

Here to There and in Between: Commuting through Perception

Millions of people in the United States spend millions of hours every year commuting to and from work, and this is true for industrialized countries around the world. Commuting consumes an enormous amount of time and resources, whether it's by personal or public transportation. Yet, due to lifestyle choices and to the design of most metropolitan areas, commuting has become a necessity, a fact of life, something that's taken for granted for large parts of the population.

My project, *Perceptions of the Commuting Ethnographer*, investigates commuting with multiple interests in mind: the physical aspects of the commute (distances traveled, route characteristics, etc.); the commute as social phenomenon, reflecting upon the commuter's relationship to the communities they pass through; the relationship between home life and work life; finally, the relationship between individuals and the growing transnational economy that makes for what Saskia Sassen has termed 'Global Cities,' key hubs in a global network of information and monetary exchange.

I have begun by recording the stories of commuters in the New York metropolitan area and the San Francisco Bay Area. Along with the stories I am asking participants to draw their commute routes from memory and to draw maps of what they consider to be their communities. The routes will be recorded with GPS and the communities researched using census statistics as well. But the hand drawn maps, with their distortions of scale and misperceived spatial relationships may indicate perceptions of comfort or discomfort, the relative importance to ones daily routine, the people, places and activities that the commuters more or less identify with, hypothetically at this point. Lastly, a smartphone app for real-time commuter surveying will be distributed in order to capture commuters' perceptions as they travel.

I originally envisioned the participants being freeway and train commuters, traveling from the suburbs to the city; however, the initial group is split between automobile and subway commuters. Taking the subway into consideration has led me to thinking about subtle and possibly not-so-subtle cross-cultural interactions that take place in the confined spaces of the subway platform and car.

As mentioned, the project will have various manifestations, but its initial phase will consist of juxtapositions of imagery (still and video), data, and commuter stories. This paper lays out some of the theoretical groundwork underlying the project.

History of Commuting

Commuting is a phenomenon resulting from a nexus of changing conditions in the U.S. (and developed countries in general), including industrialization, the growth of the middle class, the personalization of transportation, the onset of the highway system, so-called white flight, and so on. Commuting is the physical and economic connection between home and work, and potentially the *disconnection* between these two as well.

Commuting is largely a result of the industrial revolution: lifestyles were transformed by the centralizing effects of increasingly technological forms of production, and society evolved away from agrarian production to manufacturing as the predominant source of work. Of course this development proceeded through the 20th century. Commuting itself has undergone its own development, moving from being mostly contained within urban areas (referred to as ICC: inside the central cities), to commuting from outside of urban areas (referred to as OCC: outside the central cities), and then increasingly between suburban areas, as cities decentralized into metropolitan areas due to the post-War middle class expansion, and the ensuing suburbanization – what economist Robert Reich has referred to as the Great Prosperity (Reich 2010).

While commuting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was largely characterized by flows into and out of city centers, the 1970s, '80s, and '90s saw commuting increasingly done from suburb to suburb. Today, approximately 50% of the adult US population commutes; approximately 31% of that commuting is suburb-to-suburb commuting, and suburb-to-city commuting is approximately 14%.¹ This has occurred while the suburban growth in industries of all types outpaced that of city centers as businesses took advantage of the suburbs for

¹ See: Commuters in the U.S.: <http://www.slideshare.net/marcus.bowman/slides/us-commuting-statistical-analysis>

reducing their 'transaction costs' (business overhead as well as general costs of living).² This period has also seen the nature of business itself in the US change in various ways, growing more in service related areas (from consumer services to financial services) than in manufacturing, and increasingly entwined in global relations. The world economy has changed as well, as it is increasingly composed of TNCs (transnational corporations), whose power and reach in some ways defies nation-state boundaries.³

While it may have been adopted with a sense of pride and accomplishment in the mid 20th C (being a sign of a suburban, middle and upper middleclass lifestyle), today it can be interpreted as a symptom of desperate times: As available land for development within cities has declined, the physical and social infrastructure (education) deteriorated, the gentrification of affordable neighborhoods has increased housing costs, families whose incomes have remained relatively stagnant over recent decades have looked further and further outside of city centers for housing. Consequently, 'stretch commutes' (50 miles or more in one direction) have become common in many metropolitan areas.⁴ I personally observed this during the housing bubble while living in San Jose, CA: as prices for homes rapidly shot up, fueled by real estate speculation and low interest rates, two hour commutes were not unheard of.

The commute is often looked upon as an arduous task that is performed only out of necessity; a vacuous activity if conducted by car on a freeway; a claustrophobic affair on a packed bus or subway car. But commuters, like all people, can prove to be resourceful and turn the routine into something more fulfilling: reading; preparing for work or finishing up business; playing games with mobile devices or otherwise; contemplating life and culture through casual people watching.

² Lee, Gook Seo, Webster. "The Decentralising the Metroplis: Economic Diversity and Commuting in the US Suburbs;" *Urban Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 13. London, Routledge, 2006

³ Sassen: "In the 1950s, the major international flow was world trade, concentrated in raw materials, other primary products, and resource-based manufacturing. I the 1980s, the gap between the growth rate of exports an that of financial flows widened sharply." (Sassen 2000)

⁴ http://www.bts.gov/programs/national_household_travel_survey/stretch_commute.html

In any case, commuting is a daily fact of life for many people, and its routine nature lends it to being viewed as something mundane, peripheral, and unproductive. However, much like the everyday activities that became the substance for critical reflection by theorists of the mid 20th century such as Lefebvre and Debord, commuting is full of possibilities for artistic (aesthetic? conceptual?) investigation. This paper and the project associated with it are intended to do just this.

The Effects of Commuting on Community (Commuting as community divide or mixer)

The growth of commuting and its changing character gives reason to consider the effects on community; after all, the physical imposition of a railroad track or highway creates a boundary between one side and the other, and another demarcation between varied communities along its route. The division created by the commuter thoroughfare can often be along economic lines, which can also translate into ethnic and racial divisions. While the common phrase ‘wrong side of the tracks’ implies that there is a right side of the tracks, and that the tracks are the physical dividing line, it is hard to pin down the origins of this phrase, though we are all familiar with what it means.

It is easy to visualize these community effects as they have been mythologized in popular fiction about city life. We might refer to the ‘wrong side of the tracks’ divide as a lateral divide created by the commuter corridor. However, a ‘longitudinal divide’ may also be a component, as commuters often live in communities that are quite different (economically, ethnically, racially, politically, etc.) from the communities that they commute to or pass through. Both can result in what cultural geographers refer to as residential segregation. (Sibley, quoted in Shurmer-Smith 2002) Commuting allows for greater separation between home life and the other, which may be primarily work life, but is also the community in which one’s work is located. Also, due to what can be referred to as the ‘transportation divide’ that exists within the U.S., different economic classes are capable of or choose to commute by more or less exclusive modes of transportation. So within the various modes of commuting there exists, to varying degrees, a class divide.

On the one hand these social divides are not new; they accompany the existence of civilization itself. On the other hand, one can point to examples where technology has been consciously used to reinforce social boundaries (Robert Moses' highway network between Manhattan and the surrounding affluent white suburbs is an example often pointed to.) Class divides in commuting can also merely be extensions of preexistent stratifications within society.

The subway presents another type of transportation divide, one that splits the subterranean traveler from the communities above: one may be exiting Manhattan in a subway car below the high finance district of Wall Street, while the car is filled with service workers making their way to New York's outer boroughs. Riding on any number of New York subway trains one can observe a complex mix of commuters from all walks of life, and yet this mix gravitates towards different cultural groups depending upon the neighborhoods being passed through. One observes different homogeneities in different parts of the city, and at different times of the day: riding the L train into trendy Williamsburg at midnight is a different experience than taking the same train during rush hour.

However, this is a rather dystopic perspective that may be misguided, for as much as creating divisions, commuting creates spaces for cultural juxtapositions, allowing for one community to experience another, if only from a distance. Riding the commuter train up the San Mateo peninsula into San Francisco, one passes by the campuses of hi-tech firms in Mountain View, the mixed development neighborhoods of Redwood City, the shoreline of the Bay itself, and the transitional southeast side of San Francisco's China Gulch. If only from a visual standpoint, the commuter is taken out of their locality and exposed to life in these other communities. On the other coast, the Long Island commuter driving their car into Manhattan on the Long Island Expressway passes the trees and lawns of Rosalyn Heights and the frontage road neighborhoods of Queens, arriving at their parking spot set amidst Midtown high rises.

The exposure to these communities, superficial as it might be, may generate reflection upon one's community in contrast to these others. Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the effects of commuting upon commuters' sense of belonging to a given community, as mobility has gathered increasing interest in the social sciences. As Per

Gufstason points out in *Mobility and Territorial Belonging*, the relationship between work-related travel and territorial identification is complicated by the types of mobility in consideration, as well as the age, gender, nationality, etc., of the traveler. Using statistics from a 2005 survey done in Sweden, and referring to several other studies, Gufstason considers commuters' identification with local, regional, national, and international (European Union) territories given the types of travel they do. Overall, 75% the Swedes surveyed expressed a strong or very strong identification with their neighborhood or town. However, those with commutes of one hour or longer expressed less local identification than those with shorter commutes. Categorically speaking, women expressed stronger local identification than men, and white-collar workers expressed less local identification than blue-collar workers.

Another interesting aspect of the study is the relationship between nationality and community identification. Gufstason notes that it has been commonly believed that immigrants, while initially feeling little sense of belonging to their adopted country, develop this sense over time as they assimilate into the new culture. He mentions, though, that recent studies show immigrants can retain identification with their nation of origin while also developing belonging to their new home. This relates to interesting issues regarding the impact of globalization.

Globalization and commuting

These issues conveniently direct us towards considering the interplay between globalization and community. Commuters using public transportation, especially those in major metropolitan areas, often find themselves in a complex cultural mix ranging from local to global varieties. The daily routine of the commute, potentially hours spent in transit, contributes to what Bourdieu and others have referred to as *habitus*, one's cultural identity as formed through the participation in everyday activities. And as Sassen has pointed out in her writing about the continued relevance of the local, these interactions remain relevant in spite of a growing globalization. These metropolitan cultural mixes present opportunities for the exchange of ideas through subtle and conspicuous expressions – it would seem that commuting via public transportation in a Global City might be one locus in which a global cultural identity is fostered, despite what might seem to be an insignificant interaction. As a commuter on a bus, train, or subway in a large metropolitan area, there is inevitably some

interaction with people of different economic, ethnic, career, political backgrounds from one's own. Simple things like the navigation of available space on a crowded subway car can make cultural differences apparent, what de Certeau might have called the rhetorics of space become apparent. How commuters negotiate their place in a crowded car, avoiding or displaying eye contact, helping one another to clarify confusing directions, offering seats to those who are standing ... these casual interactions with strangers form cooperative bonds that, despite their brevity, are a platform for interaction that enables trust to formulate

However, despite these instances of trust, can we credit these moments, what Patricia Price has called 'pauses,' with nurturing a sort of global exchange, the sort that Sassen would have us believe takes place at the Manhattan sidewalk food vendor (Price 2007; Sassen 2005)? There is some acceptance borne from familiarity that is fostered by these encounters with others; could these pauses be wrapped into the process of globalization? While this is the case on some level, it is likely not a simple scenario. In an interesting discussion about cultural influence and recalcitrance, Paul Kennedy points out that people often hold more tightly to their cultural heritage in the face of diversity, for this diversity can be interpreted as a threat: a threat to one's 'way of life,' to one's standard of living, and so on. This threat level, while manifested in people's anxieties about cultural differences, can be exacerbated by those who seek to benefit from manipulating people's fears, such as politicians and businesses. Perhaps the average commuter carries with them a type of cultural vaccination that allows for a limited amount of multicultural engagement while at the same time holding fast to their own cultural identity.

The Political Economy of Commuting

Are commuter thoroughfares neutral entities created solely for the purposes of travel ease? Are they the result of a capitalistic hegemony that benefits from the atomization of the public and the resulting commerce? David Harvey, writing about the impact of Haussmann's Second Empire Parisian boulevards, notes that the restructuring of Paris not only affected the movement of the city's residents, but enabled greater control of the populace both physically and psychologically. The former through creating harder to obstruct passageways and

providing better site lines for police; the latter by creating a 'stage' for commerce, leading to what Harvey refers to as 'governance by spectacle' (Harvey 2006). In discussing the relationship between public space, spectacle, and political agency, Harvey (and he is not alone here) asserts that transforming public space into a site for spectacle depoliticizes that space, that the politics underlying public space are obscured for the sake of spectacle and the allied 'embourgeoisement.' What if anything does this critique have to do with the motorized 'boulevards' of current-day commuters?

It is without doubt that commuter thoroughfares (freeways, trains, subways) exist in large part due to the need of workers and goods to be transferred from point A to point B. That the design and direction of these thoroughfares are determined by people in power who have a range of vested interests, from getting materials to market to getting reelected, has been well considered by the likes of Harvey, Castells, Kennedy, and others. Aspects of transportation planning such as the transportation type, the location of routes, the location of access points, the cost for use, and so forth, have a tangible impact upon people's lives (commuting costs and real estate prices, for example) – it hits them in the wallet, so to speak.

But how does the commute function with regards to political activation or pacification? Is the routine of the commute one more element in the average person's life that vaporizes political agency? Or does it, despite its phenomenological banality (or perhaps because of it) refresh the commuter's sense of social connectedness, or even engagement? I am early yet in the process of recording commuters' stories, but what I've found is a disconnect between commuters' perceptions and their surroundings, be it people, nature, commerce, etc. Does this speak to the instrumental nature of commuting - its purpose being only to get 'there'? Could it be that commuters, while not conscious of social engagement, are in fact absorbing subtle cues from the environment, whether it is the freeway or the subway, and thereby gaining some awareness of their community? (Traveling by freeway, using one's personal vehicle, is quite different from taking the subway, the bus, or the train; it deserves special consideration.)

Aside from the particulars of the commute, commuting provides a connection between home life and work life: it is a physical link between personal life and one's role in the national and international socio-political complex. And yet, due to the routine of commuting, and the

immediate economic and lifestyle 'needs' that work provides for, this connection is often overlooked. Leading to the misguided notion that one's home life is disassociated from the larger geopolitics of global culture.

Changing Technology: Telecommuting and Community

With the rapid growth in mobile communication, the notion of physically commuting to and from work is no longer a given; telecommuting is a growing option for numerous occupations. Along with the increased flexibility this provides there is a change in how one's time is spent, who it is spent with, the substance of what is communicated, and so on. As well, telecommuting has an effect on the social bonds that once were largely established within one's proximity, but are now increasingly distanced and mediated. The ways that we think about community, possibly even the way we envision our community, may be changing along with these changes in technology. For instance, one can imagine an older sense of community that was determined by location, and that might be visualized as an entity established around one's home, or one's job. Today we can envision a community that, rather than being cohesive and centered, is polymorphous and complex, has telematic tendrils connecting places that one may only visit sporadically, or never at all. This would seem to produce an atomization of community, but one could also argue that a new form of community is shaping up. This new community is emerging with our increasing use of communications technology. It is rhizomatic in nature and appearance, a parallel to our networked lives.

Conclusion and Sendoff

Commuting is one aspect of daily life that, due to its nature of traversing through territorial and cultural boundaries, and its inherent connection between home and work, the personal and the social, the local and the transnational, is full of possibilities for investigating a range of issues. Issues such as perceived community, the cross fertilization of cultures, the relationship between home, work, and the broader socio-political realm. With the help of commuters and the use of various methods, from low-tech to high-tech, for documenting their

impressions of commuting and community, Perceptions of the Commuting Ethnographer will provide insights into at least some of these areas of interest, and areas yet to be defined.

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