

Notes from the T:

A Diary of Looking

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My commute from Porter Square to MIT is only a short bicycle ride. Cycling is an active experience, where one is responsible for the moving from point A to point B. A trip on the T or the bus is an entirely different experience, where one releases control. But it does not have to be an entirely passive one: through transience, I feel more receptive to the world around me.

9AM, May 27, Red Line: At Central station, large fans blast cool air into the train's cars. A breeze passes through the briefly opened doors.

8:41AM, June 3, Red Line: A man in a suit to my right is hunched over a laptop. Another man to my left has a hardcover book open on his lap, readers on. Others close their eyes, resting, before the day. A woman has a bike helmet on, but no bike. Some look up and gaze at those across the aisle.

Public transit is part of the realm of public space. I argue that the intimacy of people's interior lives is most porous in this public space, on the train or bus, where space is confined. Private and public collide when riders may feel alone and individual in their thoughts even as emotion and detail can be read by a stranger.

9AM, May 27, Red Line: Most of us look down, except for two women sitting across from me. They wear matching black T-shirts, black leggings, and carry heavy-looking bags. Their conversation starts and stops, picking up from where they leave off. Sometimes they laugh. One occasionally rests her hand on the other's thigh. The other woman doesn't react to these touches and continues the conversation.

9:21AM, May 27, Red Line: A middle-aged man near me looks at his phone, playing aloud the sounds of people singing. He seems to be reciting or repeating a prayer in response to the video.

10:45AM, May 27, returning from Revere Beach on the Blue Line: Sand sticks to my sandals from the shore. On the ride home, a woman sits at the opposite end of my row of seats. She retrieves a clear water bottle from her bag and gulps down an opaque, white liquid. Is it milk?

10:54AM, May 29, Red Line: A woman (mother as well, I believe) and a young boy sit two seats apart from each other, separated by their dog. She wears a wide-brimmed sun hat, and his small scooter is parked in front of them. They give each other an enthusiastic high-five. Then another. He exclaims with joy, which they follow with a fist bump and a gestural interpretation of an explosion. He wears a baseball hat too. They must be prepared for spending a day in the sun.

2:05PM on May 29, Red Line: This car is warm—no AC. A dog whines at the other end of the car. A young mother smiles at her baby in a stroller; she looks so in love. The baby's head peaks up over the stroller's cover and his mom immediately retrieves him—he wants to move! She allows for a controlled roam, maintaining a firm grip on the back waistband of his tiny pants. He and I make eye contact and he suddenly becomes shy. Hiding, he peeks with one eye through a gap in the side of his seat. He smiles and stares at me, and I smile back.

The blurred boundary between private and public even provides an opportunity for performance. Whether an action operates as a display can be entirely determined by the audience. The specific conditions of transit enable these experiences, where we are all moving and encapsulated within the same space. By pausing to observe, a kind of public theater emerges.

10:45AM, May 27, Blue Line: A few people are chatting on this ride. A man on the phone speaks Spanish through his AirPods. An older couple chat about their time at the beach (much better prepared for the misty weather than I was; in sneakers,

jeans, and rain jackets). At the airport stop, two women laden with suitcases board the train, one sweetly brushes hair back from the other's face. They're talking about people they know, their friends. To make it home, I need to transfer again aboveground. I exit the Blue Line and walk to Downtown Crossing to board the Red Line to Alewife. My path was paralleled by a couple, who moved with more purpose than me. Two of his fingers appear to be broken, wrapped in tiny individual splints. Seated on the Red Line, she leans on him and drapes one of her legs on top of both of his, their hands tightly interwoven. They speak in hushed tones with one another. She closes her eyes.

11AM, May 27, Red Line: More people seem to be riding in groups, in conversation with friends, siblings, parents, and partners. Collectively, we all seem to have woken up; there is more eye contact, more laughter. The train starts and stops, grinding its way up to the next station. This kind of jolting usually makes me nauseous, but many of my fellow passengers seem unbothered. A young woman, arm outstretched, takes a photo with two of her older relatives. A group of men look out the window to investigate what's happening to our train and find no resolution.

Around 6PM, May 28, 66 bus to Nubian: This bus is busy and much louder than my previous one. Sitting down, the bottle of wine I'm carrying slides out of my bag and smacks the ground. There are at least three conversations happening over the phone and pairs chat with one another. On phones, I see: double-checking Google Maps (many are doing this), reading emails, watching an episode of Criminal Minds. A woman leaned her head on the shoulder of one of the Google-mappers. I just double-checked my own directions.

5:46AM on May 30th, 96 bus to Harvard, in my notes app: In the process of moving houses, I accidentally packed my notebook. Two people behind me are chatting

on an otherwise silent *bus*. So far I've heard mention of "after the bombing." Also, "she has to hobble over to the museum" and some throat clearing.

"Does she have muscular dystrophy?"

"I think so."

Not infrequently, these spheres crash into one another. Sometimes pleasant, sometimes harmless, sometimes harsh. I have been subject or witness to all three forms. This point of tension, resulting from the crossing of a public-private boundary, requires more attention. How can we imagine transit as a place of cohesion and positive interaction?

10:45AM, May 27, Blue Line: Passengers glance over at their neighbors' phones, momentarily snooping before returning to their own thoughts. Two people move to sit in the same seat, the man beating the woman there. Realizing what happened, he shifts a seat over to allow her some room. She sits next to her daughter.

9:43AM, May 27th, Blue Line: A person sitting directly across from me forcefully taps their feet. I can feel the vibration in my own shoes through the ground. Their jacket holds many patches and my favorite declares that "the mothman believes in me." The taps feel nervous and random. To my left, a man wearing headphones gently taps out a beat with his feet. Later, at the Suffolk Downs stop, the loud tapper asks for my number. I decline, and they let me return to my writing. I exited shortly after and made my way to Revere Beach.

During the day, sometime early spring, Red Line: On a slightly busier trip, I sat alone with my headphones on with two empty seats on either side of me. A man walked down the car, stood close and directly in front of me, propped one foot up on the seat to the left of me, and pushed his hips forward so that his crotch was as close to my face as possible. Quickly glancing up, he smirked down at me. I ignored the positioning so that he would grow bored and move away. However, this resulted in

him walking down the aisle to make other women uncomfortable. Stopping at the other end of the car, the man sat down between two women in conversation, and put his arms around each of their shoulders. They quickly stood up and moved away from him, but not too far to provoke further action.

Transit's invisible stage offers the passenger a peek into the lives of strangers. The fullness of that view depends on the people, time of day, and place. We pass, bump by, or crash into each other as we follow our interior stage cues. In this theater—our seats on the train or the bus—we attend countless performances.

Around 6AM, May 28, 66 bus to Nubian: A woman with over-ear headphones, striped vest, and black skirt rests her Trader Joe's bag on the floor. Bright pink flowers poke up over the top of the brown paper. Her flowers match the outfit of another standing near here – she wears a range of pink shades.

11AM, May 27, Red Line: The train continues to jolt on our path to Kendall. The discomfort's silver lining is the time it gives us to watch sailboats race across the Charles. Many of us turn around in our seats to watch. The train speeds up.