

Police Presence and Fare enforcement in Harlem: Examining the Experience of the MTA as Public Space by Harlem Residents

Isabella Oliva | Advised by Prof. Michelle Smith | Harlem In Theory | Spring 2020

WHY THE MTA?

Late 2019 and Early 2020 saw several city-wide protests regarding the Metropolitan Transit Authority's (MTA) fare crackdown and subsequent police presence in New York City subway stations. Police presence in MTA subway stations have long been a subject of debate, as fare evasion and increased police enforcement are commonplace in black working class neighborhoods such as Harlem. In increasing police presence in communities already disproportionately experiencing police violence, New York City severely limits Harlem residents' use of the public transit system,



Protestors in Harlem demonstrating against fare crackdowns and police presence in the MTA (Twitter user @Ashagaony, November 22, 2019)

OVERVIEW

The crackdown on fare evasion and subsequent protests raise the question of how Harlem Residents experience the New York City public transit system as a public space. The political value of public space is proposed by Professor Setha Low in her book *Spatializing Culture: the Ethnography of Space and Place* (2016) in which she proposes that public space is socially and politically productive. Low argues that public space contributes to a flourishing society in its capacity to foster community and individual well-being, social and economic relations, and social justice and democratic practices.

Fare crackdown and police presence in public transit threaten these contributions and thus the political productivity of the transit system. In *Political Consequences of the Carceral State* (2010), Lerman and Weaver demonstrate that increased interaction with criminal justice system negatively impact political socialization.

I will focus on Low's proposed constraints to social interaction on public space in order to argue that the involvement of government and private corporate interests in the public spaces limits the Harlem community's social and political development. In particular I will focus on privatization, and securitization, both of which influence fare crackdowns and subsequent police presence in Harlem subway stations.

In examining Harlem residents experience of the public transit system, I hope to demonstrate that public space--and particularly the New York Public Transit System--is politically important. These conclusions are increasingly important as New York City continues to revise its infrastructure (public housing, the public transportation system etc.) in the 21st century and policy makers and activists seek to involve politically and socially underdeveloped communities in New York City.



Police presence in Harlem subway station (New York Daily News, May 12, 2019)

METHODOLOGY

To further investigate the constraints placed on public transit as a public space for Harlem residents, I intended to employ ethnographic research, conducting interviews with Harlem residents, MTA workers, and Harlem-based activist/ protestors in order to ascertain their perspective on the matter. Qualitative data about the number of arrests made for fare evasion do not give a complete picture of how Harlem residents experience the restriction on their use of public space or what this means for them as citizens. The lack of scholarship on the matter contributes to why Harlemite's protests regarding the policing of fare evasion is not taken seriously by the MTA or other governing bodies.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I am unable to conduct this fieldwork myself and instead will rely on interviews conducted by journalists during the city-wide protests and demographic data regarding arrests and fare evasion. Furthermore, in light of these constraints, I revisited my theoretical texts (Low and Lerman and Weaver) in order to highlight the significance of ethnography as a politically significant method of research.



Photo of several homeless New Yorkers amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic (New York Daily News April 28, 2020)

REMAINING QUESTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic presents entirely new questions regarding Harlem's relationship with the MTA, many of which pertain to Harlem's-- and New York City's-- homeless population. Governor Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio have since deployed the NYPD to remove those who have camped out on the trains in order to seek shelter amidst the pandemic and 'control' the situation. At present, many Harlem residents, deigned essential workers, still need to use public transit in order to travel to work. While police deployment was proposed in order to protect those who still need to use the transit system to travel in during the city's shutdown, we must consider how these policies will negatively impact the community once the shutdown is lifted.

It is unclear exactly how COVID-19 will increase the constraints on 'public' transit as public space but at present the governance and securitization which were previously the subject of protests are increasing in the name of protecting citizens from the Pandemic.. Which citizens will benefit in the long term from these measures remains to be seen.