysles, True, Usui, Walker, and Wu. Source: Intransitfilm.com

Most of us have ridden a train—the subway, commuter rail, or as a tourist in another country. Accordingly, most of us also have train stories. The train is a physical and cognitive vehicle for getting places, seeing things, and generating memories. It is also a vehicle for meaning. Stories about journeys connect individuals at specific times and places moving through particular landscapes, often imbued with intense emotions, unusual experiences, or other meaningful occurrences.

This project explores the unique public realm of contemporary American long distance trains—why and how it came to be this way, its underlying dynamics, and what we can do to build on this special condition. My research shows that the long distance train network is an underappreciated and underutilized resource that provides much-needed opportunities for understanding, investigating, and challenging the contemporary state of America as well as the official American state. By seeing the train as a kind of mobile urban space, or *train space*, we can build on the unique conditions that the train creates to great benefit.

Americans are in dire need of the things the train provides. Our cities are divided by race, class, and culture¹; spaces of public benefit are increasingly privatized and policed². While mobile technology provides a way to connect virtually, our environments and habits still make it too easy to spend too much time alone³. Given the alienating and divided landscapes most of us inhabit, places of face-to-face interactions with strangers, especially who come from other racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds and hail from other regions of the country are few and far between.

The train in many ways exemplifies what a great national public space can be in 2015, but it also historically helped to create and still embodies many of the conditions that perhaps actually create the need for them. Building the train network relies on specific political and economic conditions (the nation-state, regional inequalities, classes of passengers, and so forth) that benefit people unevenly. And while the train can help people connect, it also helps people move farther away from each other. As Geographer George Revill writes, “the train is bound up in the cultural geography of modernity in its embodiment of connection, isolation, proximity, distance, speed, flow, stasis, presence, absence, loss, and excess.”⁴ The train is thus a kind of an avatar of modernity: it co-created many of the conditions we label as “modern,” in both positive and negative ways. It is an alternate universe where social rules begin to break down and are recreated in unusual and interesting ways. It is, perhaps ironically, a unique and important national public space.

I will unearth some of these special qualities by analyzing what I experienced on the train with two concepts: heterotopia and public space. Heterotopia, a concept most elaborated by French philosopher Michel Foucault in a 1967 lecture *Of Other Spaces*, attempts to describe spaces that are neither here nor there: they are “placeless places,” where traditional social rules break down and are

reconfigured in transgressive, imaginative, and adventurous ways. Heterotopias as Foucault writes them are both universal (in that they exist in every culture over time) and specific (in that they allow transgressions based on notions of acceptability that change based on context). They are places that change the experience of time, either through archiving it (museums, libraries) or trying to buck its order (festivals, fairgrounds). They are places of adventure (ships, cinemas), worship (religious sites, sacred places), disability (rest homes, psychiatric hospitals), and taboo activity (honeymoon hotels, brothels). Foucault described the ways in which spaces embody meaning and metaphor for communities and cultures through providing space to re-envision the rules.⁵ I fully describe the ways in which the train is a heterotopic in Chapter Four.

The train should also be considered a site that is part of the public realm. The train, is of course, not public in the dominant way ‘public space’ is conceived; Amtrak is a publicly controlled private corporation, passengers are required to purchase tickets in order to board, and the space is highly regulated and policed. However, scholars, activists, and everyday users of cities increasingly note that traditional notions of public and private do not accurately describe the continuum of spaces we interact with.⁶ For example, many theorists include coffee shops, bars, and other spaces of private enterprises as pseudo-public spaces, or “third spaces,” noting that these are places where much-needed relaxing and socializing takes place in an increasingly privatized America.⁷ “Official” or “formal” public spaces like parks and sidewalks, which are imagined to be managed solely public entities, are in practice less and less so with the proliferation of privately owned public spaces, security cameras, private security forces, and more. Even parks and other seemingly bucolic public spaces are not equally as free for everyone: depending on one’s identity and the way that identity may be more or less free, stigmatized, policed, and otherwise positioned with regards to the state and contemporary societal rules, one may not be free to do what one wishes in public.⁸

Exploring the train as public space thus relies on moving away from strict delineations of public versus private that are based on who *owns* the space (government, private enterprise) and its *economic function* (commercial, residential) and towards an understanding of how it is used, conceived, and negotiated.⁹ Dutch urban planners and sociologists Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp suggest that we utilize the term public domain in acknowledgement that meaningful cultural sites extend beyond those that are officially public.¹⁰

A stronger focus on spatial practice (the ways that actors actually use a space, as opposed to its form, governance, or designers’ and managers’ intent) is also helpful in understanding why the train may be considered a site within the public realm.¹¹ The train’s temporary inhabitants often use the space creatively. I observed that the train can be a kind of “loose space”: space that affords a

variety of creative uses and meanings; that promotes possibility, diversity, and some degree of disorder.¹² Based on my observations, the train can also be thought of as a commons. By the commons, I mean shared resources (in this case, spaces) that allow and support all individuals and groups to be able to do the things they need to do to not only meet the basic needs of human life but to flourish.

Seeing the train as public realm demands that we move beyond utopian notions for public spaces that can ignore, pause, or end broad structural inequalities and implicit bias. Imagining that great public spaces can create equality actually descends from a liberal, masculinist notion that ignores real conflicts and denies power imbalances: it universalizes specific persons' behavior and demands that all others behave in the same way to participate. As Feminist theorist Nancy Fraser writes:

It [official public space] was also built by a bourgeoisie attempting to represent its own interests as universal interests, in opposition to others in society, particularly women and the working class, from *below*. The ideal of bracketing or ignoring differences in status was not only never achieved, but the ideal itself actually *contributes* to exclusion — 'open to everyone' effectively meant 'open to everyone like us' as liberal norms regarding participation were universalized.¹³

An alternate understanding of the public realm, which I observed being enacted on the train, is to acknowledge the geneology of privilege that constructed ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality, region, and ability and thus positions us differently with regards to resources and power. Seeing this, we are able to understand that places where people come together will always involve conflict, confrontation, and negotiations between those positioned in dominant versus marginal orientations.¹⁴

My study indicates that the train's heterotopic and public qualities benefit a wide diversity of people in many different ways. But it also shows that those managing the train could utilize this ideological reframing to make improvements that might bring it closer to an excellent public realm site. Amtrak, the United States Congress, state governments, and other stakeholders can build on these special qualities relatively quickly and with already existing physical and political infrastructure. Most conversations around improving national or regional public transit revolve around High Speed Rail (HSR), a technology that has been implemented to great success in Japan, Spain, and many other countries, and should continue to expand in the United States. Alongside HSR, however, the passenger rail network could easily expand through the thousands of miles of track that is either underutilized or only used by freight. Doing so would require alternate political arrangements, which I will not fully explore here, but bring up important considerations regarding who and what is privileged

in the contemporary political economies of the built environment and transportation.

Additionally, seeing the space of the train as its own ephemeral urban society allows the train's stakeholders to apply contemporary tactics for enriching the urban environment from the ground up. Notions explored in the emerging fields of creative placemaking and tactical urbanism, for example, could be applied to the train in interesting, inventive, and enriching ways. I will explore a set of creative interventions more fully in Chapter Six.

Moreover, we can learn from the train's emergent and beneficial qualities to improve other sites in the public realm. The train, almost without trying to, provides many positive things that urban planners and designers try to create in new or redeveloped public spaces.

Throughout this project I will draw upon the ethnographic concept of *affordance*, which the psychologist John Gibson defines as the activities and meanings that a material or nonmaterial thing allows for because of its characteristics.¹⁵ My study shows that the train space affords certain kinds of behaviors due to its physical space, functionality as a network, and cultural genealogy. In part my study is an exercise to unearth qualities of a space that I found to be unique and special, but I suggest that a similar (and expanded) methodology could be used to uncover the affordances of other places in the public realm. Planners and designers too often are not given the time nor do they insist on a deep ethnographic research period.

Methodology

When I began my research, my questions were:

- How, why, and for whom is the spatial experience of long-distance train travel in the US unique and meaningful?
- How do we enhance and create more of these kinds of experiences in travel and in cities?
- What can we learn from the train in how to design non-train spaces?

I conducted a mixed-methods study to answer these questions, combining ethnographic, spatial-behavioral observation, and a cultural history analysis. My primary data comes from the seven long-distance train rides (which Amtrak defines as over 700 miles) I took over December – January 2014, which are described in detail in Chapter Three. While on the train, I recorded seven formal interviews and conducted over 45 unrecorded informal conversations. I also observed activity for several hours each day in the various train cars, often pretending to read so as not to seem obtrusive, and filled a notebook with ethnographic notes and observed spatial patterns. This portion of my study took cues from many observational studies conducted by public space advocates and urban planning

theorists, including William H. Whyte, Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl, and Kevin Lynch.

To analyze my interview and note data, I transcribed all interviews and notes and then qualitatively coded this material to unearth patterns. I processed these patterns by drafting them and then continuously refining through re-reading interviews and notes. In Chapter Four, I categorize these patterns and propose a set of humanistic qualities that the train space affords. I then propose a set of eight spatio-temporal conditions that may facilitate the humanistic qualities.

I also spoke with several Amtrak personnel, Amtrak writers-in-residence, and others who I thought would be relevant. Below is a list of phone interviews conducted.

- Three Amtrak officials
- Nelson Walker and Lynn True, Filmmakers, *In Transit*
- Jeff Stanley, Professor and Playwright; Amtrak Writer-in-Residence
- Korey Garibaldi, doctoral candidate in the Department of History at the University of Chicago; Amtrak Writer-in-Residence
- Mimi Sheller, Director, Center for Mobilities Research and Policy; Professor of Sociology, Drexel University
- Kyle Emge, Manager, Capital Programs & Operations at Massachusetts Department of Transportation
- Jim Miculka, Adjunct Professor and Susan Scott, Assistant Lecturer, Texas A&M University, National Coordinators, Amtrak – National Park Service Partnership Program

In addition to the collection and analysis of primary data, I also analyzed secondary studies and historical analyses of the train and the railroad network in America, which I primarily describe in Chapter Five, and has informed the entire project. Finally, I analyzed contemporary public space and public realm literature.

While my study resonates with many people, I recognize that not everyone will have the same experiences on trains. Sample bias is generally looked down upon because of the fear of upsetting an internal logic that allows claims to universality. I do not seek to claim a universality of these qualities or suggestions. However, my study did resonate with many people. I received significant excitement and encouragement about this project from peers, especially those whom have had similar experiences on the train. An article I published on *Next City* entitled “What Long-Distance Trains Teach Us About Public Space in America” article garnered over 10,000 unique pageviews, much more than the average viewership for their daily post articles (the series that this article was a part of).

A recent documentary titled *In Transit*, directed by the late Albert Maysles, Lynn True, Nelson Walker, David Usui, and Ben Wu, concerns similar observations about the train. In correspondence with one of the filmmakers, Lynn True, she shared with me that she also had Foucault's ideas about heterotopia in mind when she began making the film. In an interview with another one of the filmmakers, Nelson Walker, he shared that when Albert Maysles suggested that the train be the site of their film, he thought it was a nostalgic throwback. But on his first journey he was blown away. He found the train to be a "real space for encounters and engagement" and that the train was a kind of "liminal space—a suspended reality between origin and destination". He also (without my prompting, by answering open-ended questions) described the train as a place where people have time to reflect and zone out, and also time to engage with others by virtue of the enclosed and intimate space. He used the word "testimonial" to describe many of the conversations that he had with people—that the train is assumed to be an anonymous place where you can say whatever's on your mind or reveal very personal details without the same implications or repercussions you might assume having if you're speaking to friends, family, or even people you may run into again one day.¹⁷

A Note on Subjectivity

My study is admittedly subjective, and I aim to acknowledge my subjectivity here as opposed to making objective claims. In arguing that the long-distance train ride is a successful public space, it becomes important to ask "for whom?" I cannot argue that the train provides the benefits that I (and others I spoke to on my journey) experienced, because of my limitations as a researcher and single human being. Indeed, it is precisely because of the current ordering, valuing, and cultural connotations of contemporary America that I may be able to have the kinds of experiences that lead to my conclusions. I enjoy speaking to people, and have been described as outgoing. I am a white female, which makes it possible for me to appear non-intimidating and sweet in a way that others may have a hard time being. For example, in a recent conversation with MIT Associate Professor of Urban Planning and Politics J. Philip Thompson, he recounted that on his many train rides he felt uniquely "left alone," a refrain I heard used from several other African American men I spoke to. Phil went as far as to say that no one would sit next to him, so he always had the seat to himself. His father worked as a train car porter for decades during segregated times (it being the only reasonable job he could get, even though he held a graduate degree). The train was thus both positive and negative, but Phil remembers it very fondly and was able to ride the train everywhere because of his father's association. Thus, his experiences on the train are imbued with wholly different memories than mine, at least in part because of the way that race and gender has worked and continues to

work in America. In addition, it may have been easier for me to interview heterosexual men on my journey.

These are important considerations for any researcher seeking to somehow make claims about or designs to impact others' experiences.

A Note on Language

My thesis in part seeks to comment on the dynamics of how people from different walks of life interact in public, and the value of that interaction. I therefore choose to describe (particularly in Chapter Three) certain characteristics about the people I encounter on the train. When I describe a person's cultural background using "white," "black," or even the more specific term "African American," these are usually my interpretations of a person's cultural background. I thus distinguish between how a person "presents" (meaning how I interpret this part of their identity based on how they look) versus how they "identify" (which would have require me to ask, which I did not always do). I use the terms "white" "latino" and others knowing that they are oversimplifications-- these terms do not accurately describe the cultural diversity that each person embodies based on their geneology and cultural affiliation. But because they are the dominant way to describe ethnic categories in 2015, I use them in order to clarify certain dynamics that I sought to study here.

Document Overview

Chapter One outlines the frameworks of heterotopia and public space that I will use to analyze the train space and introduces the thesis study.

Chapter Two provides a brief history of the development and politics of Amtrak, and then outlines the particular long-distance routes that Amtrak runs as well as the kinds of cars typically found within them.

Chapter Three then accounts, in narrative form, what I saw on my train journeys in December-January 2014-5. I describe encounters with strangers, landscapes, and Amtrak staff as well as internal experiences and observed behaviors on the seven long distance journeys I took.

In Chapter Four I analyze what I saw and experienced through a spatio-temporal lens and in so doing develop a series of humanistic qualities of the train ride, both individual and social. I then further analyze these qualities to extrapolate eight spatio-temporal qualities that I hypothesize come together to afford the humanistic qualities I observed.

In Chapter Five, I explore some of these spatio-temporal qualities historically, through understanding the train's popular mythologies through time, namely train as modern, urban, liberator, and marginal.

Finally, Chapter Six suggests ways to improve the train's heterotopia and qualities as a public space by building on its eight spatio-temporal qualities. I also suggest that these eight conditions could be applied to other sites of public realm in cities to improve them. I end by sharing some ideas that may help the long-distance train better utilize its unique resources to generate new cultural experiences.

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CHAPTER 2: THE POLITICAL HISTORY AND DESIGN OF THE AMERICAN PASSENGER TRAIN

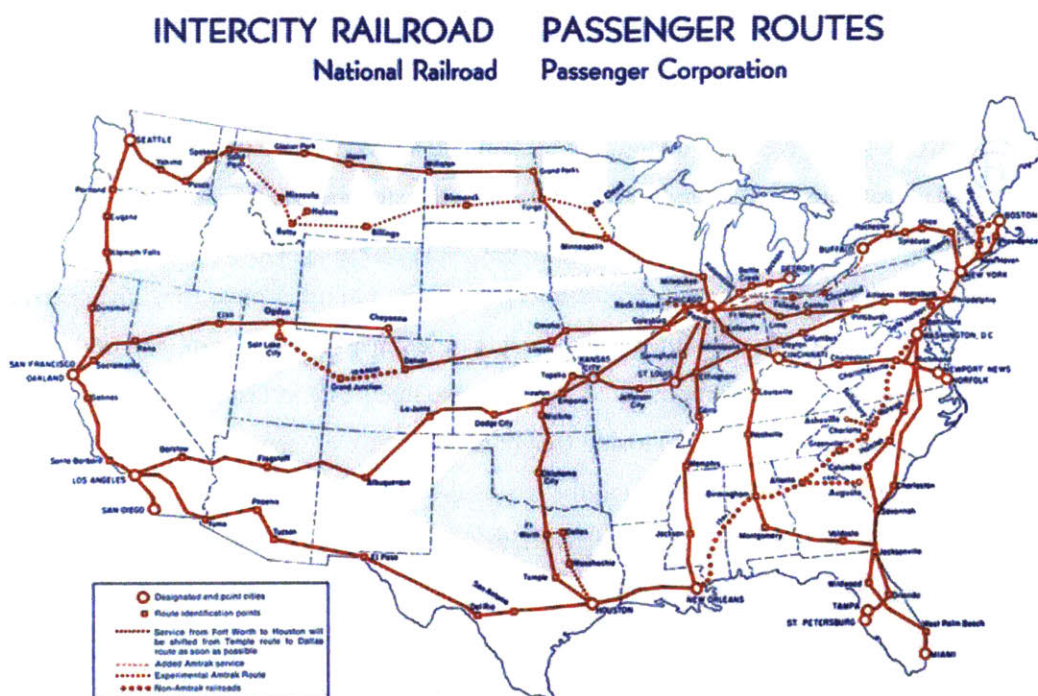


Figure 2. Amtrak's first map, 1971. Source: history.amtrak.com, courtesy Brian Roman.

Introduction

Here, I outline the contemporary politics of Amtrak, the only operator of America's intercity passenger train routes. As this project seeks to understand the dynamics taking place amongst passengers on the long distance routes, I provide a basic understanding of the operations, regulation, and management. In fact, I found that the unique experiences contained within the space of the long distance routes have a lot to do with the marginal status these routes occupy in the landscape of American transportation. That these routes were once a dominant form of intercity transit and have since fallen from grace adds another dimension to the passenger experience, which I explore in more depth in Chapter Five.

A Brief Political History of Amtrak

Amtrak, or the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, is a publicly controlled private corporation. It was formed by Congress in 1970 through the "Rail Passenger Service Act". Before Amtrak, the passenger rail system of the United States was operated by private operators. The height of passenger rail in the United States was in the 1920's, when 65,000 cars were in operation for the entire system. Until then, nearly all intercity travel in the United States happened by rail. By 1965, there were only 10,000 passenger cars in operation¹. Today, it is estimated that there are 2,000 Amtrak and commuter passenger rail cars in operation².

The causes for such a steep decline in passenger rail operation are myriad. The government began heavily investing in the National Highway System and air travel infrastructure, especially after World War II, in effect subsidizing competition that offered faster and more independent trips.³ The Interstate Commerce Commission, which has regulated rail companies since the 1880's, cracked down on private rail operators by heavily regulating speed limits and other measures. The speed of the train is a politically palatable measure to regulate, yet other measures like automatic braking are actually the technologies that are demonstrated to keep passengers safe in fast-moving trains.⁴ Rail companies were heavily taxed and began losing freight traffic and mail service as well.

Though the rationale behind nationalizing the passenger rail system is debated, John Stilgoe provides a one plausible reason through a largely political analysis. His 2001 book on American railroads, landscape, real estate and politics, *Train Time: Railroads and the Imminent Reshaping of the United States Landscape* outlines evidence showing that speculators and developers are quietly anticipating a rail re-birth, largely due to the growing American population and increasing automobile congestion. According to Stilgoe and his sources, Congress created Amtrak so that passenger rail could be kept under their thumb. Congress, acting under the influence of the trucking, airline, and highway lob-

bies, wanted to be able to ensure that just enough service existed along the Northeast Corridor so that the metropolises along it could continue to grow and not be overwhelmed by highway traffic, but not enough so that it would overtake airline or automobile as the main way Americans ship and travel. This justified putting the rail system under national control, and made possible a lack of focus on poorly providing for rural, non-northeastern states and regions. As Stilgoe writes, “Amtrak had to survive simply because regional commuter rail operations had become interstate in scale... Amtrak represented a simple, indeed elegant means of keeping railroad innovation under the control of a Congress controlled by road and airline industries—and by the military.”⁵ Simon Van Zuylen-Wood argues in the *National Journal* that Nixon intentionally created Amtrak as a for-profit corporation knowing that its financial structure was doomed to fail.⁶

Other scholars confirm Stilgoe’s narrative with less conspiratorial suspicions. Anthony Perl blames changing policy instruments and programs that were better suited for air and automobile, as well as short-sightedness of transportation analysts.⁷ A recent report by the Brookings Institution offers yet another interpretation. Authors Robert Puentes, Adie Tomer, and Joseph Kane cite changing national dynamics in a post-WWII America as a direct cause of the nationalization of passenger rail, specifically metropolitan decentralization, interstate highway construction, advances in aviation, and declining industrial production that sustained the private railroad companies (these companies provided both passenger and freight rail service in most cases).⁸ The legislation that created Amtrak also removed a previously enforced mandate that all freight railroad companies provide passenger service, and gave Amtrak the exclusive right to operate on freight rail lines. Since then, Amtrak has never been on firm ground financially or politically. Republican presidents have all tried to remove all funds from its budget with little success, and various oversight committees have proposed reforms to bring private operators back into the mix.

In a familiar-sounding story of partisan fighting, lack of long-term funding for infrastructure, and lobbyist-based corruption, Congress resists all changes and efforts to plan long-term, preferring to require Amtrak to argue for funding reauthorization year after year. The Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA) 2008 required states to contribute funds to support Amtrak, and has led to innovations that have spurred economic development in many states (North Carolina, Maine, and others), but also makes governance more difficult as there are more stakeholders. The reauthorization of the bill (now called the Passenger Rail Reform and Investment Act (PRRIA) was just passed in March 2015) was highly contested, and threatened to cut Amtrak’s funding entirely. The bill successfully cut Amtrak’s budget by 40%, citing as a justification its poor financial performance and in particular its food and beverage-related service losses.⁹ It was authorized at the level

of \$1.8 Billion per year for 5 years. The Federal Railroad Administration reports that \$5 Billion per year is needed to grow the system, and the National Association of Railroad Passengers identify over \$200 Billion in requested and needed capital upgrades across the entire system.¹⁰

Several other federal actions serve to incentivize and support automobile and airline industries over rail. It is difficult to size the level of support for airlines and highways because beyond direct funding, much of it was supported through tax-exempt bonding, tax-free treatment of highway and airport assets, etc.¹¹ Though more often the object of derision, national rail subsidies do not match subsidies to highway, trucking, and airline industries (Figures 1-3). This also is a reason for continued limitation of Amtrak train speeds to under 100 mph, though train cars are built to run up to 150 mph (long distance routes ran at this speed beginning in the 1940's and still do on some parts of Acela commuter route in the northeast¹²). Controlling train speeds incentivizes automobile and airline use. After Amtrak's creation in 1971, politicians promised that the change would not negatively impact travelers, but by the mid-1970's, "many state and local politicians complained to Congress that many voters lived in regions bereft of passenger train service".¹³

To appease these lawmakers and their voters, Congress devised the Essential Air Service (EAS) program in 1979, which subsidized the cost per passenger of airlines operating to small, rural airports to the tune of \$69 Million.¹⁴ Appropriations for 2015 are \$261 Million.¹⁵ But many of these flights are severely under-booked. More than 20 airports reported three passengers or fewer departing per flight in 2002.¹⁶ In comparison, it's not difficult to see how much more efficient it would be to run one long distance route that covers multiple journeys. And environmentally there is no contest between driving, flying, and taking the train. Measured in passenger miles per gallon, rail is between twice and four times more efficient than a car (depending on fuel economy) and more than four times as efficient as an airplane.¹⁷

While it isn't possible to say definitively that federal intercity transit funding for airports and highways caused passengers to fly and drive more, it is clear that these trends correlate. Many scholars suggest that federal funding for intercity passenger rail was essentially crowded out by funding and advocacy for airline and highways.¹⁸ Anthony Perl compares the national trends facing transportation policy analysts in the 1950s in America to that of Japan, Germany, and France. America, unlike Japan, focused on the values of speed and flexibility to focus on their transportation funding around (as opposed to equity, coverage, and stability).

Amtrak's long distance routes in particular are constantly under political fire. Usually they are criticized because they are the routes that routinely operate at a deficit.¹⁹ Commentators and writers who are mostly based on the east coast and in major, transit-served metropolises, may not be

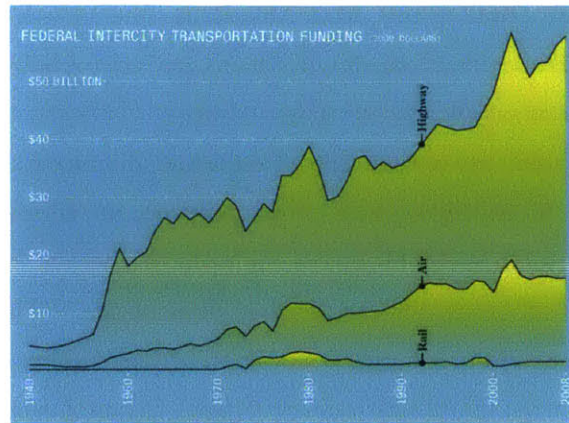


Figure 3. Federal Intercity Transit Funding, 1849 - 2008 Source: Van Alen Institute

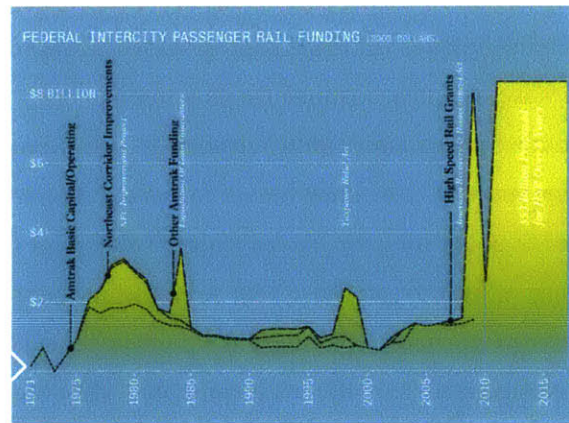


Figure 4. Federal Intercity Transit Funding, 1971 - 2015. Source: Van Alen Institute

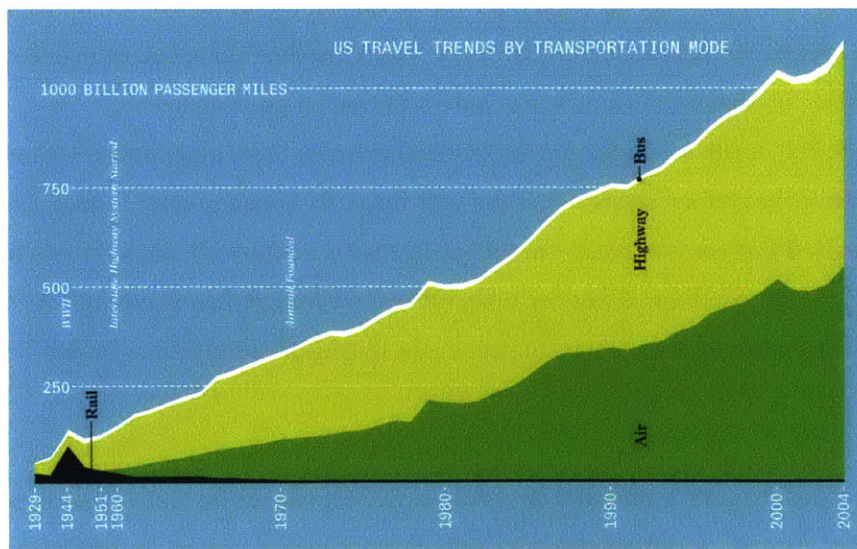


Figure 5. U.S. Travel Trends by Transportation Modes. Source: Van Alen Institute

aware of the deficit of transit options that many Americans contend with on a daily basis. Writers and journalists will often assume that long distance trains are “are for hobbyists, people with lots of time and tiny budgets, and people who are afraid of flying”.²⁰ Many people in Boston and New York City who I spoke to about my trip considered these long distance routes similarly-- as unnecessary. This assumption may be encouraged due to the prevalence of rail nostalgists called “rail fans”. Stilgoe notes that rail fans are “a group of almost entirely men who saw the demise of steam-powered railroading as the end of an era in which they had come of age.”²¹ This kind of appreciation is prevalent in *Trains Magazine* and the National Association of Railroad Passengers²². It is marked by the collection of rail ephemera: timetables, train car designs, technical details about the engineering of the rail system, and model trains. While this demographic and interest group is an interesting one, this study seeks to distinguish itself from this kind of fetishization of the past. This thesis is different from the nostalgic “rail fan” literature in that I seek to study and appreciate the contemporary condition of the train and make recommendations for its future

The misperception about where transportation subsidies go, and more generally a lack of understanding of infrastructure funding, is an impediment to gaining support for long distance and inter-city train service. In an ongoing study by Drexel University’s Center for Mobilities and Politics, researchers have found a huge split between those who see rail as necessary and those who see it as a dying form of transportation, even failing to consider the positive benefits of high speed rail.²³

Amtrak riders are, on average, middle-moderate income, and while the majority of riders are white this varies greatly by train. Nearly half of passengers on the City of New Orleans train are African American; nearly all passengers on the Empire Builder are white. Sunset limited passengers hold the lowest average household income by train, which matched anecdotal evidence shared with me by Amtrak staff on that train. Latinos are underrepresented on all routes.²⁴

Amtrak’s research details an under-appreciated reality about these long distance routes. For many Americans, Amtrak’s long distance service is the only inter-city transit option. In fact, Amtrak cites that for 23 states and 223 communities, Amtrak’s long distance routes are the inter-city transit option (besides driving).²⁵ This condition holds for over 70% of the long distance system.²⁶ As an Amtrak official shared with me, these routes are “complex, not well-understood micro-markets”.²⁷

Implications

The marginal, heterotopic experience so many people experience on long distance trains mirrors the marginal place Amtrak, and particularly its long distance routes, occupy in American transportation politics. Long distance train traffic continues to eke out a meager existence as a foil to justify

transportation between busier and more celebrated corridors along the east and west coasts. That these long distance routes continue to limp along without much support or recognition may also be what helps to provide a sense of liminality on the trains themselves, a key contributor to the unique humanistic qualities that I will detail later.²⁸

On Freight and Track-Sharing

As mentioned above, the legislation that created Amtrak prioritized the freight industry over passenger rail service. Amtrak only has control and ownership over the tracks in portions. Thus, Amtrak pays user fees to freight companies that own the tracks it runs on. This also accounts for many of the delays; while Amtrak theoretically has the right of way, freight companies frequently violate this rule.³⁰ The legislation concerning rights of way is complex, and is further complicated by a series of rulings from court cases brought over the course of the last four decades.

America's freight rail system is mighty, and growing. Though largely invisible save the occasional suburban crossing, it is currently a \$60 Billion industry, and moves more cargo than any other freight system in the world.³¹ The majority of this volume (69%) is run by result of the seven Class 1 railroad companies, which are so large as result of consolidation over time.³¹ Freight is expected to continue to increase— with burgeoning metropolitan areas and over-burdened highways, industries increasingly see freight as an efficient cargo system.³³ While largely out of the public eye, investors and speculators are quietly gaining interest in freight; the most famous recent investment being Warren Buffett's 2009 \$26.5 Billion investment in Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway.³⁴

On High Speed Rail

While Amtrak's service continues to be contentious, the Obama Administration brought renewed interest through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and subsequent funding for high speed rail . More cities and regions applied for this funding than anticipated. Its roll-out is hotly debated, of course, given the price tag, long lead time, and need for many high-speed trains to share track with existing Freight lines. This study will not delve deeply into the politics surrounding high speed rail in the United States, as there are many other technical and political studies that do so intensively. It is difficult to anticipate how its implementation might affect the public realm of long distance train travel, though it no doubt will. Japan's high-speed system, for example, feels much more like a commuter train than the long distance journeys I describe in Chapter Three. It is easy to imagine that the public realm of high speed rail would be very different than that of Amtrak.

The Decline of U.S. Passenger Rail (In Maps)

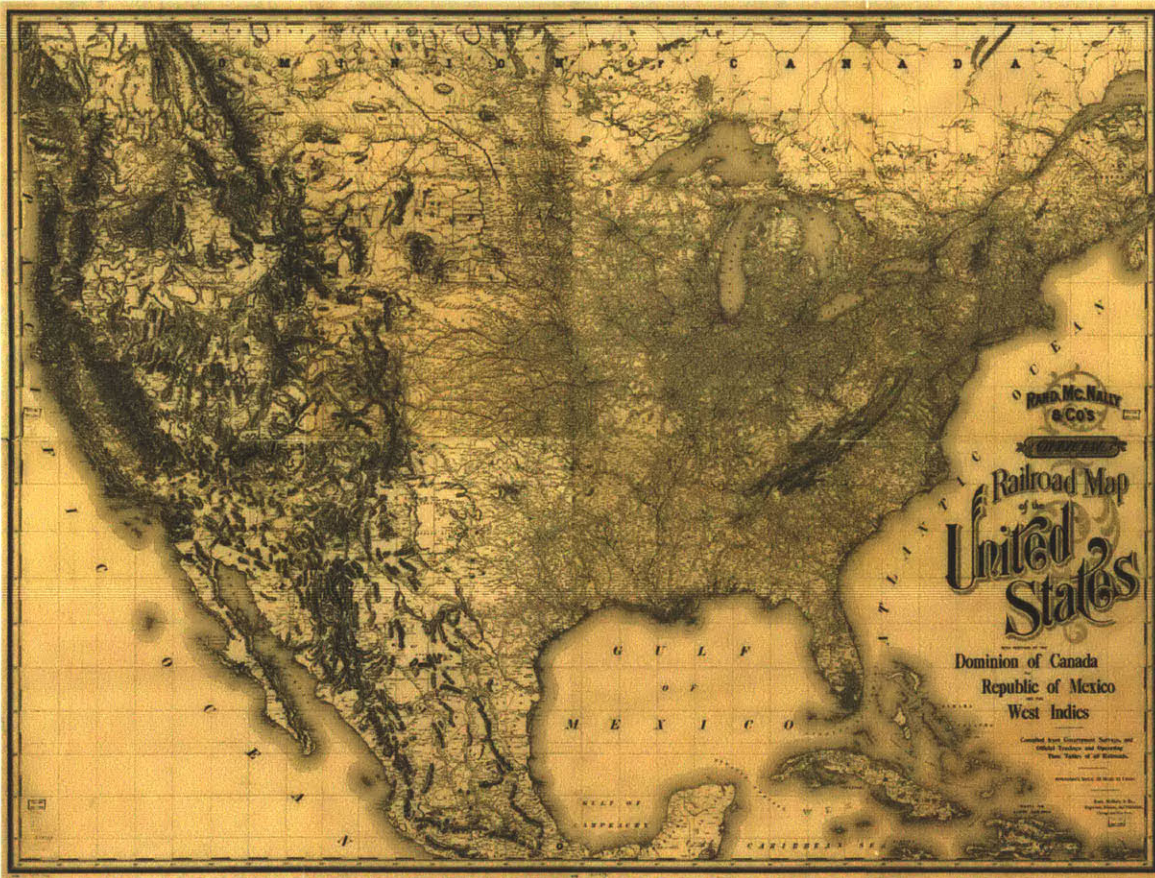


Figure 6. 1893 Railroad Service. Source: Library of Congress.

By 1850, the continental United States had 9,000 miles of track. By 1869, that number had grown to 70,000.



Figure 7. 1918 Passenger Rail Service. Source: <http://3.bp.blogspot.com>

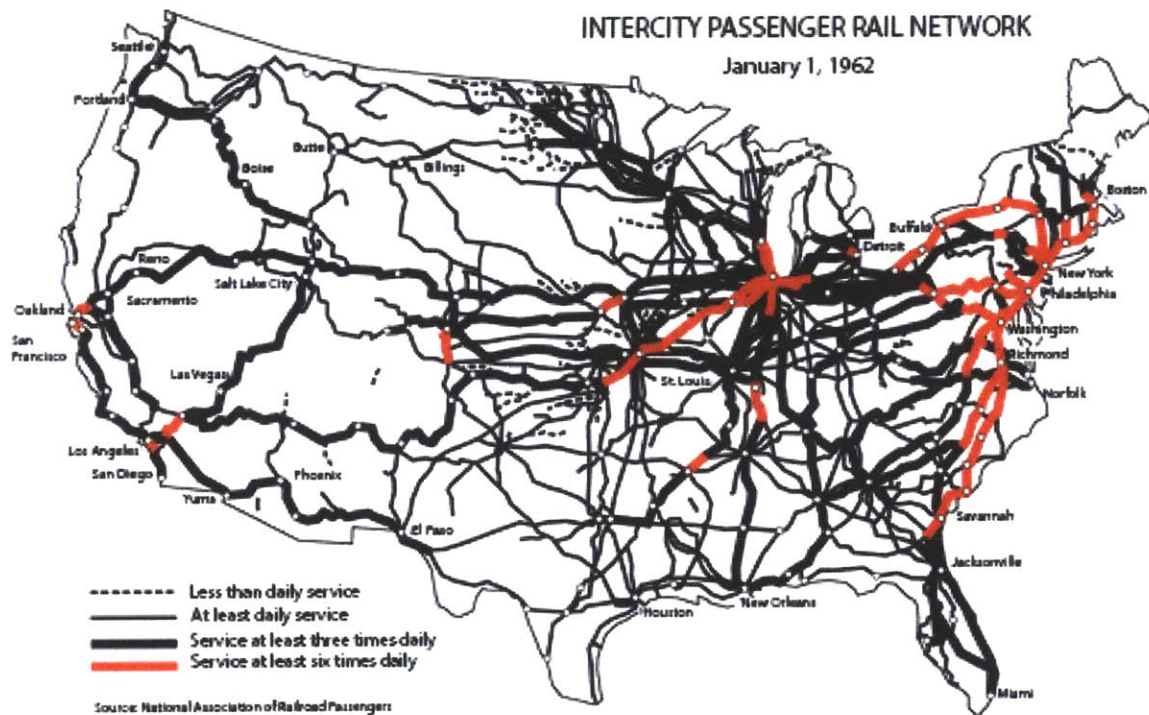


Figure 8. 1962 Passenger Rail Service. Source: National Association of Railway Passengers.

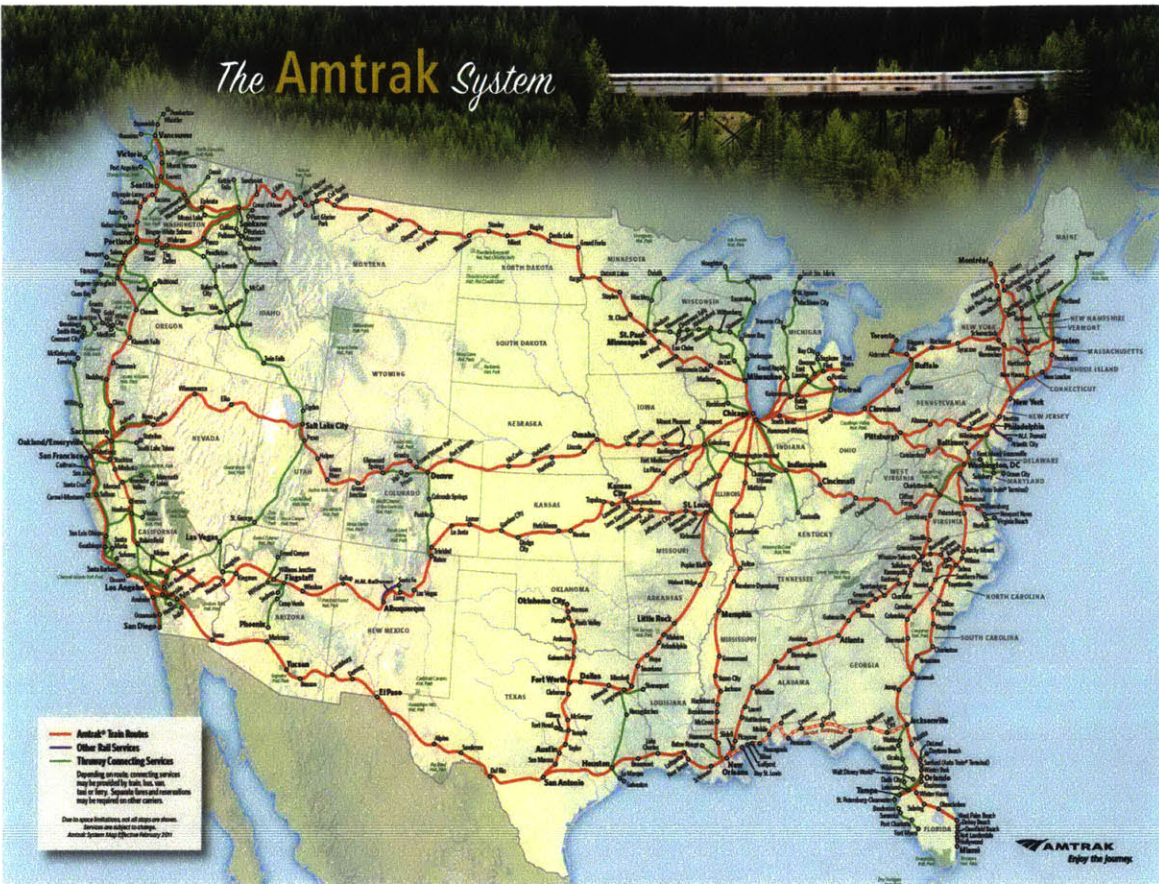


Figure 9. Current Amtrak service as of 2015. Source: Amtrak.

Amtrak's Long Distance Routes

The experience of a particular ride depends on the terrain and kinds of settlements it runs through, the kinds of people each train picks up and drops off along the way, and the spaces on the train that passengers experience. Thus the existing network forms an important backdrop for the experiences I will detail in the next chapter.

Amtrak operates 15 long distance (over 700-mile) routes that run through 39 states. The four easternmost long distance routes share the same tracks (the Palmetto, Silver Star, Silver Meteor, and Auto Train all run in various sections from Washington, DC south to Miami, FL). Likewise, the Texas Eagle (origin Chicago) and the Sunset Limited (origin New Orleans) join in San Antonio and are the same train from San Antonio to Los Angeles. The other trains run along single-route tracks.

Name	Route	Duration (hours)	End-End Miles	Frequency	Train Car Type	Consist
Crescent	New York - Philadelphia - Washington, D.C. - Charlotte - Atlanta - New Orleans	18	1377	Daily	Amfleet and Viewliner	11 cars: 2 engines, 4 coaches, 1 lounge, 1 dining, 2 sleepers, 1 baggage
Sunset Limited	New Orleans - Houston - San Antonio - Tucson - Los Angeles	46	1995	3x Week	Superliner	11 cars: 2 engines, 2 baggage, 3 sleepers, 1 dining, 1 sightseer lounge, 2 coaches
Capitol Limited	Washington, DC - Pittsburgh - Cleveland - Chicago	18	764	Daily	Superliner	9 cars: 1 engine, 3 sleepers, 1 dining, 1 sightseer lounge, 1 baggage, 2 coaches
California Zephyr	Chicago - Denver - Salt Lake City - San Francisco Bay Area	52	2438	Daily	Superliner	11 cars: 2 engines, 1 baggage, 3 sleepers, 3 coach, 1 dinner, 1 sightseer lounge
Empire Builder	Chicago - Minneapolis - Glacier Nat'l Park - Portland / Seattle	45	2206-2255	Daily	Superliner	8 cars: 2 engines, 1 baggage, 3 sleepers, 1 diner, 2 coaches
Lake Shore Limited	Chicago - Cleveland - Albany - New York City - Boston	19-22	959-1018	Daily	Amfleet and Viewliner	8 cars: 1 engine, 2 sleepers, 3 coaches, 1 café, 1 baggage
Southwest Chief	Chicago - Kansas City - Albuquerque - Los Angeles	43	2256	Daily	Superliner	12 cars: 2 engines, 1 baggage, 4 sleepers, 3 coaches, 1 sightseer lounge, 1 diner
Texas Eagle	Chicago - Little Rock - Dallas - San Antonio	32	1305	Daily	Superliner	11 cars: 3 sleepers, 3 coach, 1 baggage, 1 sightseer lounge, 1 diner
Texas Eagle (Entire)	Chicago - Dallas - San Antonio - Tucson - Los Angeles	67	2728	3x Week	Superliner	11 cars: 3 sleepers, 3 coach, 1 baggage, 1 sightseer lounge, 1 diner
Silver Meteor / Star / Palmetto	New York - Washington, DC - Charleston, SC - Miami	27	1389	Daily	Amfleet and Viewliner	10 cars: 1 power, 1 baggage, 2 sleepers, 4 coaches, 1 lounge, 1 diner
Auto Train	Washington, DC - Florence, SC - Orlando, FL	17	856	Daily	Superliner	18 passenger cars: 2 engines, 3 diners, 2 lounges, 4 coaches, 7 sleepers; 20 automobile cars
City of New Orleans	Chicago - Memphis - Jackson - New Orleans	19	934	Daily	Superliner	12 cars: 2 engines, 1 baggage, 1 diner, 1 sightseer lounge, 4 sleepers, 3 coaches
Coast Starlight	Seattle - Portland - Sacramento - San Francisco Bay Area - Los Angeles	36	1389	Daily	Superliner & Luxury Heritage	12 cars: 2 engines, 1 baggage, 3 sleepers, 1 pacific parlour car, 1 sightseer lounge, 1 diner, 3 coaches
Cardinal	New York - Washington, DC - Charlottesville, VA - Cincinnati - Chicago	28	1147	3x week	Amfleet and Viewliner	6 cars: 1 engine, 1 sleeper, 3 coaches, 1 dinette

Table 1. Amtrak's Long-Distance Routes. Source: Amtrak .com

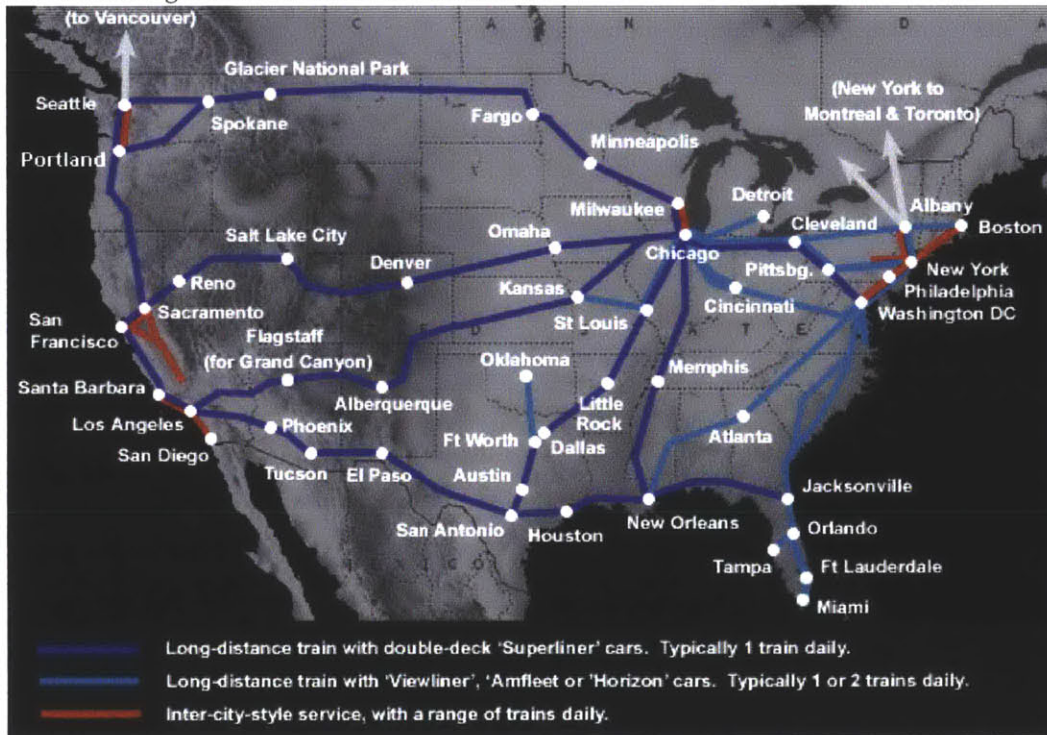


Figure 10. Amtrak routes and car type. Source: www.1train4u.com/train/amtrak.htm

Long distance train routes use four generations of train cars: Superliner, Viewliner, Amfleet, and Heritage, with each generation containing up to five types of car (Figures 9-14). Generally, the long distance routes east of Chicago use the Viewliner & Amfleet cars (except for the Capitol Limited, which runs from Chicago to Washington DC, and the Auto Train, which runs from near Washington DC to near Miami) and those running west of Chicago use the Superliner cars.

This is due to the fact that the Superliner cars are too tall to clear many tunnels and bridges around the New York City area.³⁵ The cars are all designed and engineered internally at Amtrak and have been manufactured by various American companies in different stages over time. Heritage cars are those that were purchased from private rail operators in the early 1970's when Amtrak was created. Amfleet cars were based on designs used for the Metroliner train (which disappeared with the creation of Amtrak), but were ordered in and manufactured in the early 1970's.

The Superliner I (first generation) cars were the first designs created specifically for Amtrak after it was created (Figures 11 and 12). They were initially constructed by Pullman-Standard in the late 1970's, and a second order, the Superliner II, was placed in the mid-1990's and constructed by Bombardier Transportation. There is no significant difference in design between the Superliner I's and II's. The Superliner cars are more efficient than the single-level cars as they can fit more passengers- 42 and 74 in a Superliner sleeper and coach, compared to 30 and 60 in a Viewliner / Amfleet, respectively.³⁶ The Superliner cars are also, in both my experience and according to many Rail Fans online, much more enjoyable and much more conducive to the positive qualities that this thesis is based on. The Viewliner / Amfleet long distance routes do not have the equivalent of an observation car, which provides much more social interaction and flexibility. If not for low clearances in and out of New York City and in other places on the eastern seaboard, Amtrak might choose to use the Superliner cars for all of its long distance routes.

Superliner car dimensions: 85' long, 10' wide, and 16' high.

Viewliner I cars were designed in the 1980's by Amtrak's design group (Figures 13 and 14). They were manufactured in stages: the first set (Viewliner I) in the mid 1990's and the second set (Viewliner II) in 2009. Viewliner IIs are currently being incorporated into operation.³⁷ The main design innovation in this series is modularity. Each element within the car is built separately from the interior shell, making it easy to assemble, replace, service and to modify and change the configuration of the cars over time given changing needs.³⁷ Viewliner I cars' maximum speed is 110 mph, Viewliner II's maximum is 125 mph.

Amfleet cars were manufactured in the early 1970's and began use in 1975. Their designs were based on that of the Metroliner train car, a high-speed, popular train that ran between New York and Washington and was operated by the Pennsylvania Railroad before Amtrak existed.³⁹

All single-level car dimensions: 85' long, 14' high and 10.5' wide



Figure 11. Exterior, Superliner Car. Source: Passcarphotos.net



Figure 12. Superliner Lounge Car, Second Level. Source: Adrienne Amos, Pinterest.com



Figure 13. Exterior, Viewliner Cars. Source: Railfanwindow.net



Figure 14. Interior, Amfleet Dinette Car. Source: Ben Schumin, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

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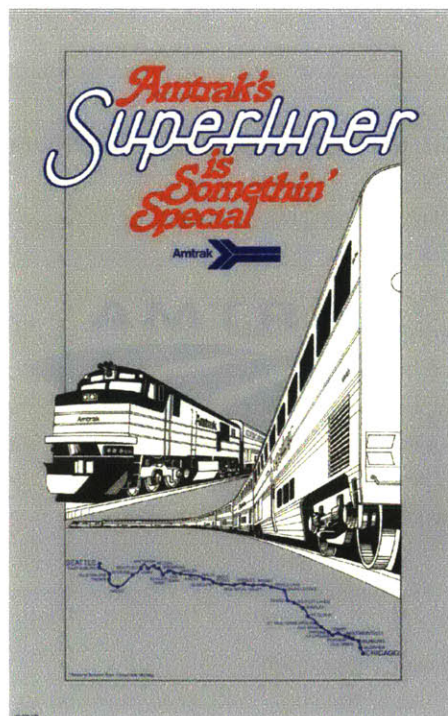


Figure 15. 1980's brochure. Source: history.amtrak.com

CHAPTER 3: TRAIN JOURNEYS



Figure 16. Lamy Station, New Mexico, aboard the Southwest Chief.

THE LAKE SHORE LIMITED

December 18-19, 2014

- Runs daily from Boston / New York to Chicago via Albany and Cleveland
- Operates with single level cars
- 19 hours
- 959 miles



Figure 17. Lake Shore Limited Map by Mackensen. Source: Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0]



Figure 18. Typical Consist Source: Trainweb.org

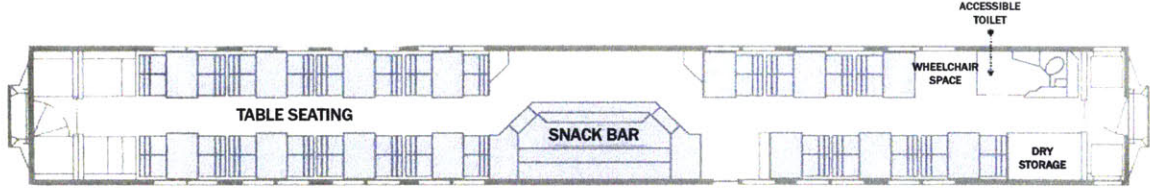


Figure 19. Amfleet Dinette Car Plan. Seats 52 people.

Right image
 Figure 20. The dinette car, evening of December 18. About as convivial as this train got.



12/18 3:40 pm Left New York City

In the beginning, there was darkness. My first trip, a tour of the post-industrial north and mid-west, is quite dark and has a depressive feeling to it. Heading up the Hudson is beautiful, but the sun begins to set almost immediately after boarding. I am not sure what to expect from this journey and spend the first few hours walking up and down the aisles to get a sense of the feeling on the train. Besides a few passengers talking in the back of my coach car, most people are quiet- on their devices, staring out the window, looking bored. Passengers are stuck in their seats because before the train meets up with the leg coming from Boston, there is no cafe car.

4:30 pm. Announcement of Happy Hour special. Somewhere in Upstate New York.

The attendant announces drink specials in the dinette car, so I go to check it out. The dinette car on this single-level line is the only social space before the train meets up with the cafe car in Albany, and is configured only with a bar and a small series of four-top tables. Most people are sitting (somewhat glumly, it feels) by themselves; there is not much socializing. In line to purchase my discounted margarita, I am hit on aggressively by a man buying four drinks (which appear to be all for himself). After he left, the attendant asks me if I am alright and told me to come tell him if I am bothered at all. I feel slightly on edge the rest of the journey about seeing the fellow passenger again but manage to mostly avoid him, and I am comforted that the attendant is keeping an eye on things.

5:30 pm. “Smoke Stop” in Albany.

I get out and begin chatting with the two passengers I’d noticed talking to each other in my car earlier, Jess and Adrian¹. Adrian is a middle-aged bi-racial man, an itinerant chef from San Francisco. Jess a white artist and set producer in her early 20’s who hasn’t finished college due to a congenital illness. Both are very open and grounded, and are cracking jokes. I learn about Adrian’s love life, his parents, and more. He compliments someone walking by on their slippers. I like them immediately. We wander around the Albany station for a bit together, they smoke cigarettes, and we get back on the train, and I try to facilitate a longer hangout and buy them both margaritas, but they go back to their seats. Jess and I make plans to eat dinner together later.

7:30 pm. Dinner in the Diner Car.

Jess and I eat dinner somewhat awkwardly together with a 21-year old from Michigan (who I sense might be interested in Jess), and I am seated across from a middle-aged man who works in

¹Author’s note: Some names have been changed.

computers in a small town in Maryland outside of DC. I'd just seen the documentary about Edward Snowden and I ask him his opinion— he describes that coming from a military family, they all came down very hard on Snowden, even saying that if they saw him they'd shoot him. He adds that some of his family had to flee when pieces of Snowden's releases came out. The food is quite good, better than I expected, but definitely expensive — and I notice that it's the same set of options on the menu as when I rode the California Zephyr the previous year.

Jess speaks quite freely about her life and is an avid conversationalist. She tells us about the fact that her boyfriend basically broke up with her just a few minutes before on the phone, but that she doesn't care because she feels like he just has a hard time with her illness. The dining car is decorated festively for Christmas. In fact, there is a guy in an elf costume wandering around asking people what they want for Christmas. It's cute at first and then rapidly becomes quite annoying. I later find out that this is a marketing ploy for Macy's when I look at the Amtrak instagram account. It appears that this occurred through a formal public relations campaign through Macy's "Believe" campaign.

8:30 pm, Melancholia. I am feeling a bit sad about people on the train because I haven't really connected with them as much as I'd like. It's been dark for a long time. It feels impossible that I will get to do any interviews, and I become nervous that my hypotheses are wrong. I am wondering if this train is so different from the Zephyr (Chicago - San Francisco), which I had taken a year prior, because of the geographic region it passes through, the lack of a view, and no sightseer lounge? Or, is it me; am I feeling tense because people don't seem too friendly?

At 9:00 pm, my luck changes. Adrian comes by and convinces me and Jess to go hang out on the cafe car. The weird but nice-seeming guy who is sitting across from me in my coach seat invites himself along (we were both traveling from New York to Chicago and thus saw each other several times from across the aisle – a common way of beginning an interaction). We sit there together and start chatting with Joe, a writer from Boston, and then the Michigan man who we had dinner with joins us too. Adrian has brought rum and we buy sodas and all start drinking. We stay for about three hours there talking and somehow the conversations becomes very festive, personal, and convivial. We take photos of each other, Joe gives me a book of his poetry, and we even begin ribbing each other (I'm made fun of because I go to a "fancy" school, Jess because of her loud conversations with her boyfriend, Jim because of the strange and hilarious dirty jokes he keeps making, etc). So far I have told people that I am working on a project about social interactions on long-distance trains, and that I am a student. I eventually get to bed (in my coach seat) around midnight.



Figures 21 & 22. Evening in the dinette. Left to right- Adrian, Joe, Jess, man from Michigan, man from across the aisle

American Pastoral

All three of my new friends were seasoned long-distance train riders. Jess, an artist, and Joe, a writer, both speak quite philosophically about the train. Jess “thinks about the freedom of [her] soul” while on the train. Adrian describes his gratitude: “I have a lot of friends, homeless and such, where this is unimaginable. So I just feel lucky to be here.” He also speaks about what it’s like to people watch “I wonder, why is this person on this train? Are they running from something?” and how you could reinvent yourself, “I mean you don’t know if I’m hella rich, you got no idea, whether I’m really sad on the inside but just pretending to be happy - you got no idea.” Joe concurs: “Every single person on this train has a different story. Has a reason. And it’s always deeper than what you think it is. It’s never just traveling.” This means something to Jess, who has a one-way ticket to rural Iowa; she’s sick of New Jersey. Jess and Joe both speak about how they enjoy imagining new things when going through small towns, strongly echoing the American pastoral ideal: “I remind myself of how life should really be. How huge everything got in the city... you work for yourself, grow your own food. People in the city, they have no idea what family really is anymore,” says Jess. She continues, “Why I like coming out here is because it gives me humanity... the train gives you a way to grow. I was talking to Joe for all those hours- I look outside and I see everything differently now.”

12/19 7:45am the next day, sun is rising and we are rolling through Waterloo, Indiana (right image). I walk to where Adrian and Jess are sitting to say good morning, and they tell me that they were all up until the 4am talking about art and more. We all walk to the cafe car together to get some cheap breakfast, and I conduct my first recorded interview with the group. I can tell that they are choosing their words carefully a bit, trying to sound inventive for the recording. We all express sadness about leaving as all of a sudden we feel quite close to each other, and exchange phone numbers and promises to keep in touch. The train feels a bit more alive in the morning. At 9:45 am we arrive in Chicago and part ways. I feel sad to leave my new friends, but also as though the friendship had happened in a weird alternate universe—what did we really have in common? What would it mean to keep in touch?

Right image, Figure 23. Near Waterloo, IN



THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS

December 25-26, 2014

- Runs Daily from Chicago to New Orleans
- Operates with Superliner cars
- 19 hours
- 934 miles

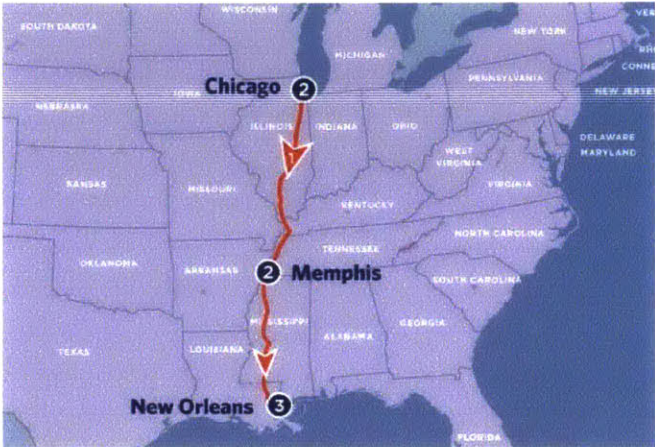


Figure 24. City of New Orleans Map
Source: blog.theacademictraveler.com

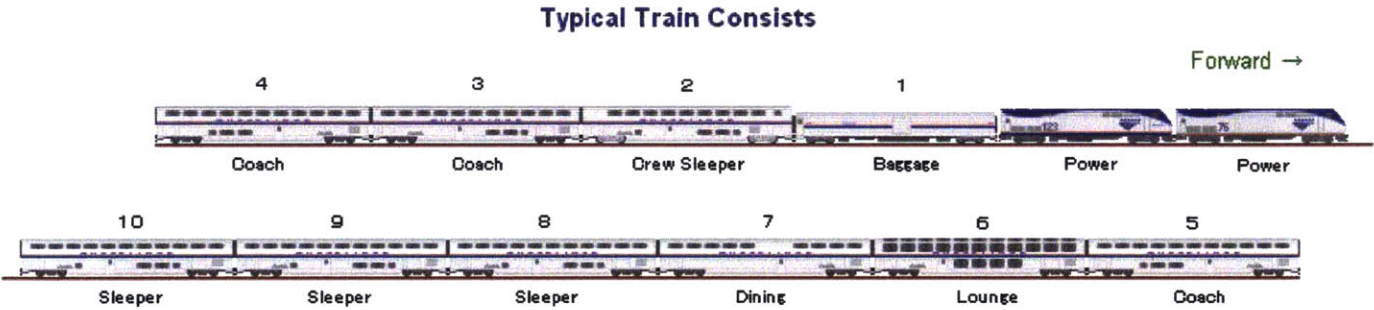


Figure 25. Typical Consist, City of New Orleans train. Source: trainweb.org

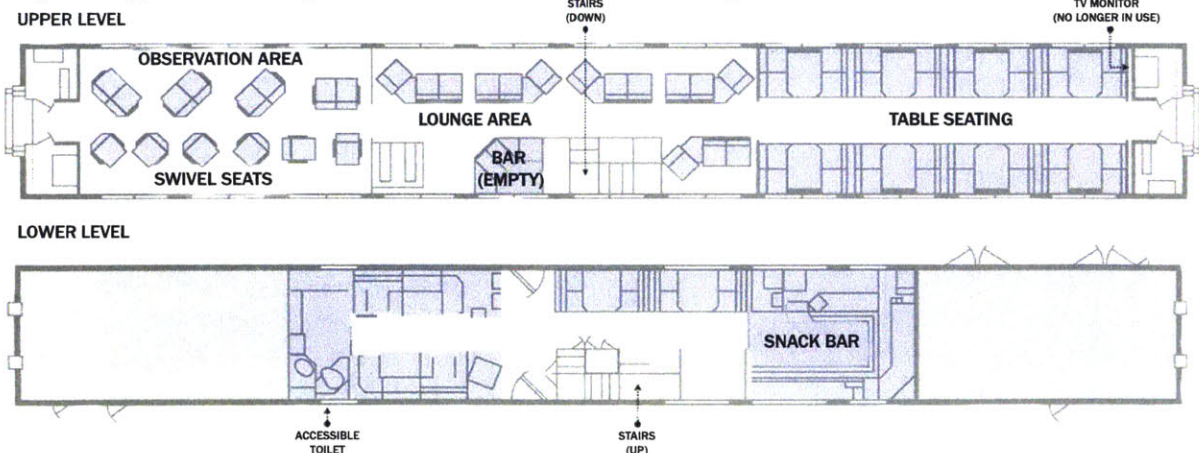


Figure 26. Plan diagram upper level of Superliner lounge car. Source: Craigmashburn.com and author
Right image, Figure 27. Christmas evening in the lounge car.



12/25, 8:00 pm Leave Chicago.

Ben, my partner, took the California Zephyr train from San Francisco and we meet in Chicago for the holidays. We take a route out of Chicago, heading south and a little west— a view of downtown I've never seen, and a part of the city I can't place. Chicago is a huge passenger and freight hub, and accordingly has a lot of land dedicated to train infrastructure that most people never see. Ben is shooting a lot of video footage, mostly out the window, and helping me develop the train project ideas. We thought it would be fun to see what the train was like on the holiday. Turns out it's quiet, and a bit sad.

12/25 11:30 pm, Quiet Christmas night.

The top level of the sightseer lounge is mostly empty. There's one white family, a stylish black man, looking to be in his 40s, eating snacks on his own, a couple (middle-age black man and white woman) and their baby. I run into the young white man from the family in the cafe (the bottom level of the sightseer lounge car) where I am chatting with the attendant who is on his third day straight working (his schedule is three days on, three days off). The young man asks me if he can use a word twice in the same Scrabble game. He's buying several drinks and goes on to tell me too much about his relationship with the young woman who is accompanying his family down to New Orleans (I didn't really ask). We walk upstairs together; his family and girlfriend are playing music on a small portable stereo. I think— the ephemerality of the train interactions is both good, because it makes people feel free and anonymous— and very strange, because if you want to get to know people you have to do so quickly or it will never happen. We are rolling through southern Illinois. The train attendant stops making announcements at 10pm and the couple with their baby are angry because they're worried they might miss their stop. They have a strange altercation with the conductor she comes through— seems like she is familiar with their shenanigans.

8am, Morning in Mississippi.

We've rolled through Tennessee and a sliver of Kentucky overnight. The train is sleepy and quiet. Looking out the window, I see small churches and cemeteries, farms with dilapidated houses, empty lots that are being used as dumps, muddy creeks, and swamps. It's a diffuse, grey, muted light. Ben says, "This feels like a lonely landscape." I'd heard that the City of New Orleans was the party train because you can get on at night, drink and have a good time, sleep late and then get to New Orleans in the early afternoon and keep partying. I'll have to take the train another time at a different time of year to see if that's true.



Figures 28 & 29. Views of Mississippi in the early morning light.

12/26 9:30am, Buzzing Sightseer lounge.

I buy a bagel from the cafe attendant and asked if it can be toasted— the attendant tells me that he would love nothing more than to be able to toast bagels for his customers but Amtrak won't give him or let him bring his own toaster. So my bagel is microwaved, which is heresy to any bagel consumer with sense. After I eat I go sit in the top level of the sightseer lounge and observe people. It's gotten busier on the train and is quite a scene. I can barely find a seat. I overhear a lot of chatter, most people have southern accents, so must have gotten on overnight, early this morning, or are from the south originally. Many Amish families; a table of folks playing *Magic: The Gathering*, a couple listening to music. There's a group of four white young professionals (two couples, one gay, one straight) that have brought tons of champagne, wine, meats and cheeses and are having a feast. A woman named Gina sits down across from me to get a particular shot of a small downtown we are going through, and we strike up a conversation. We chat with the picnickers across the aisle and they share wine with us in small water cups that Amtrak provides.



Figures 30 & 31. Left to right: Four revelers from Memphis; Gina.

12/26 12:30pm Lunch with Farmers.

Ben and I have lunch in the diner car with a nice couple, white farmers from Tennessee. They live 2.5 hours away from the Fulton, Kentucky stop, and boarded the train there at 4:00am. They are taking the train to New Orleans for vacation. She grows strawberries, he grows beans, corn, sweetcorn, wheat, and tobacco. His family worked on the railroad so he feels a connection. I wanted to interview him about his family's history, but a formal interview felt forced at this casual mealtime. The man talks our ear off with stories of what happened on their honeymoon to a Caribbean vacation — trying to go snorkeling, getting stranded while water skiing, etc. We arrive in New Orleans around 3:00 pm after having ridden through gorgeous swampy landscapes and trees full of Spanish moss. The observation car was full and vibrant, as it often feels when the train is going through interesting landscapes. It's amazing how much the terrain changes so quickly - when we went to sleep we were in nothing but flat farmland.

Stress-Free Christmas

I interview Gina outside Hazlehurst, Mississippi. Gina is traveling alone on a 14-day rail pass instead of joining her family in Manila for the holidays. She's an avid traveler and wants to go to all 50 states before she turns 50. I question whether she can really say that she's "been" to Tennessee if she's just passed through on a train, though there certainly is the feeling that you've had some kind of connection with the state more than on the airplane. Gina is from Palo Alto, and works in tech. Her route is San Francisco - Chicago - Milwaukee - New Orleans - St Louis - Kansas City - LA, and is having a great time on the train, and feels safe even though she's traveling alone (she's been posting a lot of her photographs on Facebook so her friends can follow along— an amateur photographer). She stopped in at a church in Milwaukee for Christmas mass and had a wonderful time, despite the pastor thinking she was from another country at first (she identifies herself as an American with Filipina heritage). She said this was the best and least stressful holiday she's had in a long time, mainly because of the lack of focus on buying things. She admits to me that she feels that lately, the Virgin Mary has been speaking to her.



Figure 32. Near Jackson, Mississippi.

THE SUNSET LIMITED

December 27-29, 2014

- Runs 3 times per week from New Orleans and Los Angeles
- Operates on Superliner cars
- 46 hours
- 1995 miles



Figure 33. Sunset Limited Route. Source: Telegraph.co.uk

Typical Train Consists

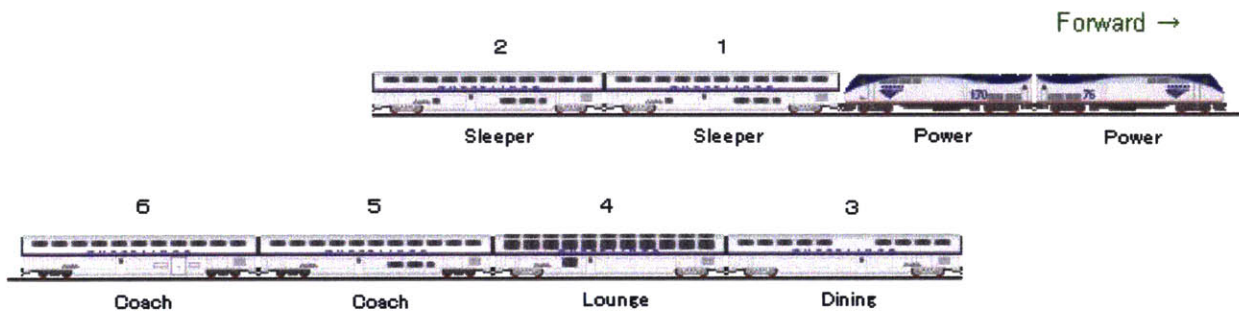


Figure 34. Typical Consist for Sunset Limited. Source: Trainweb.org

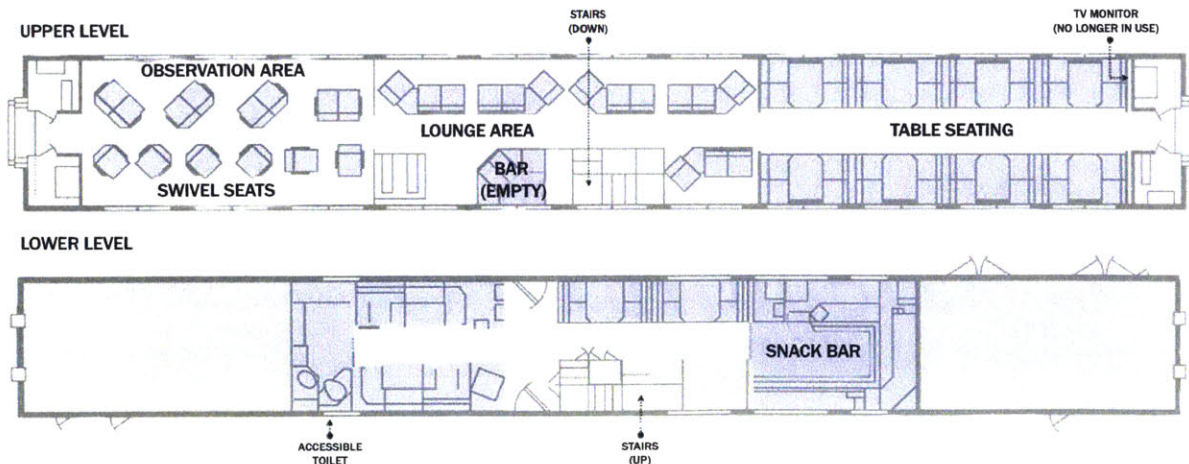
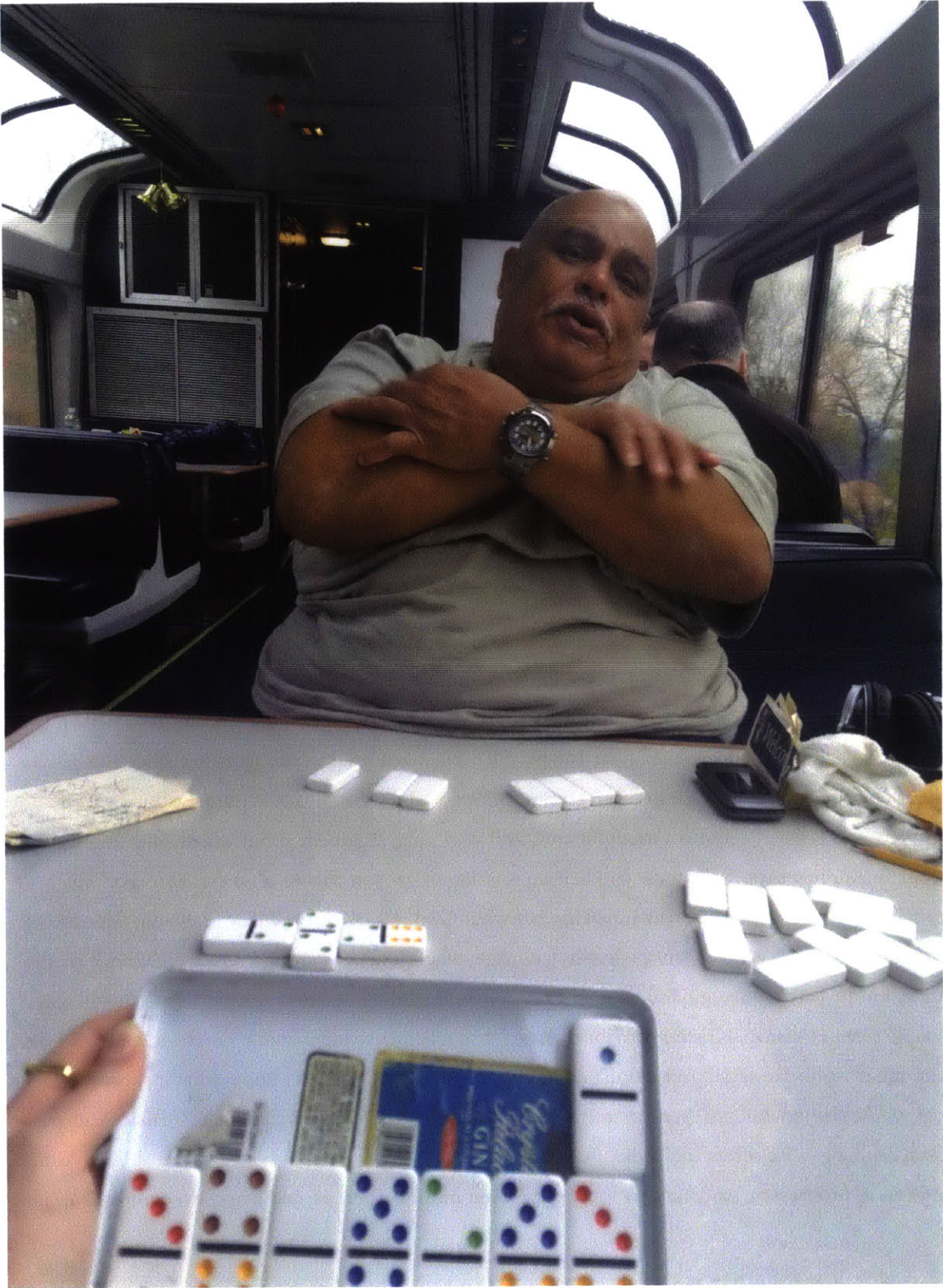


Figure 35. Plan diagram upper level of Superliner lounge car. Source: Craigmashburn.com and author
 Right image, Figure 36. Morning dominoes lesson with Andrew in the lounge car.



12/27 9:00 am, Heading west

The Sunset Limited immediately had a different, much more congenial and friendly atmosphere than the City of New Orleans — difficult to tell whether it's just the time of day, length of train journey (two nights versus one night), the fact that we're heading west, or other factors. Ben is with me on this train as well. I later discover that the conductor, Jeffrey, is a seasoned Amtrak employee and “one of the best”, according to a lovely, smart cafe attendant I speak to named Janet. So this may have a lot to do with it.

The observation car is quite full. I sit down at a table by myself, between a black man playing dominoes by himself (Andrew) and two white men (who I later discover is a gay retired couple from Houston). Andrew is drinking what I think is water and later find out to be vodka from a plastic sippy cup. He is talking to the white family across the aisle, and has a very friendly, boisterous air, like he is holding court. Whenever any people of color walk past him he gestures or asks them if they want to play dominoes, and they have an interaction. We start talking, and he invites me to join him and teaches me dominoes.

Andrew is a very good teacher. After a while, Kristen comes by. I had moved seats once to move away from her already because she's very loud and has a strange air. She motions for me to move over and joins us, without really asking. Soon afterwards she begins asking me questions about my religion (I found out that she is some kind of minister from Tucson). I decide to take her salvation prayer to see what it's like, and immediately regret it because then I become another person she thinks has conceded. She tells me that 168 people have taken Jesus' name from her since she got on the train to head to New Orleans. Ben comes to join us and refuses to take the salvation prayer. Andrew and Kristen get into a loud but civil, and very long, argument about whose faith is good enough. Andrew says, “Whatever you believe is going to get you wherever you want to go.” He convinces her of this in one way by asking her what God was called originally (Yahweh, Emmanuel) and thus that there is no “J” in the Jewish language, when Jesus was around. Over the course of the argument he gets louder and louder, and I can tell he is starting to annoy people, especially the gay couple from Houston. Kristen convinces Andrew to take her to lunch in the diner car, and she calls him the n-word. He says “please don't call me that— I'm old enough to know what it means.”

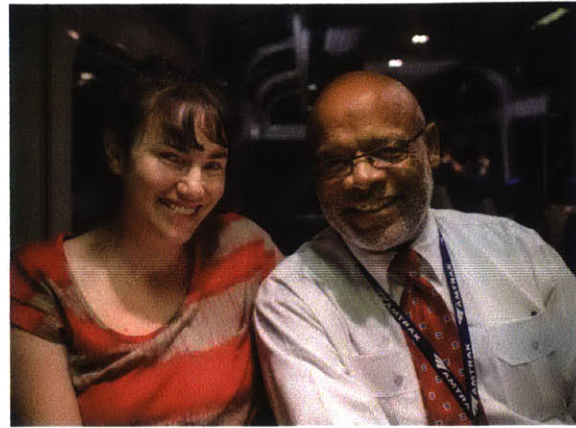
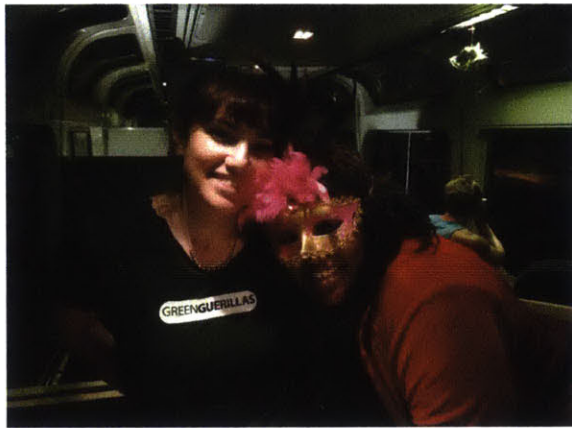
At around 2:00pm Andrew and Kristen return from lunch. It is then that I realize Andrew's been drinking— he offers me vodka from a flask that looks like it could hold a whole gallon. As the afternoon progresses, Andrew gets louder and even more boisterous, and begins to complain about

Escaping Southern Baptists

Two white men, whose wedding rings I don't notice for several hours, sit in the two chairs between the stairs heading down to the bar and the four-top tables the entire ride from New Orleans to Houston (at 6:30pm). They drink bloody marys slowly and consistently all day. They make the trip once every month to New Orleans to gamble. Harrahs now pays for their train tickets, as well as room and board; they insist that they don't even spend that much but just do it consistently. They love the train, even though once it was 7 hours late. They act as somewhat intolerant or insensitive tour guides (I am not sure which), telling me that I am some kind of saint for sitting with Andrew, and then saying with their noses up when arriving into Houston that this was the "Spanish" part of town. They met at a bar and both worked in the same field before retiring; they've spend 24 hours a day together for decades and aren't sick of each other. I wondered where they'd been married but didn't inquire because they were not being particularly open about their status. At one point they meet a neighbor on the train that they hadn't previously known after their overhear her talking about being a Texans fan.

Kristen. They start to flirt. I get sick of it and go back to my seat and avoid the observation car until before dinner, when I go down to talk with Janet, the bar attendant. She tells me that Jeffrey (the conductor) had been watching them the whole time, but finally saw his alcohol and was able to do something about it. He told them that he could kick them off for drinking, but instead asked them to leave the observation car and that if they made any more trouble he would kick them off. Andrew stays quiet in the coach car for the rest of the trip.

I have a long conversation with Janet to get her perspective. Janet takes a lot of pride in and ownership over her work and has wrestled over the years with how to make the experience better for herself and her customers. She's in recovery herself, and wants to become a recovery counselor (though she feels that in part she already is one, given how many people she meets on the train who are struggling with addiction). She tells me that the Sunset Limited is one of the trains with poorer customers; that many passengers can't afford even the Cup Noodle from the cafe car (sold for \$3.50). She's extremely frustrated with Amtrak's silly management; she says that if they lowered the prices everyone would buy more, especially alcohol, which is quite expensive. She also says that they've been impossible to work with on other hospitality issues, but that she sees it as a result of them being under watch by the federal government.



Figures 37 & 38. Left to right: Author with Kristen and a member of the Amtrak staff

The Train is What You Make It

Jackie invites Jeffrey to join our conversation us by joking “Jeffrey, a journalist is here to see you”. Jeffrey says “Jeffrey and journalists do not mix” so I decide not to ask if I can record the conversation. He joins us and begins to tell me a series of incredible stories about what he’s seen over the years. He is originally from New Orleans, and began working freight over 30 years ago. He transitioned to passenger so that the hours could be more predictable (apparently working freight means you can be called at any hour to get on a train). I ask him about his most memorable experiences. He tells me that he’s seen it all: he describes two suicides he’s seen, and I can tell his eyes start to water. He’s had to kick people off for drugs, sex, drinking, and more. He takes a liking to Ben and I and comes to sit down with us every few hours until he gets off somewhere in Arizona (at a crew shift point). He even tries to get us in a sleeper car, but they’re all full. Jeffrey has the best answer to the question I ask as many people as I can, “What does train travel mean to you?”— he says that the train is what you make it. He says that if you come on ready for an adventure, with a good book, or in a good place, you’re going to have a good time. But if you board in a bad mood, negative about the idea of meeting people, and just sit on your phone the whole time, it won’t do much for you.

The landscapes today are incredible. I’ve never seen so much swamp and I didn’t really know that there was so much of it in east Texas. We get into Texas around 3 pm and won’t leave it until tomorrow around the same time. A few hours before we get to Houston, we start to hit oil country and see many pumps alongside the tracks. I’ve never seen this part of the country either. I’m again amazed by how diverse American micro-landscapes are, and how quickly one can pass through them. The train goes slowly enough to appreciate them, and it’s tough to really do anything but stare out at them.

10:15pm Game Time

Kristen has forced two Indian American siblings to let her play Scrabble with them; I am sitting at a booth a few tables away trying to avoid her. I hear her asking them questions about Hinduism, and then “If a plane was crashing and you could take Jesus’ word and live forever or not and have the plane crash what would you do?” I hear her ask questions like this to many people until she gets off the next day in Tucson. There’s another couple playing bridge and a family playing Go Fish. People seem to be playing to pass the time.

12/28 7:30 am High Desert.

We wake up in with our fellow coach passengers; there are mountains visible, there’s snow on the ground. The vibe on the train feels Southwestern all of a sudden, between the landscape and the kinds of people on the train. Part of this, I find out, is because we’ve joined up with the Texas Eagle (which came down from Chicago via Austin) in San Antonio, around 1:00 am. The Observation car is sunny and festive; there’s a family playing Uno, and a couple playing Gin. It feels like we’ve gone through so many backyard-kind of spaces. Everyone is out of their comfort zones on the train, but no one seems to feel much pressure because the work is being done for us.

Interview Under the Influence

Andrew agrees to be recorded but I quickly realize that the interview isn’t going to be very serious. He loves to take the train because “I meet people— I don’t meet strangers — I meet people. I love people. Frank! (Gesturing to an older black man across the aisle) I just met him. This is it. Darlin’ – that’s another thing I love. See me, I don’t believe in skin color, religion, no other things else. A human being is a human being. I love everyone.” Andrew is originally from New Orleans, LA. He is a retired merchant marine, truck driver, and served in the Navy. He’s an experienced traveler. He has 19 daughters, and possibly more sons — but is not married. This is quite a revelation, as is that he is 70 (I would have guessed 50). Andrew struggles to stay focused while Kristen is asking another passenger “If god gives you a life sentence for hell, heaven or jail, what would it be?” but shares that the train means “leave, tranquility, and happiness” to him. I appreciate the way he defends pluralism in a very adamant way throughout our conversations— “You could eat a peanut, I mean, I could eat a peanut butter sandwich, you could eat steak and lobster. As long as I’m full, and you full, that’s what counts darlin’. Ok?”

1:00 pm. I sit in less-social part of the observation car after lunch; it's very quiet here. I speak briefly with an older African American woman who is heading to her hometown of Los Angeles from Texas, where she now lives. She mentions straightforwardly that she is going to California because "my baby sister died." She much prefers the train to the airplane and used to take it to take it all the time, but this is her first train ride in seven years. I tell her about my project, and that I am doing interviews, but she does not seem interested so I do not press her. Whether or not this was the reason she elected to take the train this time, I observed that she seemed to be doing a lot of solitary thinking and was not socializing very much. I run into her a few other times en route to LA—once while interviewing Trent, where she tells me that "I had found a good one" (she's obviously interested in being friendly and has been eavesdropping), and again when I am speaking with Janet, the lead service attendant in the café car, she stands around and listens for a few minutes. She apologetically shares that she is "just shy" and "didn't like talking too much" as though she felt badly that she hadn't agreed to be interviewed, and felt conflicted about wanting the company.

Free Beer

I notice AJ sitting across the aisle in our coach seats by himself, taking photos. He makes a comment about the mountains and we start talking, mostly about Austin, where he lives and loves because of how ironic the culture is there and how much free beer there. AJ is around 30, is an amateur comedian, podcaster, musician, and "gets paid to make pizza, sometimes". He agrees to be interviewed and we have a great, fun conversation. It's his first time on the train - he's heading to Silver City, New Mexico, to see family - and quickly decides that this is going to be his new normal way to travel because it's affordable and enjoyable. He's disappointed, though, because he'd wanted to take photos with a nice camera and the glare is preventing him from doing so. I ask him about his cultural heritage and he says "I guess like hispanic as far back as I know. I am assuming Mexico but your guess is as good as mine. But I can't say that's ever done anything to shape the person that I have become, will become or have been. It's just one of those things that was arbitrarily assigned to me. I mean my last name is Henderson...". It's interesting to hear about his perspective on his ethnicity, I've never met anyone with that opinion before. I am starting to wonder whether the train is a place that causes people to become more philosophical, whether people who tend towards philosophizing are more likely to take the train, or what — I've heard so much philosophizing so far. AJ ends the interview by saying (after I ask him whether there's anything else he'd like to say) "Everyone just realize that this world is arbitrary and abstract, you didn't really have a choice in your existence so be nice to each other."

2:00 pm Pegasus

I notice Trent sitting across the aisle and we start talking about where we're each headed. I'd appreciated his response to Kristen yesterday morning when she asked him about his relationship with Jesus. He is a middle-aged black man from California. His mother had been one of the earliest computer programmers working for Norfolk Southern, and had developed a mental illness as a result of a fungus contracted from working on the railroad. As a black woman she struggled to gain formal recognition for her illness from the corporation, but finally succeeded through a lawsuit that resulted in a large financial settlement for her plus a lifetime free pass on Amtrak for Trent, among other things. Trent's mother's illness prevented her from being present in his life beginning around age 14, and he ended up getting into trouble and being informally adopted by a Filipino family. He's been in jail three times, stabbed multiple times, and is missing a few vital organs— but despite it all is incredibly kind and at peace. Trent's appreciation for the train, which mirrors his existential life philosophy, is a love through understanding of deficiency. Despite all of the problems the railroad had caused him and his family, he loves the experience of the train. He says that as a black man, the train is one of the only places where he can go without feeling bothered by people. He shares:

For some reason when you meet people traveling it's always good. It's a funny thing about traveling—people tell you everything about their lives. I've seen a lot of beautiful things on the train, but a lot of sad things too. It's just life.

Trent describes two poignant experiences he's had on long-distance trips. One was that a woman whom he and other fellow passengers had gotten to know had a heart attack right there in the observation car. She had been going home to try to make things right with her daughter. He says, "we all cried because we had gotten to know her on the train, and all she wanted to do was go home and make things right." He also shares that on another trip, he's met two women, partners moving from California to New Orleans to start over. They were recovering addicts— "they weren't running from reality, they were trying to make theirs the best they could". Trent had given up on his sister, also recovering, but after he talked all night with these two women he was able to repair his relationship with his sister by realizing that what he needed to was be there for her, not judge her.

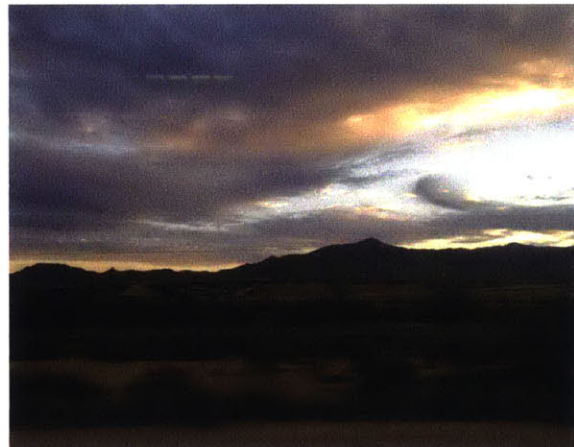
Again philosophizing, Trent says:

These tracks were made when our country was started. Most are in remote places. You're gonna see part of the country that you never would see in the air or on a freeway. Places where nobody wants to go. And that's where I want to be at. What people don't like about the train is the time lapse – people don't have patience, the time to tie their own shoes these

days. We don't give ourselves the chance to be in the moment. Whether it's good or bad, you grow.

Trent compares being in his kids' rooms with the train— he can think clearly, reflect, get his life in order. Trent is taking the train all the way to LA and after our two-hour long conversation I see him a few more times, but we don't really speak much after that. I pass the rest of the afternoon mindlessly staring at the light and then sunset over the desert— the observation car is pleasant, busy, and humming the whole time.

12/29 5:30am. Arrival into LA. We run into Brett in the station, a graduate student from MIT in neurobiology that Ben had met on the train. I interview Brett in a strange and beautiful waiting area for Amtrak passengers with a motley crew around us. Brett is Asian-Canadian, and is very anxious about sharing any personal details with me. He says he decided to take the train in part because he doesn't have an American ID so can't fly easily, and because he'd taken the train in India and had had a wonderful time. He's been enjoying it, but is disappointed in part because the train in India is much more social than the American train— the train he took there has berths with six people facing each other, and though he doesn't speak any languages besides English could communicate with people in other ways. He describes the train as "A way to connect with nature and other human beings." I take the Pacific Surfliner, a commuter train, up the coast — feels much more like the Northeast Corridor. Even with the gorgeous scenery, people are not really talking to each other.



Left to right, Figures 39 & 40: High desert in the morning, plains at sunset. Right: Figure 41. Border surveillance blimp near Marfa, TX



THE COAST STARLIGHT

December 31, 2014 - January 1, 2015

- Runs daily from Los Angeles to Seattle
- Operates with Superliner and Heritage cars
- 35 hours
- 1389 miles



Figure 42. Coast Starlight Route Map. Source: Vacationsbyrail.com

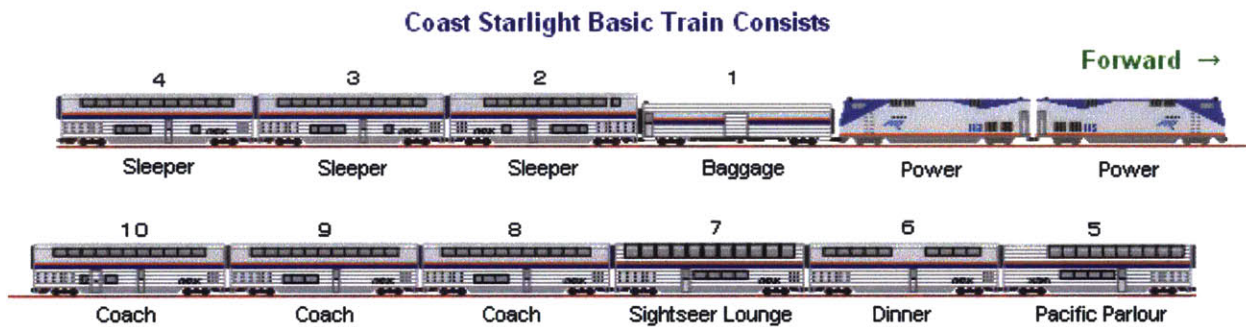


Figure 43. Typical Consist for Coast Starlight. Source: Trainweb.org

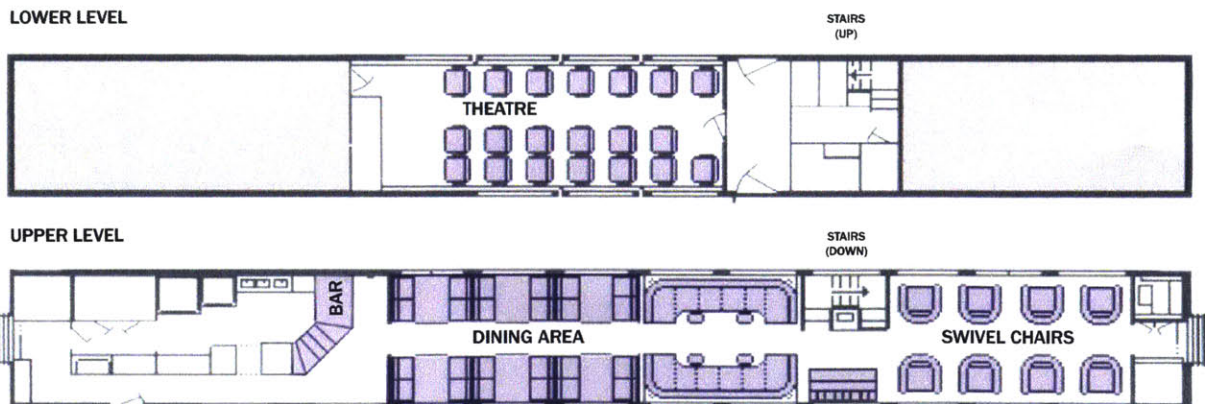


Figure 44. Plan diagram both levels of Heritage Parlour Car. Source: Craigmashburn.com and author Right, Figures 45 & 46. New Year's in the Lounge.



12/31, 10:00 pm.

I board the train in Emeryville, near Berkeley. Some friends have joined me through Portland. I was again interested in seeing what the train was going to be like on a holiday, and was again disappointed. We are dressed up, brought champagne and a boom box, and found no one else celebrating in either lounge car (there are two on the Starlight - one for “first class” sleeper car passengers and the other for coach), but no one bothering us either. We had our own dance party and shared some champagne with the attendant.

1/1 9:00am Memory Lane

I sit with an older white couple from Olympia, Washington over breakfast. They talk pretty much nonstop about their lives and experience. They look like very stereotypical Washingtonians. They met at Cal Poly in the 80's and have been moving slowly farther and farther north along the Coast Starlight route, so taking the train is like taking a trip down memory lane. They tell me that this train usually has a more glamorous parlor car but that because this particular one was late it didn't get hooked up. That car has fancy lounge seats and a screening room on the lower level. The woman tells me her theory about the country: that the people east of the Mississippi were descended from those less creative and adventurous who didn't want to cross the river, and are facing east for culture; while those living west of the river were more spirited and inventive to find a way to cross the river and are facing the wide open expanse of the west – these are the cultural legacies.

1/1 11am If It Looks Like a Duck

Thus begins my time in the whiter parts of the country. My friend and I meet a middle-aged white woman from a small town in Oregon. She's clearly out of her comfort zone, but has taken the train about six times. On a previous train ride she'd met a woman who ended up giving her a ride to her grandkids' home. She felt safe doing it even though she wouldn't normally because she'd had things in common with her. She runs a gift store in that she says functions like a community center, where they like to take care of everyone. Well, not everyone — she asks, she's had to profile people because ““if it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck...”. The full extent to this statement's bigotry only dawned on after we walked away because she had seemed so nice and had kept referring to herself as “community minded”. We somehow got to talking about guns and I told her that they didn't allow personal firearms on Amtrak. The color drained out of her face so much so that I became convinced that she had one with her, and began talking for about 15 minutes about how important guns were to her. She loves the train and is shocked when anything bad happens (apparently someone

had smoked pot on a previous ride but she hadn't noticed until the attendant busted the passenger, because she didn't know what it smelled like). At 4:00 pm we arrived in Portland, where I stayed the night with old friends. The landscape changed so much over the course of the trip, and I could tell I was in mountain territory now.



Figure 47. Oregon landscape.

THE EMPIRE BUILDER

January 3-5, 2015

- Runs Daily from Seattle/Portland to Chicago
- Operates with Supeliner cars
- 45 hours
- 2206-2225 miles



Figure 48. Empire Builder Route Map. Source: flipouting.com

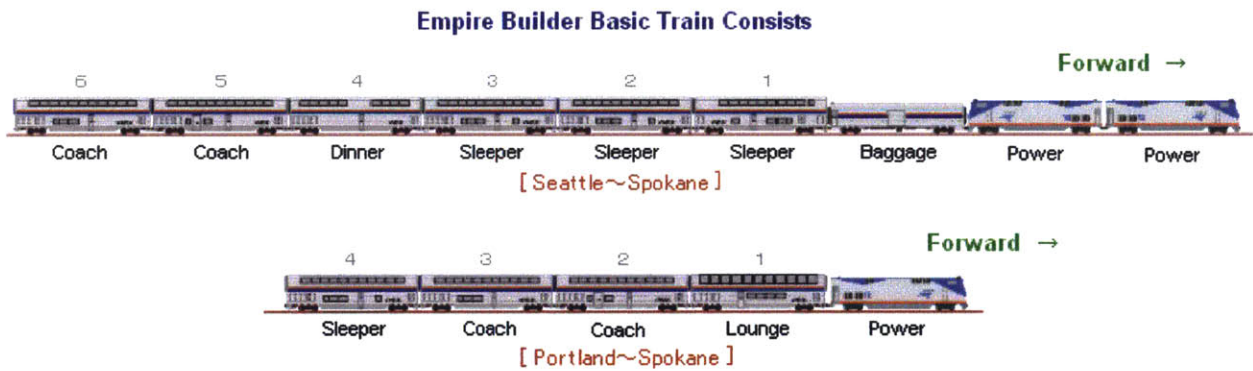


Figure 49. Typical Consist for Empire Builder. Source: Trainweb.org

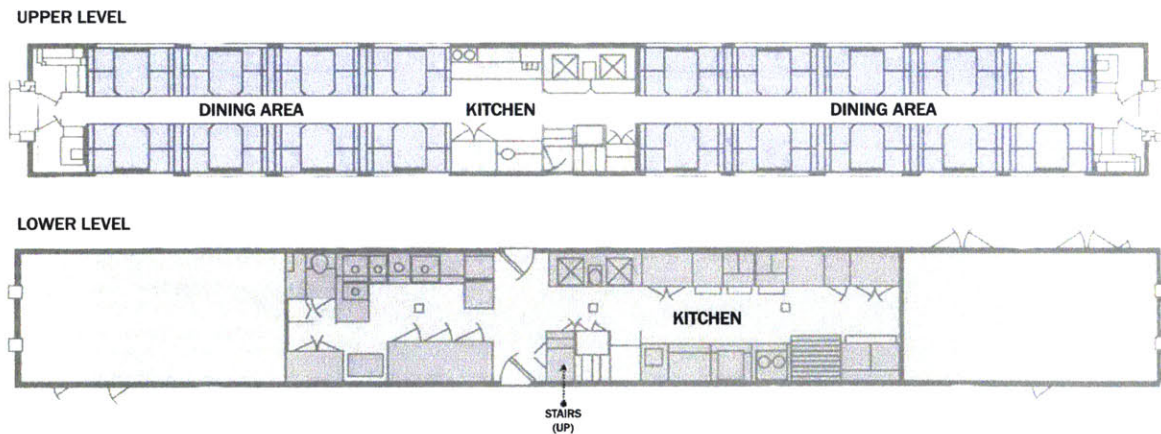


Figure 50. Plan diagram of Superliner dining car. Source: Craigmashburn.com and author
 Right, Figure 51. Passing the late afternoon in the Lounge car.



1/3 4:40pm Into the Ice

The train departs Portland with a small crew - this leg is only four cars long until we meet up with the other half of the train in Spokane. The train feels foreboding. People are quiet and unfriendly, and the announcers and staff are brisk. But the scenery is intensely majestic and beautiful. I am very curious to see what this storied train is all about. Though assumedly named to evoke nostalgia of early American expansion, the idea of "Empire Building" is still relevant in the train's relationship to the North Dakota oil boom towns of Stanley, Williston, and Minot in North Dakota. Simply judging by how people are dressed and how they look, it seems like a lot of people are on this train to get to work around this region and not for pleasure. It's mostly white men. There's a lot of military-print, farmer's gear, and oil company logos. Not very much eye contact and when there is, it is awkward and begins to make me feel quite uncomfortable.

5:30pm Sunset

Sunset along the Columbia River is gorgeous, and the tourists that are on the train are all in the observation car taking photos. In between the small industrial towns, timber mills and a few rural houses are the only signs of human work. By this point in the journey I feel I have completely lost track of time. I have to keep reminding myself of the day of the week and the date; New Year's felt arbitrary and meaningless. People are starting to drink in the observation car, and talking to each other a bit more. I speak with a heavy machine operator from rural Washington who is heading to work in North Dakota. He's never been east of there, or to a big city. He has a family; his daughter is working on an MBA and he jokes that she's already making more money than he does, but he's grateful for this job which is good money. He says that I am in for a treat because North Dakota is very "relaxed."

He doesn't pass the time on the train by doing much of anything at all, even though it's more than 24 hours' ride. I must be asking a lot of questions because after he tells me the story of his divorce, he jokes that I am "his psychiatrist". He rides the train because it's cheaper than flying or driving, and he likes it fine.

7:00 pm. Man Train

I eat food I've brought for dinner in the observation car and after observing enough overwhelmingly uncomfortable masculine energy, go back to my seat for a few hours. I have read about the man camps at the oil boom towns— how they lack women, and are quite full of drugs and lawlessness.

The men on this train, especially the younger ones, stare coldly at most of the women as they walk down the aisle. The train feels like a heightened, ephemeral version of the man camps. For the first time I am aware of how restricting the train is and how intimate it forces us all to be with each other. It's impossible to be invisible.

9:30 pm. I work up the courage to go back to the observation car and see what's going on. It's mostly empty except for 2 tables of guys sitting back to back, half white and half black. I sit behind them to "read" (ie. eavesdrop). I overhear snippets: "Everything is buying and selling in America. If you're not doing the buying and selling, you are being bought and sold" and "We're heading into a tiny little oil heaven" and "health care industry is a really good investment these days." Eventually I am joined by one of the nicer, drunker men named Charles. He is an amateur investor and has a trucking business outside Memphis. He is self-educated, and quite a philosopher. He tells me that he's fascinated by the etymology of words and teaches me that the meaning of the word "nice" is actually quite different than the way it's used colloquially. He loves the train because he hates how confining airplanes are. He wants to "slow down." After about an hour I leave, and he says kindly as I am leaving "I hope you have a wonderful life" and I felt that he meant it. Philosophizing about the train is certainly not limited to those taking it for leisure.

1/4 At 8:00 am, I buy a cheap breakfast from the cafe car and chat with the attendant. She says that this train is known for being rough—lots of drinking, sometimes violence. Yesterday she went through her sandwiches faster than she's ever had - "Guys just kept coming back for more beer and another sandwich, I couldn't believe it!" The train rolled through Glacier National Park in the early morning and now we are in the plains of Montana. The day passes slowly as the landscape doesn't change much and there aren't too many friendly people.

1:30 pm

I spend the afternoon in the observation car. It's mostly quiet with groups of people traveling together playing Uno and cribbage. A few younger men playing a pad of word games by themselves. A few people seem to know each other from previous train rides, I overhear their conversation - they are headed to Williston. They have a few beers together.

6:30 pm, Dusk, pulling into Williston. A man getting off has been talking to a group of people from Canada, explaining his work. He is in charge of 18 sites, his company runs 100. He describes eight-to-twelve hour days, going from site to site to check the pressure and oil levels. It's interesting that the train provides for so many different kinds of travel - work-related, leisure - to collide with each other.

Alone on Her Journey

Before lunch I speak with one woman in the observation car. She tells me, "I am on a journey alone, but the Lord is with me. He is my friend." She begins to look at me with wide eyes and it slowly dawns on me that I am speaking to another evangelist. She is a substitute teacher on her way to Williston; her husband is a truck driver for Caterpillar in the oil industry. The only conversations I can overhear are comparing notes about guns, and I feel extremely out of place. She tells me that she now sleeps on the lower level of the trains (in the seating areas reserved for people with disabilities) because once she saw a drunk man hit several passengers. They had to get an ambulance to meet the train at the next stop. During the incident she helped a mother and baby move safely to another car, and they all started praying together for the drunk man, "my faith gives me empathy." She then talks at length about how the world is going to end, that ISIS and the middle east is trying to destroy America by dropping oil prices. She says that she can see that I am a "lady" and that soon I will get married, and wishes that I take the lord's name soon so that when the world ends I will be saved.

1/5 The next day is largely uneventful. After the oil boom towns the train energy changes substantially. We roll through St. Paul - Minneapolis at 8:00 am and the train starts to feel more like a commuter rail between the large Midwestern cities (Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Chicago).

I spend a good portion of the day observing two people who strike up a conversation across the aisle from each other in the observation car and end up in the same booth, talking for hours. This happens with frequency, helping me to feel that my experiences are not just convivial because I am making an effort to speak with people. They are young white people, both look to be in their twenties. He must have gotten on last night in Williston or Minot (he works in the oil industry) and

she gets on around LaCrosse, Wisconsin around 11am. She's just finished school at University of Wisconsin and is talking about how bad the job market is in small-town Wisconsin. He is an amateur economist and shares his many opinions freely, explaining things as though she doesn't understand and she is playing along. It seems like he's hitting on her but she doesn't take the bait. They talk for a long time about their families, traveling, working, and politics. They both get off in Milwaukee and part ways without exchanging contact information.

At 12:30pm I sit with white middle-aged couple from Boston at lunch. She is a real estate agent and he is an electrical engineering professor at Boston University. They were visiting family in Seattle for the holidays. She's taken the train before and is more social than he is; she didn't tell him about the communal dining before they got on the train because he is shy and she thought he wouldn't like the idea, but they've both enjoyed the conversations they've had with people over meals. They had mostly kept to themselves in their sleeper car room otherwise, and are really enjoying it. She tells me that Boston real estate, especially in areas around local public transit stops, is a good investment right now.

The train arrives into Chicago late, at 5:30 pm (it was due at 3:55pm). This was the worst delay I experienced. I was expecting much worse— the Empire Builder especially is known to run late because of all the freight traffic it has to compete with.



Figures 52 & 53. Dusk, Williston, North Dakota.

The Lawless North

I eat dinner with a friendly, idiosyncratic real estate agent from Minot, North Dakota. She travels every month from Minot back to Minneapolis, where she is from. She has a service dog license so she is able to bring him on the train, and also gets access to the “accessible” room downstairs when it is available, which is very large and has its own toilet. She’s got her Amtrak travel down to a science. She mentions that Amtrak has cut back some of the services that used to make it a little more cozy. The schedule of the train works for her too – she gets on in North Dakota for dinner, and wakes up in time for breakfast before getting off, and the same on the way back. This is much more reasonable trip than those commuting to the oil towns from points west, which is a 24-hour or more journey, arriving in North Dakota in the evening. She moved to Minot to work in real estate after the housing crash because there was little work in Minneapolis. She shares crazy stories of Williston and Minot; describes them as “lawless” places; the jails are full, and the rest of the city services haven’t caught up with the influx of people either. One night driving home with a friend she noticed a man passed out drunkenly, half-clothed, in a driveway and helped him in because the temperature was 5 degrees Farenheit and she knew he would’ve frozen to death if he’d stayed there overnight.



Figure 54. Snowy scrapyard, Wisconsin. Figure 55. Right, along the Columbia River in Washington State.



THE SOUTHWEST CHIEF

January 6 - 8, 2015

- Runs Daily from Chicago to Los Angeles
- Operates with Superliner Cars
- 43 hours
- 2256 miles

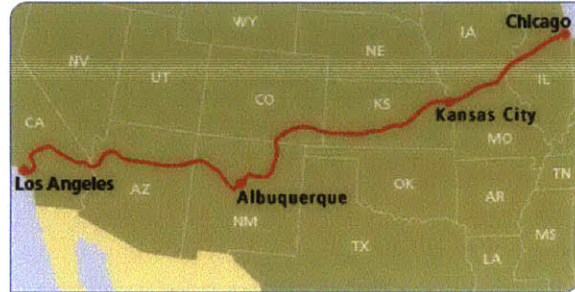


Figure 56. Southwest Chief Route Map. Source: santafejournal.blogspot.com

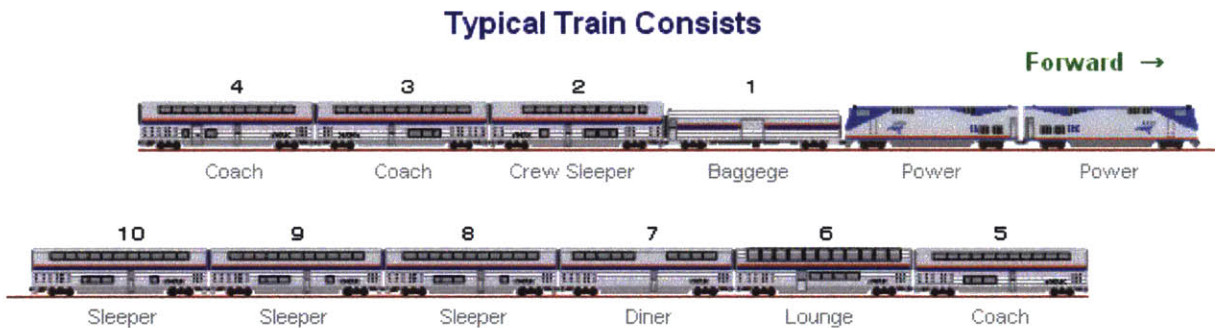


Figure 57. Typical Consist for Southwest Chief. Source: Trainweb.org

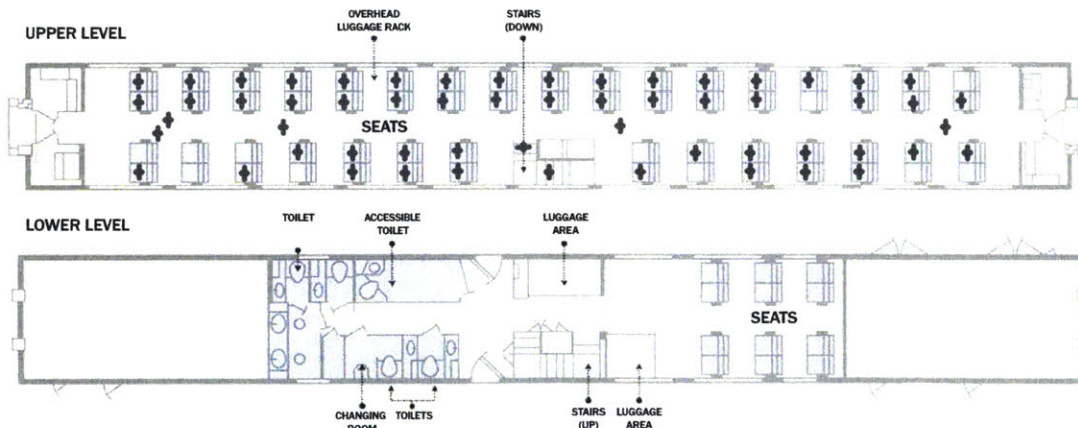


Figure 58. Half-populated plan diagram of Superliner Coach car. Source: Craigmashburn.com and author
 Right, Figure 59. Nighttime stop in Garden City, Kansas



I'm feeling a little refreshed after spending a night in Chicago with my mother, but it's quite intense to be on the train for this many days and nights. Even though it's much slower than an airplane, it feels quite strange, indeed unnatural to have gone through so many different places, climates, and micro-landscapes of the country so quickly without really getting to know them.

The first leg of the trip is managed by quite an uptight crew. They are very strict and continue reiterating rules over the loudspeaker; I guess that this is because they are trying to ward off bad behavior that perhaps they have seen before. I find that this seems to impact the social energy in the observation car and in general in people's interactions. The repetitive landscape (industrial-scale agriculture as far as the eye can see) of southeastern Illinois and then Missouri certainly doesn't help. There needs to be an easygoing air to the train for strangers to feel more comfortable talking. I like the idea of more programming to help facilitate social interactions for this reason.

At 7:30pm the dining car attendant luckily did not get the memo about being uptight. John, an older, impeccably dressed black man, is creating a cozy vibe in the dining car by playing music on his own speakers and addressing his customers with a kind of old-fashioned reverence. Given that so many of the passengers are white, this admittedly feels a little strange. But John has been working in the service industry for 40 years and seems to know what he's doing and enjoys it. He presents the menu as though it changes— "For tonight's special, we have..." even though the same meal options have followed me around the country, day after day. I sit with a hippie young white couple with a service dog heading to school in Prescott, Arizona. The man across the aisle from my sleeper car room is playing Steely Dan after dinner and I find myself becoming quite annoyed, but he turns it down just in time.

11:00am. Very busy in the observation car; many people seem very engaged by the high desert landscape. The train passed through Lamar, Colorado around 7:00 am this morning and are now in Raton, New Mexico, a famous rail pass. There's snow on the ground. I didn't know there were parts of New Mexico that looked like this. A middle-aged man named Caesar sat down next to me (the only free seat) as we were passing the Colorado / New Mexico border and talked my ear off. His doctor told him not to fly because of an injury- he's heading from near DeKalb, Illinois to Tucson to paint a mural. He believes everything is fate. He is trying to start a nonprofit called "Koncerts for Kancer." He loves the train.

At 2:00 pm I sit with a young white documentary filmmaker from upstate New York. I started talking with her because I saw her filming some of the Amish or German Baptists (there are many on this train, though I've seen them on pretty much every long-distance ride). She likes to talk to Amish people when she takes the train, because she knows she usually can't talk to them (she tells me that it is regular practice for Amish to restrict contact with outsiders). She once met a young Amish woman with whom she became pen pals. The woman was heading to Mexico by train to volunteer on Mennonite settlements there to help address illiteracy. She is unemployed right now and is working on a project but isn't sure what it is yet.

At 4:00 pm We arrive at a long service stop in Albuquerque. This stop is always a service stop, and local vendors have created a small economy there on the station, setting up each day to wait for passengers. I buy a small necklace that one of the vendors made herself.



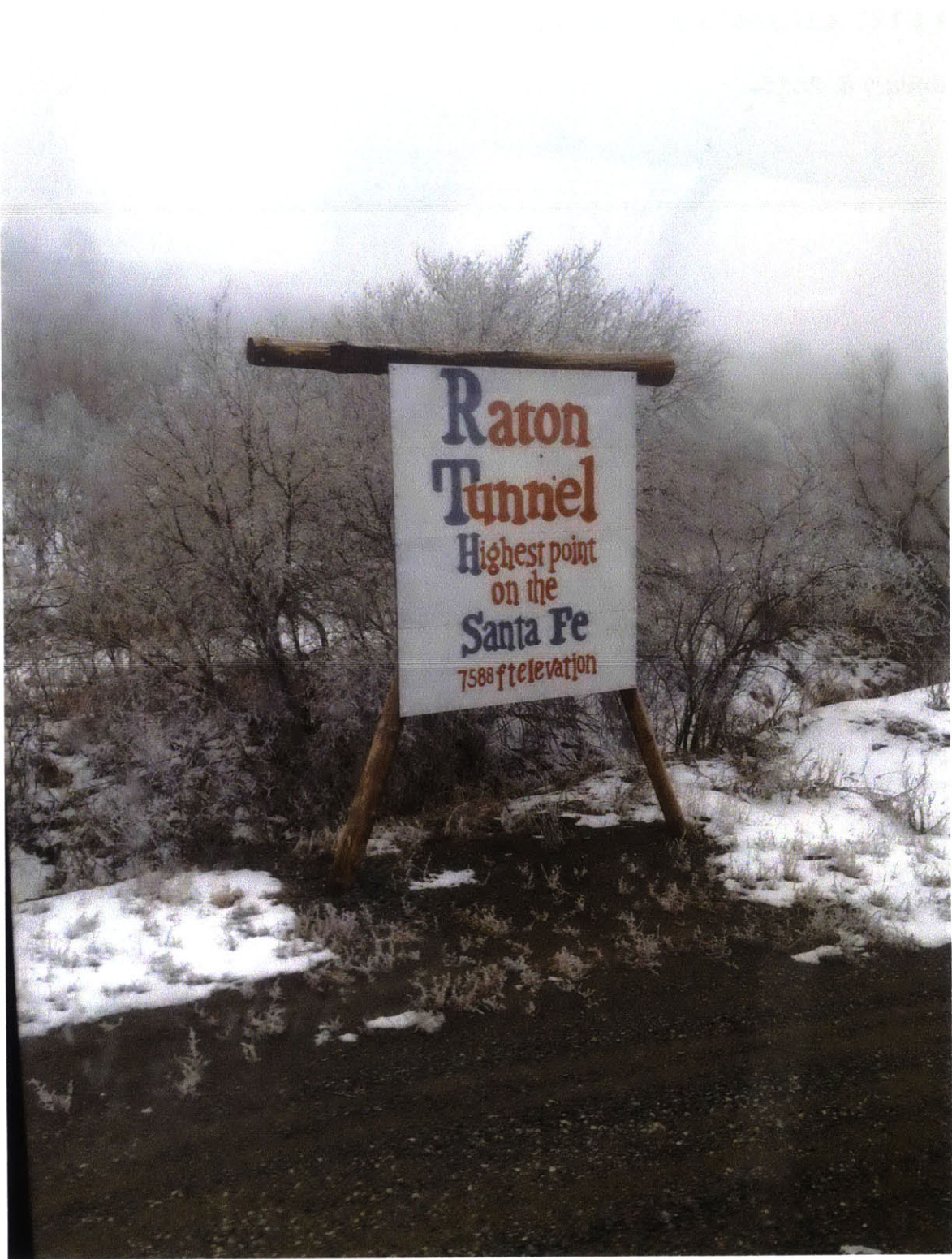
Figure 60. Albuquerque vendors.

7:30 pm. Sit with a lovely middle-aged white lesbian couple from Winnipeg. They are taking the train to LA and then driving to Baja California to go kayaking. We drink wine and sit talking for hours about relationships, divorce, and politics. They tell me that they feel that Native people's rights in Canada are finally being heard in a way that they aren't in America, and are hopeful for that. They give me a lot to think about, and make me feel less alone because we found so much in common.

I find that I have less and less energy to interview fellow passengers formally as time goes on. I did get good information from the interviews I recorded, but I also questioned how manufactured many of the things people said were because they were being interviewed. I also found that it put a strange distance between us that I became uncomfortable with. I found it more useful to immerse myself in the experience.

1/8 8:00 am. We arrive in Los Angeles early, once again. A second disorienting, exhausted walk into the grand lobby of the refurbished Union Station. I am feeling the loss of the train friends I met over the past few weeks, but also wondering whether they were friends or passing acquaintances, or something else. The public space on the train is at once freeing (people are much more open, intense, and personal with each other in conversations) and extremely limited (how could a train relationship really translate into a real one unless it continues off the train?). I am feeling quite ungrounded after so much time on the train.

Right image, Figure 61. The Raton Tunnel, near Raton, NM.



THE COAST STARLIGHT, RIDE TWO

January 8, 2015



Figure 62. Coast Starlight Route Map. Source: Vacationsbyrail.com

10:00am, leave Los Angeles .

The Starlight is busier this time around (the last time I wrote it was New Year's). The ride is sunny and the scenery is beautiful. Many Amish and German Baptists on this train as well, I overhear a conversation between two that the California Zephyr is their favorite train.

This train feels like it is moving incredibly slow, which I guess is because it winds its way through the mountains. It takes twelve hours to go from Los Angeles to the San Francisco Bay Area, as compared to a five-to-six hour drive and one-to-two hour flight. I talk with a middle-aged white lawyer from Oakland who was visiting family in Southern California. He'd like to take the train more often but can't justify how much longer it takes than driving or flying, even though it's much more convenient (it goes straight from the town his family lives in to near his house in Oakland). People are keeping to themselves a bit more; a lot of people reading, taking photos, and on their phones by themselves in the observation car. We arrive into Emeryville an hour late, around 11pm. A bus takes me into San Francisco, my last stop (for now).

Right image, Figure 63. The Southern California Coast.



CHAPTER 4: A SPATIO-TEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF THE TRAIN JOURNEYS



Figure 64. Film still from *In Transit*, Directors Maysles, True, Usui, Walker, and Wu. Source: Intransitfilm.com

Humanistic Qualities: Interactive

In reflecting on the unique social environment and individual experiences I observed on the train, I noticed many commonalities and shared characteristics. I will first set about to analyze what I experienced and saw in terms of space, time, design, and interactions. To analyze my train journeys, I conducted a “qualitative coding” of my recorded notes and interviews in order to unearth patterns. I noted the most common activities, as well as the precursors to the interesting anecdotes described in Chapter Three. Through this analysis I developed a list of common activities that I call *humanistic qualities* of the long distance train ride. These are split into activities that are interactive and those that are individual. Common interactive activities include people watching, casual chatting, intense conversations with strangers, storytelling, dining, drinking, and playing games. Common individual activities include looking out the window, working, reading and taking photos; many people also enacted disengaged individual activities like watching movies and checking their personal devices.

I then develop a set of spatio-temporal conditions, which describe what I believe are the ways in which the long distance train affords the humanistic qualities I observed and experienced. These conditions are functionality, accessibility, visual connection to landscape, human-scale design, grounded placelessness, (de)regulation and safety, duration, and autonomy.

The most common interpersonal activities that I observed and that were discussed in my interviews included people watching, chatting with fellow passengers and Amtrak staff, having intense conversations with fellow passengers, playing games, dining in the café car, and drinking in the café or observation car. The amount each of these interactive activities that occurred depended largely on easily controllable factors like the facilities of the train (i.e. whether the train has an observation car), the length of the trip, and the schedule. The amount of social activity also depended on less definable qualities such as the particular geography of the place the train is going through (for example, the Southwest was much more social than the Midwest), the particular mix of people on the train, attitudes of staff, and influences on the trip (i.e. delays).

People Watching came up as a common activity in most of my interviews. While it is done by one’s self, it requires the presence of others to do and I thus consider it interactive. It is difficult not to people watch on the long distance trains, especially in the observation car, which provides views of everyone else in the car from several different vantage points, unlike the coach car in which everyone is facing forward. People-watching also occurs while walking through the aisles; a quick glance at those you are silently sharing space with. The experience of being constantly noticed and watched thanks to the intimacy of the car can begin to be quite intense after some time, one of the reasons why those who can afford a sleeping car may enjoy having a respite from this forced silent socializing.

People-watching brings up several consistent threads: imagination, perspective, and projection. Several interviewees discussed the experience of people-watching. A friend, recalling a train experience he'd had in which he unexpectedly found himself spending Thanksgiving on the train, recalls noting that the only people on the train: the conductor, service attendant, and man playing solitaire the entire time – all seemed very sad to him, judging by their activities (chain smoking, playing solitaire) as well as their body language. He imagined that they did not have people to spend Thanksgiving with, or that they were forced to work over the holiday because of money. In this way he found himself feeling grateful that he did have family he could've spent the holiday with, and that he was in school. Adrian, Jess, and Joe, while aboard the Lake Shore Limited, described the ways in which they wonder about people they see on the train.

Adrian: I also like to think about people, like I wonder what that person over there is thinking, or where are they from, or you know, and it's mostly females because I'm single. I'm being truthful - I'm like - I wonder what she's thinking about - I wonder if she's with anybody - I wonder if she wants company. I wonder, is she ok - or even he sometimes - I wonder, why is this person on this train. Are they running from something?

Joe: Or running to something..

Jess: Every single person on the train has a different story. Has a reason. And it's always deeper than what you think it is. It's never just traveling.

Adrian: I mean a lot of people say it's vacation, but is it because you're seeing a sick relative, is it because you're going through it with your man or girlfriend at home and you just need to get away - so you're just going to call it a vacation or

Jess: Or are you going to another state to start completely over.

Both Adrian and Jess were imagining a kind of camaraderie with others they were traveling with by projecting what they were both going through onto others they saw (Adrian was looking for romantic company and Jess had bought a one-way ticket to Iowa and was contemplating "starting over").

Casual Chatting was mostly an observed or overheard activity rather than something that people spoke about in their interviews. This kind of talking happened mostly in the social spaces—the café and observation cars, the dining car, or at station stops. It happened frequently in half of the observation car where padded lounge chairs existed in groups of two or three always facing out of the window, which seemed to lower the bar for casual chatting. Many people struck up conversations with each other from a few seats away or across the aisle. Casual chatting also took place in the

half of the observation car that was set up with four-person booths. It happened more frequently when there was other chatting already happening; if there were no seats available and thus passengers would be forced to sit with each other, or happenstance across the aisle.

Casual chatting also happened frequently over shared experiences like purchasing items in the café car (with the staff or with other passengers), at “smoke stops”, or during the onboarding and alighting experiences.

A relaxed environment seemed like a necessary prerequisite for casual chatting. For example, on the first half of the journey on the Southwest Chief, the announcements over the loudspeaker and interactions with staff seemed very strained and uptight. This seemed to pervade the entire train with an anxious energy, and made it difficult to want to talk with others. Indeed, that evening after dinner in the observation car, often a time that is humming with a kind of convivial energy, was noticeably silent. Most of the socializing I did on that train was during meal time.

While casual chatting often ended after five to ten minutes, these conversations also turned into intense conversations.

Intense Conversations with Strangers were the initial occurrence that sparked my interest in this study. It is so rare to see the kinds of connections that people make with strangers on the train. It is difficult to imagine that I could have had the kinds of interviews I did in any other kind of public space (coffee shop, part, etc), which notably lacks the ability to encourage interactions due to the ability to leave and continue on with your day.

Here I define intense conversations by their content, feeling, and length. Intense conversations were about very personal details, emotional expression, or usually taboo topics like politics. The feeling of these conversations, indicated by body language, tone of voice, and other cues, are different than casual conversations, allowing me to estimate through eavesdropping and observation when passengers that I wasn't speaking to were having intense conversations

While not all of the long interviews or anecdotes I share here became intense, many of them were. Selected intense conversations discussed as appendices include interviews and conversations with Trent, Andrew and Kristen, the couple from Winnipeg, and the Lake Shore Limited Crew; observed intense conversations include the Milwaukee couple, and others. Trent told me about a lengthy conversation that he had had on a previous trip, and in so doing, the value of long, intense conversations.

The frequency of **storytelling** is another unique quality of the long distance ride, and it is one of the things that has made it the subject of several other ethnographic studies and narrative-based creative projects. I experienced many moments of storytelling on my journey, and ob-

served many more that I was not involved with. I was looking for stories and enjoy listening, and acknowledge that this may have led to more than the normal amount. But this quality is also acknowledged to be a common one by others, and was also something I overheard and observed that I was not involved with.

Storytelling is different than casual or intense conversations in that it requires one person to speak more than the other for a period of time. It also generally has the quality of a narrative recounting: a beginning, middle, and end, and often includes moments of drama and poignancy. Several of the storytelling-like conversations I had were not typical stories but could be thought of confessional, which also distinguished them from casual conversations and intense conversations, which sometimes dealt with personal details but were more of back and forths.

While it might be very hard to come by a stranger who would sit down and tell you intimate, personal stories about their lives, thoughts, and emotions in other public spaces (such as coffee shops, libraries, parks, etc), these kinds of experiences are a regular occurrence on the train. It is striking how testimonial they can become, and how free people feel to project onto those they are speaking with to draw equivalences. For example, during our interview, Trent shared many very intimate stories with me about his childhood, trouble with the law, and current family.

As anthropology student Kapish Singla wrote, storytelling is also a way of understanding local knowledge.¹ For example, in my conversation with Jeffrey the conductor, he shared many details about the kinds of people that ride this train, the cities it goes through, and more. When we got off in Tucson he told us all about what we could do for the hour-long stop. Andrew from MIT told me about one of his memorable experiences on his train journey:

[I met] this lady going through, a Hispanic woman. She was taking care of her son, who is 40, but was affected with a congenital illness. That was nice. She was giving me the scoop about El Paso, the Hispanic population, the sister city in Mexico – Juarez – she showed me the border that we passed by.

Through stories I heard on various trains, I learned about industrial farming, the oil crisis and how North Dakota businesses and employees are trying to respond, the small town Wisconsin job market and oil rig jobs, and much more.

Dining (in the dining car) is a quintessential aspect of long distance train travel. For those not otherwise interested in socializing, the dining car still provides a time to connect with others, meet strangers, utilizing food and the communal programming as the kind of “gateway” to socializing, where passengers from coach and first class come together. The food staff take the rules seri-

ously, which are that if you come into the dining car in a party of less than four, you will be seated at a table with other passengers. With this programmed activity that is also partially about saving space, Amtrak seems to recognize what scholars have written about the benefits of talking with strangers in travel². Several food staff take this host aspect of their job seriously, to great benefit. On the Southwest Chief, the food service attendant had music playing from his iPod speakers the entire time, even in off hours, making the dining room feel like a relaxing and fun space. When passengers walked in, I could tell he thought very carefully about where to seat them so that they would have the most positive experience. While waiting on people he would explain the menu by sharing “today’s specials” as though the menu changed from day to day, which they did not—the menu was the same every day and on every long distance route.

Other programming seemed to have an effect on socializing experience. For example, there was a designated smoking car on all long distance routes as late as 2004. Author Ben Sachs describes the kind of socializing that happened in the smoking car in his article for the *Chicago Reader*.³ The dining car is basically the last bastion of programming that exists throughout the long distance train ride, and has been stripped down to its bare essentials, though it is still placed between coach and sleeping car passengers thereby creating a zone of overlap and mixing. Other programs exist for first-class (i.e. sleeper) passengers on the Coast Starlight in California, such as film screenings in a special screening room on the lower level, and California wine tastings in a separate lounge car. There is a special car called the Great Dome car that is attached to the Adirondack trains that runs through New York during the fall to encourage leaf-based tourism. On a few of the trains, announcers would announce that happy hour specials were in effect during the pre-dinner hours, meaning that there were some discounted drinks. But this programming did not seem to encourage much activity. I will expand on this aspect of formal programming and suggestions for enhancing them in further sections.

Drinking (alcohol) seemed to be another unique factor and interactivity generator on the train. I observed some people drinking alone, but the vast majority were drinking socially. Beer, wine, and cocktails are sold in both the dining car and the cafe car, though the prices are quite high. Passengers also brought their own alcohol. Although technically passengers are prohibited from drinking alcohol that they brought themselves except in sleeper car rooms, this rule is unevenly enforced. I found that if the alcohol was concealed and passengers were not becoming boisterous, dangerous, or bothersome, personal alcohol could be consumed easily. Sharing alcohol that was brought on by passengers became one easy way to make friends in the social spaces. It is difficult to imagine this happening in any other public realm place, even in other places where own alcohol is carried, like

concerts in the park. Somehow on the train, the trust level is high enough that people will share beverages like this.

I also got the sense that some passengers took the train specifically so that they could drink, and though I did not ask them whether they were habitual drinkers or alcoholics, I did get that sense. For example, Andrew began drinking vodka straight at 9:30 am and continued to drink throughout the day. He was a large man but even so, he probably drank at least half a liter of vodka by the time the day was finished. That afternoon when I interviewed him, he was in a jovial mood about the train. I asked him what he liked to do on the train and he responded: "I love to play dominoes, I love to play cards, I love to meet people, I love to have a good time." Groups traveling together also brought alcohol and created a party-like atmosphere on the train, like the group of friends from Memphis.

Playing Games is a common way to pass the time on the train. Like drinking, this is an activity that primarily happened socially, both between friends & family traveling together or between passengers traveling alone but looking for company. Card games and board games were the most common. Especially for passengers traveling long distances, I observed many instances of people getting to know each other on a stop or at a meal and then inviting each other to play a game later. Joe described the way games can help break the ice between strangers:

One of my favorite train stories. I was riding the rails with a girl I was dating. We were playing go fish. We were out of games. We had been on the train for hours upon hours, waiting for trains, sitting on trains, out of card games. Let's just play Fish. So we're sitting there on the train, in the observation deck, playing fish - but these three -- I'm not sure exactly what they were - it was two Spanish teachers from South America and a French teacher from France who all now teach their respective languages in the US. They were new, touring together, they were absolutely fascinated by Go Fish. I was trying to explain it to them, and they couldn't understand it. Just lost in translation.

Games are also culturally coded. Andrew, an African American man, taught me to play dominoes. While we were playing he told me stories about how dominoes was an important game to his family. He used playing dominoes to connect with the other people of color on the train that passed by.

Humanistic Qualities: Individual

Though interactive, social experiences are an important part of what animates and invigorates public realm experiences, internal, individual experiences were common among descriptions of what makes trains special. By individual experiences, I refer to things that do not involve speaking or

interacting with others. Many of these kinds of internal experiences still require a kind of conviviality, which one might call being “together alone.” Thus, I further divide these individual experiences to those that are engaged versus disengaged. Engaged activities still involve some kind of visual or emotional connection to the scenery or people around them, like looking out the window, working, or taking photographs. Disengaged activities include sleeping, watching media, and being on one’s phone, all of which send a signal to others that while they might be there physically, mentally they are in their own world. Listening to music is not necessarily engaged or disengaged; those listening to music were still often present by maintaining a visual connection to what is passing by and to others in the car. But passengers listening to music were also often quite disengaged.

Looking out the window. This is by far the most common experience on the train, as well as one of the most unique. Because the passing landscape is often interesting (though not always traditionally beautiful or majestic), the train makes it possible to sit and do nothing for a very long time without becoming bored.

One of the most common benefits to looking out the window and the associated mental experiences is that it gives people the space to think deeply. It seems to lull many passengers into a kind of meditative state, where you are aware of your surroundings, but also lost in thought. A common refrain heard when describing this experiencing is “losing track of time.”

Passengers described different internal experiences that occur while looking out the window. Those working on creative projects, like Jess and Joe, described looking out the window and imagining new lifestyles, new ways of being, and imaginary characters that take as jumping off points what they see out the window. Jess described the experience:

‘Cause you can look outside, especially in Pennsylvania, they have a lot those stations as well, and going through the mountains, you can just look outside, there are so many things going on in stillness, and you can create whatever you want. Anything you want.

Others described the ability to work through some important emotional issues on their mind in a unique way on the train. For example, Trent, when asked what he thinks about on the train, said:

Everything and nothing... I get a lot of my self-help thoughts out of the way. I think about my next move, my options, weigh them out. I do a lot of making sure everything is up to par with my birth mother and my children. Do a lot of sorting things out. At the same time, I don’t think. I just listen to my music. I love music. It’s definitely soothing. Anytime I am thinking too hard I put my headphones on.

Beyond these more philosophical conversations, most others who I spoke to shared that they loved taking the train because they like the feeling of seeing different places, of experiencing the landscape. This was much more common on the more traditionally scenic routes that ran from Chicago to the west coast, as well as the Pacific Surfliner, which runs along the coast of California. Interestingly, many passengers seemed to equate the experience of being on the train with being in nature, something I will discuss later in the analysis section on the tourist gaze. For example, Brett from MIT shared that that the main interest in taking the train for him, beyond meeting people, was the scenic aspect. Countless others described their enjoyment for seeing the small landscapes of America, which indeed is one of the great benefits of the train. I will unpack this idea of “looking out the window” in further depth in the next section.

Working. Several people I spoke with shared with me that the train is one of the places where they are most productive. This seems to apply as much to shorter-distance and commuter lines as well as long distance rides. Joe described one reason that the train helps:

I can't write at home. Once in a while I can write in a library if it's a cool library, but I write in bars. I need the people, I need the atmosphere around me. That's where I draw the inspiration from.

The train provides a sense of focus and lack of distraction that make it easier to focus. It also provides a time-limited way to accomplish certain tasks. This may relate to interactive work as well — I ran into an old colleague on the train from Boston to New York, who was on her way to a meeting with a colleague. She said that she often gets some of her best meeting work on the train, describing that it allows for certain kind of intensity that is helpful when you need to get things done. She suggested that the train (and stations) could be better utilized for this kind of use, which I will explore in the recommendations section.

Other common engaged activities include **taking photographs and reading** (Figures 54 and 55). Two people I interviewed, Gina and AJ, had taken the train specifically to take photos, and considered themselves amateur photographers. Gina said “I am attached to my camera, this is an extension of my body”. During moments when we were going through particularly majestic scenery, like in the high desert of Arizona, the Rocky Mountains, or along the coast in California, the observation car would fill up with people taking photos and just enjoying the scenery. The mutual appreciation for landscape in these moments always brought a pleasant and quiet buzz to the social

atmosphere on the train. Likewise, many passengers quietly read, both in their own chairs and in the observation car. However, many passengers shared that they did not get as much reading done as they thought they would while on the train because how how distracting the scenery and other people are, which was my experience as well.

As part of my research, I routinely walked from train end to train end, counting what people were doing. Particularly on the second and third days of a long distance journey, I regularly observed between one quarter and one third of passengers either sleeping or watching media. This proportion rose during particular times of day and on particular trains. For example, whenever it got dark, people seemed to retreat into less social moods, and spend more time in their seats. As much of my trip was in winter, this meant that much of the day often felt quite somber. The kinds of activities that were most common in this category include sleeping, watching movies or TV on their personal devices, interacting with their smartphones, talking on the phone, or listening to music.

Many people told me that my hypotheses about the train being a unique social environment would not hold because everyone would be on their smartphones on the train. While I did find that those on their smartphones were much less engaged with the train environment, I did not find this to be the predominant activity for passengers, nor did I find that so many people on their smartphones prevented others from socializing. In observing the rhythm of a social space like the observation car, it seemed that people on their smartphones got bored after a time. It is too easy to catch someone's eye, or to have someone make a comment about the landscape or the trip to you, and strike up a conversation.

DIAGRAMS OF HUMANISTIC QUALITIES

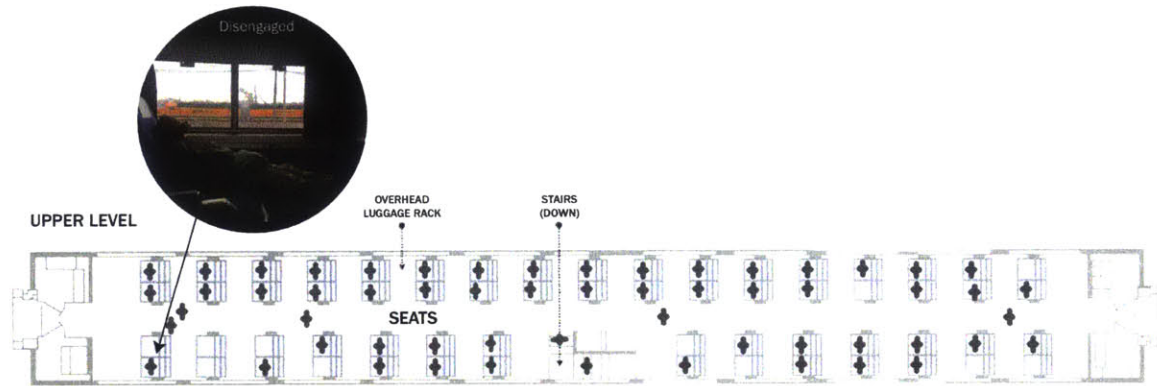


Figure 65. Empire Builder Coach Car. Source: Craigmashburn.com and the author

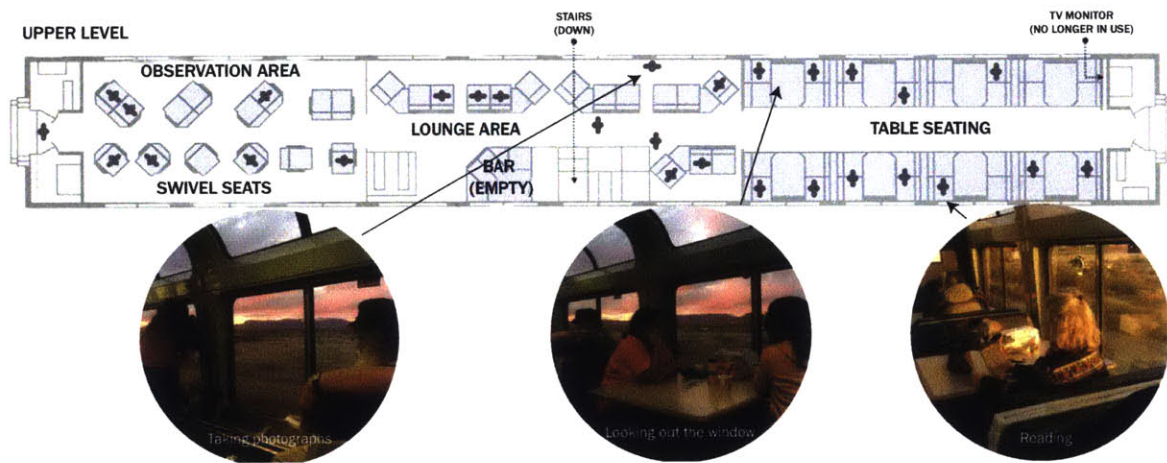


Figure 66. Sunset Limited Lounge Car. Source: Craigmashburn.com and the author.

Spatio-Temporal Conditions

There are certain conditions that underlie the unique humanistic qualities that are happening on the train. They include functionality, accessibility, visual connection to landscape, a neutral and comfortable design, a grounded placelessness, level of (de-)regulation, duration, and autonomy. I argue that together with the overall marginalization of the train as a mode of transportation, these elements create the potential for much-needed transgressive and subversive ways of being and socializing. I will introduce these aspects of the train space as levers, perhaps that can be variably mixed to create conditions for certain kinds of actions.

Functionality

The train is first and foremost a way of getting from one place to another. Within this primary function, passengers' reasons for being on the train varied greatly. Passengers travel for a variety of reasons: for business and even as a long commute (as observed on the Empire Builder), for vacation, to see family and friends, to get to and from school, and more. Many passengers choose to take the train over an airplane because unlike flying (which many characterized as stressful, harried, over-policed, etc), passengers largely find the train an enjoyable way of getting from one place to another.

Accessibility

The passenger train is primarily a way of getting people from one place to another, but what kinds of people? In terms of socio-economic class, the train is much more diverse than many people I spoke with prior to the trip assumed or expected. This is a result of the price variation that exists across the Amtrak network. The trips on the Northeast corridor are much more expensive than buses or driving, and sometimes even as much as or more than flying. However, especially in coach, regional and long distance trips are much more affordably priced. Many people I spoke with chose to take the train because of price, especially those traveling under 1 day on the long distance routes.

The train is not accessible to everyone, as it is in most cases more expensive than the bus. Its accessibility is also challenged in terms of geography. The passenger train network does not serve the entire United States, and for those places that it does serve it does not do so evenly.

But even given these caveats, the train brought together a lot of people of different ages, races, geographic locations, and reasons for being there, making the train car feel heterogenous and like an American "slice of life."

Visual Connection to Landscape

The passing landscape provides a kind of endlessly interesting backdrop that makes much of the interactions described earlier possible. The passing landscape provides a constant reminder that you are getting somewhere, accomplishing something, while still giving you the space to do other things at the same time. It provides the sensation of operating on multiple levels, which also relates to the kind of meditative sensation that I will discuss later.

Socially, the passing landscape also provides what William H. Whyte refers to as triangulation. The presence of a shared external element makes it easier for passengers to spark up a conversation; it creates a low bar for starting conversations.⁴

The passing landscape inspires a specific kind of appreciation for landscape. A common refrain heard in my interviews that I also experienced myself was the sense that you can see the landscape you are moving through, simulating a kind of “being somewhere.” However, this kind of appreciation bears the signs of the *tourist gaze*, or a kind of objectified viewing of objects deemed outside ordinary life.⁵ Gina described the kind of tourist perspective and consumptive stance that the train provides: “The train gives you perspective on so many levels. I am not even halfway through my trip and it’s just given me so much, and it’s something that I want to share with people. And I mean, people who don’t get the chance to travel - my friend has never left the state of California. I was telling her - there’s a whole world out there”. In my interview with her, she described a short stop in Milwaukee as giving her a sense of what it’s like to live there. While it’s lovely to have a brief experience in a place, it’s also important to remember the kind of relationship to place tourism promotes and provides.

Human-Scale Design

The train’s built environment is in many ways a kind of blank slate, but one that encourages and inhibits ways of being and interacting. The materiality of the surfaces is simple and seems to be chosen to be appropriate for many different kinds of aesthetic preferences. The colors are neutral. The aesthetic impression that these cars make are not very strong, making it possible for many different kinds of people (demographically and psychographically--regarding behaviors, attitudes and interests) to seem to feel comfortable in it. The train cars are made specifically for human interaction and comfort, creating a kind of density that feels cozy. I use the term human-scale design (following architect and urban theorist Jan Gehl) to describe an environment that designs around the size, shape, and movement of the human body, rather than for other objects, aesthetics, or other concerns.

The comfortable aspect of the social spaces seemed key to encouraging social activity. Upon entering the observation or cafe cars, it was common to ask someone sitting along if you could sit with them, especially if the booths were all otherwise occupied. Seats were not so close together that it felt too intense. You could also maintain a visual connection to the others that were seated in that section of the car with you, making it feel less pressurized - there was often conversation across the aisles at the booths, or with people behind you.

The observation car was also designed to have two parts, separated by a bar that was never used in my experience, and created a feeling of underutilized space (See pages 86 and 29). The visual field thus included at the most only 20-30 people and the parts of the car had their own activities going on. Thus the part of the car that was structured mainly as booths generally became more social and louder (especially when the scenery became majestic) while the other end of the car, which all had chairs facing the windows and not each other, was usually much more quiet - in between there was a kind of middle ground, which groups of “couches” and seating arrangements made for three to four people were facing each other and the window. It was often difficult to try to strike up conversations with people on the quiet end of the car, whereas it was quite easy in the parts that were structured as booths or communal couches.

It is interesting to compare the way the cafe car feels in comparison to the observation car. The cafe car’s only options for sitting are four-person booths, on both sides of a concession booth. The observation car is much more spacious. It is also much more open because of the addition of the curved windows on the tops. It also felt easy to strike up conversations with strangers sitting quite close to you if you were both facing the outside.

Grounded Placelessness

Many people described their preference for the train over the airplane by suggesting that they enjoyed the experience of seeing the places they were going through, rather than looking out over them. The long distance ride is both grounded (in that it is connected to the earth) and yet placeless. Can one really say that one has “seen” or experienced a place if one has only ridden through it on the train?

An aspect that complicates this matter further is that especially on the long distance trains, a passenger riding the entire length meets waves of passengers riding on shorter distances than they are. This means that one meets people from small towns one passes through, gaining some sense of what the culture and people are like, in addition to the landscape.

The sense of still being connected to the earth, of being able to walk on and off the train

fluidly (which is a factor both of physical and legal form and regulation) is part of what makes the train relaxing.

Train tracks largely run through parts of town that do not look and feel particularly welcoming to human habitation. The housing placed next to train tracks appeared to be public housing or housing for the very poor. Beyond housing, I observed small cemeteries, sites of industrial-scale agriculture and storage, forgotten natural areas, businesses that one might intend to visit rather anonymously (strip clubs, etc), sanitation and water reclamation plants, and other uses that are not particularly scenic.

The parts of the American landscape seen from the train are unusual views. I am from Chicago and pride myself in having explored its many viewscapes, but the view of downtown seen from the various entrances and exits on each train were disorienting and truly unique perspectives.

Marginality describes the overall condition of the contemporary status of America's passenger rail network. Thus, those choosing the long distance routes for convenience are largely marginalized from mainstream economic development and transportation patterns of the U.S. For example, I met many people on the Empire Builder who were forced to take the train from points west and south to the fracking boom towns for work. As the woman from Minot explained, this was because flights into Minot and Williston were outrageously expensive, and there were not major expressways that made driving convenient, especially during the winter. Those choosing to take the train for fun or travel enjoy this kind of marginality, which mixed with the nostalgic and symbolic meanings of the train, provide for an enriching and unique tourist experience. It seems that the one exception to those forced to take the train and those doing so for fun are regional trips that are not priced as high. For the small percentage of riders who are taking the long distance routes for business (between 2 - 12% of long distance riders)⁶, one imagines that these businesses are unique in that they do not value efficiency as much as the vast majority of American businesses do. I will explore the relationship of time to the train a bit more in the next section.

(De)Regulation and Safety

There is a sense of being under a benevolent watchful eye of the conductors and agents who were omnipresent. The train felt quite strict and regulated about its rules, but there was a lot of freedom and room for negotiation unless passengers were bothering others. This led to a certain baseline sense of safety that actually left most of us to feel quite free on the train. For those who may be vulnerable, the watchful Amtrak staff ensured a level of safety, which in turn led to a kind of inhibition. For example, I always felt that if something bad was happening to me, I knew where

to go and would be protected. On the first train I was on, I was hit on quite aggressively by a man who was ordering many drinks in the cafe car. The attendant saw what happened and we made eye contact, in a way that made me feel that he knew and was looking out for me. Later on in the ride, he asked if that fellow had made any more trouble. Compare this to the experiences of countless women on the NYC subway, an unregulated transit environment, who experience sexual assault or targeting.

Given these overall patterns, sense of safety and regulation varied greatly from train to train. As my conversation with Jeffrey, the seasoned conductor, confirmed, conductors and the service agents working with them have very different managerial styles. Some of this has to do with particular routes. For example, the City of New Orleans train is known for being lax about alcohol, and my experience matched this. The Empire Builder is known to have safety and drunkenness issues largely as a result of the man camps of the oil boom towns. Workers boarding the trains will be doing so having just gotten paid a large sum, and will spend a lot of it on alcohol. If the train is late, many will have been sitting in the station drinking to pass the time while they wait.

One situation got diffused quickly: a disturbed passenger was loudly bothering passengers over the course of a few hours, sitting down in random seats and sharing loud aggressive outbursts. One of the passengers alerted the conductor, who followed the man into the space between the cars and spoke with him there. The general protocol is that if someone is being problematic, they would get kicked off the train in whatever the next station was, or the local police of that station would come onto the car and remove the “problematic” passengers, leaving them to be dealt with under whatever legal jurisdiction they happened to be in.

The fact that I felt so free perhaps has to do with my gendered and racialized identity as a white woman. Interestingly, several black passengers that I spoke to also told me that they felt free and unbothered on the train in ways that they do not usually. I am curious to know how much of this has to do with the fact that the train service industry has a long history of employing African Americans, which still holds true today. Many, if not the majority of conductors and service agents are African American (about 40%, or 8,000 of Amtrak’s 20,000 employees are people of color, but I was not able to find more specific data)⁷. Perhaps this led to a sense that black passengers would not be targeted or profiled. It would be interesting to study in greater depth the response to the train space by ethnic group-- since latinos, asian americans, native americans, and other cultural groups are underrepresented on the train, I did not get a good enough sense to be able to reflect on that here.

For the most part, conductors did not over-enforce rules. Once a passenger complained in the quiet car (which runs along the northeast corridor) about other passengers talking, and I

heard the agent refuse to ask them to be quiet because he felt they weren't making an unreasonable amount of noise. Many passengers brought alcohol onto the train and shared it with others, and as long as we passengers weren't making noise or bothering others they weren't asked to stop.

Duration

Here, I use duration to describe the fact that mostly strangers from different walks of life are confined in an intimate space together for a long period of time. In addition to the other qualities, I argue that one of the key features of the train experience is a certain kind of immersive momentum, created by the white noise of the train and its consistent, smooth motion-- it lulls passengers into a feeling of being able to focus. This sensibility mirrors the kind of experiences that both meditators and filmmakers speak about in their work, allowing for a certain kind of detached mental engagement and creative freedom. One woman I met described liking the train because it allows you to live "frame by frame."

This is the quality of the train that seems to allow for such interesting and intense connections between people. Trent described it best:

In trains, you know you have a lot of time, people are less on guard and will interact with people. As opposed to other places where you are busy with other things. There's always -- there's long distance train ride you have a lot of time -- helps break barriers in terms of connecting with people. People want to get to know the other person they are traveling with.

This led to a sort of existential feeling about the train. It reminded me of the Jean-Paul Sartre play *No Exit* where three people are in a sort of undetermined purgatory together, forced to uncover and explore the meaning of life. One of the famous lines in the play is "Hell is other people". Joe echoed this sentiment when he said, "You're on the train, and it's not going to end. If someone has a problem, it's just gonna have to wait until you're off the train. It gives you that freedom to do what you want without outside influence." In this way, the train also reminded me of being on stage, in a kind of performative quality. As in a stage play, the drama of the train unfolds intensely because there's nowhere else to go, but also because passengers know that it will end.

Indeed, the train was full of philosophizing. A few selected quotes to this point below:

AJ: "Everyone (speaking to the imagined listeners of the recording): just realize that this world is arbitrary and abstract, you didn't really have a choice in your existence so be nice to each other."

Andrew: "I love the train darlin' because I meet people - I don't meet strangers - I don't meet strangers, I meet people. I love people. This is me. And in response to "What does the train mean to you?" Andrew answered: "It means peace, tranquility, happiness, and meeting people."

In response to my question, "What do you think about on the train?", various answers describe this kind of philosophical stance:

Andrew: "I think about how much enjoyment I can bring to another person and they can bring to me."

Trent: "Everything and nothing. It's the only time where everybody leaves me alone - they say, you know, he's in between, nobody sits down and says, "we already know what he is". I get a lot of my self-help thoughts out of the way. Think about my next move - I hate planning, no plans - I don't plan. But I just think about my options, I weigh them out. I do a lot of making sure everything is up to par with my children and my birth mother. Do a lot of sorting things out. At the same time, I don't think.

Jess: "I think about the freedom of my soul"

Joe: "Yeah and the train gives you a way to grow also - I mean, even just talking to everyone last night - I woke up and, you change. You learn different things, and you start thinking differently, and I was talking to you last night for all those hours - I look outside and I see everything differently now."

Autonomy

Another complementary and important determining factor for the train is that passengers have the ability to move around to different spaces. That this autonomy is determined by what exists on the train means that perhaps this sense is controlled.

Passengers feel that they have a sense of freedom on the train, and I attribute this largely to the fact that they can move around and choose different activities when they feel like doing them. For example, AJ from Austin, Texas, explains why he was enjoying his first train experience: "You can roam around, you can check out the scenes they have.... It's not that expensive, you can stretch your feet if you have to, interact with the other people..." This gives the long distance train a kind of rhythm, with different kinds of energies existing in the observation, dining, and cafe cars at different times of day and depending on who is there and the kind of energy the staff give off. Again, though, this sense of autonomy only creates the kinds of experiences on the train because it is an autonomy given to passengers who have already chosen to be away from their normal supports in an effort to move from one place to another. For example, Gina said: "You can't do as much when

you're on the train." There are a smaller menu of items to choose from than in daily life. Perhaps the freedom that passengers feel is in contrast to the physically constraining nature of automobile and airline travel; whatever the reason, it is clear that for many, the limitation of activities to those that exist on the train cars creates a feeling of actually being free to choose what one wants to do, even though one is confined in so many ways.

The presence of social spaces on the train are very important, not just because they make possible the kinds of conversations and activities that happen within them, but also because they seem to infuse the rest of the train with a kind of sociability or sense of connectivity.

Passengers on the train are also largely operating autonomously from their support structures. Especially those traveling for personal reasons (the majority of long distance passengers), people are away from their friends, family, things that make them comfortable, daily habits and routines, and assumptions about them. One exception to this might be the people who are on the train as a long commute, i.e. going to work. This was the characteristic of the Empire Builder, and perhaps what made it so different and decidedly less heterotopic.

The train is in this way reflective of some of the other elements of what observers and theorists of public space might call "vernacular." We can think of these aspects of acting creatively in public alone or together as certain creative tactics, but they are much more than recreational. In fact, I argue that they relate to the presence or absence of capital accumulation and regulation that goes along with it.

The train thus affords certain experiences based on these eight conditions that come together to create a unique and dynamic space that is both heterotopic and a site within the public realm. In Chapter Six, I will explore improvements that could help the train fully realize its potential, as well as speculate on how these conditions, which help us to define what it means to be a great public space, might be applied to non-train spaces. Before doing that, I will explore how the train is a complex and contradictory public site from which to learn by unearthing its close alignment with the spatial configurations and symbolism of various waves of American modernity.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 5: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE AMERICAN PASSENGER TRAIN



Figure 67. Film still from *In Transit*, Directors Maysles, True, Usui, Walker, and Wu. Source: [Intransitfilm.com](http://intransitfilm.com)

Introduction

This chapter explores the changing cognitive and cultural conceptions of the train in American material conditions as well as psyches. I found that many passengers experience unique conditions on the train in part because they are carrying with them constructed and historic narratives of America, landscape, society, and more; many referenced these narratives implicitly in describing their experience on the train. I argue that the train as a network, social space, and historic symbol is co-constitutive of dominant ideologies of American modernity. Embedded within these dominant notions are sets of contradictions that are themselves, as George Revill, wrote, “core to the cultural geography of modernity.”¹ These myths—modern, urban, liberator, and marginal—and their internal contradictions are heightened on the train and thus easily observed, making the train an important site for unearthing the material and cognitive contradictions core to modern life.

The changing political economy of national transportation preferences and funding and the according changes in urban development, along with advances in technology, mean that the world outside the train car has changed in many ways. After the height of passenger rail travel in 1920, auto transport and later air travel eclipsed rail as the dominant long distance travel mode. Experiences of space and time have changed even more recently through the development of the internet and mobile technology, bringing us in the ‘network age.’² However, the basic technology and spatial configurations of the train car have not changed much since the train’s heyday. This perhaps is what causes many passengers to describe a kind of nostalgia while on the train—as Professor Jana Cephas said, “it feels like you’re going back in time.” Riding the train today embodies traces of the past, and I will explore some of the more prominent traces here in an effort to better understand the contemporary conditions I observed.

Defining Modernity

I will use modernity here mainly to describe a set of ideologies that transform to apply to different material conditions but can be traced to specific periods of time, but whose material conditions change. Modernity arose as a way of describing new lifestyles and arrangements beginning in the early-mid 19th century, though its ideological roots are with the western enlightenment of centuries earlier. It is associated in this period materially with the changing technologies, migration patterns, spatial organization, class structure, and cultural shifts. It is generally understood to also mean changes happening at a larger scale than they had before, both in terms of numbers of people, space, and money. Along with structural changes to society and the economy, modernity is closely associated with aesthetic and creative responses to these changes, including new forms of represen-

tation, visual codes, and new disciplinary lenses through which to understand the world.

In understanding how fundamental the railway was to heralding the beginning of the modern era, I suggest that modernity is ongoing, as is our use of the rail metaphor as well as the material changes that continue to go along with changing technologies of mobility. Architect and geographer Maria Kaika, in *City of Flows*, notes, “Modernity... is understood as a programmatic vision for social change and progress, linked to industrialization and capitalist expansion, and in effect as an ideology for human emancipation.”³ Though capitalism, industrialization, and the other changes that accompanied the first modern “era” have greatly evolved, the way modernity looks and feels has evolved too. The train continues to symbolize and evoke progress, but it also embodies nostalgia; something society has moved beyond.

Modernity is not so easily pinned down as a set of physical and social upheavals—it was and is predicated upon an ideology and mindset, what Richard Dennis calls “the shock of the new.”⁴ Dennis describes the myth of the modern as predicated upon a fetishization of some aspect of the past and rejection of other aspects of it in an effort to create new traditions on larger and more relational scales. He writes, “modernity... [retains] the past as ‘other’ as a continuing proof the superiority of the new.”⁵ In this way, modernity as a concept is fundamentally relational, as well as relying on understood hierarchies of people, space, and time between pre-modern and modern.

Modernity itself relies upon and thus inscribed the idea that people, groups of people, sites, cities, and more can be objectively, coherently and consistently defined and represented at a large scale and then classified and mapped onto hierarchies. The notion of “modern” itself implies a comparative other, the “pre-modern”; just as urbanity requires the rural. As noted in Allan Sekula’s “The Body and the Archive”, technological instruments used during the height of the 1st wave of modernity obscured the construction of these systems, which in themselves assume certain viewpoints and value judgments.⁶ The spatial and social constructions described below—modernity and urbanity; racialized, classed, and gendered identities, were aided and co-constituted by the development of the train network and experienced intensively in the space of the train car itself.

Train as Modern

“Modern life” conjures a set of systematizing technologies that in turn connote progress and productivity. A new system of managing time was crucial in the formulation of modernity, leading cultural historian and theorist Wolfgang Schivelbusch to famously describe the way railroads appeared to annihilate space and time. As railroad networks grew as small private entities, they did not negotiate with each other, allowing each company to keep its own timetables. Before 1889, the

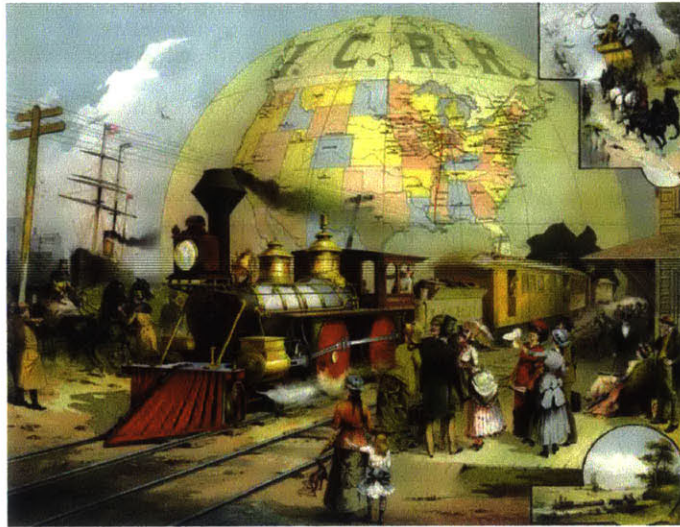


Figure 68. 1882 Swain & Lewis Poster showing the Illinois Central Railroad. Source: thumbs.imagekind.com

territory we now recognize as the United States kept over 100 of its own time zones. As rail traffic grew this made it increasingly difficult to coordinate arrival and departure times, and avoid collisions. Thus by the late 19th century the territory was divided into the four time zones (given legal recognition in 1918) that now order our lives. This had the effect of systemizing, disciplining, and joining the disparate territories into one legible system.⁷

Historian Richard White disputes the notion that the development of the train network was in practice an ideal efficient and progressive venture that we should continue to idealize. White's *Railroaded* details the disorganized, dysfunctional, and corrupt ways in which the railroad developed during the late 19th century. White judges these enterprises as failures not only because of the enormous human toll (suffering and deaths of its workers, disruption of and violence against Native American cultures, communities, and livelihoods, and more) and environmental degradation, but also by its own standards—the railroad businesses that White discovers are chock full of financial and logistical disasters as well. White's railroad enterprises were “overbuilt, prone to bankruptcy and receivership, wretchedly managed, politically corrupt, environmentally harmful, and financially wasteful.”⁸ That the entrepreneurs, who White characterizes largely as “limited and ordinary men,”⁹ were able to profit from these enterprises was due to luck, timing, and state intervention. Moreover, they built transcontinental lines ahead of demand, creating promotions that led to quick destruction of native communities and many ecological resources. In what White calls a kind of precursor to the modern-day credit crisis, he shows that the transcontinental railroads at this time were financed through debt and tricks of the financial markets, which put the risk squarely in the hands of others.¹⁰ The result was a privately owned system that set up new inequalities of social relations of property.¹¹

White concludes that these ineffective, wasteful, and violent corporations thrived only because of the political conditions that evolved hand-in-hand. We have inherited this system today. White argues that the railroads should have developed more gradually without such drastic subsidies and negative consequences.

We less often hear about the stories of the thousands of workers involved in the creation of the rail network, but this too is modernity—the dark side, conveniently ignored in the triumphant dominant narrative of progress and modernity. In the years of intensive transcontinental building, the 1880's - 1890's, thousands of trainmen died and tens of thousands were injured. In 1893, the first year of national safety legislation, 1,567 trainmen died and 18,877 were injured.¹² Most of these were preventable. The two most common causes for accidents in these years were a result of coupling and breaking, though technology that would have greatly reduced accidents during these common occurrences existed.

The exclusive group of Anglo-Americans who profited greatly (financially and politically) from the railroads existed in constant conflict with lower class workers, whose power through unionization was a constant threat to their profits. Some of the railroad companies dealt with this through union-busting while others tried to inscribe a kind of welfare capitalism. Working-class communities of various European descents formed the powerful Knights of Labor at this time. The Knights were effective in their anti monopolist activism and provided powerful source of resistance to the extractive labor system; they also relied on racialized denigration and violence against contract Chinese labor, a position which allowed them to transform themselves from being a “threat—an ignorant and vicious working class—to being victims.”¹³ And yet bullies they were; the dehumanizing denigration of the Chinese made great bouts of violence possible, perhaps the most famous instance of which was at Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885. An armed mob, consisting largely of men of English, Scottish, Welsh, Swedish, Danish, and Irish descent, burned Rock Springs Chinatown to the ground, killing over 50 Chinese and stealing over \$200,000 in savings. This hatred was justified through racialized constructs, but as is often the case its source was economic – the Knights saw contract labor as a huge threat to their own economic arrangements, and idealized “free labor” (necessarily white, and male) as the basis of the working-class republic.

Train as Urban

The period of great railroad expansion during the progressive era is also that of the first wave of massive American city building. The train network itself facilitated this pattern of spatial development by creating nodes and networks, and moving large amounts of goods and materials

across long distances. It also helped to facilitate the conceptual (an largely mythological) divide between urban and rural that still exists with us today. Before railways, it was impossible to move goods and people at the same scale with regularity and speed. Thus, railways made possible the transformation of landscapes and ecosystems into places habitable and resources extractable for and by humans at the scale we currently take for granted. Cultural historian Leo Marx' *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* unearthed the contradictions between the ideal concepts of the pastoral and the technological in 19th century American literature. By tracing the trope of the technological interruption in nature in famous works of Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, and more, Marx helps show that the idealization of agrarian simplicity alongside drastic industrialization so common in American psyches is a strange tension.¹⁴ Other works, notably Environmental Historian William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, outline the way in which the urban/rural divide became a productive tension, a conceptualization that responded to and made possible new spatial and economic arrangements.¹⁵

Urbanity also refers to new kinds of socializing and holding space with others. The drastic growth of urban centers in the late 19th and early-mid 20th centuries that was largely facilitated by the railways created the urban condition of social mixing with diverse strangers in ways previously unknown at that scale. New ways of fraternizing with and viewing others en masse created a kind of performative sense of identity. Public corridors and mass transportation generated ways of marking and describing categorical and representative identities that have now become archetypes—the high-class flaneur, the immigrant drying laundry in the tenement alleyway, and more. The railway carriage, as other social spaces like the sidewalk and park, became a prime place to perform classed, racialized, and gendered identities.¹⁶ They also became active spaces to view others, with certain material markers and practices forming the basis of identities and group consciousness.¹⁷ Thus the railway passage, as a metaphor for the modern city, became a place to view and tolerate the diversity of its inhabitants but also to define and categorize, through this new relationality, why and how who gets what.

The railway, along with public parks, sidewalks, and others, became seen as forces that promote democracy. Prominent progressive thinkers noted that that the railroad forced rich and poor passengers to travel in the same trains at the same speed, and that this created equality.¹⁸ The French progressive thinker Constantin Pecquer wrote that “the railroads... advance the reign of truly fraternal social relations and do more for the sentiments of equality than the most exalted sermons of the tribunes of democracy. To thus foreshorten for everyone the distances that separate localities from each other, is to equally diminish the distances that separate men from each other.”¹⁹ While the train

may have shortened distances for some and provided ‘fraternal’ relations for many while riding the train, it also served to increase the distance between people in nuanced and systematic ways. Seen through its impacts and the social infrastructure it put in place, the railroad was implicitly integrated into the formation of social hierarchies, especially with regards to race, class, and gender, and also geographic inequalities. The railroad easily lends itself to a metaphor for the nation-state—both as a force for socializing across difference as well as inscribing inequality. Richard Dennis describes this contradiction: “A recurring theme in the cultural analyses of modern cities is the creative tension between increasingly structured and segregated spaces and the opportunities among socially and geographically mobile populations to transgress the boundaries between them.”²⁰

Train as Liberator

The idea of modernity has wrapped within it the concept of freedom and liberation. While these myths overlap in many ways, I will focus on the idea of train as liberator specifically as it relates to conceptions of mobility, individualism, and legibility.

A figure that still looms large in popular Americana is that of the hobo. “Hoboes” were first and foremost migratory workers, who numbered in the millions during the time of their popular inscription into American economy and culture. The itinerant worker, or contract laborer, became an identity and subject during the period between the Civil War and the Great Depression as industries grew rapidly and more stratified economic arrangements took hold. While narratives of these workingmen are somewhat rare, the mythical figure of the hobo (who is usually imagined as white, though contract labor was made up of men of various ethnicities and immigration status) gained popularity through a kind of romanticization of freedom, adventure, and a challenge to mainstream lifestyle. Many migrant workers were struggling to survive and support families, having left service in the Civil War to find the country’s economy restructuring. While often derided as outcasts, these workingmen were necessary to the growing industrial system.

The railroad helped make possible this kind of romanticization. Itinerant workers were able to travel for work thanks to the growing railroad network. Contrary to the reality (which is not often told), the image of the hobo that survives is that popularized by authors like Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and others. And there are surviving narratives that confirm that many people did hop trains during this time. This interest in travel came in part thanks to the regular flow of industrial train traffic through working-class industrial neighborhoods, with open freight boxcars enticing many to illegally hop on board, bound for wherever the train might take them.²¹

Perhaps the figure of the hobo has lasted in part because of its alignment with American

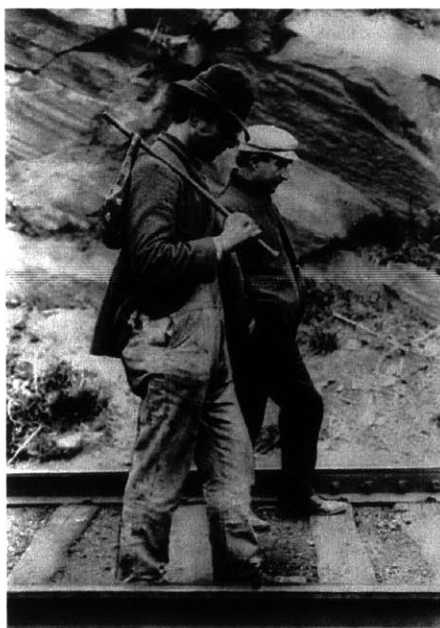


Figure 69. Railroad workers, date unknown circa 1880's-1930's. Source: Library of Congress.

ideals of individual freedom, challenge to authority, and self-sufficiency; ideals that it helped to give figure to. The hobo myth also helps to provide a shadow, a contrast through which to define “mainstream” or acceptable notions of work and masculinity.²² As Revill put it: “Hoboes...like to go their own way; they do not live within the rules and restriction of everyday society; they cannot be tamed... they are both a liability and marginal... a threat yet necessary to America’s continued functioning.”²³ Just as today, dominant national dialogue often ignores and derides homeless individuals in an effort to define the limits of acceptability, the hobo myth conveniently overlooked the necessarily role that migrant workers played in building the infrastructure and industry in a vibrant and lasting period of American growth.²⁴ The contemporary practice of train hopping descends from this idea, whereby individuals illegally stowe away on freight trains to travel around the country.

As the train network expanded rapidly in the late 19th-early 20th century, it became seen as a way to escape oppressive realities. The train was transformed into a spiritual force for redemption by African Americans in the Delta, which, as American Historian John M. Giggie writes in *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta 1875-1915*, was reflective of both a need to re-author a space of segregation into something more humane as well as the material reality of the train network bringing new economic opportunities. Even before this time, the metaphor of the railway as physical network that leads to freedom was utilized in the term Underground Railroad, which of course was not an actual railroad but a system of stops and passageways for enslaved African Americans seeking freedom.

The train car itself was a famously segregated site. The famous case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, decided in 1896, ruled that “equal but separate” accommodations on public conveyances were legal. The only thing equal about black and white experience on railways during this period was ticket price. “Negro” cars, as they were referred to at the time, were overcrowded, not regularly serviced or regulated, and were situated behind the engine and thus loud, filled with soot, and the first to bear the brunt of an accident. White cars (largely the famous “Pullman”) were luxurious and staffed by black porters tasked with helping with luggage and anything else. While white passengers could experience fine, leisurely dining in the dining car, black passengers could only utilize a few seats in the back corner of the car (if that).

The train car and platform became a metaphor for spiritual deliverance in part because of its sensorial qualities, but also because it became a common experience for African Americans during this time; both to experience the oppression of segregation but also to move north in search of opportunity and away from Jim Crow. White industrialists began investing heavily in the rail expansion of the south, and by 1890 90% southerners lived in a county with a railroad stop.²⁵ The growing railway was a way of reinscribing racialized violence and constraints of slavery (through the imposition of segregated cars and unequal conditions), thus shoring up a white identity by virtue of its distinction. But it was also a common experience of African Americans, leading communities to reappropriate the dominant cultural meaning from one of segregation into racial liberation. Giggie describes how the train car functioned as a kind of heterotopia during this time, where societal rules were often broken and re-created in unusual ways. He writes:

African American passengers discovered that aboard trains the races mixed and the color line flexed to a degree unrealized in public parks, pools, schools, libraries, and restrooms. Despite separate coach laws, southerners of all types— black and white, male and female, poor and affluent— could never fully avoid the sight, sound, or smell of each other when riding the rails. Once the train departed the depot, it temporarily became a type of self-contained society, where black and white strangers confronted the implications of racial difference in an atmosphere beyond the immediate reach of local authorities. It was this ambiguous, inchoate and fluid racial quality to train travel that made it so unusual as a public space and so inviting as a modern setting to probe the limits of the color line. Although other forms of public spaces emerged as powerful forces and venues of segregation in the post Reconstruction South, none at this time rivaled the railroad in popularity or significance as a cultural site where African Americans explored the multiple meanings of racial and religious freedom.²⁶

For financial reasons, owners refused to build separate lines for blacks and whites, and purchased

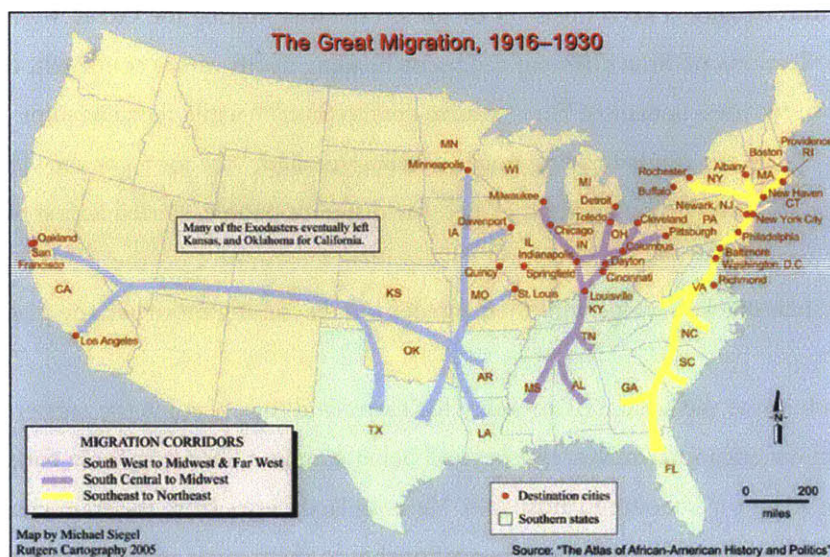


Figure 70. Migration patterns. Source: Michael Siegel, Rutgers Cartography.

“freight and passenger cars whose architectural layout typically forced blacks and whites into the close proximity when entering or exiting the train and accessing the washroom or dining car.”²⁷ When train cars weren’t full, porters were ordered to seat black passengers in white cars to accommodate as many ticket buyers as possible. Part of the reason for this renegotiation of radicalized rules and society on the train was due to the physical nature of the train car and decisions made (for profit) by its owners, many of which hold true today.

The Great Migration (or migrations, usually thought of as happening in successive waves 1916-1930, and 1945 – 1970) refers to the movement of over six million African Americans from the largely rural southern states to northern urban centers of industrialization, in search of economic mobility and freedom from harsh and unjust realities of the Jim Crow south.²⁸ Migrants traveled largely on the railroad, in many cases carrying with them most of their possessions and being carried to where the train took them, the terminus of the railroad lines in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other northern and western cities.

The journey itself was a defining moment for many. Journalist and author Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* narrates three black Americans’ lives through the great migration, incorporating data from hundreds of other interviews as well as historical evidence. Wilkerson’s book follows the life of George Starling, who left Eustis, FL to escape racial violence and economic immobility, and moved to New York City. Though he was smart and well-educated, the best job he could find was a luggage attendant on the east coast train lines of the Silver Meteor, Silver Star, and others (many of these names still hold for today’s routes). Starling worked for over 35 years without

promotion, and thus became a keen observer of life on the train during the Great Migration. She describes his recollections of how different the trains heading north versus south felt; those heading north were full of “worried optimism”²⁹... “festive and anxious”³⁰ while those heading south were “quiet and sober”.³¹ On the trains heading north, Starling recalled, “the moment they [black Southerners] stepped on the train going north, they became different people, started acting like what they imagined people up north to be. Some started talking their version of a northern accent, sitting up straighter, eating their chicken wings with their pinkies out, becoming more like the place they were heading to.”³²

The train became the source of mobility for many, and thus become the carrier of many different kinds of American narratives. But beyond being seen as a liberating force for people, the train also became a site for liberating landscapes. Viewing landscapes from the train changed the way they were seen and experienced, and thus our relationship to them, making them objects of viewing in a new way. Wolfgang Schivelbusch explains how the transition from horseback, walking, or carriage to railway encouraged passengers to take in only the landscape at the horizon. While moving at such a velocity it becomes impossible to focus on the foreground (interestingly, Schivelbusch also connects this to why it becomes so easy to focus on a the foreground of the train car itself, making reading and writing enjoyable). While building tracks through a landscape inextricably bound the two together, the sensation of riding the train creates the feeling that landscapes and places can be easily and quickly consumable. This connects the new consumable landscape viewable through the train window with other forms of imagery, notably photography and cinema, that gave the viewer impressions and constructions of reality through flattened representation.³³

The train encouraged and continues to encourage the viewing of other-ized landscapes for consumption through its advertising. Dean McCannell writes, “The structure of modernity is composed of a system of linkages attaching specific bits of information to concrete representations of society and social relations.”³⁴ The train thus acts as a huge system of communication for these linkages, liberating but also confining places under the guise of a realist, consumable representation. Indeed many have noted the connection between cinema and the railroad, as these two technologies developed and became common cultural experiences for many Americans around the same time.

Train as Marginal

That the train, and in particular its long-distance routes, is seen as a marginal form of intercity transit in the U.S. can partially be explained by the current political arrangements governing its service. Amtrak is a publicly controlled private corporation that was created in 1971 by an act of



Figure 71. 1973 Marketing poster. Source: history.amtrak.com

Congress. The act mandated that Amtrak cover its costs³⁵, a very difficult condition for any public transit system to meet. Currently, there are about 2,000 passenger rail cars in operation³⁶; at the height of passenger rail service in the U.S. (when lines were run privately), there were about 65,000 cars in operation³⁷. Especially since World War II, American federal transit funding has overwhelmingly preferred the airline and car industries (in the mid-1990s, federal funding for rail was less than \$1Billion, while funding for Air travel was about \$15B and Highways \$30B) and U.S. travel trends have followed suit³⁸. Long-distance routes are regularly denigrated; they are represented in the news as largely for hobbyists, tourists, and retirees³⁹. For many Americans, Amtrak’s long-distance service is the only inter-city transit option. In fact, Amtrak cites that for 23 states and 223 communities, Amtrak’s long-distance routes are the inter-city transit option (besides driving).⁴⁰ This condition holds for over 70% of the long-distance system.⁴¹ Amtrak has to make the case, over and over again, for Congress to fund these long-distance routes, which in reality are, “complex, not well-understood micro-markets.”⁴²

The train’s marginal status figures strongly in Thomas McCarthy’s 2003 film *The Station Agent*. The main character, Fin McBride (played by Peter Dinklage) is a person with dwarfism who begins living in an abandoned station agent’s home by the railroad tracks near Newfoundland, New Jersey that he inherits after his only friend passes away.⁴³ The film is highly regarded, especially for the ways it challenges dominant forms of viewing those often marginalized in an imperialist, racist, hierarchical society through its portrayal of the struggles Fin faces. In “Disability, Spectatorship, and The Station Agent”, English literary scholar Michael Tavel Clarke suggests the filmmakers utilize the railroad

to suggest a few overlapping themes.⁴⁴ Fin and the person who left him the station agent's home in his will are rail fans, and Fin's love for abandoned rail infrastructure and habit of train-watching is depicted as nostalgic and off-beat, but eventually an interest that becomes his calling card in a final scene where he connects to students in a local elementary school through explaining his love of and the history of trains in America. Fin doesn't understand why something so "ordinary" is misunderstood, an echo of a statement he later makes when he says that he doesn't understand the way "different people see me and treat me" when in fact he's a "very simple, boring person". Clarke also suggests that the train and its tracks, along which Fin nearly commits suicide after being bullied, are shown as decaying; a symbol of a transition from a more hierarchical, oppressive society to one in which difference is appreciated and hierarchy undermined. Clarke cites Alan Trachtenberg, writing that the "railroad historically represented a model of community formation founded in unity through subordination." That the railroad is both Fin's home and passion as well a decaying figure-head of oppression suggests that the railroad continues to embody layered myths of modernity, imperialism, freedom, marginality, and humanism.

Though there are notable changes in the way the train operates now as compared to the first wave of modernity I have largely been discussing here, the basic technology and car configurations has not changed much since this period. What has changed, however, are advances in transport technology outside of the realm of the train network, notably in airplane technology; the spatial landscape of the United States has also changed considerably around the rise of air travel and auto transport. Experiences of space and time have changed even more recently through the development of the internet and mobile technology, bringing us in the 'network age'.⁴⁵ This, along with the foundational narratives embedded in the train as discussed above, create the feeling that one is going back in time; when on the train one is recapturing a lost era. The train can thus simultaneously embody nostalgia, marginality, and contemporary notions of technological progress and modernity, the latter in the form of dialogue around High Speed Rail.

Implications

The American train thus embodies contradictory notions of modernity, owing to its facilitation of and symbolism for the large spatial, political, and economic shifts that occurred during its heyday. Though technology has evolved since then, the train car space and experience of passing through landscapes hasn't changed much, which conjures nostalgia for an idealized past among many passengers today. The train gives us a window through which to view and interrogate conceptions of modernity and their implications. This is an important qualification to the idea that planners and designers can simply learn from the train – in doing so we must address these contradictions and their implications for socio-spatial relations.



Figure 72. Film still from *The Station Agent*, Director Thomas McCarthy. Source: filmworship.wordpress.com

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- 45 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 2nd edition (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE TRAIN AND NON-TRAIN PUBLIC SPACES



Figure 73. Millennial Trains Project participants in the Great Dome Car, which is no longer in frequent use by Amtrak is but available for private charter. Source: Tyler Metcalfe for *National Geographic*, online.

Implications from this study are three-fold: first, I will describe how the train currently functions partially as a heterotopia and a public space, and indicate ways that the train could more fully realize its potential through improvements based on its eight spatio-temporal conditions. Secondly I will suggest that because these eight conditions can come together to create desirable experiences on the train, they may be extrapolated and broadly applied other public realm sites. Lastly I will suggest a series of creative interventions drawn from my experience on the train and my analysis.

The Train's Heterotopic Public Realm

The unusual humanistic qualities observed on the train and the underlying spatio-temporal conditions come together to create a unique environment that echo conceptions of heterotopia and public space. The train space functions partially as a heterotopia, in creating the ability for passengers to observe and socialize (sometimes quite intimately and usually civilly) and tell stories with strangers, to have intense moments of productivity and self-reflection, and to visually connect with the passing terrain while not actually being immersed in it. It is an autonomous zone where normal social rules can be reconfigured. It is a site of adventure, where time is experienced in strange and sometimes disconcerting ways. The train affords an escape from everyday routines and constraints and makes possible unique kinds of social interactions that are otherwise often difficult to find. Daniel Campo and Brent Ryan argue that heterotopias of this nature have “disruptive and transformative powers and excite the imagination...”¹

The long distance train could improve upon several of its emergent conditions in ways that may improve upon its heterotopic qualities. Specifically, Amtrak could build upon the conditions of “duration” and “autonomy” by acknowledging these unique conditions among all staff and regulating the space accordingly. Amtrak already does this partially by creating and enforcing “train rules.” Two key train rules are based on spatial limitations: passengers must sit with others in the dining car if they are traveling in a party fewer than four people, and must also sit next to others in coach seats if the train is full. This creates necessary acknowledgement and usually socialization amongst passengers, helping the train to feel like its own unique environment. Other rules could be created and enforced to further encourage social mixing. Examples of this include requiring sleeping car passengers to exit their sleeping rooms for meals (right now passengers are allowed to eat in their rooms, meaning that they do not have to interact with others at meal time), providing lower cost meals to coach passengers (meals are currently free for sleeping car passengers and somewhat expensive for others, which means that many passengers do not have the benefit of experiencing social dining), and other ideas to encourage more socializing during meals. Other ways of helping passengers more

fully enter a heterotopic environment while on the train include creating new “train traditions,” such as train happy hours, announcements at certain times of days (morning, afternoon night) regarding scenery and the train crew, and more. If management were consistently trained to see the train not only as a place to get from point A to B but a space to help passengers realize a more enjoyable ride, many practices would come in line underneath this goal and value. Perhaps a kind of hospitality training could be a part of this. This would also mean empowering middle management at Amtrak and allowing conductors and attendants to utilize their own skills and resources as they see fit. Again hearkening to the loosely-coupled system nature, it would be interesting to encourage conductors and attendants to bring their own interests and skills to trains, thus making each ride a little less standard but in ways particular to the personnel who happened to be on the train. For example, the attendant I met who wanted to bring his own toaster oven would be encouraged to do so and more depending on what he wanted to provide for customers.

Beyond encouraging unique social activity as a way of encouraging the train as heterotopia, passengers could find elements on the train that enhance the unique individual humanistic qualities. By virtue of the train’s “grounded placelessness,” passengers often described the train as a site of creativity and productivity. Amtrak could build upon this by creating specific “quiet hours” in the observation car, selling notebooks and pens, placing work space in the underutilized spaces, and creating more programs like the Amtrak writer’s residency. The residency was began last year and elicited 16,000 applications for only 24 spots. Writers received free first-class tickets for several rides and were required to blog their work. Amtrak could build upon the enormous success of this program by instituting many more creative residency programs for writers, filmmakers, visual artists, designers, and more. Flooding a national dialogue around Amtrak with imaginative visions might help passengers to think more creatively themselves while on and off the train, and increase the likelihood of passengers interacting with artists and writers themselves while on the train.

Amtrak does take some advantage of the train’s “visual connection to landscape,” but could do a much better job of this heterotopic aspect. The trains have poorly written and aging printed “route guides” that describe particular sites of interest, and also run a “Trails and Rails” program with the National Park Service, whereby volunteer docents interpret sites of interest for passengers during warm months on several long distance trains. Amtrak could significantly build on this aspect of the train by creating more interpretive materials—better guides, listening stations, podcasts, and more—that help passengers to connect to the landscape they pass through. Local storytellers, musicians, and others could board the train at key moments to help passengers connect to local culture. Conductors could more consistently announce key sites that are viewable from the train as it passes through.

The train could also extend its heterotopic qualities to stations. The market at the Albuquerque station could be a model for this. The train could help support local economies as well as providing unique and semi-heterotopic environments for town residents and passengers alike by creating food and craft markets at stations. It could also take better advantage of how rules change from state to state. For example, I noticed a very covert and informal market for marijuana on several train platforms in Colorado and Washington States. These however were transactions taking place between passengers (not between residents and passengers), indicating that passengers had been carrying substances illegally through other states. There could be markets set up by local vendors so that passengers could be encouraged not to take this risk and moreover so that passengers could experience the result of these local legal variations.

Several of these eight spatio-temporal conditions indicate that the train space also deserves to be considered part of the public realm. What defines a beneficial public space is much more complex than a simple analysis of its ownership structure and purported function, though these elements are surely important aspects. The train's conditions, in particular its functionality, accessibility, human-scale design, (de)regulation, duration and autonomy come together to create a space that in many ways exemplifies what great public sites should be.

The train's functionality and accessibility means that it serves a wide diversity of people in terms of age, ethnicity, class, region, ability, and interest. The easiest way to build upon this unique quality that only a national transportation system can have is by increasing the train network. Tracks that were built throughout the end of the 19th century still exist in many places and are actively used by freight. Amtrak expansion to more cities, towns, and states could take place under the current political configuration of operations or by re-configuring the public private partnership. Increasing service in this manner has the advantage of making use of relatively accessible resources (tracks, already manufactured train cars, old stations), and would have a huge impact on the accessibility and functionality of intercity and long distance train service, as well as creating a much more inclusive public realm.

More complex ways to build upon the train's accessibility and functionality would be to lower ticket prices and remove barriers between coach and sleeping car passengers. This challenges the fundamental financial arrangement of Amtrak (it is now theoretically required to fund its operations, though it has never met this goal), and demands that the train be seen as a public space in the eyes of the federal government rather than a semi-privatized service. The train is not currently seen and discussed in this light, which prevents it from being fully realized as a public realm site as well.



Figures 74 & 75. Left, Mobile food vendor on train station in India. Source: Kapoor Baldev for *The Guardian*, online. Right, Fold out bed in Pullman Cars, circa 1880. Source: Railswest.com

An effective public realm site might better provide for basic human needs of food, shelter, and others. The high cost of food and beverage on the train is a huge barrier to the train being successful in this regard, especially for those on limited budgets. Passengers respond to this by bringing their own food and alcohol, which means that Amtrak is also losing business. Amtrak could lower simply lower prices, or subcontract out to informal food vendors at stations or on trains, similar to what exists in other countries or on streets, like mobile tamale carts, etc. Perhaps another way to address this need is to provide save devices for passengers to bring their own food or beverages and heat them up on hot plates or in hot water boilers. Boxed meals could be sold on platforms easily, and would provide more jobs for local food vendors in cities the train passes through.

The train's human-scale design (along with the duration and autonomy found on long distance rides) facilitates passenger relaxation across demographic groups. Relaxation and an ability to make spaces feel like temporary homes are important aspects to why the train functions as a semi-successful public space: by making comfortable spaces that can be used inventively, the train creates the conditions necessary for passengers to have fun with each other, talk with each other at length, and more. Amtrak could build on this quality by increasing passenger comfort, particularly in coach. One key aspect would be making sleeping more comfortable by including beds that fold-out of the ceiling (which used to exist and still do in other countries), seats that recline fully, and simply allowing coach passengers to sleep on the bed-like benches in the observation cars. Amtrak could also provide or cheaply sell small conveniences like toothbrushes, blankets, pillows, and eye masks to help coach passengers sleep.

Beyond sleeping, the train could better encourage passengers to feel comfortable on the train

by providing small lock boxes for passengers' personal items. Theft did not seem to be common but I did hear of one or two stories; nevertheless, passengers felt they needed to always be on the lookout and keep their personal items with them. Lockboxes could therefore help passengers feel freer.

Improvements in the built environment of the train, and particular in the furniture arrangement of the observation car, could help passengers better utilize the small space provided. The bar that exists on the second level of all observation cars was never utilized and was wasted space. Several of the lounge chairs used to swivel; the introduction of moveable furniture may go a long way to helping passengers feel they could manipulate the environment as they wish.

The train's highly regulated nature ensures safety, leveling the playing field for individuals who may be more vulnerable or are likely to be targeted by other passengers. However, its regulation also means that passengers are not entirely free, and this is particularly salient for some more than others. Border patrol is known to regularly board the trains, especially on the Sunset Limited, which runs along the border with Mexico. Undocumented persons are thus not advised to take the train, making a huge number of residents and workers that sustain the American economy significantly less mobile and vulnerable than others. The highly regulated nature of the train also means that all activity is policed, giving passengers the impression that they are being watched and evaluated for their behavior. This can have a disciplining effect, particularly on some trains where staff were very stringent with the rules. Amtrak stations can function in many ways like public waiting rooms for people with unstable or nonexistent housing situations, which in an era of growing inequality and mass incarceration affects an increasingly large number of people. However, Amtrak does not allow homeless to take shelter in most stations, even during cold winter months.²

The train also, somewhat unintuitively, sometimes provided the sense of de-regulation. When present, this created a "looseness" or freedom- the ability of passengers to negotiate freedom from everyday restraints by drinking with strangers, for example, thus generating dynamic moments of play, celebration, and learning. Amtrak can and should learn from conductors and other staff who are able to provide for passengers' safety without overregulating the train, and mandate this kind of management for all trains.

The train, passengers cannot help but see each other, revealing key differences in the ways people are living, and crucially are positioned with regards to various privileges, in contemporary America. The train creates a kind of ephemeral commons, passing through many different places and picking up many different people and depositing them an intimate, shared space for an intense but brief moment. This provides a unique place to renegotiate and temporarily move beyond habits and even biases as individuals negotiate what it means to share space with others. This element

is uniquely possible on a train that passes through regions and towns, and provides an important aspect of public space that is hard to find.

Applying the Train's Conditions to Non-Train Spaces

The long distance train's social, spatial, and temporal conditions provide interesting and important experiences for a wide variety of people. While the train's conditions uniquely come together in this ephemeral train space, they may also provide lessons for non-train spaces when abstracted. Here I will reflect on how these principles might improve the theory and practice of designing and managing sites of the public realm.

Functionality

The train meets the basic needs of passengers, though some more readily than others. Having sites of public realm that meet basic needs (other than just leisure) is important because not everyone has time to nor wants to relax in the same way. Many individuals and communities are in need of spaces to express themselves, recreate, perform group cultural traditions, and more – things that are the lifeblood of a thriving city. More basically, not everyone is able to meet their basic needs of food, shelter, and health given unequal resource distribution.

Dan Campo's study of the unplanned space on the Brooklyn Waterfront provides a concrete example of how individuals and communities will utilize underused space to meet these important needs.³ Campo spent time with the users of the abandoned train terminal for ten years (2000 – 2010), who included the homeless, skateboarders, marching bands, and neighbors needing a place to gather and relax. These users utilized the "benign neglect" of the space to design and manage it themselves, always temporarily to make space for others, and were forced to negotiate (which sometimes caused conflict).

When spaces are not designed to function for its users, users will begin to use it to suit themselves. Nabil Kamel and his students conducted a study of what he calls placemaking tactics in a Phoenix neighborhood that had been built primarily for middle-class white residents but is now occupied primarily by low-income latinos.⁴ Residents reappropriated space and regulations in order to conduct business, enact cultural practice, and more. Following Architect and Urbanist Margaret Crawford's "everyday urbanism" concept, designers, planners, and policymakers can learn from and help to support the way people use space organically to suit their needs, with the understanding that the public realm must be able to be flexible enough and have functionality as a key feature.

Accessibility

Accessible design is usually discussed in terms of planning for those with disabilities according to the Americans for Disabilities Act. This is of course a key consideration, and the field of design and planning can and should push this principle beyond this feature. Designers, planners, and policymakers must consider the varying needs of a diverse public in the same way that they now design spaces to be accessible to those with special physical needs. Ethnographic analysis, combined with reflective practice and communication and listening skills may be crucial elements of the design practice in order to fully understand the impact of spaces on groups of users that are surely more diverse than a small group designing a space will be.

Visual Connection to Landscape

The train provides this in a unique way, but the principle of creating sightlines, unique perspectives on cities, and a visual connection to the space around you is one that is well-known as an important quality of many successful public spaces. Designers often accomplish this by creating hills and changes in elevation; providing opportunities to see buildings around the edges of spaces, and ensuring that views of the sky. People are drawn to the waterfront and other bodies of water; any connection that improves a sense of place with regards to nature is usually a successful one. The train provides this in a simulated manner visually, but other less mobile sites of the public realm are able to provide this in much more comprehensive, immersive ways.

Human-Scale Design

The train's material and aesthetic sensibility is extremely successful. It is the opposite of flashy—its materials and colors are simple and quotidian and its forms of furniture are easily recognizable. This, combined with the spaciousness of the aisles and seats and yet coziness of the train car, provides a very successful interior environment that allows the activity of the car to be more important than the aesthetics or physical forms. This is an important principle to address in contemporary urban design, which can often privilege the aesthetics, materiality, and form of space over how people feel and use it.

Grounded Placelessness

This is perhaps the most train-specific condition of the principles and one that may not seek to be emulated by all other public sites. But extrapolating a bit further, the sense of heterotopia may be desired in public sites and could be encouraged through design and management. For example, the

High Line park provides some of the same characteristics by virtue of its separation from the urban environment. In the time I spent there, I noticed many users treat each other with a bit more consideration than on the sidewalks below. Users also shared that they were a bit more open to new ideas and imaginative thinking while on the park. This principle of creating a partially autonomous zone with visual connection to landscape may be desirable as a way of providing these kinds of valuable and unique experiences.

(De)regulation

Finding the right balance between safe and open is key for a public realm site. The train perhaps goes too far sometimes in regulating behavior, perhaps because of its unique autonomous zone and need to ensure physical safety. But it was also sometimes able to create a feeling of freedom and openness. For example, on New Year's eve we were able to drink our own and share other passengers' champagne, play music for the entire observation car, and more. These are against the rules but as staff walked through, they observed that we did not seem to be bothering others or doing anything dangerous and allowed it to continue. This condition was also observed on other train rides. I do not advocate a similar policing scenario in non-train public sites, but it is worth considering for a particular site how it can find a similar balance of safety and freedom.

Duration

The train encourages social activity in large part because passengers share the same space for an extended period of time. This helps passengers to feel a bit more at ease, that they have "found time" (as many said), and do not mind passing it in conversation with others they may not otherwise speak to. It will be hard to replicate this in some sites of the public realm, but intra-city public transit may be the most likely. Furniture design on buses and trains could help to encourage interaction, which research shows is more likely to improve daily sense of happiness and contentment. In non-transit sites like parks, libraries, coffee shops, and more, events and activities that ensure people are gathered together for an extended period of time may increase the likelihood of positive social interaction and meaningful individual experience as well. Festivals and other ephemeral gatherings also rely on this unique experience of time that helps to encourage meaningful cultural experiences.

Autonomy and Diversity of Use

Parks and other sites that can provide opportunities for individuals and groups to peacefully coexist while doing different things and not bothering each other can count on a longer successful life.

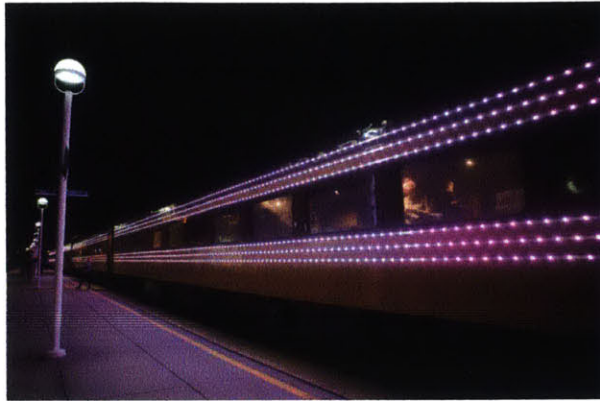


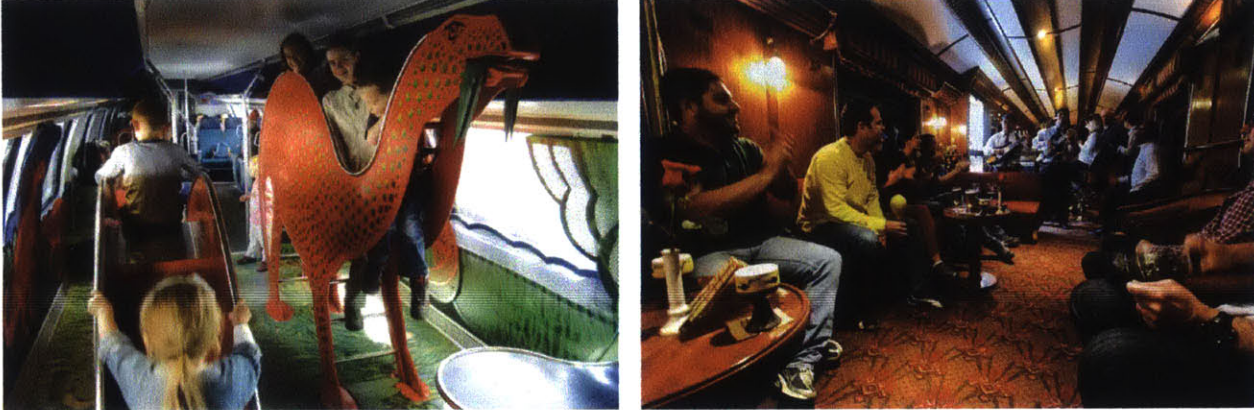
Figure 77. The artist Doug Aitkin's light sculpture, part of a multimedia series of events called "Station to Station" that took place on a train journeying across the country in 2013. Source: Ye Rin Mok for *The New Yorker*, online.

It also measures successful public space in terms of "clean", "low crime", "readable", "historic". These principles seem to privilege economic development goals (which may appear to benefit from sanitized, highly regulated public space) over long-term engagement, cultural vitality, and diversity of use. These eight principles suggest that it is vital to consider aesthetics more reflexively. When planners and designers purport to build space for "everyone" without deep observation of aesthetics and practices preferred and enacted by the various user groups the space is intended for, claims to universality mask and, as Michael Rios writes, "reinforce dominant views and normative beliefs of order and legitimacy, concealing the sensibilities of multiple public and rendering invisible the everyday practices and livelihoods of the marginalized".⁶ Considering aesthetics as political is an important step towards recognizing that sites making up the public realm (both formal and informal) are vital in development of a more inclusive, supportive, and just state. The eight spatio temporal principles garnered from observing the train may help us to see why these goals should be amended if we are to have a public realm that truly serves the diversity of America's inhabitants.

Creative Interventions and Cultural Programming

In order to more fully realize the long distance train's unique and beneficial qualities, Amtrak and its partners should develop the ability to produce events and activities that build on the success of its writer's residency. Amtrak could develop a Cultural Affairs Department with a series of staff that might provide grants, initiate residencies, and produce programs in collaboration with local partners to take advantage of the train's unique cultural platform. Programs of this nature should seek to be both inclusive and high quality so as to add to the memorable and meaningful nature of the journey.

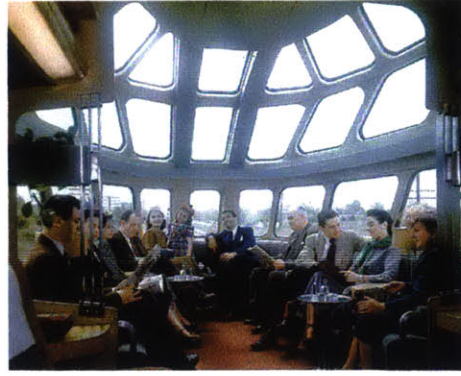
Below are several ideas that could creatively provide a platform for more social encounters on the train. Here is a set of ideas that could help the train to become something akin to a well-functioning ephemeral community center.



Figures 78 & 78, International precedents. Left, many European trains have children's areas, like this one in Sweden. Source: kandas-adventures.typepad.com. Right, live music on the Belmond Hiram Bingham train to Macchu Picchu, Peru. Source: thelondonfoodie.co.uk

Self-managed programs. The observation car could have a series of activities, supplies, and books that passengers could take out for periods of time. This is a common resource in parks and community centers; passengers would either have to put down a deposit or leave their identification card to rent something. Materials and supplies could include art supplies, board games, books (both fiction and non; could focus on interesting history and information of places the train runs through). The same person could manage some kind of sharing board, similar to what takes place during the Walker Art Center's successful Open Field Program.⁷ Passengers could write down something they could teach or want to learn, for example "Spanish language exchange" or "knitting circle". This could be managed by one person or it could be an experiment to self-manage. Usually, the space on the lower level near the cafe car was underutilized, and had plenty of storage space.

Drop-in programs. In order to take advantage of the unique mental space that many passengers are in on the train, I think some kind of drop-in mental and physical health counseling would be extremely well-utilized. Perhaps passengers would take the opportunity to speak to someone about wanting to quit smoking; about the person they are traveling across the country to see, about their blood pressure. The testimonial nature of communication, philosophizing, and "found time" of the train would be therefore effectively put to work through this kind of process. This activity could easily take place in the underutilized space on the lower level of many Superliner cars.



Figures 79 & 80, Underutilized resources. Left, a private chartering company converted an old baggage car to a bar and dance party car. Right, an older style Great Dome car from the archives of the same company. Source: 261.com.

Organized programs. Many programs and activities would be enriching for the train ride. A few favorite ideas include:

- Creativity: kids art programs, adult art programs, creative writing programs
- Evening programs: regular happy hours, trivia, pecha kuchas (where people give 1-2 minute extemporaneous talks about their work and lives), karaoke
- Wellness: Exercise classes, meditation, creative visioning
- Education: Teen docent program, teach-ins, facilitated dialogues about contemporary political topics,
- Entertainment: Poetry, concerts, film screenings
- Food: Education about local ingredients, potluck (people could share what they brought), tastings with local chefs

The most efficient way to implement these programs would be to draw on resources of the places the train runs through, which would also make the programs more culturally relevant to the audience. Amtrak or the cultural partner contracted to run the programs could sub-contract with arts organizations, schools, and other local and state cultural agencies and organizations. For example, when the train runs through Minneapolis, it could pick up teen docents from a local museum, chefs from local restaurant, and musicians, to infuse the train with local spirit and education. They could get off in Chicago and get on going the other direction, engaging a new set of passengers on their ride home.

It would also be wonderful to run focus groups, prototype, and pilot programs with frequent users, notably staff and regular passengers. This would take advantage of their considerable knowledge of the train and its social environment, empower and engage them, and help to create a more lateral sense of ownership for the programs and social interactions in general on the train.

Party Train. The original idea behind this project was to develop a kind of party train, akin to a cruise but much less packaged and much more democratic in spirit. This idea would involve many of the ideas above but would definitely require new train cars. The Party Train would be booked in advance, perhaps along a scenic route like New Orleans to Los Angeles, and involve daily programming of all kinds. Ideally many of the program leaders, musicians, artists, DJ's, educators, etc are those who are also passengers on the train, again making it feel less like a passive consumptive experience and more an engaged cultural activity. A similar specially programmed train could also be prototyped specifically for business or educational retreats, for activist groups to strategize, and much more.

Designed Spaces. If possible, it would be wonderful to bring back old train cars that are currently available only for a very expensive rental. There could also be a great opportunity to design new train spaces. A design competition could be held; designers could be required to pair with local organizations to develop and prototype uses most commonly needed and wanted on particular routes. Designers could also look to international precedents for new train uses and designs. In Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, and other places, train cars have play areas for children. Many Indian train cars are organized with seats all facing each other to encourage interaction.

In addition to opening up, the train could actively utilize its space to promote political action. It would be very difficult to negotiate this so that Amtrak does not seem partisan, but in my experience the unique space of the train in many ways cuts through politically correct speech that dominates national dialogue. Private organizations could utilize private car rentals or new train types to plan retreats for political organizers needing to work on a national scale who could use "found time". Building off of the role of the train during the civil rights era as a way to share print news from the north to the south, the train could still help to share stories from people in various locations around the country by having local newspapers, documentaries playing on trains or at listening stations that share stories of people from towns the train passes through, or other ideas.

Finally, the train could function as an important place to reflect on its changing role with regards to the commons. An engaged history program and curriculum could be developed that focuses on largely untold stories of those displaced, killed, and harmed by the building of the rail network. This educational function could also focus on US Labor History, engineering, urban theory and design, and much more. Again, a more efficient way to enact this kind of work would be to

draw on existing resources that may want to reach a broader audience. Rail fans could be coached to educate passengers about the nitty gritty of train engineering and history; professors and teachers could ride the train for short distances and host lectures and dialogues; artists and curators could develop new media exhibitions to digitally share stories.

Artist-Led Interventions

Lastly, I propose a series of more creative interventions that seek to fuse many of the ideas presented throughout the course of this project. These would continue to bring out what's special but also encourage us to reflect and challenge some of the negative aspects of the train and its networks.

Re-designing Project. The train could take advantage of its unique car space and time-limited journey to host a very unique urban design competition. Design-builders, engineers, and others would set off on a train beginning on the west coast with an empty train shell and materials. They could stop and pick up materials, inspiration, and advisors along the way. By the time they reached the east coast, they will have had to re-design the interior space of the train and implemented other improvements (for example, finding a way for the train to more efficiently use energy, to experience the outdoors, etc). Several design-build trains could run during the same time and a jury made of designers and regular Amtrak users could decide who utilized the space most effectively and creatively when the trains arrived in the east. Perhaps MIT's urban planning, architecture, mechanical engineering, and transportation programs could come together to produce this.

Re-naming Project. The current names of the train lines and the train cars themselves are evocative and help to shape passengers perceptions and thus experiences. I propose a re-naming project that could perhaps crowdsource names from passengers and non-passengers for train lines and train cars. Passengers could brainstorm in cars themselves. Re-naming cars— for example, a simple change from the “observation car” to “living room” could get passengers into a different mindset when entering the space. Changing the name of the “Empire Builder” line away from something that evokes western imperialist expansion to something that shares special aspects about the states it runs through (ie. “Northern Explorer”), or playful (i.e. “Snowpiercer”⁸), as well as removing the fetishization of the name “Southwest Chief” could be an interesting way to make the train intentionally engaging with politics and space.

Low Tech. While it might be inevitable and useful to many that wi-fi will become available on all Amtrak trains, the current engagement with digital media on trains is also preventing healthy and interesting experiences on the train. I propose that for a few hours or even for an entire train ride, the use of digital devices would be banned. Passengers could read books, talk, or look out the window (it might be important to provide activities on this train or during this time in particular). This would be a fascinating social experiment and while people might complain at first I imagine most people would end up enjoying the space and freedom to let their mind wander. Existing digital cleanse retreats, which are generally quiet expensive and function more like vacations, begin with counseling, which I think could be a very important aspect of this experience as people may have extreme emotional reactions to this.

High Tech. / The Tourist Gaze. The train could also utilize social media and new GPS-located mobile guide technology to crowdsource stories from passengers and residents in the towns the train passes through to highlight certain aspects of daily life, mobility, social experiences on the train, and more. The idea stems from an interest in engaging the modern forms of looking that the train and cinema helped to co-produce and have morphed into new ways of virtual engagement and spectatorship through digital media. These efforts would need to take place not under the direction of Amtrak's own social media as that platform is mainly for marketing— this would be more artistic and humanistic in content. Perhaps MIT's own Arts, Culture, and Technology or Center for Civic Media programs could be engaged to develop ideas for how to move forward with several ideas in this realm.

Interrupt Spatial and Social Hierarchies. The train network provides many positive benefits but also, especially seen through Chapter Five, reifies certain inequalities. One of the key ways it does this is by helping to benefit areas that it runs through and accordingly disadvantage those it does not. To bring attention and playfully engage with these trends, a series of design, artistic, or other interventions could take place. For example, what would the train look like without stairs and only ramps, so that all passengers might be able to ascend to the second level? What would it be like to visualize the freight routes that currently exist but through which passenger trains do not run? What would it look like to visualize the goods that are carried by freight rail, and what questions would this bring up for viewers? How do we begin to engage in a national conversation about equitable transit, and equitable support for spatial practices? I think the long-distance train is in a unique position to serve as a platform for engaging these kinds of questions.



Figure 81. Millennial Trains Project workshop. Source: Tyler Metcalfe for *National Geographic* online.

Implementing some of these programs could take place on a national, regional, or local scale. One interesting precedent would be a recent collaborative grant issued by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and National Parks System (NPS). The grant, called “Imagine Your Parks” is a competitive call for artists and groups engaging young people and other populations to highlight national parks through creative measures.⁹ One could easily imagine a similar project focused on the trains. This kind of funding follows in the footsteps of the Federal Writers’ Projects and other national-level funding for artists of various kinds. While widely celebrated, these projects rarely are replicated.

Another precedent for implementation is called the Millennial Trains Project (MTP), which is a non-for-profit organization that rents private cars and attaches them to existing Amtrak routes for one journey per year. It is focused on young people with social change ideas, and accordingly is set up like a kind of mobile leadership program. MTP partners with Amtrak, indicating that other such smaller partnerships could exist.

Endnotes

- 1 Daniel Campo and Brent D. Ryan, "The Entertainment Zone: Unplanned Nightlife and the Revitalization of the American Downtown" (*Journal of Urban Design*, Vol. 13. No. 3, October 2008), 291-315.
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- 3 Daniel Campo, *The Accidental Playground: Brooklyn Waterfront Narratives o the Undesigned and Unplanned* (New York: Empire State Editions, 2013).
- 4 Nabil Kamel, "Learning from the Margin: Placemaking Tactics," in *The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor*, eds Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 119-136.
- 5 Setha Low, Dana Taplin, and Suzanne Scheld, *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
- 6 Michael Rios, "Learning from Informal Practices: Implications for Urban Design," *The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2014), 176
- 8 *Snowpiercer*, Joon-Ho Bong, Director, Moho Film, 2014
- 7 For more information, see <http://www.walkerart.org/openfield/>
- 9 "\$1 Million in New Grant Funding Available to Celebrate the Arts and National Parks," National Endowment for the Arts Website, Accessed May 2015 <http://arts.gov/news/2015/1-million-new-grant-funding-available-celebrate-arts-and-national-parks>

AFTERWORD

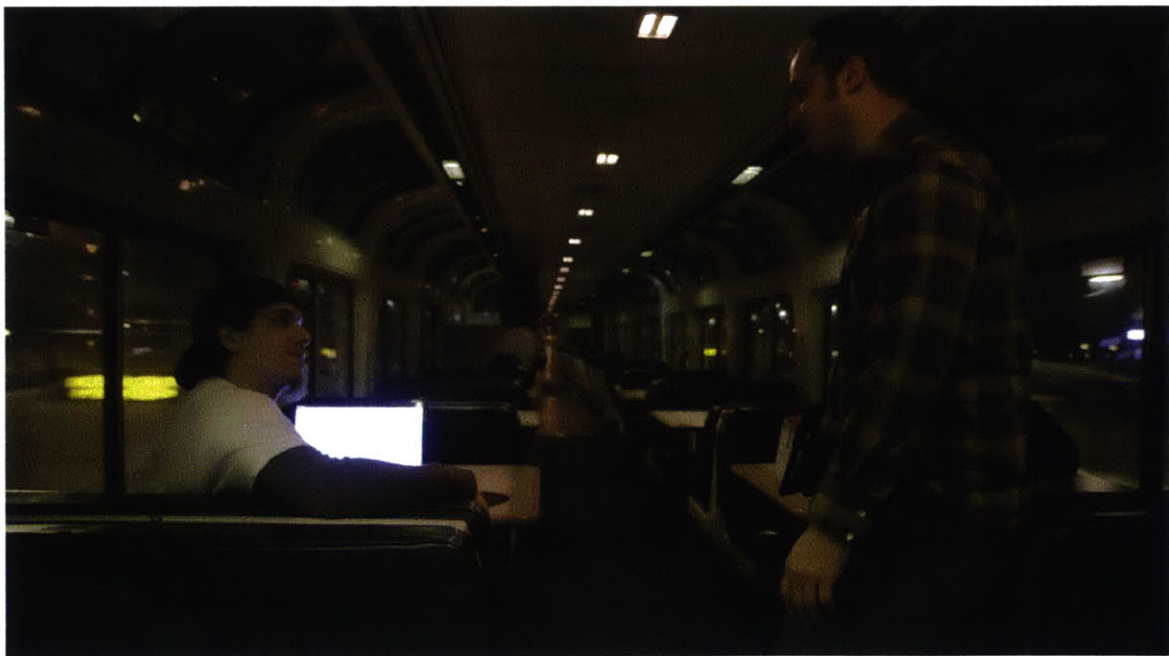


Figure 82. Film still from *In Transit*, Directors Maysles, True, Usui, Walker, and Wu. Source: Intransitfilm.com

A journey on the long distance train is at turns captivating, disconcerting, engaging, dislocating, convivial, lonely, and more. The many conversations with friends, families, and colleagues, that arose given my choice of thesis topic indicates that experiences on the train are many things, but most of all they are memorable. The train provides a unique space apart from everyday routines, allowing a diversity of people to reflect and interact in unusual ways. While the conditions of these temporary gatherings may not all be positive, there is often something generative in them. They force us to see and interact with each other, face-to-face, and give us the opportunity to expand our minds, remind us of our humanity, and see new things. The train reminds us of the overwhelming serendipity of modern life: we are all in transit and the moments we have with each other, while fleeting, can be quite meaningful. As author, journalist and Amtrak writer-in-residence Faira Chideya said on the Melissa Harris-Perry show, “When we meet each other in the common spaces on the train... We have these different social interactions across race, class, gender... there’s a dialogue about society that can occur on a really profound level.”¹

While the train network may historically have created some of the divisions and isolation that we still feel the effects of today, its space can help to remedy these dynamics to great benefit. Americans are in need of the company. In 1985, one in ten Americans said they had no intimate with whom to discuss important matters; in 2014 the figure was one in four.² Contrary to the notion that we are not living in a colorblind countries where differences are disappearing, cities are becoming increasingly segregated—the foreclosure crisis most recently contributing intensively to racial and ethnic segregation.³ While the train may not provide remedies to these problems, it helps us to see these problems more clearly by bringing difference into focus and helping us find common ground.

Many actors can build on these eight spatio-temporal qualities, which have emerged without intention, to improve the train experience even more. Federal, state and local governments can build on the train’s network in the short term by re-regulating freight rail companies and funding Amtrak or other operators more comprehensively. Considered as a public site, more efforts can and should be made to make coach passengers more comfortable and make ticket prices and stations more accessible, particularly to vulnerable populations like the homeless, ex-prisoners, undocumented and other immigrants, and those with limited income. Furniture in the observation car could be reconfigured to maximize its reflective, productive, and interactive potential. And Amtrak staff could intentionally manage the train as a space for unique experiences by ensuring safety but relaxing unnecessary rules.

Creative interventions that build on the writer’s residency could help the long distance train

become a uniquely American platform for advancing and celebrating culture and civic society. Building on the success of Amtrak's writer's residency, a series of cultural programs, design interventions, and artist-led projects can take cues from emerging urban planning trends like everyday urbanism, creative placemaking and tactical urbanism to great benefit. These activities can help to bring the long distance train into the 21st century by encouraging participation and active engagement.

The train also provides planners and designers with important considerations for non-train spaces. This thesis indicates that certain heterotopic qualities are beneficial. It is worth considering how it may be possible to regulate, design, and manage spaces to encourage more heterotopias because, by virtue of the flexibility and imagination that they engender, they are places where dynamic cultural experiences and meaning-making occur.

A study of behavior and space on the train also provides important lessons for planners and designers more broadly. That the train provides guidance on how to successfully design and manage other public sites is in many ways surprising given its status as a privately operated transit space. Planners and designers might do well to consider the implicit assumptions governing current delineations between "public" and "private space". The train is privately owned (though publicly controlled), and is theoretically a place to simply get from place to place. Judging simply based on its governance and economic use functions, the train is not a public site. And yet, it functions as one in many ways: it brings a wide range of people together and facilitates interactions between them (as coffee shops, bars, and festivals do). It also provides important individual benefits (as religious sites, parks, and museums do).

Unpacking these distinctions complicates traditional notions of public and private in ways that other theorists have done for shopping malls, university campuses, and abandoned private sites that operate as public in many ways. It is worth considering how we think about public and private in light of this complexity so that we can properly consider the benefits, drawbacks, and management of various important cultural sites.

The long-distance passenger train is not easily summed. The physical space of the train cars provide many different kinds of functions for many different people and many different moments. Each train ride is unique. And yet, there are persistent themes. These themes relate to the material qualities of the train (the cars' designs, the way the train interacts with and separates itself from the landscape), the relationship of the train to time and mobility, and of course, the particular people who happen to be on the train. Those people carry with them heterogenous memories and experiences according to their individual lives as well as the communities, publics, and social signifiers that they identify with; they also carry with them memories of the train that they have inherited from

previous eras, traces of the train's symbols and mythologies. Something about these layers forms what I describe here as a more ideal public space than many others, and yet it is so paradoxically--it is not free, it is always ephemeral, it is not grounded in any one place, and it is specific to the time, people, and landscape through which it passes.

In complicating our notions of what we mean by “good public space”, a study of this nature of the long-distance train can help us to question our assumptions and implicit political ideologies that can be easily masked through design and planning. Quite materially, we might be able to translate what makes the train successful into the design and management of parks, plazas, sidewalks, other transit spaces, and more. At a deeper level, riding the long-distance train provides us with a way of viewing and understanding our current relationship to technology and progress as well as the ways in which we relate to past moments of technology and progress. These moments were foundational to the current American economy, our spatial arrangements, social hierarchies, and more, and there is so much history that deserves to be told as we seek to better understand current inequities with the hopes of charting new paths.

Because the train is both of these things, it is an ideal site to interrogate and experiment with—it may help us understand ourselves better, as individuals, as communities, as a country, and beyond.

Endnotes

- 1 Accessed May 2015 <http://blog.amtrak.com/2015/05/finding-commonalities/>
- 2 David Bornstein, “Rekindling Human Contact in the Digital Age” (*The New York Times*, May 8 2015). Accessed May 2015 http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/08/human-contact-for-the-digital-age-loner/?_r=0
- 3 Matthew Hall, Kyle Crowde, and Amy Spring, “Neighborhood Foreclosures, Racial /Ethnic Transitions, and Residential Segregation” (*American Sociological Review*, April 2015). Accessed May 2015 <http://asr.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/04/20/0003122415581334.abstract>

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