

Window Seat: Examining Public Space, Politics, and Social Identity through Urban Public Transportation

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Abstract : 'Window Seat' uses public transportation as an entry point for understanding the relationship between public space, politics, and social identity construction. This project argues that by bringing people of different races, classes, and genders in 'contact' with one another, public transit operates as a site of exposure, as people consciously and unconsciously perform social identity within these spaces. These performances offer a form of freedom that we associate with being in urban spaces while simultaneously rendering certain racialized, gendered, and classed bodies vulnerable to violence. Furthermore, due to its exposing function, public transit operates as a site through which we, as urbanites and scholars, can read social injustice and reflect on the work that is necessary to become a truly democratic society. The major questions guiding this research are: How does using public transit as the entry point provide unique insights into the relationship between social identity, politics, and public space? What ideas do Americans hold about public space and how might these ideas reflect a liberal yearning for a more democratic society? To address these research questions, 'Window Seat' critically examines ethnographic data collected on public buses and trains in Los Angeles, California, and online news media. It analyzes these sources through literature in socio-cultural psychology, sociology, and political science. It investigates the 'everyday urban hero' narrative or popular news stories that feature an individual or group of people acting against discriminatory or 'Anti-American' behavior on public buses and trains. 'Window Seat' studies these narratives to assert that by circulating stories of civility in news media, United Statesians construct and maintain ideas of the 'liberal city,' which is characterized by ideals of freedom and democracy. Furthermore, for those involved, these moments create an opportunity to perform the role of the Good Samaritan, an identity that is wrapped up in liberal beliefs in diversity and inclusion. This research expands conversations in urban studies by making a case for the political significance of urban public space. It demonstrates how these sites serve as spaces through which liberal beliefs are circulated and upheld through identity performance.

Keywords : social identity, public space, public transportation, liberalism

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