

Domestic Migrations, Train Travel in the United States 2012-2022

Project 2311
September 2023

McNair Evans

Introduction

This project hypothesizes that public transportation, particularly intercity passenger train travel within the United States (Amtrak), fosters empathy, patience, and solidarity among its riders though both intentional and inadvertent circumstances.

As author and principal investigator, I grew up in a small farming town where I worked for a short line freight railroad during highschool. I completed a BA in Anthropology (Davidson College, 2001) and a MFA in Photography (Academy of Art University, 2011).

Over the course of ten years (2012-2022) I traveled annually to meet fellow Americans, record stories about their lives, and make pictures. The project collected more than 6,000 original photographs, 218 passenger interviews, and approximately 400 handwritten pages. The working process was auto-ethnographic, recording my first-person experiences along with those of the passengers interviewed. Unless otherwise noted the information presented in this paper consists of primary research, collected during passenger conversations and interviews. While this working method may not always present the most factual contemporary or historical record, it does provide unique insight to the perspectives of those currently utilizing America's intercity passenger rail service.

The effectiveness of public transportation is routinely measured through quantitative methods such as ridership statistics, trip durations, on-time versus delayed arrivals, operating budgets, etc. Qualitative analyses often focus on passenger reception of intentional services such as food and beverage options or negative impacts of inadvertent circumstances such as delayed arrivals. My experience revealed that services and circumstances sometimes recorded as negative passenger experiences within traditional qualitative and quantitative analyses, ie. delayed arrivals and assigned seating, actually cultivate empathy due to Amtrak's collectivist policies and the trains' interior architecture. Though effectiveness is essential to any public transportation system, this project concludes that efficiency is not the only, and may not be the best, metric with which to assess user benefits of intercity passenger rail travel.

U.S. Passenger Rail Historical Summary

From their inception and race across North America to the promotion of Manifest Destiny and contribution to the Civil Rights Movement, trains and train travel have fundamentally shaped what it means to be American.

Amtrak provides only a fraction of the passenger service that once connected the county. The Association American of Railroads estimates that nearly 140,000 miles of freight railroad track is operational within the United States in 2023¹. This is approximately 55% of the 254,037 peak trackage miles operated within the United States in 1916². At that time intercity passenger rail was offered by private freight companies in conjunction with freight service, thus providing a very extensive network. In comparison, in 2023 Amtrak offers a 21,400 mile intercity passenger rail system, 96% of which is operated on track owned and maintained by freight railroads.³

On January 21, 2013 while traveling west on Amtrak's Empire Builder route, I met and interviewed Robert Moen, the National Association of Railroad Passengers Council Representative for the State of Minnesota. Representative Moen provided the following historic summary of intercity passenger rail service within the United States.

Historically passenger trains were operated by the railroad as a for profit business. It was always marginal business for them, never contributing more than 5-10% of their revenues. Freight was always 90% of the business and other railroads made the money to pay for the infrastructure. Starting in the 1920's the advent of the automobile started to impact their passenger train business, especially short distance local business. About 1920, the federal gov't decided to build the first federal highway system. This was encouraged by the auto industry, this was the start of government subsidization of rail competition. The key thing to understand is that railroads were kept on a free enterprise private ownership and investment model and roads were on a public subsidy and investment mode with little or no charges to the user. Previous to this railroads had a virtual monopoly on intercity transportation. Government policy makers wanted to respond to the public demand for better roads and provide the railroads with some competition.

After WWII the federal government invested heavily in highways and airport/air traffic control systems and charged no user fees to the airlines until 1971 and kept gas taxes low. This ate into the passenger and freight railroad business. It also destroyed privately operated transit systems in cities. The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 dealt the final blow to the passenger train. The business man started flying in the 1950's and left in droves after the jet in 1958-1960. The public started driving in the 1960's on the new interstates rather than ride the train. Meanwhile the passenger trains started losing big money. Railroads were heavily regulated and had to petition the Internal Chamber of Commerce to abandon trains and tracks. This was expensive and slow.

The private enterprise model for railroads couldn't compete with the public subsidy plus investment model for air and highway. The railroads wanted out. The freight side of their business had also been impacted by these federal government policies. In 1970, Penn Central RR went bankrupt, and talk of shutdown and liquidation scared congress into action. The auto and steel industries would have to also shut down with no rail service. The result was Amtrak legislation in 1971 and the creation of Conrail in 1976 to save the profitable core of Penn Central.

1. <https://www.aar.org/facts-figures#>
2. https://www.railserve.com/stats_records/railroad_route_miles.html
3. <https://www.aar.org/issue/freight-railroads-amtrak/>

In 1970, there were about 25 freight railroads also running passenger trains. On May 1, 1971 private passenger train service ended and Amtrak took over and was federally subsidized to cover the losses and preserve a basic network of trains. After Conrail was created for northeast rail freight service, congress deregulated the freight rail industry in 1980 (Staggers Act). The freight rail industry blossomed and has become profitable + vibrant in the 30 years since. Amtrak has limped along preserving a basic skeletal network waiting for the day the country wants to really invest in passenger rail.

Now high speed rail is being seriously invested in by the federal gov't, it is most appropriate in populated markets 200-450 miles apart and traveling at 90-110 MPH. Ideal markets would be in the Northeast, Midwest, South East, Texas, California, and Pacific Northwest. High speed rail is not appropriate for transcontinental travel, where airplanes are more appropriate, but the transcontinental train serves rural America. It connects small towns to big cities and vice versa. The average rider on a Chicago to West Coast train is not riding the whole distance, but riding 300-600 miles. The average seat turns over 3-5 times across the route. We need a basic network of once a day long distance trains mirroring the interstate highway network and we need 3-8 trains a day on major 100-600 mile corridors between major cities. High speed rail is most appropriate for these urban markets. The long distance trains tie the whole network.

Project Summary

In 2011 I traveled Amtrak from Raleigh, NC to Richmond, VA. I had used this route regularly to attend school in Virginia (from my native North Carolina) in the mid-1990's, but this was the first time I had ridden Amtrak since. The train interiors appeared to have received few updates, and services such as the water fountain and on-board wifi were non-operational. The height of the train provided a unique, slightly elevated perspective that cleared most ground fencing along the route and offered intriguing views of the post-industrial landscape. Once active factories and loading zones were seen empty or under utilized.



Empire Builder route, 1/21/2013

Though the route provided a necessary transportation service, the pace of travel was slower than that of modern automobile travel. When I asked fellow passengers if I might make their portrait, a high percentage of people agreed, citing 'nothing to do' or welcoming an activity to help them fill their travel time.



Nataline Mayes, 6/16/2020

This trip formulated my initial interest in the current state of passenger rail, as well as the project at large. Imagery of trains and train travel have become symbols and icons of Industrial Age achievement, regularly emphasizing an overly romanticized, socially sanitized vision of industrialism and passenger rail travel. Yet in the 21st Century and Information Age this route presented the economic consequences of late stage capitalism. Direct economic and social correlations existed between the landscape immediately surrounding the route and the lives of passengers on the train.

I defined an auto-ethnographic project that would draw inspiration from my personal and familial history with trains while making photographs and interviewing passengers across the entire Amtrak route system. Over the next ten years (2012-2022) I would travel almost annually to meet fellow Americans, record stories about their lives, and make pictures.

Project funding for the first 2-3 years drew from my earned income as a working photographer. A John Gutmann Photography Fellowship (2015) and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship (2016-2017) financed the remaining material and travel expenses.

Consisting of approximately 135 days, 44,300 miles, and over 1,050 hours on trains, the project included 11 trips and systematically covered every route within Amtrak’s passenger rail system. Each trip is detailed within the table below. Route names listed twice in a row indicate a return trip on the same route, which was a necessity in order to travel many of the shorter regional routes. I rode the routes connecting my home city of San Francisco to other parts of the county, the California Zephyr for example, multiple times in order to access shorter routes further afield.

Trip	Dates	Routes	Miles	Interviews	Pictures
00	7/11/2011	Silver Star (Initial Discovery)	139	0	40
01	2/7 - 2/22/2012	California Zephyr, Capital Limited, Silver Star, Silver Meteor, Capital Limited, Southwest Chief, Coast Starlight	7031	23	453
02	9/15 - 9/20/2012	Coast Starlight, Sunset Limited, Crescent	2010	17	810
03	1/10 -1/23/2013	Coast Starlight, Empire Builder, Lake Shore Limited, Crescent, City of New Orleans, Empire Builder, Coast Starlight	9097	40	1897
04	12/7- 12/16/2013	California Zephyr, Lake Shore Limited, Down Easter, Down Easter, North East Corridor, Silver Star, Silver Meteor, Capital Limited	7149	43	1632
05	8/18/2014	Crescent	736	3	89
06	12/11 - 12/31/2016	Coastliner, Sunset Limited, Texas Eagle, Heartland Flyer, Heartland Flyer, Texas Eagle, The Adorondak, The Adorondak, The Vermonter, The Vermonter, The Carolinian, The Carolinian, The Cardinal, California Zephyr	10441	60	1487
07	7/18 - 7/20/2018	Freight Hop, California Zephyr	1190	8	234
08	7/22 - 7/25/2019	San Joaquins, Coast Starlight, Sunset Limited, Sunset Limited, Coast Starlight	1248	6	97
09	6/14 - 6/16/2020	Coast Starlight, Coast Starlight	1394	12	193
10	7/7 - 7/8/2022	Pacific Surfliner, Pacific Surfliner, Coast Starlight	1091	0	105
11	10/26 - 11/1/2022	Pere Maquette, Pere Maquette, Blue Water, Blue Water, Wolverine, Wolverine, Carl Sandberg, Carl Sandberg, Lincoln Service, Lincoln Service, Southwest Chief	2734	15	255

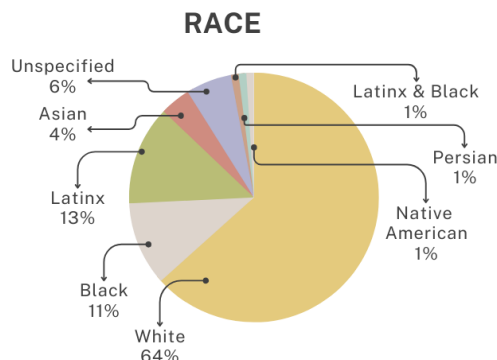
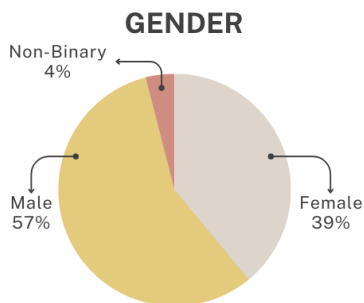
Passenger Perspectives on Amtrak Travel

Participant selection was made in a variety of ways. With my camera and notebook in hand, I would walk through Coach Class cars and look for passengers that appeared to be open to a conversation, were actively curious about what I was doing, or possessed a specific characteristic, visual or thematic, that interested me. Additional participant engagement occurred through the collectivist Amtrak policies of assigned seating at dining car meals and shared tables in cafe cars. These provided a structured format for chance meetings and unpredicted interactions. In all cases I would introduce myself, explain that I was working on a long-term documentary project about train travel in the United States, and ask if they would be willing to share their experiences

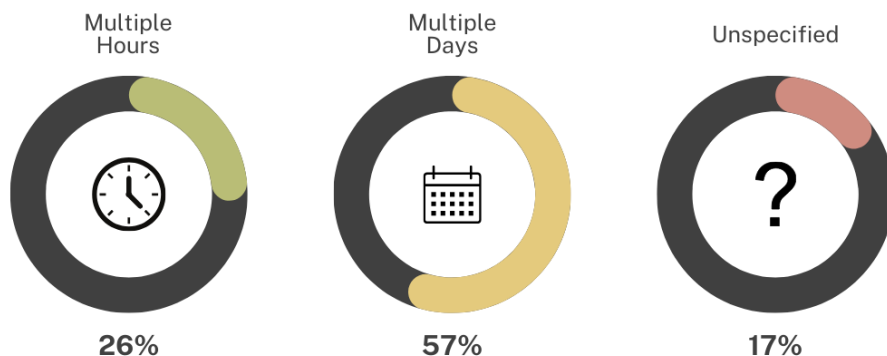
and / or make a portrait together. Not all passengers agreed to participate. Of those that did, some agreed to both write and be photographed, while others chose to contribute only a writing or a photograph.

Participant statistics are shown below. Date, route, race, gender, and nationality of each participant were documented at the time of interview. Due to an intentionally open-ended interview format, all additional statistics shown below derive from information pro-actively shared by each participant.

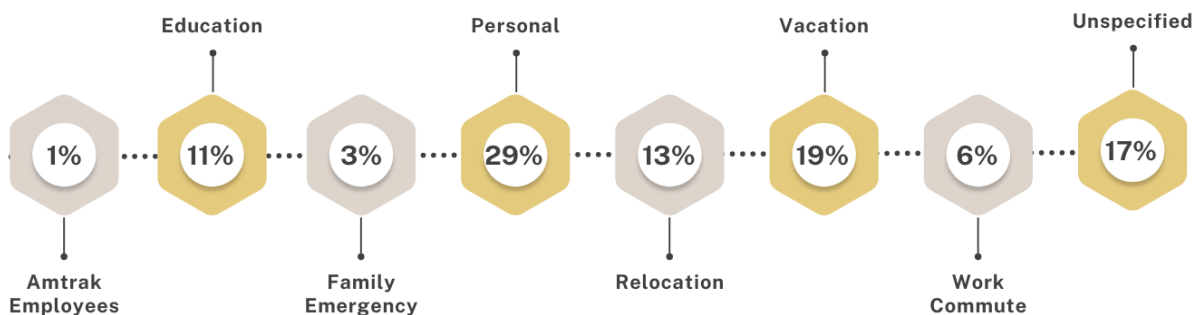
Of the 218 participants interviewed for the project....



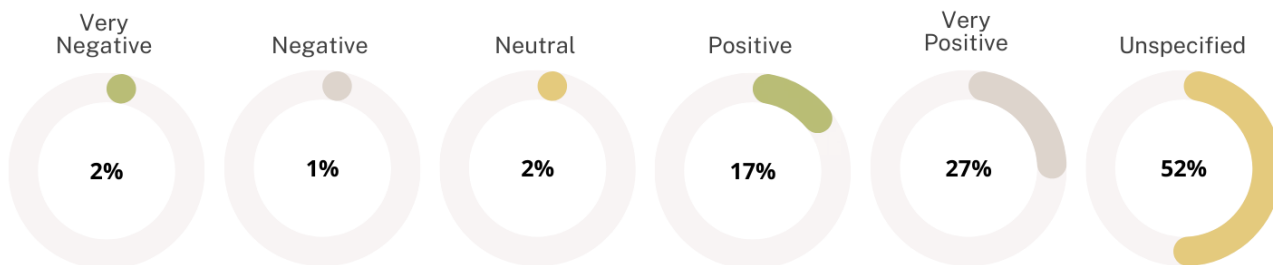
DURATION OF TRAVEL



REASON FOR TRAVEL



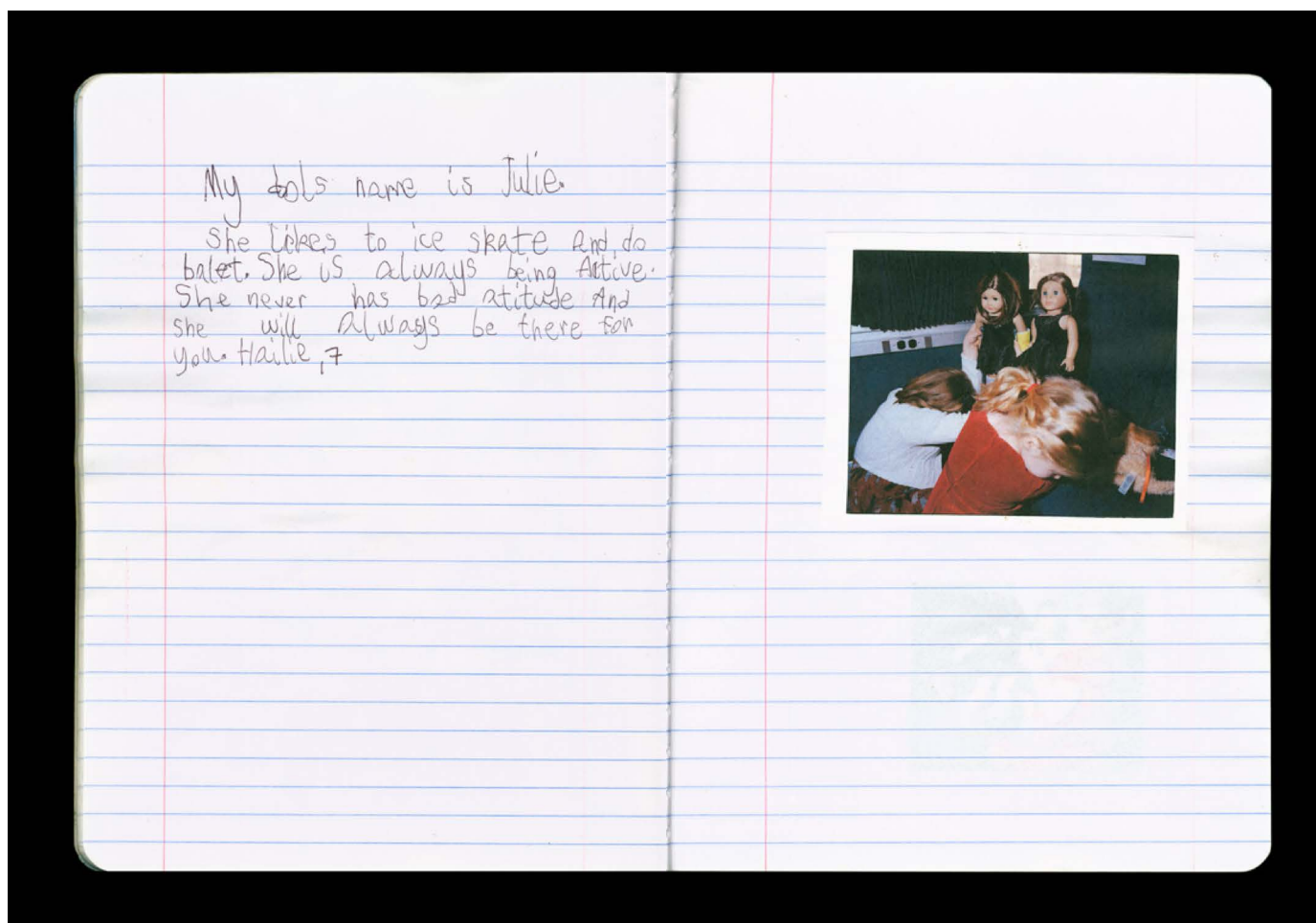
PERSPECTIVE ON AMTRAK



Passengers often asked what they should write. The response was usually open ended, “Whatever you like.” Other times I would respond “Where are you coming from and where do you hope to go, why are you traveling, what is your perspective on train travel in the US, what is your perspective of the country now, or whatever feels right to you.”. The flexible format allowed for unexpected discoveries from those being interviewed.

When a passenger mentioned their train travel without a positive or negative sentiment, their perspective on Amtrak was rated Neutral. If they stated that their train experience had been either positive or negative, their perspective on Amtrak was recorded as such. If they made multiple mentions of their experience (positive or negative) or said they definitely would or would not travel Amtrak again, their perspective was recorded as Very Positive or Very Negative.

Participants' handwriting, spelling, colloquialisms, and perspectives often proved equally informative as their content. For example, Hailie's perspective on what qualities make a 'model' girl, "...being active... never has bad attitude (sic) and she will always be there for you," are clear indications of certain socialization patterns she was being taught.



Hailie, 2/20/2012

Intercity train travel within the United States provides a practical transportation alternative for passengers with physical conditions, mental conditions, religious beliefs, or privacy concerns that prevent them from flying; people in need of a short-notice, cost-effective transportation option (often for family emergencies such as illness or death); and others attempting to move illegal drugs, alcohol, or illicit cash earnings from state to state.

Boarded Amtrak train in New Orleans – heading to Atlanta, GA. Atlanta – for an Anniversary Trip. This is our first train ride. Things that we will be doing in Atlanta – Aqua, Coke Building, CNN News town – zoo – Gardens, and a great place to enjoy Anniversary dinner.

This trip is my husband's first moving trip since fighting + dealing with vertigo for the past 6 years. If he can handle this then maybe next will be flying.

- Carol Arboneaux, 9/20/2012

Today...today I woke up to the sunrise. Usually, I find beauty in such things. But today I am changing support groups--from my boyfriend to old friends. I put my hand over my heart to remember--I have purpose. I am traveling home to say good-bye. My friend died last week of natural causes. (We're too young to be dying of natural causes.)

I find myself caught between desperately grasping onto my faith in humanity and forgiving myself, I hadn't realized how symbolic this train ride would be. I left home because I was offered a second chance at life and in my wake, I left the burning heaps of chaos. I had never been ashamed of myself as I had been, leaving that life. I know that my life could never have stayed as it was. All my life, I've been told by friends and strangers alike, that I have purpose in this life. I'm going to do big things.

But I never told him what he'd meant to me or that I am sorry. I'll never know if he forgives me, so this journey home is not for you, Reader, but for me. I'm going to find my strength in the love of our friends. I am going to ask for forgiveness and stop remembering all the things I didn't do.

- Sarah Parks, 2/18/2012

Lastly, this is my first experience taking the train - I generally fly or catch a ride when I can down South from New York City. Convenience and necessity prompted me to travel by train. My story this time around is that of a million-day bootlegger. You see, New York state doesn't have interstate regulation on spirits. My particular love is of whiskey. I've become a collector, and I'm always on the hunt for hard-to-find bottles, especially since the industry has changed and typically readily available whiskeys have now become scarce. North Carolina is a state that has regulation on spirits, so they are always sold at an MSRP price, whereas this does not exist in states like New York. What this means is that retailers can set their own prices, and a 'market price' is set by allocations and desire for the product. I'm able to purchase items at retail price from down South and flip them for an ~~in~~ inflated price and incredible profit. I've accumulated quite a stash over the last couple of years, but unfortunately haven't had the means to bring it back up North, ~~as they~~ Since there are no bag restrictions (or very few), this serves as the perfect means to conduct my business.

- Anonymous, 12/27/2016

Self realization and connection both emerged early in the project as common themes among multiple passengers. This desire for connection was not just limited to people at the end of a journey, but often included the desire to connect with others traveling, remote geography, train history (in certain instances nostalgia), distant memories, future aspirations, and even different versions of oneself that emerge within the particular experience of train travel.

The train can be comfortable, convenient. I'm riding the train this Friday February 10th for connection. I road (sic) the train 3 months ago to start a life in Chicago. Hoping that by making such a drastic move from my home in Philly, that my career would blossom. That I would be able to do more for my two boys. And that everything would start to make sense. But with each day I seemed to grow fonder of the life I moved away from. The distance made it clear to me that there are people that mean the world to me. London, Liam + Ali. I'm hoping this train brings me connection... especially with the love of my life. It's strange to me, how living 30 minutes away from someone you love can make you distant. But living 13 hours away can make you fall in love all over again.

- Nikki McCrae, 2/10/2012

Because I grew up around trains (Dad worked for the Milwaukee Road) I've always felt a connection with them. Though I wouldn't change the era I grew up in for any other, there's a small part of me that wishes I could have been around to better comprehend the heyday of train travel and the changeover from steam powered trains of late 40's and early 50's.

As it is, a few early train trips including Wisc./Washington + Wisc./Calif. gave me the travel urge. Through college, all my trips were by train. I didn't fly until after graduate school. For awhile, air travel was exciting and new, but after a lot of flying I found myself drawn back to trains--

[Check] actually see the country

[Check] meet people with surprisingly similar interests

[Check] have no other option but to relax

[Check] see geography and geology in person--

all with the pleasure of feeling the rocking of the train, hearing the sound of steel wheels on steel rails, and waking up to look out the window not knowing where you are, but knowing it's not where you went to sleep.

Sadly, with each trip I take, it's done with the knowledge the (sic) due to the short-sightedness of Republicans in Congress, there might not be a national long distance rail system to ride in a few years. Sitting in their 40 year old sleeping car in need of repair + remolding, I think of the fast, on-time, modern European trains I've ridden and wonder why the U.S. is so willing to fall behind the rest of the world in this necessary realm of transportation where once we were the envy of the world.

- Jeff Traintime, 2/9/2012

My name is Carla Hendrickson. I have a 7 year old son and I am from Coeur d'Alen, Idaho. I travel back and forth to Williston, North Dakota to work to take care of providing for my son. I recently just moved to Bismarck, North Dakota to finish school in the cosmetology field as well as nail technician, esthetician, make up artistry and eventually have hope of owning my own salon/spa after a few classes in business management. After that I plan to pursue culinary school and go further with that as well. I travel on the train to be able to visit my son in Idaho. I usually work for two-three weeks working as a housekeeper for my friends (sic) company Camkin Personal Assistants LLC. I also work as a cocktail waitress at night at a bar called Heartbreakers. As well as modeling. I have hopes of writing a book in the future about my life struggles and my goals in life.

- Carla Hendrickson, 1/22/2013

As a "divided nester" I have found my creative voice moving between strategically selected locations. I like to say that I root very much like the strawberry along a long vine--horizontal . I have been encouraged to "repot the plant" but I find that the train travel between my residential points allows the flow of thought that I need to find the stories waiting within me. It also allows in a semi-economic style a chance to have new experience to draw from. I consider the train to be my long hallway between two "houses" tiny in size large in poetry. My work occurs as I gaze from the window and search for the answers to personal riddles + longing. With the material I am able to access from this moving "hall" I form a body of stories on various topics which along my way had confused me but due to the focused contemplation of travel have become clear. I offer these to audiences ranging from one to about 20 in a formal setting, telling stories of creative renewal + hope. Having had years of confusion surrounding food, romantic love, where we live, the houses we buy or do not buy; what we search for, what we offer or do not offer-because of my choice to work as I move I have found my answers. The message I attempt to cary (sic) is one of hope and freedom. I attempt to teach "Personal Opera." That I have found mostly in the sojourns. In the end my choice is not to drive a car but to use the train to connect to my soul, to others, and to home. Indeed, it is my home, and muse for creative voice.

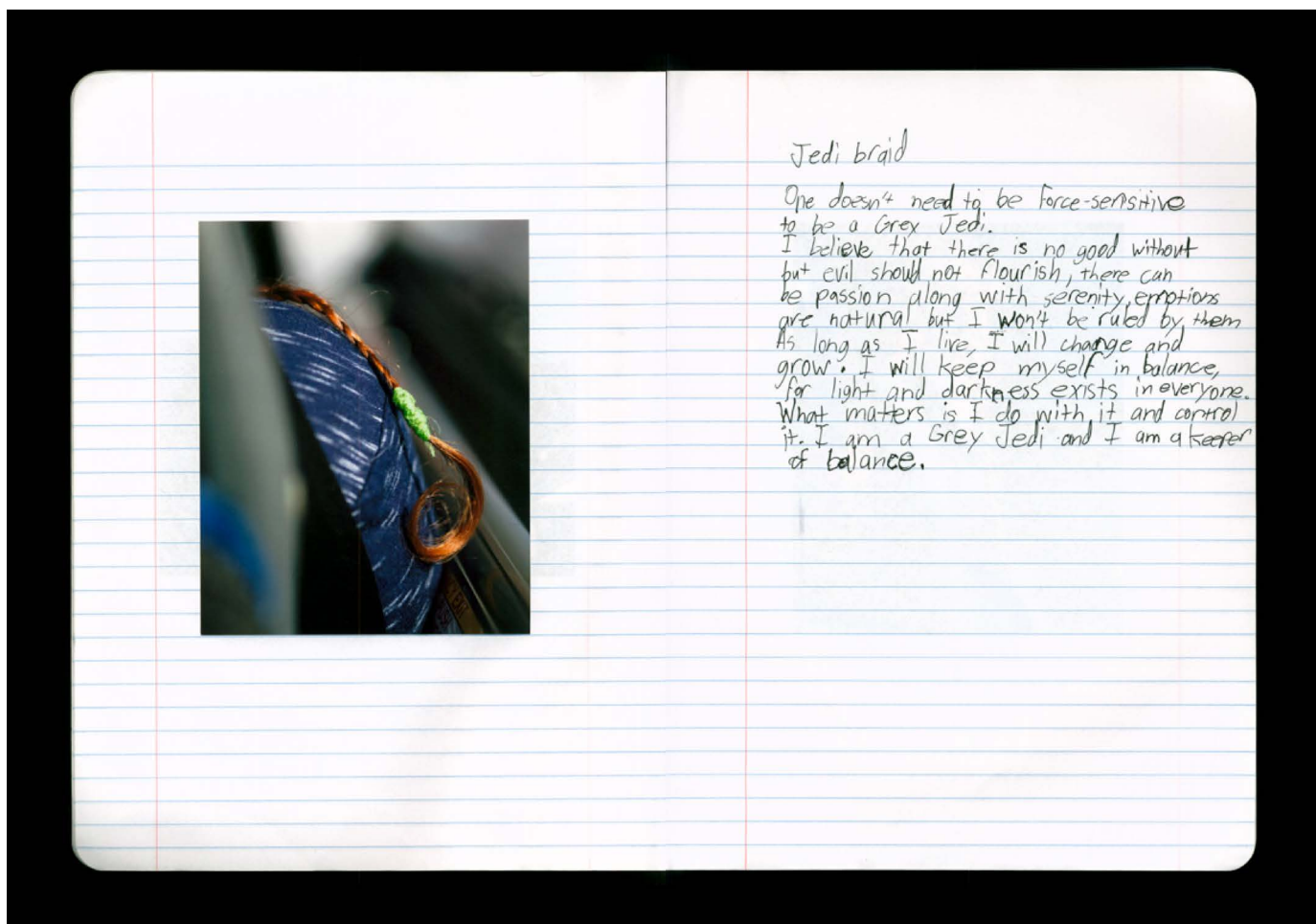
It is also a reminder of the beauty of our country. An endless flowing tapestry of inspiration a network of corridors still offering the "sense of occasion" almost lost in life still toward surroundings, meetings, and the almost vanished old hotel.

- Martha Letterman, 2/10/2012

For some passengers the anonymity of public transit combined with the social environment of cafe cars allowed them to connect with fictional or fantastical versions of their own identity. When interviewed about his reason for travel, the passenger shown below, preferring to remain unnamed, shared an adventurous story involving illicit drugs and travel. I later identified his plot line as belonging to the book at his side, *Naked Lunch* by William S. Burroughs.



- Identity Unknown, 2/18/2012



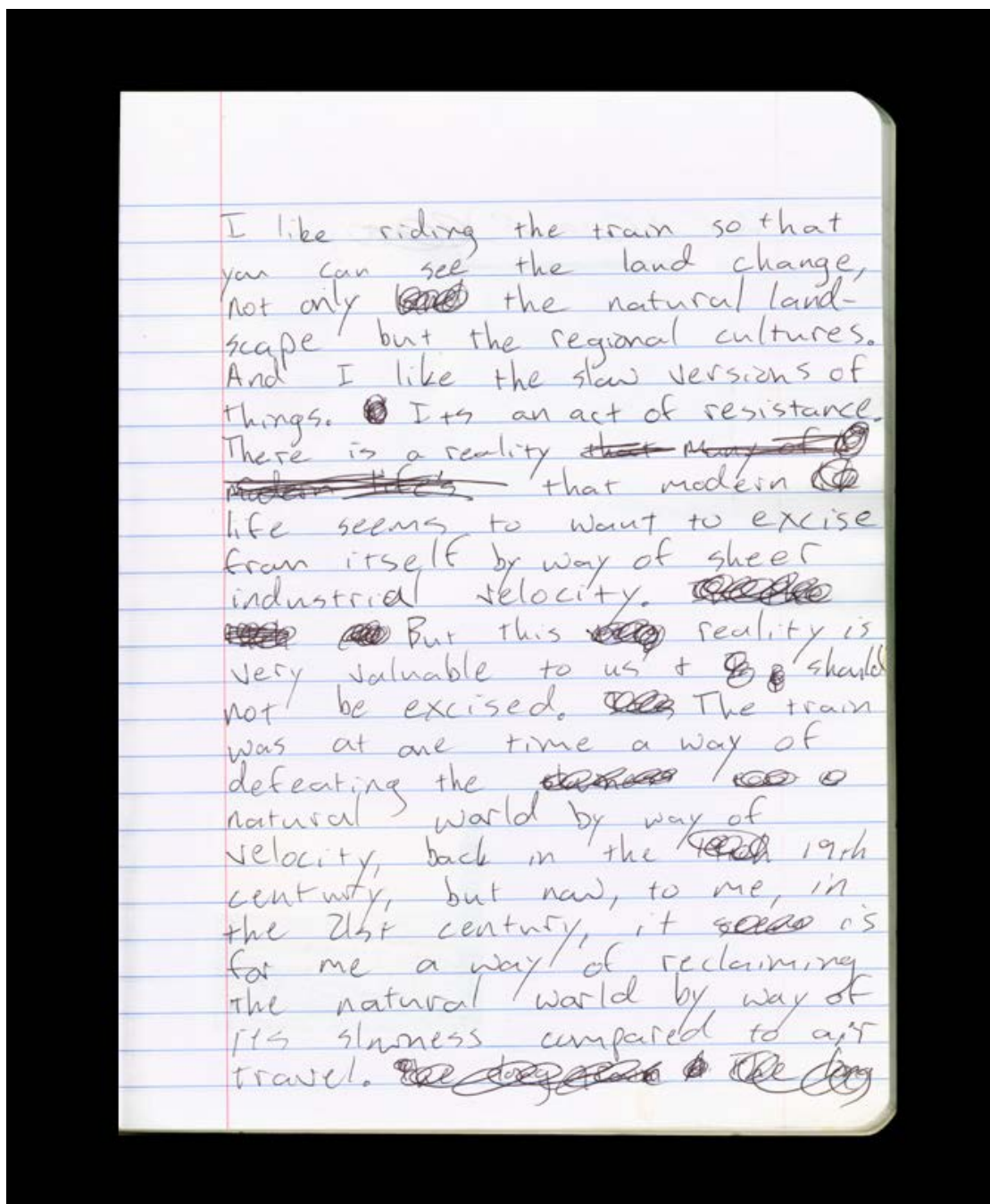
Jedi braid

One doesn't need to be force-sensitive to be a Grey Jedi.
 I believe that there is no good without but evil should not flourish, there can be passion along with serenity, emotions are natural but I won't be ruled by them. As long as I live, I will change and grow. I will keep myself in balance, for light and darkness exists in everyone. What matters is I do with it and control it. I am a Grey Jedi and I am a keeper of balance.

- Identity Unknown, 7/22/2019

In today's world of mobile internet and 'on-demand' everything, many in the United States view intercity passenger rail travel as inefficient and impersonal. When compared to air travel (and sometimes private automobiles), intercity train travel can require more time. But when comparing energy use per passenger, intercity train travel is a far more efficient means of transportation.

Many participants I interviewed intentionally chose Amtrak for its longer trip durations and lower energy input requirements. For them traveling by rail was an act of resistance to a zeitgeist blindly enamored of all things efficient and without consideration to what is being lost.



- Mike Brown, 2/21/2012

Why ride the train? I guess because I've been trying to live my life in a way that would make sense in the kind of world I want to live in. I could fly from Portland to Philadelphia, & for cheaper than Amtrak charges, but several aspects of rail travel appeal to me. There is, of course, the romanticism of it. The train is also a social atmosphere; several days without internet access & people start to converse & interact with the people around them in a way I wish we did in our everyday lives. I like to be conscious of the space & the people between the east & west coasts, & the days of watching landscapes pass & passengers get on & off make the reality of our country as a whole a tangible part of my reality. Because train travel consumes far less resources than other modes of cross country travel, I see it as a means of making travel a sustainable endeavor, accessible to more people. But above all, I think train travel requires a mindset that we desperately need to connect with in our country: that of slowness, of contemplation, of being where we are & seeing what is in front of us, of letting things take as long as they take & valuing the journey as much as the arrival.

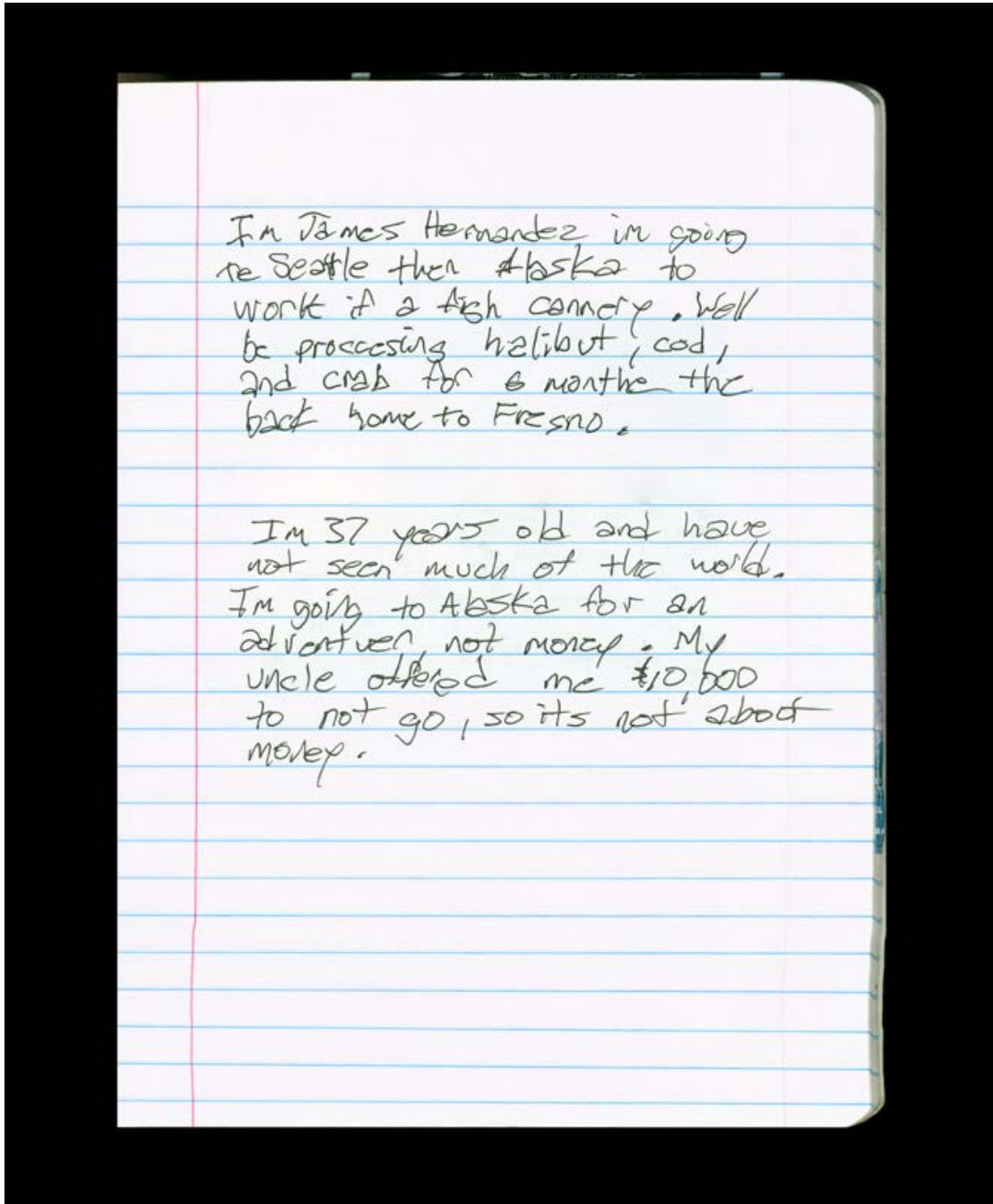
- Alyssa Woods, 1/22/2013

As David and I retired, we decided to stop traveling by air. Flying seems too environmentally costly, and now it's possible for us to take more time and enjoy the ride. We have a daughter and two grandchildren in Napa, California, and we live in Washington, DC, so we spend almost a week on the train each time we visit, but we consider the time on the train a glorious free time with no obligations. We enjoy looking out the window, reading, writing, and talking to people.

Today we were amazed to run into, again, Dan Turk, who volunteers in the same school where I volunteer, because the same thing happened in August on this same stretch between DC and Chicago. So I invited Dan to join us in our supper of homemade sourdough bread and cheese, hard boiled eggs, sweet peppers and apples. We have had a lively conversation about Alzheimers and education, one of those serendipities of traveling by train.

- Marja Hilfiker, 12/16/2017

There were others for whom train travel was a means of self discovery, not only in beginning a new chapter, but also self discovery through train travel itself.

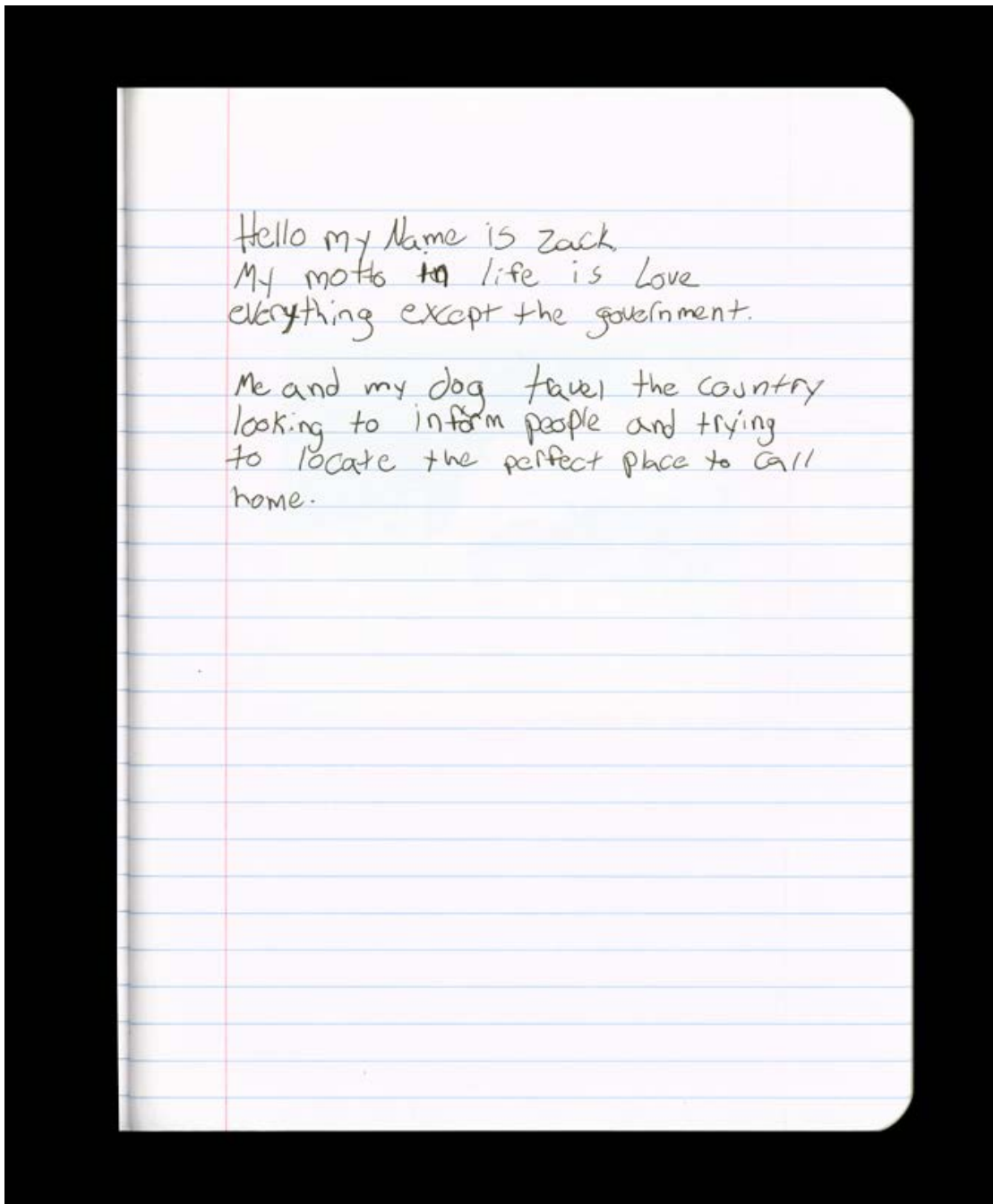


- James Hernandez, 1/10/2013

Before Friday, July 27, I had never experienced riding in a train, though it has always been a dream to hop a freight train. Close to 28 years old, I've hiked nearly 8,000 miles & have seen lots of adventure, but nothing quite compares to this train hopping escapade. We spent days in the jungle of Eden scouting out trains, dodging drones, & battling dehydration, right outside the Roseville yard. We talked about how our parents met, played cards, & made meals together. Within 24 hours we snuck into a hole in the fence climbed into the

lip of an intermodal double stack high cubes, hoping it was headed east, & experienced going over Donner Pass by moonlight, hiding from crew changes, & countless views with legs hanging over the side of the train with no glass, no barriers, that created a physical connection to the landscape. I loved the shared moments of complete solitude. In stark contrast, our trip back home on Amtrak was equally gratifying. We met Patrick & taught him how to play blackjack. We met Alicia and talked about spirituality vs. religion. This trip has been an act of faith, & I will be forever grateful to have experienced it with someone who values adventure & compassion.

- Meg Roussos, 7/31/2018



- Zack Winn, 12/8/2013

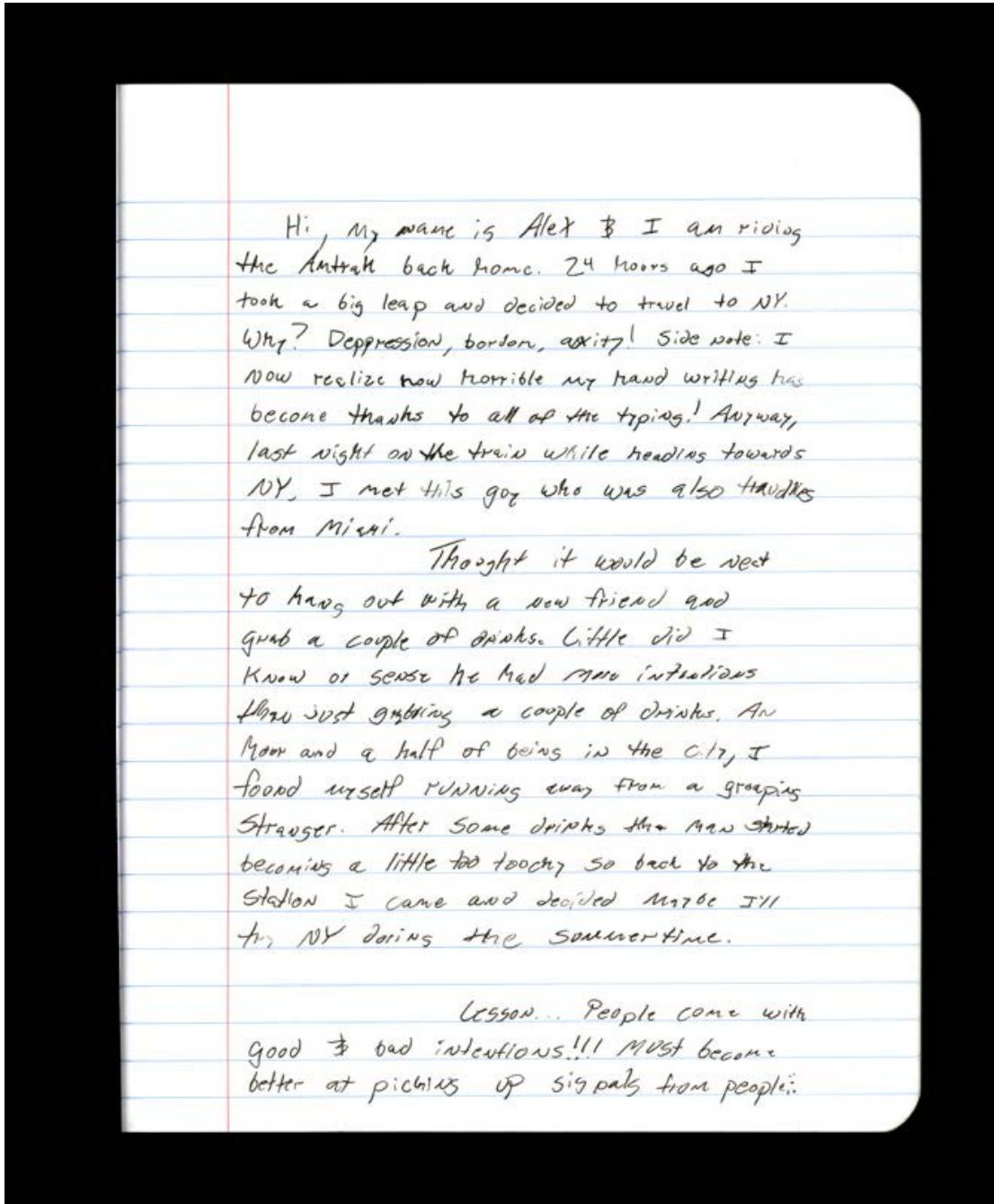
The interior architecture of Amtrak trains provides an unparalleled social environment for strangers to connect. In contrast to contemporary bus and air travel options, passengers are encouraged to circulate. Ample room between seats and spaces dedicated to gathering (dining and cafe cars) facilitate social adjacency and social interactions at distances that maintain comfortable personal space for each participating passenger. Whether through eavesdropping on conversations or direct engagement, listening to other passengers yields increased understanding and, for some, a sense of connection.

Jay Davies was a photo editor at Getty Images in New York City. He took a month-long train trip around the country in hopes of making a photography project about national politics during the runup to the 2012 election. Unsuccessful in his project ambitions, his trip became a vacation of sightseeing and visiting family.

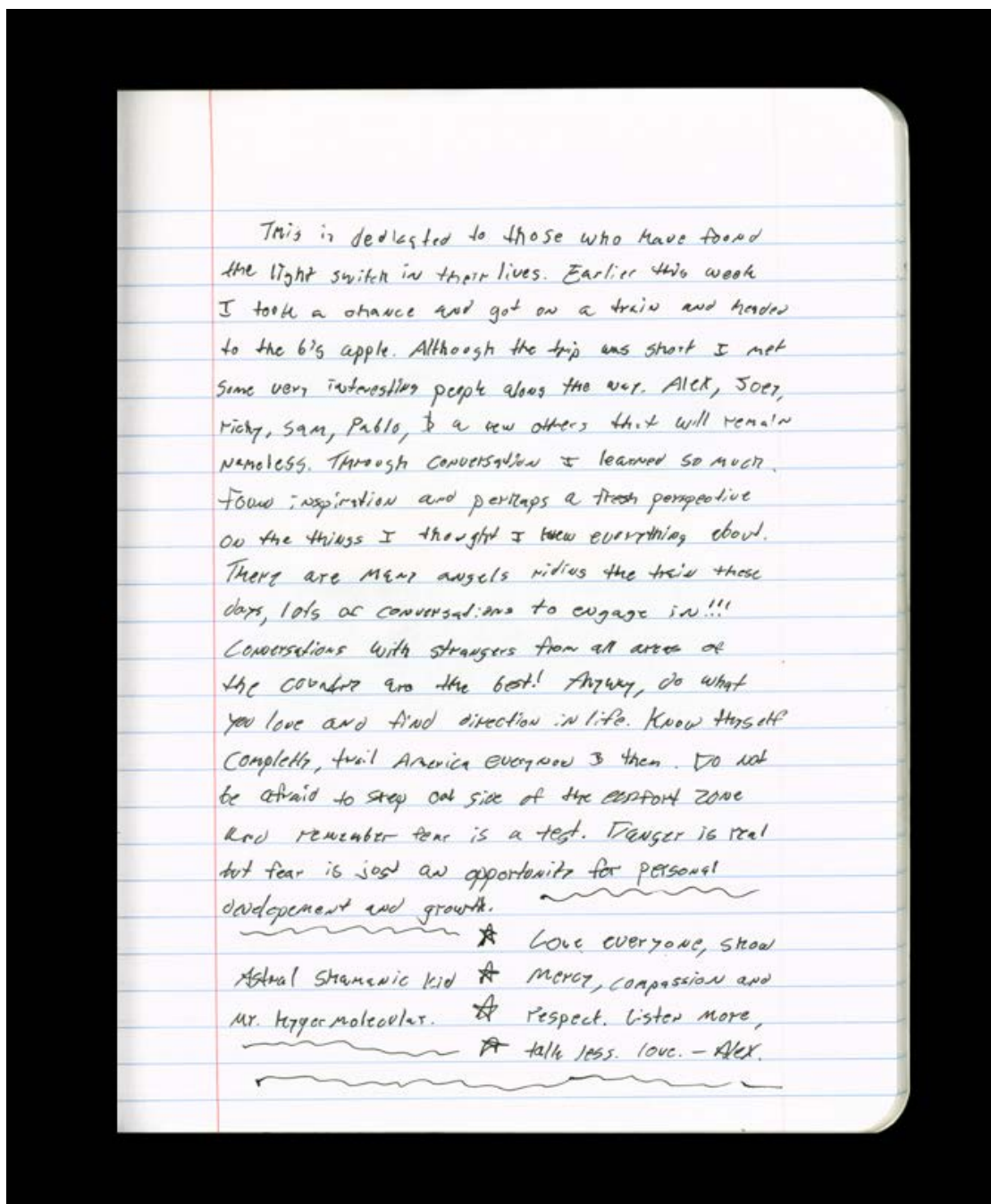
...I really wish I set off on this trip prepared to write about it and the people I met – or at least the people on whom I eavesdropped. On any given day the lounge car was a riot of interesting and inane conversations, with usually much more of the latter. I had nice conversations with nice people, but even nice people – judging from my experience on the train – have limitless capacity for personal racism, political ignorance, myopic provincialism, self-absorption, and all other sorts of obnoxious idiosyncrasies that are especially pronounced during a brief encounter, unmitigated by knowing the better angels of a person's nature. Hours or days on a train doesn't seem to bring out the best in people. So, on one hand, the story of the train seems to be the unpretty glimpse it provides of American attitudes and beliefs, but on the other hand this story is distorted by the environment. People get a little stir-crazy, normal social etiquette is thrown out the window, and, just for good measure, everyone wears the bleary-eyed shabbiness caused by prolonged travel. Can both of these stories be told photographically? I don't think so. Seems more the province of writing.

- Jay Davies, 9/20/2012

In contrast, the following two writings were contributed by the same passenger. The first at the beginning of his return from New York City to Miami, and the other approximately 20 hours later, after a day spent conversing with his fellow passengers. The observable change in his perspective on strangers is profound, proof of the empathy building capacity of intercity passenger rail travel.



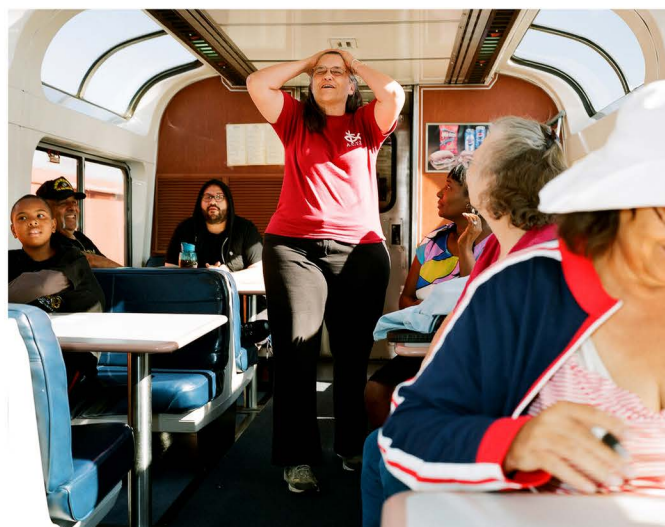
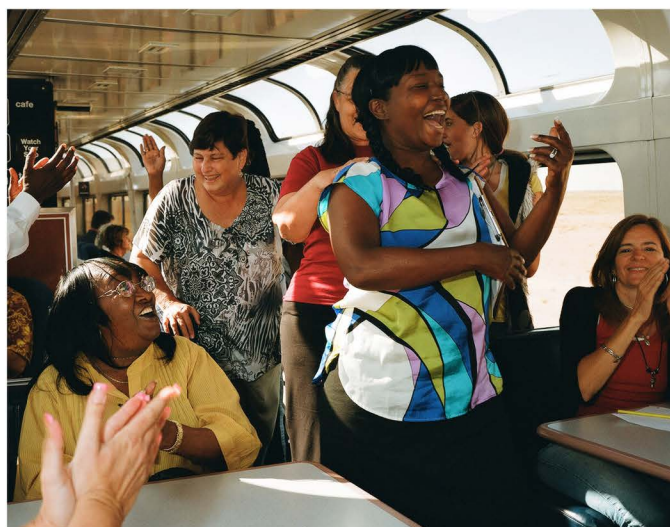
- Alex Llamio, 12/13/2013



- Alex Llamio, 12/14/2013

Interpersonal Connection Facilitated Through Planned Activities and Inadvertent Events

Planned activities on Amtrak trains, such as crew-led games in the cafe car and presentations by on-train route docents, facilitate conversation and shared experiences between previously unassociated passengers. The grid of four pictures below depicts a Charades game witnessed on the Sunset Limited route. The game was organized by an Amtrak crew member and attracted participation from previously unassociated passengers.



- Sunset Limited route, 09/16/2012

While the passage below reads as two passengers who preemptively choose to travel together, Charlie and Tim were unknown to each other prior to beginning their respective journeys. Though their Amtrak travel experiences clearly lacked in efficiency, and at times were quite frustrating, the shared experience kindled a strong friendship between the two. At the time of their interview, I found them sitting together, in relatively high spirits, and eager to share the story of their adventure.

It all started on the west coast Oregon to be exact. We, Charlie and Tim started thier (sic.) adventure to Florda (sic.). Charlie started in Salem (on a bus) to Portland where he met Tim. They were going to catch a train there but due to weather - not...They were put on a bus to Spocken (sic.) to meet the train there. Once there, they meet Rick who was going to FL to bury his father at White Fish Mont. Switches were frozen that put us behind. On our way across N. Dakota, we were put on a side track to let Feright (sic.) trains go past us Back West (sic.). We sat there from Sunrise (on the left side of our Train to Sunset on the right) (sic.). When we got moving again, we traveled 150 yards to stop due to electrical short which caused further delay. Had to wait for BNSF engine, however got compensated with mystery meal.

- Now, we were back on the move only to find out we have a bad wheel in Elk Heart (sic.) IN on the last car so they moved all the people forward and removed the last car. Now we were packed in with people sleeping in the club car.

- We got in to Chicago to (sic.) late to catch the next train so we were put up at the Hyatt hotel till the next train that night. That put Rick late for his fathers funneral (sic.) so he turned around and went back to Washington St.(sic.) very mad at the whole trip. We were once again on the road till I was approached by a drill instructor attendant and said I was looking for you. We will be taking you off train and busing you to Wash DC from Pitt. That was a Kodak moment. I looked like a deer in headlights. Bus #3.

I had a job interview. Did not make it to interview. I did not get job and 12 Doller (sic.) to my name start new life with girlfriend. So the Bottom line of this story to me is expect the worst, Hope for the best, and enjoy the people who you are with and if you want to ride a Bus, Buy a train tickett (sic), or maybe if you buy a Bus tickett (sic), you could get a train ride?

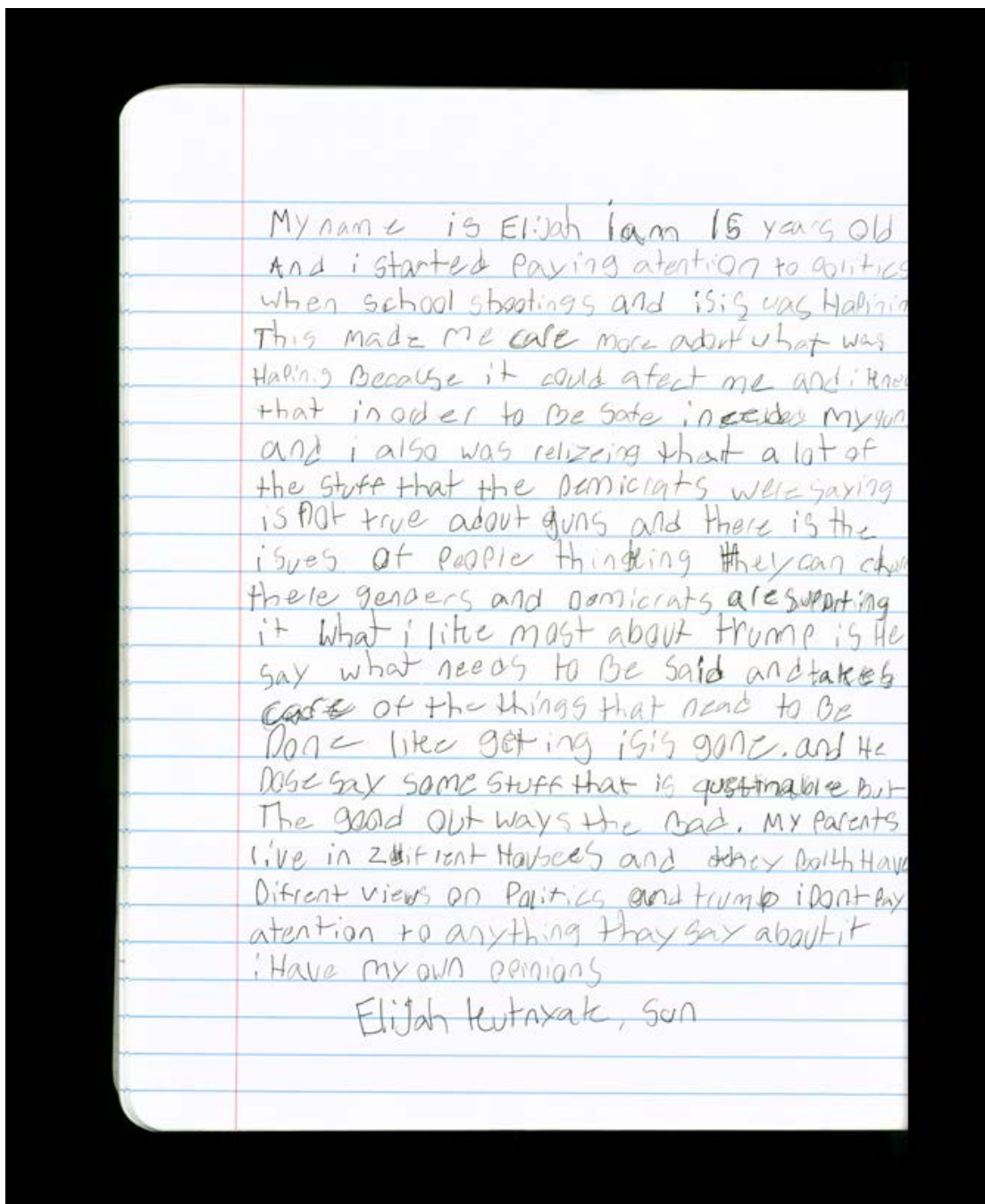
- Tim St. Clair & Charles S. Oakes, 12/13/2013

Conclusion

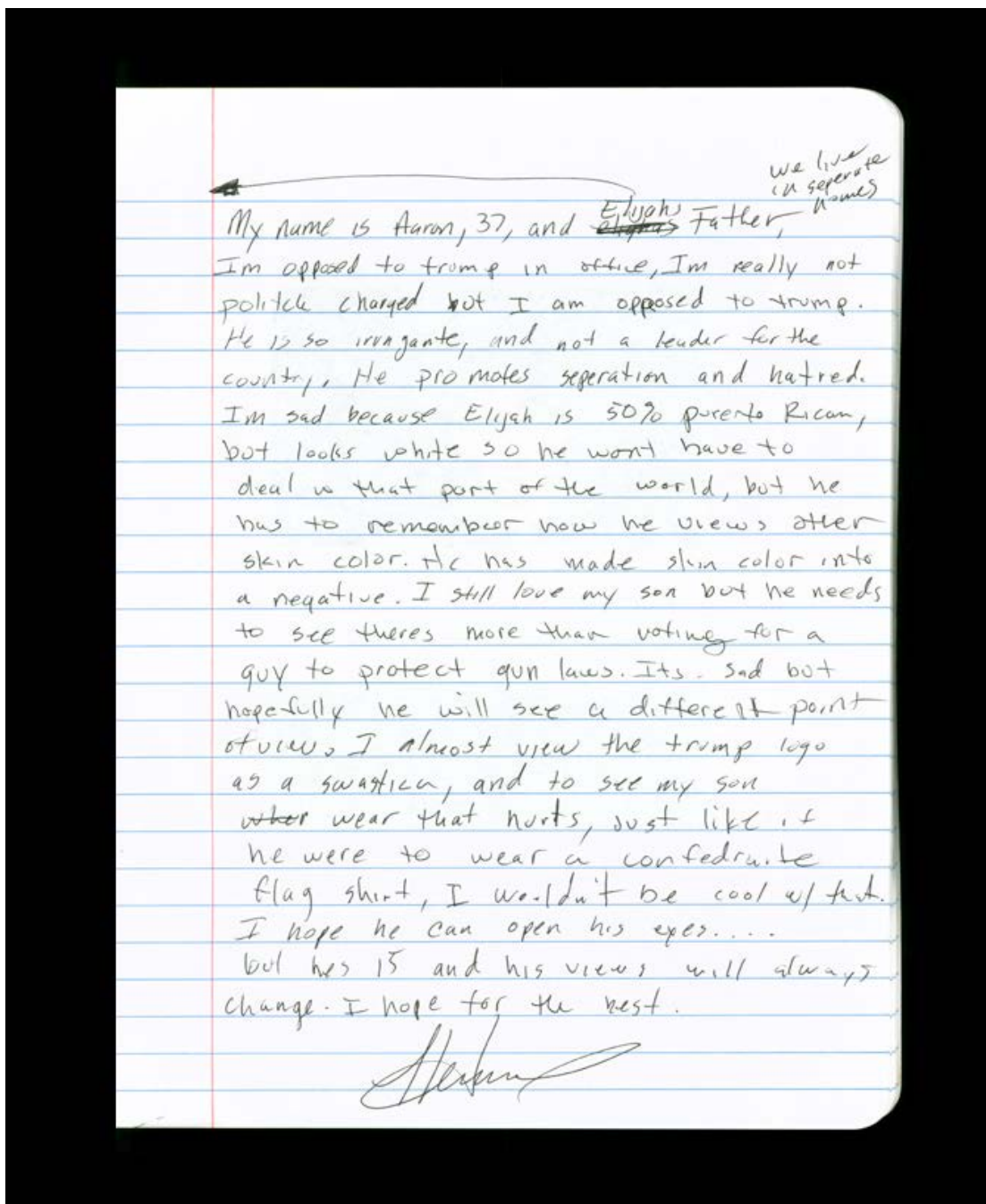
Intercity train travel within the United States provides a unique environment that facilitates social encounters and engagements that differ from our daily or digital lives. While not everyone who rides Amtrak experiences an increased sense of empathy, many passengers commented positively on the social, and in many cases unexpected, conversations they had onboard.

Hearing the truth of others in a non-judgemental way requires time and mental space, and interstate trains in America are inefficient in a way that few other national train systems are. In that inefficiency, while adjacent with people of differing backgrounds and viewpoints, there's a space in which to reconnect with a slower pace of life, a slower pace of thought, and a slower pace of interaction. This slower pace of interaction provides processing time to potentially hear and better understand complex truths, whether the personal challenges of others, the state of the country, or the state of politics, that exist all around us.

In my own experience, the following interviews, Elijah and Aason, Jackylen whose aspirations to attend college were leading her to a group home in Portland, OR, and Milo who was relocating from Virginia to Florida after her partner was incarcerated for marijuana possession, were deeply moving.



- Elijah Leutxate, 7/31/2018



- Aaron Herrera, 7/31/2018

I'm moving to Portland, OR to be in a group home. This is my first time living without my family around. I've lived in Mexico, Lakeview, Texas, Georgia, but always with my family before. I'm just trying to discover myself. If there is a better way to describe it, I don't know. Hoping to try to make new friends. I'm gonna be honest with you, I grew up in an abusive family. I've lived in foster homes before. I was never really the social type of person, so I'm hoping that moving to Portland will help me get out of my comfort zone. I'm not sure yet how long I'll live in Portland, maybe 2 or 3 years. It kinda just depends on how I feel. I want to go to college and try to get my associates degree in child development. I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school and I'm the first to want to go to college. My family is not that caring of a group of people, so they are not that proud of me. When I was 9 years old I came back to America by crossing the border because I still didn't have my passport. This is the first time in a long time since that I've traveled alone. Not having my mom or my dad around was the hardest part of that trip. I think the hardest part about life in Portland will be trying to get out of my depression and being able to be myself for once without hesitation.

- Jackelyn Monrreal, 6/16/2020

I heard your soothing voice last night, a whisper in my mind. It calmed my nerves, as I'm on edge...slipping, falling, letting go, and flying all at once. Our lives keep turning corners, each dramatic change, resulting in nothing less than perfection in our mess, in my eyes, as I see it. Just as I know why your baby blues twinkle and smile reassuring me too. Intuition tells us what burden to expect, our faith in God, and dedication to what's true gives us the strength to endure the pain...I feel you. Every aching hour, another day I pray, I call out to your soul to feel me still fighting back, speaking out, to make a stand against the corrupt abuse of power, cruel and insensitive, secretly the devil schemes. This passion ties us deeply to our purpose and places us in alignment with our stars. No room for doubt. To have fear is a risk. Every ounce of energy my committment (sic.) is timeless, I always lay it all on the line. Your love uncovered the strength in the core of my being, sparked a flame within me that had slowly died and with this, I take new found pride in the gift, the key that unlocks all doors, intrigues me more still not to merely exist but to shine bright my spirit radiates a guiding beam, like a lighthouse calling forth the angels from the sky. I'll always shake the heavens and make it known we're still here. So fear not dear, we will rise above.

- Milo, 12/14/2013

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the unique social experience of intercity train travel fosters empathy, patience, and solidarity. Having traveled every route within the Amtrak passenger rail system over the course of this project, I believe that any accurate value assessment of intercity train travel within the United States must take these social benefits into account. To evaluate our intercity passenger rail system by its fiscal and operational efficiency alone would overlook the immense social and individual benefits this shared public space provides.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks all those passengers who agreed to contribute their image and writings to this project as well as the Mineta Transportation Institute, John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and John Gutmann Photographer Foundation for the support necessary to produce this project. The author especially thanks Lisa Rose, for editorial services, as well as MTI staff, including Executive Director Karen Philbrick, PhD; Deputy Executive Director Hilary Nixon, PhD; and Director of Operations Alverina Eka Weinardy.

About the Author

McNair Evans is an independent artist, photographer, and educator. His work appears in numerous publications and exhibition settings and has been recognized by awards such as an Innovation in Documentary Arts Award from Duke University, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a John Gutmann Photography Fellowship. His books and prints are held in public and private collections including SFMOMA, BAMPFA, and Yale's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

This report can be accessed at
transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2311



MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the US Department of Transportation, the California Department of Transportation, and public and private grants, including those made available by the Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (SB1). The Institute is part of San José State University's Lucas Graduate School of Business.