
**PEOPLE IN TRANSIT: EXPANDING THE SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL
FRAMES OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION ANNUAL
MEETINGS**

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ABSTRACT

This photo essay comprises a series of black and white photographs taken in transit. The photographs were taken in airports, planes, busses, railway platforms and underground metro stations during the photographer's journey to the 2017 American Anthropological Association (AAA) Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. Taken in high contrast, the images presented here reflect the photographer's acute awareness of the sharp conceptual boundaries that separate the scholarly arena located inside of the venue's walls from the social, political, economic and spatial worlds that exist outside of them. The essay provides a visual narrative of the photographer's observations of people and places while on route to the event. In doing so, it highlights everyday lived experiences that occurred "just before" the official onset of the event, while "on the way" to the venue. Through careful attention to shadows and viewpoint, the photographer subtly anonymizes subjects, maintaining the fabric of their relationships as passing strangers. While at once a reflexive commentary on the temporal and spatial frames of conferences, the essay also documents the diverse ways that people temporarily dwell in ephemeral travel spaces.

KEYWORDS

Street Photography; Visual anthropology; Photography; Space; Place; Politics; Conference Travel; Reflexivity; Aesthetics; Experience

Bio

Justin Raycraft is Ph.D. student in the Department of Anthropology at McGill University, with interests in environmental anthropology and photography. He holds a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and a Richard Salisbury Award from the Canadian Anthropology Society.

People in Transit

Victor Turner (1967) famously mobilized the phrase 'betwixt and between' with reference to the liminal phase that people must enter into in the context of culturally-sanctioned rites of passage. Since then, the concept of 'liminality' has continually resurfaced throughout anthropological scholarship. Anthropologists themselves often embody the concept in their professional lives. Life for anthropologists often oscillates between field sites and academic institutions. Scholarship on the concept of "the field" suggests that field sites are not necessarily bounded locations, but are porous places of mind, continually constructed and reconstructed in abstract manners that are congruent with current ways of thinking (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The dichotomy between "being there" and "not being there" does not effectively encapsulate the ways in which anthropologists may find themselves carrying out their everyday lives at home, while their minds drift back to their field sites and the people with whom they have lived and shared experiences. There is liminal space, both physical and mental, between the home and the field, and these spaces are ripe for anthropological inquiry.

How are anthropological conferences situated in relation to this complex dialectic between "being there" and "not being there?" When I travel to conferences, I am often struck by the similarities between them regardless of place of implementation. Certainly, there are contingents of scholars who present on issues relevant to the local ethnographic context. For the most part, however, the overall structure of conferences from one locality to the next is the same.



When I step inside of a conference venue, usually a luxury hotel, I often feel like I have entered into a conceptual space that is no longer contextualized in relation to the phenomenology of everyday life outside of its walls. This distinction is particularly pronounced for graduate students like myself who are reliant on public transit for economic efficiency.

One of my interests when I travel to conferences is getting a glimpse of the observable aspects of everyday life happening in public spaces outside of the venue. While a few days in a new city is certainly not enough time to engage in ethnographic fieldwork, it is enough time to acquire an initial sense of place, and the urban lifeways that animate it. Places provide backdrops to experiences that are subjectively linked to people's ways of seeing. To fully engage with the layers of meaning and significance that are woven into the social fabrics of places, one would need to conduct long-term ethnography. However, Luvaas (2018) has argued that "ethnographers do not hold a monopoly on seeing richly" (191). Street photographers, he argues, also share an anthropologically-sophisticated way of seeing people and places, and "demonstrate the potential of photography for enhancing a particular kind of experience of place." (Luvaas 2018, 190). Luvaas (2018) goes on to explain that street photography can "convey a mood" and "enrich a theme" (Luvaas 2018, 190). I follow Luvaas's (2018) sentiments here, suggesting that street photography can offer a particular lens for expressing an experience of place. Perhaps street photography and ethnography are not mutually exclusive, and can articulate with each other in artful ways.

As Rose (2007) shows, academics are coming to realize the important role that visual media can play in capturing and conveying the 'texture' of places (see also Merchant 2012, 220). I am particularly inclined towards photography as ethnographic method. Photography provides both a mechanism of documentation and of reflexive commentary on one's own subjective experiences.

Building from these themes, my intentions behind this photo essay are threefold. The essay comprises a series of high contrast, black and white photographs taken during my trip from Montreal, Quebec to the American Anthropological Association (AAA) annual meeting in Washington, DC in November 2017. The essay is first an expression of my experience of place through the lens of street photography. By carefully considering shadows and viewpoint, I subtly anonymize photo subjects to maintain the nature of our relationships as passing strangers. Second, in highlighting lived experiences that occurred "on the way" to the venue, I provide a commentary on the politics of conferences. I attempt to broaden the spatial and temporal frames of the AAA annual meeting by drawing attention to everyday experiences that occurred "just before" the start of the meeting, outside of the venue's walls. Third, I use the theme of 'people in transit' as a metaphor for the liminal lives of anthropologists, who must regularly negotiate spaces that are both 'betwixt and between.' In doing so, I demonstrate, following Luvaas (2018), a potential application of street photography within the anthropological project.



PHOTO 1: View of Montreal Trudeau International Airport from the runway



PHOTO 2: En route from Montreal to Toronto



PHOTO 3: Sunrise over Toronto Pearson International Airport



PHOTO 4: Departure gate at Toronto Pearson International Airport



PHOTO 5: Glimpse of a passing traveler.



PHOTO 6: Waiting in the shadows.



PHOTO 7: Boarding at daybreak.



PHOTO 8: Passengers silhouetted on the flight from Toronto to Baltimore.



PHOTO 9: Thoughtful gaze.



PHOTO 10: Dozing on the bus from Baltimore. Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport to Greenbelt Metro Station.



PHOTO 11: Reflexive shadow on the Greenbelt Metro railway platform.



PHOTO12: Shadow self.



PHOTO 13: Catching the Metro at Gallery PI-Chinatown.



PHOTO 14: The escalator at Woodley Park-Zoo Metro Station.



PHOTO 15: The final leg of the journey. Looking upwards towards the exit of the metro.

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