

## Chapter 5

# ‘During’: Moments of Sexual Harassment on the London Underground

### Abstract

This chapter focusses on the ‘during’ – the actual corporeal experiences of sexual harassment on the London Underground. I explore these ‘moments’ in detail, the nitty gritty complexity of these experiences that often hold vulnerability, fear, resistance, anger and ambivalence all at once. As considered above, this ‘messiness’ can be lost in quantitative work, to the detriment of a nuanced understanding of sexual harassment. I continue to explore and understand these moments through the lens of mobility, again operationalising Lefebvre’s *rhythmanalysis* and Cresswell’s (2010) concept of *friction* in order to draw out key conceptual observations that are specific to how sexual harassment manifests in a public transport environment. Using a framework that has movement and mobilities at its core, this chapter links sexual harassment to spatial and temporal elements of the broader city and its transport system. In doing so, it shows how these multiple rhythms coalesce to create the conditions within which sexual harassment is perpetrated and experienced in a certain and particular way. The framework illustrates how harassment is, in part spatially implicated, facilitated or hindered by the spaces and paces of the city.

*Keywords:* Sexual harassment; public transport; London Underground; mobilities; *rhythmanalysis*

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**Mind the Gender Gap: A Mobilities Perspective of Sexual Harassment on the London Underground, 75–94**



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doi:[10.1108/978-1-83753-026-720241005](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83753-026-720241005)

*Railway stations and trains are ‘... places of unexpected social interchange as people’s lives from distant parts are contingently brought together, often only for ‘brief encounters’ before the characters move away’. (Urry, 2007, p. 109)*

*When it first happened, when he first started rubbing himself against me, I didn’t really realise what was happening. There are a lot of people on there and he did it in time with the swaying of the tube carriage .... By the time I really realised, like properly, what was going on, that he was actually rubbing against me, it was too late because it was my stop. (Demi)*

The overarching aim of this chapter is to identify the key features of experiences of sexual harassment in a transport environment. At this part of the journey, we slow down time, and zoom in, to focus on the ‘during’ – the actual, corporeal moments of these intrusions. I explore these ‘moments’ in detail, to draw out and give credence to the complexities and contradictions that they hold. By doing this, we see that these experiences often induce feelings of vulnerability, fear, confusion, resistance, anger and ambivalence (sometimes all at once), shaping women’s immediate reactions to these intrusions and assaults. We continue to look at these experiences through the lens of mobility, again operationalising Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis and Cresswell’s (2010) concept of friction to highlight key conceptual observations that are specific to how sexual harassment manifests in a public transport environment. Using a framework that has movement and mobilities at its core, this chapter links sexual harassment to spatial and temporal elements of the broader city and its transport system. In doing so, it shows how these multiple rhythms coalesce to create the conditions within which sexual harassment is perpetrated and experienced in a certain and particular way.

By taking this approach, I identify three key conceptual observations that constitute unique features of sexual harassment on public transport. These have been discussed elsewhere (Lewis et al., 2021), and I take this opportunity to review these characteristics in more detail and show how they manifest in women’s in-depth accounts. To begin, the rhythms of the city above permeate the Underground, and are used by perpetrators to *aid* and *conceal* sexual harassment in different ways, at varying times of the day. Bissel (2009) considers how travelling by train is often characterised by the density of strangers being transported in proximity. As we explored in the previous chapter, this is most recognisable in morning and evening rush hours. At these times, passengers are restrained on platforms and in carriages with one another – physical contact is common and largely understood as an unavoidable norm. The density of people allows certain types of sexual harassment to be perpetrated, most notably in the form of groping and frotteuring, in a way that remains relatively hidden. As we will see in Ruth and Sheila’s stories, offenders act within the normative, rhythmic, composition of the busy carriage without *observably* transgressing the social norms of the space. They surreptitiously exploit the high level of interpersonal tactility within the space to perpetrate and obscure their assaults. In the stories below, we will also

see how perpetrators used the rhythms of the urban and the Underground to stalk through the network in a non-suspicious way (see Rach's account), and to perpetrate blatantly sexual behaviour when the carriages are isolated at quiet, off-peak times or in more remote areas of the city (see Grace and Carla's accounts). This obfuscation often defines incidents of harassment in these mobile spaces, causing confusion and subsequent distress for victims as they are forced to navigate these intrusions that are shrouded in uncertainty.

The second key conceptual observation is that the strict, normative social rules of the Tube are implicit in curbing women's responses to sexual harassment. The rhythmic flow of movement through the Tube network shows regulated bodies coming together to move as a 'polyrhythmic' (Lefebvre, 2004) collective. Hornsey (2012, p. 686) describes how the Underground is designed to function with 'the logic of a factory assembly line' and Urry (2007, p. 38) posits that, this is in part constituted by the fact that 'people know how to behave on the move'. Consequently, anything that creates a disruption or *friction* to people's journeys is often treated with contempt (Edensor, 2011). As Lefebvre writes on 'dressage', he discusses the disciplining and training of the body. Physiological bodily rhythms coexist with and are conditioned by the social environment, as we train ourselves and are trained to behave according to the norms of the space (Lefebvre, 2004). This is interesting to consider when women are anxious about reacting overtly due to breaking the social etiquette of the Tube. He describes how we contain ourselves by concealing the diversity of our rhythms, stating 'humans break themselves in like animals. They learn to hold themselves' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 48). This acts as a form of friction, as women may *feel* a certain way (fear, anger, etc.), yet often act in a way that is against their own rhythms in order to conform to the space in which the body is situated. As discussed previously, one of the most observable interactions on the Tube is Goffman's (1963) concept of 'civil inattention', a deference owed to strangers in a crowded public space. Whilst essential for survival in the modern city, the women's stories presented here show how collective civil inattention breeds an unsympathetic and isolating environment, diminishing a sense of individual or communal responsibility. This is exacerbated by the prevalence of the 'metropolitan individuality' and the 'blasé outlook' (Simmel, 1903), where excessive stimuli in the city means that 'people are forced to develop an attitude of reserve and insensitivity to feeling' (Urry, 2007, p. 22).

The impact of civil inattention will be given more attention in this chapter. When women recognise that they are being sexually assaulted or harassed, the anxiety that exists around breaching the social etiquette of the Underground and the risk of (by speaking out) causing tension between passengers significantly shapes their responses to these intrusions. As detailed in women's stories below, each of them expressed a reluctance to rebuke their harasser in a confrontational way. Their apprehensions revolved around the risk of humiliation, and the concern that other passengers would treat them with contempt. In conjunction with this, I show how we can further understand this collective apathy of the Tube carriage by drawing on Baumgartner's (1988) concept of 'moral minimalism'. Though her work revolves around the social order of the suburbs, and how conflict is largely avoided here, many elements of this can be transferred to understanding

the dynamics of the Tube that are fundamental in shaping women's experiences of sexual harassment. This is not surprising, as Baumgartner suggests moral minimalism is likely to prevail anywhere where there is 'social fluidity, in which people are highly mobile, both physically and inter-personally, and move in and out of relationships constantly' (p. 129). As a place of abundant mobility, moral minimalism is rife within the Tube network. A key example of how this manifests includes understanding the general lack of bystander response when women do not overtly react (for reasons explored below), or as Baumgartner (1988, p. 56) suggests: 'the seriousness of an offense is defined in practice by the response to it. Where moral minimalism prevails, offenses are apt to appear trivial to an observer precisely because their victims react with such restraint'.

The third key conceptual observation is that as a highly peripatetic space, the transitory nature of the Underground often creates a situation where women barely fully register an incident of harassment before it has passed, or they anticipate that it will be over quickly. It also contributes to the perception that perpetrators can swiftly disappear into the network without a trace. As the opening quote from Urry (2007, p. 109) considers, interactions in transport environments are usually 'brief encounters' between strangers. We see this play out in the stories below, where women struggle to comprehend (or believe) what is happening to them before it is over. If they do realise 'in the moment', the transitory nature of the Tube means women often come to a decision not to overtly engage on the basis that their journey and current situation are temporary and will soon come to an end. On top of this, in the context of being in transit, women's priorities are habitually occupied by wanting to get to their destination. We can apply Goffman's (1963) concept of 'allocation involvement' here, to understand how, in transport spaces, people on the move have the primary desire to arrive at their destination, without disruption or ancillary interactions and involvements. Thus, women enact a resistance to the friction caused by harassment: in many instances, they refuse to slow down and to let their mobilities be disrupted. Concurrent to this, it is important to consider how perpetrators operate amidst the transience and anonymity that shrouds the network and use this atmosphere to almost seamlessly 'slip away' after they have perpetrated their assaults. In these circumstances, the perpetual motion of both trains and individuals constructs the illusion that the offender has disappeared and is untraceable amongst the spaces and paces of the Underground. The rest of the chapter will show the manifestation of each of these conceptual observations through women's descriptions of their experiences of 'concealment', 'etiquette' and 'brief encounters'.

## Concealment

*She said she was standing, holding on to one of the poles so she didn't lurch forwards and backwards with the movement of the carriage, which she knew was about to stop. It was a crowded, morning rush hour, arms everywhere, bodies close together. Nothing particularly unusual for her commute into the city. As the train began to brake,*

*screeching to a sluggish stop, she felt a firm, tough hand grabbing her waist. She said she froze, muscles tensing, surprised by the sudden physical contact and the purposefulness of it – different from the usual brushing and accidental bumps that are bound to happen with so many people in a confined space. A moment later, she felt another hand on her other side, again a strong grab. The hands stayed there for a second, and then, as the train jolted to a standstill, forcibly moved her to one side and a man in a suit nudged past her. She asked me 'is that sexual harassment?' I didn't know how to answer, so I asked her if she thought it was. She didn't know. He could have said excuse me, she said. He didn't need to touch me. Maybe it wasn't sexual, but it was unnecessary and inappropriate. She said she felt intimidated. Confused. It felt intrusive, but did he really do anything wrong? (Reflections on an informal conversation with Beth, 11 November 2016).*

Lefebvre (2004) argues that the rhythms of the city are, above all, dominated by the flow of capital and productivity: the mechanisms of daily grind. In London, this is most observable during 'rush hours' in the central areas of the city. It is at this time-space axis where the infamous stereotype of Tube travel manifests, with agitated commuters wedged up against each other on platforms and carriages in order to maximise flow and efficiency, both on an individual and collective level within the network. It takes little conjecture to see how this physical and social dynamic is exploited to perpetrate incidents of sexual harassment and assault such as inappropriate and ambiguous touching (like Beth's story above) and frotteurism, or groping. This is the context in which Ruth, whose story we now follow, was assaulted. Her daily commute took place in inner-city London, starting at Waterloo and finishing at Bank, one of the busiest Underground stations located within the City of London (the central business and financial district). This is important, as here, the rhythms of the city above, dictate the rhythms of the Underground. Considering the interaction between the spatial and temporal, Ruth's journey on the Tube is influenced significantly by the fact she is travelling within the heart of the city, on a popular commuter route, at peak time. Overcrowding in the morning rush hours, between 7.30 a.m. and 9.30 a.m., is caused by the mass, daily influx of commuters and, like most transport systems, the Tube is regulated in a way that aims to maximise the speed of those moving through it. Lefebvre (2004, p. 43) encourages us to try and discern a hierarchy amongst the 'tangled mess' of rhythms, to observe and feel whether there is a 'determining rhythm'. In this space, at this time, the dominant rhythm is the corporate rush of the city above, with the Underground facilitating and supplying the city with its workers.

Ruth described how, like every other weekday morning, she was wedged between strangers in a busy rush hour carriage: 'I'd just gotten on to the tube, I hadn't been one of the first people on, I'd been one of the last, so I was standing closer to the doors, you know that shut behind you, almost on you. And there were lots

of people around me and at some point during that 8 minutes, I felt someone's hand touch me really closely, on my pubic bone. It was done in a way that, you know when you're a child and you need the toilet and you might cup yourself, it was that motion. So, somebody had gone in with the tips of their fingers and palm up and gone underneath .... And the bizarre thing is that it happened so quickly, and there didn't appear to be anybody that looked as though it was obviously them. Because getting the Waterloo and City into Bank means that the majority of people on that carriage are men, and they're suited and booted working men usually sort of between 30 and 50 years old and it could have been anyone. I couldn't tell the angle of where the hand was coming from so it could have been the bloke to my right or my left, or slightly to the side, I just didn't know, and everyone was just looking around like normal, and I was going, is this really happening? But the hand was still there. It must have stayed there for maybe 5 seconds. And it moved, but then I just sort of felt a finger move from side to side like a pendulum on my pubic bone, and then it went and then the tube arrived, and the doors opened, and everyone got off'.

Ruth intrinsically ties the movements of urbanity to her personal experience. The way in which she reflects on her assault highlights how the broader rhythms of the city and the Underground network become corporeally felt on an intimate level. She also notes how, despite the understanding that personal space is limited on the Tube, and thus, physical contact is to be expected, the interaction described above still felt instantly jarring:

And this happened and at first I was like .... you're used to people being in your personal space, you're used to people touching you out of necessity, the tops of your arms, your back, your chest, your belly, your bum even, you're just used to being pressed up against people. But I was like there's no way that this is accidental .... It made me feel ... the first thing was shock and disbelief, did that really happen, and you think, it definitely did because I felt it and it must have been deliberate. You question whether anyone would do that on purpose, cos you sort of think did that happen? Yes it did. Could that have been an accident? No it wasn't.

This reminded me of my own experience on the metrobus in Istanbul – I was simultaneously *certain* that I was being assaulted, and, in the same breath, questioning whether it was *really* happening. Ruth's story illustrates how the rhythms of the Underground both enabled and disguised the intrusion of her body and space enough to add an element of confusion and left her navigating a state of obscurity. Within the frenetic hustle of morning rush hours and the temporary physical immobility forced on individuals in the carriages, the movements required to commit this assault deviated in an almost imperceptible way from

the 'correct or regular movements of the daily commute' (Cresswell, 2010, p. 25). What this means, is that these digressions are invisible to bystanders and even cause victims to question their own bodily knowledge of what is *really* happening.

Sheila describes a similar experience implicated by the busyness of the network on an early summer weekend: 'So, I was stood up by the double doors at the back of the carriage and I was kind of, vaguely paying attention to who was getting on and off, and I remember there being this guy who was creepy ... I noticed him because he looked out of place. He'd got a big coat on which was a bit strange, given that it was the end of May, and it was red hot out. So, I remember thinking why has he got a coat on, because it's boiling in the carriage. So, I was just standing there sweating and holding on to the pole, and I could see him looking at me, and it makes you a bit neurotic, I think because I'd already been in an abusive relationship, I was a bit wary of men at that stage anyway but not enough to immediately suspect that something was going to happen. And people kept getting on and the carriage was getting quite crowded, and he kept moving closer towards me, and I remember thinking this is getting a bit creepy now, because there's enough room for him to not be that close to me. And he was staring at me and all sweaty, it was really horrible ... he was really freaking me out at that stage. I think the stop I was going to get off at was Hammersmith, but I think about quarter of the way through the journey, he was so close to me that I could feel his breath on my face and then he starts basically rubbing on me, this is the bit I find awkward talking about, he had a hard on and he was rubbing it on me. But because it was so crowded in there I couldn't immediately ... I think in my head I was thinking it was a bag or an umbrella or something because nobody would do that would they? And he was stood behind me at this stage rubbing on my leg and my bum. I think this carried on for about 5 minutes before I thought oh shit. And I think it's a very English thing to not want to make a fuss even if someone is dry humping you on the tube. I don't know why, I think I was just frightened, you know I don't want to make a fuss'.

Like in Ruth's story, we hear Sheila describe how the offender uses the rhythms of the space to evoke enough ambiguity that she questioned what was happening and therefore did not respond in an overt way. The perpetrator blends in with the composition of the crowd and synchronises with the movement of the carriage, without visibly transgressing from the normative way of behaving in the space. The expected amount of tactile friction that occurs between passengers is exploited to perpetrate and camouflage these incidents of sexual assault. What we see then, is how this weaponising of rhythms generates a (psychological) liminal state between knowing and not knowing that obfuscates women's understandings

and reactions, rendering them even more invisible and misunderstood. It is this type of behaviour happening in rush hour carriages that is arguably the 'image' that comes to mind when discussing sexual harassment on public transport, and indeed, many of the stories shared took on some version of this. Yet the 'tactics' used to perpetrate sexual harassment and assault shift significantly depending on circadian temporalities. Another clear exploitation of the (slower) rhythms of the city and the Tube includes perpetrators enacting overtly sexual behaviour when women occupy spaces of the network that are isolated (removed from the urban centre) at 'off-peak' (non-commuter rush hour) travel times.

In Grace's story below, she reflects vividly on an incident that happened when she was 14 years old. It was a weeknight, and she was travelling home from an after-school club on an empty, off-peak Tube, traversing the outskirts of the city. With significantly fewer people and a relative slowness, these interacting rhythms of sub-urban areas create an atmosphere that impresses upon the social interactions occurring within the Tube. Grace spoke of how Upminster station has a noticeably different feel to it in comparison to congested areas, where Londoners appear ambivalent, even repugnant towards one another (Simmel, 1903). Here, people notice each other and brief, even momentary interactions with strangers are not uncommon.

Grace describes her experience: 'At this time, there was like, no one on the tube. This is the district line. So until I got to the second from last carriage there was no one. And when I got to the second to last carriage, there was a guy standing in the doorway, the doors were still open. I looked at him and he looked at me and I didn't think anything of it. I got on the tube, sat there for a bit. And I either had a blazer or my bag on my lap or something, and I remember sitting there and something about it made me feel wrong already because it was empty apart from me and this one bloke, but I was going two stops and then I was going home, it was a journey I'd done a million times. And then the doors shut and we move off. So we're going to the first stop. And I looked, and through the interconnecting doors, he's looking at me through the window. So that made me feel really intimidated. And he was just staring at me. I remember just staring at my bag, not wanting to engage but needing to know what was happening. I look back and he's still there and then I look back and he's gone, and I thought, weirdo, or whatever. Get to the first stop and no one gets on but he gets off his carriage and gets on to my carriage .... So he's sitting there and I'm thinking ok this is really weird, but you have one stop to go. How long can that take? Well apparently, it takes a really long time! Because as we pull off, I can hear his belt go and I had to kind of look because again I had to see what was happening. And I could see that to me it looked like he was tucking himself in. And I thought that's ok, fine. And then I was sitting there thinking that then he must've sort of moved or something

and I thought you're going to get flashed, that's the first thing that came into my head, you're going to get flashed, prepare yourself, you're going to get flashed. And he never came near me. But I could hear him, and I looked out of the corner of my eye and he was masturbating. And I just had to sit there and just wait until I got to my stop. And then when we got there and the doors opened, what's strange is I went out of the door that was nearest him ... I don't know what that was! I think it must've been like I needed to know if this had actually happened, it was so beyond. I was like am I making this up? And I just stood on the platform like did that just actually happen to me? I stood there for a good few minutes processing it, like trying to figure out did I make it up, was that really happening? Had I gone into some sort of dream? Nothing felt real, it felt quite surreal'.

At the beginning of this interaction, Grace feels uneasy, but can't place why. Some explanations may hint towards a 'gut feeling' or a fear response (de Becker, 2000). However, the rhythms and social norms of the space can also offer an explanation here. The man's initial interaction with Grace was *almost* within the realm of what might be understood as 'normal' between strangers in a public space (an incidental glance, followed by looking away) – this would fall under the 'rules' of 'civil inattention'. However, by holding her gaze, he transgressed the boundary of normative social etiquette enough to make Grace feel uncomfortable. Like in the experiences of sexual harassment in rush hours, obscurity and concealment pervade the entire interaction (both his mode of offending and Grace's response). To a bystander, his extremely predatory actions would likely be indiscernible. He did not talk to Grace or touch her physically, sitting away from her in the carriage. As such, in many ways, he did not break the nonrepresentational modes of interaction that are usual on public transport (Bissell, 2010).

Carla's story has similarities to Grace's: 'I was sitting on the train, heading out to Zone 4, the carriage was pretty much empty, there was probably 4 or 5 people a way down, and opposite me on a seat a bit more to the right, there was a guy sitting there and he had a laptop case on his lap, which he then put in-between his feet, and then he decided to pull his genitals out from his trousers and started masturbating in front of me and I just felt so awkward. I was 17, I was by myself. You don't exactly go up to the person and say hey what are you doing because you don't know how he's going to react. And because it was pretty much empty in the part of the carriage that we were in, it wasn't as if anybody else saw. So I couldn't even go up to anybody else and say you know, would you mind if I sit with you please, I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable about what this guy is doing. But you know I looked at this guy in his face and he looked at me and he just carried on. It was really ... yeah, he had no shame, he was quite brazen in what he

was doing ... he was playing with his genitals in front of me. Yeah, it was about 4 minutes to my stop and I stayed, and when you're in that situation at the time, you don't think, like oh my god let me get off the train, you just think oh my god this is happening in a public place'.

Situated within the urban geographies and rhythms of the city and Underground, Carla's harasser was facilitated and concealed by isolation, containment and mobility on the carriage. Whilst his behaviour was explicit and visible to Carla (so she did not have the same uncertainty as Grace), it was concealed from other passengers, and thus constrained scope for responding. Rach's story is slightly different. She talks about her experience of being assaulted and then followed on the Tube network. Travelling in from Bristol for a work night out in London, she is heading back to her sister's house.

I get to Mile End, happily, listening to my podcast. Got to the Mile End tube station and was looking at what train I needed to get because I still wasn't very aware of where I was going, just knew I needed to go West. And that's when I remember ... in the next few minutes I don't remember that much, I just remember flashes because I was relatively drunk but I remember there was someone standing next to the board that said the stops. There was a group of maybe three of them, all men and they were talking to me and implied they'd help me to get home. I thought they were just being kind, having fun. And I don't know if I told them where I was going, I don't think I did but maybe I did. Then all I remember was lips on my lips and I remember putting my hand in-between them and pushing him off. And then he went for me again and I pushed him off again and I remember running down the steps and throwing myself on the first tube. And it was when I was on the tube that everything became really clear, I snapped into, fuck, what just happened. And then I remember looking up and I saw a yellow t-shirt, that's the one thing I recognised about this man, he was wearing a bright yellow t-shirt and was sitting opposite me on the tube .... In hindsight, I should have found the nearest person and said I think I'm being followed but what happens if I'm wrong? The minute we got into Bank, I threw myself off the train, through the tube station very quickly, got on the next tube and sat down and looked up and there he was again in the bright yellow shirt. And that's the main thing I remember, bright yellow shirt. And I thought I can't go to Mornington Crescent because I know how quiet it is and I felt like I needed to be where people are, I need to get above ground. So, I got off at Euston and go upstairs, trying to phone my boyfriend. And then I saw him again, the man who'd followed me, in the bright yellow shirt. He approached me and said are you ok? So, I just turned my back on

him because I didn't know what else to do. I went outside, on the phone and he still followed me. I ran and jumped in a taxi and burst into tears.

Rach's harasser first takes advantage of her need to stop and check where she is going (as well as abusing the more relaxed 'night-time' sociabilities of the Tube that will be discussed below). As a 'non-Londoner' her 'urban competency' and mental map of her journey are less established, and the initial interaction is initiated under the guise of 'helping' her. He also uses the network to follow her inconspicuously – whilst his behaviour gradually becomes overt and visible to her (and thus, frightening), his actions are concealed to bystanders by their normality within the context. Each element of his harassment fits with the rhythm of the space in which it is perpetrated – the movement through tunnels, sitting stationary and 'watching' in the carriages where there are bystanders, and two verbal intrusions in spaces where a brief interaction would not be uncommon. His *modus operandi* of approaching Rach follows the ebb and flow of the network, and as such, conceals it from the view of other passengers.

Another form of sexual harassment that occurs on the Underground is what Brooks Gardner (1995) terms 'romanticized' sexual harassment. This more commonly plays out on late-night journeys, or on the 'night-Tube' (the Friday and Saturday service that runs through the night on five of the busiest lines). In the terranean night-time economy, social interactions are imbued with the crackle of excitement and possibility that comes from ambiguous and spontaneous connections, many of which are driven by continuous, heavy drinking (Smith, 2014). Leaching between the cracks of this 'transgressive ambiance' (Hobbs et al., 2005), sexual harassment is also rife in these spaces. As well as incidents of rape, assault and drink spiking, Gunby et al. (2020) theorise that, in this environment, the overarching forms of common unwanted sexual attention are 'the pick-up routine', and 'showing off for the lads'. Whilst separate from the clubs and bars above, at this time of night, being on the Underground does not signify the end of the night, but an extension of it, as animated carriages offer further opportunity for fleeting social connections. As Urry (2007) considers, trains and stations can be arenas of unanticipated social exchange. Thus, as blurry-eyed revellers retreat across the city in the early hours, the intoxicating atmospheres they have occupied become mobile, clinging to their skin like the smell of smoke, and spilling over in the space of the night-time Tube carriages, bringing with them the possibility of lax and playful social interaction. Though this kind of exchange can be a source of fleeting connection (Hubbard, 2012; Urry, 2007), in some circumstances it can creep from amicable to threatening. Rose tells of her experience on a late-night weekend train that was hosting a cacophony of drunk revellers travelling across the city. She reflects on how the ambiance of the network often shifts at this time of night to become a more extroverted space.

'There's a different vibe .... after a night out people are less embarrassed and less polite, there's license to do whatever they want to do ... maybe more pushy in their conversation'. She then

describes an interaction with a man during her journey home: 'I was on the tube coming home, it must've been half 11 or something, it was late, and it was a Friday or a Saturday so there were lots of people a bit drunk or whatever. And I was wearing my red lipstick ... I'd just been out dancing. This guy came and sat next to me ... I think he was with some friends, and he came and sat and he started talking to me, and like I told you, I like to chat to people on the tube, I don't mind, so I engaged with the conversation that he started, it wasn't really a conversation just like uhhh hi you had a good night, yeaah you yaaah woo you alright ... he started getting closer and closer and uhm, like pushed himself right close to me. And my body language at that point, I was still being polite, but the thing is I had this problem where I didn't just want to be like, fuck off mate so I was still being polite to him but I was being really short with my answers ... and then his station came and before he got off he leaned across me and was like it's been so nice like talking to you ... and he tried to kiss me and at that point I put my hand on his face and pushed him away from my face ... eventually his friends were like come on mate, stop and pulled him off'. 'He wasn't being malicious, he was just overstepping the mark, an idiot, he was drunk ... he just thought he had the right to do that'.

Jules was on her way home from a late event on a Friday night when a man got on to the train and started talking to her: 'I got on the tube, it was quarter past 11, so it was late. And somebody got on the tube, he'd obviously been out partying and he came and sat next to me and started chatting. And to be honest, he got on at Tottenham court road and he looked like he'd just come from Soho and I assumed that he was gay. Then he started chatting and it became clear that actually he wanted sex .... And I said no, and he said well then why did you talk to me? And I'd misread his signals completely which happens to me very often. I don't think I was giving any off but there you go. Just being friendly, but because I'd spoken to him, he felt he was owed something more. Anyway, he then got quite grumpy and kept grabbing at me and so I stood up and went down to the other end of the tube and sat on a different chair, and he followed me. So at this point I was sitting down and he was standing over me and he kept leaning in to try and ... I'm not sure if he was trying to touch my face or kiss my face, but he kept doing that and coming towards my face. And I put my hands firmly in the middle of his chest pushing him away and saying no go away. And I must've done that 5 times, pushed him away and said go away'.

In a refraction of the activity in the night-time economy resounding in the city above, at these points in time the regulating norms of Simmel's (1903) 'blasé outlook' and Goffman's (1963) 'civil inattention' are diluted, as passengers become more open to spontaneous interactions with fellow travellers. We can discern from all the stories presented above how experiences of sexual harassment on the Underground are moulded by the various rhythms that flow through it depending on the time of day and activity in the city above. In Rose's and Jules' stories, we see how the overflowing of night-time economy sociabilities into the space of the Tube acts to alter the ambiance of the carriages. In this environment, the normalcy of fleeting and spontaneous interaction is exploited in order to engage women in ambiguous interactions that they are unable to easily withdraw from. Ruth's and Sheila's experiences offer examples of how, at peak rush hour times, the static crush of commuters means physical assault is perpetrated that is invisible to fellow passengers and experienced as confusing for the victim. In Grace's and Carla's stories from when they were younger, men masturbated in public space, in broad daylight, but in a way that was, again, unnoticed by other passengers. Furthermore, the trapped-ness of the carriage meant that the girls were forced to endure these visual assaults. In all of these stories, the rhythms and sociabilities of the space act to facilitate and conceal specific forms of sexual harassment, at particular times of day.

## **Etiquette**

As we explored in the previous chapter, there are specific social rules, or 'Tube etiquette' that dominate the accepted and expected modes of behaviour within the London Underground. A concept that we have already touched upon throughout the book so far will now be given specific focus. Linking specifically to behaviour in public space, Erving Goffman's concept of 'civil inattention' refers to when individuals engage in a delicate balance between acknowledging the presence of others, whilst also respecting their privacy. Put simply, it refers to the right to be private in public. It is a highly useful concept to understand the nuance of often non-verbal, subtle public interactions. In condensed spatio-social environments such as public transport, it is not unusual to engage in brief, non-intrusive glances, offering others an awareness of their presence, without invading their personal (mental and physical) space. Clearly, the perpetration of sexual harassment abuses this norm, but, it also significantly structures how women react, in the moment, to these intrusions for fear of disturbing other passengers and being judged for doing so.

Eliza describes two experiences of assault. The first took place on a busy weekend tube: 'It was quite busy, but I was so engrossed in this book, I wasn't really aware of who was around me. And I slowly began to be aware that something ... there was a pressure on me. And it was only when I felt a pain that I kind of took notice and came out of my book. And I realised that there was this quite old guy. He was standing in front of me and he was pressing

his fist so hard, like against my vagina basically. But he must've done it so slowly that I didn't realise ... in London you don't notice sometimes when your personal space is being invaded because you're so used to it. So, I didn't even notice that this guy had started pushing his fist, until it hurt, until it physically hurt me'.

Eliza considers how, in the moment she 'just wanted to push him away, shout at him'. However, she was worried that reacting overtly would disrupt the carriage: 'I didn't want to deal with the embarrassment or humiliation of people looking at me, judging me and probably not even helping'.

The second incident she talks about involves a man rubbing his erection against her. She describes her reaction: 'I turned round and really stared at the guy and moved away purposefully and dug my elbow and moved him away with my elbow. But again, I was too scared and embarrassed to make a fuss, that's the thing with me about keeping the peace on the tube and not wanting to cause a disruption that will make other people feel uncomfortable, or panic anyone. So that kind of keeping really silent and dealing with it in a different way'.

Her perception of the social nature of the Underground overrode her bodily desire to respond to both these incidents. She understood, that by blatantly reacting, she would break the barrier constructed by the collective enactment of civil inattention, leading to tension and embarrassment. Instead, she responds in a similar way to how her assault was perpetrated – corporeally, silently and unobserved by fellow passengers. Here, the rhythms and sociabilities of the carriage regulated both his action and her response. Eliza's desire not to draw attention to herself or make a scene was echoed by several other women who were forced to negotiate an experience of harassment or assault on a busy carriage.

After being groped on a busy tube, Emmy felt constrained in her response: 'And there's a lot of people around, because it was a packed carriage, so I guess I didn't want to make a scene, so I felt embarrassed, awkward .... It's really hard to break that silence ... there's no eye contact ... there's no talking, everyone's in their own world, trying to get through it because it's the part of the day that's a means to an end, trying to get to work. Nobody is present, they're just getting through it as quickly as possible'.

This speaks directly to Bissell's (2010) notion of rail carriages possessing 'affective atmospheres' which can lead passengers to semiconsciously adopt collective behaviours. We also see from the last couple of examples, how 'moral minimalism' rears its head within the space of the Tube and contributes significantly to these atmospheres. We see how women who 'know' the Tube, hold a strong belief that

no one will support them if they react. When moral minimalism takes hold, social order is dominated by efforts to deny, minimise, contain and avoid conflict, and when conflict does arise with strangers, Baumgartner (1988) theorises that people 'do nothing and wait for the offender to move on or for the situation to resolve itself' (p. 105). This makes it harder for women being harassed to transgress these dominant socio-spatial norms, and their own internalisation of the social order of moral minimalism on the Tube. There is some existing research that draws attention to how women often do not react to sexual harassment in transport environments for fear of the situation escalating into violence (Horii & Burgess, 2012; Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2013), but we see here that women do not just 'freeze' or keep silent due to an innate fear response (though for some women this does play a role). Rather, responses are regulated to synchronise with the social 'decorum' of the carriage and an internalisation and enactment of moral minimalism. Neglecting to recognise the pervasive impact of social norms is to disregard the nuances of spatio-temporal mobilities that interact with women's agency when they are forced to negotiate such experiences. Another element that comes forth in Emmy's account is that many of these negotiations are explicitly connected to the fact that these incidents of sexual harassment and the atmosphere of collective civil inattention in which they occur, are happening 'on the move'.

The peripatetic quality of the Tube carriage renders it what Augé (1995) defines as 'placeless', places that are characterised by profuse mobility. As Emmy considers, the only reason for being in the liminal space of public transport is to get somewhere else (Urry, 2007) and subsequently, travellers tend to want to minimise their journeying time. This connects with Goffman's idea of 'allocation involvement'. Conceptualised as part of his dramaturgical perspective on the social world, allocation involvement refers to how we strategically manage and distribute our attention in public social interactions in order to control our presentation of self. It is, in part, a process of engagement and disengagement. In transport environments, people can purposefully (dis)engage with those around them, as there is a shared focus on reaching the destination with as much predictability and as little disturbance as possible, thus, all other involvements are secondary and generally deemed worth avoiding. This has a significant impact on how women reacted to sexual harassment in the moment, with many of them not wanting to disrupt or elongate their journeys.

When a man rubbed up against Charlie during an evening rush hour, she says how she 'wanted to get off the tube, but also I didn't because I wasn't where I wanted to be ... I was entitled to be there and using it to get home, getting off would have slowed me down'.

Earlier, we focussed on Carla's experience of a man masturbating at her on a quiet carriage. When this happened, she was on her way to meet a friend, and she spoke about how her reaction to this incident was mitigated by the fact that she was on the tube, on her way somewhere: 'Walking away wasn't an option, and I was already late, so I just kind of looked away and stayed on until my stop'.

Hearing these stories reminded me of my experience on the London bus, how I was disgusted and appalled by the man masturbating, but still didn't 'react' overtly. Except I did. I chose, like Charlie and Carla, to wait until my stop, get off the bus and carry on with my day. In some ways, like Gardner's (1995) observation that women manage power by not reacting to street harassment, these refusals to slow down are a resistance to the friction that is often imposed by men's intrusions. Overall, these stories collectively show how the space-specific rhythms, etiquette and sociabilities nudge against women's agency to morph and shape their immediate reactions to sexual harassment.

## Brief Encounters

Here, I will reiterate the opening quote of the chapter from Urry (2007, p. 109), who describes train stations and carriages as '... places of unexpected social interchange as people's lives from distant parts are contingently brought together, often only for brief encounters: before the characters move away'. The very point of public transport is its transience, and its ephemeral nature plays a significant role in offering cover for deviant and criminal behaviour. As we have seen, for some women, particularly those who were assaulted during rush hours, the moment of intrusion was distorted with uncertainty. The confusion they felt around whether they were being purposefully victimised meant they were not able to process or respond to the incident in a way that they felt was appropriate to the situation and congruent to their sense of self.

Tia reflects on how her reaction to being groped was shaped by the ambiguity of the situation: 'The thing itself now doesn't bother me so much, I'm not like traumatised or anything. But the weird thing, the thing that I think I still think about sometimes and what sticks in my head, is that I didn't really do anything. I sort of just let it happen. I actually just let this man put his hand between my legs and didn't kick off. But I think also like, it took some time to actually realise. I don't know if it was shock or just sort of, what, is this actually happening here? Could it be something else or ... I don't even know but I think I was just confused more than anything and I missed my window to call him out. That still gets to me'.

She recognises the significance of temporality and transience here, as she discusses the appropriate 'window' in which she feels able to react (in the next chapter, we see Kath use the same language to describe her own reaction). In this instance, she misses what she perceives to be the right time to speak due to her uncertainty around the man's intent and whether what she could feel was *really* happening.

Demi talks about a similar experience when she was in London for a business trip and travelling just after morning rush hour: 'It

wasn't massively busy, but enough people that when you bumped together you didn't think anything of it. So when I felt someone bump against me, to start with I didn't think anything of it, but then right in my ear there was heavy breathing and I was thinking that's a bit weird you're standing a bit near. And then I felt him bumping into me repeatedly and I could feel his erection. So I thought this isn't ok. But because I was in shock for a few seconds I didn't do anything, like is this actually happening to me right now ... a guy is basically grinding into your back whilst heavy breathing in your ear, this is grim. When it first happened, when he first started rubbing himself against me I didn't really realise what was happening. There are a lot of people on there and he did it in time with the swaying of the tube carriage .... By the time I really realised, like properly, what was going on, that he was actually rubbing against me, it was too late because it was my stop'.

Again, these experiences challenge the notion that women do not react overtly simply because of fear (Pain, 1991). We can link this back to Koskela's (1997) work on 'bold breakings' where she argues that, in response to street harassment, women often experience a sense of boldness and fear at the same time. These stories show that, amidst the mobile and rhythmic space of the Underground, women must also contend with feelings of uncertainty and confusion that mould their experiences and responses. This is an important contribution to work that has argued we must circumvent reductive portrayals of women as submissive and vulnerable, and rather do justice to the complexity of women's feelings and (internal) negations that constitute the foundations for their visible reactions.

Finally, it is important to address how the ephemerality of the transport environment gave women the impression that their situation was fleeting and temporary. This implicated their decisions around whether it was worthwhile confronting their harasser (and dealing with possible escalation, 'getting it wrong', and the potential shame and embarrassment caused by the disdain from other travellers), considering that the situation was temporary, and the journey would soon be over.

Chloe described her decision to stay where she was whilst a man rubbed against her from behind, in the hope that the interaction would not be prolonged: 'I thought just hang in there and wait for the next stop, then he might leave ... but stop after stop he didn't'.

Shuttling through tunnels between stations, the Tube carriage is recurrently sequestered from the world above (the sensation of being 'cut off' is exacerbated by the lack of phone or Wi-Fi signal on most lines). This sense of disconnect-ness meant Chloe felt trapped and unable to remove herself from the situation. Yet the arrival at each station offered a glimmer of hope that the offender would leave without her having to confront him. This is an illustration of the uncomfortableness or sense of arrhythmia that arises when conflicting rhythms

meet – in this instance, the body is *stationary* whilst being *transported* at a pace uncontrolled by the individual. This is yet another nexus of multiple rhythms that implicates women's reactions to sexual harassment within this dynamic space.

We see this play out in Talia's encounter: 'I think I'd been at a work event and I'd had a few drinks but I wasn't drunk, I was like in that mode, cos I'm quite chatty anyway, where I'm quite happy to sort of like chat to people .... He was sitting next to me and he just pulled my hand on to his lap ... he wasn't doing anything dodgy, he just held it. But I froze. I completely froze .... And other people were getting on and off the tube and it was like a really quiet tube, only 4 or 5 people in our carriage and I desperately wanted to say to somebody can you get this guy off me, but I couldn't look at him or speak to him, to say can you get off me ... I was completely frozen, it was a really odd situation and it lasted all the way home, we must be talking about 15 minutes, and the longer that it went on for the longer that I felt like I couldn't, and I kept trying to like subtly move it ... I was genuinely frightened you know .... If I do something to him is he gonna like kick off. And I kept thinking you know when we were at stops to say something but then like you know there's the hustle and bustle of everyone getting off like do I say something or do I get off. Now looking back on it I think I should've just got off, even though that's him taking me out of my space but I think at the same time I just wanted to get home, I still don't understand it, I've looked back at the situation ..., my mind was going ten to the dozen, and I just kept thinking you know, this is such odd behaviour but what's he going to do next if I escalate it. But I think why it bothers me so much is that it was so, it wasn't violent, it wasn't that he was trying to touch me in a gross way, or anything like that, it almost wasn't sexual. And I feel like that was more about power, I feel like he knew what he was doing and it was about controlling me in someway'.

Talia articulates fear of escalation as a central part of her emotional response, and how this acts in conjunction with the mobile, confined nature of the space. If she had made the decision to get off the Tube, she would have significantly disrupted her journey. If she reacted overtly, she would then have to deal with his response (which she feared) in a confined environment. Each time the train passed through a station, she (re)negotiated her decision, until she arrived at her stop. The more time that passed, the less she felt able to respond. In a similar situation, Layla described how, when a man was pushing his erection up against her on a busy Tube, she considered trying to leave at every station by merging with the fluctuation of people getting on and off the carriage: 'I kept thinking, well only three, two, one more stops to go'. Again, if we reflect back to Grace's experience as a 14-year-old when a man masturbated at her on an empty carriage, she remembers thinking about how long she would have to endure it for '... one stop

to go. How long can that take? Well apparently, it takes a really long time!' Here, we see the subjective nature of temporalities play out. Whilst, as Urry (2007) considers, high speed travel tends to compress time, the personal experience of this can be mitigated by a disruption to psychological rhythms that causes time to stretch and drag. Here, incidents of abnormal behaviour in the form of sexual harassment cause the sensation of temporal friction and slowing down, overruling the (bodily experience of) mechanical, fast pace of the Tube.

The perpetrators of these offences also exploit the transient nature of the space. A number of women had experiences where the man who harassed them used the movement of the trains and crowds to 'slip away'.

After being groped on a rush hour carriage, Ruth said: 'Then the doors opened and everyone got off ... the guy got off ... everyone carries on with their journey ... the tube, it's such an ephemeral thing, you're not there for long, you just get through it like oh it'll be over in a minute .... And then you think, the moment's passed, there's nothing I can do about it'.

Eliza similarly discussed how after groping her on a rush hour tube the man 'slunk away down the carriage ... he got off and then disappeared into the mass of people'.

Here, the incessant movement of both trains and people allows the perpetrator to slink away and dissolve anonymously into the maze of the Underground. In this final section of the chapter, 'Brief Encounters', we have discerned how the mobile features of a transport network act to significantly mould experiences of sexual harassment. The temporary nature of the interaction between the victim and the offender often led to women not having time to fully comprehend and process the intrusion before the situation came to an end. As well as this, the expectation that the situation would soon resolve itself (by the journey ending) impacted their decisions to not respond overtly. Paying attention to the mobile landscape of transport spaces and the subjective interpretations and experiences of time within them, offers a deeper understanding as to why many women do not confront offenders in these environments.

Using a mobilities approach, this chapter has sought to discern some key features of incidents of sexual harassment on the London Underground. Three key conceptual observations have been outlined as significant in how sexual harassment is perpetrated and experienced on the Underground, these being: how the rhythms of the city and the Underground facilitate and conceal harassment; women's fear of disrupting the social etiquette of the space; and women's perceptions of the situations as brief and temporary encounters. This chapter has shown that the way in which sexual harassment is happening in a transport environment is distinct from the way it is perpetrated on the streets and in workplace settings. Whilst there are similarities to street harassment, its unique spatial, temporal and social nature means that sexual harassment that occurs in transit is perpetrated and experienced in a specific way, facilitated and constricted by the environment.

The characteristic traits of the Underground are truly temporal and rhythmic, and the women's stories shared here illustrate the real, social impact of these rhythms, and how within this rhythmic ensemble, women negotiate the disruptions caused by this form of gendered violence.