

The Long Way Home
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It is a Saturday night in New York City, or early Sunday morning rather, and a professionally dressed businessman sits alone in the corner seat of a train car. This car is one of seven cars that comprise the 1:30 a.m. train out of New York, departing Grand Central station at promptly 1:30, leaving the stragglers behind. The businessman in the corner seat is one-of-a-kind; the majority of the 1:30 train crowd is made up of rowdy teenagers, drunken young-adults, excited tourists, and a variety of other people with different reasons for being on the train at such an hour. Throngs of partiers stagger on to the train in a “mad, sometimes wobbly dash” laughing, screaming, and yelling (A. Jacobs). These rowdy crowds “reach the gates just as the conductor shouts, ‘All aboard!’ Sweaty and winded, they flop into their seats with self-satisfied laughter as the train pulls away” (A. Jacobs). Most of the other passengers seem unaffected by this animated behavior. To this lone businessman, however, these random crowds of people seem to pose a threat; they are rambunctious, unruly, uninhibited, and most of all, potentially dangerous. Used to the quiet nature of his usual rush hour commutes, the businessman feels uncomfortable in this strange and boisterous environment. For a usual commuter, the noisy and action-packed 1:30 train ride seems like an extremely precarious place to be, and scoring a corner seat is possibly the only way to assert himself as on the offensive against the other passengers. While he may be uncomfortable, though, his actually being on the train is not unreasonable; although different from his usual commuting option, sometimes a later train is necessary when certain situations arise. So, why is it that this businessman must isolate himself, and why does he feel offended and threatened by the

behavior of the other passengers who seem otherwise content? Is this man really in danger?

In order to find out why the businessman feels so out of place, it is necessary to explore the relationships and behaviors of the other 1:30 train passengers. Such train crowds are extensions of street corner crowds. A train ride can continue either the beginning or the end of a business commuter's day, while a partier's wild night can continue on the train. Many groups of random people end up on trains, making them as public as street corners. Given, then, that trains are extensions of the city streets, we might turn to Jeff Ferrell's work, Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy in which he discusses crowds on the city streets. Ferrell is an urban life theorist and self-proclaimed street "busker," who plays music and entertains on the streets for random passersby. Ferrell agrees with a fellow busker Barry, who states that the crowds are unpredictable "'cause you never know what person's coming around the corner.... It's completely unscripted" (qtd. in Ferrell 60). Ferrell's acknowledgment of this uncertainty is initially one of excitement; he and his fellow buskers thrive on the unpredictable crowds and uncertainty of wondering who will pass them each night. However, Ferrell then goes further saying that sometimes the crowds have a "meaner edge." Ferrell gives an example of a "meaner" crowd by recalling a certain evening when some drunken fraternity brothers approached him and his fellow buskers and began swearing at them and threatening them. Ferrell acknowledges nervousness here, because he does not know what these boys are going to do, or what might happen to them (62). This feeling of nervousness and uncertainty is what the corner seat businessman

experiences, because he doesn't know how the other 1:30 train passengers are going to act; they seem boisterous, dangerous, and threatening.

Contrary to his original point, however, Ferrell finally concludes that although some of the crowds seem mean or dangerous, they never actually pose real threats or create dangerous situations. Ferrell states, "Street musicians and other sidewalk habitués maintain a remarkable ability to resolve differences and to set the boundaries of public space, sans weapons, sans police officers, sans official 'entertainment guidelines'" (62). Ferrell admits here that although certain crowds seem unpredictable and potentially dangerous, he and his fellow buskers are never in any real danger and they can usually resolve any issues or differences that occur. It is clear that the crowds, which Ferrell labels edgy or dangerous, are actually not. Ferrell is quick to label crowds as dangerous when in fact they are just unfamiliar or variable. Subsequently he acknowledges that danger is avoidable and that the street community comes together to find resolve.

This concept of a seemingly dangerous crowd is exactly what exists on the 1:30 train from New York. However, while the large crowds of boisterous individuals seem threatening and dangerous to the lone businessman, they actually never endanger him or cause any harm. There is an invisible community, which exists on the train, that prevents danger.

Ian Fisher, a writer for The New York Times, discusses the absence of actual danger on the 1:30 train in his article "Rolling Home: Weary Allure of the Last-Chance Train." This article specifically explores the 1:30 train, both its atmosphere and its passengers. Fisher discusses the rowdy personality of the passengers, but acknowledges "Despite an occasional carnival atmosphere that makes some riders uneasy, the last train

is not especially dangerous” (“Rolling”). This is the same concept that Ferrell discusses, when he acknowledges that although seemingly dangerous, the street crowds never really endanger him or his fellow buskers. The reason for the absence of danger on the street that Ferrell expresses is the same reason for the absence of danger on the 1:30 train that Fisher expresses: the existence of an invisible community. I have experienced this community firsthand as well. On one specific train ride, my sister and I were returning to the suburbs after seeing a late show. Having gone shopping earlier that day, we were laden with shopping bags, and kept to our business in our seats. About halfway through the ride, a small group of young women approached us in a panic: one of them had consumed too much alcohol and was going to be sick. The women wanted to know if we would give them one of our shopping bags so as to prevent a messy situation. Being put in an awkward position, my sister and I first hesitated and then quickly rearranged our purchases to create an empty bag. It may seem strange and uncommon to have to lend a shopping bag to a sick passenger, but similar situations happen often on the late night trains. Because the crowds are so random and individuals know that they will never meet again, they tend to have few inhibitions and bond together in strange ways, such as asking for bags in which to vomit, from a perfect stranger. Although the late night train crowds are random, they form their own temporary communities, which act as protection for the duration of the train ride.

Communities in general are formed by contact, which is the most basic form of interaction between people. Contact can be defined by any interaction, from a simple “hello” or acknowledgement, to something more complex such as offering to house sit for a neighbor. However, contact must also have limits and boundaries so that

interactions do not lead to more complex or personal relationships. Contact with limits is what people maintain with “acquaintances,” or people they may see regularly, but whom they do not know well. Acquaintance relationships can also be formed with people whom you do not see regularly, but with whom you might spend some amount of time on one occasion, such as your fellow train passengers. Jane Jacobs, a theorist who explores various aspects of communities in general, discusses this idea of contact and its limits in her book The Death and Life of American Cities. Jacobs introduces an anecdote in which she tells of a storeowner who holds keys for local customers as a favor. This storeowner, explains Jacobs, never hesitates to hold the keys for his customers and never asks the reason for their leaving them. By holding the keys, the storeowner is doing a favor for his customers and creating contact with them. By creating contact, the storeowner makes known to his customers that they can return to him for this favor, and thus a community is formed. However, by not asking their reason for leaving them, he is giving them privacy, and establishing a boundary of contact in the storeowner-customer relationship. According to Jacobs, the beauty of this relationship is that the storeowner has “no personal responsibility about our private affairs” (60). Many limited relationships contribute to the community because the storeowner is taking care of his customers, and the customers return to the storeowner regularly because they know he is reliable. This idea of doing things for each other is what establishes a community.

The communities that form among the 1:30 passengers are unrecognizable to passengers, such as the corner seat businessman, who do not frequently ride the 1:30 train. Some commuters, such as the businessman, are used to a different train atmosphere, one that exists on the rush hour trains, which is a “dull daytime uniformity of blue suits,

dress skirts, and rustling newspapers” (Fisher). Because the corner seat businessman is so accustomed to a train atmosphere which is quiet and uneventful, he feels threatened and uncomfortable when he experiences the 1:30 train atmosphere, which is “something chattier, ruder, and decidedly less staid” (Fisher). The businessman feels as if this 1:30 crowd is chaotic and irregular, and that therefore no community can exist, because there is no consistency among the passengers. However, there is actually less of a community on the daytime rush hour trains than on the 1:30 train. Although the same passengers utilize the rush hour trains each day, thus seeing the same familiar faces, they rarely, if ever, interact with each other and thus form no community. The daytime commuters do not interact because the consistency of the passengers causes a lack of limits on their contact. When contact has no limits, relationships cannot have boundaries and they become less desirable. No real community exists among the rush hour commuters, but the businessman who is used to that atmosphere assumes that consistency equals community, and he thus fails to recognize the *actual* community that exists on the later train. Because he does not recognize the community, he feels threatened by the crowd.

Just as limited relationships are formed among customers and the storeowner, so are they formed on the 1:30 train. Two main reasons contribute to the formation of acquaintances on the 1:30 train: the few inhibitions of the passengers which make them talkative among one another, and the time limit of the train ride, which establishes a clear limit or boundary of contact. The 1:30 train arrives at its last destination one hour after it leaves New York, so that these relationships can only exist for a maximum of one hour. Although trivial and temporary, these relationships form a community amongst the train riders. While the corner-seat businessman felt threatened by the 1:30 train crowd, it was

only because he was unaware of the bonding that occurred among the passengers, and the community that was actually in place on the train. Ferrell acknowledges the invisible support community that is formed around him and his fellow buskers, which keeps them out of real danger. Had the businessman taken a closer look at the 1:30 crowd, like Ferrell did with the street crowds, he would have realized that the train was completely safe and that he was in no danger at all. However, because the environment was unfamiliar, he quickly wrote it off as dangerous and thus isolated himself completely in fear.

Works Cited

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