Drone over East Jerusalem,
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IN/VISIBILITY IN TRANSIT

the everyday politics of urban transport

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The twin towns of Ul Qoma and Besźel in China Miéville's fantasy-detective novel *The City and the City* (2009) exist entirely independently of one another even though they overlap spatially. The streets of the two cities are crosshatched — that is to say, one city's buildings stand adjacent to the other's; residents regularly pass inhabitants of the other city, but any interaction between the two sides is strictly forbidden and punished by an invisible force called 'Breach'. The cities' residents thus make sure to 'unsee' those on the other side — to register the presence of the other just enough to avoid a collision, but to show no sign of acknowledgement. They police their own movements, expressions, and even their own thoughts so as not to engage with the other city, even when it is in front of them. Despite occupying what is in essence the same city, the residents of Miéville's double-city relegate those outside their own society to another realm. This can be understood as a reflection of the way inhabitants of real-world cities interact with others on their daily journeys through urban space.

Jerusalem is similar to the fictional Ul Qoma and Besźel in that here, too, two cities, al Quds and Yerushalayim, seem to inhabit the same physical space. Although Jerusalem is often described as divided, it might be more accurately described as fragmented, permeated by numerous borders and overlapping territorial claims. Depending on the time of year, and day, and the political situation, certain spaces are occupied or temporarily used by different groups in a complex choreography of movement that is not always without friction. Along Jerusalem's Hebron Road, blue Palestinian buses use the same bus lane and pick up passengers at the same bus stops as the larger, green Israeli vehicles. Once, as I was riding the bus to the Bethlehem checkpoint, an Israeli woman waiting at a bus stop looked up. When she saw me (a European-looking woman) sitting in the window, she rose from her seat to get on, but then, with some confusion, realised I was sitting on a Palestinian bus. Her eyes became unfocused, as if she were looking through me, and the entire bus, forgetting that she ever registered it,

unseeing it. Although the bus may well have gone to her destination, it was not part of her world, and it was easiest to ignore the fact that it even existed.

Unseeing the 'other'

In public spaces and places of economic exchange beyond our own, familiar and predictable niche of the city, we encounter people whose worlds do not usually overlap with ours. Public transport, which is by its very nature connective, not only allows city dwellers to move beyond their home turf, but also creates a space in its own right. Unlike the street or the market, where encounters are fleeting, here we are forced to spend time with strangers in a small, and often crowded, space. The enclosed environment of the bus, tram, or subway car; the dead time that can be spent watching other people; the disparate areas linked — all make public transportation spaces of encounter.

The concentration of strangers on public transport can be perceived as a potential source of danger, and many of us believe that pretending not to see them will protect us from conflict. As a child, I was warned

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not to stare at people on the New York subway and not to look strangers in the eye because they might take offense, or worse. A good urban citizen, I learned, minimises interaction and lets people get on with their lives. While this also serves as an all-too-convenient excuse to ignore homeless people and others asking for help, it appears to be the only way we can cope with the multiplicity of societies and lives that intersect in the city. We make ourselves numb to them and thoroughly filter our surroundings in order to avoid having to take it all in. In his 1903 essay, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', Georg Simmel argues that the blasé attitude of city dwellers is a reaction to their sensory over-stimulation. In order not to be confronted with all the snippets of lives we see, we shut down. We dull our expression so as not to give away too much of ourselves. Our eyes glaze over, blunting our capacity for empathy. Admittedly, it's difficult to maintain decorum on the evening commute after a long day of work, being as physically close to strangers as we might otherwise only be to our sexual partners — faces in armpits and all. Pretending that we aren't seeing, feeling, smelling, or hearing our intimate bystanders is the only means of upholding our collective dignity in this situation. An armoury of books, phones, and earbuds helps to build a defensive barrier against the outside world that keeps breathing down our neck, elbowing us in the side, or rubbing up against us (on purpose or by accident, we wonder).

The suspended disbelief in our own visibility is the other side of the unwritten code of ignoring others in public space. We act as if we were invisible to our co-passengers, moving our morning makeup routines from the privacy of the bathroom to the underground, speaking on the phone about our most personal relationships, as if no one could hear. Lines of civility are not only crossed when others pop our imaginary bubble, momentarily destroying the illusion of our isolation, but also when we take this pretence too far. Expecting others to ignore the un-ignorable — like fragments of clipped fingernails projected in our direction — is considered rude, so transport companies frequently attempt to encourage civil behaviour. This can be seen, for example, in the soulless announcements on the sleek new metro in Delhi (often ignored by passengers) advising passengers to sit on seats as opposed to the floor, as well as in the signs on the New York subway admonishing men who sit with their legs wide-open to 'stop the spread'.

Suspicion and surveillance

In the post-9/11 world, such public announcements have moved beyond the appeal for courtesy, and instead ask us to turn our moralizing gaze from ourselves to others. The trademarked slogan of New York's Metropolitan Transport Authority (MTA), 'If you see something, say something', leaves it up to the passengers to determine what constitutes 'something': what is normal behaviour or appropriate clothing?

Who defines this, and what does this mean in a city that deems itself cosmopolitan? Visually, the culture of mutual surveillance is encouraged by advertisements such as the Transport for London's Orwellian poster subtitled 'secure beneath the watchful eyes', the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit's poster of a pair of eyes with the caption 'bomb detectors'. Such public safety campaigns encourage mutual scrutiny and suspicious sideward glances. Whereas not staring at strangers used to be considered common courtesy, looking closely at the person sitting opposite has now become a civic duty.

When Jerusalem's light rail began operating in 2011, it was the first mode of transportation to serve both Israeli and Palestinian areas of the city. While it has opened up Palestinian neighbourhoods such as Shuafat to Israelis who would have considered them off limits before, it has also exposed these areas to increased policing and surveillance practices. In addition to the security cameras and armed guards on all trains and platforms, a new police station was opened where the train enters East Jerusalem. And in the summer of 2014, drones were temporarily introduced to provide live footage of the train tracks and adjacent Palestinian neighbourhoods. From the beginning, security considerations were an important aspect for Israeli planners when they encouraged Palestinians to use the tram. According to the former CEO of the light rail operator, the train is 'much more safe and secure than other public transportation in Jerusalem because Arabs are using it'. Paradoxically, then, while the Israeli operator feared attacks by Palestinians, a sense of security was derived from the presence of Palestinian passengers, who were thought to protect the train from potential terrorist attacks. The company thus went to great lengths to ensure Palestinian buy-in. Rather than viewing service delivery to marginalised populations as a value in itself, diversity on public transportation was appropriated as part of the security discourse.

Crossing boundaries — inclusion or displacement?

The Jerusalem light rail connects disparate areas, transgressing intra-urban boundaries. On the one hand, in doing so, it provides a public service to a section of the population that has long been excluded from municipal amenities. On the other hand, many view the light rail as an illegal incursion into Palestinian territory that serves to effectively annex East Jerusalem to the Israeli west of the city. By connecting Jewish settlements in the Palestinian east of the city to

Arab neighbourhoods, it not only opens Palestinian areas up to Israeli movement, but increases their visibility and navigability, and creates the potential for appropriation. Public transportation itself becomes the frontier of urban conflict, serving as a vehicle to permanently alter a city's space and undermine the not-quite invisible boundaries of segregated cities. It is in this light that local residents have expressed their rejection of he light rail's expansion of Israeli space into Palestinian neighbourhoods by calling for a boycott, and by vandalising stations and attacking trains with stones. Public transport here becomes the target of attempts to uphold urban boundaries, to defend spaces of autonomy by limiting connectivity.

Even in cities not torn by ethno-national conflict, public transport can become a site of the negotiation over urban rights and belonging. Although improved access to amenities in the city centre is generally welcomed, there are some downsides for the residents of areas that previously had limited access to public transport. Proximity to train stations is a key indicator of real estate prices and improved connectivity almost always functions as a harbinger of gentrification. As connectivity to the rest of the city improves, prices rise, and residents are priced out of their neighbourhoods. We see here, then, an echo of the fears over displacement Palestinians voice in conjunction with the Jerusalem light rail. On the other hand, residents often demand access to affordable public transport, and once an area is connected to the transportation grid, it becomes a constitutive part of the city. When the hilly and difficult to access slums in Medellín, Colombia and the Venezuelan capital, Caracas, were connected to new cable car systems, their inhabitants gained more than improved access. When these informal areas were acknowledged as deserving of public services, and put on the map through inclusion in urban infrastructures, their residents became recognised members of the city.

Violence and the negotiation of belonging

While public transport is part of the contestation of urban territory at the large scale, it also plays a role in the negotiation of the public sphere at the everyday level of micro-interactions. As a liminal space, much of the Jerusalem light rail runs along urban fault lines, and has thus become a place of friction and violent encounters. There have been attacks on Palestinians who use the train to access the 'other' side of the city, such as women wearing hijab at tram stops in West Jerusalem. The train stops

The Jerusalem Light Rail,
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A Palestinian and an Israeli bus pass one another on the Hebron Road.
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located on the Green Line, the internationally accepted border between East and West Jerusalem, have also been the site of several lethal attacks in which Palestinian drivers crashed their cars into groups of waiting passengers. In their presumed attempt to control the access certain to areas by limiting Israeli use of the light rail, these acts might be considered extremely violent forms of boundary negotiation.

Yet even when geopolitical boundaries are not an issue, instances of violence against strangers on public transport is still a brutal aspect of the struggle over inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere. The ubiquitous sexual harassment of women on crowded trains may be understood as a means of asserting dominance over space. The introduction of women-only carriages in public transit systems has been floated as a policy solution to the lack of women's safety in various countries around the world, yet the

separation of diverse public space for the protection of 'minorities' begs the question, 'where segregation should begin and where it should end?'. In the case of gender-based violence, most harassment and abuse takes place on the street and in the home, but examining our behaviour on public transport can serve as a starting point for broader discussions.

The 'public' in public transport

The ability to share public spaces and act according to an unwritten code of etiquette within them does not necessarily amount to respect for otherness. In fact, as Gill Valentine's research on encounters has found, habitual contact with others without any meaningful interaction might even exacerbate group animosities rather than undermine stereotypes. When others intrude on our private bubble in public space by looking at

or addressing us directly, by blasting music, or by talking so loudly that it becomes impossible for us to ignore them, they seem to have not only broken through our invisible defences, but to have also violated a sacred, urban code on behaviour in public spaces. They cause annoyance because they refuse to let us be aloof city-dwellers who see journeys on public transport as dead space-time between Point A and Point B, and who only interact with the communities of our own choosing. Yet these fleeting, often irritating or perturbing, interactions constitute some of the rare urban moments in which our lives intersect with those of members of parallel societies. In the liminal space of public transport, we are confronted with difference, and thus have to negotiate on a personal level how we deal with the diversity of lifestyles and cultures in the cities we live in.

Our mundane daily interactions on public transport reflect how we conceive our collectiveness as residents of the city. In its role as a space in which we encounter those different from us, public transport might be the physical realm in which what Chantal Mouffe calls 'agonistic pluralism' is lived: since we cannot expect to always arrive at a consensus in pluralist societies, we must allow for potential conflict. Agonistic encounters, too, are attempts at connecting in one way or another, of escaping our individualism to establish some kind of collective order. Thus, disruptive behaviours, unpleasant encounters or even violent attacks are part of the social negotiation of who is visible and who belongs just as policy debates over access to mass transit (even if couched in language of spatial planning and finances) are essentially about the question of social inclusion. The spaces of friction become the arenas where difference is confronted on a physical, affective, and personal level, and where we are forced to come to terms with otherness. Rather than sharing public space unwillingly, looking away to avoid conflict, or only barely tolerating one another, we should attempt to see (and become visible to) one another. While this may create distraction and discord, it also might mean potentially arriving at a deeper level of empathy and interaction. The everyday politics of public transport should be taken seriously. If we try to rethink our subways, buses, and trams as spaces of engagement rather than avoidance, if we attempt to see one another rather than looking away, we might begin to see ourselves differently, too — as part of the city, rather than just passing through it.