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Trans* Folks in Motion: Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Individuals' Experiences
of Transit and Transit Spaces

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, much of social science theorizing has seen an influence and shift, both substantively and methodologically, toward the spatial aspects of society. These attempts to reconcile space and society reconceptualize human life and social organization as not only temporal, as conventionally held, but also spatial (see Lefebvre 1991). This reconceptualization requires integration of the spatial into the social and vice versa. Within sociological theorizing, this has resulted in an emerging “mobilities” paradigm. Mobilities examines the sociologically patterned movement of people, ideas, and goods and encompasses the study of such diverse social phenomena such as economic migration, vacationing, telecommuting, and transportation. A focus within the field of mobilities is on the “experience, practice, and symbolism of [people’s] daily movement,” which Vannini calls *mobile culture*. This leads us to fuller examination of (social) spaces hitherto undertheorized such as the transit spaces of the present study. Far from being merely a means of moving from point A to point B, we examine transportation as a rich site of this mobile culture, worthy of study in its own right.

In this paper I use several terms relating to space. Consistent with the integration of the social and spatial, I use “space” to refer to a generic physical and social location, with all its physical and social contents and dynamics (see Neal 2010). Public space is simply a space that is in principle open to all members of society. For the transit spaces of the study, I am referring to the physical and social spaces of bus stops, light rail train and streetcar platforms, as well as inside buses, light rail trains, and streetcars. Based on how the study participants responded, much of the focus of this paper will be on the inside of buses and the social experiences people have there.

As with mobilities, the field of transgender studies has greatly evolved in the last several decades. Though “transgender” saw its first academic blow up in the 1990s (Stryker & Whittle 2006), the 2014 founding of the first transgender journal, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, and the 2016 announcement of the world’s first Chair in Transgender Studies, seems to signal a new era in the field, with transgender perspectives and issues being examined from a multitude of angles, both academically and in terms of policy. Moreover, a recent explosion of media attention on transgender individuals like Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner, as well as national debates sparked by controversial “bathroom bills” seeking to restrict transgender and LGBT access to public accommodations, have brought transgender civil rights to popular awareness.

While these more accessible media images of transgender individuals have been essential in moving popular conversations forward, they are far from representing all transgender and gender nonconforming people, particularly those of concern in the present study. In the pioneering *Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker & Whittle 2006), Whittle’s foreword to the compilation project proclaims that “a trans identity is now accessible almost anywhere, to anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed at birth” (ibid: xi). Thus, Whittle and other transgender studies scholars are concerned with not only people like Cox and Jenner who are recognized by audiences as the gender they identify as (this is commonly called “passing”), but also with transgender men and women who are not always recognized for the gender they identify as (similarly, “not passing”), as well as individuals who do not identify with the gender binary at all and may or may not intentionally elude any sort of recognition. In other words, they might not be concerned with, or be trying to “pass” as a man or woman. These individuals may variously identify as transgender, non-binary (not identifying within the binary

categories of man and woman), gender non-conforming (not adhering to traditional gender roles or presentation), or something else.

While the wide variation in usage and the multiple meanings of many transgender terms can quickly confound and overwhelm those new to the field, some useful distinctions have emerged. In this paper I will use the term trans*, written with an asterisk to denote inclusivity, as Stryker and Whittle do above without the asterisk¹. This umbrella usage seeks to include all the participants of our study and serves as the lens through which I attempt to understand their experiences. Other important terms include cissexism and heterosexism, which refer to systemic patterns of discrimination towards trans* folks and gay or lesbian folks, respectively. Heterosexism was often reported in participants' experiences, as other passengers and passersby might have read them as gay or lesbian rather than trans*. Transmisogyny is the particular discrimination, often more severe, that trans women and trans femme folks experience, as a matter of being perceived as both transgender and female/feminine.

It is essentially at the crux of these two interdisciplinary fields of study, sociological mobilities and transgender studies, that the present study was undertaken. In my paper I seek to answer two main questions: What are some of the general experiences of trans* individuals on public transit, and second, How do spatial characteristics of public transit, including the openness of bus stops and the tight confines of crowded buses, affect how trans* individuals experience transit?

First I present key findings from our study's interviews with 25 trans* regular users of public transportation regarding their everyday experiences, including everything from hostile stares, to, as was the case with one participant, a stabbing. I recount the range and types of situations trans* riders encounter, and how they interpret and react to these situations, as they

appear in the interview data. Subsequently I utilize the literature from an array of disciplines such as feminist geographies and urban sociology to interpret and discuss the interview data and its implications. In particular I intend this paper first to amplify the stories of transgender individuals and advocate for trans-inclusive approaches in transportation planning and policy, and second to contribute to the complexification of theorizing gender in public spaces.

TRANS EXPERIENCES OF DISCRIMINATION*

Across many cultures, places, and times, humans have honored and lived out a plentitude of various gender identities. In fact, Susan Stryker (Stryker & Whittle 2006) traces gender nonconformity in Western society (and what we may now categorize as transgender) back to the Greeks and Romans. Geographically and culturally distinct nonbinary identities and roles are found across every inhabited continent in the world, from the hijra of India, to the muxe of Oaxaca, to the Maori whakawahine. In the individualistic United States, though transgender and nonbinary identities have long existed, neological terms to describe one's gender identity have recently proliferated. Terms like genderqueer, agender, androgyne, femme, boi, demigirl, and neutrois can refer to gender identities that exist either along a spectrum of masculine to feminine, or outside of this binary framework altogether. Because there are multitudes of terms which vary in usage and often overlap, the term *trans** (again, see ¹) has become a sort of umbrella term to describe all identities that do not adhere to the traditional male/female binary, which I will continue to use in this paper. Other studies may look at different subsets of *trans** populations, or use different catchall terminology, and I will distinguish this where I feel it is relevant.

It is well documented that transgender and gender nonconforming individuals experience significant discrimination, verbal harassment, and physical violence, including murder, due to

their identity or presentation (Grant et al 2011; Jauk 2013; Miller et al 2015; others). The National Transgender Discrimination Survey (n=6450) found that 53% of respondents were verbally harassed or disrespected in a place of public accommodation such as a restaurant, store, hotel, bus, or government agency (Grant et al:5). Another sizeable study (n=402) found that 60% of respondents had experienced violence or harassment (Lombardi et al 2001). Viviane K. Namaste's seminal work on genderbashing (2000) adds to theorization of anti-transgender violence by suggesting that a primary factor in all anti-LGBT violence is visible gender nonconformity. In this sense, gaybashing can also be understood as a form of gender violence, insofar as the victimized individual is targeted due to gender-atypical presentation or behavior.

Moreover, there are many studies showing the link between anti-trans* discrimination and negative health outcomes. At least one study has linked personal experience of discrimination with an increase in health-harming behaviors such as smoking and drug or alcohol abuse (Miller et al), and links between discrimination and negative health outcomes have been attested among other marginalized groups. Miller et al also noted a link between visible level of gender nonconformity and risk of discrimination, and thus health-harming behaviors. Nadal et al (2012) also linked microaggressions (slights, insults, and subtle or indirect discrimination and hate) with diminished mental health and Miller et al linked everyday anti-trans* discrimination, as well as major discrimination, with elevated rates of attempted suicide.

GENDER AND PUBLIC SPACE

Along with the women's movements of the 1960s and 70s many academic disciplines began to consider for the first time the unique perspectives and concerns of women. Feminist critiques and takes on geography, sociology, city planning and urban studies contribute much to

our understanding of gender in urban public spaces. These scholars have analyzed extensively how patriarchy has shaped the city and metropolitan regions and discuss how urban material and spatial reifications of patriarchy contribute to women's oppression. In other words, the city is inherently sexist. Theorists like Nancy Duncan, Clara Greed, and Susan Gal have highlighted the gendered nature of the public/private divide and explain how assumption of who should be in what space and when have served to subjugate and constrain women. Sue Hendler suggests that cities hoping to address their sexist nature would implement gender equity planning practices, including a particular attention to availability and accessibility of childcare, robust public transportation with crosstown service, affordable housing, and personal safety design.

Similarly, scholars of sexuality, queer, and trans geographies such as C.J. Nash and Gill Valentine discuss how different urban lesbian, gay, and transgender communities have disrupted the heterosexual and cisgender assumptions inherent in urban spaces. They suggest that explicitly queer spaces have a mutual relationship with queer identities, each supporting and/or transforming one another. For example, Nash (2010) recorded how some trans men went through a spatial transition from frequenting lesbian spaces to frequenting exclusively straight spaces and exclusively (gay or straight) male spaces as part of establishing their new identity. This mutual relation between gay, lesbian, and trans individuals and the spaces they inhabit suggests that the nature of public space has an effect on transgender individuals, including their identity and behavior.

This leads to another emphasis in the gendered nature of public spaces. Documentation on gender and safety in public spaces is prolific, both in how these spaces *evoke* feelings regarding one's (lack of) safety and are *navigated* with regard to one's feelings of safety. Fear of crime and violence is consistently documented as more pronounced among women (Madriz

1997; Pain 2001; Ratnayake 2016; others). This is despite the greater likelihood of victimization among men, and is often called the fear-safety paradox. Initial theorists thus called the fear irrational and unfounded, but studies have since attempted to explain this fear-safety discrepancy among women. One study cites gendered differences in vulnerability in the actual case of victimization (regardless of likelihood), as well as socialization of fear and risk perception in order to elucidate the significance behind the paradox (Smith and Torstensson 1997). May et al (2010) also highlight the elevated *perception* of risk in addition to fear of crime among women when compared to men. Additionally, Brownlow's (2004) study suggests that women consciously monitor the public spaces they navigate for environmental cues of danger and differentiate which spaces are generally safe and which generally are not. All of this appears to suggest that women's risk assessment has a particular spatial component to it. Men's evaluations of safety in public spaces, in contrast, are more independent of location or space. In other words, their "level of concern is constant across situation and context," even while it may be lower generally (ibid:589). Thus gender is a clear factor in shaping feelings of safety and resulting behavior in public spaces. This research is in line with feminist urban planners' calls for policies that include personal safety as a key factor in design and planning (see Ratnayake 2016).

In addition to the gendered nature of feelings of safety in public spaces, scholars have documented how women change their behavior in response to these feelings of (un-)safety. Some examples of these modifications of behavior in public include avoidance of particular spaces or at particular times, travelling with company, keeping a friend updated on their whereabouts, and carrying personal safety devices such as pepper spray. In fact, May et al have demonstrated that women also change their behavior in relation to their fear and evaluations of risk including usage of avoidance and defensive behavior. Other scholars (Skogan & Maxfield 1980) confirm that

women modify their behavior in public spaces in response to fear of crime more frequently than men.

This fear of victimization and resulting behavior modification has also been studied within the context of transit. One study suggested that gender was a key factor explaining fear of crime on public transit (Yavuz and Welch 2009), while earlier studies have established that fear of crime in general affects transit usage and avoidance (Lynch and Atkins 1988). Another scholar even cites gender as “the most significant factor related to anxiety and fear about victimization in transit environments,” effecting what modes, routes, and times women utilize for their personal transportation (Loukaitou-Sideris 2008). While the explanations for the fear-safety discrepancy are still evolving, the fact that gender plays a huge role in perceptions of safety, fear, and subsequent behavior in public in general and on transit in particular is virtually uncontested. In this paper I seek to complexify the understanding of gender in public space by adding the voices of trans* individuals regarding their experiences of public transit.

In one of the few studies to highlight trans* individuals’ perceptions of urban space, 14% said they felt their city was unsafe for trans* people, 48% said tolerable, and 38% said their perception of safety was good (Doan 2007). Additionally respondents reported they felt threatened in their city in the last twelve months by hostile stares (32.7%), hostile comments (21.8%), and physical harassment (17.1%). In light of the evidence that fear and perception of safety can alter women’s behavior, it may seem natural that trans* individuals also engage in similar avoidance and defensive behavior in reaction to evaluations of safety. In fact, one study has shown how trans men feeling a lack of safety are compelled to alter their behavior, to perform defensive masculinities that uphold the gender binary (Abelson 2014). These dynamics

are also likely to extend to how trans* individuals intellectually interpret, and emotionally and behaviorally react to their experiences on public transit.

TRANS* FOLKS IN MOTION

The 2011 report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Grant et al) is the most comprehensive publication to date on the experiences of discrimination of trans* individuals in the United States. In the report, several questions were asked relating to transportation (p130). Verbally harassment or disrespect on a bus, train, or taxi was reported by 22% of respondents. After physical assault by a police officer (6% of respondents), the most commonly reported occurrence of physical assault happened on a bus, train, or taxi (4% of respondents). In addition, 9% of respondents were denied equal treatment or services on a bus, train, or taxi, and 26% reported experiencing any of the above three on a bus, train, or taxi.

It is clear by this point that trans* individuals face various forms of discrimination in various places, including public transportation. However, the experiences of trans* individuals on public transportation has never been studied in depth. This study aims to aggregate and interpret a diverse set of experiences, supplementing and adding depth to the above NTDS statistics. In addition, I have presented the literature establishing a clear relationship between gender and key aspects of the experience discrimination, including the perception of risk, fear of victimization, sense of vulnerability, and subsequent behavior modification. As the research on (binary) gender in (public) space abounds, studies that highlight the unique nature of *nonbinary* gender in public space number only a few, while no major studies have ever before theorized nonbinary conceptions of gender in transit spaces. I hope to contribute to the continuing evolution of theorizing gender and space.

METHODS

The rich voices in this study come from 25 interviews with trans* individuals regarding their experiences on public buses, light rail trains (MAX), and streetcars in Portland, Oregon. The regional public transportation service provider, TriMet, offers residents of the greater Portland metro area various modes of transportation, including 78 bus lines, 5 light rail or Metropolitan Area Express (MAX) lines with 97 stations, and 2 streetcar lines. Service hours are approximately 5am until 2am. The city itself is notable in that it boasts the second highest percentage of self-identified LGBT adults according to a 2015 Gallup poll, and prides itself on having a quirky, liberal culture. This may have had an effect on the experiences of trans* interviewees, as some even noted differences from other cities they'd lived in. Interview topics included gender identity and history, public transit usage (including time of day, mode, route, and purpose of travel), typical experiences and emotions on transit, particularly positive and negative experiences, barriers and challenges in using transit, suggestions for change, and comparison to non-transit public spaces.

These interviews were conducted and transcribed by co-researchers. Study advertisements called for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals (who I refer to as trans* in this paper) who rode public transit at least three times per week. All participants have been given a pseudonym as a measure of confidentiality. Effort was made to retain the gender or “flavor” of participants’ real names in order to respect the significance of many trans* individuals’ names in their identity. I then participated in a workshop style approach to organizing, categorizing, and interpreting the interview data, guided by a general inductive approach (Thomas 2003). This approach seeks to define emerging patterns in the data and interpret them in relation to the research question(s). Together we created a coding scheme that

captured important emerging themes, coded all the transcripts using qualitative data analysis software, and then summarized each of the thematic codes in code memos. Thus, in this paper I draw from my co-researchers' work on compiling the literature, and categorizing, interpreting, and analyzing the interviews, while all of the writing and discussion remains my own. I used the above methods to answer my research questions regarding the general experiences of trans* users of public transit as well as how the nature of various transit spaces, including the enclosed, confining nature of the bus and the openness of the bus or MAX stop affected riders.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Many of the themes that emerged from our interviews that we found significant were given a code. These include type of discrimination (major and everyday), source of discrimination (off-transit passersby, on-transit passengers, and TriMet staff including drivers), positive experiences, discussion of police, discussion of intersecting identities on transit, gendered experiences (transmisogyny and FtM male privilege), discussion of gender nonconformity, strategies for managing discrimination (both at the personal and institutional levels), and discussion of the nature of the transit space itself. Below I only summarize the findings most relevant to my research questions, organizing summaries by thematic groupings.

Experiences of Discrimination: Type, Source, and Nature

The National Transgender Discrimination Survey was first to gather statistics on the rates of harassment and discrimination that trans* folks experience in public transit. The responses of the participants in our study add some depth to these statistics. I summarize the frequency of both everyday and major discrimination, describe who is discriminating against trans*

passengers, and what this discrimination may look like. We found that discrimination occurs in a range of ways, and that overall most discrimination is coming from other passengers and passersby at bus and MAX stops rather than TriMet staff.

Everyday discrimination is any incident that occurred on transit that was harassing or discriminatory in nature, but did not seem to have gravely impacted the participant. This type of discrimination included everything from passengers taking pictures and laughing at participants to passengers moving seats as to not sit near a trans* person. Looks and stares were the most common form of discrimination. Some looks were described as disgusted, while other participants reported experiencing hostile or even sexually objectifying stares. Other common discriminatory interactions included cissexist and heterosexist language and slurs, challenges of the participant's gender identity, and invasive questions about the participant's anatomy, sexual practices, and gender identity. Kacey recounted the distress of having her gender identity drawn to attention and questioned:

[W]e were waiting for the bus to go home and I think this guy came up asking if we had a cigarette he could spare...[and] I responded to him. The moment he heard my voice he asked what gender I was. I'm just kind of like, I don't want to deal with this right now. So, I just sort of buried my head in my partner's shoulder and she got rid of him.

Major discrimination would be any discriminatory incident where the participant described or implied the severity of the event and how it affected them or their ability to ride transit. This comprised a much smaller portion of the reported incidents, but still was alarmingly common, at 10 out of 25 participants. One of the participants, Trysta, was stabbed at a MAX platform and how that affected her. She also described another recurring situation of men ostensibly accidentally slamming into her when the MAX would lurch that got so bad she started carrying Mace and making it visible to the men who pushed her. Other participants described physical

confrontations and assaults that forced them to change the bus stop they would use or what time of day they would ride transit. Enid reported,

I had a lady that I would prefer to say was under the influence of cocaine- decided I was too effeminate and punched me. So, I've ridden the bus with that woman before and every time I'm around her I'm very on edge...even though it's right there on my main ride, so obviously I'll schedule around from that, or get off when I see her get on.

As for where the discrimination was coming from, the majority of the incidents that participants spoke of were from other passengers. The most severe incidents often happened on the MAX platforms and at bus stations where other denizens and passersby would verbally harass or physically attack trans* individuals waiting for transit.

Gendered Experiences: Transmisogyny, FtM Male Privilege, and Gender Nonconformity

While some participants in our study simply identified as (binary) trans men or trans women the majority of participants claimed at least in part a nonbinary identity, or in a number of ways described their gender identity with varying degrees of fluidity. For example, one participant, Luke, identified himself as both “transgender female to male” and “genderqueer,” using he/him/his pronouns. Another participant, Jordan, consciously subverted gender norms, considering their nonbinary identity political.

In any case, an even greater number of participants recounted experiences in which they were perceived as transgender or gender nonconforming, often attributing the discrimination to this perception. For example, Felix contemplated, “I’ve noticed on days that I’m far more masculine I tend to get less looks or whatever, versus days that I’m a little more androgynous.” Here Felix is explaining how they get more stares when they are visibly nonconforming, but fewer when they adhere to stricter masculine standards of presentation. Many instances of

discrimination or microaggression were linked to misrecognition (sometimes referred to as not passing) and/or intentional gender nonconformity among participants. In some situations, it was clear that being read as transgender or gender nonconforming immediately preceded and gave rise to discrimination. This was often the case in the widely reported othering glances and hostile stares. In any case, for some, the simple act of misrecognition or repeated misrecognition constituted a negative transit experience.

In addition, the male privilege of the four binary-identified trans men was strikingly clear. Their interviews were shorter, with fewer incidents to tell of, and several of them were conscious of the fact that they didn't have much to say. Jackson explicitly reflects on the privilege of being male in comparison to before:

I have recollection prior to transition to having some times where I felt very uncomfortable with people looking at me, commenting about "hey are you a dyke?" ... I feel like prior to transition I got more looks and more comments directed to my weight. Now that I'm male people don't bug me about being "hey fatto." Whereas before it was definitely an issue people focused on, or commented on, or felt it was appropriate to comment on, or had no filter about it.

After transition he reports not having any safety concerns or anything that makes him uncomfortable on transit. When a trans man reported concerns or fears on public transit, they had to do less with gender, for example, Tucker's occasional claustrophobia on crowded rides.

This sharply contrasts to the experience of trans women and other participants identifying and/or presenting feminine of center (which I will refer to inclusively here as transfeminine). The transmisogyny experienced by these participants is distinguished by its severity and frequency. Transfeminine participants experienced the most severe, invasive, and frequent forms of discrimination, harassment, and violence, including a stabbing, sexual objectification and harassment, and unprovoked physical fights. Piper recounted one particularly invasive and distressing incident:

I was riding the max home... and some rider... wanted to make me out to be some kind of male in a dress or something like that, they were actually literally asking me to pull down my pants to the point where I was in tears.

Transmasculine and nonbinary-identifying participants also reported invasive anatomical questions. Janelle, who identifies as “genderqueer” and presents “androgynous, masculine of center” reported:

What I often get is a staring contest with folks who will stare me down, and quietly murmur to whoever they’re talking with, up to like, people asking me if I’m a man or a woman, asking me if I have a vagina or a dick, people sitting really close to me and asking invasive questions.

While participants of multiple identities and presentations received such invasive questions and challenges to their bodily sovereignty, the severity of physical attacks and the frequency of harassment and microaggressions toward transfeminine participants distinguished the pattern of transmisogyny.

Personal Strategies for Managing Discrimination

With all the discrimination participants faced, everyday and major, many had developed distinct coping techniques and strategies for mediating potential and actual discrimination.

Behaviors such as wearing headphones or reading a book while on the bus or MAX were ways that several participants described ensuring that no one attempted to bother them. Tucker explained, “For me, [headphones are] a symbol; don’t talk to me, leave me alone.”

At least one participant, Enid, preferred to strike up conversation with other riders, and other participants recounted friendly conversation as part of a sign of a safe or enjoyable ride. Trysta described once displaying a can of Mace as a deterrent to the threat of another passenger. She

also touched on how strategies for managing discrimination and violence must be conjured up to suit the environment:

I have my no bullshit face when I'm going—when I'm walking around out in public the boots I'm wearing make a serious click. You're hearing this [pounding sound] everywhere I'm going. I have to do this; otherwise I will be victimized by any number of people. None of this will work on the train because I can't move.

This reveals that managing discrimination for some riders is a conscious, sometimes burdensome process. Shannon adds:

If I'm going comfortably on the MAX or on the bus I am definitely thinking “how do I look?” If I'm gonna pass—how well do I pass? If I don't pass, well how non-binary do I look in this moment, and therefore how much attention do I think I will attract? If I go as a boy, if I go in boy mode, I'm fine. If I go in girl mode and wear my sunglasses and I'm cute, I'm usually okay. If I'm non-normative then I'm hitting everybody with a double whammy: black is different and non-normative is different. We don't know which box to put you in... Trans women don't always last very long, especially trans women of color, so passing is something that I've definitely had to incorporate into some of my work life.

Other participants similarly report planning or modifying their gender presentation while on public transportation in order to mediate harassment or discrimination. Other common strategies participants employed included avoiding a particular mode of transit (some preferred the bus over the MAX and vice versa), avoiding certain travel times, particularly when high school students use the bus, avoiding certain bus lines which they often had a prior negative experience on, and avoiding a part of town associated with crime in popular conception but not necessarily because of prior experience. Perhaps in one of the most striking examples of the above list of strategies, Sam described how they were verbally and then physically harassed at a bus stop. After the incident Sam described being so shaken up, and their wife so worried, that they agreed on a plan of what particular bus stops were safe to use, being chosen in part for the presence of other pedestrians. This example also clearly shows the role of prior experience in shaping one's subsequent transit behavior.

[Not sure if I want to add Institutional Practices to my findings and discussion or a separate policy discussion section, and instead focus more intently here on gender, gender identity, gender presentation, personal strategies and transit spaces]

Spatial Factors in the Experience of Transit

Feminist, sexuality, queer, and trans geographers and urban theorists have shown gender and sexuality to play out uniquely in space and that space is uniquely shaped by gender and sexuality. An emerging theme participants kept mentioning had to do with the particular effects of the captive space encountered aboard the buses and light rail MAX trains, so I decided to include it as a thematic code. Here I summarize all the various excerpts I understood to have a spatial component. The data I coded under this theme included talk of crowded rides, attacks at bus stops, male privilege of others respecting personal space, and the metaphorical violation of personal space in the objectifying gaze. To make a sort of sense out of these diverse responses, I categorized them into two basic somewhat overlapping categories of Responses on Space and Safety and Responses on Space and Gender.

Physical/social space and safety

Many of the responses fitting under the “discussion of transit spaces” theme were discussion of various safety concerns faced in transit physical-social spaces. Many comments existed along the line of feeling that the specific layout of the transit space was confining or restraining, thus affecting their ability to escape danger or an undesirable situation. This feeling

of being trapped most frequently applied to riding the bus, and, to a lesser extent, riding the MAX. Talia explained the predicament unique to transit:

Sometimes the nature of public transit causes more problems because anyone who wants to be an asshole to the people around them has a captive audience that can't or doesn't want to get off immediately. If you're on the street it's easier to get away from people you don't want to be around.

While many participants spoke of discomfort and feeling trapped on the bus or MAX, at least two participants, Teagan and Christine, both described situations where they were forced to choose their personal safety and disembark the bus over their right to use public transportation. Other participants such as Nico spoke of other factors that weigh in when a threatening situation arises: "Especially since I'm going to and from work. I don't have an option without big consequences in my life of exiting from a negative bus or train type of situation." This may be a particularly troubling situation for low-income and transit-dependent riders, as well as riders with a different ability. Tucker also spoke to the increased feelings of fear of something going wrong on public transit, pointing out that you're trapped.

In addition, Piper felt quite literally trapped when a passenger tried to remove the headphones she was wearing in an attempt to make her listen to him. She said, "[C]onsidering I was trapped between him and the window I kind of had no other choice. I'm like, okay, I'll wait a couple of stops after the one I'm going to get off just so he doesn't follow me." Alternatively, Sam prefers to remain hypervigilant, in a way, constantly mapping out escape routes and eyeing out public venues along the bus line where they could stake out refuge from a perpetrator. All this demonstrates the effect of the enclosed space of a bus or MAX light rail train on trans* participants' feelings of

safety, fear of riding transit, and coping strategies such as disengaging and disembarking or practicing hypervigilance.

Another trend in comments about Safety and Space on public transit had to do with the new or additional safety and discrimination risks that transit spaces bring, mostly having to do with being in close quarters with many strangers, often for a long period of time. In contrast other public spaces like streets, restaurants, and parks, where people are less confined and restrained and there are many other distractions, the opportunities for strangers to grope, bump into, or otherwise violate someone's personal space may be far fewer. As Trysta alludes to, the violation of boundaries can be constant in these spaces. On a crowded train rides, "some cis male, when the train lurches, he'll slam up against my backside. The first time, I was like, 'Oh it's because of the train.' The fiftieth time, I was like, 'Fuck you,' out loud, right?" Other transit-unique risks include exceptionally long and intense sexually objectifying or hostile stares and scrutiny of appearance and unwanted sexual advancements. These spaces might make some onlookers feel as though they have a right to study other riders, and subsequently ask invasive questions about anatomy or sexual activity. Several participants recalled such invasive questions, not the least of which demanded Piper to pull down her pants and reveal her body. In addition to this unique risk of examination and interrogation, Piper also briefly demonstrated the fear of being followed home above. Shannon further elucidates this particular additional risk of being in transit spaces:

[T]here's a very real danger just being in public and then in an enclosed space on public transit stuck with someone who might have clocked you and now dislikes you and might be staring at you and you don't know—does this mean you're waiting to see where I get off the train or the transit or the bus? 'Cause I've done that, I've waited, I've gone long past my stop until someone who was staring me or made me uncomfortable got off first.

I was not gonna let them get off after me, was not gonna let them follow me.

Though being followed can occur anywhere, Shannon highlights how a long, intimate transit ride can multiply the risk of being followed. In addition, transit allows potential stalkers not only the chance to follow, but also the chance to discover an individual's particular schedule, or exact home or work address. These spatialized fears and safety concerns comprise the first set of findings on trans* individuals' experiences of transit spaces.

Physical/social space and gender

Some of the most obvious examples of the intersection of space and gender have to do with male passengers' aggressive spatial entitlement on transit, in contrast to trans* (particularly nonbinary and transfeminine) senses of being squished, groped, examined, and all around having their personal space violated. Teagan reflects on several types of violation:

[N]egative riding experiences are always just someone who feels entitled to my space. And imposes their space upon me whether that's through verbal abuse, whether that's improper questioning, whether that's just physical manspreading. It's always about inserting their space into my space.

Teagan uses the word space here to refer not only to the physical space occupied by and immediately surrounding her and other passengers' bodies, but also the social space that our bodies inherently inhabit. Janelle, Trysta, and Piper were asked invasive questions about their bodies, another imposition of social space. Another example of the male-domination tendency in transit space can be seen in Janelle's reflection of when they were on a mostly empty MAX and a drunk man sat right next to them, pressing his shoulders into theirs, asking Janelle if they were "a dude or a chick." This double imposition of male space over trans* space may have been assisted by a substance, but is

consistent with the everyday impositions seen in stares, glares, and gazes. The men slamming into Trysta opportunistically as the train lurched is another example of male spatial entitlement, including into the personal spaces of trans women and nonbinary trans* individuals.

A second subtheme of gender in transit spaces that may be seen as a hopeful corollary or compliment to the first, was that of resistance, and attempts to stake one's own trans* claim in the transit space. This can be seen in Trysta's reaction to the man slamming into her by shouting, "Fuck you!" and in subsequent incidents, brandishing a can of Mace. The difficulty and risk of staking one's own claim can also be seen in how Trysta admits she doesn't know if its legal for her to openly wield the Mace like that, and that it would likely affect "half the train."

Another reportedly successful attempt of defending herself on the street, the clicking of Trysta's boots contribute to her serious "no bullshit" demeanor. But she admits that this act of resistance and reclaiming public space doesn't translate to the bus or MAX. These two actions of Trysta's to reclaim a tiny, safe trans* piece of space on public transit demonstrate the challenge of resisting the patently harsh assaults on the spaces of trans* individuals (and trans women like Trysta in particular) without inciting the backlash from the cisnormative space all around.

Teagan, Christine, and Sam faced similar difficulties in resisting domination by male and cisnormative space. For example, when Teagan tried to stand up to the cis white man who was using gay and trans slurs on the bus and it escalated, Teagan felt the need to back down and exit the bus after "the entire bus looked at me like I was the aggressor." After seeing the loss of her male privilege after transition, Christine wanted to resist and

“kept resolving, I'm just not going to stand for this. I'm going to push right up to the counter. I'm going to push right up to the entrance. Do whatever I need to do,” but soon realized, “That’s just what we do [as trans women]. If we act as a man, that just confuses people. It serves to alienate people.” And so she capitulated to the continued male domination of space perhaps because she knew it could undermine her recognition as women or distress her relationships.

Sam contemplated a time when a man came up to them expressing sexual interest and getting all close. Rather than carve out a safe trans* space for herself, she moved seats, fearing what might happen if she was not all smiles with this man. These examples show the difficulty in claiming even the smallest personal trans* space of safety within hostile, cisnormative and patriarchal spaces.

Another response exemplifying the relations between gender and space is Talia’s contemplation on how transit differs from other public spaces. She reports when she is dressed more feminine on public transportation, she is more likely to get harassed than on the street, but if dressed masculine, she wouldn’t have a problem. Others also report this interplay of gender and space aboard the bus. Talia’s experience exemplifies how a trans* identifying and at least partially gender nonconforming individual can manipulate the reactions she gets both by type of dress and type of space.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS

The experiences that the trans* participants in our study endure surely concern researchers such as myself. By collecting the stories offered by our participants, we hope to contribute to more informed urban policies. One of the interview questions asked participants to

ponder what TriMet could do to improve the experiences of trans* riders. The suggestions I give are a synthesis of what participants reported and my own analysis of what might be helpful.

In the state of Oregon, gender identity is in fact a protected class, as declared in 2009 by the Oregon Equality Act. TriMet nondiscrimination policy as found on their website, however, does not explicitly include gender identity. Many participants noted this and suggested that TriMet update their language to include trans* folks as a protected class. Though riders can theoretically seek recourse at the state level in the case of an event, increased visibility and recognition of trans* riders could go a long way in demonstrating their commitment and making trans* users feel safer in the first place. For example, several riders experienced harassment on the bus or MAX but did not report it, and some who reported incidents to TriMet received little or no follow-up. Other ways to affirm and support trans* riders would be to increase representation of visibly trans* folks in their ads and placards, as some participants suggested. Shannon sums up the enormous work that affirmation and representation can do to start making transit safer and more comfortable for trans* riders:

[S]eeing [signage] that reflects that trans people exist even, and are probably on this bus with you would make me feel so much better about whether or not the people around are aware of the fact that I might exist...And that, while it's not their responsibility to have to care about me, they do have to see me as a member of their community.

While both the findings of the overall study and the participants' observations themselves support the fact that most of the discrimination in transit is being perpetrated other passengers, there can still be a productive role for TriMet staff. In any case, they can keep an ear, and, when appropriate, an eye, out for interactions which threaten the safety of

passengers. Though, as many participants agreed, it is not the operator's job to mediate interactions at the back of the bus, nor should it be for reasons of driving safety, they should at the very least respond to passengers' solicitations for help. Teagan, for instance, attempted to report to a bus driver another passenger who was making inappropriate and offensive suggestions about her anatomy, yet the driver decided not to intervene. Teagan assessed that this was likely because the driver was unaware of trans*-specific issues and did not recognize how the situation Teagan reported was threatening.

One measure that could address this issue is a gender and LGBT sensitivity training for all staff, such as the Bridge 13 training that is offered to organizations all around Portland. This was in fact one of the most repeated suggestions for TriMet, along with a policy of using gender-neutral pronouns such as singular 'they' to refer to all passengers who the staff person does not know. Christine also added that such trainings can alert operators that just because a trans* person is involved in an altercation on transit does not mean they are to blame. They may in fact be in need of support from TriMet staff, and staff should act accordingly. Several participants experienced situations on transit and other places of public accommodation where employees intervened, but only to remove the trans* person from the vehicle or business. This only furthers the discrimination that trans* individuals experience on transit and further reduces their ability to ride, and do so safely. Not only do trans* riders need operators and other staff to intervene, they also need them to have the appropriate knowledge to intervene supportively.

One participant, Janelle, while recalling a positive experience on transit, expressed a simple solution of positive authority presentation that could be employed to

reduce instances of discrimination without asking an operator to divert too much attention from the road:

Usually they'll introduce themselves, and I take a seat, and they immediately address us with a friendly, respectful authority. So some of those drivers will say things like "hold on everybody, we're moving pretty fast." I notice when they have a verbal confirmation to the entire bus and when they're constantly aware of their surroundings, my experience is more positive because their authority is being presented in a respectful manner. So folks don't usually try anything when an operator is that present. There have been a couple times when folks were disgruntled or whatever, and they've immediately jumped out and said, "Please don't do that, please don't swear on my bus, if you cannot correct your behavior I'm going to have to ask you to leave." That will immediately stop anything from happening.

In addition to the threatening interactions with other passengers that can make riding public transit unsafe and distressing, passengers did have a few instances where TriMet staff were responsible. One of the most repeated concerns regarded TriMet transit police. Several participants noted that, due to their marginalized identity(-ies), the unprofessional, aggressive, and intentionally intimidating behavior of transit officers was particularly distressing, making them feel unsafe. Other instances included drivers snickering, whispering 'freak' at a passenger, and denial of service, as when a bus driver took one look at Christine, shut the door on her, and drove off. At the same time, Christine evaluated that this type of discrimination on part of the driver was the exception, and restated her positive experiences with staff. In any case, the above listed measures could vastly reduce the occurrence of drivers directly discriminating against trans* passengers, all the while creating a supportive environment that addresses the discrimination occurring at the hands of other passengers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Thanks to a rich dataset provided by participants, many examples and patterns of trans* individuals' experiences on public transit are easier to examine. Some of these key findings include that trans* individuals face both major and everyday harassment and discrimination on public, the bulk of which comes from other passengers, with these patterns differing by gender. Binary-identifying trans men reported next to no transit issues, while trans feminine individuals experienced the most severe attacks and frequent microaggressions. The plurality of participants (11 of 25) identified as a nonbinary identity and the majority included some sense of fluidity in their identity.

In response to anti-transgender violence and discrimination, participants employed a range of personal strategies to mediate the effects of such discrimination or prevent it from occurring again. They include wearing headphones, modifying one's gender presentation, and avoiding particular routes or transit hours.

In exploring trans* individuals' experiences of transit spaces, several key findings emerged relating to the unique social nature of transit spaces, particularly on the bus. Trans* users of public transit expressed safety concerns, pointing to the restraining nature of public transit, as well as the potential to expose users to unique forms of harassment. Other spatial themes regarding other male passengers' attempts to dominate trans* riders spaces, the often difficult attempts at trans* spatial resistance, and the role of gender nonconformity in transit spaces fall under the Gender and Space side of participants' responses to experiences of transit spaces.

In sum, trans* riders face many challenges that ask them to use personal coping strategies and stake out a trans* micro-refuge within the cisnormative space of the bus or light rail train.

As trans* riders express fear of crime, sense of vulnerability, and gender- or gender-identity based discrimination, it may well be worth including the experiences of trans* transit users alongside those more well-documented experiences of women, in order to understand broader gender-based issues. Other issues trans* individuals face in regard to getting around their city or town may need to be studied in greater detail. For example, as one participant noted, some trans* folks use transit differently, needing to take it to multiple different doctors, to work, and home. Other studies could look at transit dependency among trans* riders, transit routes, and experiences in other public places to support endeavors to improve policy and expand protections.

NOTES

1. As terminology and usage greatly varies, I have found some distinctions useful. I stubbornly include the asterisk in each deployment of trans*, simply in order to clarify the diverse range of nonbinary and gender nonconforming identities are to be included. Sans asterisk, trans may or may not be interpreted to include the individuals of our study. The many ins and out of transgender terminology and distinctions such as the one I use continue to be the matter of debate. The usage I prefer for this one paper is in no way an attempt to conclude this discussion/debate. In fact, the evolution and fluidity of terms and concepts may even be considered a hallmark of transgender studies, which Stryker & Whittle in fact consistently refer to as “trans studies.”

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