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SLOW SPEED RAIL:
THE SOCIAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF
LONG-DISTANCE TRAIN TRAVEL

by

VINCENT GRAGNANI

A master's capstone submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
The City University of New York

2023

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement
for the degree of Master of Arts.

Approved: April 2023

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Slow Speed Rail: The Social, Psychological and Environmental Benefits of Long-Distance Train Travel

by

Vincent Gragnani

Advisor: Tomoaki Imamichi

Long-distance train travel in the United States is slow, inefficient and woefully underfunded. Trains are routinely delayed for freight traffic. Many major cities are served in the middle of the night, or not at all. And the cost of a sleeping compartment is far out of reach for most Americans. This is all in stark contrast to the reliable services offered across Europe and parts of Asia. But for the 3.5 million people who ride Amtrak's long-distance trains every year, the experience can be a fulfilling one. This web-based project, slowspeedrail.com, explores these benefits, namely, an intimacy with the landscape unique to other forms of travel, a closer connection to fellow passengers from different walks of life, and a state of mind where time seems warped, a welcome contrast to our ever-accelerating lives. At a time when air travel continues to endanger our warming planet, this topic is of increasing relevance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have completed this project without the following:

- The Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at CUNY's Graduate Center, for travel grants that enabled me to make four Amtrak rides in different parts of the country. While my past trips exist in memories, photos and notes, the ability to ride long-distance trains while working on this project was invaluable, allowing me to make more focused observations of the people and places I was experiencing, in dialogue with the theory, history and travelogue books I had recently read.
- My professor and advisor on this project, Tomoaki Imamichi, who introduced me to environmental psychology and taught me to observe more closely how our natural and built environments affect us. Over the last 18 months, first in class and then in regular meetings, he has introduced me to a trove of texts that have helped me complete this project. For every travel experience and observation I have shared with him, he has offered a tangible connection to the environmental social sciences. His time, patience, and scholarly input has been invaluable in completing this project.
- Elizabeth Macaulay, who served as an informal advisor throughout my time at the Graduate Center, and gave me the freedom to pursue a semester of independent study that allowed me to take a deep dive into literature about train travel. I will always value her advice to find a capstone topic that I would enjoy being immersed in for a long period of time.

- Each of my professors at the Graduate Center: Ann Kirschner, Annalyn Swan, Steven Kruger, Miles Corak, Kaitlin Mondello and Cindi Katz, who taught a diverse range of classes and enabled me to connect each one to travel.

Outside the university, I am grateful to my parents, who introduced me to travel at an early age and enabled me to nurture my love of travel throughout my youth and into adulthood, and to Michael, who continues to nurture our shared love of travel, even when I want to take the slower route to a destination.

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DIGITAL MANIFEST

I. Capstone Project Whitepaper

II. WARC file

1. Capstone Project website

Archived version of <https://slowspeedrail.com>

Introduction: All Aboard

At twenty-one years of age — long before reading any academic pieces on travel or motion, and before discovering a rich body of writing on train travel — I began to discover what I will attempt to convey in this project: Train travel in this country is slow, inefficient and woefully underfunded, but for those who climb aboard one of Amtrak’s long-distance trains, the experience provides an intimacy with the landscape, a connection with fascinating strangers and a state of mind that moves at a refreshingly different speed than that of our everyday lives.

During the summer before my last year of college, I traveled aboard Amtrak’s Southwest Chief from Chicago to Southern California. Among the many interesting individuals I met was a woman who was completing a month-long rail tour of the United States and Canada on the no-longer-existent North American Rail Pass. Three months later, on my winter break, I would retrace her steps, up the entire west coast of the United States, across the Canadian Rockies and prairies to Toronto, down through Michigan to Chicago, and back home, again on the Southwest Chief. Months later and just days after earning my undergraduate degree, I completed another month-long trip around North America, this one taking me to the northwest corner of British Columbia, just forty miles from the Alaskan border, and to Glacier National Park. These trips marked the beginning of a lifelong love of train travel, one I was able to indulge in again during the Covid-19 pandemic. This project is, in part, an articulation of that love of train travel, through the lenses of environmental psychology, and social and environmental justice.

This project also comes as the burning of fossil fuels is bringing the world closer to the threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming. At a time when Venice is installing turnstiles, Amsterdam is limiting tourist-centered businesses and Barcelona is restricting vacation rentals

— all to control the flow of an onslaught of tourists who expend an enormous amount of fossil fuels to reach these places — this form of travel might be more relevant than ever (Hospers, 2019).

Roads Less Traveled: Journey to the Capstone

Entering the Graduate Center

Like the many trains that crisscross the United States, my route to this project was a circuitous one, and I did not develop the idea for this project until taking my eighth class at CUNY’s Graduate Center. However, for every class I took — whether the topic was economics or world’s fairs or climate change — I completed a final project that connected the coursework to my interest in travel, bringing me closer to this project.

I approached the Graduate Center at CUNY not with the goal of advancing my career in government communications, but with the intent to expand my depth of knowledge in an area that interested me and to give my mind a more rigorous workout. My original thought was to study history, but the interdisciplinary nature of the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies intrigued me. I started as a nonmatriculated student taking Professor Ann Kirschner’s “Mind the Gap: The Future of Work,” where we were tasked with envisioning a “big idea” for the future of work and spelling it out in a policy paper. Mine was the establishment of an Office of Sustainable Tourism that would shift the paradigm of a traditional tourism office and instead work to ensure that host communities benefit as more and more people partake in the joys and benefits of travel. This course helped me to pivot away from my interest in history and toward the future of travel — although history would appear in my capstone project.

With that in mind, I formally entered the MALS program four years ago with the intent to focus on sustainability and the future of travel, and the growing phenomenon of overtourism.

The number of international travelers had soared from 700 million in 2002 to 1.5 billion in 2019 ("International Tourism Growth" | UNWTO, n.d.). Travel industry leaders often celebrate this news, with the U.N. World Tourism Organization noting that the number of destinations earning \$1 billion or more from international tourism had almost doubled since 1998. But the increasing concentration of tourists to several cities — Venice, Barcelona, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam and more — threatens local economies, cultures and natural environments ("The Backlash against Overtourism," n.d.). Once formally admitted to the MALS program, I sought courses that would help expand my understanding of sustainability and tourism.

Connection with Graduate Center Coursework

As I progressed in my studies, I was reminded that it is not enough to spread tourism more evenly and encourage people to visit lesser-known cities and regions. Encouraging tourists to visit, say, Seville instead of Barcelona, or the Albanian coast instead of Dubrovnik, is beneficial for both the tourist experience and for the host community, but travel and tourism create larger problems, too.

In "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Climate Change," I completed a final project that focused on how air travel affects climate change, and how our warming planet may force us to rethink travel. The idea of "flight shaming" has gained ground, and while guilting people out of flying may or may not be effective, policy makers are responding, with France banning air travel between cities that can be reached in less than two hours by train (Limb, 2022). The future of travel may require a new paradigm, given climate realities. To paraphrase John Urry and Jonas Larsen in *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, we might need to exchange the exotic gaze for a local gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011). My final project on flight shaming for this course helped form the "why this matters" introductory page of this capstone project, at slowspeedrail.com/why.

In “Political Ecology and Environmental Justice,” my final project was an annotated bibliography of recent academic pieces on the intersection of political ecology, environmental justice and tourism. Here, it was especially interesting and relevant to find academic pieces calling for a more just framework for tourism as it rebounded after the Covid-19 pandemic (Benjamin et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). In “‘We Can’t Return to Normal’: Committing to Tourism Equity in the Post-Pandemic Age,” Benjamin et al called on people to “choose a system that fosters sustainable and equitable growth — which in turn, ‘slows down’ our ways of *consuming* the world around us — transforming our values and experiences of what tourism is and should be” (p. 421.). This is very much the focus of my project, as riding a train slows us down and changes the nature of tourism consumption from converging on heavily touristed cities to appreciating the landscape and people closer to home. People should see greener forms of travel not as a limit or a sacrifice, but rather a reorientation that brings the fulfillment we seek in travel, just in a different way.

Toward the end of my time in the MALS program, I was introduced to the field of environmental psychology, the roughly sixty-year-old branch of psychology that explores the relationship between humans and the natural and built environments. My professor, now advisor, Tomoaki Imamichi, shared with us a piece he wrote about the phenomenology of walking and taking public transportation through Tokyo with his mother, and the physical, cognitive and social engagement required on such a journey (Imamichi, 2019). This piece and Imamichi’s course had had me thinking more about the psychology and phenomenology of various modes of travel. Professor Imamichi took a great interest in my idea to connect environmental psychology with modes of travel, recommending several books that have since become central to this project.

At the time, I had traveled more than 33,000 miles on trains in North America — I have included a map in the Appendix. I knew that it was a far more sustainable form of travel than the 45,000 flights the Federal Aviation Administration handles every day, (*Air Traffic By The Numbers*, 2022) and that the experience of riding on a train induced a unique state of mind and perspective, similar to Imamichi’s academic piece on walking through a city. I could explore this state of mind, while also noting the social and environmental benefits of train travel as a viable, affordable and fulfilling alternative to flying across an ocean to join millions of others descending on the same cities.

Years ago, I had purchased the URL “slowspeedrail.com” with the intent of sharing my own rail travel stories. High-speed rail is a key part of a greener future, but I had always appreciated the slower pace of Amtrak, hence the name of the URL. I realized this was an ideal name for a capstone project that would explore slower, long-distance rail travel through the lenses of environmental psychology and environmental justice.

I began by pulling together many of these ideas and concepts to create a final project for that environmental psychology class. The result was a 5,500-word narrative that began with the premise:

“North American train travel is slow, inefficient and outdated, so why do some people love it? Drawing on the work of travel writers, environmental psychologists, anthropologists and my own experiences, I will attempt to answer that question and explore some of the unexpected benefits of *slow* train travel.”

Once it was complete, I shared the project with Imamichi and then-Executive Officer of the MALS program, Elizabeth Macaulay, and discussed the possibility of developing it into my capstone project. They both agreed that this could serve as a blueprint for a web-based capstone.

I then spent a semester of independent study with Imamichi and Macaulay, where I read more than a dozen books encompassing theory, history and travelogue. I have included brief summaries of most of those books as a part of my project at slowspeedrail.com/books. My final piece of writing for my semester of independent study situated slow train travel within the “Slow” movements, i.e., Slow Food, Slow Cities, Slow Travel, Slow TV, etc., and formed the basis for a page, slowspeedrail.com/slow-movement, of my final project.

Train travel, and Social and Environmental Justice Studies

The MALS Social and Environmental Justice Studies concentration “frames these issues ecologically to illuminate pathways and processes for justice,” with the goal of addressing “both the environmental and the social in tandem, as they exist in the world.” When you consider that U.S. airlines carried 674 million passengers in 2021 (“Full-Year 2021”, n.d.) at tremendous cost to the planet, the future of travel is an issue of social and environmental justice.

Aside from the climate benefits associated with train travel and the social connections made, a section of my site focuses more closely on social and environmental justice, namely, that the railroads were hastily built in the 19th century at horrifying cost to immigrant laborers, Native Americans and the landscape itself. And then, just when rail travel could have been key to a greener future, the railroads were hastily sent into a downward spiral in the 20th century by massive investments in highways, many of which tore apart urban communities and induced demand for cars that burn fossil fuels.

Intended Destinations for Slow-Speed Rail

I chose to do a web-based capstone project because I wanted the content to be accessible to the public. I had in mind the words of my Summer 2020 “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Climate Change” professor, Kaitlin Mondello, who spoke often about bridging the disconnect

between academia and public discourse. Given that my career has involved writing for the general public, I am more comfortable in this medium and style of writing — so a public-facing website was a natural choice for me.

Also, this format enables me to tell this story not just in words, but with images and video, especially important for this piece given my attention to what Urry calls “the tourist gaze” and my focus on the traveler’s connection with the landscape. My hope is that the words, images and ideas of my capstone project reach a wide audience. And, as I will expand upon below, this format allows my academic work to be a living project that I continue to work on after I have submitted it for my degree.

This web-based capstone project illustrates and explores the following points:

- Rail travel is more relevant than ever as a mode of travel and transportation, as it creates far less emissions than travel by air or car. And swapping air travel for rail travel is not necessarily a sacrifice, but can be a more fulfilling travel experience (slowspeedrail.com/why).
- Slow rail travel can fit into the growing “Slow” movements that trace their roots to the 1980s launch of Slow Food. These movements are a reaction against speed and modernity, and the questionable notion that technology makes us happier (slowspeedrail.com/slow-movement).
- Because of the way railroads were built in the United States, following the contours of natural features, rail travel connects people to the landscape in a way unique to other forms of travel (slowspeedrail.com/landscape).
- A long-distance train ride offers the opportunity for conversations with other people — from Italian tourists to Kentucky retirees to Amish farmers — that we otherwise

would not have the opportunity to speak with at length

(slowspeedrail.com/passengers).

- Being in motion on a train for hours or days at a time induces a different state of mind, where time seems almost endless. For some, this is time to socialize and connect with other passengers, while for others, it can mean time to daydream and explore inner thoughts. And for still others, being in motion can induce deep thinking that in some cases has led to academic breakthroughs

(slowspeedrail.com/psychology).

- While the 19th-century construction of American railroads represented what we would now call an environmental injustice, a second injustice was done in the middle of the 20th century, when public policy and investment sent passenger rail into decline. A reinvestment in rail travel today could be an example of environmental justice, connecting people and places affordably with minimal carbon emissions (slowspeedrail.com/justice).

- In addition, I included sections on how speed has been perceived over time (slowspeedrail.com/relative-speed), practical information about domestic train travel (slowspeedrail.com/downsides and slowspeedrail.com/planning) and a section for further reading (slowspeedrail.com/books).

An earlier version of my site already caught the attention of producers from the Canadian Broadcasting Network, who contacted me last summer when they were covering widespread air travel delays. The CBC's Saturday radio program Day 6 interviewed me about train travel, my academic work and environmental psychology (Ore, 2022).

Beneath the Tracks: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The Birth of Environmental Psychology

Much of this project is rooted in the theoretical framework of environmental psychology, a field that emerged in the 1960s to connect the natural and built environments with the then-ongoing studies of motivation, cognition, attitude-formation, development, etc. As Joachim F. Wohlwill noted in the early days of the field, behavior occurs within a space, and “qualities of the environment, such as under- or overstimulation, crowding, severity of climate, etc., may exert generalized effects on broader systems of response within the individual” (Wohlwill, 1970, p. 304).

Or, more succinctly: “Wherever you go, there you are — and it matters.” In a piece outlining the relevance of the then half-century-old field of environmental psychology, Robert Gifford spelled out the premise of the field:

“We are always embedded in a place. In fact, we are always nested within layers of place, from a room, to a building, to a street, to a community, to a region, to a nation, and to the world. ... Person-place influences are both mutual and crucial. We shape not only the buildings, but also the land, the waters, the air, and other life forms — and they shape us” (Gifford, 2014, p. 543).

The connection between environmental psychology, and social and environmental justice is also worth noting. Environmental psychology was born in the 1960s, amid the zeitgeist of the human rights movement, the ecology movement and the state of architecture (Imamichi, 2014). It was primarily motivated by an interest in the effects of architecture on human beings — namely, that architecture was not serving people well — and the idea that environmental psychology could influence future architecture. The emerging field was also interested in how

the natural environment shaped human beings and how human beings shaped the natural environment. The early years of the field aimed toward an “architectural psychology” and a “green psychology” (Steg et al., 2012).

Environmental Psychology and Travel

The long-distance Amtrak passenger is “nested” — to borrow Gifford’s analogy — with multiple spaces that shape the passenger experience: The passenger occupies the train itself, either a bedroom or a coach seat, and, depending on the train, the passenger can move to a sightseer lounge, a café and/or a dining room. In addition, the train occupies and moves through a space outside, usually a combination of natural and built environments. This project explores that shaping in detail, looking at how the train itself and the outdoor environment affect travelers, including their own state of mind and their interactions with each other. Indeed, author Tony Hiss borrowed psychologists’ term “second skin,” a reference to our personal space, and extended the analogy to refer to transportation methods:

Then there are the vehicles we enter — our ‘third skins’. To what extent can our several awarenesses ‘breathe’ through these skins, which are mostly made of metal, plastic and glass? To what extent are they suffocated or simply not taken into account? Nowadays most travel seems to involve packing passengers in as if they were freight; or it aims to cocoon us from the very experience of travel with in-journey entertainment and distractions. But the appeal of many of the most popular journeys has been intimately tied up with the vehicle in which the journey is made and the experience that vehicle provides. The *California Zephyr*, for example, ‘immediately captured the nation’s imagination’ when it first ran in 1949 — despite being ten hours slower than other trains on the line — because its ‘sleek, silvery, air-conditioned fluted stainless steel cars

featured glass-enclosed penthouses that gave the rider a fish-eye lens's 180-degree vista' (Kisor, 1994). Such beloved vehicles are a 'third skin' that allow the traveller to feel their movement through the world and thus help the traveller to invoke the excitement and wider awareness that comes with Deep Travel.

With such insights in mind we might yet recapture the full mental benefits from our travelling nature. (Niblett & Beuret, 2021, p. 52)

Some academic papers have looked at the link between psychology and travel. At least one of these studies predates the field of environmental psychology by more than a decade. In "Some Hypotheses on the Psychology of Travel," Maurice Farber looks at psychodynamics of the impulse to travel, interpersonal relations on the trip, the distantiation of neurosis, the perception of foreign places and the residues of travel (Farber, 1954). His section on interpersonal relations — where he notes the "curious phenomenon" (p. 269) of a train passenger telling his innermost secrets to a fellow passenger because they will never see each other again — was especially helpful and relevant for my section about how slow, long-distance train trips foster connections among passengers unique to other forms of travel.

In the same 1970 piece cited above, Wohlwill referred to the "grossly neglected area" of travel and tourism. Travel is of interest to psychologists, he wrote, as it reveals "the power of the environment as a source of affect, arousal, and exploratory activity" (Wohlwill, 1970, p. 306).

More recently, though still well before the 21st-century acceleration of mass travel, Joseph Fridgen explored the relationship between environmental psychology and tourism, breaking down travel into five phases: anticipation, travel to the destination, on-site behavior, return travel, and recollection (Fridgen, 1984). He includes observations about the relationship between satisfaction and the authenticity of an environment, and the extent to which the

environment has been altered by human beings — both of which resonated with my own experiences viewing the natural and built environment, from the majestic to the mundane, from a train. A reference to airlines going to “considerable expense to create feelings of spaciousness, privacy and control” may seem nostalgic to the 21st-century reader, but also speaks to the contemporary differences between increasingly uncomfortable air travel and train travel which, while lacking in speed and efficiency, does provide these amenities (p. 27).

Like all academic fields — but perhaps more true of a still-emerging one — the environmental social sciences are evolving and now include a variety of “moving methodologies” that focus more closely on the person moving through the environment. Among the examples of this would be Mimi Sheller’s *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes*, which looks at inequalities in movement, from the ability of the wealthy to travel as they please to refugees who struggle to cross borders to escape violence, poverty or persecution (Sheller, 2018). Similarly, Imamichi’s own pieces about marathon running and walking with his mother add that dynamic component to the field by focusing on movement through the environment (Imamichi, 2019). My hope is that my own project advances environmental psychology in a small way by taking a closer look at one method of travel and its effects on the human person and on the environment.

How Travel Impacts People

Outside of journals, several theoretical books speak to the connection between psychology and travel. Most important in my project here is the work of Tony Hiss, specifically his *In Motion: The Experience of Travel* (Hiss, 2017). Hiss writes about the heightened state of awareness into which people enter when they travel to a new place. Included in this book is a detailed description of a winter train trip out of Rutland, Vermont, where he offers not only vivid

images of the nested spaces — a worn, dated 1960s car, with coffee brewing, and outside, a bright blue sky and biting cold temperatures — but also how he reacted mentally to this bumpy stretch of track north of Albany. “Energized, untethered, unhurried, and protected, your mind can be free to explore any subject at all, because all possibilities lie open,” Hiss wrote (p. 390). He notes that evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin used his time on a 1972 bus ride from Chicago to Bloomington, Indiana, to disprove the prevalent notion that there were deep genetic differences between human beings with different skin color, and biochemist Kary B. Mullis invented the polymerase chain reaction — the DNA testing used in criminal cases — while driving through the redwood country north of San Francisco. These are both examples of what an architect friend of Hiss’ called “think time,” the idea that long-distance transit induces a spatial detachment and time suspension necessary for bold thoughts to race ahead (p. 400). While “think time” does not resonate with me as much — I am more focused on the people and places around me when I travel — it is nonetheless an interesting phenomenon, one that I noted in my section on the psychology of rail travel. The latter chapters of Hiss’ book explore the evolution of early hominids and the suggestion that our desire for travel is rooted in our DNA. Several parts of my project are a dialogue with Hiss’ thoughts and ideas — and I was also fortunate to have had an actual dialogue with Hiss about them.

In *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, John Urry and Jonas Larsen track the development of, and historical transformations within, the tourist gaze, beginning with the development of seaside resorts in 18th-century England, and continuing through the development of the railroad, air travel and digital photography (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Perhaps most intriguing is their exploration of the future of travel. Mindful of the negative environmental effects of increased travel, they envision three scenarios: a high-speed hyperconnected world, where fast travel does

not negatively impact the environment; a world where everyone is forced to stay close to home; and finally, a dystopian future where resources are scarce and only few can travel. A better answer, they suggest, is a future where we exchange the “exotic gaze” for the “local gaze” and better appreciate wonders close to home. To me, this is a blueprint for a future that focuses on rail travel.

Starting with the premise that travel is central to the human condition, Eric J. Leed’s *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* sets out to answer questions about why human beings have traveled since we emerged as a species — and how the transformations of travel produce the mind of the traveler (Leed, 1991). I was drawn to Leed’s comments on passage, specifically how smooth, frictionless, unresisted motion induces a “flow” state of mind, how the continuousness of motion can give rise to an idea of space as endless, and how travelers surrender to the conditions of motion.

Traveling long distance by rail, while seemingly old-fashioned, can be for some a reaction against the accelerating speed of the world. Slow Travel has many advocates, with roots in the Slow Food Movement that formalized itself in the 1987 publication of the Slow Food Manifesto (Portinari, 1989). The Slow movements are a reaction against modernity, especially as increased speed has failed to deliver the promised benefits of a shorter work-week or greater happiness (Clancy, 2019). I dedicated a page of this project to tracing the Slow movements, and Clancy’s *Slow Tourism, Food and Cities: Pace and the Search for the “Good Life,”* was helpful here, as was Carl Honoré’s *In Praise of Slowness* and Alice Waters’ *We Are What We Eat: A Slow Food Manifesto* (Honoré, 2009; Waters, 2021).

With all my writing about trains as a slow mode of travel, it is important to remember that trains were once considered a dizzyingly fast mode of travel. For this perspective, I relied

primarily on Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Schivelbusch, 2014). Schivelbusch reminds us that when travel by stagecoach was pleasurable and the norm, rail travel was dizzying, disorienting and dehumanizing, with many travelers complaining that 35 mph reduced the landscape to a blur.

History, Travelogue and Policy

Finally, I found information and inspiration in several books that transcended genres, often a mix of history, travelogue and the public policy that has shaped our current transportation infrastructure. Among them:

- *Making Tracks: An American Rail Odyssey* and *Last Train to Toronto: A Canadian Rail Odyssey*, by Terry Pindell (Pindell, 1990, 1992). While Tony Hiss reminds us that we enter a different state of mind while on a train because the path and the tracks were charted and built decades ago, Pindell brings that path-building to life as he alternates his narratives between a lively, detailed travelogue of the people and places he sees on the train, and histories of how that particular railroad was built. Pindell's epilogue in *Making Tracks* looks forward to what he saw as an optimistic future for train travel. Written in 1991, his reasons for an expanded network do not mention an impending climate disaster, but he does write about pollution and how rail creates less of it than other forms of travel.
- *Stranger on a Train: Daydreaming and Smoking Around America with Interruptions*, by Jenny Diski (Diski, 2003). Diski chose to travel on Amtrak not to witness anything spectacular nor meet interesting people, but rather, to daydream and be lost in her own thoughts. I quoted this book several times in my project, as Diski provides great descriptions of her interior thoughts, as well as the people she met while on two cross-country Amtrak trips.

- *Zephyr: Tracking a Dream Across America*, by Henry Kisor (Kisor, 2015). Because of its dramatic scenery across the Rocky Mountains, the California Zephyr has been a favorite among travelers since it debuted in 1949. Kisor gives a behind-the-scenes look at the train, documenting a 1994 trip he made aboard the Zephyr. I quoted his descriptions of the route itself, as well as his words about time and the social aspect of the train.
- *Amtrak, America's Railroad: Transportation's Orphan and Its Struggle for Survival*, by Geoffrey H. Doughty, Jeffrey T. Darbee and Eugene E. Harmonion (Doughty et al., 2021). This book gives a thorough and readable history of Amtrak, explaining not just the who, what, when and where of Amtrak, but also a lot of all-important whys — why did private passenger rail need to be rescued, why is our current system struggling, and so forth. It was especially helpful in the environmental justice section of my project, which in part tells the story of how a series of policy choices sent passenger rail in the United States into decline at a time when it could have been key to a greener future of travel.

Methodology

Personal Experience and Phenomenology

Much of this project is rooted in phenomenology, looking at how people experience train travel. In “A Way of Seeing People and Place,” David Seamon refers to phenomenology as the exploration and description of things or experiences as human beings experience them, or, more succinctly, “radical empiricism” (Seamon, 2000). He outlines three forms of phenomenology, each of which I have used in my project.

In first-person phenomenology, the researcher has direct contact with the phenomenon. Much of this project draws on my own experiences, including two trips across the United States and Canada in 2000 and 2001, and two cross-country trips during the Covid-19 pandemic, in

September 2020 and April 2021. These trips exist in memories, photos and some journaled notes. With the help of funding from the MALS program, I had the opportunity to make four additional long-distance domestic train trips while working on this project:

- to Rutland and back aboard Amtrak's Ethan Allan (following in the footsteps of Tony Hiss)
- from Flagstaff to Chicago aboard Amtrak's Southwest Chief (partially retracing my first long-distance train trip)
- from New York City to New Orleans aboard the Crescent
- from New Orleans to Chicago aboard the City of New Orleans

The last two trips gave me the opportunity to experience parts of the country I had not yet experienced by train (see Appendix for map of routes). Riding trains while working on the project enabled me to make more detailed and focused observations, and to have focused conversations with fellow travelers about their own experiences and their attitudes toward domestic rail travel.

Second, Seamon refers to existential-phenomenological research, which involves gathering descriptive accounts from respondents regarding their experience, with the aim of identifying underlying commonalities and patterns. I employed this while engaging in a handful of extended conversations, including author Tony Hiss, YouTube content creator and author Thibault Constant, and people I have met while traveling by train. Some of these conversations are explicitly cited in my project, while others help form one of my main points: that train travel fosters conversations with people we would not ordinarily speak to. In addition, I engaged with an online forum, Amtraktrains.com asking questions of rail enthusiasts about their own experiences, and using their answers in my project.

Finally, Seamon refers to hermeneutic-phenomenological research, which involves discovering meanings through texts. I used this approach with several travelogue books, looking at how authors have described their own experiences aboard long-distance trains, some daydreaming and introspective, and others describing their encounters with fellow passengers.

Additional Methodologies

Parts of my project also involve ethnography, looking at the social and cultural life of a long-distance train ride. In addition, I have used several books and articles about history and public policy, citing these as part of a narrative arc relating trains to social and environmental justice.

Evaluating the Journey

My capstone project is very much what I envisioned when I started this project. Having already pulled many of these ideas and themes together as a final course project, my goal was to break it apart into several “chapters” and give each of these chapters its own web page, expanding on each one with more in-depth stories and observations.

However, the more I read, the more I travel and the more I write, the more I find new material. For example, I only discovered the behavior setting theory of Roger Barker, or the phenomenology philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the final weeks of working on my project. This is one of the challenges that comes with diving deep into any topic, but more so for me, entering the program with a nontraditional academic interest and without a sharp initial focus on a final thesis or capstone project.

Much of my time in the MALS program was spent casting a wide net, taking classes of interest to see where they would lead me. But that, too, was fulfilling. One course example worth noting that I did not cite earlier: “Books of Marvels and Travels: The Middle Ages and Beyond,”

with Steven Kruger, introduced me to travel accounts from William of Rubruck, Marco Polo, Benjamin of Tudela, Ibn Battuta and much more. My final project was a 16-page analytical essay exploring Ibn Battuta’s identity as traveler, and how the extensive hospitality offered throughout the medieval Islamic world suggests this traveler’s identity was a “higher calling.” Though it had little relevance to my final project, it was a fascinating course, and it is likely that at no other time in my life would I have read these authors, certainly not with the conversation and interaction that a doctoral-level English course provided.

Thus, spending time casting a wide net was fulfilling, but also left me with less time to work on a focused project. It was helpful to spend the Spring 2022 semester completing independent study, reading a dozen books and producing several pieces of writing. I then spent Summer and Fall of 2022 continuing to read and write, while meeting monthly with my advisor. Given that I had spent a relatively short amount of time in the MALS program with an idea for my final project, I had considered taking an additional semester to continue reading, writing and working on this project. Ultimately, I decided to wrap up the project now to keep it from becoming too unwieldy, as it is already beyond 16,000 words.

I feel that the site is a good mix of academic theory and travel experiences — both mine and the experiences of others — told in a way that makes academic concepts accessible to the average reader. Further, by separating the content into several web pages, I enable readers to access topics that interest them, without committing to reading a single 16,000-word piece.

Next Steps

My intent is for slowspeedrail.com to be a living site, a home for my travel journals, which I have already begun compiling at slowspeedrail.com/travels (which is part of the site but not necessarily part of the capstone). In addition, I have spent some time writing similar material

on Medium.com/@Gragnani. Since our conversations in Kaitlin Mondello’s class nearly three years ago, I have felt that more people in academia should be writing on sites such as Medium for a public audience. I intend to adapt many of the ideas of my capstone project into shorter pieces on Medium to reach a wider audience, and possibly direct people to my capstone page. Also, while I have read dozens of relevant books while working on this project, I have come across many more that I would like to read — and several that I find I need to re-read. I trust that additional reading will inspire additional public writing. Without much effort, I have gathered a modest 108 followers on my Medium page. I hope to grow that following by publishing more regular pieces on my thoughts and research on slow travel. I have also shared photos and reels of train travel on my social media accounts, and I intend to continue that work as well.

In addition, I may consider publishing a piece in an academic journal that synthesizes some of the material in this project. A likely place for this would be *Travel Behaviour and Society*, a journal that “provides a discussion forum for major research in travel behavior, transportation infrastructure, transportation and environmental issues, mobility and social sustainability” and more.

Conclusion

In conversations with Elizabeth Macaulay about selecting a thesis or capstone topic, she advised me to choose something I would be happy to be immersed in for a significant length of time. I am grateful to have found that. My hope is that this project is not just an exploration of the convergence of psychology, social and environmental justice and train travel, but an inspiration to those who might be seeking something different from their travel experiences.

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