Coaching and Training: an Ethnography of Student Commuting on Sydney's Suburban Trains

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Macquarie University, New South Wales, Australia

ABSTRACT   *Public transport systems in Australia receive subsidies from state governments to facilitate the movement of students to and from schools. During the educational peak hours, students on their way to and from school dominate the demographics of buses and trains. Policies of de-zoning plus the drift to non-government schooling have increased the numbers of students commuting each day. As with commuting in general, student commuting is taken for granted and its associated 'travel performances' under-investigated. This paper analyses the 'choreographies' of students as they travel to and from school on Sydney trains. It is argued that students form closed micro-communities for the passage of their journeys, during which they enact a range of cultural and educational activities and performances.*

> This was the first railway journey she had made by herself, and there was an intoxicating sense of freedom in being locked in, alone, within the narrow compass of the compartment. She was at liberty to do everything that had previously been forbidden …
> (H.H. Richardson, 1910/1977, p. 21)

The boundaries of educational life are limitless ones, which extend beyond the compass of the school. They are manifested not just in the compound impacts of schooling on society, but also in the temporal reach of the school. At the quotidian level for example, the school's timetable commences in advance of its beginning and continues after its end. One element of this temporal overhang is the journey to and from school. Although many children are driven to school, significant numbers of them, particularly those attending high schools, take trains or buses. The upsurge of this daily travel is one consequence of the incursion of markets into education, certainly into the schooling systems of Australia and the United Kingdom. This has

allowed parents the opportunity to turn their back on neighbourhood schools in favour of more efficacious ones, sometimes at remote locations (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1995; Butler with Robson, 2003; Campbell & Sherington, 2006; McCulloch, 1992; Taylor, 2002, 2007). It is not part of the remit of this paper to question the social efficacy of this mobility. The degree to which it threatens the generation of social capital that was once generated around neighbourhood schools, is a matter of concern, not to mention the fact that it is, on the surface at least, an educational waste of time.[1] Instead, this paper's focus of interest is the nature of the school journey.

Though there is now much research on how children travel to and from school, much of it lamenting the fact that too many of them are being chauffeured (Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990; Fotel & Thomsen, 2004; Pooley, Turnbull & Adams, 2005),[2] this does not apply to their actual travel activities. The journey to school on some form of public transport is notable on a number of counts. It takes place in an environment that is a threshold, in-between space, on the verge, depending on the time of day, of both home and of school. It also one that is a fluid environment, ever-changing in terms of its social composition, shared with other adults, who are also on their way to work or places of study. In this context, the identity of school students is an ambivalent one, where the normal confines and strictures of childhood are abandoned yet present. The journey to school is one of those occasions when the gazes of teachers and parents are absent, and children enjoy a measure of autonomy. It is one they exercise to an inordinate degree, often transgressing the limits of life in public.

In this paper, I argue this paradox of being free and un-free produces commuting practices that are significant on a number of grounds; these include their 'theatricality', defiance of rail 'codes of conduct', and the 'carriage' of the classroom into the train. In particular, student commuting exemplifies the way the envelope of corporeality now incorporates mobile technologies as key parts of social relations and identity. Indeed, it is significant that the commuting habits of students have contiguity with those of other commuters on trains and that the two run into one another in more senses than one. Prior to analysing the 'performances of travel' (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 216) of school students, I examine the policy and urban conditions that have given rise to Sydney children travelling long distances to school each day.

The Trained Eye: a Note on Methodology

The main focuses of this study are the travelling 'habits' and 'displacement' practices of school students on Sydney's railway network, in particular, on that part of the line from Redfern to Strathfield, which serves the city's inner west, where seven private (non-government) and three state high schools are located. Their habits and practices were observed and 'audited', on and off, over a two-year period. This allowed me to take account of the school calendar's 'seasonal' variations. No special travel arrangements or detours were required on my part, for the itinerary of the students overlapped with my own journey to and from work, early in the morning and late in the afternoon. In this respect, I was already a participant in their journeys and it was relatively easy, by virtue of some strategic positioning designed to bring me closer to the students, to turn my own

trip into an ethnographic one, with the researcher remaining, in so far as it was possible to do so, inscrutable and inconspicuous, in a state of methodological inattentiveness, for all intents and purposes just another passenger in the throng of commuting.

I sat around in the carriages waiting for things to happen, noting as I went along events of significance and regularity, making comprehensive notes 'for playback purposes' (Plummer, 2001). I did this lest anything appearing initially trivial was in hindsight culturally significant. Even so, the act of focusing on any event sequence in everyday life is to begin producing a story, is to parenthesise one set of actions rather than another. In retrospect, it would have been safer to have taken along another researcher, to keep abreast of what was happening elsewhere on the train, as Weilenman & Larsson did in their study of mobile phone usage on trains (2002, p. 93).

I made a strategic decision to forgo any opportunity to interview the students, which is a normal part of the ethnographic process (Delamont, 2002, p. 130) for the following reasons. First, I calculated that the gains to be had from going undercover outweighed those of being a 'recognised' researcher, who was known to the students, as I was more likely to observe them acting 'normally'. Second, though there are ethical issues associated with researching children in any context (Christensen & Prout, 2002), the fact that the activities of the students, who are not identified either by name or institution, were literally in the 'public domain' and therefore 'open' to other commuters to scrutinise, mollified any ethical doubts about the research. Third, had the students been, as it were, in on the act and known that their actions were being 'observed', their actions might have been more guarded or, alternatively, they might have over-performed for the researcher.

In the circumstances then, a judgement was made to travel incognito, without arousing suspicion or otherwise drawing attention to my activities. In order to avoid this possibility I kept myself out of the picture by only occasionally dropping in on the carriages and the platforms where the students mostly convened and congregated. I did so 25 times over the course of my study. Had my cover been blown, that would have been the end of my activities – at least on the inner west line. The fact that my observations were undertaken with strategic infrequency does not undermine their trenchancy. Research of this kind involves serendipity, of being in the right place at the right time. I could have spent months of regular observation, and not witnessed anything particularly unusual. Student commuters are, after all, as regular in their habits as other commuters; it is just that their *habits* always stand out but some stand out more than others.

I did travel with a notebook to keep track of the incidents I was witnessing, recording while they were still fresh in the eye and ear, any snippets of dialogue appertaining to them. As many commuters routinely write in notebooks and diaries, I hoped this would be seen as normal behaviour, would not attract suspicion from my subjects. I tried to do as much as 'overseeing' and overhearing as was possible without drawing attention to myself as a peripatetic ethnographer.[3] I also made verbal sketches of the train environment, the layout of carriages and platforms, the posters and notices adorning railway walls, all of which contribute in a material way, to the travelling experience.

La bête humaine

Although in the face of competition from other forms of transport rail patronage is declining, the historical significance of rail in establishing the foundations of industrialised travel and legitimating movement as one of the cardinal features of modernity, should not be downplayed. Indeed, rail came to epitomise modernist order; it helped society to run on time, and for its members to appreciate the importance of observing temporal discipline as an inescapable predicate of modern life (Berman, 1983, p. 159; Carter, 2001, p. 9). Individuals who resisted the doxology of speed risked marginalisation. Railways helped them become inured to the chronological regimen of a scheduled life, one of appointments, punctuality and complex patterns of time-management, one element of which was the 'forced labour march' called 'commuting'.

Travelling to school is not new. It is a form of instrumental travel, undertaken out of necessity and shares qualities with commuting to work, as distinct from those more pleasurable forms of travel, associated with taking a holiday, with being a tourist rather than a commuter. Nor is it the only form of *educational* travel. Students regularly undertake field trips, to places imbued with pedagogic value (Tait & Huber, 1999), usually by bus rather than train, and under the supervision of teachers, which they are not on their trips to and from school. I have argued elsewhere that educational commuting emerged during the latter part of the nineteenth century when the advent of the railway, which engendered Sydney's suburban expansion,[4] led to schools being placed close to railway stations (Symes, 2007). One ought not to downplay the significance of railways in re-engineering the urban sensibility and laying the foundations of an outlook that has persisted into the twenty-first century and has led to large sections of the population migrating to the city's outer rim as the preferred place to live. Through their successful attempts to picture the rural outskirts of Sydney as arcadia incarnate, property developers helped to promote this trend, which was also aided by public health officials and morals campaigners who demonised the inner city as squalid, profligate and disease-ridden.

The aggregate impact of these topographical and rhetorical manoeuvres was that it produced a city fractured along class and ethnic lines, with the middle classes moving to its outer, semi-rural rim, while the inner city remained the preserve of the working classes and ethnic minorities. This continued until the 1970s when the outflow of populations was reversed and it was once again fashionable for the professional classes to live in the increasingly gentrified inner city. The manoeuvres also served to 'normalise' travel as an inescapable part of metropolitan life, that using the train and eventually other modes of transport were elements of being modern, the predicates of an urbanised sensibility; in effect, movement was a precondition of social advancement and self-improvement (Bauman, 2000). Indeed, the differential access to so-called 'motility capital' is now recognised as a 'structuring dimension of social life', impacting profoundly on educational and employment opportunities (Hine & Mitchell, 2003; Kaufman, Bergman & Joye, 2004). But at a deeper level altogether though, it is through motility that cities come alive, that its myriad bodies project themselves into city spaces, leave their 'inscriptions' on its streets and buildings, modes of transport, develop grammar and

rules for dealing with their engagements with the city and transport systems (Grosz, 1992). It is with making sense of how school students engage with the latter that this paper is pre-eminently concerned.

Trains of Thought

One of the curious oversights of the mobility turn in sociology is its failure to engage with the actual experience of travel, which is frequently seen, quite literally as a means to *an end*, as 'dead time' with only marginal cultural interest (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 217; Urry, 2003, p. 155). The 'pre-destination effects' of travel, the displacement practices generated within the confines of trains and aeroplanes and the 'nowhere architecture' of railway stations and airport terminals, are rarely analysed. In spite of the fact that travel is an inescapable part of modern life, the almost complete absence of studies analysing the precise nature of the micro-communities, the randomised 'bundles of human relations' (Foucault, 1986) that are formed 'on the road', 'on the line' or 'up in the air', highlights the degree to which the travel experience is seen as unexceptional, even banal.

Typical of this sociological neglect appertaining to travel is that of the car, which has 'domesticated' mobility, enabling day-to-day trajectories to be individualised on an unprecedented scale. When so-called 'automobility' has been examined critically, the focus has been on identifying its contribution to environmental decay, urban sprawl, declining social capital and so on (Adam, 1995; Kunstler, 1994; Putnam, 2000). By contrast, studies of the cultures actually generated within cars are thin on the ground (Miller, 2001). One of the few such studies (Sheller & Urry, 2004) suggests that the culture generated within them and over countless journeys has a distinctive dramaturgy – at least as rich and if not richer than that of other quotidian spaces. Similar neglect of the live theatre of travel also pertains to other modes of transport such as aeroplanes, buses and trains. One exception to this is Letherby & Reynolds' study of trains, which suggests there is a need to treat the 'train as a place in and of itself' (2005, p. 7). What they call the 'ultra-ordinariness' of train travel, they argue, is deceptive (2005, p. 120); its apparently mundane exterior hides extraordinary complexities and deep scripts, which govern the conducts of travel. In their inquiry into these, and more generally into the existential condition of being 'trained', they utilise 'written responses' from travellers, railway workers and railway enthusiasts, travel across the world.

In the absence of sociological studies of being mobile, novelists such as Dickens and Zola have proved useful sources of edification. Their novels provide among the first 'ethnographies' of *being* on the train, of the 'foreshortening' effects of speed on the mechanically propelled *flâneur* (Carter, 2001; Freedman, 2002), and on the 'nomadic urge' (Urry, 2000, p. 60). The effects of locomotion on the contemporary subject have also been analysed by a range of contemporary French theorists. Foucault's (1986) analysis of everyday geographies and space includes a consideration of train space, as does de Certeau's (1984), which argues that, relative to walking, train travel is more disciplining, offers less scope for the exercise of freedom. In his reflections on the Paris *métro*, Augé (1986) notes its power to inculcate itself on the individual, that its routes become as deeply ingrained on the self as the lines on one's hands. Butor (1974) argues that the *métro* induces ennui,

which commuters sublimate, reading their way through journeys, reaching out to imaginary spaces to allay alienation. Latour's reflections on the *train à grande vitesse* (TGV) suggest that modern travel has minimal impact on the body by comparison with walking. The very 'smoothness' of the TGV enables passengers to continue with their normal lives (Latour, 1997, p. 177). It is a reminder that trains, unlike more 'turbulent' forms of transport such as buses and cars, allow their habitués to work, to read and so on. Indeed, for many commuters, trains have become extensions of work, places to prepare for work and to undertake homework (Letherby & Reynolds, 2005, p. 141), though given the arduousness of much contemporary work they are increasingly more like dormitories.

Ticket of Leave

Though not an entirely new phenomenon, the fact that legion students now travel to school by train is a legacy of the de-zoning policy that the then New South Wales Premier Nick Greiner and his Minister for Education, Terry Metherell, introduced in 1983. This was part of a portfolio of neoliberalist policies – in the Australian context, radical for their time – designed to overthrow the comprehensive, neighbourhood school. Such a school had been the pivotal element of the organisation of secondary schooling that had developed under the auspices of the Wyndham Scheme and which was part of a broader policy objective to foster democratic and egalitarian communities (Campbell & Sherington, 2006). Prior to the introduction of de-zoning, students at government schools were required to attend their local secondary schools, those located within five kilometres of their places of residence. Special dispensation, only granted in exceptional circumstances, was required to circumvent this ruling, which denied parents freedom of choice and locked their children into attending schools they might not have voluntarily chosen. De-zoning provided a solution to this problem and allowed parents to access, if places were available, a range of allegedly more propitious schools – which now included, another Metherell innovation, specialised high schools – even if it meant undertaking long journeys to attend them. In order that families might properly avail themselves of the opportunities de-zoning afforded, a School Student Transport Scheme (SSTS) was introduced. Under its provisions, students who met the relevant eligibility criteria, such as living more than two kilometres from their school, enjoyed free travel on public transport, during specified times between their homes and school. A school pass indicating the relevant arrival and destination points was issued for this purpose.

Figures compiled for 1999 by the New South Wales Travel Data Centre (2001) indicate that 14 per cent of all Sydney train trips are education-related; nine per cent are undertaken with the aid of a school pass. Students, aged between 11 and 20, make 23 per cent of the journeys undertaken on public transport on weekdays (NSW Government Department of Planning, 2006, p. 16). The majority of education trips occur during the morning and late afternoon, between 7.00 and 8.30 a.m. and 3.30 and 4.00 p.m. respectively, when students dominate passenger manifests. The principal mode of accessing a station (at least in the inner city) is walking and the average distance travelled by train for educational purposes is about nine kilometres. Relatively speaking though, the number of students using Sydney's rail system is

small; most students, especially those attending state schools either walk, utilise a dedicated bus-service or are driven by a family member, as part of a 'multi-purpose journey'. At least one of the private schools in the inner west offers students living in city's southern suburbs their own bus service, which enables them to avoid taking what otherwise would be a long train journey. As elsewhere in the world (see Pooley, Turnbull & Adams, 2005), the impact of these journeys on Sydney's traffic load is evident when 'school's out', which produces a noticeable 'de-congestion' of its thoroughfares. The movement of students thus makes a substantial contribution to the centripetal and centrifugal flow of populations during the city's peak hours.

Part of the price of the voluntary incarceration associated with rail travel, is a willingness to accept its 'panopticism'. This takes the form of an inspectorate that now routinely patrols trains and its robotic incarnation, CCTV, which has given CityRail a distinctly para-militaristic air. It is one further underlined by the disciplinary texts that 'line' the walls of stations and carriages, the so-called 'Code of Conduct' governing rail travel and which is accompanied by illustrations of exemplary behaviour. Some of these texts are directed at particular groups of travellers, including school students (see Figure 1). They provide reminders of what behaviours are unacceptable on trains and the penalties incurred for breaching them – $A550 fine for 'feet on train seats', $A1,000 fine for 'forcing train doors open'. It is important not to downplay the prudential objectives underwriting these disciplinary texts: travelling by train is not without its hazards and requires a modicum of self-regulation if they are to be avoided.

In addition to codes of officialdom, there are tacit ones choreographing passenger movement. These come into play in particular spaces on the rail system and/or at particular times of the day. On station escalators for example, passengers divide themselves into two lines: those who prefer to be motionless in their ascent or descent remain on the left, while those who prefer to walk occupy the right side of the escalator. And on the platform, during peak hours, passengers waiting for a train to arrive line themselves up, near to a platform's edge, while those waiting for a later train hold themselves back. These rules are not spelt out in any code of conduct but form part of the *habitus* of travel in Sydney, and which is adhered to unhesitatingly.[5] This is unlike the more explicit instructions barked out over the station's public address system, as a series of disciplinary reprises, such as spreading out along the platform, which is in large measure ignored, presumably, because it serves no one's interest to do so.

Railway Children

On Sydney's inner western line Redfern and Strathfield stations are important transfer points, where large numbers of students, after having travelled on another train, change 'lines' and spend a few minutes waiting on the platform for an 'all-stops'. Such a train will take them to a station within walking distance of the non-government and government high schools located close to the line. Though their numbers are not large, during the periods immediately prior to and after school, congregations of students are an unavoidable presence (if only through their uniforms and backpacks) on Sydney's inner city stations. They occupy large volumes of space, and exhibit hyperactive commingling, which contrasts markedly with the
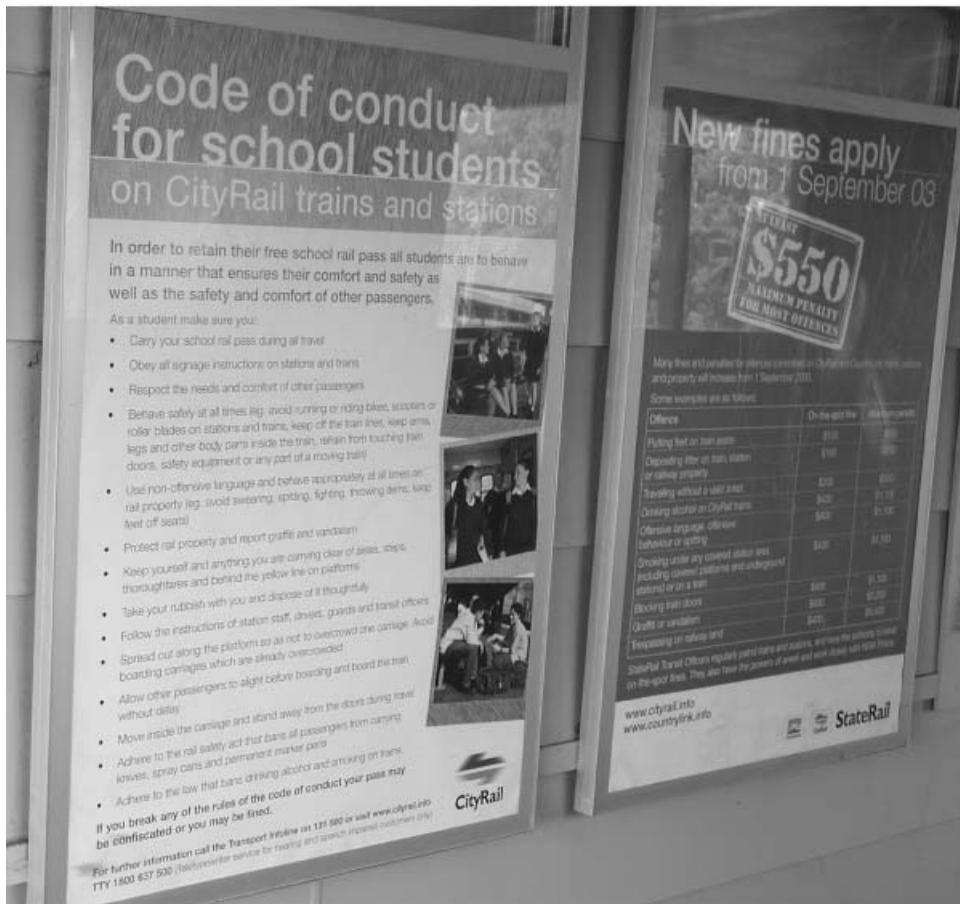
Figure 1. Posters commonly found on Sydney train stations, especially those that are close to schools, specifying the 'Code of conduct for school students' and the fines incurred for transgressing the code.

Source: CityRail

relative sobriety of other passengers. They are anything but docile bodies and frequently transgress the codes of conduct they are exhorted to observe. Thus, when a 'demobilisation' of students occurs at a station, carriages almost instantly return to their normal, almost inert states.

The journey to and from school using public transport is often a complex one which, unlike travelling by car, is rarely seamless or 'straight to the point'. It is likely to be discontinuous and multi-modal, involving walking, travelling on a bus and/or train, and periods of waiting. Determining an efficient itinerary between home and school, one allowing enough time to reach school on time, with a minimum of delay, involves the skill of 'wayfinding' (Golledge, 1999). Its objective is to determine which among the available transport options offers the most alacritous one. Other factors might come into play that might override this imperative, such as taking a more aesthetic or less hazardous route.[6]

It appears that children's 'emplaced knowledge' is often limited and that they often lack basic mobility information (Christensen, 2003, p. 21). In this respect, children who travel to school under their own steam have a distinct advantage over their peers who are driven to school and who have fewer opportunities to acquire mobility essentials. Parental fear of children venturing into public spaces including trains, and which is often an over exaggerated one (Fotel & Thomsen, 2004; Woolley, 2006), counts against many children acquiring even basic 'navigational' knowledge about their cities. In any case, the chronological and cartographical accounting associated with travel is one element of the regimen of time management that is a cornerstone of adult life. Arguably, in forcing school students to travel around the city they are being, quite literally, trained to accept this regimen, are being inducted into the conducts of mundane travel, of which precise time scripting is a part. But it is also emblematic of the way the train timetable intersects with that of the school, and of the way, the school's 'chronic' segmentation flows into the extra-curricular realm and into life generally. Further, it is also emblematic of the way the spatial increasingly defers to the temporal in quotidian life.

These issues, though not without interest are much less so than the 'compressionist' practices, engendered from 'confinement' in a train carriage. These are associated with the 'micro-communities' that are formed when students board a train, which they are obliged to share with other commuters, and which dissolve once students alight. The patterns of sociality associated with 'going to school' are different from those 'going home'; they are asymmetrical ones. In the morning for example, students are more likely to travel at different times and they, depending on from where they have come, tend to 'meet up' with other students on a train or at a station; moreover, their time of travel coincides with that of other commuters. This means their 'presence' on trains is a more dispersed one than it is at the end of the school day, when they tend to descend on rail system 'all of a piece'. What is more, because the time is outside the peak hour, other commuters do not dilute their presence. Thus, one could be forgiven for thinking that they had entire proprietorship over trains during the period immediately after school – all the more so, because their behaviour at this time is more extrovert than at the beginning, and therefore is harder to ignore. But even though the bulk of the exodus from schools occurs at 3 p.m. or thereabouts, students returning home after after-school activities continue to have a presence on trains, albeit an ever diminishing one.

Closely Observed Trains

Unlike other travelling spaces such as aeroplanes, commuters on trains are not allocated seats but have to 'fight' for them. Most commuters prefer, if they have the option, to sit alone, and use a range of self-containment devices including books, newspapers, magazines, laptops, mobile phones, personal stereos and iPods (Bull, 2005) to indicate their desire to be left alone. This commuting protocol effects to parenthesise passengers; it acts as a 'do not disturb' sign, indicating that they are conversationally speaking off-limits. Notwithstanding this, commuters are not averse to receiving mobile phone calls that are now parts of the 'interpersonal surveillance' and a ubiquitous feature of life 'on the move'. Loved ones, friends, business colleagues can, in effect, be fixed in space, their movements tracked and

positioned (Cooper, 2002; Green, 2002; Molz, 2006); the absent are forever present (Gergen, 2002). It is of note that while most students carry mobile phones, they use them, perhaps because of the expense involved, only sparingly.

Passenger placement is conditioned by the architecture of railway carriages, which confers limits on what is possible in the way of micro-communal conduct. Incidentally, this also applies to other forms of public transport. The presence of the driver at the front of the bus for example, creates a potentially more abrasive environment than on a train and it is common for bus drivers, perhaps because they are more visible and audible to them, to regale their student passengers with injunctions to behave properly ('move away from the backdoor'; 'please move to the back of the bus'). A series of 'explosive' incidents on Sydney buses involving school students in 2005 led to the introduction of a code of conduct, specifying a range of offences, including 'window etching', 'smoking', 'throwing things in or from the bus', which had the potential to lead to the confiscation of the student's travel pass (MoT, 2006, p. 5).

While security guards and police patrol Sydney's trains in large numbers, they are not much in evidence on 'school specials' and as a result, students have more freedom than on buses. One suspects though, that there is proxy surveillance of students undertaken by the general public, who are not loathe to report acts of misbehaviour to the relevant school.[7] Indeed, in a leaflet produced for school students by CityRail it is suggested that failure to observe train etiquette 'will be noted by other travellers – their opinion of you and your school is important' (CityRail, 2005/2006). Plus, as will be noted later, other passengers are not averse to remonstrating with recalcitrant students.

As on a bus, it is the seating arrangements of individual train carriages, which determine where, how and in what numbers students (and passengers in general) can be seated. Those used to form Sydney trains have two decks, which are accessed through a vestibule at either end.[8] The double decking does not appear to produce any obvious 'dividing practices' among passengers. Each deck sits up to 60, with room for standing, which passengers are forced to do during peak hours. The seats are arranged across an aisle with two on one side and three on the other. In many carriages (not all), the seats are mounted on a swivel mechanism enabling passengers the choice of facing one another in groups of four or six or alongside one another, in groups of two or three.[9] It is an arrangement that allows for social isolation and social interaction at one at one and the same time.

Carriage architecture, which has its origins in assumptions about what 'measure of closeness' the travelling public will tolerate, engenders a range of territorial conducts arising from the population and topographical pressures of crowded carriages. The fact that, other than that at the beginning of a journey, there are ever diminishing numbers of vacant seats as the train nears its destination, creates its own positional calculus of social segmentation and integration. Passengers for example, have more scope for spatial 'discretion' at a train's departure point than they do at its destination. Indeed, when the train is overcrowded the scope for such discretion might be almost non-existent, and passengers are often forced to run along the platform to find space or, worse still, wait for the next train to access space they can call their own. Discretion is further limited by whether they travel alone or with others. Couples wanting to sit together 'flag' this desire by 'turning down' the seat in

front of them. But they only have scope to exercise this 'tie sign' (Goffman, 1971) in relatively empty carriages and once they do so, it effects to further limit the spatial discretion of other passengers.

Most passengers also have an aversion (even though it is safer) to facing backwards to the 'engine', and turn their seats around, which also means they can avoid any discomfiting eye contact with others. This squares with the observation that in cities individuals seek ways to avert face-to-face interaction through the adoption of 'civil inattention' strategies (Goffman, 1971). Fixed seats, some of which face into the carriage, thus are among the last to be filled and it is of note that when more preferred seats become available among the first to be vacated are the fixed, inward facing ones.

This reflects another commuting strategy: that of avoiding enforced proximity, which is particularly pertinent in the case of three seats, and which promotes a commuting version of the law of the excluded middle. The middle seat, even on crowded trains, is invariably left vacant, usually because a passenger either sitting in the inner or the outer seat places their more 'detachable possessions' to flag their proprietorship over it and to deter any would-be occupants. The same effect can be induced by a look of disdain towards a passenger moving 'in' on the seat (Goffman, 1971, p. 41). Personal space is valued on trains, which only the boldest are prepared to transgress, though not without reaction from the transgressed, and who often stand (or rather, sit) in the way of making a seat easily accessible. In order to make their affront more palpable such passengers will often remove themselves to another part of the train once the seat is occupied. That these interactions are invariably silent ones is telling; if words were exchanged, they might engender friction.

Brief Encounters

Interestingly, none of these territorial 'grammars' apply to school students. The zeal for solitariness among other commuters is not evident among them, who, with rare exception, travel in 'groups', mostly school-based in composition. These tend to form as students wait for their trains, as part of a range of 'pre-compression' activities, which includes an effusive greeting of some kind, especially among the private girls, who will, on arrival, ritualistically embrace. Boys restrict their physical contacts to shaking hands or mildly pugilistic 'exchanges', more amiable than aggressive. Commuting scripts are gender differentiated from an early age. Even so, girls often do unexpected things, such as competing in a 'piggy-back' race along the length of the platform. Even more surprising, was that it engendered so little interest among the other students, which suggests that their threshold of tolerance is very high or, that they are so ensconced in their own activities that they remain indifferent to those of others.

The groups vary in size between five and ten students approximately of the same age, and generally stand – though it is not uncommon for the girls to sit in a circle, tailor-fashion, on the ground, with backpacks in front of them, acting as modesty guards. There seems to be an unwritten rule among students that platform seats are reserved for adults. Generally, the behaviour of the students is not overly boisterous or unruly, and if it threatens to become so an older boy (seemingly responsible for

their behaviour) will intervene and bring the recalcitrant boy(s) into line with a delicate enjoinder 'to relax'.

What inter-school fraternisation there is, occurs mostly between girls and boys from the single-sex, private schools, especially those that already enjoy formal academic ties. In the case of two such schools, some of the girls will forgo the option of travelling on the 'express' to Strathfield, the station closest to their school, in favour of a slower, all-stops train, generally the 7.55 a.m. from Redfern, on which the boys travel. Moreover, there is evidence that this 'co-education-on-the-line' is intergenerational. Generally though, the contacts between students attending different schools are more limited; they certainly are between students attending private and state schools, as they are with other commuters, who seem to regard the areas of platform occupied by students as 'no go' areas.

This educational form of apartheid manifests itself spatially in the way students distribute themselves along the platform, certainly at Redfern. By and large, the private students 'colonise' an area of the platform close to the footbridge, which they occupy year-in, year-out, whereas the state school students are forced (though that might be too strong a word) to move further down the platform. Some of the positioning involved is strategic rather than territorial and is related to occupying a position on the train such that when the students alight at their destinations they will be near an exit. Adults use the same strategy. Presumably as a way of cajoling passengers to distribute themselves across the train, exit points do vary from station to station, which means that in alighting from certain carriages passengers are forced to walk the length of the platform to their exits. As a result, students from the same school tend to occupy the same carriages, which means that students boarding at intervening stations know where their friends are likely to be located, and indeed as the train enters a station they will often be seen, if they are not already in position, scurrying to the right carriage, often with their friends standing in carriage doorways waiting for them. Alternatively, they will attempt to draw the attention of the student they want to join them; indeed, they will even slow a train's departure, by standing half-on and half-off the train, to give their friend more time to board.

Once on board, students station themselves en masse, in groups of six or more, the nucleus of which are formed on the platform, usually at the front and rear ends of the carriage, reversing the seats to create more space for themselves. These areas also offer more privacy than the more exposed regions of the carriage, the students only spilling over into other seats or sitting next to other passengers if they are forced to do so. Likewise, other commuters are very circumspect about 'moving into' what is transparently student space, to what, by virtue of the ruckus and kerfuffle, is an adult-free zone. Indeed, they often throw down their backpacks, despite being counselled by regular platform announcements not to do so, to mark the perimeters of this space, especially on afternoon journeys when, to a large extent, certainly on outer suburban routes, students can have the carriages to themselves. The prospect in any case of being adjacent to a stentorian clique of students is not one that most passengers – given their zeal for solitude – find attractive, and when it is unavoidable can produce friction and, occasionally, injunctions to be quiet. A woman, for example, sitting opposite girls from a private school, who were engaged in an extremely loud *tête-à-tête*, had no compunction in asking them to be quiet, which they did, albeit rather sheepishly. Generally though, the seats in immediate proximity

to students are left vacant which means they have space, as it were, surplus to their requirements. Indeed, on one occasion a girl actually apologised for occupying the seat next to the researcher, which was the one closest to her friends. If students need privacy, they will often separate themselves from the group and use the opportunities afforded by empty seats for this purpose. In journeys lasting no more than 15 minutes, some students will relocate themselves several times.

These choreographies suggest that the mobility routines of school students are more complex and heterogeneous than those of other commuters, who once having found a seat remain stationary, either losing themselves in a state of self-absorption or in some electronic or bookish 'vehicle' of distraction or palliation. Sydney trains, unlike other public spaces, have yet to be equipped with muzak that might otherwise serve the latter function; commuters are therefore forced to carry their own distracting and calming devices. Students generally show much more camaraderie than other commuters. Also, students not infrequently treat the train – much in the way some other commuters treat it as an office – as a classroom but one from which the teacher is absent. They will use their journeys as an opportunity to complete assignments, particularly in the morning, turning lever-arch files into desks for this purpose. But they rarely do this on their own. Students take the opportunity to work together with very little sense of proprietorship over their work. They will exchange solutions to particular problems and plagiarise the work of a fellow 'traveller' – practices for which at school they would be admonished.

Zazie dans le métro

Not suprisingly, schoolwork is not often undertaken on the journey home. Indeed, there is considerable asymmetry between the trip to school and the trip home, which is a more free-for-all one, when play is more in evidence than work. On one afternoon for example, I witnessed an impromptu 'football' match, which began with two boys kicking an empty 'water' bottle around the carriage vestibule; they were subsequently joined by other boys, who created a goal area and there ensued a match of sorts, which was abandoned once the principal players had alighted. None of this was organised; it was spontaneously created in the void points of the journey.

While Ruskin in the nineteenth century railed against the mind-numbing effects of railway travel (see Schivelbusch, 1986, p. 66), that does not appear to be the case with Sydney students in the twenty-first century. They compensate for their disengagement from the external landscape (they have seen it all before) by transforming the internal space of carriage into 'other' environments, in this instance, a sporting one. Space for them is malleable, a resource of possibility, a domain of agency and improvisation. They are forever re-scripting their commuting.

On other occasions, I witnessed impromptu quiz shows à la *Sale of the Century* – which doubled, so to speak, as coaching for a forthcoming test. One dealt with Gough Whitlam's Labor government (1972–75). A girl acted as quiz mistress. She asked the other girls present a series of questions ('What year was the racial discrimination act introduced?' 'What positions did Jim Cairns hold?' 'What was the loans affair?'). Triumphal calls of celebration echoed through the carriage when questions were answered correctly. A boy from another school joined the

group and took delight in answering questions ahead of the girls. Another such quiz dealt with illicit 'drugs' and the girls were asked about the effects of heroin and marijuana.

Inventive though these activities are, they are indicative of the way the imminence of the school day is at the forefront of student consciousness. Indeed, much of the time on the train is a dress rehearsal for school, checking school dairies, commenting favourably on so-and-so's lesson, conducting post-mortems on the previous day, anticipating what remains of the term ('next week is going to be full on'; 'four weeks to the HSC … more worried about English than Maths'). Frequently, students bring to the attention of their friends various items of scholastic accoutrement, such as the aforementioned diaries, one of which was embellished with rock emblems, which elicited a comment to the effect that the 'graffiti-ing' of school diaries was proscribed. Indeed, although the teacher's gaze is absent from the train, some students assume that gaze, scrutinising the appearance of their peers ('Why are you wearing a blazer?'). One girl chastised another for an unduly ruffled collar! Indeed, girls often use the journey – in direct imitation of many women travelling on the morning trains – as an opportunity to undertake last-minute grooming: another example of the degree to which student commuting is gender differentiated.

But not all the activities of the students are school-related. It is not uncommon to see groups of boys (and it is usually only boys) playing cards, with their friends observing, occasionally advising on what card to play. A considerable amount of eating takes place, especially at the end of the day, when the food and drink dispensing machines on platforms are 'ransacked' by students. And on special occasions such as the birthday of a student, the event is celebrated, carrying over from the platform, where the birthday girl or boy had already been the object of attention, onto the train. On one occasion, two or three minutes out from Redfern, the students broke into a chorus of 'Happy Birthday', prompting the birthday girl to comment: 'Thanks guys, that was really kind of you…'

Trains are for much of the times on the move; but the various spaces which comprise them are motionless and stationary; it is the passengers boarding trains who constantly make and remake their spaces, bring their own 'performances' and effects to them. When they alight, and are replaced by new sets of passengers, the space is, for all intents and purposes, re-formed, becomes a new space, even though its outer fabric remains the same. This observation accords with recent theories of space (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005), which emphasise its socially constructed nature, and that far from being inert and incorrigible, space is 'alive' and mutable. The 'timely' nature of a train journey tends to detract from its spatial aspects, which in the case of students are complex and dynamic, and use the geography of the train's environment inventively, as the stage for manifold activities.

Les enfants iPods

What is striking about student commuting is the degree to which it segues from work to play and back again, and that students engage in multiple and varied activities, constantly re-channelling and re-mediating themselves. The transition from school-book to fashion magazine occurs in a microsecond, almost imperceptibly, engendered by subtle, swift 'turns'. Many of the 'turns' use the mobile technologies

that are a pervasive feature of commuting space. Recent theories of mobility recognise that contemporary journeys are increasingly multi-dimensional. Individuals, through their engagements with such devices as mobile phones and laptops, can travel outside themselves beyond their corporeal location, into a range of virtual and imaginary spaces. It means that the minds of countless commuters are, quite literally, off the rails, reading a book, listening to music, playing an electronic game, doing a crossword, beginning and/or finishing work, receiving a mobile phone call. Interestingly, use of laptops among school students, even though mandatory in many schools, is rare on the trains.

Among school students, the most favoured form of distraction is the iPod, which – now that personal stereos have gone the way of all flesh and did so in the 'lifetime' of this research – is now the primary source of music. Students use the iPod to transmute the work/play binary, to roll them into one another. For example, it is common for students to have heads in their schoolbooks and earphones in their heads at one and the same time, to be plugged into music while undertaking schoolwork. The time-space compression environment promotes a densification of time characterised by doing many things at once, by simultaneity. In effect, students use mobile technologies to live in different 'time zones', and to electronically play with the present tense, to remove the sense of the immediacy of the journey.

In writing about virtual technologies Boden & Moloch (2000) have observed that they promote impersonal environments in which individuals are forced apart from one another, to work in solitary conditions; this also extends to commuting environments, that they discourages close encounters, face-to-face contacts; indeed, they encourage the opposite, avoidance of proximity and social interaction. They argue this has promoted a 'reactionary effect', the compulsion for proximity, and the need for intense, face-to-face experiences, rich with co-presence. Hence, the importance of networking, conferences, lunches, drinking in bars after work, which provide antidotes for the de-personalised ambience of modern workplaces.

Here again, the practices of school students on trains are dissimilar from those of adults: they are invariably marked by close communication conducts characteristic of co-presence such as eye-contact, touching, fast turns of speech, laughter, kissing, holding hands…in other words, a considerable repertoire of corporeal interaction (Boden & Moloch, 2000, pp. 259–260). Further, students incorporate into this repertoire of interaction the technology that they have 'hanging' around them. Thus, they show each other their mobile phones and the messages and pictures they have stored on them; in doing so, the private becomes social, the social private. Commonest of all these sharing practices is that using iPods, with earphones being shared by two or more students, usually to audition a favourite track, and this while they are undertaking school-related tasks. In doing this, they are recuperating what the prototype of the iPod, the Walkman, was designed to do, that of allowing concurrent listening (du Gay *et al.*, 1997). What these activities exemplify, is the capacity for students to 'live' in a multi-mediated world, sometimes auditory, sometimes real, sometimes virtual. Students can, as it were, board on and the off train at will.

On one occasion, for example, two girls were plugged into an iPod (and they seem to have more sonic leakage than other players) and began to sing along to it, thus creating a travelling karaoke bar, before a boy from the same school began to sing along with them, a voice loud enough to be heard across the carriage. In the set of seats they were occupying was a younger boy, from another school, who remained apparently oblivious to the impromptu performance. At Strathfield station, where they alighted, one of them tapped the student on the shoulder and broke into another song: 'bye-bye little guy'. The terminal accoutrements that are vital accessories of adolescent life represent another stage of the intensification of nervous stimulation that Simmel saw as a symptomatic of city life (1997, p. 174). But in this instance, it is the students who generate the stimulation, who super-saturate their journeys with activities transgressing the normal grammars of time and space. The classroom must seem humdrum by comparison.

Meanwhile, as the students close in on their destination, of which they are all too conscious ('Where are we? Burwood, already!'), they undertake 'decompression' activities, the preparation for their arrival. They pack away the texts and technology that have enabled them to wile away the journey. Once the school students leave the confines of the train they are within purlieu of their schools, and during the last seconds of their journeys, they spend time undertaking the sartorial equivalent of *vernissage*, on ensuring that their uniforms are appropriately presented. The most dramatic manifestation of this activity – at least for the girls – is that hats are retrieved from backpacks, and are donned in the prescribed manner. The discipline of the school supplants the temporary freedom of the train.

Light at the End…

The transport logistics involved, of delivering countless thousands of children from their home to their schools on time, with a minimum of mishap, are impressive to the say the least. They also represent a considerable feat of self-governance on the part of students, who are able to parry temptations that, presumably, beset them en route, and arrive punctually at school. To the extent that student commuting is of any educational value at all, it is that students, for good or ill, are being inducted into the forms of 'self-scheduling' that now dominate the regimes of millennial work (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 220).

In this paper, I have analysed the 'travel performances' of Sydney high school students and have argued that there is much that is distinctive about their commuting. The trip to school is a brief respite from the rituals of home and of school. The 'travel performances' of school students are not dissimilar to those of adult commuters, which are also rule-governed and scripted. In the micro-community of a train carriage this acts as a safety valve, reducing the friction that might otherwise manifest itself as a result of being forced into closed proximity with strangers. Students however, often break free from the codes of civility observed by other commuters, and in doing so risk censure: hence, they often take themselves off into spaces on the train where they are at liberty to be themselves. In the words of the epigraph, the journey to school each day provides students with an 'intoxicating sense of freedom', a brief refuge from school and home, where they are mobilised into doing the 'forbidden'.

Notes

1. The Taunton Commission into nineteenth-century English public schools voiced similar concerns about the amount of time children were spending on trains to reach their schools (Marsden, 1987, p. 124).
2. Nutritionists argue a factor in the rising levels of childhood obesity is the declining numbers of children walking and cycling to school. Very few NSW high school students do so (SPANS, 2004), though a scheme designed to reverse this trend, by identifying child-friendly routes to school in Sydney's inner city, seems to be paying off.
3. Only on the one occasion did I feel that a student had noted my note taking, and that it might be in relation to them. In response, I stopped.
4. These social divisions were not peculiar to Sydney but existed in other cities, most notably London (Sennett, 1994, p. 333) and Second Empire Paris, which Haussmann created to segregate the population. In the United States, the electric streetcar prompted migration to the suburbs and led to suburbs being devoted to particular spheres of economic activity (See Nye, 1990).
5. Each mode of transport of course has its own particular *habitus*, and whose efficacy depends on being in the know, on being able to apply the appropriate grammar. For example, though intended for commuters, tourists now use Sydney's harbour ferries, certainly after 9 a.m. Their *habitus* reflects the need for tourists to occupy the best seats for exercising the 'tourist gaze'. Other passengers tend to hold back from occupying these seats.
6. CityRail now offers a service whereby efficient itineraries are available online, thus obviating the need for students to consult timetables and maps.
7. Evidence would suggest that school principals in NSW would prefer not to be posted to a 'railway' school. They are faced with too many incidents of students misbehaving on trains. The number of train-related incidents reported in school 'Punishment Books', reinforces this view. I am grateful to Craig Campbell for this observation.
8. At present, there are three types of carriages operating on the Sydney rail network: the Comeng, the Tangara and the Millennium. They all have similar seating plans.
9. Train carriages originally followed the compartment design of stagecoaches. Because it was hard to conduct an audible conversation, there was no obligation to speak to other passengers. Trains were much quieter by comparison, which made the experience of sitting opposite someone in silence somewhat disconcerting (See Sennett, 1994, p. 344; Giedion, 1948, p. 440).

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