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Subway Crush

KELLEY HOLLEY

An attendant exerts all his strength to squeeze in as many passengers as possible into a car at the 28th Street Station in New York. The most prominent passenger feature is the contorting face of a Black man. He is surrounded by white riders, one of whom is trying his best to read the newspaper, a little girl, who stands with her legs akimbo, and a white woman, obscured by the window. The hectic scene muddles the identity of body parts, more akin to a game of Twister than a fantasy of public mobility across an urban landscape. Reduced to limbs and faces, the diverse passengers portrayed in Bernard Brussel-Smith's 1940 lithograph demonstrate its title: *Subway Crush*.[1]

The density of the ever-crowded subway car is seemingly in direct opposition to the freedom of mobility, bound versus unbound. While Michael W. Brooks argues that the subway offers a radical new spatial arrangement of the city that reimagines proximity by creating the potential for easy travel from one area of the city to another, mobility is hardly available to many on the subway without in turn being crushed.[2] The subway's early promise of movement is accompanied by a claustrophobic reality: in order to move freely, you are confined. This paradox requires one to sacrifice freedom to obtain freedom, to render unstable conditions of safety and bodily autonomy. For many who are dependent on the subway, forgoing a densely packed subway ride means greatly reducing one's access to the city.

For women, who make up the majority of global public transportation users, this fraught negotiation is constant.[3] Density risks sexual assault and other types of physical danger. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a new paradigm of physical safety emerged, as a congested subway car came to be seen as a germ-laden incubator. However, empty trains raise concerns about physical safety once again. The subway crush is an ongoing negotiation that is left to the individual but experienced by and affecting many, which determines the possibility of mobility within the city. Plays about the subway offer a recognition of the constant negotiation, an off-kilter push and pull, between the promises and reality of subway travel that each passenger must manage.

The experience of the subway crush is a familiar sensation for many who ride the train and has been a constant companion of the subway rider, emerging as soon as public transportation went underground. In October 1904, only a day after the first subway cars began to operate in New York City, *The New York Tribune* coined the term to describe a gnarled scene of 'rib-smashing' proportions. They recounted, 'Women were dragged out, either screaming in hysterics or in a swooning condition; gray haired men pleaded for mercy; boys were knocked down, and only escaped by a miracle being trampled underfoot.'[4] In reducing the passengers to a collection of heads, elbows and feet, like the lithograph, this frenzy reveals the dangers of such density: a lack of bodily

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autonomy, the possibility of sexual assault, or being actually crushed as a result of the pressing bodies.

Despite a recognition of danger from the start, the subway crush only became normalized, an anticipated and unavoidable consequence of any travel on the subway. Regularly noted, but not resolved, the crush began to appear in cartoons, songs and plays, including Elmer Rice's *The Subway* (1929) and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), littering the early twentieth century with references to the tension between mobility and constraint.[5] For Treadwell's Young Woman, the central figure in *Machinal*, the subway is a source of constant anxiety for this reason. Day after day, she tries to ride the train but constantly finds that she needs to escape. Is the problem that it stalls, her co-workers inquire, imagining a technological cause. No: it is 'All those bodies pressing.'[6] Treadwell credits the subway crush as the direct impediment to the Young Woman's mobility.

Being crushed is not ideal. Neither is being alone on the train. Both the crowd and its absence render a passenger vulnerable to sexual harassment. Where the crowded train may result in being groped, an empty train makes one a target. However, one does not have to be alone to be in danger on the subway.[7] An image from the original production of Rice's *The Subway* mirrors the composition of Brussel-Smith's lithograph.[8] Like the lithograph, the still features the train car in profile, utilizing the large opening by the door to reveal the passengers sandwiched within. In *The Subway,* Sophie Jane Hamilton assumes the position of the dominant figure, as she staves off the lecherous looks from the male passengers that surround her. Where the men in Brussel-Smith's work are reduced to limbs, here they are reduced to lustful eyes. The effects of density are often unwavering.

It is not incidental that the maligned passengers in both real and artistic accounts centre women, people of colour, children and the elderly. The tension between the desire for mobility through the city, and the subsequent loss of mobility on the train itself, serve as an inflection point for social instability. Much has been written about the subway's unique role as a catalyst for social tension.[9] Marginalized demographics are both the most vulnerable and often the most in need of public transportation. Consequently, they are the most 'crushed' by impediments to mobility, including the pandemic.

The fear of the COVID subway crush drastically reduced ridership: in April 2020, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) served only 8% of its pre-pandemic ridership.[10] For those who needed to take the subway, the possibility of contagion could be paralysing. In *The Long Haul*, a 2020 play by D. Lee Miller, Marguerita, a woman taking her first subway trip in six months, records voice memos for the benefit of contact tracing. When Marguerita does come into physical proximity with other passengers, she responds with ire. She seethes as she moves away from a man who is close and not properly wearing a mask. Swearing at a man who stands above her, she moves again. Like social distancing, the subway crush is left to the individual to manage but is experienced by many. The same can, of course, be extended to density itself. A packed train is so because of the individual interests and needs of each member of the crowd, left floundering on infrastructure that did not anticipate or respond to such usage. Left to the individual, the subway crush becomes a matter of many personal responsibilities.

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Nearly 120 years since it first arrived on the scene, the subway crush is so ubiquitous and expected in New York City, that its absence during the COVID-19 pandemic is startling. Throughout the play, Marguerita wrestles with the peculiarity of an empty train: 'Hallelujah! The door closed and no one's pushing!' she exclaims.[11] Immediately after, it dawns on her that many individuals are missing. She starts to shape out the regulars missing from the amorphous crowd. The joy found in an empty train is transitory. Immediately, there is relief found in the absence of the subway crush, both in its normal anxiety and the pandemic-tinged overlay. Then, there is the recognition of how little the city resembles itself without it.

In Rattlestick Theater's *M.T.A. Radio Plays* (2020), this is taken a step further, in which the subway is cast as a site of nostalgia for the community that vacated it during the pandemic. A series of eighteen radio plays, each centring on a different stop of New York City's 2 train, the plays envision the crush as part and parcel of subway life. The density of a train ride is far less commented upon than it was in dramas from the beginning of the twentieth century. Instead, it is incidental, the given circumstance under which everyday life occurs on the train. When it is commented upon, like in Episode 10 'Times Square', when a woman's foot is trampled by a herd of eager tourists, it is in passing, as an annoying but inevitable part of city life.[12]

It is perhaps unsurprising that the play's subway crush is most clearly demonstrated in Times Square, which is the MTA's busiest station.[13] This is unchanged since 1929 when two travel writers cautioned: 'The subway crush, of course, is unmatched anywhere; but the Times Square crush is one of the worst.'[14] What has instead changed is the attitude toward the crush. The injury is glossed over, in favour of an only-in-New-York interaction between passengers, that reflects a fondness for the everyday frustrations then lost to social-distancing New Yorkers. From the vantage point of home, in which the subway is but a distant memory, it is easier to ignore the pain of the subway crush.

The creator of *M.T.A. Radio Plays,* Ren Dara Santiago, fondly recalls cramped subway rides of yesteryear, casting the project as one of nostalgia.[15] Affectionately characterizing the subway crush as if it were a badge of honour, the article croons, 'In the scrum of a rush-hour train, everyone from executives to office cleaners were pushed and shoved in a daily reminder that the New York hustle leaves few unscathed.'[16] No longer merely the bane of New York, it is also part of its DNA, a great equalizer. The subway crush may determine one's ability to move in the city, but it also characterizes that movement as uniquely part of the city. It is the individual who is moving, as fashioned by the collective. While the subway might crush you, one can recast that crush as an embrace, and see the crowd as a community.

Since 2020, the subway has yet to fill back to its regular capacity. While some riders have slowly returned, as a demographic, women have been less likely to do the same.[17] Many cite the rise in crime on the now less densely packed subways for their reluctance, believing that it has become more dangerous since the pandemic. Speaking to *The New York Times*, women suggested that in opting out of the subway, they had to quit jobs with late hours and turn down career opportunities that would require them to have greater mobility. Nostalgia alone is not enough to negate the limitations posed by the subway crush. There is friction between density and mobility, friction between

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how we imagine the city and how we experience it. So long as these frictions are left to the individual to resolve, there is no easy resolution to the subway crush. Mobility, like density, is a matter of the crowd.

NOTES

1 Bernard Brussel-Smith, *Subway Crush,* 1940, lithograph. Image: 275 x 375 mm. Sheet: 320 x 423 mm.
2 Michael W. Brooks, *Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 3.
3 Sarah Goodyear, 'More Women Ride Mass Transit Than Men. Shouldn't Transit Agencies Be Catering to Them?', *Bloomberg*, 30 January 2015, at https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-30/more-women-ride-mass-transit-than-men-shouldn-t-transit-agencies-be-catering-to-them, accessed 15 January 2024.
4 'Birth of Subway Crush: Scenes of Frenzied Pushing at 145th-St. Terminal Fence Laid Low by Crowd Reserves Stop Mad Stampede', *New York Tribune*, 28 October 1904, p. 1.
5 For an excellent analysis of early twentieth-century subway songs see Sunny Stalter-Pace, 'The Subway Crush: Making Contact in New York City Subway Songs, 1904–1915', *Journal of American Culture*, 34, 4 (December 2011), pp. 321–31.
6 Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (London: Royal National Theatre: Nick Hern Books, 1993), p. 6.
7 Minyvonne Burke and Alicia Victoria Lozano, 'Police Say Riders Didn't Help Woman Raped on Train. Does the "Bystander Effect" Explain Why?', *NBC News*, 20 October 2021.
8 Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, 'Jane Hamilton Surrounded by Unidentified Actors in Subway Car Window in the Stage Production Subway', New York Public Library Digital Collections, at https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/0a2a3cb0-66c5-0132-736d-58d385a7bbdo, accessed 27 December 2023.
9 See Stéphane Tonnelat and William Kornblum, *International Express: New Yorkers on the 7 Train* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Brooks, *Subway City*; Sunny Stalter-Pace, *Underground Movements: Modern Culture on the New York City Subway* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Julia Solis, *New York Underground: The Anatomy of a City* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
10 MTA, 'Subway and Bus Ridership for 2020', at https://new.mta.info/agency/new-york-city-transit/subway-bus-ridership-2020, accessed 12 April 2022.
11 D. Lee Miller, *The Long Haul* (New Play Exchange, 2020), p. 2.
12 Rattlestick Theater, 'Times Square', *MTA Radio Plays*, n.d., at https://www.rattlestick.org/mta-radio-plays.
13 MTA, 'Subway and Bus Ridership for 2020'.
14 Henry Irving Brock and Joseph Webster Golinkin, *New York Is Like This* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1929), p. 76.
15 Christina Goldbaum, 'Miss the N.Y.C. Subway? These Radio Plays Bring It Back to Life', *The New York Times*, 24 December 2020, sec. C, p. 2.
16 Ibid.
17 Ana Ley, 'Subway Ridership Rises, But Risk-Adverse Women Are Reluctant to Return', *The New York Times*, 13 February 2023, p. A15.

KELLEY HOLLEY (kthspa@rit.edu) *is an assistant professor of theatre at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Her current research focuses on how an audience experiences the concept of 'place' in site-specific performance. In this capacity, her research intersects with food, subways, museum spaces and dramaturgy. She received her PhD from the University of Maryland. She works as a dramaturg across the United States.*

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