

Encounters convening publics: opposing politics and confronting trouble-making

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ABSTRACT

In this article we examine the outbursts of a white passenger on a London tram, antagonizing others through swearing, nationalist, racist and anti-immigrant talk and the responses of carriage members to her confrontational talk. Our analysis uses a video recording of the event made by a passenger that circulated widely on social and news media. We document multiple forms of response, including the video-witnessing itself. We describe how the trouble-making passenger antagonizes other passengers in order to produce opponents. In addition, we track how members of the carriage, in responding, show their right to respond, seek to avoid the terms of the confrontation and, once constituted as political opponents, their opposition to the politics being expressed. In examining the responses to the trouble-making and the politics being contested between the persons involved and, in tracking how public transport is attempted to be transformed into an ad hoc agora, we contribute to Barnett's work on convening public space, ordinary action, and politics in human geography.

Introduction: On Public Trouble

Many of us will have been in that situation where a passenger in public transport is making trouble by shouting at someone, be it the staff or other passengers. Most of us don't want to be the one that gets drawn in, that becomes their opponent. There is no easy exit from buses, trains and trams. There is an ordinary sense of doubt about becoming the person who both *speaks to* the opponent and who *speaks for* the other passengers, becoming an informal representative of a 'we'. We are aware that by acting as an opponent those other passengers might support us, anyhow they will almost certainly examine our claims and judge them and treat our speaking as speaking *for* them, as well as *to* them. Other passengers may or may not help us, may or may not agree with what we say, as what they would say. We likely have a sense too that responding to the trouble would lead to more trouble: escalation, violence and, down the line, questioning by the police and testifying in court. Such are the problems that begin to arise for passengers in the immediacy of being faced with the accountabilities raised by trouble in public which requires that those that respond, act as members of a public. One of the fears they face is that in trying to respond to the trouble, they are left on their own by the other passengers around them.

The late Clive Barnett was interested in the philosopher Stanley Cavell's sense of politics as knowing how to 'go on' in terms of how norms have meaning for communities and, more significantly, that in making political claims 'nothing guarantees that projecting meanings into new contexts will come off successfully, neither grasping universal principles or an appeal to conventional meaning' (Barnett 2017, p. 60). It is, as Barnett goes on to describe, a form of life where the emphasis is on life, and not form, where a communal or political 'we' is a fragile achievement. All the more so, as we shall see, when a public has been drawn together from, and as, commuters on a crowded tram at the end of a working day. In his reconceptualization of public space, Barnett (2017) asked geographers to shift away from the focus 'on spaces of co-presence'. The mistake he identifies amongst geographers is to pursue 'the 'materiality' of public space' (Barnett 2008a, p. 407). Thereby, geographers miss the sense of publicness which 'is something people do, rather than a space they inhabit' (ibid.). Although he wrote of the mobile quality of publicness, he would warn us against repeating the mistake of examining public transport as a special type of place, where the public sphere is grounded or materialised. Instead, we join him in arguing that public transport can become a public space, by way of what its travellers address to one another and what responses they receive. This possibility has been touched upon in mobility studies (Tuvikene et al. 2023) and geographies of speech (Ogborn 2020). Moreover, public transport would readily be accepted in Barnett's reconfiguration of democratic public action, because the creation of an ad hoc agora there, p.

'is parasitical on the material configurations and social relations laid down by other forms of activity, in the sense that it is dependent on these as its conditions of possibility, as well as in the sense that it is these conditions that in turn become the object of transformative public action' (2008, p. 414).

In particular, through the idea of encounters, Bissell and others have analysed events where passengers are forced into, or exposed to, political problems on city buses and commuter trains each of which raises questions of wider concern (Bissell 2016; Kemmer et al. 2022; Wilson 2011).

Seeking to contribute to Barnett's (2008a; 2008b; 2017) arguments around convening publics, we examine the contingent of the public, from a crowd, through responses to what is hearable as confrontational public and political speech. To this end, we re-examine a widely reported

incident from 2011 of trouble on a London tram where a white passenger was video recorded, by another passenger, shouting, lamenting, insulting and provoking neighbouring passengers using language that was hearable as political and contestable as nationalistic, anti-immigrant and racist. Rather than analyse the later responses to the recording by journalists, cultural critics and others, we will use the recording to return to the events in their contingency, seeking to recover the problems, possibilities and actions of its local cohort of passengers.

In seeking to understand trouble-making which uses political disagreements, we are concerned with the struggles of passengers to respond to claims about national identity, immigration and race pursued by an aggrieved antagonist. What we want to explore further, in this paper, is the local organisation of passengers confronting and opposing a political antagonist and, in doing so, finding themselves becoming a politicised public. Barnett's orientation to injustice asks for 'a heightened appreciation for the situated contexts in which grievances and harms are generated, recognized, problematized, and acted upon' (2017, p. 17). In the antagonistic encounter, which we examine, we hear recognisable grievances being claimed and contested (for a fuller analysis of the postcolonial aspects, see Gilroy 2012). In situations of confrontation, where criteria are not clear and the application of rules is insufficient, we show how anyone might, and how a specific person does, oppose contestable claims, in public, and that they do so as an ordinary and accountable way of acting in and sharing public transport.

The Private Language Argument And Arguments Producing The Public

Barnett (2008a) identifies several meanings of public from which he establishes its importance to democracy. In this article, there are two uses of the term public which are of interest to us, where one use of public is happening in and activating the other. The first is an identifying and differentiating prefix for a distinct approach to psychological concepts such as motive, emotion and cognition, what is known as the 'private language' argument (Cavell 1999). 'Publicly available' signals ethnomethodology's alternative to this dominant approach to psychological processes which treats them as private and only indirectly accessible. It refuses to defer understanding and explanations for the varied mental psychological aspects of human action to the disciplines which build upon such a form of cognitive psychology. Returning mental concepts to ordinary language and social practices as publicly and intersubjectively available is built upon Wittgenstein's dismantling of the idea of 'private language' (Coulter 1979, Edwards 1997, Lynch 1993). The public availability of our thinking, feeling and sensing opens the door to human geography and other disciplines recovering a concern with domains of social action, including public reason, which it long ago ceded to behavioural and cognitive psychology. The second related sense of 'public' that is relevant is, simply put, people doing things in the open. These are activities that have expected places for doing them, in order to be public, which are then produced and recognised by members as appearing in public. Goffman (1963, 1971) lays out much of the groundwork for one well-known way into understanding how people organise space which has concerns for both its publicness and its privateness, including transport spaces, and his work is taken up in later, and less well known, ethnomethodological studies (D'Antoni et al. 2022; De Stefani & Mondada 2018; Lee & Watson 1993; Smith 2019). What is distinctive in ethnomethodological approaches to public space is their alternate conception of the publicness and privateness of expected, but also unexpected, places as constituted by their members (Ablitt 2021).

A central intersection between these two senses of public is in situations where there are persons using publicly available methods for producing recognisable publics. This intersection is most

obvious in the mass activities of protesting crowds (Amin 2008; Drury 2020; Reicher 2001) but also in myriad other occasions for public appearance, where persons use publicly available methods for appearing as particular types of character, actor or representative, in relation to recognisable publics. Public transport is one of the common places we have for appearing in public as a commuter, tourist, young mother and many other possible categorial identities (Wilson 2011).

Historically, public transport has been a site for disciplining populations by codes of conduct, partition through age, class, gender and racial segregations (Hutchinson 2003; Sheller & Urry 2003). At the same time, it is a space of proximity, manifest in relations of temporary neighbourliness (e.g. who is sitting or standing beside whom) and encounter (Chowdhury & McFarlane 2022). Public transport, as an institution, is both a system and a collection of types of places and vehicles. In its vehicles, persons have a right to be there and to be transported, with a 'ticket' of whatever kind. At first glance it appears that it is populated by unacquainted persons and groups *en passant*. A more sustained examination reveals that is not so: for example, certain carriages at certain times have locals, regulars or users who consider it as theirs, have seats they usually sit at etc. All are passengers yet amongst these there are recognisable categories that have prioritisation, parents with babies, elderly, the frail etc (Muñoz 2021).

Goffman (1963; 1971) was attentive to how persons are both presenting self and monitoring others in public transport where they 'must keep within the spirit or ethos of the situation; he must not be *de trop* or out of place' (1963, p. 11). As a live concern, in the midst of our travelling with others, each of us are in the company of a potential general public of specific others who are themselves recognisable as school kids, couples, families, parties, crowds and more. As a passenger, we find a sense of the crowd, we find a relation to the groups we are amongst, as at home with, or estranged from (Bissell 2016; Wilson 2011). It might be a railway carriage of mainly office workers with white faces. It might be a bus of students hearably speaking and flowing between Spanish, Arabic and English. Once the passengers are there, as individuals, groups and a collective, they can be analysed, judged, complained about, praised and, in the event that follows, antagonised. Once categorised as part of a group, their categorisation provides a resource for not only rendering intelligible but also judging how that group conduct themselves in public. Central to our concern in this paper, passengers are available for those looking to find a site of confrontation, to try and convene them as their opposition, allies and as a public audience (Barnett 2008a).

Ethnomethodological and conversation analytic (EMCA) studies which pursue the uses of insults that use race, immigration, national identity, parenthood and more in antagonistic events and relationships reveal a complex picture (Shrikant 2020; Stokoe & Edwards 2007; Xie et al. 2021). Stokoe and Edwards (2007) show how reports of racial insults are reflexively tied to reporting on disputes and confrontations amongst members acting as neighbours and not as a public. Complainants in police interviews and mediation services reported that their neighbours were racist via their use of recognisably racist phrases such as 'go back to your own country'. The reported insults were part of describing neighbours' escalating encounters which end in assault and/or damage to property. Notably a racial insult is treated as a reasonable justification for shifting from a verbal dispute to assault or property damage. Whitehead et al. (2018) provide one of the few studies on trouble-making leading to physical fights in public places, notably the majority of their cases are in transport spaces. They tracked the initiation and escalation toward violence, where insults based around race, gender and class categories are used to escalate the conflict.

In the recording which was circulated on multiple UK news outlets after being uploaded on to Youtube¹, we will witness swearing, racial, gendered and migrant insults which are reflexively tied to what appears to be a project of airing grievances, looking for conflict with both anyone and someone (both targets are tried). While the event did not result in a physical fight, the antagonist used a similar search procedure for finding places and their inhabitants to fight with. Jackson-Jacobs (2004) shows that there are logics to places where youths go to have better resources at hand to start a fight (e.g. parties, bars & cafeterias). Although public transport is not mentioned, we will have a grasp on why it is also a place to look for a fight, by the end of our paper. Given the moral problem of physical fights as a major escalation, Jackson-Jacobs (2004) shows how physical conflict becomes a reasonable next step for one, or more parties, on the basis of its methodical pursuit, the sort of pursuit which we will examine in the material that follows (see also Collins 2008).

On other sorts of crowd troubles in public transport, Chowdhury and McFarlane (2022) document through the retrospective accounts of passengers, sexual assaults from other crowd members in trains in Tokyo. There, ‘male commuters make full use of the obscurity lent by the crowded trains to grope women passengers’ (2022, p. 10). Using the crowd to hide the identity of the attacker will stand in stark contrast with our troublemaker, who will is not at all hidden and will declare her identity to her neighbours. In both encounters, public transport carriages are places where fellow passengers cannot easily escape the trouble-maker. Bissell (2016) captures that quality in his field story of a group of boys taunting and threatening train passengers who respond by avoiding, ignoring and confronting the boys. In the sites of the transportation network, passengers’ avoidance of initiating, or pursuing, relationships is at work in the face of the many new or familiar persons in their proximity. The proximity, potential intensity and a lack of easy escape brings with it a heightened awareness of our own desire to remain undisturbed and our desire not to disturb others (Bissell 2010; Jirón et al. 2010). Meantime, for those who wish to disturb others, the vehicle’s crowdedness can be exploited in forms of unwanted attention and for exercising disgust, shame and repulsion upon fellow passengers.

Four Responses To Trouble-Making

As we noted at the outset, one or more people shouting their grievances is a familiar enough scene in crowded carriages. Shouting’s identifying loudness in a public place activates its publicness by making the shouter’s speech, hearable by all (Bissell 2016). Hearable practices in public places seek to produce, and are recognizable to, different collectivities (De Stefani & Mondada 2018; D’Antoni et al. 2022). A singing busker in a railway carriage attempts to produce the carriage-members as an audience. Complaining about the lack of seats, or the ticket inspector asking for tickets, are actions that expect responses from people as passengers. As Barnett (2008a) argued, complaining about a topic like the state of the nation produces a public space and, in this case, it is produced as looking for opponents through its exclusions. There is a limited array of possible members’ responses available, each of which falls in-between appearing in public and speaking (or not) *for*, *to* and *as* a public: becoming an opponent, becoming a witness, becoming a victim, becoming a bystander, becoming a local audience, relatedly, becoming a local public (Lee & Watson 1993). In selecting different courses of action, persons become, on that basis, an incumbent of distinct categories, though these categorisations are constantly open to transformation through further action.

At the beginning of the recording, we witness a passenger seated with a young child on her lap and hear her speaking in a raised voice. ‘What’s this country come to. A load of black people and a load of fucking Polish’. Her talk is already hearable by everyone, though not responded to by

anyone as contestable speech. We could categorise her here as a trouble-maker which does capture elements of what she seems to be looking for, yet it would diminish the political aspects of her speech. Her talk is designed as an ‘arguable utterance [which]... may contain objectionable features’ (Maynard 1985, p. 3) that, if it is contested, both projects launching a dispute and producing its respondent as an opponent. By using terms marked by racial and national categories, she is enticing opponents into a familiar and charged political debate, yet she lacks a specific recipient (Reynolds 2011). To locally produce a public through a public matter, she provides the state of the country as her topic. In her racialised and anti-immigrant account, we begin to have a sense of how Gilroy (2012) hears a ‘postcolonial melancholia’ in her speech. For the passengers, examining who they can hear speaking objectionably – a woman with a young child balanced on her lap – she then poses a more immediate problem: how and who could respond to such a figure.

For those present in an emerging conflict, they have a ‘turn-to’ mechanism as a resource which draws upon who is entitled and expected to deal with the trouble (Sacks 1992). One of the specificities of public transport, is the local turn-to mechanism first selects a driver, guard, or other representative of the transport authority, where, by comparison, in a public park, it would be the keeper, ranger or police (Ablitt 2021). In the absence of such a party, a selection problem arises of who has both the right and the capacity to respond to the trouble (some passengers solve that problem by turning to their phones, potentially messaging authorities elsewhere). The targets of her insults are a category of passenger which the turn-to device would not select, yet they are the very parties that the antagonist is trying to get a rise out of.

Before examining, in more detail, the responses by other passengers to the actions of the troublemaker, we want to begin with the recording of the event on a mobile phone as itself both our way into the event as a later public audience, and one of the routine contemporary responses to trouble in public.

1. Video-witnessing

Witnessing and recording events with a smartphone is one of the now commonplace ways in which ‘bystanders’ become part of those events (Broth et al. 2014). They reflexively configure those events as of public interest which require recording because there are matters for later judgement by a wider public. They are one of the ways, through social media or news media, that witnesses try and convene a public (Barnett 2008a). The recording begins with our antagonist (for brevity, we’ll refer to her as ‘Ag’ from now on) coming into shot a little unsteadily and there appear to be fingers over the lens. When Ag looks briefly at the camera, it moves away from her. Evident in its opening is a lack of preparedness and uncertainty in initiating the recording. As the events progress, the shooting shifts from being covert to more overt and more confident. There are points where we can see Ag briefly inspecting the person filming her. Reporting on the event the Daily Mail claimed that it was ‘secretly filmed’², while it might have begun that way, it transforms into publicly available documentation of the trouble, and perhaps also serves as a means of trying to end it. As part of the video-witness becoming more explicit in her documentation of the event, the filming alters from an unsteady to a steady shot of Ag before, at its most noticeable, moving the phone to follow the back and forth between Ag and her opponents.



Figure 1 – *Video-witness briefly showing their face. Original uploader: Youtube User ladyk89³*

Significantly, the video witness turns the camera to briefly reveal her own face, a brown face. Moreover, her shot of herself is timed to the moment when Ag shifts to shouting 'black' at her first opponent. As a video practice, it is managing the accountability associated with 'categorizing the categorizer,' wherein members of settings 'display an orientation to the relevance of their own racial identities, and the common sense knowledge associated with them, for how they report on and intervene in matters of race' (Whitehead 2009, p. 339). Her intervention, as the recorder of these events, makes her one of the potential targets of Ag during the event but also for a later public judging her position as a witness (Xie et al. 2021). While eyewitnesses do not usually film themselves, here the shot is used to show a particular category of eyewitness whose entitlement to make this record is vouched for as one of those parties suffering the insults.

Having briefly examined the recording practices, we will next trace our way through three other responses to Ag. We will examine on what basis and how members of the carriage avoid or build upon Ag's search for opponents.

2. Opponent 1: Threatening expulsion and escalating to the worst slur

For passengers, hearing that they and others are being more, or less, directly targeted by Ag's speech, what is their basis for claiming involvement? One claim is that, in the face of trouble in a public place, they have the right to act as a member of the public, where that very category is made relevant by trouble which requires response. 'Member of the public' does not differentiate one from another, all passengers are potentially members of the public. Ag's targeting through

her national identity construction and her insults, confers rights on to those so targeted to respond.

The first party who challenges Ag does so, early in the recording, just after Ag has targeted three other passengers in turn with the accusation ‘you ain’t English’, which has, then, already raised national identity and her denial of that category to them. She finished that round of targeting individual passengers, with ‘none of you are fucking English’. None of the first three targets opposes her accusations, which is unsurprising given they are accusations and so direct challenges rather than pre-challenges, where the latter serves to lure a party into conflict (Reynolds 2011). One of the targeted passengers assents, ‘No I’m not no’.

When we join her in Transcript 1 she is trying a different tack from targeting someone in particular. Ag is instead lamenting aloud, speech which is designed for anyone in the tram carriage to challenge. She does it on the basis of the national category ‘My British’ which, by the ‘my’ rather than ‘our’, she thereby speaks to her addressees, rather than for them (transcript 1, panel 1). When opposition to her speech begins, it is then, interestingly and deliberately, not to directly oppose her possessional claims to national identity.



Transcript 1, Part 1 – intervening & trying to avoiding confrontation⁴

Given Ag appears to be looking for an opponent, we can note that this passenger (Opponent 1) intervenes rather than responds to specific insults. Her intervention is prefaced with the politeness marker of ‘excuse me’ (transcript 1, panel 2), though we can note that ‘excuse me’ more likely prefigures disaffiliation, challenge and complaint (Schegloff 2005). As an initiating action, Opponent 1 also seeks to restart the action sequence – moving away from the topic to a problem with her current audience.

The account for the intervention: ‘there is little kids on the tram’, does not directly address the political challenges, instead dealing with Ag’s public speech as a different category of trouble: swearing. It draws on and makes public the presence of children. It makes relevant Ag’s identity as a mother while refusing to take-up the racial or national categories used by Ag. Her formulation of the problem of Ag’s speech is hearable as speaking for all the children in the

carriage and speaking for all those passengers concerned about that issue. In response, Ag accepts the factual aspect ‘yeah fine’, and, seemingly, its implications. After a short delay, she notes her own child’s presence, making relevant her identity as a mother too (panel 4). It is at just that point that Opponent 1 threatens Ag with two ‘if then’ consequences (Hepburn & Potter 2011). The second is, in response to her identity as a fellow mother, to ‘have respect’ but the first and more significant in terms of escalation is removing her from the space: ‘take you off’. In the violent bus confrontation, described by Whitehead et al. (2018), the opponent there calls upon the bus driver to ask if they would like that Antagonist removed. To make trouble in a public place projects removal from that space as one of its central and available sanctions while also refusing the right of the passenger to produce the space for other purposes, in this case, as a political agora. Meantime, and in just this way, Ag has lured a passenger into opposing her, so she now can begin to pursue her project of producing the tram carriage as a public space for airing her grievances.

In her next move, Opponent 1 responds to Ag, no longer in terms of what has to be *done to* Ag and instead what Ag *should do*. While an element of threat has been deleted, the upshot is delivered in an upward shift in affect from Opponent 1 – she has begun shouting (panel 7):



Transcript 1, Part 2: Becoming angry, escalation and anti-immigrant phrases

After a brief round of direct insults, Opponent 1 returns to Ag being ejected from the train (panel 9). The agent for the ejecting is reformulated, this time, not as herself, nor the opponent, but ‘someone’. To say ‘someone’ is to call upon other persons for help (if weakly) in that it allows other passengers to step in for her. Her call is not responded to by a member of the carriage stepping forward, or, at least, not yet. Ag continues escalating by repeating ‘I dare you’ (panel 10) and, reconfiguring Opponent 1’s previous turn as a threat. In response, Opponent 1 steps down her escalating, to a reprimand: ‘just watch your language’, which is closing-implicative (panel 11).

Unsurprisingly, Ag does not end her speech there, instead, continuing to escalate the confrontation by provoking her with the hearably anti-immigrant and racist taunt: ‘go back to where you come from’ (panel 12). Her use of the taunt is heard as emerging and returning to her

earlier racist and xenophobic taunts, the difference now is that she has a particular person engaged. However, when she says ‘go back to where you come from’, she shifts her face toward others in the carriage. While, then, she is engaging Opponent 1, she is also her taunts as a way of pursuing others to join as allies of her opponent. She is continuing to pursue her incitement of the others passengers, using their availability as a potential public opposition to produce them as such, and as the representatives of a constituency (immigrants) that she wants to speak *to* and *against*.

In her next turn, she ratchets up her taunting by uttering the worst race slur available, yet in a maladroit way. Ag is hearably searching for a place formulation that will fit with her anti-immigrant taunt. She starts with ‘si’, tries again with ‘nig’, produces ‘niggeragua’ and finishes with the empty ‘wherever you come from’.



Transcript 1, part 3, p. Going extreme and messing up the insult

Ag ultimately, and stumbingly, produces a word that manages to merge a starkly racial insult with a country suffix ‘agua’. It has sound similarities with ‘Nicaragua’, which as a place formulation fails, given that it does not have racialised and/or immigrant associations in the UK, though is loosely geopolitical. The public availability of Ag’s struggle is taken advantage of by Opponent 1’s ‘where is that’, underlining Ag’s failure to formulate a recognisable country.

Upcoming racist talk is frequently preceded by speech perturbations, consequently Ag’s stumbling is itself hearable as projecting objectionable speech (on racist, sexist and other ‘x-ist’ talk, see Stokoe 2015; Speer 2015). Even though mangled, she is hearable as meaning the ‘n-word’. An extreme insult which will provide justification for others to join Opponent 1, and two passengers do. One person, sitting beside the video-witness, says ‘watch out’ and ‘no no no’. Behind Ag, a young man stands up (we will return to what happens to him in our final section). What using the ‘n-word’ seems to have accomplished is, by uttering it at the end of a series of steps, maximised its offence for the audience, while also enticing more passengers to respond.

It is at this point that Opponent 1 shifts into the racialized political argument which Ag has been seeking. ‘You guys’ (panel 15) is hearable by the rest of the carriage, via the constituency claimed by Ag, as white Britons (Sacks 1992, p. 238). It would be easy to treat what she is doing as only insulting, but it is doing more, it is responding to the anti-immigrant ‘go back to where you come from’ with an account of her presence as a legitimate and necessary migrant. Building on the very structures of her opponent’s taunt, she taunts Ag as belonging to a category of white persons who are failing to contribute to the nation through work (Goodwin 2018).

In becoming an opponent, the woman has been singled out by Ag. While the Opponent’s hope might have been to speak for passengers and parents as a collective who are unhappy with Ag’s public conduct and seek to end it, she is instead slowly drawn into speaking to Ag as a

representative of white British citizens and as part of a conflict around race, nation and immigration. Her speaking-for is of a certain kind: she does not turn to the carriage to address them as the ‘we’, proposing for them what should be done to Ag. Instead, it is in her emerging confrontation with Ag that the collective, whom she is speaking for, may or may not emerge in how they, in turn, respond to her actions and are, anyway, now her audience. As a first opponent, she has accomplished and will be aware that, she is affiliated with other passengers, when, hearably, they shush Ag (panel 11), stand up (panel 14) and call out their shared opposition, ‘no no’ (panels 13, 14). It is not a choral clapping or cheering, instead it is a distribution of speaking as building an opposition to the conduct of a public speaker.

3. Opponent 2: Reasons to confront racialized aggression

Harvey Sacks pursued the categorization practices through which we, as professional analysts and as ordinary members of society, use to make sense of people’s actions. His theorizing of categories originated in the analysis of the categories used by a young child in saying: ‘the baby cried the mommy picked it up’ (Sacks 1992). We mention his example because it is that same set of category-organized relationships that are drawn upon when a second opponent steps in and provides her reasons for responding to Ag. A baby is heard to cry out in the ongoing confrontation between Opponent 1 and Ag. After the baby cries, loud enough for those nearby to hear, the mother picks up, not the baby, but the baton of opposition from Opponent 1 to become a second opponent. At this possible transition point, she is not the only person trying to intervene but is the one whose baby is crying (Transcript 2, Panel 1). From the previous pans of the video-witness, Opponent 2 has been following the confrontation.



Transcript 2, Part 1: ‘Now you’re waking my baby up’

If we examine Opponent 2’s intervention: a different passenger speaks first at the next potential transition point, using the polite summons ‘my lady’ (panel 1) to try and gain the attention of Ag (which is not gained). Instead Opponent 2 takes the floor with a directive: ‘look’, to pursue Ag’s attention. Her right to intervene and the problem which she is responding to, is constructed

similarly yet distinctly. She accounts for her right to speak to Ag through the publicly hearable cry of her baby (e.g. not all kids in the carriage) and their suffering. Instead of proposing ejection, she asks Ag initially to ‘calm it down’ before escalating to ‘shut your mouth’. We have a sense of the collectiveness of the opponents in the directive both not including Opponent 1 while also continuing her project of ending Ag’s talk.

By contrast Ag changes her form of address, situating Opponent 2, not as her opponent, instead, as potentially affiliated to her. ‘Where does she come from’ is posed to Opponent 2 as a legitimate question to ask. Except that the question has its part, of course, in an attack on Opponent 1 as a representative for immigrants. Rather than antagonising another recognisably white person, and thereby making her an opponent, she is attempting to build Opponent 2 as part of the constituency whom she is speaking for. Opponent 2, meantime, had not directly addressed what Opponent 1 had said as insulting or racist, so her stance is not clear yet. Initially, Opponent 2 provides a softer directive: ‘look shoosh’, before picking up, in a slightly delayed manner and for different purposes, their racially and accent-matched categories (panels 4 to 5). With ‘and I’m English’, she uses the locally constructed resource of colour and the contrast built from her softer directive, to then express, with remarkable economy, her complete disagreement with Ag and dismantle Ag as successfully speaking *for* white English citizens (panels 5 to 6). There is an audible ‘thankyou’ (panel 6) which would make for a significant acknowledgement of Opponent 2’s intervention (however, there is another person speaking, drowned out for the most part by Opponent 1, so it could also be acknowledging something which they said).

Unsurprisingly, and in the face of disagreement from Opponent 2, Ag refuses to shut up, providing her account for doing so: ‘someone’s gotta talk up for these lot’ (panel 7). ‘Someone’ here neatly builds her becoming a political speaker who has identified a public problem and so is convening a public, to be heard.



Transcript 2, Part 2: Using the publicly available appearances of the passengers

In Ag’s account of her speech, building too on her earlier ‘my England is fuck all’, she is speaking as a member of an ‘England’ who has a duty, in ‘gotta’, to speak publicly. and to show her reason for her public confrontation and argument to a person she categorises as white English, whom she is speaking for. Ag directs Opponent 2’s attention ‘look’ (panel 8) to the crowd (and audience) standing in the carriage behind her. Their appearances as a collective, using the extreme case formulation of the ‘whole fucking tram’ and her repetition, treat her evidence as obvious. Opponent 2’s response is brief: ‘no it ain’t’ and stays with a flat opposition: it’s not the evident picture of Ag’s claims. The visual evidence is not there to be used by Ag, to be drawn into looking and examining the carriage would be to look at the other passengers as racialized, and to do so as a white English inspector of that scene (Goodwin & Goodwin 1997). As a public speaker, she opposes the speech itself as sayable. She refuses the building of an alliance with Ag and thereby, for other members of the carriage, confronts and refuses Ag’s ‘my England’ white

non-migrant English to be the basis for such an assessment of the crowd in the tram. The shouting match has continued with Opponent 2 – though a shouting match is perhaps what was needed to show passion and to show passionate opposition. Let us move to the distinct difficulties for the racially and age-targeted young male passenger who stood up earlier in the conflict.

4. Opponent 3 – Standing up, held back and consoled

Our inquiry into the troubles of responding to trouble-making and transforming a carriage into a public space for political disagreement has examined two people who stepped forward from the crowd to oppose Ag. Neither of them were directly pursued by her before they responded, they both made motherhood relevant in their attempts to end the trouble-making. Earlier in the confrontation we can now trace out elements of the young man's response to her antagonism and the self-organising of the passengers in their response to his response. He was directly pursued by Ag, stood up and showed he was selecting himself to respond. Several visually available elements come into play for those around him: escalation, the mismatch in the pairing of the opponents, the projection of physical conflict and Ag's and their (and our) analysis of his relevant racial, age and gender categories.

As we noted earlier, he is in the seat behind Ag's right shoulder. She picks him out by leaning over to direct her speech at him, this is before Opponent 1 has responded.



Transcript 3: Directing antagonism at specific passengers

After 'what's this country come to...'. she twists around to say 'my British...' at him (panel 2), before then turning away to continue '...is fuck all' (panel 3). That her grievance is heard by him, as directed at him, is evident in his turning his head toward her. What does it do to direct 'my British' at just this passenger? By directing her voice at him, by her ongoing racial categorisations, she makes him a potential respondent – which in this case, as we have said, means an opponent. As we showed earlier, the possessive 'my British' rather than 'our British' is there to provoke others by excluding them from that national category.

Ag succeeds in involving him, though she seems unaware of her success and he is monitoring her actions from then on. It is when Ag produces her merged N-word and country category that he stands up.



Transcript 4, part 1. Standing up to racial slurs and becoming an opponent

The rest of the witnesses make sense of his standing in relation to its timing on the N-word. There is more to the recognizability of his standing. Opponent 3 takes his bag off, showing thereby a readiness for one form or another of physical action, whether it be taking her off the train, or, fighting with her (Whitehead et al. 2018). In response to Opponent 3 standing up, the person beside him reaches up to him and a woman diagonally across from him immediately shoves her leg out to block his path (panel 5). Part of the logic of fights becoming violent is that potential current or next opponents are encouraged or discouraged by members of the crowd (Collins 2013).



Transcript 4 part 2 – Holding Opponent 3 back

The others, holding Opponent 3 back, continue to do so once he sits down. Meantime, Ag and Opponent 2 remain in the struggle, on which Opponent 3 continues to witnessably focus his attention. In panel 7, the woman that earlier blocked his way with her leg, adjusts her position to touch him. With an arm held out across the aisle, there is little mistaking their restraining yet also, in their touch, their consoling as a collective who are caring for him. Yet why collectively hold him back in the first place, how have they found him unsuitable as an opponent? There are a number of criteria being exercised. He is category mis-matched, he does not share Ag's age, gender, nor is he witnessably the parent of a young child. As Jackson-Jacobs (2013) has shown, opponents are examined to assess the fairness of the fight, they should be equally matched before it should go ahead. His actions display a potential escalation of the confrontation not toward political confrontation but toward a physical conflict. Beyond the mis-match of opponents, however, a young black man is analysable as understandably one of the most passionate and the most hurt because he has been picked out and upon, by Ag.



Transcript 5 – Consoling Opponent 3

The passengers that have restrained Opponent 3 continue to show their support and their sympathy for his emotional response. The person immediately beside hugs him. One of the women from across the aisle gets up to join in hugging him. She sustains the hug while they turn together to watch Ag continuing her fight with Opponent 1. In one sense, this is part of the routine methods members have of helping a worked-up and angry opponent back down from physical violence in a confrontation (Jackson-Jacobs 2013). Yet, the political significance of what is happening is all the more apparent in that it is not simply that Opponent 3 has been targeted. As Jackson-Jacobs (2013) notes, violence typically erupts over seemingly trivial matter, here, what is at stake is whether and how a person making such a public and political set of statements, accusations and insults will be contested and who among the passengers is entitled to do it. In this way the logics of looking for a fight displace those of looking for political opposition and affiliation. While Opponent 3 has been halted in becoming an opponent, he is not being disaffiliated with. Instead, the work of the collective is to show, through how they restrain him, their recognition of his injury and their standing toward him through their response to his passion (Cavell 2005).

Around Ag there is a differentiation of the attack amongst the members of the public who are, themselves, monitoring what is being done to whom (Sacks 1992). They witness Opponent 3 being targeted. When Opponent 3 shows that he is hurt, they are ready to care for him. Each of the carers, in the racialised distribution of the conflict themselves are white and thereby not targets nor is their entitlement to respond straightforward. There is other work to do in the crowd in relation to their standing toward the young man who, they find themselves in the position to respond as restrainers, carers and recognisers of his injury.

Conclusion: The Trouble With Politics And The Politics Of Trouble

The activity of public-making inheres not in gathering, nor even in assembling, but in this activity of convening, that is, in calling out to others, attracting their attention. (Barnett 2008a, p. 411)

With no congress or parliament or town hall to hear her public pronouncements, Ag used a tram and its passengers to try and convene an agora for her. Part of her vulnerability in her search for an available public, is that her fellow passengers were not gathered as a political crowd, even though she uses them for that purpose and, in their responses, they showed their lack of desire to become political opponents or allies. Staying with her confrontational talk we begin to understand how transport is constituted by members as a public space in collective responses to her 'claims of belonging, citizenship, rights to the city [or nation], rights to dwell or to move' (Sheller 2023, p. 3161-63). The category of the passenger, although seemingly omnirelevant,

abides as a retreat, refuge or disclaimer. Opponents, as we have shown, use categories of carers for children, or babies, to contest the speech as offensive and unsuitable for children. In the making of claims to speak for others, as parents, as passengers, as citizens, in encounters, like this one, we find solidarities and divisions, supporters and opponents (Bissell 2016; Wilson 2011). We find who comes forward and who stays back, in trying to represent an 'us' in response to trouble, where here it is political trouble but not only – it is also immigrants' trouble, racial trouble, travel trouble and children's trouble.

For scholars of the public, of emotions, of transport and spaces, our article has opened up how a collective, as its lived work, in categorial accountabilities of neighbouring, parenthood, immigrant, race, and national identity, responds to trouble emerging in its midst. Publicness, as Barnett (2008a) puts it, in preference to 'the public', has no proper place. As we noted at the outset of this paper, Barnett argued strongly for geographers to let go of their prioritisation of particular spaces, such as parks and urban squares 'as scenes of genuine public life and authentic public expression' (2008, p. 406). Publicness emerges in addressing others and in the citation of public matters. This is not to say that public transport has not traditionally been devalued and overlooked as a component of our co-present public spaces, one for which recent mobility scholars are advancing 'the claim that public transport is public space and analys[ing] what conditions its publicness' (Tuvikene et al. 2023, p. 2964). Yet if we try to analyse what conditions its publicness we risk returning to an emphasis on the *spatiality* of publicness which Barnett warned against, where he asks us, instead, to foreground 'publicness as process' (2008, p. 407).

In this paper, the tram carriage has the appeal of appearing like the contained, circumscribed space of Speakers Corner in Hyde Park and it is that quality that Ag exploits, yet, as we have seen, her attempt to convene a public for a political conversation is neither welcome nor ignorable. Unwelcome and unignorable, not because of a desire to avoid political talk but because her address towards other passengers is inextricable from her trouble-making. Her escalations project physical violence and her seeking to injure others on the basis of race, migration and gender. As Barnett would point out, it is not so different from posting an unwelcome political opinion in an internet forum thread, 'there is no reason to suppose that these face-to-face encounters are any freer from uncertainty and indeterminacy than stretched-out, distanced relationships.' (Barnett 2008, p. 410). In Ag's attempt to speak for one public and speak to another, she, and they, produced the distinctive collectiveness which convenes what is happening as a public matter and not the convening of 'families, parties, friendship networks, or bureaucracies' (Barnett 2008, p. 411).

Amongst the members of the tram, some avoid provocations, some become witnesses, some put up their phones as shields. Our attention was devoted to those who oppose the trouble-maker, who have to come to terms with the kind of trouble it is. We have described elements of how each member of the carriage shows their rights to speak as a representative of the passengers or of parents or of the politicised groups whose emotions this antagonist is trying and succeeding in stirring. It is striking how, without the standing toward one another in the friendships and marriages that Cavell (2005) wrote of, these members of a crowded carriage in their responses as more than passengers, they find themselves as a collective and to be a collective and they care for one another and response to detestable speech as a matter of public concern.

Notes

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/28/tram-passenger-racist-abuse-arrested>
2. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-12900/Emma-West-secretly-filmed-racist-rant-tram-Nov-2011.html>
3. In using still images, which are available from the multiple copies in circulation in the public domain, for critical purposes, we acknowledge Youtube for what appears to have been the first hosting of the video. We acknowledge ladyk89 for the original recording.
4. A blur filter has been applied to the images to show our desire to anonymise the persons recorded, particularly the child of the antagonist.

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