Subterranean Subjects
Urban Practice and Embodiment in the New York City Subway

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Table of Contents

Introduction.........................................................................................................................4
  Project & Methodology......................................................................................................13
Chapter 1 Theoretical Framework.....................................................................................21
Chapter 2 Civil Inattention.................................................................................................31
Chapter 3 Confrontations in Contractual Space..............................................................45
Chapter 4 Sympathetic Interpolation.................................................................................55
Conclusion.........................................................................................................................61
Works Cited.........................................................................................................................64
Introduction

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman playfully remarks that "only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the ‘realness’ of what is presented" (Goffman 1956, 17). He is referring to the day-to-day performance of social roles by a believing actor to a presumably receptive audience. His casual observation led me to wonder where and when I fell into the intersection of this venn diagram of general skeptics. My personal desire to pursue sociology and anthropology probably emerged from an existing agitation in my sense of trust towards the world around me. I have always felt uncertain about presentations and interpretations of the social world. This distrust is not a result of deception. Instead it has come out of an avid prodding of the social world that appears in plain sight. I have stuck my hand into the unconcealed nature of my surroundings, and caught a glimpse of how deep even the most apparent information can be. My pursuit is of course motivated by my existing social agitation, which is then bolstered by my investigations, and so on and so forth.

Therefore, as a pseudo-scientifically minded socially disgruntled creature, I might dig further into understanding the “realness” of my milieu than the average person. When riding on the subway, I often select a certain subject and ask myself, what social roles are being performed and how are they being embodied? Although the question is not articulated so precisely in my head, that is essentially the question I want to answer when I look at an individual ask myself how they came to be here and in this precise form.

One of the easiest ways to determine the nature of my surroundings is by appraising the material culture around me. If my social knowledge is enough to gather hints regarding an article
of clothing, I eagerly perform a google search on the approximate if not exact price of that item (for example, I do not know if the individual purchased the object second hand or first hand, but an ebay appraisal at least demonstrates the current value of a comparable item).

Take for example this particular item that caught my eye the other day: a bright red puffy winter jacket printed with bold white letters “By Any Mean Necessary.” The quote was familiar to me, and so was its visual presentation. Anyone who went to highschool in New York City in this millennium would be able to identify the branding as Supreme, a New York based skate brand which rose to fame in the late 2000s. Their limited edition clothes invites long lines outside of their tiny Soho store, and their articles of clothing circulate throughout New York City creating youth culture as well as representing it. The company’s trademark graphic design is actually taken from 60s pop artist Barbara Kruger whose famous quotes like “I shop therefore I am,” and “Your body is a battleground,” warn of consumerism, commodity fetishization and media. The company adopted her signature Futura typeface as their own insignia which is now more recognizable as their product than hers.

This highly recognizable graphic design is imprinted on an equally recognizable form. The puffer jacket is a famous product of the North Face brand, an outerwear and sporting gear company. And if you were not able to immediately determine from the formal and symbolic visual cues of this clothing, prominently featured on the sleeve are the two logos ‘NorthFace” and “Supreme” to ensure clear communication of origin. Using all of this visual information, I took advantage of the MTAs recent underground wifi service to search the article of clothing and the individual it speaks for. Unlike the branding, there was apparently no appropriate place to site the speaker on the jacket itself so the quote remains unattributed. Some of you may have already recognized this quote to have been famously spoken by Malcom X.
Finally, I returned my glance to the individual wearing this item and asked myself who he might be. He is a scrawny high school age white boy, which is the typical demographic seen to be sporting this type of clothing. A list of all the different actors, interests, and individuals influencing this image flips through my head. Who is communicating to me through this body? Is it the wearer, the speaker of the quote, the manufacturer, or any number of cultural influences that I may not even see? I begin to ask myself how Malcom X might feel about this, but stop myself. The implications are too muddled and at this point I already feel overwhelmed by the interconnectedness of seemingly relatable but ultimately for me in this moment, irreconcilable snippets of information. Instead, a year later, I rewrite this disturbed memory with a few words by Frederic Jameson.

“Indeed, what happened to culture may well be one of the more important clues for tracking the postmodern: an immense dilation of its sphere (the sphere of commodities), an immense and historically original acculturation of the Real, a quantum leap in what Benjamin still called the "aestheticization" of reality (he thought it meant fascism, but we know it's only fun: a prodigious exhilaration with the new order of things, a commodity rush, our "representations" of things tending to arouse an enthusiasm and a mood swing not necessarily inspired by the things themselves). So, in postmodern culture, "culture" has become a product in its own right” (Jameson 1990, ix).

Did Frederic Jameson already know, in 1990, that one of the most influential music albums of 2017 would be Migos’s rap album “Culture”, and that the word itself would get thrown around with such cannibalistic glee? The layers of culture printed on this shirt are a complex constellation of media, art, and consumerism. I guess kids these days want more culture, which is why they wear Maclom X quotes on their bodies. To me, this signals a
disturbing distortion of Malcom X’s intentions despite a preservation of his words. Was this fragment of a sentence meant to be recorded, reified, idolized, and mechanically reproduced to the point of total capitalist suffocation? Furthermore, did Barbara Kruger think that her works of consumerist protest would be visually replicated and circulated as items of clothing? Probably not. Her postmodern work featured famous images, quotes, and mocked them through what Frederic Jameson would call pastiche. Regarding a copyright lawsuit with Supreme, Barbara Kruger remarked, “What a ridiculous clusterfuck of totally uncool jokers. I make my work about this kind of sadly foolish farce.” (Kamer 2013). Kruger’s intentions of exposing a consumerist fetishization were co-opted by this company, her original message reappropriated. Then I remember that she herself uses a different Malcom X quote in one of her works, “Not Angry Enough” and fail to see how she could be surprised by the further commodification of this celebrity intellectual and freedom fighter. So what now when Barbara Kruger’s postmodern adaptation of Maclom X’s work becomes seamlessly integrated into Supreme’s clothing where fashion is art, and hip hop is culture?

These actually aren’t the questions that I’ll be answering in this thesis, only examples of the many that can arise with a quick ride on the subway. Like a sublime song or a masterful painting, the subway is infinitely suggestive. Every time I look, I should be able to see a new piece, a new layer, and a new personal meaning. Because I cannot accurately interpret the precise meaning of any individual and how her identity is embodied, the information I glean is always partial and always personal. It does not suffice to ask what is being communicated by an image; I must also interrogate how I function as a receiver and interpreter of this information.
Information on the subway is both visual and symbolic as the trails of the millions of ephemeral individuals begin to add up to an effervescent drone representing the city as a whole. Life in New York City will inevitably produce for each individual a unique database of social information, or different tests of reality.

Subway as Heterotopia

For many years, the subway has been my favorite place to test my reality. The subway is the sign of a New Yorker and significant point of regional pride. Knowledge of the subway is regularly brandished in everyday interactions. Asking the question, “how can i get to this stop?” will produce a series of cartographical hypothetical scenarios. The subway map has been grafted onto my spacial memory and acts as my primary index for understanding “the city” as a spatial entity. The famous subway map demarcates precisely which areas have legitimate claims to the title New York City, both by privileging subway access to certain areas and by precisely circumscribing the area within which lies the 5 boroughs.

Commuting is one of the ways that I began to strongly relate to the city as a geographic unit. As someone who lives beyond the reach of the subway, I have always been a slight stranger to the center of the city’s locus of energy and attention. In high school, I had to take a bus to the subway every day, which made my commute a total of 3 hours daily. I think my slight outsider status has made me more analytical and open in my relation to the subway, more eager to go the distance and more appreciative of the subway’s abilities to collapse these differences. I have repeatedly noted a difference in attitudes towards transit from those who live in Manhattan versus those who live in outer boroughs. Manhattanites never want to travel very far, eager to protect the radius of their city from expanding. This expansion is inevitable as the city grows and
property prices increase, more and more people are starting to occupy, gentrify, and reculture outer areas of the city. Spatial perspectives on the city and the values attributed to different areas are always in flux. Would Staten Island seems so distant were it not visually isolated by the subway map? Would Queens seem so “deep” and abysmal? Would Manhattan seem like the absolute center of the universe if there were alternate routes between Brooklyn and Queens, Queens, and the Bronx, or Staten Island and Brooklyn? The symbolic hierarchies made legible by the subway map are shared among New Yorkers. The subway circulates individuals as well as spatial knowledge of the city.

The subway holds a unique position in a New Yorker’s life. First, it is a regional symbol which is also practiced daily. It is the place most shared by the most New Yorkers. The subway invites individuals from all walks of New York life, as well as those flocking from around the world, eager to consume the cultural phantasmagoria of the city. It is a place of comfort and deep practiced knowledge as well as a place of constant contention. Each subway ride is unique because the constitutive parts of the ride are always subject to change. No matter how consistent your route, you will always see new faces and all of the sensory information that comes with people. Therefore the subway is a place for slow learning, memorization, and ingrained appreciation for things. It is a place to practice patience. Every day we wait for a certain character of intrigue to appear. Some days she might take the later train and one day I see her running towards the doors as they close. One day I might even be able to hold the door for her and hear her voice of appreciation. The subway is a place to accumulate knowledge through embodied practice. Every iteration of this daily ritual adds a sliver of information to a boundless mental archive.
At the same time, there is always the chance of experiencing the new and unexpected. The subway could break down, a friendly stranger might prompt an unexpected question, or maybe someone just catches your eye in an unpredictable and deeply meaningful way. The subway is where momentary eye contact can become a spontaneously created lifelong desire.

Due to the multitude of scenarios to be experienced, I see the subway as a place of the possible. It is a place where the possible is actualized daily, in micro-interactions, but unappraised as a place of its own. In a city where free or cheap public places are increasingly difficult to come by, the subway should emerge as a site for assembly. Highschoolers, and youths who do not live on their own are always looking for places to loiter, yet it is much more common for groups of people to loiter outside of a subway station than inside or on the subway. The problem of space and leisure time cannot be emphasized enough, as it is a problem that intersects fundamentally with race, class, age, gender and sexuality. The city which calls itself the melting pot is not really as inviting as it claims to be.

The desire to be in and a part of the city is constantly threatened by the intolerance of a capitalist city which seems to want to expel all of its marginalized inhabitants. There are fewer and fewer places that welcome a sense of familiarity or belonging for the vast majority of people. Groups of kids are regularly reprimanded at art galleries and museums and stores because of their lack of purchasing power and deemed worth. Even public parks close at sundown, and many of my friends have received the absurd fine for just being in parks after hours. The city doesn’t want you. Why don’t groups of kids just ride the subway then? The unsupervised underbelly of the city does not serve most as a place just for being.

Residing deep underground the surface of the glamorous city, the subway rumbles in spatial alterity. It lives underground yet the neon green entrances are prominently scattered along
the street level, reminding us that whole world takes place below. When hypothesising the conditions for heterotopias, Lefebvre states that, “Verticality, a height erected anywhere on a horizontal plane, can become the dimension of elsewhereness, a place characterized by the presence-absence: of the divine, of power, of the half-fictional half-real, of sublime thought. Similarly, subterranean depth is a reversed verticality... Height and depth are generally part of monumentality, the fullness of a space that overflows its material boundaries,” (Lefebvre 2003, 38). The subway is necessarily situated underground and the circuit of information necessarily concealed. The underground system is massive and yet it cannot be grasped visually like the monumentality of the New York City skyline. It can only be imagined through symbolic representations such as the map or seasonal MTA sponsored illustrations.

The subway serves as a functional otherplace in space-time which exists only in relation to the things around it. For this ritualistic treatment of the subway as a threshold, I will characterize it as a heterotopia. The concept of heterotopias was first formulated by Foucault who relates it to the experience of a mirror. “The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (Foucault 1986, 23).

Although heterotopias exist in our physical reality, they are also characterized by an elsewhereness. Unlike utopias, heterotopias are present and active in our world acting as “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” (Foucault 1986, 23).
Lefebvre’s definition of heterotopia diverges in some ways from Foucault. For him, heterotopias are not necessarily places unto themselves but have to be actualized through their usage. It is dependent on a dynamism produced through its usage and the “mobilization not of the population, but of the space. A space taken over by the ephemeral. So that every place becomes multifunctional, polyvalent transfunctional, with an incessant turnover of functions; where groups take control of spaces for expressive actions and constructions, which are soon destroyed,” (Lefebvre 2003, 131). I can think of no other place that resonates as strongly with such transfunctional potential as the subway, in which a new being from an unimaginable corner of the city can take over at any moment the sensory attention of the space. The subway features a constant turnover of momentary celebrity, rapidly generating and destroying people into moments of entertainment, infamy, abject and beautiful.
Project & Methodology

My thesis deals broadly with the question of urban practice and its embodiment. Through auto-ethnographic study of behavior on the subway, I propose a possibility of interpreting our daily rituals as meaningful practices deserving interrogation and agentive exercise. My project is to suggest just a partial look into urban practice through the particular experience of the New York City subway. I hope to put a range of scholars on urban practice and into conversation. While many conversations have remained contained within a relatively narrow moment, or methodology, I hope to bridge some of these disparate scenes because I believe that they have many overlapping concerns.

Lefebvre reveals his disgruntled attitude towards positivist knowledge stating that “every discovery in the fragmentary sciences leads to a new analysis of the total phenomenon” which demonstrate new information, aspects or elements of the urban totality without ever reaching a more holistic understanding. “Every specialized science cuts from the global phenomenon a “field,” or “domain,” which it illluminates in its own way … Sociology is divided into political sociology, economic sociology, rural and urban sociology, and so forth.” (Lefebvre 2003, 48). These fractious commitments to different disciplines continue to hinder any comprehension of the urban approaching a totality.

Classic sociologists such as Simmel and Wirth instigated a generation of thinking deeply about the problem of the post-industrial city. Looking at commodity culture and relations of power and production, Weber, Wirth and Simmel anticipated an age of deep socio-cultural anxiety and apathy. Sociologists of everyday life have rigorously fought to dismantle classic urban theories which have cast relations in public and among strangers as meaningless. Over the past several decades, authors such as Lyn Lofland, Jane Jacobs and Erving Goffman have
persuasively demonstrated that seemingly banal interactions are actually meaningful and
demonstrative of social norms. Where they “‘should’ have found a social vacuum,” they
discovered a richly social character to the public realm, (Lofland 3, 1998). Yet in their
commitment to the sociology of individuals in space, they have not analysed the depth of these
meanings in the scheme of subject formation in our late capitalist culture. For this reason I turn
to critical thinkers such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Lefebvre and Jameson to provide conceptual
frameworks for understanding our current moment.

In order to approach the type of understanding I aim for, I must blend diverse
genealogical work with postmodern work, philosophical and psychoanalytical work with
behavioral sociological work. Rather than seeing these parts of life in the city as disparate and
irreconcilable, I would like to propose a range of applications of different critical methods.
Lefebvre states that, “Urban practice overflows these partial concepts and consequently, theory.
Among other things, this practice teaches us that we produce signs and significations that we sell
and consume” (Lefebvre 2003, 50). Returning to the anecdote first mentioned, I realized that
there was no way to understand the image and the individual before me without undertaking
simultaneously material, cultural, social, and corporal investigations.

The theories, principles, and methods that I apply to my study are not specific to New
York City, and provide a framework for understanding the interrelatedness of any urban space
and its constituents. While the New York City subway is unique in the manifestation of its
history, it acts as a case study for a system of relations which I think can be universally applied
and observed towards the urban. Lofland suggests that the possibility for participation in the
relational web may vary historically and culturally. She quotes historian David Olson in his
argument that “nineteenth century London was far more “domestic” than were Vienna and Paris
in the same period, private space represented a smaller proportion of the everyday life space of inhabitants” (Lofland 71). This invites an engagement with socio-historical factors underpinning the private and the public in different cities at different moments in time. Each city presents a unique relationship between interiority and exteriority on both a physical architectural level and on a subjective individual level. Yet the specificity of location and site does not undermine the application of these methods of analysis. Instead, it shows that the case studies I present are documentary and symbolic. Their reality can only be thoroughly comprehended through resonant experiences on the subway and in other lived interactions in public space, and differently located experiences will result in different resonances and comprehensions.

In Lefebvre’s essays on rhythmanalysis, he boldly argues for a creation of a new discipline and methodology for learning and subverts positivist ideas of what is fundamentally knowable about our social world. Lefebvre articulates his notion of rhythm, which “reunites quantitative aspects and elements, which mark time and distinguish moments in it - and qualitative aspects and elements which link them together, found the unities and result from them.” (Lefebvre 2004, 9). Using philosophical, musical, and corporal analogies, Lefebvre proposes a new approach towards all things in the world. While we are forced to comply with the absolutely constant rotations of the earth, the day, hours and all regular cycles of time, it is the human element which makes moments unpredictable, subjective, and meaningful. Rhythm analysis therefore relies on categorical oppositions between repetition and difference, the mechanical and the organic, the qualitative and the quantitative, etc.. Lefebvre tells us, “we know that a rhythm is slow or lively only in relation to other rhythms.” (Lefebvre 2004, 10). Even though each rhythm can be quantified according to velocity, measure, or beat, it is only in
relation to the human elements, a heart beat or a step, that the qualities of rhythms are perceivable.

The subway emerges as the perfect subject for rhythm analysis as it displays all of the contradictions of the regular and irregular, where delays, early arrivals, and the punctual repetitive reliability of its function are always under scrutiny. The experience of the subway is contingent on a desire and need to move through space-time, and all of the human elements which surface at the meeting of the failures and successes in attempting to do so. The time-table and velocity of the train is the quantitative measure against which rhythm analysis on the subway is performed. There are many markers of linear mechanical time on the subway which are only interpretable once their natural function is disturbed. The loud but imperceptible droning of the train is only acknowledged when it stalls and a motionless silence settles it. The sound of the doors opening and closing are taken for granted until the doors are held open for a few seconds too long, and the anxiety of an unfulfilled pattern creeps into the heartbeat of the passenger.

To perform rhythmanalysis is “to grasp a moving but determinate complexity” (Lefebvre 2004, 12). The diversity of elements on the subway can never be fully articulated. Only certain patterns or rhythms can be perceived at key moments. Therefore, rhythmanalysis is always partial yet it attempts to grasp at a totality beyond the specific categories of sciences or humanities. For my study, I perform the work of a rhythmanalyst. Lefebvre paints a sensitive portrait of this character as someone who performs the work of interpretation through embodiment. “He listens first to his body; he learns rhythm from it, in order consequently to appreciate external rhythms” (Lefebvre 2004, 19).

A rhythm analyst must experience moments, not just as an analyst, but also in the way that non-analysts perceive them. She must perform the dual work of being a stranger to the
environment and a deeply ingrained member. Many of the case studies presented in my paper are thus deeply connected to my own bodily experience of the subway. It is therefore necessary for me to locate my body and its indexical relationship to the world around me. I am 21 year old South Asian girl of short stature, dark hair, attractive features, and attention to fashion and my interactions on the subway are always in relation to these attributes. Most of the experiences I recount in this paper are interpreted through a cumulative body of knowledge gained between the ages of 13 to present. Over the years, i have tracked the changes of my interactions according to variations age, hair length, attractiveness, type of dress and other factors. I mention these elements of my identity to help paint a clearer picture of the encounters described, but not to restrict the relevance of my observations to the specificity of my identity. To reduce my observations to a mere matter of identity would suggest that individuals can be categorically understood by discrete discursive characteristics. Instead, I would like to see myself as a full member of my social space which is New York City.

As a lifelong native New Yorker, I feel the most equipped to talk about this city over any other. Because my project deals with the question of urban practice and its embodiment, my analytical approach to the urban is derived primarily from my own urban practice. Auto-ethnography allows me to give respect and attention to my individual experience of the city. I believe that personal experience can present critical information into the social world and exemplify larger truths about our existence as social subjects. Although my experience is particular to my history, I do not think that the specificity of my identity takes away from the reality or relevance of my accounts toward a wider application of understanding the social world.

As a member and active participant in this conglomerative force of eruption and evacuation, I place myself at a unique position to determine and interpret moments of interest,
disturbance, and excitement on the subway. I privilege my position in this thesis because I have spent many years informally studying, observing, and riding the subway. As a daily commuter, I feel dependent on the subway and see it as a necessary tool that shapes my life. I believe that my own deep respect for the subject will prove the subway to be a valuable site for studying the social life of the city.

Rhythm analysis leads me to make certain decisions on what elements are most remarkable and transformative. An unbiased scientific study demands that the research question is not posed with prejudice in either its formulation or analysis. Yet the driving force of my work is bias and prejudice gained from the subjective accumulation of spacio-temporal data. In order to grasp a rhythm, “it is necessary to have first been grasped by it” (Lefebvre 2004, 27). Because these moments are necessarily fleeting, they must strike me in their temporal existence. The moments I record are recorded specifically because I was subjectively moved by them. Changes in rhythm make themselves known through my situational knowledge of linear rhythm. Since a rhythm analyst relies on her own body and breadth of experience to inform her sense, she relies on “an already acquired ‘knowledge’ [that] enters one the scene and delineates the game.” (Lefebvre 2004, 21). This is the knowledge accrued through spending time in a place and in particular, being that disgruntled social skeptic that Goffman referred to.

As I mentioned earlier, rhythm analysis is always partial. It’s a methodology that is in itself paradoxical because it assigns the task of articulating what is often profound because of its inarticulately. While a respectable scientific study would allege a non-coercive relationship with its subjects, I argue in the chapters that follow that no level of participation, looking silently, listening, or any aspect of being in a public space can be considered inconsequential or
uninfluential. This suspicion towards the meaningful totality of the social is strongly informed by Erving Goffman. I owe my methodology largely to the esteemed studies of Goffman and I hope that my observations reflect a rigorous commitment to the study of ordinary human traffic to which he dedicated his own life’s work.

In this thesis, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which citizens and the city are mutually responsible towards the creation of unique form of metropolitan subjecthood through their clothes, physicality, and representations in virtual space. I believe rhythmanalysis will help lead us to understand the qualities which both enable and inhibit the enactment and eruption of heterotopia. Rhythmanalysis can point to those key moments in social life which are the underlying rhythms determining our desires, emotions, fears, and general behaviors and practices.

I find Lefebvre’s definition of heterotopia to be of particular relevance when it comes to the subway. Here, heterotopia is something that needs to be actualized through purposeful usage. The subway is subject to a wide range of uses and rhythm analysis may help us understand what conditions are most productive of heterotopia. I would like to understand which rhythms of daily life may lead to creative and laboratory use of a space.

In this thesis, I will look specifically for uses of the subway that inhibit heterotopia. Certain rhythms attempt to restrain the creative and energetic emergence of utopic possibility towards the purpose of state control and capitalist order. Expectations and social demands often determine how individuals think of spaces and their possible uses. These expectations limit the freedom and creativity needed to actualize heterotopia. What are these expectations and how are they embodied? I will look at which those rhythms which demonstrate embodied performances of social demands and expectations.
After looking at these, I will proceed to understand other rhythmic variations which occur on the subway. Certain variations are more conductive to heterotopic usage of space. Under certain conditions, individuals sharing a space may traverse social expectations and allow members of different groups to engage actively and communally. Under what conditions can subway riders learn from each other? When are we more or less willing to communicate with other riders? How can we improve the social use of the subway and imagine new ways of relating to one another in this transitory space.

I begin by providing a theoretical overview of the various thinkers who have influenced my approach to the urban. In subsequent chapters, I will use my own experiences and observations to illustrate how some of these concepts are enacted and embodied in daily life.
Theoretical Framework

The difficulty of understanding urban practice may come from the rapid development of the world economy contrasted with an uneven development in mental adjustments. In her book, The Public Realm, Lyn Lofland inquires, “given the lightening-fast character of this transformation (from a predominantly rural people to a significantly urban people), perhaps we should not be surprised at how little they know about their new environment, how negatively some of them view it … a near majority of us are now or will soon be living in a socialpsychological environment that we do not understand, that many of use despise, and that, because we act toward and on it out of ignorance and prejudice, we may be making unliveable” (Lofland 1998, 1). She argues that the urban has been treated as an unnatural environmental challenge to natural human life. Contemporary urban humans are thus often seen as working against their natural state, and the mentalities and conditions created by the urban appear alien to humans themselves.

Material changes to the urban landscape have gone hand in hand with the accelerated commodification of objects and things, but where does the social fit into this new universe? Benjamin states that “the manner in which human sense-perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by Nature, but by historical circumstances as well” (Benjamin 1936, 39). So surely contemporary urban practice has developed its own unique way of organizing sense perception with the economic initiative of total commodity fetishization. Whatever it is that the urban subject practices, it cannot be entirely separate from what her predecessors encountered. Jameson approaches the contemporary moment through the
heading of postmodernism. He articulates that

“...The fundamental ideological task of the new concept, however, must remain that of coordinating new forms of practice and social and mental habits (this is finally what I take Williams to have had in mind by the notion of a "structure of feeling") with the new forms of economic production and organization thrown up by the modification of capitalism -- the new global division of labor -- in recent years. It is a relatively small and local version of what I elsewhere tried to generalize as "cultural revolution" on the scale of the mode of production itself; in the same way the interrelationship of culture and the economic here is not a one-way street but a continuous reciprocal interaction and feedback loop. (xiv)

Through a material cultural history of the Paris in the 19th century, Benjamin paints an image of the individuals growing relation to the money economy. Benjamin discusses world exhibitions in their instrumental role in “the enthronement of the commodity and the glitter of distraction” (Benjamin 1969, 168). He views it as an incipient moment in transferring the phantasmagoria of consumer culture to the private citizen. These exhibitions showed the public that consumer goods and their connoisseur value could be possessed and produced by the private citizen too. By the late 19th century, the interior “represented the universe for the private citizen. In it he assembled the distant in space and in time. His drawing-room was a box in the world-theatre... The interior was not only the private citizen’s universe, it was also his casing.” (Benjamin 1969, 169). It is in the interior that the citizen collected her world through the commodities she desired to constitute it. Individuals came to produce their individuality through objects, and commodity fetishization began its reign. Material and cultural capital imbedded
these objects with their connoisseur value, and individuality and self-valuation became an
objective pursuit. In interior decoration, the capitalist subject articulated herself and her
individuality through the deliberate accumulation of valuable objects.

Clothing and embellishment of the body are also ways in which individuals have been
able to mediate their worlds. They are able to create their own private universes one their bodies
through the material cultural choices performed on their own bodies. The importance and appeal
of clothing in commodity culture is easily recognizable in the metropolitan city, and the
proliferation of glass as a technology for display has significantly contribute to the glamour of
this object fetishization.

In the mid 19th century, glass was one of the key architectural elements that gave Paris’s
arcades their strength in attracting consumers. Benjamin quotes the “Illustrated Paris Guide”
which championed, “‘these arcades, a new contrivance of industrial luxury, are glass-covered,
marble-floored passages, through entire blocks of houses, whose proprietors have joined forces
in the venture. On both sides of these passages, which obtain light from above, there are arrayed
the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, indeed a world, in miniature’” (Benjamin
1969, 165). The technology of glass was itself instrumental to the creation of consumer desire.
An analysis of the material technology of glass windows is necessary for understanding their
consumer appeal and their world-making potential. Glass relies on light to activate a coy
interplay between transparency and reflection. Jameson speaks of glass and the postmodern
architecture of a consumer society, stressing the ways in which “the glass skin repels the city
outside… it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the [Bonaventure]
hotel’s outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself, but only the distorted images of everything
that surrounds it,” (173). The surface of the building induces the sense of an inverted interiority.
Ever since, glass has been both the site and marker of urban luxury. This is where the new market society asserts its contemporary aesthetic. The reflective surface of store windows participates actively in the “glitter of distraction”. A pedestrian walking down the street may catch a glimpse of themself out of their peripheral vision. They are drawn to their own reflection out of a desire to see themself, and confirm their existence as an aesthetic commodity. They follow the sight of themself in the store window, turning their head from the forward motion of their walking to accommodate their desire to be seen by themself.

Goffman notes the allure of the mirror and recognizes them as an important site for considering the management of auto-involvements in society. Auto-involvements are defined as self-directed or self-absorbing physical acts which are differentially permissible while present before others. While etiquette books note the impropriety of looking at oneself in the mirror while in public, Goffman states that trends in society have led towards a much more lenient attitude towards the use of mirrors in public, and in many cases, it is encouraged by the increased presence of mirrors in workplaces and elsewhere. Most notably, Goffman states that, “In American society, apparently, the temptation to make use of nearby mirrors is very difficult to resist” (Goffman 1966, 66). The previously considered private act of looking in the mirror has become increasingly permissible in public spaces. As the city becomes increasingly covered by a glass skin, the temptations of the mirror become physically irresistible.

Glass enhances the effect of the postmodern city as a prism of presentation and performance. Benjamin indicates a shift in the relationship between the individual and the city in which the presentation of the self through objects became of increasing import. Now in the city, commodities take on a major role in this classifying scheme and act as the basis for all relations in the metropolis. As Wirth describes, “in a community composed of a larger number of
individuals than can know one another intimately and can be assembled in one spot, it becomes necessary to communicate through indirect media and to articulate individual interests by a process of delegation. Typically in the city, interests are made effective through representation” (Wirth 1964, 73). Fashion is an example of indirect media which communicates through representation. Through fashion, an individual communicates publicly what cultural knowledge they participate in. A metropolitan individual is communicating their social and cultural commodity connoisseurship at all times. They are immediately legible to other pedestrians participating in their same socio-cultural strata.

In the metropolis, the division of labor is so thorough that every aspect of life is subject to objective aesthetic scrutiny. All social relations become visible in the city. Simmel describes the metropolis’s organizational system as depending upon “an extremely varied hierarchy of sympathies, indifferences, and aversions of the briefest as well as of the most permanent nature,” (Simmer 1950, 416). The deployment of acute differentiating strategies is necessary in the face of so many stimuli in the city. Due to the extreme density of people and objects in the metropolis, urban social space cannot be organized by proximity. Instead, social status must dominate our criteria for sympathy and recognition. Weber specifies that power is not equal to economic capital, and social status is gained at the intersection of multiple factors in the distribution of honor in a community. While honor is certainly often linked to economic class situation, status honor is “normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific style of life is expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle.” (Weber 211).

Because status is so linked to style, status in the city can be immediately understood through its reflection of “taste”. Bourdieu defines taste as “the source of the systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence” (Bourdieu 1984, 175). It is the
mechanism through which things attain distinctive sign and become classified in relation to
certain class conditions. Taste operates within habitus. Bourdieu’s idea of habitus is defined as
“the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification”
(Bourdieu 1984, 170). Habitus is the system through which social relations in the city are made
visible. Practices and objects are embedded with symbolic value that enters them into a complex
classificatory system that also generates categories of perception. Through a combination of
social, cultural, and material capital, different objects and practices reflect an individual’s place
in the social fabric. Bourdieu’s theory of capital and social space gives essential insight into how
the aesthetic information of the city is made into classifiable practices and objects. These
knowable differences reflect power relations of capital.

The immediate intelligibility of material culture and capital gives the impression that
relations in the city are purely objective. The scholarship of George Simmel, which has
maintained an ominous influence on urban scholarship to date, articulated the problem of
nearness and remoteness in the mental and social adjustments of metropolitan subjects.
According to him, the industrial metropolitan city creates psychological conditions necessitating
rapid judgements which are intellectual rather than emotional in nature. since the money
economy dominates the metropolis, interactions between individuals take on a “purely matter of
fact attitude” of objectivity and apathy. Simmel memorably paints a picture of “that peculiar
adaptive phenomenon - the blasé attitude - in which the nerves reveal their final possibility of
adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response
to them” (Simmel 1950, 15). Simmel’s argument is based on the assertion that man has certain
psychological needs and capacities which are having to contend with the modern demands of
urban time-space. Therefore, the individual must make adjustments to his conduct which
suppress overstimulation of the nerves through systematic impersonality “until they finally can
no longer produce any reaction at all” (Simmel 1950, 5).

The City and the Metropolitan Body

Given the immense power of commodities in representing individuals in class status,
taste, and life-style, where does an individual’s corporeality function in this seemingly total
system of classification? Simmel claimed in 1908 that “the deepest problems of modern life flow
from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his
existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage
and the external culture and technique of life,” (Simmel 1950, 1). Today it seems that the
reconciliation of this relationship has been most desperately problematic for the sociologist
herself. Few scholars of urban practice have bridged the gap between material culture, discourse
and the embodied reality of humans in a way which gives attention to human subjectivity and
embodied performance.

Judith Butler critiques genealogical writers such as Foucault because their treatment of the
body as an unassuming surface upon which historical and cultural information is inscribed. She
states that ““This “body” often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription
from a cultural source figured as “external” to that body,” (Butler 1990, 205). This reveals the
ideological assumption of a body prior to cultural inscription, and reproduces a dichotomy of
internal versus external identity. If an internal self is assumed, against which all cultural
information is grafted, then all embodied actions can be understood as performativity.
I would like to apply Butler’s theory of performativity towards understanding Althusser’s concept of interpolation. It must be acknowledged that discourse is brought into existence through the performance of culture and ideology by and through the body. Althusser calls interpellation that process through which subjects recognize their subjecthood. It is through this that ideology is made possible and ideology is therefore non-existent without its embodiment. He illustrates it through a simple scene:

“I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in a such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all) or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject,” (Althusser 1970, 174).

The act of turning may not be a meaningless symbolic gesture, but one which participates actively in the process of interpolation. I would like to turn my attention now to the physical gestures which fill public spaces as interpolative practices. Hailing does not require a specific articulation of a subject’s identity. It is the subject who understands her position through the obviousness of ideology. The diffuse and diverse set of things that can call an individual to interpolate is enormous in our contemporary state. Metropolitan subjects protect themselves from certain forms of interpolation through various bodily means and invite interpolation through
others. Interpolation is simultaneous to bodily performance and thus the embodiment of ideology.

Taking into consideration the multitude of signs that index a person’s identity, I would like to see how metropolitan individuals mutually hail, interpolate, and internalize identities. Due to the range of things which come to symbolically mark identity in the city, individuals are being hailed constantly. Hailing is not something restricted to the mere act of verbally acknowledging or naming someone. It takes place constantly, when you see another person wearing the same shirt as you, when you see yourself in the urban mirror, when you compare yourself to the person next to you, and when you try to catch the attention of a stranger on the subway. I believe all acts in public spaces contribute to a continuum of an individual’s interpolation.

Within this constant bombardment of interpolating information, technologies, and pieces of cultural and social capital, metropolitan individuals have organize a way to resist turning their heads to recognize themselves at every call. There is a rhythm to how individuals on the subway react to the mutual presence and acknowledgement of those around them. We select certain moments to physically recognize others and are constantly making decisions about who and what demands sympathy at what times. The organized response of metropolitan individuals to this constant interpolation may be the cause of a perceived apathy or waning of affect.

Perhaps this thing which Simmel calls the blase attitude may, under further observation, be called civil inattention. Simmel’s description of the industrial city provides many relevant insights into the contemporary city, yet the diffusion of material culture and its embodiment has certainly changed since. 50 years later, the concept of civil inattention was theorized by Erving Goffman in 1963 to elaborate the rules of involvement among strangers in public places and has
since been utilized persistently among writers meditating on and dissecting the nature of interactions in public. I believe that their disparate concepts may be reconciled by giving attention to the ways that sympathy and identification are embodied by urban citizens.

What may have externally appeared to Simmel to be complete apathy to stimulation has been thoroughly studied by subsequent sociologists of everyday life to imply a different reality. Rather than interpreting rapid metropolitan interaction as “experienced as meaningless,” scholars like Goffman assert the thoroughly meaningful and social effect of these interactions. Civil inattention involves a set of socially acceptable behaviors which acknowledge the mutual and cooperative presence of all other individuals in a shared space. In a public place, civil inattention regulates the harmonious coexistence of different subjects. The acknowledged mutuality of this mechanism functions due to the interpolation of metropolitan subjects. Civil inattention relies on the embodied recognition of a multitude of diverse subjects in a shared space.

In the subsequent chapters, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which individuals and the ideology of the city are mutually responsible towards the creation of unique subjecthood. I will argue that in the city, individuals are interpolated not only through language and discourse, but through embodied practices such as clothing and body language.
Civil Inattention

Simmel and Goffman’s rigorous commitment to the particularities of mental and social life inform my attention to the subway as a critical site for understanding our contemporary world. I will attempt to analyze Simmel’s conception of strangeness and remoteness through Goffman’s concept of civil inattention. Simmel pathologies the quality of strangeness and remoteness as a condition of the urban mentality. He states that every interaction is at risk of being transformed by strangeness, which is characterized as a skepticism in regard to the uniqueness of a relationship. Much like the sociological skeptic, the stranger is one who is removed enough from a situation to assess it, determine its value, and act “objectively”. Although conditions of remoteness and the state of civil inattention can be found in rural and less-than-urban societies, the practice of civil inattention will be most present where civilians are the most estranged from one another. Simmel would attribute this condition over-stimulation of the urban individual’s senses to the reign of the money economy and the mental and physical demands to conform to late-capitalism.

In the city, civil inattention composes the necessary foundation for cooperation in contractual space (Goffman 1966, 84). Civil inattention involves the narrow set of actions performed among people who are mutually present but not involved in any direct interaction. It is considered the most proper treatment of strangers in public. The contractual fiber of any social situation must be upheld by a firm understanding and majority cooperation of civil inattention. It is a necessary tool which behaves towards the maintenance of order in an undisciplined space. Without it, could public gatherings burst into an unrestricted eruption of human connection and
confrontation? It is particularly important to elaborate the specifications of civil inattention in order to understand why infractions against it are so potent.

In Goffman’s words, “What seems to be involved [in civil inattention] is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design.” (1966, 84). We feel immediately that civil inattention is composed of separate but reciprocal parts. It depends on both the projection and reception of a social agreement. It is a performance of courtesy which admits the human presence of another individual without affording that interaction any special meaning or “recognition”. In fact, it implies that no information was gleaned from the coexistence of two people in a shared space. While this may seem like a trivial and banal aspect of social life, it is one that “constantly regulates the social intercourse of persons in our society” (1966, 84). Relations in public space are dependent on its users knowledge and performance of civil inattention.

The subway emerges from there as a critical site for the study of many diverse ecological elements of metropolitan life. The confluence of stimulus that is experienced on the subway makes it the most socially fraught site for the maintenance of order in social space. Urban subjects are able to practice strangeness through embodied experiences on the subway. Scholars of urban spaces have argued that encounters in public have a fundamental role in integrating urban strangers into a cooperative and contractual space. Interactions in public require people of diverse backgrounds to come together and practice civility towards each other. In his work on poor urban black neighborhoods, Elijah Anderson has argued that “cosmopolitan canopies” actually help integrate black youth into an acceptable social framework. Due to their shared
space, white people are encouraged to show civility and perform the work of an impartial stranger (Anderson 2004, 40). Seminal scholar of urban space, Jane Jacobs, argues that the sidewalk performs a critical role in maintaining the social order of a city. Jacobs recognizes the sidewalk as a site for city dwellers to maintain the peaceful and safe passage of all other pedestrians. “By definition again, the streets of a city must do most of the job of handling strangers, for this is where strangers come and go” (Jacobs 1960, 109). Relations in the public realm rely on the peaceful performance of strangeness and the vigilant preservation of social norms.

Civil inattention involves a highly choreographed set of instructions for maintaining the orderly traffic of bodies. This choreography is accessible to all through what Goffman calls the body idiom. According to Goffman, the body idiom is a conventionalized discourse with a set of symbols and vocabulary that may be understood by all individuals a part of that society. There must exist a general agreement on the meanings of behaviors as well as a common understanding of expected norms. A set of normative behaviors is commonly understood and exists as a reference against which all other behaviors can be compared and judged accordingly.

Goffman recognizes that it is impossible to have a complete command of every expressive idiom within this language or even a majority of it, yet everyone possesses enough overlapping knowledge to be literate and responsive to performances in public space (Goffman 1966, 34). A variety of subsets must exist to the larger societal body idiom which enables members of subcultures to better understand expressive idioms among their group members. Overall, Goffman believes that sharing a common body idiom is “one reason for calling an aggregate of individuals a society” (1966, 35).
The body idiom is non-verbal communication that is unconsciously enacted by the subway rider in how she walks, sits, where she sits, which direction she faces, and a variety of other infinitesimally small physical adjustments. Goffman explains that “Although an individual can stop talking, he cannot stop communicating through body idiom; he must say either the right thing or the wrong thing. He cannot say nothing,” (Goffman 1963, 34). Since an individual’s actions are inescapably communicative, it feeds constantly into the choreography of other bodies in a space. This choreography is highly specialized, adaptable, and immediately effective. There is no delay in the performance and interpretation of interactions on the subway; cause and effect are nearly simultaneous.

The body idiom constitutes one system or level of what Lefebvre calls urban practice. Likened to a speech act, body language acts as a manifestation of the body idiom. It is imbedded with a set of lexical, semantic, and grammatical rules which remain hidden to us during the actual performance. The success of this system even relies on “the absence of system at the level of effects, acts, and events, even though its presence is manifest to varying degrees.” (Lefebvre 2003, 50). Individuals must remain blind to what actually structures the rules and techniques of meaning in order to communicate most fluently and without being socially disturbed. “The effect, the impression, or emotion, in no way implies a knowledge of the system’s laws” and relies on its being concealed to most effectively evoke its magnetic force (Lefebvre 2003, 52).

On the subway, the body idiom is framed by the mechanical rhythms of the train. Individual users are highly trained to organize their days according to the temporal grid provided by their transit system. Users are not only trained according to schedules. Subway users develop a highly specialized ability to notice when a train is arriving by a distant sound, or the slight indication of a headlight reflected onto the tunnel wall. Subway riders must know from which
direction the train is to arrive; this determines which direction their bodies will be oriented towards. Even in a reposing state, subway riders will prefer to be facing the direction that the train will appear from. Subway riders anxiously walk past the yellow border that they are regularly warned to stay behind. They position themselves at the precise points on the platform, where they anticipate the doors opening, and where they will exit on the other end.

This physical phenomenon is well documented by Marc Augé who traces the itineraries of Parisian metro users in the physical, historical, and muscle memories of their routes. He determines that “subway riders basically handle nothing more than time and space, and are skilled in using one to measure the other” (Augé 2002, 8). Augé describes the virtuous subway in the following passage:

“They know how to adapt themselves to the resistance of matter and to the throng of bodies, in a single gesture grasping the door latch with a flick of the wrist, as might a self-centered brat smoothly slipping the ticket of his subway pass, into the narrow slot of the turnstile, glancing off the walls and cutting the last corner, jumping down the last stairs two at a time, before leaping through the closing doors of the car, escaping a hard knock on the ribs from the jaws of the automatic door and applying an insistent pressure with the forearms on the inert mass of those who, having just entered, don't think anyone else could ever get in behind them.” (Augé 2002, 8).

Augé focuses specifically on the negotiations and adaptations that metro users make as time-space travelers, though subway users are not only mechanically adaptive to the physical environment of the underground system. The relationships between personal itineraries in time-space are necessarily shaped by the itineraries of all other subway users."
I was first awed by what Augé calls “virtuosity tied to habit” when running one day to catch the train with a friend from out of town. The sound and light of the approaching train invigorated me with the urgency to move swiftly through the turnstile, which I did seamlessly, gliding the metro card through the narrow slot in one go. Looking behind me, my friend was stuck clumsily passing her card through the reader over and over again without success as irritated locals neared and immediately swerved to a faster lane. Noticing my friend, a local stranger yelled out “fast then slow, fast then slow” which we realized was an instruction on the proper gesture and flick of the wrist necessary for easy MetroCard passage. No doubt this method worked immediately. His abstract articulation of this gesture is evidence of the extreme precision of the learning and physical adaptations that a regular subway user possesses. While most users perform this seamless gesture subconsciously, this particular user’s ability to locate the precise nature of this gesture shows that he understands the subway body idiom as one that is systematic and learnable. He learned these gestures and also considers it his duty to pass on this knowledge to maximize the efficient passage of other subway users as well. Subway users depend on the efficient flow of other users in space to maintain their own itineraries.

**Rhythms in Space**

The physical adjustments necessary for civil inattention are particularly stringent in areas of high density such as the subway. Urbanites realize the necessity to be extremely sensitive to many situational variables such as proximity, density, and orientation of bodies in space. While they are no more culturally entrenched than in any other place, the demands of civil inattention on the subway are particularly notable due to the physical distribution of objects and people in
the subway. It is rarely a conscious choice to become oriented in subway space. It is through muscle memory and adaptations in space that we come to be extremely sensitive to the rhythms of the subway. Marc Augé states, “Most of the singular itineraries in the subway are daily and obligatory. We don’t choose to retain them or not in our memory: they get impregnated within us, like the memory of military service,” (Augé 2002, 8).

A physical comprehension of the subway’s geography is needed if we are to truly understand how bodies are oriented in this space. The subway cart is a long rectangular enclosed room. The opportunities for occupying its space are largely determined by its spatial geography. The car is much longer than it is wide and only tall enough to touch the ceiling. The expectations for behavior in the subway responds to the material layout of the subway car itself. A combination of geography and social norms come together to determine the proper coordination of bodies in the space of the subway.

If the subway is predominantly empty, with many free seats, it is expected that the riders will all take a seat. If one does not wish to be seated, it is always more proper to stand by the doors than it is to stand in the space between doors. If the subway is more densely packed, and there are individuals already standing by the doors, it is appropriate to stand in between doors. If the subway is relatively unpopulated, riders are expected to maximize on the space between passengers. A minimum amount of space must be preserved between strangers.

As it turns out, it is only proper to look across the width of the subway car, not length wise. Unless it is packed in which case physical constraints allow you to position yourself in any way that may appear to maximize your own personal space. It is more permissible to turn one’s head towards the length of the car if one is seated on either end of the subway. The further one is towards the periphery, the more appropriate it is to look towards the interior. Accordingly, it is
most inappropriate to turn one’s attention laterally when seated in an interior seat. In general, turning one’s head noticeably is considered inappropriate.

Photographs by Bruce Davidson 1980

The adaptive politics of subway seating, standing, and orientation reveal the surprisingly consistent cooperation of subway users in contractual space. To call it empathy would be a generous assumption, yet it operates nearly that way. Without the mindful cooperation of a great majority of subway users, we could face a nearly anarchic rule of individuals in space.

Lofland terms this coordination as cooperative motility. She states that, “Dancelike,
almost choreographed character [cooperative motility is] the idea that strangers work together to traverse space without incident, .. in their movements in and about the public realm, humans are making their way through an often fairly daunting environment composed of inanimate objects, animate objects, and inanimate objects” (Lofland 1998, 29). These are the organizing principles and practices that make most of the time our movement through the public realm is simply uneventful.

Like a forest, the subway can be a place where an individual goes to be in complete peace with his or her environment. It is actually particularly peaceful because the elements are so intertwined and committed to coexistence. Every element is so cooperative that the rhythmic flow will lull many of us to sleep. Jacobs is so taken by the choreography of the street that she calls it “the art of the city”. The synesthetic harmony created in public places may appear shocking to anyone who takes a moment to notice it, but it is precisely this seamless function that makes it imperceptible. Far more noticeable are the moments in which the subway proves itself to be unpredictable and dangerous. Like any language there is no way to perfectly practice the code of civil inattention - and in fact its usage invites its constant manipulation and violation. The mutations and reactions within and around these laws are also social.

When practiced perfectly, the subway environment fully disappears. The individual is neither aware of themself being in a place nor there existing a place around their being. This state of total equilibrium is easier achieved during certain times of day. When people are tired but not exhausted (because exhaustion comes with urgency and urgency invites paranoia) the rhythm of the train is most stable. School children and people coming home from work can finally relax on the subway and appreciate the joint company of others relaxing after a long day. Those lucky enough to grab a seat will often drift off to sleep in their own worlds and others will search for a
door to learn on. In the mornings, a mix of tension and relaxation can be felt from the jittery anticipation of the next stop, which will determine whether riders are late or prompt to their destination.

Those commuting from the outskirts of the city get the privilege of picking their seats first. They are also more tired because they have to wake up earlier to catch the subway. Those who jump on from the interior of the city are usually livelier by the time they get on the subway. The social capital of subway riders in the morning can be felt by how energetic they are when crossing the threshold of the subway door. There is a distinct change that can be felt when the subway crosses from an outer-borough into Manhattan. Manhattanites confidently step onto the scene, disregarding the tired and quiet state of those who have been on the subway long before them.

At night, the atmosphere of the subway can easily shift to paranoia. Individual’s are more aware of those around them and shift their heads to discretely survey those around them. At night, people turn more judgmental of those sharing their space. An increased vigilance heightens the tension of the subway. It is more difficult to disguise discomfort at night, and the distress and anticipation of returning home can be sensed.
Despite claims that the metropolitan environment is unnatural and external to the natural flow of humans, it is apparent from city life that the rhythm of human interactions in the city are deeply connected to the plastic, metallic, and glass skin of the city. The technology of the metropolis is synesthetic with the organization of time and space for the urban user. Subway users adapt to technological elements and also change the use of physical space for their social needs. The material reality of the city is fundamental to understanding social life in the city, and cannot be viewed as separate from it.
Visibility

Our current metropolitan society is indebted to every individual actor making space for the comfort and easy passage of all other actors in the subway. This is particularly remarkable on the subway where no figure of authority are present. Jane Jacobs states that “The public peace – the sidewalk and street peace – of cities is not kept primarily by the police, necessary as police are. It is kept primarily by an intricate almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves.” (Jacobs 1961, 108). The same principal applies towards the subway. Responsibility and authority is distributed across each individual user. There is even the perfectly contractual use of space among those who are non-typical subway users such as homeless peoples, beggars, subway performers etc. One never comes across a subway car with more than one beggar soliciting money, or more than one group of performers populating the space with sound and motion.

What is the nature of this cooperation and to what can it be attributed? The general state of harmony on the subway is vigilantly preserved by its constituents. The fact that there is no direct figure of authority only amplifies the individual responsibility for surveillance and self regulation. Foucault rigorously traces the changes in disciplinary tactics used by Western power structures in his landmark monograph *Discipline and Punish*. These tactics include the strict training of individual into productive and docile bodies. The absence of authority on the subway allows for the diffusion of power into the hands of many, and ultimately relies on the normalization of judgment to maintain order. Visibility is dominant mode through which discipline is made possible on the subway. As Foucault explains “It is a normalizing gaze, a
surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them.” (184 Foucault).

Since there are no officials on the subway, the physical space of the subway must enable individual actors to monitor themselves as well as others. A historical comparison of the different arrangements of subway seats over time lead interestingly enough to the current moment which provides maximum visibility in a subway. Subway seats were first designed to be parallel, seats much like those found in rail trains. In this arrangement, a seated individual only sees the backs of the heads of those in front of him. Those behind him are completely inaccessible and only those next to him can be seen by turning his neck. The individual’s viewing opportunity is severely limited by this arrangement. Accordingly, it is perhaps the most socially comfortable because it requires the least interaction with strangers. Later designs reorganized seats to have more sets of seats face each other. The seating arrangement in figure 2. Illustrates this new, more complex geometry of ninety degree angles, diversifying the potential views. Some seats face the width of the train while others face towards the length of the subway. This way, users may end up facing a person head on or in profile. In the past few years, all older trains have been retired for the newest model of subway seating which only features horizontal seats with follow the length of the car. This maximizes open interior space and provides the most natural opportunity for viewing the entirety of the car.
Figure 1. In service between 1928 and 1965

Figure 2. Built in 1949

Figure 3. Current most popular subway car model
Confrontations in Contractual Space

On the subway, the infinitely communicative function of the body is not restricted to physical motions. Bodies in space are largely identified by visual interpretation of their appearance i.e. race, gender, clothing, smell, posture and all forms of bodily presentation and performance.

Civil inattention reveals the individual’s goal as a stranger in public space: to appear cooperative in contractual space without attracting any special attention. This is achieved through the management of the body, which despite its constant communication, can approach silent passing through the performance of norms expected of an individual of “that type”. This raises a series of questions or complications to Goffman’s theory regarding the nature of types and the differential treatment of individuals of different types. In Goffman’s articulation of standard behavior, he does not attempt to raise questions about societal definitions of safety, threats or the social rules of attraction.

Goffman admits that his studies rely on a middle class standard. This can be pressed further to mean a white middle class male standard of decorum. Therefore, Goffman does not nuance the ways in which the role of civil inattention requires very different performances from different members of the social network. He admits that civil inattention can be tied to the idea of safety, fear, and hostility when he states that compliance with civil inattention “demonstrates that he has nothing to fear or avoid in being seen and being seen seeing, and that he is not ashamed of himself or of the place and company in which he finds himself.” He does not acknowledge that the societal expectations of fear, shame, criminality, or suspicion are differentially distributed.
among members of different groups on the urban spectrum. For example, Goffman assumes a constancy in the rules of engagement such as the length of time that one can make eye contact. Yet an immediate subway experience would reveal the expectation of homeless subway riders to not make eye contact with the other presumably non-homeless users.

Civil inattention does not only occur among a median social strata. It requires participation from all. In order not to be noticed, “The way in which he can give the least amount of information about himself ... is to fit in and act as persons of his kind are expected to act.” Therefore, participation in civil inattention requires an acute sense of one’s own position in urban society. To succeed at civil inattention requires both a performance of inoffensive public situational presence, and an acceptance of an average amount of attention that does not constitute a target of special curiosity. The amount of attention that should normally be given and received varies along highly differentiable characteristics. Different objects and practices distinctly reflect an individual’s particular place in the social fabric.

Bourdieu states that “the objectified body, which lets itself be trapped in the destiny proposed by collective perception and statement, is betrayed by a body that is subject to the representation of others even in its passive, unconscious reactions” (Bourdieu 1984, 207). Those of the dominating class are able to assert their superior tastes and impose norms of perception, while those of subordinate classes unconsciously accept their inferior social status. Through interpolation, individuals come to learn their position within the social fabric, and they anticipate what sort of treatment they should receive from others.

These knowable differences reflect power relations of capital and contribute to the disciplinary goals and requirements of the subway. As Foucault writes, “discipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location
that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (Foucault 144). In order to accurately discipline one’s own performance of rank, individuals on the subway must have a thorough sense of their role in the larger eco system. The successful performance of civil inattention thus confirms that the individual has understood their own highly specialized role. Through the successful performance of civil inattention, the individual subconsciously affirms their identity or, interpolates the obvious or apparent reality of ideology. They are reminded without particular self recognition or remark.

On the other hand, a breach in or failure to receive civil inattention forces a confrontation with one's assumed position in society. While an infraction to civil inattention will most likely repeat or confirm information that one already knows about oneself, it none the less forces a confrontation with that information and how it compares to the surrounding individuals. In these moments, different power relations are subtly recognized and in rare cases, openly revealed.

Due to the extremely subtle nature of civil inattention, subway users are always at risk of an infraction. Auge writes, “the theme of insecurity in the metro would not be so widespread, nor the reactions to provocation or aggressive behavior so spirited, were not the idea of a contractual consensus essential to the definition of this institution.” (Augé 2003, 44). Infractions to civil inattention can be articulated through extremely minute physical adjustments such as the simple duration of eye contact. If an individual stares too long at another on the subway, it is a sign that there is either something to be looked at, or that the starer deserves special attention, or both. Goffman states that “staring itself is widely used as a means of negative sanction, socially controlling all kinds of improper public conduct.” (88). It is therefore an indication that the individual is for some reason responsible for attracting unwanted attention. The fact that eye
contact is a highly contentious site of interaction on the subway has been confirmed through many different sources. An excerpt from the autobiography of an ex-dwarf illustrates this matter poignantly:

“There were the thick-skinned ones, who stared like hill people come down to see a travelling show. There were the paper-peekers, the furtive kind who would withdraw blushing if you caught them at it. There were the pitying ones, whose tongue clickings could almost be heard after they had passed you. But even worse, there were the chatterers, whose every remark might as well have been “How do you do, poor boy?” They said it with their eyes and their manners and their ton of voice.

I had a standard defense—a cold stare. Thus anesthetized against my fellow man, I could contend with the basic problem—getting in and out of the subway alive.” (Goffman 1966, 87)

This case clearly demonstrates the great effect of eye contact in maintaining civil inattention. In that moment when eye contact is either diverted or overextended, the man gains a mental image of how the rest of society must see him. He is forced to accept their imposed status as socially divergent in social status or physical appearance. Whether or not he agrees with their interpretation is secondary to the fact that he knows that others have already placed in him in this societal category.
I was very lucky to capture a video of an interaction as rhythmic and illustrative as this one featured in figure 1. The video is painfully demonstrative of the minor anxieties which reverberate between individuals during a breach in civil inattention. The reflective tension between these two men reveal the great difficulty of practicing civil inattention. The black man is very perceptive of the fact that the man next to him is paying him attention. He was most likely alerted when perceiving that the white man had turned his head to the left. As mentioned previously, this is an inappropriate physical adjustment made to look at whoever was sitting next to him. This initial breach incites a series of attempts by both individuals to catch a glimpse of the other without apparently breaching the physical expectations of civil inattention.

Of course, they both failed to comply with civil inattention by visibly exposing that they had noticed each other. The two men participate in an exchange which Elijah Anderson calls eye work. Eye work is a unique physical adjustment that transpires when white strangers encounter
black strangers in public. He states the “many blacks perceive whites as tense or hostile to them in public. They pay attention to the amount of eye contact given. In general, black males get far less time in this regard than do white males. Whites tend not to “hold” the eyes of a black person. It is more common for black and white strangers to meet each others’ eyes for only a few seconds, and then to avert their gaze abruptly.” (Anderson 2010, 220).

The video reveals the anxiety of making eye contact with another individual on the subway. The white man attempts to surreptitiously gain a perspective on the black man seated next to him, but is unable to do so without being notice. He then withdraws his gaze when the black man attempts to make eye contact with him.

Visibility on the subway allows all of its users to be objectified. Those who fail to achieve a normative physical appearance may appear on fashion blogs or humour blogs. If an individual is openly approached for their divergent appearance, they may gain a positive impression of their function in subway society. Many on the other hand are surreptitiously observed and photographed. The candid photographs found on the instagram profile Subwaycreatures shows a vast majority of images taken while an individual is turned away or sleeping, so that they do not realize that they are the target of attention. This is because one will also be negatively sanctioned for taking an inappropriate amount of attention in another stranger.
Photographs from the Instagram account subwaycreatures

The extremely exposed visibility of the subway makes individuals all the more vulnerable to the possibility of a breach in civil inattention. This presents the irony and extreme difficulty of trying to go unnoticed. Subway users are burdened with the extremely socially demanding task of fully exposing themselves while trying to conceal as much information as possible.

An increase in auto-involvements allow this to become truer and truer. Auto-involvements allow individuals to practically remove themselves from their environment and instead focus on a self-serving activity. An ethnography conducted on high school students using the subway researches the stress teens experience on the subway. A 16 year old boy named Juan
states, “When I am sad, I feel lonely and looking out the window separates me from the people around me because I do not have to make eye contact with them. If there is any noise, I have to increase the volume, not to hear the noise around me.” Through the use of personal technology and a diversion of eye contact, Juan crafts a personal routine that allows him to feel detached from the setting. Ocejo and Tonellat interpret that “Juan feels that he must use the props of his music player, earphones, and the subway window to control his emotions better and to disengage from the action... protected by his successful performance as a stranger, he does not concern himself with whether or not he is being made the object of attention by another rider.” (Ocejo and Tonellat 2010, 504).

Despite these attempts are isolation and disengagement, individuals on the subway are unavoidably woven together into a physically present fiber that could not be escaped even through total sensory deprivation. Relations on the subway change constantly as the members of the subway flow in and out. At one moment you could be invisible, and in the next, a target of some special attention. The subway performer is one variable that can change all the relations in a subway from one moment to another. The particular class of subway performers known as showtime boys behave much like jokers or Shakespearean fools. While they are poor and practically beggars with tricks, they are also the wise observers and sharp critics of anyone who falls within their view. When a subway dancer enters the car, the senses are immediately brought to a new locus of attention. The subway rider then must confront one of two options, to forge their own invisibility as well as that of the performer, or give in to the physical and sensory reality of song and dance. It is absolutely a delusion of course to believe that when a subway performer comes and asks you for money, you are really invisible if you do not make eye contact. Of course not! they have deliberately made a spectacle out of themselves, and have seized the
right to look back at the audience. The subway performer wields a thorough surveillance of the length of the subway car. Any attempt to go unnoticed can backfire. The subway performer mocks those who, in a confrontation with civil inattention, choose "nonperson" treatment. The physical adjustment needed to ignore these performers is significant. The performers are invariably the loudest, most active source of stimulation on the subway. To deny their presence involves an attempt to deny sight, sound, and the feeling of the tremors created as they run up and down the car, kicking their feet in the air and often in the faces of those seated riders who feign invisibility.

In this moment, an individual must shift from a "natural invisibility" to a forced invisibility - one which denies the humanity of the other in order to deny the mutual right to the subway space. Many turn their heads away from subway performers because they believe that watching will imply a monetary exchange. At this moment, a confrontation with power occurs. Either one thinks, I don't have any money to give, or they feel guilt at having money to give, which they will withhold. The individual is forced to process their own positionality in relation to these subway performers. Anderson observes that, "Many people, particularly those who see themselves as more economically privileged than others in the community, are careful not to let their eyes stray, in order to avoid an uncomfortable situation. As they walk down the street they pretend not to see other pedestrians. (Anderson 2010, 220). Eye contact is therefore somehow related to economic inequality or recognition of class differences. By avoiding eye contact, individuals try to withdraw from recognizing differences but in doing so, make even more apparent the distance between them. The recognition of this distance is interpolative of the different class or honor statuses of the individuals involved.

These personal confrontations often result in the further withdrawal of individuals into
what would might appear to an outsider as the indifferent and blasé attitudes that Simmel warns of. Yet the pregnancy of these moments and the physical adjustments they solicit reveals a great deal of attention and social concern.
Sympathetic Interpolation

Sympathetic interpolation is the term that I will give for the various networks of relation that occur on the subway when strangers are actively perceived and interpreted by others. Sympathetic interpolation shows the wide range of variable responses that can come out of a given interaction due to the surroundings rather than the precise legibility of media and commodities on the body. Different relational webs are exposed beyond the immediate bounds of commodified presentation of self and overconfidence in the interpretive accuracy of identity may lead to paranoia.

One interaction I overheard was a conversation which transpired between two old friends, both white males of 50 to 60 years of age, whose voices would vouch for their identity as true New Yorkers. A young black man around 16 years old passed through the subway soliciting money. He is fat, visibly dirty, and wears tattered clothing. The young man announces to the passengers on the train that he is homeless, looking for a job, and kindly asks anyone to spare a few cents for him. The two men do sitting next to me do not interrupt the conversation they were having prior to the boy’s arrival, and move on to discussing their conceptions of destitution and who is visibly in need of money versus those who are not. The men are dubious of this boy’s genuine poverty and state that “you can tell” if a person really needs the money. They insist that when an individual who does qualify within their criteria for deserving money, they will invariably give them a few dollars. In this case, the boy did not make the cut, despite his disheveled appearance and self-declaration of homelessness.
Curiously enough, a sly smile on his face which emerged after a woman handed him a dollar led me to believe the position of the old men, that the boy was in fact faking it. Another indication of his performance was in the fact that he exited the subway onto the platform after receiving the money. Typically, those homeless individuals who ask for money on the subway maintain a straight course through the train, progressing continuously from one car to the next.

In any case, this shows that New Yorkers have a distinct articulation of homelessness and the soliciting of money. The men claim that this man is most likely faking his condition, and therefore find it unnecessary to conceal their conversation. The indiscretion of this conversation is not something commonly performed before an “actual” homeless person. Typically when a person of severe destitution solicits money, other passengers avert their gaze, turn their eyes downward, and hush or entirely arrest their conversation while the individual makes their way through the subway.

Urban citizens are able to discern information from far more nuanced signs than clothing or material signifiers. Urry’s analysis of the use of senses in the city points to the importance of managing senses in the city. He argues that sight should not be privileged as the dominating sense but should be considered in how it interacts with smell and sound to create an evolving sense of spatiality (Urry 2011, 354). Metropolitan users are highly trained to use all of their senses to establish discrete understandings of the social status and symbols of the information around them.

Due to their judgement of this man as a pretender, the older white men do not interpolate homelessness onto the identity of the man. Another example recalled by my friend will demonstrate a contrast in attitudes. She recounts the following narrative:
“So we were on the uptown N train around the late 50s and the train doors were open an unusually long time. We turned around to see what was taking so long and saw that there were a couple of cops in our car, standing in the threshold of the middle doors. We turned back around and saw a black homeless man casually loading ginormous garbage bags full of his belongings onto the train as the cops seemingly held the train for him. Everybody in the train stared, mouths agape, as this man transferred at least 10 human-sized garbage bags and a shopping cart onto the train. A couple of people even started taking photos and videos as this homeless man could not give two shits about whether or not he was holding up the train or barricading our section of the train with his stuff. Sitting opposite of us was an older (30-40 yrs old?) white man who was clearly very entertained by the whole ordeal, snickering as he filmed and photographed on his phone. A beautiful black girl about our age entered the train and sat perpendicular to us. She noticed the man filming and quickly became horrified and angered. She said something along the lines of "he's a human being, why are you taking pictures? You think it's entertaining?" to which he replied in an indeterminate European accent "no, I think it's disgusting that's why I'm taking pictures." She answers: "But he's a human being. You're an asshole." Having picked up the accent, she continues: "You come into our country and make fun of our problems? What, you don't have homelessness where you're from?" The man dismisses her with an angry look and a "shaaadup, you're disgusting, just stop talking to me" as the rest of the train watches on.

The story actually shows a range of different sympathies and groupings of individuals. The narrator shows herself to be a part of a large group of passengers who recognize themselves in stark contrast to the homeless man. Civil inattention is mutually breached by many passengers. The narrator shows an awareness of the other passenger’s physical embodiment of curiosity
through visual markers of surprise. A shift of focus takes place when the subject of attention moves from the homeless man to the interaction between the European man and the young black woman. When the European man takes photos, he is clearly breaking the rules of civil inattention. This is an infraction which would not be performed by a native New Yorker. The man thus distances himself from the rest of the train which most likely resonate with the young black woman’s defense of the homeless man. While European man attempts to associate her with the homeless man, by relating his disgusting condition to hers, she cannot be genuinely interpolated with the homeless man. She has already set herself a part from him by articulating his humanity without interacting with him directly. She asserts that despite his perceived entertaining appearance, he is human, an allusion to an internal external dichotomy with lends itself to the preservation of discursive categories on homelessness and presentation. Homelessness is pathologized as cultural problem by both major actors.

An encounter which transpired between a middle aged white man peeing on the train and a middle aged black man reveals yet another set of interactive potentials on the subway. When riding the subway one evening, I see a man lying down on one full subway bench to himself. The rest of the passengers on the train very deliberately avoid him. The closest individual to him is the middle aged black man who sits at a diagonal across from him. At one moment, a tinkling sound can be heard and by means of a sideways glance, the passengers on the train realize that he is peeing. Most of our immediate reactions are to look away. When looking away I lock eyes with a young latina woman sitting across from me. We smile, and share a moment of mutual discomfort and amusement. Only the black man acknowledges the peeing man. He tells him to go to the doctor, because he can’t just pee on the train. In response, the peeing man states that he has diabetes and can’t control his bladder. They two enter into a repetitive conversation where
one insists that the other go to the doctor and the other angrily refuses. In response to this conversation, new passengers not only avoid sitting next to the homeless man, but also avoid nearing his interlocutor. Passengers who enter one their side of the train will casually walk towards the other side which is now far more congested with people. Through this conglomeration of individuals in avoidance of the two, both men are interpolated as abject. They are avoided not on the basis of urination but of association with each other and the consequent rejection of their shared space by all other passengers.

Interacting with others on the train makes us immediately vulnerable to the possibility of association with them. Therefore, a direct engagement with the marginalized subway user results in the abjectification of individual. By sympathetic interpolation with diverse groups of people, individuals may gain the potential to radically decenter their identities. This can denaturalize and reveal the performative nature of our own interactions as well was those performed on us. At these seams of interconnected identity, illusions of discrete interior vs exterior presentation and performance show themselves to be paradoxical. Through the recognition of discursive meaning, bodies have the agentive ability to subvert categorical relationships of power and signification. This opportunity comes into play often when I ride the subway alone at night.

When riding the subway late at night, I perform an ease of demeanor as a means of protection. A man asks if he can sit down next to me, a formality which is rarely undertaken because it is the unspoken but very apparent habit of the subway that “anyone” can sit “anywhere”. The fact that he asks me indicates that he perceives an incongruity between his spatial privilege and mine. That there was a threshold to be crossed and that he needed to draw attention to his body in relation to mine.
This incongruity was immediately felt by the passengers around me. I noticed that the surrounding riders turned their gaze towards me acutely appraising my position as a small young girl in contrast to his as an older grizzly black man. Not only is he of contrasting appearance, but his bodily demeanor is inappropriately casual. He eats audibly and also makes loud snorting sounds. The man leans forward and sits at the edge of his seat. To match his physical comportment, I behave similarly indiscreetly, tapping loudly, rocking back and forth, and moving my head eagerly looking around. The reactions of the other passengers around me indicate surprise and confusion towards my behavior. At first alarmed by my activity, the man hesitates as well, but then settles in to our joint company. Unlike the rest of the train, we eagerly and twist and turn our bodied to get a good look at the room around us. Just a few feet away there is a drunk man drooling on himself. Me and the man next to me look at each other and laugh at the drunk man dropping his phone.
Conclusion

In *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre states that “we must overcome the obstacles that enhance the opacity of relationships and the contrasts between transparency and opacity, that relegate differences to distinct (separate) particularities, that restrict them to a prefabricated space, that mask the polyvalence of ways of living in urban society.” (Lefebvre 2003, 178). Lefebvre is talking about the possibility of heterotopia and seeks ways to traverse the rules of interactive rituals which restrict us to certain acts and behaviors within certain expectations on identity and performance.

In this thesis I bring attention to bodies on the subway as a critical site for practicing and attempting to create heterotopia. Our bodies have already been rigorously trained to perform codes like civil inattention and the blasé attitude, which attempt to maintain the order of distinctions and indifferences between individuals sharing a common space. These codes seek to keep us estranged from one another and help us rearticulate our precise position in an extremely varied hierarchy of differences. But the rules of engagement on the subway cannot be entirely
determined by objective interpretation and rational objectification. I believe we are highly intuitive, subjective beings who are very vulnerable to emotional currents and sensitive to subtle rhythmic changes. The sense perception of city dwellers is thorough enough to identify extremely nuanced social rhythms, though we are often encouraged to ignore the types of information which may connect us to others.

As Foucault demonstrates in *Discipline and Punish*, the body is inscribed with an infinite historical archive of knowledge which shapes how it behaves and to what end. The body of the contemporary metropolitan individual has been highly trained by the history, technology, and discourse of the city. Our bodies are both the subjects of late-capitalist control and the instruments which carry out the systematic demands of a city. When we comply with civil inattention, we are active participants in embodying the demands of the state. We must recognize that identity and the recognition of subjecthood bring ideology and discourse into existence.

Yet, our bodies have also been trained by the rhythmic coordination of the city. By riding the subway and establishing personal and communal rhythms shaping our daily existence, we become integrated into a community, whose currents run deep through our bodies, in our ears, eyes, and noses. As metropolitan subject living in an energetic and unstoppable city, we are inexplicably connected to something greater than capitalism and state control, and something which takes on a life of its own. Lefebvre optimistically projects the possibility of an urban which outgrows the grasp of states control through the desire for habiting. He believes that cities have the ability for heterotopic potential in which urban citizens actually find ways to resist state control and hegemony. This resistance must necessarily take place on the body and through bodies, as individuals are the ones who have the ability to carry out this change. The information
exchanged between individuals, whether that be between two people or an entire parade or protest happens through embodiment. They communicate through a profound language which can be at times inviting and intimate, and most other times protective, dismissive, and isolating.

I believe that in order to increase the heterotopic potential of the city, we must retrain our bodies to reject reifying categorical differences between urban subjects along lines of class, race, gender, status, clothing, and more. We must denaturalize cultural significations as they are printed on the surface of the body, and use our sense perception to form new ways of sympathetic engagement. We must look at the body, not as a passive medium, but as a critical site of urban practice - where cultural inscription as well as resistance can take place, and we must turn to the embodied practices of the urban to imagine its radical potential and the ways in which identity can be decentered.
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