

“Busing It” in the City

Black Youth, Performance, and Public Transit

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I

Almost immediately after taking office as San Francisco’s first black mayor in January 1996, Willie Brown recruited a team of young people to surveil public transportation as a violence prevention unit. The program, called TURF for “Together United Recommitted Forever,” received national attention, primarily because it employed youth in visible roles of authority (Bowman 1996:A13). Positioned on bus lines considered unsafe or dangerous, the unarmed youth, dressed in bright blue jackets and caps emblazoned with the letters of the program, were to help deflect conflict and to assist passengers. The fact that these monitors were young was not tangential, but, rather, crucial to the success of the program, according to public officials implementing TURF. Unlike the special police units that had ineffectively monitored high-risk bus routes in recent years, the teenagers were presumed to be street-smart and savvy; many were even ex-gang members with a keen understanding of San Francisco and its various cultures (Johnson 1998). The publicity of the TURF employees’ previous criminality implied that only their state-sponsored uniforms and their registration on the city’s payroll separated them from potential young troublemakers. Both the employees of TURF and the youth whom they were hired to monitor had already been marked as deviant and anti-authority; but the social redemption of the former was their willingness to perform surveiling functions for the state.

In San Francisco, as in many cities in the United States, high crime and the fear factor on public transit have been largely attributed to the presence of racialized youth.¹ On public transportation, the fear factor is so strong that most urban centers have special police forces specifically assigned to the transit system. Policing on public transportation appears to be more concerned with restricting youth of color than protecting the well-being of the general public. The logic of youth as deviant guarantees that the goal of both operations is synonymous. TURF is clearly a response to the perceived threat that racialized

youth represent in urban public space; and even more significantly, the program embodies the helplessness that adults, including city officials and law enforcement, feel toward “controlling” youth. Thus, Mayor Brown’s reaction to this anxiety was to uniform the young and to arm them symbolically as the patrollers of conduct and order in public space. Brown believed that a youth security team would offer a friendlier face of authority, thus minimizing the long-standing hostility between police and racialized youth groups. Less than six months into the program, the mayor was reported as proclaiming: “The (TURF) program has worked spectacularly [...]. There has been [...] a reduced amount of fear in riding and using the Muni buses” (McRobbie 1996: A15).

One argument for supporting TURF was that young troublemakers would be more likely to listen to their peers than to adults. According to this logic, the TURF members would be seen as legitimate role models—once deviant, but now reformed. What often went unstated was the anticipated effect that the sheer physical presence of the TURF members—primarily large African American, Latino, and Pacific Island males—would have on controlling disorder on the vehicles. In effect, the fear of racialized young males was used by the state to prevent disorder and to manage interactions in this public space.

Yet, acts of youth criminality, which would hopefully be curtailed by TURF, resurfaced in San Francisco’s public discourse—specifically through local print journalism—with the monitors as perpetrators. In March 1998, the Federal Bureau of Investigation began inquiring into suspicion of drug trafficking among TURF employees (Matier and Ross 1998:A1). By the time of the FBI investigation, Mayor Brown’s pet project had branched out from bus lines into other arenas of public space, namely low-income public housing. The TURF monitors’ previous criminality was at the center of the controversy, as one journalist wrote:

San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown was criticized for turning gang-bangers into city security guards when he first hired at-risk youth to ride Muni buses and patrol public housing projects.

Two years later, Brown says the TURF program (Together United Recommitted Forever) is a success. But charges of drug dealing by some of its members have raised new concerns about the effectiveness of the self-help group. (Johnson 1998:A11)

The journalist’s description of TURF members as “gang-bangers” and the program as a “self-help group” reveals his bias and regurgitates stereotypes of racialized youth promoted in mainstream media and public discourse. The controversy over the possible criminal activities of certain members of the security force wedged a division between those who considered the project to be overwhelmingly successful—because it offered an acceptable public presence for racialized youth—and those who believed the scandal undermined any possible benefit of the program. Yet, the assumption of both supporters and opponents of the program was that these bodies needed to be disciplined and reformed.²

In the years following the Civil Rights movement, the specter of racialized, specifically black, youth as thugs became a symbol of postindustrial anxiety and disappointment. In the public discourse and national media coverage, U.S. cities had been abandoned by whites, populated by the poor, blacks, and Latinos (frequently overlapping categories), and left to decay. At the heart of both the creation of TURF and paradoxically its investigation for illicit activities is a social panic stemming from adults’ desire and presumed impotence to

regulate urban racialized youth in public arenas.³ The program was an attempt at deflecting this terror through a negotiation of public transit as a space to which all citizens had equal access, yet is controlled by state-appointed youth. While I do not dismiss the fear of crime and violence on public transit, I want to suggest that tensions regarding the presence of youth of color in this arena go beyond issues of physical safety and crime. Instead, I consider much of the activity of the young on mass transportation, which is interpreted as expressions of delinquency, as a performative engagement with adults' anxieties and with the cultural trope of urban, racialized youth as deviant.

This study engages with previous theories of the everyday and of subjectivity (Anderson 1990; de Certeau 1984; Goffman 1973). I theorize public transit as a particular site where black youth engage with adults' fears and with media representations of youth and racialized bodies as threats to social order and safe space. How are adults' perceptions and black youths' actions and responses shaped by a social construction of racialized youth as deviant? This question foregrounds the visual resonance of popular cultural imagery and the media coverage of the spectacle of black youth criminality.⁴ The public arena becomes a material space for youth to reify and contest through social performance the construction of youthful and racialized identities as deviant and threatening.

It is partly because of the rich history of public transit as a site of struggle for marginalized groups in the United States that I chose to focus on it. Another factor in my choice has to do with its accessibility and ubiquitous presence in most major cities. Finally, I am a frequent public transit passenger. During the period of my observations, I concentrated on the physical and discursive positioning of youths and adults in public transit and the tensions that emerged throughout the space itself.⁵ In writing about adults and youth on public transportation, I have tried to remain aware of the ease with which one can slip into dividing youth and adults as two inherently oppositional and easily identifiable groups. I have also stayed conscious of my own anxieties over interpreting behavior and choosing what to include and exclude from my analysis. My most difficult task has been locating my own position within this study, especially as a young black woman who, at the time of this study, often got read as "youth" in public. To destabilize the category of youth, I look at the definition itself by



1. Fashion, language, public presentation, and body positioning are some of the markers of youth on the MUNI public transit system in San Francisco, CA. Bus Line 22 in the Mission District, San Francisco, August 2003. (Photo by Nicole Fleetwood)

examining the signifiers of racialized adolescence. In doing so, I focus on certain public signs (fashion, language, public presentation, and body positioning) and how these markers are read in public transportation. While I look at the interactions between youth and adults in general, my focus is on black youth because of the historical legacy of black youth's relationship to public space and the public's fixation on black youth as the embodiment of social deviance and incivility.

Although I had worked as a youth advocate for several years and have spent a significant amount of time studying black youth's cultural practices, I recognize that the persistence of the trope of black youth as threat influences my own assumptions and behavior. While employed as a vocational counselor at a San Francisco school for "high-risk" students, I worked with a group of black youth who routinely scouted certain bus lines where they mugged adult passengers (typically white professionals). When administrators became aware of their activity, teachers began to follow the students to bus stops in an attempt to monitor them. This was in my mind as I rode public transportation during my observation period. After several days on board with "no action," I realized that I was searching for extreme conflictual encounters between white adults and black youth, instead of the nuances, gestures, and glimpses that define attitudes on a daily basis. I had in mind the specter of racialized youth as disruptive and a public threat.

II

Since its inception, urban public transportation has been a site of racial and class tensions and confrontation in the USA. Long before Rosa Parks in 1955 refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, public transit had been ritualized as a theatrical setting for performing disharmony and social unrest. Historian Evelyn Higginbotham shows the ways in which the street trolley became a symbolic platform of the struggle for space and accessibility waged by blacks in 19th-century Washington, DC (1992). Though Higginbotham focuses on the nation's capital, the struggle over rights and access were visible far beyond the boundaries of the District of Columbia. Higginbotham recounts examples of middle-class black women protesting transit discrimination during the Reconstruction Era (1992:161). The efforts by the state and many white citizens to limit access to black women included physically attacking and forcibly removing them from public transportation on numerous occasions (Higginbotham 1992).

Robin Kelley further explores the importance of public transportation as a historical setting of staged resistance for black Americans (1994). Kelley analyzes mass transit in Birmingham, Alabama, during World War II as a daily site of struggle and resistance for black working-class people. Focusing on incident and police reports, Kelley probes the methods by which blacks, particularly young males, contested the racist structure of the Jim Crow South through various methods (from humor to physical violence) of engaging white passengers and drivers. He writes:

Some of these forms of behavior could be regarded as playful pranks, but given the repressive, racist atmosphere on the bus and the black youth's sense of alienation and frustration, it is hard to imagine these acts as anything but oppositional, much like the original motivation behind subway graffiti. (1994:63–64)

Kelley uses concepts of social performance to describe the daily events in these vehicles and even labels Birmingham's buses as "moving theatres" (1994:55). He argues that public transportation was among "the most hotly contested aspects of Southern regulation of public space" (1994:75). Both Higginbotham and Kelley attest to the primacy of ordinary sites like public transit as spaces for struggle and resistance for marginalized groups.

Public transportation remains a contested zone in many urban areas of the United States. It is a uniquely enclosed setting from which it is impossible to remove oneself while in motion. As panhandlers and street performers demonstrate, public transit is an ideal stage, framed by the physical limits of the vehicle, for performing and contesting social norms in the presence of others. Passengers on buses (and to a lesser extent commuter trains) have few options for locating their bodies and belongings. The narrow aisle allows for little variation in the expected pattern: unidirectional movement from the driver toward the rear. But even as it is a tightly enclosed space, the constant motion through the city streets gives transit a fluidity and openness that are at odds with its structure. The routine and monotony of public transit also make it an ideal location to observe how institutional systems are contested on a daily basis.⁶ Continuous change and movement through the various neighborhoods of the urban landscape make this seemingly rigid space very dynamic.

Crucial to the dynamics and risk-taking of public transport is the fact that here one cannot choose one's company. Because of its combination of intimacy and anonymity, riders are forced to bear witness to events and people outside of their ability to control. On the bus, one is encroached upon and human touch is unavoidable. The anonymity in such a physically confined space contributes to the risk-taking behavior that often occurs on board. Thus, public transportation becomes a zone where difference and sameness collide, where power relations are ambivalent and shifting, and where engagement with or spectatorship of others is impossible to avoid.

III

In describing how adults react to youth in public space, scholars often racialize the petrified adults as white and the supposedly threatening youth as black. I began my study of the buses with a similar assumption. Soon enough, I learned otherwise. One of the most striking observations for me in riding public transportation was that fearing young black males is not a response shared by white adults only. Adults across racial lines demonstrated similar responses. Along with avoiding eye contact and talk with black male teenagers, many adults—black and white—refused to sit next to them, even when the bus was packed.

This preoccupation with avoiding young black males extends to most arenas of urban public space. Elijah Anderson's prized ethnography *Streetwise* examines how racial and class differences frame public (street) interactions in mixed-race, mixed-class communities. The sociologist concerns himself with how the presence of black male bodies in public spaces of the neighborhood dictate interactions and behavior. Anderson argues that adult residents attempt to understand and navigate the potential threat of urban black youth and that black youth negotiate the complicated reactions that their bodies engender in others. Along these lines, Anderson writes that "the presence and behavior of anonymous young black men is the single dominating concern of many who use its [the neighborhood's] public spaces. The central theme in maintaining safety on the streets is avoiding strange black males" (1990:163). This same

theme permeates public transit where avoiding contact with racialized youth is the dominant concern for many adults.

For the most part, adult passengers stay as close to the front or center of the bus as possible. The few who migrate toward the rear tend to be young adults—college students, working-class, or, by fashion markers, counter-cultural individuals (punks, skaters, hippies, and dreads). The older professionals who occasionally sit in this region hesitate, check out who is occupying this space, and cautiously look for a seat as close to center as possible.⁷ In contrast, it is common knowledge that the back of the bus is the preferred site for most teenagers—upon boarding a bus most young people head directly for the back. Youth enter more frequently in groups while adults tend to board individually or in pairs. When a teenager enters alone, he or she often wears headphones listening to music while moving from front to back.

Without a doubt, the back of the bus is rich in citationality, given its historical association with racial segregation. Historically, the back was a restricted, racialized space, providing the only access black Americans had to the public bus. Moving from the front entry to a place of oppressive containment was a source of daily humiliation for blacks. During the Civil Rights Movement, the bus became a stage for contesting the social drama of racial inequality. For many black Americans, the bus remains a symbol of the struggle for civil rights, a location for the performance of protest.

In the midst of a conversation with a boy in his early teens on the bus one weekday, I asked him why he preferred to sit in the back. He said the back provided him with a vantage point from which he could observe everything taking place on the bus. It was the best position for viewing other passengers and the driver. Because the back door was located just a few feet from where he was sitting, he felt better prepared to respond, “to jump off.”⁸ Also, in the back, he was out of the sight and hearing range of the driver—the visible representative of authority. Being positioned away from the driver is crucial to many youths—especially those who know their behavior can get them ejected from the vehicle.

Toward the rear of most buses, the floors are dirty and seats covered with “tagging.” On several occasions, I witnessed teenagers pulling out markers and quickly scribbling tags that identified them, their territory, or their group

2. Teenagers scribble tags that identify them, their territory, or their group affiliation. They prefer the back of the bus, which is rich in citationality, given its historical association with racial segregation. MUNI public transit system in San Francisco, CA. Bus Line 22 in the Fillmore District, August 2003. (Photo by Nicole Fleetwood)



affiliation. Others simply doodled to fill time as the bus crawled along the city streets. Another visible marking of the space distinguishing it from areas more populated by adults was the plethora of chewed sunflower seeds and candy wrappers covering the seats and floor. The seeds were favorites of young teenage boys who would sometimes rocket them across the aisles, hitting unsuspecting passengers in the head as the perpetrator ducked or looked in another direction. Tagging, littering, and seed bombardment were all acts—more or less playful—of undermining the institutional structure of the bus, its primary use for commuting (as opposed to play), and its somber code of guarded anonymity.

The rear of the bus as the focal point of action reverses the conventions of the ordinary stage or sports field. In orthodox theatre and sports arenas, the stage or playing field is positioned and lit better for the audience to see. But on the bus, the “stage” or “playing field” is a place allowing the actors to stay out of sight of the audience. Or perhaps, to play for and among themselves—the youth being both players and spectators. Adult spectators riding in the front of the bus, their seats facing away from the action, must sneak peaks, turn their necks, and eavesdrop. Adults may listen or look in, but rarely can they directly gaze on the actions of the young in the back of the bus. Even when adults dare look back, there is an effort not to make eye contact with young people. Eye contact might be construed as hostile or confrontational. Avoiding the gaze is a way of controlling the action by keeping the spectacle in the rear contained there. Youth are aware of adults’ ambivalence, both desiring to see and repulsed and fearful concerning what is happening. Young passengers thus successfully destabilize the locus of power by transferring “center stage” to the back of the bus, a space to which adults have only limited access.

One morning as I sat toward the center of #49 from downtown Oakland to the eastern limits of the city, a group of mostly male black youth, gathered in the back on their way to school (I assumed based on the time of day and their backpacks and books). They rapped back and forth in a low volume so that from where I sat their words were barely decipherable. I was in a row that faced the aisle, giving me the viewpoint to look in both directions without much notice. A few blocks into the ride, when we stopped in a residential area near downtown, an African American woman with two young school-aged boys boarded. The older of the two boys ran straight toward the back of the bus. His eyes lit up and he smiled at the site of the group in the back. His mother froze in place and yelled, “Get back!” The bus occupants, startled, looked up at her, then back at the child who stood in the aisle frightened by her volume. The bus began to move forward. The young boy ignored his mother and continued toward the back. The anxious woman called for him again in a calmer voice, this time aware of the attention she attracted. When the boy still did not respond, the mother found a seat for the younger in the center of the bus, left him there alone, and went to the back to sit next to the older child.

A couple of the teenagers softly giggled at the situation even as they continued their conversation. The mother sat facing forward with her eyes on the younger child in the front. The older child rode facing backward, perched on his knees in the seat with his eyes on the teenagers. The mother, as well as the teenagers, seemed quite aware of what triggered her response. What seemed from appearance to be an overreaction had burst forth simply at the sight of seeing her son enthralled by and embracing this group of older black youth. In hindsight, her warning to get back felt like she was trying to prevent her older son from participating in behavior that marks black young males as a public threat. Yet, her decision to venture into the back of the bus and to let her son drink in the happenings around him might have been her way of acknowledg-

ing that her fear was grounded in racialized discourse and media representations and not located in the bodies that preoccupied her son.

IV

The oppositions of adult/youth and front/back of the bus are subverted by the presence of teenage parents. For logistical reasons, young parents often ride toward the front or center when traveling with young children and/or strollers. The relationship between the youth-parent and child becomes an object of public scrutiny for many of the bus's passengers. Early one evening as I made my rounds on #22 in San Francisco, I noticed a youth whom I had taught two years prior in a high school special education program. I recalled him being a disruptive student who vehemently resented adult authority. He sat near the back of the bus, blending in with the other African American young males, except that he held a small girl in his arms. His large physique, Hugo Boss bomber jacket, baggy Tommy Hilfiger jeans, and Air Jordan shoes were in striking contrast to the small child dressed in pastels and wrapped in a blanket. The two together were a visual twist on the image of father and daughter. He handled her with extreme care—moving slowly, talking softly, and playing with her their entire ride. His daughter responded with giggles and smiles.

It was rush hour, the bus was full—a mix of teenagers, professionals, and elderly.⁹ The interactions between father and child attracted the attention of many of the passengers who sat near them. To differing degrees, passengers were captivated by how nurturing and responsible the teen father was. The intimacy between father and child directly challenged the stereotype of fatherless children of teen mothers. In another context the young man, without child in arm, may have been easily avoided as threatening. Yet his clearly demonstrated role of father mediated how the adults on the bus regarded him. A professionally dressed white woman sat across from him asking his daughter's age and name, commenting on his attentiveness and care. The young father smiled, remaining aware of both his daughter and the audience of passengers gazing upon them. His visual markers of racialized youth set him apart from adults, but the care he lavished on his daughter allowed adults to engage with him in a nonthreatening way.

Here he was positively acknowledged as a productive social agent. In this instance, where he performed the norms of fatherhood for an approving audience, he negotiated through action and the gaze of others what it means to be an adult and to have authority over another. His demonstrated care for his daughter contrasted sharply with the spectacle of detached and reckless youth that marks an entire generation of young black males in social services, and in educational and penal institutions. At one point, the young father turned toward me and asked if his daughter looked like him. "Yes," I replied. He smiled and looked away.

V

Now it is the clothed rather than the unclothed body that supplies the visual signatures of the authentic black self. (Gilroy 1995:29)

If identity is not a state of being but one of doing, then to identify oneself and be identified as youth is to perform a set of norms that is interpreted as

such. “Youth” is an ambiguous cultural construct, which is impossible to fix even if it is locatable on certain bodies. A primary visual marker signifying “youth” is fashion. Popular culture scholars have discussed the importance of dress in identity construction and self-assertion for youth.¹⁰ Accordingly, Paul Willis in his analysis of symbolic creativity in the everyday cultures of youth writes: “They [youth] always transform the meaning of bought goods, appropriating and recontextualizing mass-market styles” (1990:85). In recent decades, youth has been one of the most prominent and visible consumer groups, transforming entertainment, leisure, and retail markets. In one sense, youth in urban centers serve as the ultimate in fashion advertising, given the display of fashion labels as a continuous marketing tool for fashion companies and the importance of the fashion label as a commodity to youth consumers. Though I agree that there is often intentional defiance in how youths dress, I do not consider that this use of fashion always connotes an oppositional stance which challenges visible or invisible power structures. In many respects, youth dress codes are deeply consonant with adult-regulated institutions.

The fusion of race, youth, and fashion has so significantly influenced some of the U.S.’s largest manufacturing companies that special marketing divisions have been created to meet the demands of this consumer group (Gladwell 1997). The popularity of racialized fashion targeted at youth groups has grown with the emergence of urban and hip-hop fashion companies created by music producers and black fashion designers in the 1990s.¹¹ In a 1997 *Forbes* cover story entitled “Baad Sells,” Joshua Levine examines the marketing of urban black fashion in the U.S. and abroad, from clothing to telecommunication

3. *The popularity of racialized fashion targeted at youth groups has grown with the emergence of urban and hip-hop fashion companies. MUNI public transit system in San Francisco, CA. Bus Line 14 in the Mission District. August 2003. (Photo by Nicole Fleetwood)*



instruments like pagers and cellular phones. The article simplifies relations by homogenizing blacks as poor, fashionable, and status-seeking and whites and other non-blacks as hungrily grasping for a piece of black alterity. Yet at the same time, Levine conveys the complexity of racist and racialized fashioning. In it, Levine juxtaposes the opinions of designer Tommy Hilfiger, whose clientele is largely comprised of youth, many of whom are black, (quoting him as saying “‘I don’t condone violence, and I think ‘gangsta rap’ should be outlawed [...] but the music is powerful because the musicians are irreverent and don’t follow the rules’” and “‘Many of these people [urban black youth] would rather have a Rolex than a home’”) with the lyrics of the rapper Q-Tip who praises and racializes Hilfiger as black because of his trendy fashion: “‘Tommy Hill was my nigger/ and others couldn’t figure/ how me and Hilfiger use to move thru with vigor/ had to sit and plan how to make these seven figures’” (in Levine 1997:144). Levine’s article also draws the connection between urban black culture and larger youth populations: “At first U.S. corporations flirted uneasily with the styles, music and attitudes of the inner city. But as black urban culture took root as the universal youth emblem, they overcame their squeamishness and went for a taste of what the streets call ‘flavor’” (1997:142).

I do not discredit the performative potential and cultural meanings of youth’s creative engagement with fashion. In particular, I acknowledge the complications that reading fashion bring to reading youth, gender, and race. On a weekday afternoon, a group of young Asian American males stood on the platform of BART’s Richmond line. They formed an impenetrable circle and joked loudly with each other. Each youth had on spotless Nike shoes, oversized baggy designer jeans, and a long T-shirt with various sports logos such as Nike’s ubiquitous swoosh (gear made popular nationally by black athletes and rappers). One wore a Wu-Wear T-shirt, a clothing line started by the very popular rap group Wu-Tang Clan (a group of African American males who mould their music and group image from an exotic hodge-podge of Asian cultures).¹² As the already crowded train rolled to a stop, the four entered and immediately formed an even tighter circle. Their voices were submerged within the densely packed car. On both the platform and in the interior of the train, these youth occasionally glanced around acknowledging the adult spectators surrounding them. A few adults glared in curiosity/confusion at their impeccable street fashion: their clothing signs of alterity; their overstuffed backpacks and books in hand as markers of being studious. The racial myth of certain Asian groups as model minorities was at odds with their flirtation with and/or investment in b-boy culture. As Paulla Ebron and Anna Tsing write, “African Americans and Asian Americans have been set against each other in powerful white stereotypes that depict them on opposite ends of a continuum of minority citizenship that reaches from criminality to successful assimilation” (1995:126). And so while the clothes of this group of Asian American youth set them apart in the presence of adults and marked their difference, their instruments of schooling symbolized youth who were not “too far gone.” These youth destabilized the fixed notions of badness and anti-authority that are embedded in urban fashion from the perspective of the adult gaze.

As Dick Hebdige notes in *Subculture* (1979), a classic study of British male youth culture, gender performance is central to youth’s fashion choices and style. Late one Sunday evening, I watched several young people enter and exit the bus as it moved from the urban center of Oakland to more residential areas. For the length of the journey, a young black couple sat together near the rear of the bus two seats in front of me. They were intertwined and leaning on each

other: one dressed in trendy tight pants, a satin blouse with long processed hair; the other dressed in Nike gear from foot to head including a sports cap pulled over the eyes. The couple merged with the setting of the back, which was completely occupied by youth of color. I found myself staring at the couple in an attempt to read the gender markings of the Nike-clad youth. Her only distinguishing signs of being female were her voice and the outline of breasts under her sports jersey. Ashamed by my own voyeurism and attempts to decode her gender identification, I looked away. I was intrigued by her ability to go unnoticed in this space. I observed no other passenger, adult or youth, giving any special attention to the couple. I wondered whether other passengers presumed that they were a heterosexual couple, because of the couple's ability to cite normative codes of gender, race, and youth.

The butch b-girl occupied space in a manner very different than her feminine counterpart and knew how to perform urban masculinity.¹³ She kept one leg hanging in the aisle forcing passengers to maneuver around her and had an arm wrapped possessively around her companion.¹⁴ Though the same size and frame of her girlfriend, she appeared larger and more physically powerful than her demure partner. In her dress, posture, and gestures, the butch b-girl employed the symbols of what in the USA today constitutes black youth masculinity. Simultaneously, she challenged the conflation between black masculinity and the black male body. Her ability to pass underlines Halberstam's point that "masculinity is not the property of men" (1998:16); instead it is a performative engagement with codes and signs.

VI

Language, like dress, is another sign marking youth; it is also an indication of the merging of racialized and youthful identities. Urban street jargon in the U.S. is rooted in black vernacular speech, with multiple other influences. Using cultural forms such as music, comedy, and films, it moves from local or regional settings to the national, and sometimes transnational, dictionary of youth. Terms are constantly generated, diffused, consumed, and reproduced. A commonly used example is the historical racial epithet "nigger" which is now used cross-racially by youth to refer to friends and/or other young males. Yet, as certain jargon becomes more diffused and cited by a larger public, older terms are abandoned and newer ones adapted. Being fluent in current street jargon is how youths of both genders preserve their insider status.

On public transportation, young females draw attention more often through use of language (in content and volume), whereas teenage males are noticed more through dress, posturing, and physical occupation of space. Contrary to the spectacle of the disruptive adolescent, during my observation period, youth entered buses fairly reserved except for occasional females giggling, males rapping, or youths talking among themselves. When youths make their presence known first through language, it is typically young girls. On a rainy Saturday evening, I rode the almost empty #15 line, losing track of time and place. Two very young black females entered loudly and shook the few passengers out of our silence and haze. I became immediately engrossed in the conversation between the two. One explained why she had dropped her boyfriend: because of his lack of "game"—his inadequacy in romance and seduction. The girls began to talk about what they like in potential mates and quickly the conversation turned to sex. The explicit language that they used to discuss heterosexual intercourse, in close proximity to the other (primarily adult) passengers, was both shocking and enticing. The other riders and I

moved uncomfortably in our seats. It was as if I were witnessing something to which I should not be privy but yet my presence was recognized and part of the performance. The two females sat at the back of the bus, discussing the intimate details of their sexual lives, while projecting voices forward and injecting meaningful pauses at points so that every passenger/spectator would be forced to ingest their shameless confessional. One began to repeat lyrics of the controversial rapper, Lil' Kim, who has made a successful career of expressing an explicitly female sexual virility: "I got that bomb ass cock, a good ass shot/ With hardcore flows to keep a nigga dick rock" (1996). The other chimed in, while dancing in the aisle. No passenger would dare comment upon, interact with, or look back directly at the girls acknowledging that this performance was really taking place. Yet, the adults remained alert, silent, and stiff until the girls abruptly and loudly exited the bus.

The embarrassment and discomfort of the adults delighted the adolescents, fueling their stories as they giggled louder and encouraged each other. Though I assume that the adults did not understand fully the youth's word choices, there was still a sense of curiosity—exhibited through the passengers' movement in their seats, slight turning of heads, and sighs—an effort to decode the "wrongdoing" that the teenagers were recounting. The girls were performing a public confession, a national ritual made popular through television talk shows and mediatized court events (Acland 1995). This theatre of public confession usually concludes with an attempt to reestablish morality and to discipline the confessors. The process of public confession in which the two females were very much engaged usurped the power of the adult spectators by virtue of the remorselessness of the youths' testimonies and the enforced silence of the adults. The young females drew upon the spectacle of the immoral and reckless youth who admits guilt yet refuses discipline. Part of the teenager's pleasure in confessing was based on the lack of power of their audience, who had no choice but to listen and were unable to pass a public judgment against the girls.

Whether their "illicit" tales were based on actual incidents or not was irrelevant. What matters is the fact that the girls consciously articulated the stories knowing precisely how they would affect their audience. A fairly obvious argument to make is that the girls reified media representations of racialized teenage girls as prematurely developed, grossly sexual, and irresponsibly promiscuous: a story we can spin out to all sorts of dependence on the welfare, social service, and criminal justice systems.¹⁵ Yet, in zooming in on the telling of the stories as a sort of disruptive performance, we can see the creative power of the girls in recounting their exploits. What was more engaging than the content of the tales was the girls' critical engagement with the power of confession and their playing with cultural representation. The discomfort that the girls triggered in the adult passengers temporarily usurped adult authority.

VII

The bus continues its slow, repetitive crawl through the city. Eventually I must exit. Someone will enter shortly after and take up my space. Others will leave as passengers continue to board. The monotony of the route will occasionally be disrupted by the unexpected, the sublime, and the dreaded. Struggles over territory and positionality will emerge, climax, and come to temporary resolution through a change in ridership.

The primary concern over passenger safety on San Francisco's public transit results in the identification and regulation of bodies marked by race and youth.

While the creation of TURF was a concerted effort to address this, the city's official youth taskforce was glaringly absent during my observation period. On rare occasions, I spotted a pair of male youth in TURF jackets talking playfully with others in the back of the bus. But for the most part, they were absent from the space. What Mayor Brown's innovative youth security force highlighted was the power of the specter of racialized youth to shape public discourse about how to regulate public space. Just as the specter is always present but only made visible in fleeting, contingent ways, so were the TURF guards—as an extension of the policing arm of the state. TURF, like the spectacle of deviant youth, circulated through public discourse, primarily media representation that itself highlighted social and psychic fears. In the visual field, TURF youth reinforced the trope of youth as deviant. TURF's function demonstrated the state's willingness to use racialized youth as a way to generate social fears, regulate codes of conduct, and control public interactions. Youths' routine ridership of public transit demonstrates the manners in which they acknowledge, confront, and contest this trope.

Notes

1. Recent shootings and other illicit activities on public transit have drawn public and media attention to crimes committed by youth disproportionately as compared to adult crimes. Headlines in the *San Francisco Chronicle* during my period of research include "Hunter Point 17-Year-Old Arrested in MUNI Bus Shooting" (12 December 1997) and "MUNI Rider Puts Collar on 'Tagging' Teen" (26 November 1997). The ramifications of such coverage and a larger public outcry have led to repressive anti-youth legislation—most notably, the passing of Proposition 21 in 2000, which lowered the age at which youth in California can be sentenced to adult prisons from 16 to 14.
2. Cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, and Dick Hebdige have interrogated studies of youth culture as the progeny of early-20th-century sociological investigations of deviance (see Hebdige 1979; Hall and Jefferson 1976; and McRobbie 1994). Historical and contemporary research and public discourse that either implicitly or explicitly conflate youth culture with deviance propagates an equation that reads: to be young is to act out deviance. This conflation is intensified in the case of black youth who, marked as black, have already been branded "criminal-minded."
3. The Central Park jogger case—in which a group of black and Puerto Rican youth were falsely accused, tried, and convicted of the brutal rape of a white professional jogger—is one of the more publicized incidents that sparked a national outcry and dehumanization of young black males (Dwyer 2002; Santora 2003). For more analysis of the fear of black youth and the simultaneous media obsession with representations of black youth, see Watkins (1998); Kelley (1997); Gray (1995); Rose (1994); Giroux (1996).
4. While the focus of my study is on black youth, I do want to acknowledge the impact of the discourse on deviance in framing youth of all races as aberrant. A good example of how white male youth are projected through notions of delinquency is the late 1990s coverage of school shootings. Yet, one of the major differences between the treatment of white youth criminality and black youth as criminals is the rhetoric of rehabilitation employed to "save" young whites, while the understanding is that black youth are beyond rehabilitation. At times, I use "racialized youth" to refer to large populations of nonwhite youth (instead of black youth) especially in urban areas, who are homogenized and framed as social threats.
5. I conducted fieldwork over a six-month period between 1997 and 1998 on public transportation in the San Francisco Bay Area, focusing on specific routes in the region (#15 El Cerrito and #49 Eastmont Mall in Oakland, CA; #14 Mission and #22 Fillmore in San Francisco, CA; and the Bay Area Rapid Transit's Richmond and Fremont lines). I chose these routes as ones that have stops in both urban centers and at/near high schools and/or youth centers. As part of my analysis, I paid close attention to the pre-boarding and post-boarding activities of each line. Issues that I considered while riding were: how both youth and adults entered the space, especially upon awareness of the other; how

passengers responded as others entered; where people positioned themselves on the bus; if (and how) individuals engaged each other while riding; and how riders exited (particularly youth). In focusing on youth, I paid close attention to their signifiers of difference and identity: language, gestures, and dress. I recognize my role in marking certain bodies as youth and others as adult through this study.

In San Francisco, public transit is used by a significant portion of the city's residents of all ages, classes, and races. It does not have the pejorative connotations of public transit in other west coast cities, like Los Angeles, where most of the patrons on public transit cannot afford automobiles or other more private forms of commuting. The bus lines in Oakland are used primarily by students, senior citizens, and poor and working-class adults. Certain lines, for example those that run to downtown Oakland or across the Bay to San Francisco, are used also by young professionals. By contrast, the local rail system, Bay Area Rapid Transit, was created primarily as a way of bringing in professionals from the suburbs and outer regions into business centers. It is more expensive than the bus system, and while a large portion of the passengers are professionals who live outside of the urban sections of the Bay Area, BART is also used by a cross-section of San Francisco–Oakland residents.

6. Even though the bus driver may often be the only representative of state authority in this space, power and institutional control are asserted and experienced even without these visible signs of authority. As Foucault asserts, a part of the governing mechanisms of institutions is “the government of oneself, that ritualization of the problem of personal conduct” (1991:87).
7. As an observer, I always attempt to position myself as close to the back as possible. Being only a few years older than many of the rear's occupants and racialized as black as are many in this section, I go unnoticed until I pull out my notebook to record my observations. I then notice people noticing me and also sense my internal gaze (not comfortable as a detached observer waiting for action). After a few minutes the looks cease—just another student doing work. Yet, my own gaze continues to highlight the awkwardness I feel.
8. On occasion, I did see young people “jump off” quickly at a stop when they recognized someone they did not want to see boarding the vehicle.
9. When I noticed my former student, the bus was literally between two neighborhoods: Portrero Hill and the Outer Mission. Both of these districts, until the mid-'90s, had been occupied by lower-middle and working-class blacks and Latinos. However, during the dot-com boom of the late 1990s, they have been under major gentrification and the number of professional whites continues to increase.
10. For more on youth and fashion, see Hebdige (1979); Bruzzi and Gibson (2000); and Fleetwood (forthcoming).
11. In my essay “Hip-Hop Fashion, Masculine Anxiety and the Discourse of Americana” (forthcoming), I discuss the growth of the hip hop fashion industry and the commodification of black urban practices.
12. For example, they use pseudo-Asian characters and sounds on their publicity materials and in their songs. The group also invokes visual symbols of a monolithic and mythic “Asian culture” through performing a parody of martial arts movements and through the incorporation of symbols and characters in their music videos.
13. For a detailed analysis of female masculinity and gender performance, see Halberstam (1998). In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam calls the “masculine woman who wears male attire as part of her quotidian gender expression” a drag butch (232). Applying Halberstam's distinction while recognizing the impact of hip-hop aesthetics and youthful age categories on her fashion and demeanor, I refer to the masculine b-girl as a butch b-girl.
14. In *Race Rebels* (1994), Robin Kelley argues that young black males would position themselves similarly to force white passengers to go around them in the Jim Crow South.
15. Their stories also cited “the video ho,” a common visual trope in contemporary black popular culture. “The video ho,” one of the most widely circulated images of black women in recent years, grows out of hip-hop music video aesthetics. She is an overly sexualized, scantily clad female who reappears in many music videos and is often commented upon in the lyrics of rappers. Her primary function is to dance as background prop and to hang on the lead male rapper as a fashion accessory. “The video ho” tends to appear in multiples.

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