



# Changing geographies of the passenger: Heterogeneous subjects on the move

Jean-Baptiste Frétigny, Weiqiang Lin

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**Abstract:**

At the intersection of transport geography and mobilities studies, scholars have paid increasing attention to passengering as a key characteristic in transport systems and a window through which one can understand how transport unfolds on the ground. In this editorial to the virtual special issue, we contribute to these debates by thinking through how passengers and passenger groups are deeply heterogeneous in nature, being far from singular or discrete, and escaping easy definitions of what passengering is or does. We discuss such variability in passenger formations and roles in three ways. First, we consider how passengering is a nonreplicable process involving different compositions of people each time. Then, we highlight passengers' inconstant roles and subjectivities while on the move. And finally, we delineate how the act/art of passengering can be extended across multiple time-spaces involving and exceeding immediate transport environments. We show that these three prompts have important implications for transport infrastructures and services, as well as for transport design and planning. By tackling these ideas, the papers in this issue offer new insights on the spatialities of transport and on the site-specific productions of passengering.

**Key words:** Passengering; Subjectivities; Mobilities; Time-spaces; Transport design; Transport planning

**1. Geographies of the passenger**

Over the last decade, the subject of passengering has come to the fore of transport studies. While appearing nondescript and mundane, the activity constitutes a significant part of transport experiences for many people, and is an important consideration in the daily practicalities of a person's travels (see, for example, Binnie et al., 2007). In recent years, both academics and practitioners have taken this topic into the planning domain, turning micro transport spaces such as stations, platforms and the interiors of transport vehicles—from aircraft to buses—into objects of design and improvement (see Fernandes et al., 2017; Rui et al., 2015; Vink and Brauer, 2016). With this increasing interest in the minutiae of passengering, transport studies have also gradually opened up a new line of inquiry that used to be on the margins of more conventional concerns such as networks and nodes.

Within geography, there has been a growing attention to passengering as well. In transport geography specifically, one notable collection of work is found in Bissell et al.'s (2011) special issue (in this journal) on the topic. Here, the authors lay out a foundational, socio-cultural framework for thinking about and researching the 'figure of the passenger'. This discussion spans four themes. The first pertains to the social nature of passenger experiences; the second focuses on processes and practices that produce the passenger; the third considers the material affordances of transport experiences; and, lastly, the fourth explores the relationship between passengers and transport structures. For the authors, training an analytical lens on the social production of the passenger affords

expository insights into how quotidian spaces are experienced and constructed on a daily basis in motion (ibid: 1008). It adds a thick sense of how transport spaces are actually lived and inhabited, while giving salience to the role of institutions and governance regimes in framing transport use (Lin, 2018).

Relatedly, a second corpus of work more closely allied with mobilities studies can extend Bissell and colleagues' arguments. In this broader literature which charts multiple empirical studies, scholars have variously unpacked 'passengers' for their diverse typologies, as well as the different senses of being 'on the move'. In particular, interrogating the movements of economic streams such as businesspersons (Faulconbridge, 2013; Unger et al., 2016), commuters (Bissell, 2010; Hislop, 2013) and tourists (Cohen et al., 2015), as well as social types like families (Vannini et al., 2009), students (Symes, 2007) and migrants (Abranches, 2013; Sirriyeh, 2010), the corpus has outlined the myriad mobile practices, social experiences and corporeal affects that animate the act/art of passengering in different contexts. Collectively, this research affirms Adey et al.'s (2012: 173) assertion that 'passenger experiences are multiple, heterogenous and are mediated along many different lines'. At the same time, it also attests to the notion that passengering is an important extension of transport systems, capable of affecting journeys and their accomplishment by the things that passengers 'do'.

It is at the intersection of these two bodies of work—transport geography and mobilities studies—that new insights about the spatialities of transport have also begun to develop (see Shaw and Hesse, 2010; Shaw and Sidaway, 2011). On the one hand, there is now a more intimate grasp of the subjective agencies at work in the micro spaces of transport, extending existing understandings on travel time use and transport behaviours (Jain and Lyons, 2008; Tranter and Whitelegg, 1994; Van Acker et al., 2010). On the other hand, by attending to how different passengers live out their (im)mobilities practically, a focus on passengering has productively laid bare the ways in which transport is a highly unequal resource. Indeed, well-networked transport systems do not guarantee universal passenger access, comfort, or experience, as some may be denied participation and/or channelled to slower lanes (see Fransen et al., 2015; Martin, 2011). These comprehensions arguably lead to a more fine-toothed understanding of how transport unfolds on the ground—not as abstract models or grant planning analyses, but lived spaces where flesh-and-blood dwells.

## **2. Heterogeneous passengers and passengerings**

Despite these illuminating insights, we argue that existing research has yet to fully address how passengering is a much more complex and heterogeneous affair than simply having multiple (but disparate) subjectivities and experiences. This is not to downplay the current attention to different subtypes of passengers, but rather to acknowledge that *any* passenger or passenger group is far from singular or discrete. Indeed, variable axes of difference may overlap in the same setting, appear in the same body, or stretch across multiple contexts at once, resulting in complex situations that escape easy definitions of what passengering is or does. As one of us argues elsewhere with respect to frequent air travellers, passenger personas, practices and behaviours tend to elude easy qualifications, or quick archetypal solutions to subsume them and all they entail (Frétigny, 2015). Admittedly, such a stance complicates theorisations on the subject; but there is also value in uncovering how such unusual configurations may impinge on transport planning decisions in nonconventional ways. Instead of grouping people according to their mode of travel, social role or economic class, this issue emphasises the fluid role that each passenger can, to some extent, play in (re)creating and changing mobile situations on the ground. Building on Bissell et al.'s (2011) arguments, we seek to open the field up to

a greater latitude of possibilities and diversities, and allow transport to play out in more flexible and creative ways.

To give more substance to this reorientation, we consider three ways in which such fluidities may arise. The first relates to how, for most transport modes, passengering is a heterogeneous and nonreplicable process, involving different compositions of people each time. Due to heuristic reasons, most studies have tended to approach passengering as generic experiences shared by segments of, if not all, transport users onboard a vehicle. From car rides, to train and bus journeys, to airline jaunts (Bissell, 2015; Edensor and Holloway, 2008; Jain, 2009; Waitt and Harada, 2016), there is a tacit assumption that passengering experiences are largely shared as collective, more-or-less stable undertakings among members of a mobile community. Commonly, these writings allude to senses of national or subcultural belonging (see Burrell, 2011; Wilson, 2011); at other times, passengers are divided up into broad groups identified by their socio-economic class or race (see Bissell et al., 2012; Hirsh, 2016). There is of course merit in such generalisations, but using these frames repeatedly can also lead to inadvertent omissions of other markers of difference such as gender, age, disabilities and body weight that often become salient in unexpected ways in a transport situation. Indeed, some studies have interrogated such manifestations of multidimensional assemblages (see Kloppenburg and Peters, 2012; Wilson, 2011), but the intersectionality at play in the power geometries of passengering remains largely to be written.

In lieu of a homogenous view of passenger experiences, there can thus be a greater stress on the relational instabilities of transport spaces, as passenger communities of different persuasions form and collide with each other. Not only is this awareness key to recognising the variability in passenger formations, it also alerts one to the material effects that people of varying comports, habits, dispositions, and (non)agencies coming together can have on transport systems, entangling them in friction and (temporary) disruption. Take for example Small and Harris's (2014) cue on the angst and degradation of travel time when babies cry on airliners; or Bissell's work on the encumbrance that unexpected artefacts like luggage and bicycles can cause other passengers on trains; or Muñoz's (2020) contemplation of the incompatibility of some infrastructure when 'older', wheelchair-bound and 'fat' passengers try to board the bus. Each of these coalescences of bodies and subjects must be recognised as part of a unique actor-network that holds—or fails to hold—transport systems together in that instance. They impel a rethinking of transport design that goes beyond the provision of material infrastructure for one generic group, and a need for more adaptable spaces that can accommodate different eruptions and permutations of heterogeneity in transport. Against the backdrop of increasing expectations to integrate myriad users in transport services (as often seen in public committees and participatory planning), these kaleidoscopic conceptions of passengers' traits have important implications for future transport planning. Although filled with challenge, they help inch transport operators, authorities, civil society and academics alike towards conceiving transport infrastructures that are truly shared, and engaging with what Nikolaeva et al. (2019) have termed 'commoning mobility'.

As a second prompt, passengering can also be a varied phenomenon because people's subjectivities are not constant while on the move. Indeed, over the course of a single journey, an individual can take on, and oscillate between, different roles in quick succession, according different qualities and meanings to their movements. It may seem trivial if someone decides to sleep, eat or work during rides (Jain, 2011; Laurier, 2004), but, a passenger slipping in and out of character has significant consequences for what – and who – exactly constitutes 'being-in-transit'. Consider frequent fliers who vacillate between being elite passengers and aviation enthusiasts seeking to experience airport lounges with no intention to fly (Zuskáčová and Seidenglanz, 2019); or urban commuters who

make stops for non-transport reasons, truncating their trips and/or folding in other roles to result in nestled journeys (Kitamura and Susilo, 2006). These deviations make passengering harder to pin down as a concept, seeing that identities can be fluid and potentially switch at will. In a loopback to an earlier point, they furthermore create additional axes of difference in communities of travellers, where some have more agency to transform their experiences than others. To the extent that these fluctuations have real effects, they also have to be factored into planning decisions. From infrastructural provision to peak travel distribution, passengers' inconstant subjectivities only serve to complicate how the geographies of transport pan out. Their understanding can contribute to orienting policy approaches towards new conceptions of 'flexi-mobility' (Chatterton et al., 2015), i.e. promoting forms of transport that are more adept at attending to variations in everyone's uses of travel modes.

In starker cases, the boundary between passengers and drivers—often perceived to fulfil binary functions in transport—can also be blurred because of this oscillation of roles. Adey et al. (2012: 172) allude to this notion when they argue that the dichotomy between the former (as a 'withdrawn body' being transported passively) and the latter (as a 'more powerful and commandeering figure') is a false one and may not stand to scrutiny in real life. Indeed, passengers do not all suffer from a lack of agency (especially in intimate settings like a car), neither do drivers carry out their responsibilities separately from those they ferry. In fact, it is plausible for both personas to reside in the same body, as a single individual plays the part of both 'passenger' and 'driver' to achieve certain 'mobility possibilities' (Dant, 2017). Referring to the term 'rider', conventionally used to reflect each of these roles, could help make our imaginations more attuned to this ambiguity. Most clearly seen in the rise of on-demand transport services and autonomous vehicles, such mergers of characters are likely to intensify as technologies advance (Herrmann et al., 2018; Litman, 2017). As subjects glide seamlessly from one role to the other, important questions would need to be raised about the future of transport, as well as networks and nodes increasingly determined by the user.

A third trope we want to pursue pertains to how the meaning of passengering draws from an extended geography of heterogeneous values lying both within and beyond transport systems. Indeed, though a performance that appears to be locked in time and space, the act of passengering practically invokes a wide variety of disconnected terrains, as people tend to bring with them memories, habits, experiences and social identities drawn from non-mobile situations (Bissell, 2018). Having these values bleed across different time-spaces not only necessitates an extra-contextual understanding of transport; it also requires an attention to how passengers embody lifeworlds that exceed immediate transport environments. In this sense, the figure of the passenger is not just composed from a blank slate, beginning and ending where the journey does. Instead, it is a simultaneous expression of both the present and a long genealogy of elsewhere and elsewhere.

Such spillovers across geographies and temporalities portend both a politics of, and a potential in, passengering. On the one hand, transport systems can sometimes serve as an offshoot of existing social hierarchies. Expressly, they can play a vital role in reinforcing otherness, not because passengers are innately different, but because wider social prejudices—e.g. of racism, intolerance for foreigners—are allowed to transfer and fester within transport's confined spaces (Wilson, 2011; Lobo, 2014). On the other hand, the propensity in passengers to import external time-spaces while on the move—whether certain moods or certain personal encounters prior to travel—can also create opportunities for experimentations and the forging of newfound camaraderie with fellow travellers (see Cervero, 2017; Crang and Zhang, 2012; Higate, 2000). In this context, transport spaces are like crucibles that fold into themselves social experiences and knowledge from the outside, through the body of the passenger. Insofar as these infusions lead to new heterogeneous reactions and possibilities, they are also poised to enrich the micro geographies of transport.

### 3. The papers

The three prompts above seek to diversify current understandings of passengering in transport geography, by further dissecting and nuancing the namesake figure. The papers in this issue are specially curated to reflect on these finer heterogeneities—of communities of travellers sub-divided into more dynamic distinctions than generic modal or socio-economic types; of passengers capable of assuming multiple roles and characters in the course of a journey; and of social subjects prone to connecting mobile experiences with those beyond transport. Each of these folds considers how the spatialities of transport might change with these new travel propensities, and raises important implications for transport planning. The papers in this issue tackle these ideas and questions across land (road and rail), sea and air transport. They further traverse through a spectrum of spatial terrains and realms, drawing insights from the airspaces of Finland, to the southeast coast of Newfoundland in Canada, to urban milieus in the UK, New Zealand, and Japan. Such contrasted geographies contribute to a better understanding of the site-specific productions of passengering.

Exactly cognisant that passengers are not all uniform within their travel group or class, Sysiö (this issue) opens the discussion with an examination of diplomatic air travel. Using the Finnish foreign service as a case study, his work points to the fact that air passengers do not always neatly fit into airline-designated service levels (e.g. ambassador or business class for diplomats); even if they are in the same cabin class, neither are they exactly the same generic type. Specifically, the paper notes that diplomats span across multiple ranks, and, as such, some of them often travel in economy class. Moreover, in a reflection of how multiple subjectivities can reside in a passenger, Sysiö's work also highlights how diplomats often use the aeroplane as a space to engage in work and relaxation, diminishing 'the functional difference' between the office, home spaces and a moving cabin (p. 93). What is even more interesting is the way in which diplomats appear as passive subjects while on the aeroplane, but in fact have played an active role in negotiating international air services agreements that made the service they partake in possible in the first place. These insights represent a departure from purely experiential analyses that have dominated literature on air passengering. In addition, they signal a need to understand the synergistic connections between air transport systems and (some of their) passengers.

Turning to another expression of heterogeneity, this time in urban travel, Doody's (this issue) paper examines the contours of passengering among New Zealander expatriates in London. His work is not only unique in that it interrogates the travels of a niche—and highly skilled—migrant group in the city; it is also distinctive for its use of a biographical approach to trace the way they use urban transport. In particular, his paper highlights how passengering is heavily influenced by specific events and life stages that passengers underwent/undergo prior to travel. He argues that these 'small-scale, ephemeral, subtle and multi-directional processes, events, actions and decisions' have 'cumulative, amplifying and transformative effects' on the ways in which they inhabit transport spaces (p. 2). Specifically, the paper illustrates how the migrants' travel habits are gradually changed through their everyday interactions with support groups in the host society, and the transport systems themselves. Doody's paper offers a clear case of how passengering is a culmination of multiple time-spaces, and not an impromptu act that happens while in transit. It recognises how transport design must increasingly account for such variable customs and habits that exceed the local, in global cities like London and beyond.

Equally sensitive to the diffuse time-spaces in passengering, Negishi and Bissell's (this issue) paper approaches the extra-contextuality of transport through the lens of imagination. Via a study on urban railway travel in Tokyo, their work demonstrates how transit experiences are highly generative of new senses of self, as passengers are suspended in a liminal zone with time to (re)evaluate their

subjectivity. The paper begins by looking into literary explorations of urban transport spaces, positing that mobility provides an opportunity for passengers to transcendently change their outlooks and escape both the physical setting of the railway cabin, and also the socio-cultural conditions in which they are embedded (e.g. long work hours, and the mundanity of life). Using autoethnographical techniques to decipher how a rail advertisement can evoke memories and recollections in that respect, the paper highlights how imagination constitutes a potentiality in transport spaces that can either align the passenger with the transport provider's will, or alter the mood and feel of being a passenger in more liberating ways. Concerned with these minutiae in travel, the piece presents a micropolitical perspective that stresses how imagination has the power to reshape experiences of passengering in heterogeneous and surprising ways. At the same time, it is a reminder to transport designers to take heed of the material environments that they create, so that transport spaces open up, rather than shut down, the positive potentials of imagination. The final paper by Royal and Roseman (this issue) tackles the question of heterogeneity through a thoughtful contemplation on ferry commuters' gendered relationships while in transit. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with residents of ferry-reliant Bell Island, Canada, their work develops the concept of 'co-passenger' to evince how riding the ferry is a rich act in mutual assistance and social support. In particular, they highlight how co-passenger often involves sociable extensions beyond the ferry commute itself, invoking activities such as shared car rides (to/from the pier), collective schedule planning, and even home gatherings and visits among fellow passengers. Such social relationships play out in more fine-grained ways onboard the ferry, as co-passengers engage in mutual care, leisure activities and group emotional support in highly gendered and distinguished ways. Royal and Roseman's work not only underscores again the nonuniformity of passengers in a transport mode. It also critically shows, like the other papers before, the intersecting lines of relations that render each passenger always multiply imbricated in many subjectivities at once, as well as the inter-connections between many (im)mobile others. Such is the messiness of the sociality of transport worlds, requiring our continued attention to their constant (re)configuration and evolution, in order to come to grips with their manifold appearances. Perhaps as a continuing thread in this story, the health crisis of COVID-19 and its profound impacts on transport have already begun another mutating turn in these ever-changing geographies of the passenger.

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