A SUBWAY STORY: BOUNDARIES, TRANSMISSION, AND COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
In a brief autoethnographic vignette, I explore manifestations of the transmission of affect in the New York City subway system amid the rise of the Delta variant of Covid-19 in the summer of 2021. I relate the transmissibility of affect to the contagion of Covid-19, particularly as both are approached in the subway, a place marked by proximity among strangers. Finally, I investigate the social construction of disgust and its involvement in organizing social proximity through the movement of affect in the subway.

KEYWORDS
urban, affect, anthropology, subway, Covid-19

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Figure 1. *MTA Stop the Spread Campaign* (Margalit Katz, 2021).

July 6th, 2021, 2:00 pm

On my way into Manhattan on the C train, a young Black man gets on at Utica Avenue. He wears new yellow Jordan's, jeans, a belt, a heather grey t-shirt, sunglasses, and a fresh single-use blue surgical mask. As he gets on the train, I hear him repeatedly mutter, "Ohhh man, oh shit, bro! Don't do it!" He snickers to himself in a low, gravelly tone. He sits down on the bench diagonal from me. As the train barrels through the darkness, he continues to speak, and directs his gaze toward the window across from him, almost as if to talk to someone on the other side of the glass. Suddenly, he takes his t-shirt off. He flexes his bicep muscles and lets out a deep growl. He pulls his shirt back over his head, but only partly, leaving one sleeve flapping on top of his bare right shoulder. His back and chiseled abdomen remain exposed. The young white woman closest to him looks up at him out of the corner of her eye.

I look down for a moment to take notes when suddenly I hear a loud smacking sound, as if someone just slapped another person. I look up, and once again, smacking sounds, only this time I see the source—the half-shirtless man jolts and pounds his fist into his own abdomen. The sound of skin slapping against skin ricochets down the car. A white man in a suit looks up from his phone and over at the half-shirtless man. At the next stop a white man in dirty, tattered clothing gets on and launches into his panhandling spiel. His

> speech remains stable as he tells his story, but I am wary of the potential for his tone to flip, to curse us out for not helping him. Although in many cases, people are moved to give by pity or guilt or some other affect, on this ride everyone inspects their shoes. No one donates a cent, so we avoid the pang of envy of other passengers more generous than ourselves. The panhandler passes the half-shirtless man, and I hold my breath. However, to my surprise, the half-shirtless man does not engage. The presumably homeless panhandler moves on to the next car. The half-shirtless guy continues to mutter and sporadically punch himself in various parts of his body. A middle-aged white man who sits close to the end of the car lets out a cough that seems to dispel the tension. The half-shirtless man hangs his head and remains silent for several stops. Then, for no apparent reason, he jerks his head up and bangs his palm on the metal pole, hard. The pole vibrates and rings for what feels like minutes. No one else so much as stirs. At Fulton Street in Manhattan, he stands up and bolts off the train, his sleeve still hanging off his naked back.

In these sounds, sights, smells, movements, and stillnesses, serendipitous feelings of tension, connection, and inexplicability arise, subside, and re-emerge in the subway car. The experience of physical proximity in the subway makes it a potent environment for observing the movement of affect and its social meaning.1 As the primary mode of transportation in New York City, the subway mobilizes New Yorkers from every corner of the city. It is one of the only places that individuals from disparate backgrounds regularly come into close contact with each other. As diverse as New York is, boundaries are pre-constructed by neighborhood, socio-economic class, ethnicity, gender, and race, and are only reified by the perceived threat of proximity to the 'other.' Despite socio-cultural and physical boundaries in places of close proximity, like the subway, the borders between individuals become blurred. The social interpenetrability that results is an inherently affective phenomenon. In order to mitigate anxieties surrounding this transmission of affect in enclosed space, passengers have employed social distancing since long before Covid-19 (Brennan 2015). To avoid viral and affective contamination, passengers tend to disperse within subway cars, maximizing the distance between themselves and strangers. The pursuit of personal space surpasses a mere desire for physical comfort and a range of movement. In the subway, "personal space may be defined as that area surrounding, or belonging to, a person, which is cathected consciously or unconsciously to the self" (Fried and DeFazio 1974, 49). In other words, we imagine our affective selves as projected beyond our skin. To reassert our boundaries, despite our uncontained bodies, we distance ourselves from others.

Other ways to distance are to avoid meeting another's gaze via what Erving Goffman (1980) calls civil inattention, and to adopt what Georg Simmel (1950) refers to as a "blasé attitude," or nonchalance (Boy 2021). These performances reinforce the boundary between the individual and any affective "impressions" or potential

that they encounter (Brennan 2015). During rush hours, when physical contact is impossible to avoid, tension and discomfort can build as passengers struggle to maintain their physical and affective integrity. During the pandemic, the entanglement of physical and non-physical forms of interpersonal permeability could be observed in a heightened way.

July 6th, 2021, 2:04 pm

> The coughing man continues to cough. He's wearing a striped t-shirt and no mask. He looks like a disheveled version of Jerry Seinfeld. A young Brown guy on the other end of the car wearing an army green t-shirt and a camouflage-print backpack stands up with purpose and tears down the car. He takes a seat directly across from me, which puts me on edge. He appears erratic and flicks his MetroCard over and over in his hand rapidly before he sprints to the other end of the train, his shoes thundering down the linoleum aisle. As the doors open, he cuts in front of the white man in the suit, who grimaces. They both get off.

> The coughing man wheezes again. It's getting ridiculous, and I want to ask if anyone has an extra mask for him, but I don't. A rail-thin Black woman wearing a wifebeater, sweatpants, and flip flops barges through the gangway door, then turns back and yells something I can't make out to someone in the other car. She rushes to the end of the car and sits in the corner. She closes her eyes. Suddenly she opens her eyes and yells something I can't catch, then jumps off at the next stop. When the doors open at West 4th Street, the coughing man coughs up gelatinous globs of green phlegm and spits them onto the platform three times. He notices me looking at him and says something I can't hear. He hangs his head and appears distressed. The erratic guy from long before jumps back on and sits down right next to the coughing dude. I guess he never actually got off the train, he just switched cars. After about one minute he springs up again and jets off. I feel antsy, like there's tension building, like a bubble that eventually needs to pop.

Affect or "intensity" as Brian Massumi (2002) defines it, "is…a nonconscious… autonomic remainder" (Massumi 2002, 25). In other words, for Massumi (2002), affect is an other-than-conscious free-floating "potential" that escapes confinement in an individual being in the form of emotion (35). However, as Sara Ahmed (2004) notes, these intensities exist neither inside nor outside an individual—rather, "they 'affect' the very distinction of inside and outside in the first place" (28). During my train ride, I became aware of the unclaimed affect within the car, prior to the moment it was converted into emotion. Emotion, according to Massumi

(2002), is affect contextualized, "owned and recognized" (28). The "remainder" of affect, however, moves between individual bodies and evolves, prior to being owned or "captured" (Massumi 2002). These remnants of intensity develop as "unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective" until they are captured (Massumi 2002, 35). Ahmed, however, would argue that, despite this process of transformation and conversion, affect can never, even momentarily, exist completely unclaimed or captured. She flags this partial capture as an example of the "stickiness" of affect and the ways in which it permeates the boundaries of individuals and connects them to each other through shared affect (Ahmed 2004). The uncaptured portion of intensity, despite constant movement and development, is often undetectable until its moment of capture (Massumi 2002). Thus, people often describe the capture of intensity as sudden, as I do in the scene above when I use language that conveys an abrupt turn or flareup, such as my description of a passenger's apparent "eruption." At the same time, since I observed the same setting for an extended period, I was able to discern a growing tension, or the transformation of the uncaptured "remainder" as it underwent various evolutions and micro-captures that justified the outburst as a mere continuity in the arc of the affect's trajectory.

The affect that I felt accumulate and explode can also be understood not just as movement and capture, but also as transmission between individual bodies that have captured affect. The free-floating, unbounded remainder that Massumi (2002) describes is not captured intentionally—it is transmitted. Affect is social and can arise from within and outside of individuals, as "the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another" (Brennan 2015, 3). Transmission can manifest emotionally, physically, and biologically. As the transmission of affect connects humans to each other, it highlights the boundaries, or lack thereof, through which affect permeates (Ahmed 2004). Much as our physical borders are undetectable until the moment of contact with another body, our boundaries are reified by our exchange of affect (Ahmed 2004).

In response to this contagion of affect and the interpersonal connection it causes, we develop methods of self-containment to defend our boundaries via physical and emotional means. Again, it is only in relation to a defined 'other' that we can identify our own borders. Thus, processes of self-containment require a foil, or "other" who can transmit and/or capture affect (Brennan 2015). However, Brennan (2015) argues that Western society does not legitimize the transmission of affect as real—the idea that emotions and bodies are permeable by invisible forces

counters the entire individualized belief system surrounding affect. As a result, we urgently reproduce the constructed illusion of the bounded body as well as norm-based boundaries—such as social distancing—in an attempt to prevent and dismiss the possibility of transmission. (Brennan 2015).

July 6th, 2021, 2:11 pm

> Another splitting cough cuts through the silent car. Finally, someone cracks. A person I read as Latinx and gender non-conforming sitting across from the coughing man erupts, "YOU WANNA FUCKING COUGH UP A STORM BUT NOT WEAR A MASK?!? IT'S FUCKING DISGUSTING!" They get up and dart toward the opposite end of the car. Their booming voice startles me, and I'm impressed by their ability to project. As they pass me, I nod my head at them, but they ignore me and sit almost as far from the coughing man as possible. He replies with a weak, "oh fUck yOU." No one else even looks up. The person continues their tirade: "COPS GIVING OUT TICKETS BUT NOTHING? ANOTHER STRAIN IS GOING AROUND!" I shoot them a look to convey my gratitude, but they seem too riled up to notice. The guy across from me listens to music through his headphones and drums a beat. The coughing guy looks at his combatant and mutters, "Fuck you, fa—." I can't tell if he says 'fat- something' or 'faggot.' He rises to get off at 59th and once again yells, "have a nice day fa—" but again I can't hear what he says because he's so soft-spoken. His rival bellows, "YO GET YOURSELF CHECKED OUT! YOU HAVE THAT COUGH BUT IT MIGHT HAVE GONE TO YOUR BRAIN! HOW ARE YOU GONNA YELL AT *ME* BECAUSE *YOU* DONT HAVE A MASK ON?!?" The closing doors jingle plays as the coughing man walks up the steps on the platform. The person who spoke up shakes their head, and we exchange a glance. I shake my head and smirk. The bubble has popped.

In the summer of 2021, due the ubiquity of information on the transmission of Covid-19, the public experienced a heightened awareness of the permeability of the body via the breath.2 The transmission of affect happened to follow the same trajectory as the potential transmission of Covid-19. The presence of Covid-19 highlights our interconnectedness, as well as our separation, from other humans and threatens to violate our already partial boundaries. Perhaps the coughing man's intrusion and refusal to maintain physical boundaries reminded his angry fellow-rider of the impossibility of sealed borders. Covid-19 exposes the illusion of enclosed physical bodies, sometimes with fatal consequences, only amplifying the existing anxiety surrounding proximity in the subway.

The implicit impetus for the conflict was the other passenger's fear of catching Covid-19 from the coughing man. However, the focus placed on this concern conceals the looming contagion of affect. Would this interaction have happened if not for the intrusions of the shirtless man, the screaming woman, the running man, and the panhandler just a few minutes prior? To what extent had their presence agitated the affect in the car through their transgressions, building the tension, the intensity that I also experienced, such that it needed to be transformed and stabilized via capture and transmission? I wondered if the anger the passenger conveyed was an expression of discomfort with the transgressions and their subsequent transmission of affect. Similarly, I wondered to what extent their anger stemmed from the larger context of death, loss, and precarity outside the subway, their own accumulated 'potential' they brought into the subway to transmit. To what extent was Covid-19 and the (absence of the) mask, as the available social symbol of the virus, a catalyst for the passenger to make sense of and express their discomfort, their pain? There is no way to know for sure. I only know the tension and release I felt as affects accumulated and dispersed.

Although the social distancing practiced during Covid-19 is distinct from that solely brought on by the transmission of affect in situations of physical proximity, it is still surprisingly affective. If we did not develop intense affective attachments and reservations surrounding Covid-19, we might not so vehemently abide by or disobey the medical knowledge that informs our behavior and the science-based precautions deemed necessary to avoid transmission. Consequently, the transmission of affect about Covid-19 brought about by news coverage and political polarization is one of the very forces determining whether people follow Covid-19 precautions and, thereby, also impacts the transmission of Covid-19 in the subway. Affectively charged opinions and the lengths that people are willing to go to abide by new norms compel us to 'other' those with opposing views. We must separate ourselves from those 'others' whose breath threatens to permeate us. In Covid-times, these 'others' either penetrate us through an infringement on our personal liberties (such as to go without a mask) or through a potential or imagined transmission of Covid-19. Therefore, we can view the structure of feeling of Covid-affect not as a novel form of sociality in the subway but as a routine—if exacerbated—manipulation of affect to negotiate boundary formation.

The involvement of disgust, an embodied sensation, in the conflicts surrounding Covid-19 further illustrates the relation between the transmission of affect and the transmission of Covid-19. During my affectively charged ride on the C train, I felt the visceral sensation of disgust as the man spat mucus onto the platform. Everything indicated that the person who yelled at him also acted out of disgust,

along with other emotions (anger, perhaps fear). The production and expression of the feeling of disgust depends upon our immersion within hierarchical social structures. In the West, disgust is often described as corporeal in ways that other emotions are not. It is a sensation frequently felt in the stomach and, in cases of extreme disgust, can produce nausea.

The physicality of disgust, however, is often conflated with instinct (Durham 2011). Due to this conflation, Deborah Durham (2011) argues that the visceral nature of disgust is precisely the source of its power. She claims that disgust is naturalized and unchallenged because of its physical nature. However, like Mary Douglas' (1966) definition of dirt, as "matter out of place," disgust is relational (Durham 2011). Nothing is inherently, universally, or naturally dirty or disgusting. Georges Bataille (1986) explains, "We imagine that it is the stink of excrement that makes us feel sick. But would it stink if we had not thought it was disgusting in the first place? We do not take long to forget what trouble we go to pass on to our children the aversions that make us…human beings" (38). Here Bataille (1986) upends the claim of visceral essentialism, arguing that disgust, due to its dependency on taboo, humanizes, but in doing so, animalizes the object or 'other' and, by extension, organizes social hierarchies.

Durham (2011) takes the argument for the social construction of disgust one step further. She adopts William Miller's (1997) cultural argument in *The Anatomy of Disgust* that something becomes disgusting only when it threatens to contaminate the self through proximity. Accordingly, if we go by developments in the West, "The unwashed poor are pathetic, admirable or disapproved, and different while living in distant fields; when they come into the cities in masses with industrialization, they become disgusting, as people [the emergent bourgeoisie] draw up new moral and aesthetic boundaries" (Durham 2011, 148). The historical European imagination of certain ethnic groups as malodorous similarly works to construct moral boundaries by evoking disgust and motivating social distance between ethnic groups. Durham (2011) argues that, as this classist, racist, xenophobic mentality suggests, disgust requires imagining the self in proximity to or as the object of disgust. Disgust creates relation between the object of disgust and the "sphere of intimacy of the disgusted bourgeoisie," which threatens the elite (Durham 2011, 149). In bridging subject and object and defining them as oppositional, disgust creates and reifies identities and borders, much like affect more broadly (Ahmed 2004). This argument speaks to the ways bourgeois values became naturalized as the norm, assisted by the physicality of disgust (Durham 2011).

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This physical proximity among strangers in the subway creates a sense of intimacy with the 'other.' Passengers choose to fill their commute time in a variety of ways: reading, listening to music, closing their eyes and resting. Many people, however, engage in the solitary contemplation of their surroundings. During this time, I become keenly aware of the ephemeral nature of the setting. I know that I might never see the people in my company again. I do not know them or anything about them. This empathetic contemplation amid physical proximity elicits curiosity and an artificially augmented sense of intimacy with other passengers. Yet this imagination of proximity, despite efforts to maintain social distance, establishes the prime conditions for disgust to incubate. If someone in tattered clothing, dirty socks, and no shoes stumbles down the car, I may instinctively recoil. I do not feel disgusted because the clothing or the person are inherently disgusting, but because I imagine myself as that person or in physical contact with them and my mind and body have been trained to reject this idea.

This visible new form of radical social difference further promotes disgust because disgust involves a relation to an 'other.' Our fear of contagion deepens in the company of someone, like the coughing man, who improperly wears or fails to wear a mask, because with this behavior, the likelihood for transmission rises. But with the emergence of Covid-19 our sensation of disgust goes beyond this knowledge. The presence or absence of a face mask has been commonly interpreted as indicating political affiliation. Non-compliance with the mask mandate in spaces like the subway pointed to the position assumed by the far right and by politicians toward whom many liberal New Yorkers feel disgust. Conversely, anti-maskers might feel disgust as they are surrounded by mandate-abiding liberals whose presence galvanizes anti-maskers' revulsion at the idea of wearing a mask themselves. The coughing man's disgust toward masked people only escalated when he was verbally attacked by someone in a violation of civil inattention, transferring affect to him. Hence, the disgust directed at the coughing man converted, probably alongside anger and shame, into emotion, which he expressed through his use of profanity. Perhaps a subconscious discomfort with the transmissibility of affect was the reason the coughing man also reaffirmed boundaries by labeling the passenger as a member of a stigmatized identity, an 'other.'

Yet this socially constructed experience of disgust, in which we imagine or experience proximity to the 'other,' does not only urge us to maintain distance. Rather, it incites a conflicting push-pull tension, also inspiring shared spectatorship and fascination among those who ostracize the 'other' because of his behavior. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai (2004) remarks on the pleasure of the experience of disgust, which not only stems from the process of social exclusion disgust entails, but also from the human fascination with transgression. While taboo dictates limits, or so-

cial norms, they are "only there to be overreached. Fear and horror are not the real and final reaction; on the contrary, they are a temptation to overstep the bounds" (Bataille 1986, 144). Those who animate disgust by transgressing taboo in public, like the man coughing up mucus, are not merely dismissed as disgusting. They attract attention—we often may feel disgusted, but we cannot peel our gaze away.

Ngai underscores the way that disgust not only warns us to assert our boundaries via the fantasy of proximity, which creates a tension between ourselves and an 'other'—it is itself an act of othering in which we locate ourselves within a group. She reminds us of Miller's observation, that, because disgust is learned, as Bataille (1986) demonstrates, "the avowal of disgust expects concurrence" (Miller 1997, 194). The sensation of disgust, Ngai (2004) writes, "seeks to include or draw others into its exclusion of its object, enabling a strange kind of sociability" (336). Through shared experience of disgust, social groups communicate shared taste or refinement.

Like disgust, the shame that the coughing man may or may not have felt highlights the separation (or lack thereof) between the self and others. Calling on Silvan Tomkins, Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995) note how shame marks the individual as other, or strange, to other individuals. They go on to argue that "shame, like disgust and contempt, is activated by drawing a boundary line or barrier" (520). Berlant adds that certain marginalized groups, perhaps like conservatives or anti-maskers in New York City, experience shaming and, as a result, adopt a "shamed" subjectivity. The performance of shamelessness, on the other hand, can be a form of political refusal, or a way to claim freedom (Berlant 2008). One might argue that the coughing man was shameless in his choice not to wear a mask, openly refusing to conform to the social norm of masking. Berlant (2008) argues that when someone performs shamelessness, others often react negatively, "not having skills for maintaining composure amidst the deflation of their fantasy about how their world is organized" (209). Perhaps the other person yelled because they felt attacked by the coughing man's refusal to maintain the norm of boundary formation through masking.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the illumination of our physical permeability spread through the growing knowledge of how the airborne virus circulates in crowds, the subway lost millions of customers due to anxiety of contagion. For those who continued to ride the subway, this anxiety solidified pre-existing boundaries and enforced new ones, such as wearing facial masks and

social distancing. In this way, the material transmission of Covid-19 mirrors the transmission of affect. We construct social boundaries to contain both. Methods of virus avoidance, such as social distancing, are informed by the pre-existing normative techniques of affect management in the subway. Consequently, conflicts that arise surrounding the enforcement of boundaries invented to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 are also affectively charged. Thus, the tension surrounding Covid-19 has become a means of communicating anxieties about transmissions of affect at large.

Endnotes

1. In this vignette I have intentionally identified the racial presentation of the individuals involved, with conscious consideration of my positionality as a white person and the impact of my words, their ability to perpetuate racial bias, and the value of such details in the context of this story. In the subway, where I cannot know someone's background or how they identify, I have made assumptions based on phenotype, behavior, general appearance, etc. At the same time, recognizing that racial and ethnic biases play a large role, both implicitly and explicitly, in social interaction and in the affects that emerge from proximity, I have flagged racial indicators in this story to highlight tensions and connections between individuals that may have been racially motivated, or that require racial markers to better illustrate the affective tension created by boundaries, proximity, and otherness.

2. While a novel realization for many, such awareness is commonplace for individuals with disabilities and chronic illness, and has long been studied in Disability Studies. However, the emergence of Covid-19 marked widespread consciousness across all identity and cultural groups in the city for the first time.

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