



Riding in the desert city: inattention, observation and mobility in Phoenix, Arizona

Brian O'Neill, March 2025

Despite being one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States, Phoenix, Arizona, is one of the few with no Amtrak train transit. While you cannot get in or out of the city by train, it does have a humble light rail system, built in the face of public sector austerity in 2008. In this article, sociologist, writer and photographer Brian F. O'Neill describes his process of unpacking the everyday experience of riding the rails through image-making, video, sound and writing, bringing together insights and methods across current arts research and scholarship on walking/mobile methods. By reworking the notion of a transect (repurposed from the biological sciences) as a means to engage in critical urban research, this piece poses the question: how we can be attentive in a city whose very infrastructure seems to provoke a mindset of isolated and individualised distraction?

Keywords: Arizona, Mobility, Urbanism.

*The machine is the primum mobile, the solitary god from which all the action proceeds.
It not only divides spectators and beings, but also connects them.*
Michel de Certeau "Railway Navigation and Incarceration"¹

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Train riding and image-making seem natural bed fellows, or at least they have been historically made so. Just think of all the photographic projects that have involved train riding, from American Amtrak trains, to the Orient Express, to the Trans-Siberian Railroad.² Perhaps, as photographer and writer W. Scott Olsen explains in regard to his adventures on the Amtrak system in the United States, the association has to do with the fact that “to ride a train has always been to embark on an adventure,”³ and the camera is the most realist, but perhaps also one of the most evocative, descriptive tools⁴ that can capture such a sincerely modern phenomena – industrial mobility.



October 25, 2023 – The end of the workday in downtown Phoenix. Image © Brian F. O'Neill.

Top image: October 25, 2023 – Riding the Phoenix, Arizona Light Rail system along Central Avenue. Image © Brian F. O'Neill.

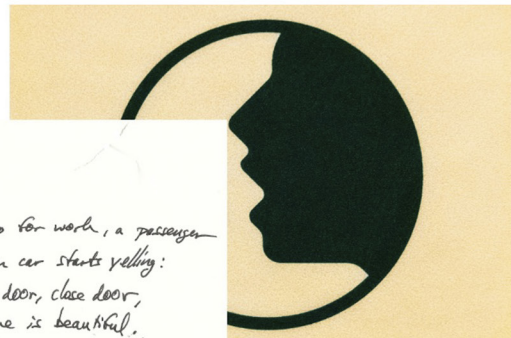
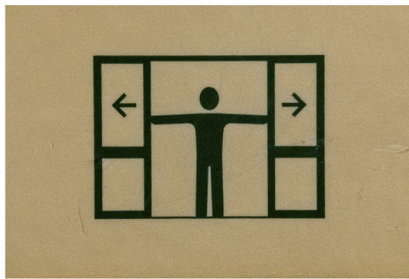
Furthermore, there are variety of experiences to be had given the modality of the transport. Within the history of photography, there is something, some specific feeling, and an enthusiasm, that follows the idea of photographing “public” transit, even if we must pay for our rides there too. We might think of many examples in this regard: Camilo José Vergara’s New York Metro pictures⁵ for instance, which of course follow in the tradition of Walker Evans and Bruce Davidson,⁶ and innumerable others.

So, what’s the deal with photographing (on) trains (not to be confused with trainspotting)? And, from a methodological point of view, is there some connection to the even wider tradition of, to quote Michel de Certeau’s famous essay – “Walking in the City?”⁷ The answer is multifaceted. For Evans and Vergara, to photograph on/in trains seemed to be a conduit for imaging (and imagining) what might be called bare life – the subtleties of an intimate, yet unseen existence. Additionally, there is an element of danger often associated with this style of image, as was especially noted in the case of Davidson’s work, perhaps enhanced using wide-angle lenses and flash. While we still might not know whether this sort of photographic methodology is about consecrating a “hardened” photographer, or about the quality of the images,⁸ what is clearer is that in this way, the transit photograph becomes about both a kind of visibility and seemingly, an insight into a specifically non-kin form of sociality. The lens becomes a means to socio-spatial understanding. How, it seems to ask, do people behave when “no one” is looking? The paradox is of course evident – “everyone” is looking. On and around the train we are in public.⁹ Indeed, part of my own fascination with train travel is the fact that amidst the apparent sea of humanity, atomization, not collectivity, seems to largely be at work. The photographer then becomes interested in a certain question: what happens when, at best, people are in fact *inattentive*?

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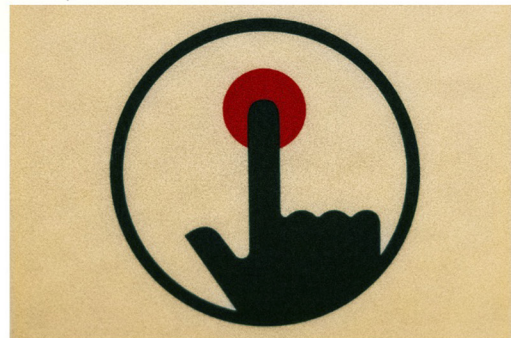
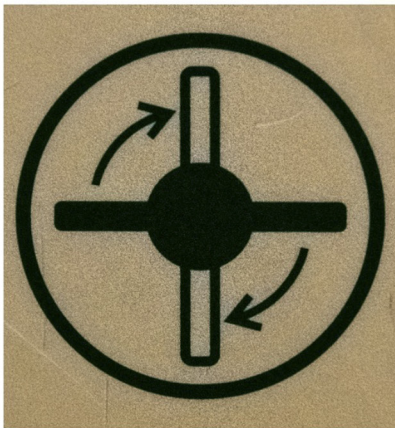
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Gazing out the window and into our phones – these are, like train travel, thoroughly modern, and maybe even very contemporary phenomenon. Indeed, inattention, in these and other ways, is a common practice of civility which, as sociologist Orvar Löfgren has explained in his historical analysis of public transportation, has to be learned. For Löfgren, it is actually the utterly mundane nature of public transit that is really of interest. Why? For him, it is an instance of the inculcation of a sort of truly modern ritual: “The daily commute is often routinized into mindless transportation, which makes it hard to study.”¹⁰ But, as an American, I wonder if maybe Löfgren is too European here. Transit rail is quite ubiquitous, especially in Western Europe.¹¹ And, if it is not cheap, then it is actually efficient and convenient quite unlike the American railway experience, even if train laborers strike (occasionally) in some countries, like France. But, even in the case of strikes, there remains an interesting social dimension whereby the issue of train travel itself takes on a collective valence – les banlieues of Paris won’t be working that day. In that instance, “we” have to accept it, together. Indeed, even de Certeau’s lament about the prison like atmosphere of some trains reads to me as a great joy as, not only an American, but an American of the desert city of Phoenix, Arizona. Indeed, in the third part of de Certeau’s book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (published in English in 1984) one finds what is perhaps his most widely referenced, and perhaps, most popular text – “Walking in the City,” in which he begins with observations from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center and then pivots to a discussion of how to read the city as a “text.”



Wed. March 15th, 2023

As I near my usual stop for work, a passenger in the rear of the train car starts yelling: “open door, close door, open door, close door, open door close door. Everyone is beautiful. If I see you again, thank you very much. You take all the drugs you want, but take care of your account.”



March 15, 2023 – Collage of text fragment from my field notebook as well as a series of images directing train users on how to engage with the mechanisms of the train itself.

Can Phoenix, Arizona be a text? Is it a city that can be read? Can train travel afford this – a window into the atmosphere of one of the largest metropolitan areas of the United States (though hardly discussed when compared to Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, etc.). In this regard, my proposition is that we must begin at ground level, in a way unlike de Certeau’s famous essay, and from the less obviously contemplative standpoint, thus the train with all its movement and container-like qualities can serve as a fruitful point of entry: “A travelling incarceration... a perfect actualization of the rational utopia. Control and food move from pigeonhole to pigeonhole: ‘Tickets, please...’ Sandwiches? Beer? Coffee?’¹²

What does it mean to make images in a desert city like Phoenix, Arizona? A careful consideration begins to reveal that the stakes of such questions start to become quite large, for public transit vehicles often have provided for the photographer a window into Truth. For,

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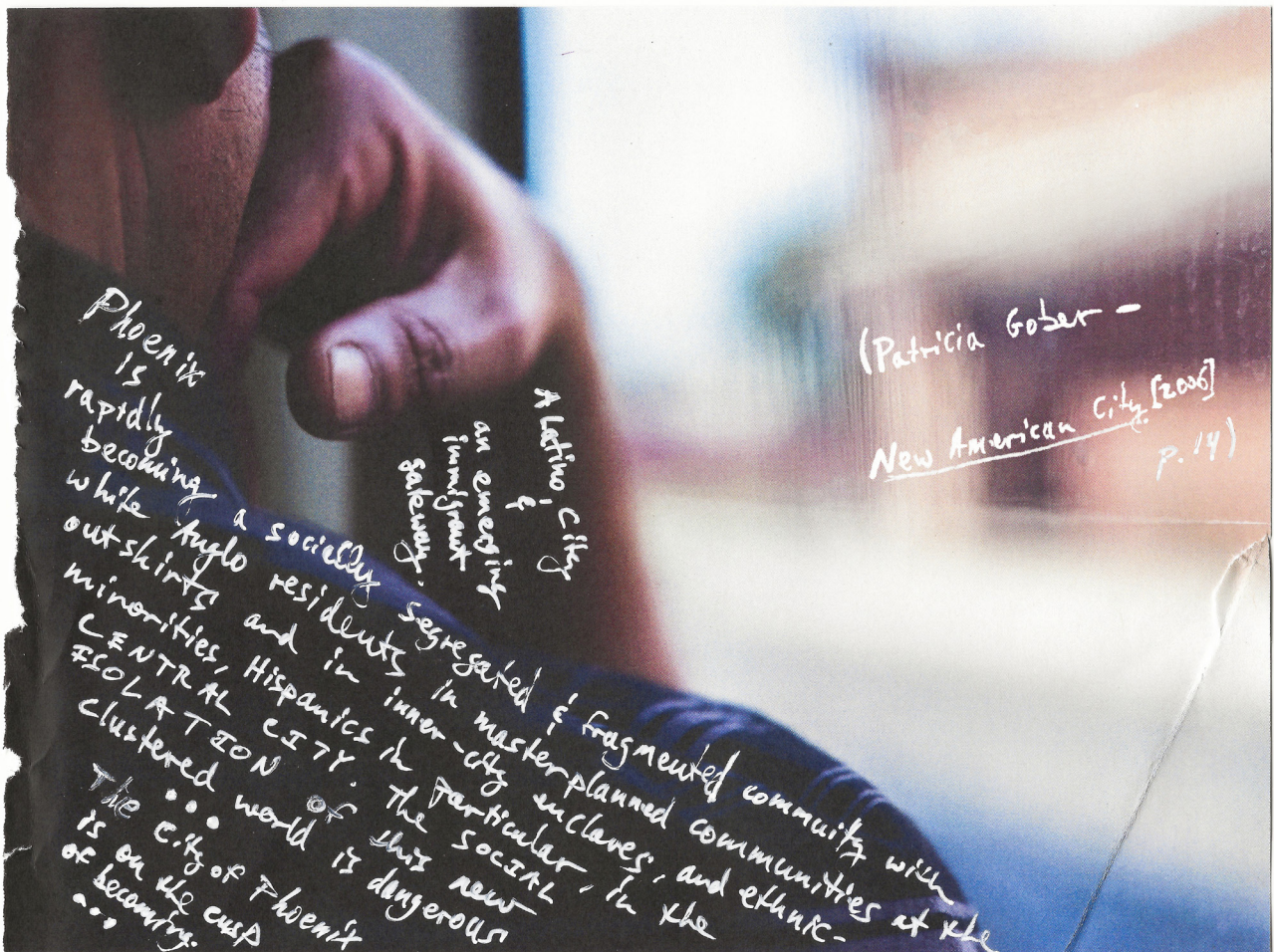
Tuesday, Nov. 7th, 2023

other necessities for my fellow commuters

- Makita brand drill (presumably with bits)
- grocery bags full of clothes and food
- rolling shopping baskets for easy mobility
- cases
- lots of luggage and bikes, often together
- Bicycles - a polarizing situation - either in some state of disrepair, or they have battery packs, GPS, side bags, and literal bells and whistles.
- marijuana cigarettes
- tin foil for black tar heroin inhalation
- beer
- towels for sitting
- etc.



November 7, 2023 - Collage using my notes on the tools and other items people carry with them to ride the train.



March 16, 2023 - As I began to construct a "project" out of my daily life of riding, I began exploring collage and other techniques of image-text combinations, sometimes using my own observations, sometimes from books I was reading about the city. Image © Brian F. O'Neill.

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what else could Evans – so clearly inspired by Honoré Daumier’s painting *Third Class Carriage* (c. 1862-4) – mean when he discussed his series *Passengers* (photographed from 1938-1941), in the following way: that the project was informed by “my idea of what a portrait ought to be: anonymous and documentary and a straightforward picture of mankind.”¹³ Likewise, French photographer and film-maker Chris Marker seemed to have nearly the same concept in mind decades later with his series of Paris metro riders, giving a nod to Evans by titling his project the same way: *Passageurs*.¹⁴ The idea of catching people unawares, unguarded, is of course extremely enticing, and is the basis of interest for much street photography. I understand the impulse intimately. I also like idea of Mark Steinmetz’s project *Terminus*, wherein he photographed people at airports. In that work, Steinmetz seems, quite unintentionally no doubt, descriptively motivated by the Löfgrenian issue of social conditioning brought on by the fact of the rail ride. For instance, Steinmetz explained that:

“I was interested in weaving together overlapping perspectives. There might be a photo of a passenger waiting at the airport in some sort of very specific, yet perfectly mundane situation along with more abstracted images of jet trails or tiny planes against clouds.¹⁵ I wanted to look up at the planes from the ground as well as look down at the ground from the planes. I wanted to describe the predicament of a traveler in the midst of a journey.”¹⁶

This combination of an interest in socio-visual imbrication has motivated my work on Arizona, photographing my movement through spaces and places in/of transit.

I ride (most intensely from 2022-2023) the city of Phoenix Arizona’s Valley Metro Light Rail.¹⁷ Yes, there is a public transport system in Arizona. You may not have known, given the fact that even more than Los Angeles, Phoenix has been the city dedicated to the automobile. The train route runs for some 30 miles. And, it is not only in Phoenix, but spans Mesa, Tempe, and as part of its recent evolution, it now edges into Peoria. Sounds good so far, right? Well, what they don’t tell you in the promotional material for it, is how painfully slow it is. To ride the entire route, one verges on a 4-hour journey. Unfortunately, it doesn’t look like things will be getting much better soon. As I write this (2024), Republican legislator Jake Hoffman, who runs digital marketing company Rally Forge, which has been banned from both Twitter and Facebook for its activities around fake accounts in relation to elections, has put forward



April 27, 2023 – Near the Roosevelt Row district in downtown Phoenix. Image © Brian F. O’Neill

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legislation to destroy the Arizona Department of Transportation and specifically flatten any attempt at creating a Tucson to Phoenix Rail connection.¹⁸ What a dream-like experience that would be – passengers encased in plastic and steel racing (well, sort of) across the rugged landscape of the Northern reaches of the Sonoran Desert!

Anyway, I took many rides while conducting my little visual investigation that emerged out of the necessity of getting to work. The tedium of the non-expeditious journey quickly had me pulling out my camera and notebook and noticing what I could along the way. You have to take what the world gives you. Some rides were mundane, but others were just plain odd. Getting offered holy water for sale, spooned out with a steel spoon into plastic bowls – what? Other times, it was the offer of a seat with an unidentified liquid pooled at its base – thanks, but no thanks. Still other times, I was welcomed onto my train ride by the smell of burning heroin tar and screams of “get that shit outta here.” All along the way, a seeming harbinger of public sector decrepitude could be heard – the female service voice announcing the upcoming stations and telling you to report any suspicious activity monotonized periodically in a choppy, short-circuited, nearly broken digital distress – “Nex-ation-empe-own-la...”¹⁹

Anomie and disjunction seem to be everywhere and aren’t hard to spot. In one memorable encounter, a screaming match could be heard from the interior of the train before it even stopped at the Roosevelt station. Quite a feat given the hermetically sealed nature of the capsules. Catching the exchange mid-way through, it went like this:

“I know all about you motherfuckers. It’s because I’m white.”

“Get the fuck off.”

“Any of you white people on the platform better watch out. I’m gonna kill you. [pause] Hey, you look like you got money. Yeah, because you’re white like me. We’re so privileged!

Or, in another instance:

“Hey, any of you black guys learn how to be a black smith?”

SLAP! Someone hits him across the head from behind knocking his Chicago Cubs hat off.

“Hey! You can’t do that. That’s assault mother fucker!”

“Shut your mouth!” The slapper replied.

“You don’t even know. I’m an Indian. They tried to kill us too. Damn. That’s what’s wrong with this place – ain’t nobody got any sense of humor.”

“Shut the fuck up! Get off the train man.”

Civil inattention, engage.

My inclusion here of these instances is of course my own selection. Perhaps they are not “representative” of the myriad experiences one might have. But, they are minor, if not very subtle instances of the interplay of race, class, ethnicity, and other forms of difference on/in the train. And, they make me wonder if, strangely, Jake Hoffman is right, if in a certain way. “People” don’t want public transit in Arizona. Who wants to ride this train? It’s a toxic tube, seemingly at the end of the world. In this republican stronghold, this deep-south way out West in fact, as write and popular historian Jon Talton has intimated,²⁰ the light rail may be nothing more than a façade of some vestige of an idea of public infrastructure. Who wants to take a train ride that bumbles along at a snail’s pace? Even the train itself appears unmotivated to move. At least on the Paris metro, to use one example I know, the normalization of harassment on public transit, mostly directed at women, revolves around amorous intentions. Phone numbers are attempted to be

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March 17, 2023 – Downtown Phoenix near the Her Secret is Patience Sculpture of 2009 by Janet Echelman at the Phoenix Civic Space Park. Many parks and science centers in the city seem to gesture toward the future. The play of light and the unique color banding was afforded by the window glass, but also the spotted window coverings, often advertisements for sports drinks, beer, or the local soccer team. Image © Brian F. O'Neill

passed on, assurances about a nice dinner, etc. It's a situation that is exasperating for onlookers and leaves the object of desire pulling her hair out after her would be boyfriend finally departs. On the Phoenix Light Rail though, an ambiance of hatefulness and dread seems to permeate everything.

As I continued to ride the Phoenix light rail, a colleague from France, who had never been to Phoenix before, told me that he was very surprised about the "metro" here: "you know, it's a very specific population that rides that train." My colleague was not wrong and expresses a tension about the qualities of the system. And here is where we must think about "the public" and what this means. It's not the case for everyone, but for many people who I ride the rails with, well, they are only barely allowed to exist as people in this desert society, in the great Valley of the Sun™, as the Phoenix region is called. They ride the train aimlessly and mindlessly, blaring speakers, doing drugs, and yelling at the nearest person they see in a society that has forgotten them. In a way, the train is a place left beyond the margins of care and interest. People ride the rails to escape the searing heat in the summers, and maybe for something to do in the winters. They ride to their court appointments about the assault they are accused of several months back, and hearings about the custody of their kids. They ride the rails to get to a Walgreens where they hope to get a prescription, and then to hop off and head for another hit, and surely another bad night with no sleep under the I-10 that Hoffman and the rest of the planners and political establishment in the Valley of the Sun™ love so much.

I want to love this train. But it's a hard thing to do. Yet, being able to photograph and to record is a discipline that engages one bodily in place(s). It is to find interest where others might not see it. Motivated by locating an aesthetic pleasure in the visual plane and combining it with my observations, I eventually developed the project in the vein of a *transect*, following the recent interventions of urban sociologists, as well as social and cultural geographers.

Traditionally, a transect is a term for a line used in a landscape to survey plant or animal life, such as a biologist might do. However, there have been a number of recent extensions of this term into the social sciences and how it can be deployed in embodied research

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approaches. Matthew Gandy has provided one of the more synthetic treatments of this notion as part of his own investigations into the nexus of society and nature in urban settings, as well as urban atmospheres. Instructively, he remarks that:

“the ethnographic transect is rooted in a slow and often painstaking immersion in urban space that points toward the conceptual disorientation of the embodied human subject, in an intellectual maneuver that questions the relations between bodies, objects, and others. To queer the transect is to destabilize the walking methodology from a variety of empirical and conceptual vantage points.”²¹

How, Gandy implores and inquires, might we use this transect idea, not in a dogmatic way, but in a mode of exploration that troubles existing taxonomies and categorizations of contemporary urban life? Here then, and especially with a rail ride, we are doing something different than the ever-resurgent *dérive*, the drift notion of Guy Debord, as a counter-cultural means of anti-hegemonic



April 27, 2023 – With each new summer it seems a record-breaking heatwave greets the city’s inhabitants.

mobility.²²

Riding the Phoenix Light Rail, I then have come to think about it less as a train and more as *A Desert Transect*, and my combined images, texts, videos, and sound recordings, all as a kind of unconventional “sequence” that is the result of my many hours spent waiting out the days, and nights, in metro-Phoenix, and of looking through the oddly colored glass and surfaces obstructing my view as I move through a desert city. Here, I think again of de Certeau, who, riding along, finds himself recollecting Jules Verne’s *Nautilus*, intimating the idea of a vehicle of both scientific and aesthetic expression. Importantly, de Certeau realizes that, just as Hervé Guibert,²³ as well as Verne and his Nemo did, “the windowpane is what allows us to see, and the rail, what allows us to move through.”²⁴ de Certeau’s comments further speak to the project of image making as much as that of bookmaking and other arts practices that are increasingly connected to the walking arts:

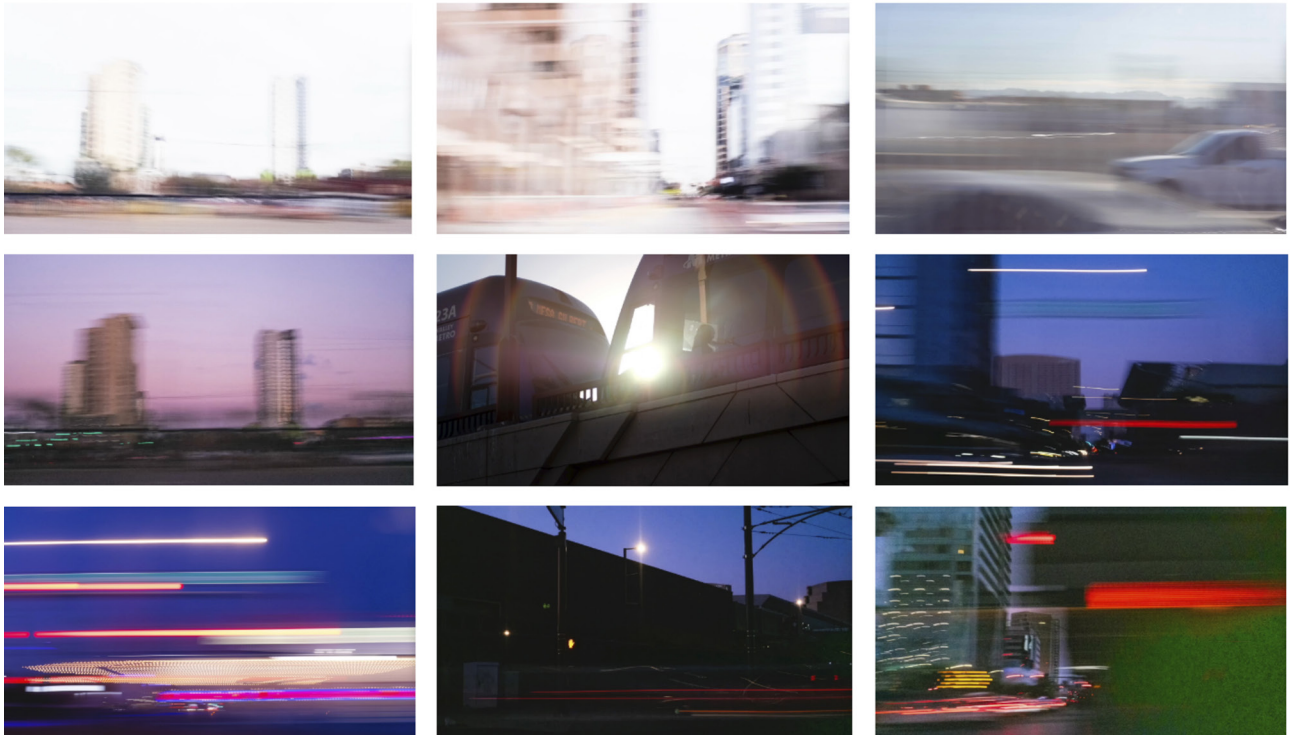
“paradoxically it is the silence of these things put at a distance, behind the windowpane, which, from a great distance, makes our memories speak or draws out of the shadows the dreams of our secrets... Glass and iron produce speculative thinkers or gnostics.

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This cutting off is necessary for the birth, outside of these things but not without them, of unknown landscapes and the strange fables of our private stories."²⁵

Thus, whether riding or walking, the process becomes about forms of reflection. Importantly, it is about the obstruction/mediation. Perhaps it is this kind of limitation that makes knowledge possible – that enacts a kind of deep inscription, if not a mapping, in the artist/writer/photographer/documentarian. And so, what are we to see and move through in the urban desert – this transect of life



March 12, 2025 – Collage built from stills (from different times of day and night) of the short film made as part of the project. Here I also explored time-lapse photography as a means to photographically produce a video format as I began collaborating with the composer who goes by the name Wyoming Toad. I would share images and field recording; they would then share music samples with me and over a period of weeks we produced more a full sonic album around the theme of urban transit in the desert. Sometimes hand holding, sometimes using a tripod attached to my seat, I made thousands of still frames to then pull them together for the film.

About the author

Brian F. O'Neill is a sociologist, writer and photographer. rained in both the United States and France, his work explores the relations of society to nature, as well as mobilities, using a variety of documentary and analytical techniques. Much of his output to date has investigated the practices and meanings of “industry” to local communities and environments, and he is widely published in academic and artistic fields concerning such issues. He is a contributing editor at The Photobook Journal, and the host of the podcast, Immaterial Voices. His artist book *A Desert Transect*, is a multimedia exploration of urban mobility in Arizona, and will be released in 2025 by Immaterial Books.

www.brianfoneill.net

www.immaterialbooks.com

www.wyomingtoad.bandcamp.com

Footnotes & references

[1] Page 113 of de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. University of California Press, 1984. https://monoskop.org/images/2/2a/De_Certeau_Michel_The_Practice_of_Everyday_Life.pdf.

[2] As a kid in Ohio, my father had, for decades, collected the National Geographic Magazine, among which was a 1998 issue with a striking image of a “Russian” man’s semi-blurred face behind a frosted pane of glass on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. <https://www.amazon.com/National-Geographic-Magazine-Trans-Siberian-Railroad/dp/B07H7X3R8W>

[3] Olsen documented his journeys online and has made mention of a possible future book: <https://blog.cord.edu/movingwindow/>. And the call of the rails spans generations, as walking artist Alex Wolfe via his Pedestrian blog, has used the train as a means for extended walks around the country in his “Sun Song” project: https://pedestrian.substack.com/p/pedestrian-27-sun-song-10-cities?utm_source=publication-search.

[4] O’Neill, Brian F. “Documentary photography as vocation: reflecting on Frank Cancian’s contribution to visual studies.” *Visual Studies* 38, no. 2 (2023): 235-252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2021.2008815>.

[5] Vergara, Camilo José. *Subway Memories*. The Monacelli Press, 2004. <https://www.lensculture.com/books/6228-subway-memories>.

[6] Davidson, Bruce. *Subway*. Aperture, 1986/2011. <https://www.rizzolibookstore.com/product/bruce-davidson-subway?srsId=mBOoqfaOc4B3oGaGuX9gpXwzvRKK9RXGCiZM252NNiF4lR2pQqCqyt>.

[7] The essay appears as chapter seven in the English edition of *The Practice of Everyday Life*. and can be found online here: https://monoskop.org/images/2/2a/De_Certeau_Michel_The_Practice_of_Everyday_Life.pdf.

[8] Bair, Nadya. *The Decisive Network: Magnum Photos and the Postwar Image Market*. University of California Press, 2020. <https://www.upress.edu/book/9780520300354/the-decisive-network>.

[9] For podcast listeners, there is a fascinating discussion by Todd McGowan and Ryan Engley of how mobility often connects with “the public” and why “the public,” with all its seeming inconveniences and uncomfortable qualities, needs to be defended against the onslaught of capitalist encroachment towards privatization: March 2, 2025 episode “The Public” – <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/why-theory/id1299863834?i=1000697270086>.

[10] from page 331 of Löfgren, Orvar. “Motion and emotion: Learning to be a railway traveller.” *Mobilities* 3, no. 3 (2008): 331-351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100802376696>.

[11] For those who are interested, I have written about train travel and the tradition of its investigation in Paris here on my blog – “socioNeill” on substack: <https://socioNeill.substack.com/p/moving-through-the-city-of-light>.

[12] Page 111 of de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. University of California Press, 1984. https://monoskop.org/images/2/2a/De_Certeau_Michel_The_Practice_of_Everyday_Life.pdf.

[13] Further discussion of Evans can be found here at the Met Museum website: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/259975>

[14] See Joe Fyfe’s “Stop Staring” Review of Chris Marker’s Passengers series for Artnet. <https://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/fyfe/chris-marker5-5-11.asp>.

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[15] Garry Winogrand notably also spent a lot of time at airports and transit areas, such as can be seen in his Arrivals and Departures. <https://steidl.de/Buecher/Arrivals-Departures-1721233741.html>

[16] See from Virginie Kippelen's (February 28, 2018) "Photographer Mark Steinmetz finds beauty at the Atlanta airport," for ARTSATL. <https://www.artsatl.org/mark-steinmetz-finds-beauty-at-atlanta-airport/>.

[17] Some history of the city's rail system can be found here: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/00e5ef860b384e27a2d52ff0b41e49ad>.

[18] See Demion Clinco's (March 4, 2024) "Local opinion: Arizona GOP's assault on transportation progress." Arizona Daily Star. https://tucson.com/opinion/column/local-opinion-arizona-gops-assault-on-transportation-progress/article_2d539c50-d59f-11ee-9411-27e3fbb56249.html.

[19] For this project I also made field recordings, collaborating in a music album with composer Wyoming Toad: <https://wyomingtoad.bandcamp.com>.

[20] Talton, Jon. *A Brief History of Phoenix*. Arcadia Publishing, 2015.

[21] From page 144-145 of Gandy, Matthew. *Natura Urbana: Ecological Constellations in Urban Space*. MIT Press, 2022.

[22] Smith, Phil. "The contemporary dérive: a partial review of issues concerning the contemporary practice of psychogeography." *Cultural geographies* 17, no. 1 (2010): 103-122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474009350002>.

[23] Guibert has a specific essay on photography and train travel in his book *Ghost Image*, which also recalls the visuality of Stan Brakhage and his "Wonder Ring" film from 1955 (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0278151/>). See Guibert, Hervé. *Ghost Image*. University of Chicago Press, 2014. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/G/bo18031187.html>

[24] Page 112 of de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. University of California Press, 1984. https://monoskop.org/images/2/2a/De_Certeau_Michel_The_Practice_of_Everyday_Life.pdf.

[25] Page 112 of de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. University of California Press, 1984. https://monoskop.org/images/2/2a/De_Certeau_Michel_The_Practice_of_Everyday_Life.pdf.