Runaway Train:

Railway Children and Normative Spatialities in India

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At around 1:15 pm on April 4, 2011, a boy named Petu ran after the departing Shramjeevi Express as it pulled out of New Delhi Railway Station, hoping to jump on and scavenge some empty plastic bottles for cash. As he chased Train Number 2392, Petu was getting ready to follow a well-worn itinerary, followed throughout the day, every day, by many others like him, through the city’s several other stations. By late afternoon, according to this itinerary, as the original train continued into countryside to the southeast, Petu would have gotten off, tarried a little while at another station, and then returned on another train to his place of residence at the main New Delhi Station.

But as Petu climbed the stairs of the still slow-moving Rajgir-bound train, he fell. According to some of his peers, he was caught beneath the train and dragged for several hundred feet. He died, sliced into several pieces, beside the tracks at the “Nizamuddin End” of the station. According to some children, he perished immediately. According to at least one other station-

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1 Petu is a nickname whose meaning can be translated as “Tummyboy.” Many solo children in urban India have a *pyar ka naam*, a “lovename” of endearment used by friends and to cover up real identity; many such nicknames refer to some bodily feature (dark skin, a missing limb, a scar). I change the names of all subjects discussed here. In Petu’s case, however, given the public circulation of information about his death in Supreme Court proceedings and the press, I have used the actual nickname.

2 To District Nalanda, southern Bihar, a zone of active Naxalite conflict between Patna and Gaya. The region is a major source of railway-riding runaways, and this train delivers many children like Petu into and out of Delhi.
dwelling child, however, who contested the others’ versions (“you weren’t even there: I was”), he was conscious for a few moments, and tried to utter a few words, before passing away. Shortly thereafter, afraid of retribution by the police for potential bad publicity, all of the regular “platform kids” dispersed and quickly found safe hiding places elsewhere in the station. For a time, Petu’s mangled body laid deserted by the tracks.

Having spent the morning working at another of my research sites, the Hazrat Nizamuddin Railway Station, I decided to ride a long-haul train a few stops until I reached the New Delhi railway station: Petu’s likely itinerary in reverse. I arrived at New Delhi Railway Station at 1:15, passing the spot where Petu died almost precisely at the moment he died. When I reached the station I found my colleague and then, beneath the stairs where they reside, my contacts Arshad and Vikram.

“A child has just died on the tracks,” said Arshad.

“When?” I asked.

“Only just now. Shall we go see?”

I hesitated, and then Arshad convinced me to follow him. When I came, with my assistant and the two older adolescents, upon Petu’s dead body, it was in very poor shape, violently severed at mid-thigh on both legs, and badly banged-up on the abdomen and head. Nobody else was present. Vultures and eagles circled overhead, ever closer. Flies swarmed. I looked away, and looked back again, and then we called the police. A camera was available. We asked the police: might some photos be taken?

“Why do you want photos?” queried an officer.

“We work with such children,” answered my assistant and colleague, Khushboo, indicating the corpse on the tracks.
“This entails a formal process,” said the policeman. *Tasvir khinch de to us se ek ‘story’ banayega*, he concluded: take a picture and they’ll make a story of it. The picture-taker among us ignored the remark, snapped the three photos nonetheless, and indeed a “story” emerged.

Petu, as we expected, was, like most children living alone in the city, a runaway from Bihar, and a full-time resident of New Delhi’s railway station. According to his friends, in the lingo of railway station inhabitants, he “lived at 12 and 13” (*woh baara-terah nambar par rehta tha*), meaning his full-time place of habitat, as known to others, was a space between those platforms, where he lived under the “supervision” of another platform-dweller, an older youth named “Mental.” Like most children like him, Petu had a particular place within the microgeographic space of the railway station, a particular social grouping, and a particular persona that had evolved (or that he had fashioned) in and for that space.

Petu’s status (even in death) as one of many is centrally important for this article. All along these tracks, in fact, and along the others that the Shramjeevi Express was to roll through that day, with Petu on board, are the hundreds of children who have run away from home to live in the stations and even within the trains. They occupy tracks, roofs, adjacent dumps, carriages moving and carriages parked, subterranean passages and electrical grids. Attached to railway space in India, firm embodiment as it long has been of empire, state, modernity, and capital, are multiple overlapping ideological narratives and investments (see LeFebvre 1974, Massey 1994, Harvey 1985, de Certeau 1984). If such space is ideological, then its use by subjects can also be an object of ideological assessment or commentary, and certain uses can be proscribed, or further deemed defiant, transgressive, or undesirable. A critical task then becomes the determination of the nature of the ideology attached to the space, and the location of the power which determines subversion.
This article, then, is about the implications of the active use by Indian “platform children” of railway space in the context of ideologies about (and histories of) that space, ideologies and histories that shape their interaction with it, but not fully. In the shape of such formative forces, children push back, and the article is thus also about the way that they are able to exert some meaning-making power over the molding of that space.

[Double-]Crossings and [Dis]Junctions: Violation, Defiance, and Spatialized Normativity

If this essay is about solo children’s use of railway space in North India, it is also necessarily about the way that such use constitutes a violation of regnant norms about what railway space is and should be, and indeed what public space is and should be (and what children’s place is in it and the world). The fact is that the runaways that I refer to as “solo children” violate, on one level, the normative rules of the railway space they inhabit, in part by virtue of beliefs about and histories of that space, and in part by virtue of the nature of their anomalous and anomic visibility, their mode of activity, and beliefs about who they are and why they are there.

But in another sense, looking from the vantage of the locus of spatialized normativities, it could be argued that platform children in North India absolutely meet expectations about railway space: they have become part of a landscape and a landscape imaginary, and their presence can be narrated simultaneously as an annoyance and eyesore, on the one hand, and a facet of the sociospatial order of things, on the other. One way of explaining this is to suggest that the idea that they are out of place and complaints about their presence, have all themselves become normative discursive rituals about railway space.
Nonetheless, solo children’s presence in railway stations, on tracks and station structures, and in carriages, is a continual site of visible friction (see Tsing 2004), public debate, and everyday agitation, and the children, in response, push and insist and defy and resist. In this way, railway children’s violation of normative spatialities constitutes a true site of violation and contestation, and not one that is simply reproduced in the satisfaction of expectations or rituals. Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (1998) point to similar dynamics in Brazil:

Street children, by ‘invading’ the city centers...defy the segregated order of the modern city...[and] frustrate those who seek to maintain distance and difference from the urban poor...their claiming of public streets... as their own...are a language of protest, defiance, and refusal. Street children are, in a very real sense, poor kids in revolt, violating social space, ‘direspecting’ property...and refusing to disappear. (382-383)

The resistance of Indian “railway children” has its own special features: it is in the intimate mechanics of their use of space, of tracks, train cars, roofs, in their active possession of virtually the entire domain of the station, with all its components, as a space for the exercise of autonomy and even resistance, that the children’s intentionality becomes discernible. I endeavor, then, to document the ways that solo children in North India stake claims, with their bodies, to railway space.
Figure 1. Body Claims: Raju on the Tracks, Hazrat Nizamuddin Station

Petu provides a further lesson here. Even in death railway-dwelling children (or their bodies) challenge, defy, unsettle ideologies of space. Petu’s death made a scene, and a mess to be cleaned up, recalled issues unpleasant to reflect on, drew attention to undesirables not to be shown to the public; as everyone around me seemed to know, a solo child’s death (not to mention a solo child alive) is unsightly, and a matter for retribution (upon others whose living visibility might recall the mess of their cognate’s death), obfuscation, and silencing. It would not sit well, and in recent years such people-out-of-place have not sat well, with the new image Delhi has been promoting for itself, occasioned by the Commonwealth Games of 2010, 2020 Olympic hopes, and a new passion for the aesthetics (if not the substance) of the (corporate and shopping mall) modern (see, among others, Srivastava 2005 and Roy 2002). The matter of the death (and the presence of other, still-living, children that the death underscores), suggested the police
present (and, later, public officials), must be closed immediately. Petu’s body, living or dead, certainly constituted (following Douglas 1966) “matter out of place,” and, either way, a nuisance to be cleaned up. But it also constituted a token of a type of nuisance against whose appearance a constant and vigilant campaign must be waged if Delhi is to become the type of place that its elites (national government, municipal government, corporate executives) and their subordinates (the police, urban planners, city officials) imagine it to aspire to become.

Derailing Discipline:
Rendering Railway Resistance Legible

My first assertion, here, was to say that the simple visually-confirmable presence of solo children in Indian railway space defies ideologies of railway space rooted in notions of a clean modernity. My second step was to say that such defiance is not just in the eyes of the viewer, but that it is also active. But now I turn to a third question: what, within the contexts and relationships in which it is situated, makes it defiance? What is the nature of the power being defied, and of the relations of power in which presence becomes defiance?

Obviously, at the center of these questions are dynamics of the interaction of power and movement, of mobility and motility and countervailing forces focused on fixity. Railway children in India inhabit as full-time residents spaces that are understood as existing for transience and transit only. They embody fixity where ideological structures decree only motion, and motion in a world where fixity is always to be attached to citizen-subjects. Such children thus defy expectations of proper location and locatability (and the proper intersection of age with these other axes), of trackability and staying still when told to (as children are meant to do).
In Foucault’s (1995 [1977]) well-known formulation, “one of the primary objects of discipline is to fix; it is an anti-nomadic technique” (218). As a broad observation this has some relevance for postcolonial railway space, though the relevance is complex. What, for example, might be the meaning of an anti-nomadic technique in a space that is decidedly nomadic, or at least seems to be? Might it be said that certain fixities can be constituted by forms of mobility as long as they follow the patterns decreed for them, that they are not truly nomadic as long as they maintain the well-worn lines they are meant to follow?

Solo children in Indian railway space, if they navigate an anti-nomadic power, enact, themselves, an anti-disciplinary practice, an anti-anti-nomadics, perhaps, or an active nomadics. They escape fixity, they defy categorical definitives and imperatives, they evade, by virtue of their use of a space of mobility, the confines of processes of subject-making to which others are exposed. Nonetheless, as I will show, any resistance or “freedom” achieved must be constantly asserted, maintained, or regained: these subjects are neither afforded the total circumvention of state power nor the empowering perpetual anti-centric marginality of which Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) “nomads” are capable. De Certeau (1984) identifies a relevant middle ground between externality and total domination in “multiform, resistance, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised” (96).
The discipline that is being defied by these children is one that decrees or prescribes the proper nature and form of movement in railway space; the status of the defiant subjects as children, and thus non-citizens, or even non-beings, of a sort, further charges the symbolic and material struggle over and in this space. Laura Bear (2007) identifies a “railway morality” whose origins in British epistemologies of space “continue to develop within the contemporary bureaucracy” and that has “prospered within the structural innovations of administrative forms of discipline introduced since independence, which built on colonial forms of command” (256; see also Legg 2007). As I suggested in my discussion of the ideological investments of this sort of space, above, train cars and stations are in the public imaginary in India usually exclusively functional and instrumental sites of and for movement; runaway children in India seem to see in them, however, a potential to serve as contexts for the kind of anti-disciplines I’ve described,
spaces to move to and through: fluid channels rather than barriers, compartments, and boundaries. Indeed, as I will explain below, the train cars themselves are vibrant spaces of passage and transit not to or from any particular station but to and from other points within themselves.

The rail cars, the objects most readily identifiable as the vehicle only of movement and function, become in this anti-disciplinary practice zones with fully-constituted internal lives. The Indian train, then in my view, is not, as Marc Augé (2002) suggests for the Paris metro, a “nonplace” (108, 125). In India, rail cars constitute social spaces, spaces between spaces, liminal non-places connecting places to places, but also constituting, self-sufficiently, bounded zones of being and subject-making, of creative self-fashioning, vehicles of movement but also moving sites of internal movement (Sadana (2010), also refuting Augé, makes a similar argument for the Delhi Metro). De Certeau (1984), in formulating his concept of the “railway incarceration,” (“Nothing is moving inside or outside the train”) suggests that travelers are “pigeonholed, numbered, and regulated in the grid of the railway car,” which forms “a bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity” (111). For De Certeau only the only movement is in the nexus of window and landscape. But the train in India is indeed a space that is moved through (or even to), in contrast to the rigid compartmentalization whose emergence in Europe Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1977) emphasizes.

The popular image of this notion is certainly not new, nor is it one in narrow circulation; as a kind of paradigmatic myth, it is available in Bollywood, and not at all out of reach of the children either who live it out or who are referenced by it. In the “Riding the Rails” segment of Slumdog Millionaire, for example, the lead character (“Jamal Malik”), along with his brother
(“Salim”), travel the length and breadth of India as full-time train residents. Ranging the trains’ interiors, they sell and steal to survive to the tune of M.I.A’s Paper Planes (“Sometimes I think, sittin’ on trains/Every stop I get to, clocking that game”). They ride heroically on the roof, jump from car to car, and, when cast off by a passenger from whom they try to steal food, they find themselves delivered by the journey to what at first seems to be paradise (“Is this heaven?”), but then turns out to be the Taj Mahal itself, emblem par excellence of India. A grand and romantic adventure. It is not at all unreasonable, then, given the flow of such discourses, that many train-bound runaways in India hope for various forms of deliverance like the one captured here.

If rail cars can be said to be bounded zones of social activity and movement, even as they themselves move, then this is doubly true of the railway stations; these are full-time, long-term habitats (one young man under whose wing were several boys in Nizamuddin Station had been there some twelve years since he left his home, at 12 or so, in the Pauri Garhwal Himalaya) for the children who have fled their homes. These too are again not “non-places,” nor, as Schivelbusch (1977) observes of the historical station in Europe, an “alien appendage[s]” (171) to the city. The children who live in these stations ignore, transgress, and defy its lines, barriers, 

3 And the transformation and passage that the train enacts is two-fold: not only have they arrived in heaven/Agra, but where before they were seven or eight, they are now, as they shake off the dust from their fall, suddenly pubescent boys of 13 or 14. Thus the train provides passage not only from nowhere to somewhere representing place in its most compelling materiality, but also from childhood to something that comes after it. Certainly such images affect and effect life in complicated ways; how they do so is not in the purview of this paper but it is taken up by Aguiar (2011) and Kerr (2003).
compartments, and boundaries, to assert their own modes of movement through it, all the while fashioning their own innovative strategies for circumventing power, hiding, and surviving; enacting their own clandestine economies; mounting their own resistance. The stations that I moved through with the “platform kids” during my work were spaces that existed somehow in the shadows of the other, everyday spaces moved through by the customers: parallel (but nearly-isomorphic, coterminal) spaces actively occupied by the children and fashioned to their wishes.

Stations of Life:

The Defiant Cartographies of Railway Children

All this is best elucidated through an intimate description of the spatial lives of the stations, and of the children’s cartographies of their habitats. As mentioned, Petu, when he fell, was riding a train out of the main New Delhi Station (NDRS) towards Hazrat Nizamuddin, whose specialty is long-haul trains. Having arrived at Nizamuddin, Petu would likely sort through his “take,” trade it for cash either there or back at his home base, or perhaps having traded them in he would have collected a new batch at Nizamuddin and then ridden back to New Delhi for a new sale (Rs. 40 per kilo, approximately and depending on location). While sorting, collecting, selling, or taking a huffing respite at Nizamuddin, he would likely have known and recognized several children there; most children that I spoke to knew names, faces, or physical markers of children resident in the other stations.

This type of movement highlights the landscape in which the several stations of Delhi, as I’ve suggested, collectively form a network of movement that spans the city but remains within the bounds of the railway, and a context for interesting forms of solidarity. In a remarkable moment, I watched as a group of new arrivals from Ajmer, some of whom had run away many
times and others of whom were novices, met full-time Nizamuddin station residents, and began a session of boasting, sharing information, posturing themselves as more or less experienced railway users, showing off their urban expertise and geographic knowledge, and performing a “shared structural predicament and experience of dispossession” (Comaroff 1985): we, they seemed to be saying, are subjects of the same type, on the same type of journey.

Petu never made it to Hazrat Nizamuddin; as I explained, he died at the “Nizamuddin End.” The stations indeed have named “ends,” and much more; their internal geography, in the children’s narratives, is exceptionally detailed. For example, in both Hazrat Nizamuddin and New Delhi Station, the “Pipal Tree” forms a central gathering place. At the former it is the primary area for sorting through scavenged bottles and other garbage items, though many of the scavengers that use it, according to the solo children, are residents of the nearby slum “Kale Khan” (Sarai Kale Khan) and it is seen by at least some as a proprietary territory for people whose primary descriptor is that “they have their own homes.” The “Pipal Tree” at New Delhi Railway Station, correspondingly formed a gathering point for runaways, scavengers, and beggars.

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4 One of the banyan members of the Ficus family (F. Religiosa) associated with Vishnu, Lakshmi, and Hanuman, and with various other sacred meanings, the pipal is also the “sacred fig,” and the “bo tree” under one of which the Buddha received enlightenment; I thus interpret the fact that it is such a central axis (mundi?) even in the stations (which have fully-elaborated sacred geographies as well, mosques and temples and shrines built into the platforms) as rooted in the larger ritual complex in which it is accorded value, and as one of the elements that makes the station’s space culturally legible as self-bounded and not disconnected from rites of movement-as-pilgrimage.
The symbolic status of the Pipal Tree in everyday Hindu (and Buddhist) milieux opens up possibilities for interpreting not only the microgeography but also the cosmography of railway space, for recognizing in what might be taken for a rather banal realm the possibility for a sacred cartography; certainly sacred structures, shrines and so on, are built into the station’s architecture itself, but beyond the fixed structure of the station, trains too can be vehicles of an important component of cosmology and belief: pilgrimage (and, as is invoked in Slumdog, the deliverance that might thereby result), a charged and urgent movement of which running away can certainly be an instantiation or an inception.

If the stations have ends, they also have meaning-loaded “sides.” These sides usually exist in binary opposition to each other. Different identities are affixed or attached to children in different parts of the station. In some cases, groups from one part either avoid interaction with or pit themselves against groups in other parts; sometimes the conflict is explicit, and at other times it is simply a matter of derision and disapprobation. For example, children who live and work on the “Delhi Gate” side of the New Delhi Station spurn and keep their distance from the “dirty” children who live on the Paharganj side (reputed as it is for prostitution and narcotics trading). Douglas’ (1966) reading of socially relevant “dirt” and its corresponding binary in “order” is again salient here.

Correspondingly, Hazrat Nizamuddin’s “Platform 1” (“Ek Nambar”) kids are seen by the “Platform 6-7” kids, again, as dirty, no good, vagrant, drug (over)users with whom they have no interest in interacting, as they say, beyond absolute necessity. Some children, such as “Amrit” from Platform 1, bridge such zones, and are accepted in each. But most find a community, simultaneously mutually protective and hierarchically exploitative, with which they are allied;
most such “communities” have an older male who exerts some control, and exacts some tribute (flexible in its form), over the younger ones.

I explained that the first detail we received on Petu from the other children, upon observing his corpse, was that he “lived at 6-7 ‘number’” with “Mental.” Other initial details provided were murky; most of the children present wanted to assert that they had known him but that they were not friends with him, in order to distance themselves from any potential association with the event. Mental was, and still is, nowhere to be found. The salient element here, however, is the “permanent address,” the fixed spot in the station—beyond their connections to particular sides—that most children are tied to. Therefore, in Hazrat Nizamuddin, the primary group with which I worked lived in a nearly-invisible spot between two of the inward-sloping segments of corrugated tin roofing that runs along the combined platform, and underneath the footbridge that spans the station, from whose lateral lattice it must be accessed (falls, according to the children, were quite common, and occasionally deadly). The group, very stable in its composition, slept, ate, huffed, snuggled, and sorted in that location.
Roof living, indeed, is very common, and a good way to stay out of sight of the police and hostile passengers. Javed, a now-grown runaway who works for an organization for street children, recounts that his group lived for years in a spot of roofing in the New Delhi station that they called, simply, “our place.” Another group I worked with in the same station lived beneath a section of stairs near the bathrooms on the Delhi Gate side. The primary living, sorting and sleeping location for children in NDRS, however, is the so-called *jali*, near the Nizamuddin End. A *jali* is a lattice or screen, but it also represents seclusion, secrecy, status, and purdah in Indo-Islamic architecture and literature, and is thus of great symbolic importance in collective imaginaries of space; like the Pipal, it represents a certain cultural read of the station. This particular *jali*, however, happens to be a screen (or a grill) enclosing an electrical grid or substation (a high-voltage power-supply, in fact, to feed overhead catenaries); the children’s sleeping area, astonishingly, was in the peripheral interior space between the screen and the electrical grid it protected. Despite (my) safety concerns, it seemed to serve its role as a *jali* in the domestic and cultural sense, bestowing a degree of seclusion, separation, security, and privacy within its forbidding perimeters.

A delineation of gender’s role and gender roles, primary among forms of discipline and power operant in the railway child’s landscape, must be made here (see Massey 1994). Most runaways, and thus most solo child occupants of Indian railway space, are boys, and railway space is more available to be occupied by boys than by girls. Given the differential forms of socialization for boys and girls, it is less common for the possibility of running away to strike
most village girls as feasible. Girls’ and women’s movement in and through public spaces is, further, deeply limited by the same complex of rules that decrees that their proper place is at home with their families.

The dynamics observed by Huberman (2006: 66) are informative here; the “ghat girls” she observed in Varanasi, selling postcards and offerings at the river’s edge, rarely remained in the public eye after puberty. A girl in public, she learned, threatens the family’s honor with suspicions of impropriety, and places herself in danger. There are girl runaways, but the potential length of their time on the street is much shorter. Girls are much more likely than boys to be immediately recruited into formal prostitution upon or before arrival in the city.

Solo railway children are both subject to gendered orders and exert their own gendered forms of power. The axes of power governing children’s lives in railway space include social class, caste, religious community, physical ability, and age. In all of these categories the children of India’s railways represent the outcome of some form of exclusion. The axis of gender is rather different, however, and requires some scrutiny. If we return to the fact of the prevalently-male composition of populations of railway children, it is hard to say whether presence in and claims on railway space by boys represents an entitlement or a privation. On the one hand, it could be said that these children are only able to have the autonomy to be in this position of defiance and relative freedom, and to leave home, because they are male; free living for boys is certainly more widely condoned (if not celebrated) than for girls. On the other hand, it could be said that it is their maleness, and the social notion of their availability for labor, that places them in the running away predicament to begin with, and more or less compels them to leave home. Privilege or burden, then?
During the day, as I have indicated repeatedly, the largely-male resident runaways’ primary work is what is referred to in local contexts as “ragpicking.” That term was replaced, in nonprofits’ lingo, as “recycle scavenging,” which has in turn been replaced, to expunge the “scavenging” piece, with “waste recycling.” The children themselves tend to use *botal khinchna* (or *khainchna*) to denote the gathering of bottles into large sacks of woven nylon for later sale. That they do it and why they do it is central to my consideration, below, of these children’s position in contexts of production and consumption; how they do it and where they do it, however, are of primary importance for the current discussion of antidisciplinary practice, for it is in this activity that they transgress most markedly the station’s normative spatialities and spatialized moralities, and in this location that they evince the greatest disapprobation.

Collection occurs most often on a recently-arrived long-haul train; on such trains, plastic water bottles are strewn everywhere. Even before all the passengers have disembarked, the children begin to move, at remarkable speed, and with exceptionally well-organized division of labor, through the cars. They move swiftly to evade Railway Protection Force sanction, climbing bunks and diving beneath seats, and then move on to another. After a big collection, when bags are full, and once a lull has arrived, a collective rest period is undertaken to sort and crush. Most frequently, sorting occurs in the midst of those clusters of tracks which have no platform separating them, a space entered by nearly nobody else.
While sitting in the middle of the tracks they are frequently castigated by railway officials, and insulted by passengers. Extra food is often a by-product of the collection period. Once collection and bottle-crushing are complete the bottles are taken to the stall, just outside the station, of a recycle vendor, who pays the children, and then sends the plastic back to the manufacturing facility by way of an intermediary merchant. The cooperative groups of children

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5 It is also of note that the activity they are engaging in here, a form of garbage collection and public cleaning, is one that was until recently and in the eyes of many passenger observers from village and city alike the domain of professional, caste-based scavengers or sweepers (i.e. *Bhangis* or *Balmikis*), and that this read is grafted onto the perception of the status that such children should be accorded (despite the trans-caste composition of their groups).
share the yield, which they use to save to go home, buy inhalants and food, pay off threatening superiors, purchase desired commodities, or send home, on occasion, as remittance.

On the interior of the station’s edges are the designated spaces of the proper and prescribed subjects (or agents) of railway space, including the Railway Protection Force, engineers, train operators, military security (present in force with machine guns) and other station staff. Even menial labor, whose portering work is formalized in stations, have their own designated location marked with a sign reading “Coolie Shelter”; not so for solo children. There is nowhere they are explicitly allowed to be, or supposed to be, so they must forge of the station’s space transgressive zones in which they can move and subsist evasively. This legal and disciplinary conundrum is part of what requires resistance, or transforms just-living into resistance, and defiance of the sort that mounts a challenge to disciplinary spatialities. Everyone legitimate has a “proper place”; even the poorest laborers are legitimate. But for the few subjects who have no proper place, being anywhere is legible as the contestation of a space. To accord them a place in the station would be to acknowledge the legality of child labor and of the failure of welfare, to point to the perceived failures of a nation, and to highlight aesthetics that the city and the state, modern, corporate, Asian, and clean as they envision themselves, would rather not dignify with comment or deixis.

Beyond this compartmentalized officiality, and past the tracks’ edges, lie the stations’ borderlands and shadow zones: dumps, scrubland, makeshift croplands, sewage swamps. At Hazrat Nizamuddin, this zone contains a vacant lot that is called “the Park.” While lounging around the inside of an inactive train one afternoon with some eight or nine of the boys, who

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6 See Prakash (1990), and Torabully and Carter (2002) on coolies and bonded labor in and from India.
wanted a solvent-sniffing rest after some tiring scavenging, I asked, after a mention of someone who had gone to the Park, “what happens there?” Raju, with whom I worked intensively at Nizamuddin, looked away, and said, in a hushed voice, “sexy.” Perhaps overreading his candor and comfort at the question I then later asked if he might repeat what he had said, to open it up for comment by the other boys, and for Khushboo to hear. But he declined, not surprisingly, and would not elaborate.

There is thus also, of course, the World Beyond, beyond even the far reaches of the station, the part of the Real World that exists in some complementary relationship to the bounded stations. These are the adjoining bazaars and slums where the boys trade their bottles (or bodies) for money. Here are also the service providers for the stations’ many denizens: places travelers with a long wait or a canceled train can shop or stay; workshops where small components for the train station itself, or for trains, can be purchased; and, most significantly for this essay, the many nongovernmental organizations serving the children. Children flow in and out of these organizations, and, despite a marked suspicion about the institutions’ motives and policies, move between them across the entire space of the city.

In the indeterminate gap between the notion of defiant claim, by the children, and of coercive dislocation, by others, between choice and necessity, there lingers an insistent and nagging question that I have not been able to answer. Is this “their” space, as Javed called it, only because it is the only available space, because street children are cast so consistently out of other people’s fixed spaces of habitat that they are relegated to other people’s spaces of transience?
An alternative argument to the one I’ve made above, then, earlier in this section, might be that “anti-discipline” is an over-read, or an erroneous read (or a romantic read: see Abu-Lughod 1990), and that what appears to be resistance in railway space is itself the satisfaction or consummation of the objectives of confinement and discipline; that the invisible, evasive existence I document here is just the manifestation of the place accorded by others to such children, though it is not made explicit, and that what appears defiance is in fact the push and struggle that such subordination requires of them just to survive in the corner of the world to which they have been relegated, that they are not voluntary inhabitants of the station, but rather its prisoners. I do not believe this to be true, nor do I want to.

The railway contains its own contradictions, weds and welds together disparate poles of subject-making and subjection. In a space whose very definition is imagined to be line and discipline, steel, rock and timber, anti-disciplines indeed emerge. Laura Bear (2007) sees in the
establishment of Indian railways in British India the birth of “a new technology for governance” (22). I suggest that this necessarily meant the corresponding and simultaneous birth, at the same moment, of a new space, malleable in its nature, for *counter-governance* (and perhaps anti-governmentality). As the power operant or embodied in the railway shifted from empire to state, the mode of using its resources in the service of resisting power must further also have changed. The genesis of the railway provided the preconditions for its own rejection and resistance. And not just resistance to itself, but a wider resistance *born by virtue of its existence*. In the laying of the tracks, the seeds were planted for the deployment of railways as both instruments of power and also themselves as vehicles of resistance.

*Embodyment*

Children mark railway space in India, but the railway also marks children; their interaction with it is embodied, inhabited. They wear their intimacy with the railway and its disciplines on their selves, and on the outside as well as the inside. The somatic trace it leaves (not to mention the emotional) is indelible and permanent. Thus a labor of empire and nation and industry becomes a feature of the solo child’s subjecthood, part of the landscape of the body, just as the solo child becomes a feature of the landscape forged of that material assemblage.

Consider Nabil, the thirteen year-old runaway from Northwest Bangladesh, who lost his arm, as he slept one day by a train he thought inactive, to the space between a train’s wheel and the tracks; he now cannot bring himself to go home for fear of the grief he is sure he will bring his mother by virtue of his railway-mutilated body.
“How can I go home,” he asked as we sat one day by the Yamuna riverbank, indicating the place where his arm had been, “like this? I can’t. I can’t have her weep for me. I can’t see that.”

Nabil, in the space of “the street,” is toonda, a nickname he has been assigned that means “cripple” or “one-armed.” During his tenure at Hanuman Mandir, above which the trains lumber into Old Delhi Station, he could not be located by means of any other name. Thus his re-shaping by means of the railway here becomes identity and persona, and railway becomes in his narrative of self life history. Petu and Rubel challenge us to see, then, one of the ways that it is possible for histories of empire and industry to become life and death and embodied subjecthood by means of the railway.

Discipline, observes Foucault (1977), is a matter of the governing of bodies through the vehicle of naturalized norms suffused into the nearly invisible fibers of daily living, and the subject’s concomitant submission of her own body to rules of governance. In previous sections I have underscored the ways the railway is tied up with the body’s governance through disciplinary mechanisms. What I am pointing to here is something rather different from discipline; it is about the materiality of interaction with a historical form tied to capital, migration, and rule, and the way that materiality inflects lives and produces subjects and categories. Petu and Rubel reveal the intimate and nearly limitless reach of the postcolonial

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7 “I think she’d rather have you alive, even with no arm, than not at all,” I replied. Nabil’s father had died some six years earlier of treatable kidney failure; he had subsequently clashed with his mother’s new husband and opted to leave for India. But slowly it came out that Nabil was acutely homesick, and plagued by a profound sense of betrayal of his mother.
railway into the domain of the body, subjective being, life, livelihood, emotion and death. In coming sections I will deal with the extent of the railway’s reach in a different sense, with its tentacular spatial reach into remote rural lives, with the yoking of such places to other places and processes through specific historical acts.

The notion of the traces of the railway on living bodies points to a different kind of embodiment and a different kind of trace than a bodily one, and the notion of possessing space points to a different kind of possession: one in which the trains and tracks themselves forcefully recall and suggest those lives lost along their lines. Mention must be made of hauntings, spirit possessions, narratives of the abundant ghosts (bhut-preet) on the tracks (see Freed and Freed 1993). The bodies and their subjectivities thus remain, even more than mere traces, even after they are no longer physically present. As in Dickens’ (1866) story *The Signal-Man* (“cut down,” narrates one of the gathered crowd, not unlike the one that had gathered around Petu, “by an engine”) the Delhi stations are full, says Naushad, of ghosts and specters (even in the toilets), as are the stations in Calcutta. “Would you,” he asked, standing before Petu’s remains, “spend the night here alone?” A death on the tracks thus lingers for a long time, and its specter does not easily depart. Living bodies on the tracks are undesirable and objects to be purged; all the more dead bodies; what, then, of the bothersome traces they leave behind when both living body and dead body are absent?

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8 Laura Bear (2007) writes brilliantly of ghosts and hauntings in Indian railway space, among railway workers, and in Anglo-Indian railway colony families (“I am not,” says the former railway driver member of one such family, “a ghost; I am one” (257)).
Kovats-Bernat (2008) proposes that street children in Haiti occupy a liminal position, in the Turnerian (1969) sense, and that they are further stuck, suspended, in a kind of rite of passage, but with no destination or exit. He suggests that street children occupy:

an interrupted rite of passage whereby domiciled children are transformed into a liminal state where they remain and are generally vilified variously as aberrations, monstrosities, or social threats, and in all cases as nonpersons...[The street is] an unstructured space of seclusion and marginalization where liminal identities have been assumed after old ones have been shed, without any promise of a full reaggregation back into structured society with the status, rights, and privileges that come with being a full Haitian “person.” Is the street then the site of a ritus ruptus, a ritual of passage interrupted at the limen? (69)

Could the social landscape I have described above be well explained by virtue of liminality, perhaps, rather than discipline and evasion? As part of a larger cohesive social landscape, less turbulent, less dissonant, less disjunctive? Certainly it is true that railway children appear suspended, and that what they are suspended in suggests the idea of passage from one place or state to another.

But a liminality argument, by claiming that street children occupy a space that is essentially and immutably in-between, presupposes a certain unidirectional force exerted by socially-produced space over such subjects, and ignores subjects’ ability to exert, to claim, to control, as imagined in a Lefebvrian (i.e. 1974) sort of contested space, or the ability to use, mold, and interpret, as we derive from de Certeau’s (1984) conception of everyday space.
Liminality as explanation, here, makes (or mandates), further, presuppositions about who sets the dominant rules of space (always distant and elder others from a unitary assemblage called “society”). The notion of “re-aggregation into structured society” assumes that “street children” are not already part of the social fabric; hints at an equally unsatisfying corollary that suggests that there is indeed a unitary and uninterrupted social fabric which they might otherwise be participating in, and that everyone must be either inside or outside of its bounds; and favors certain axes, sites, or agents of aggregation while denying others. Finally, a liminality argument suggests a permanent non-arrival, and, failing to accord subjective perspective what it deserves, ignores the possibility of interpretations of permanence and stability in the space deemed by other observers liminal, or, alternatively, the possibility of children’s locations in railway space as always allowing for a thousand possible and impending arrivals.

Mobility, as an idea, problematic, or line of inquiry, offers a much richer framework for reading railway lives, I think, than liminality (see Urry 2007, Creswell 2006, Vannini 2009, and Greenblatt 2010, for more on mobility as paradigm), helps explain the distinctive allure of railway space and account for what it offers. It highlights questions about what certain technologies and spatialities offer children, and what active use they make of them, rather than imagining them either as hapless and helpless failed beneficiaries of a social status that might have been bestowed upon them.

More specifically, in interrogating and interpreting the significance of the choice of this particular location (if it is indeed a choice and not a product), I suggest railway children endeavor to ensure that they are never severed from the experience of escape, of running, that they seek to be permanently fixed in the space of movement, of non-fixity. Thus they are always, in some sense, able to remain in the state and process of running away from anything that
threatens to become a home; they rarely leave the conveyance that delivered them to their current location; and they remain always able to be anywhere they wish with a sprint, a jump, and a hoist.

Figure 6. Exercising Mobility, April 2011

In such a framework, they are maximally mobile, and what this mobility offers is possibility, the possibility of the perpetual availability of movement; it becomes a potential mode of empowerment, or rather a mode of perpetual potential empowerment, and provides an exceptional opportunity for the exertion of control over self and body (in a very limited menu of such sites).
Keeping Track of the Time:

Children Along History’s Highways

I

Leaving Home in the Postcolony

The runaway’s transits and pathways to the city manifest historical forces—capital, nation, empire—in individual lives. Even the specific contours of each runaway’s passage to the city bear the traces of the past and the imprint of the global. Children leave without permission or companion from their villages, and unwittingly, as they travel, they follow the precise pathways laid by industry and history; the tentacular reach of changes wrought by those same forces are the antecedents of their departures.

Running away is thus a historical act.

In the decision to depart are concentrated the elements of three centuries of historical transformations. Ghosts of more than one variety haunt the tracks.

The train becomes, for the potential runaway or real runaway, a catalyst able to transform a childhood into what is interpreted by observers as a “street childhood,” and it thus becomes a crucial node in the relationship between rural people and larger markets, between children and the city, and, even if only for separation or reunion, between children and the families they leave.

Most runaway children in North India flee from a set of shared rural predicaments generated by interwoven histories of industry, empire, and urban growth, or rather they flee from emotional and domestic predicaments inflected by these historical formations. These flood-prone, drought-prone, malaria-infested zones have suffered from more than two centuries of debt servitude and credit peonage (sponsored, at least at first, by the British), more than a century of declining rural options in the face of urban manufacture, and more than a half century of
increasing landlessness at the arrival of the “green revolution” and the costly pesticides and fertilizers it demands (see Guha 1983, Sainath 1996). Nowadays, Maoist Naxalite conflict and corruption in state governments makes life even more precarious, unpredictable new monsoon patterns destabilize crops and increase flooding, most men are gone at least half the year for city jobs, and domestic violence is widespread. Under the roofs of mud and thatch and straw, death and disease are everywhere. When families find themselves unable to cope with these stresses, children often find themselves unable to cope with their families; the idea of departure is widely accessible, if not an emergent tradition; and thus in the face of such anomic circumstance, they leave with neither word nor permission. Some of them are the gradual runaways I’ve described, and others are accidental (or even casual) runaways. And their vehicle of departure is a product of the same histories, moments, and forces that have generated the departures themselves.

It is in this context that the railway children, and the railways themselves embody (passively) and enact (productively) a certain historically-significant relationship between city and country (and not to mention, as I will address below, between citizen and country, in the latter’s other sense). My purpose in this section is to explore the tie that the railway cements or suggests between the rural and the urban; and further to develop an understanding of the human being that resides—or indeed embodies—these interstitial crossings and junctions: the runaway child that is conducted by virtue of tracks laid by empire, capital, and the postcolonial state from village to city.

Poor, railway-dense states like Bihar have stations in or near almost every village; density of railway networks and frequency of railway movement in and out of a village ends up a strong predictor of running away. It is further at a very young age that many families socialize their children to the rite of working and selling goods like tea, refilled water bottles, and trinkets in
such stations. Their exposure to railway space begins very early, then, and the notion of its potential for movement is easily naturalized. The web of railway economies in fact extends right into the village, where gangs further recruit children to work in the stations. And, as villagers have characterized it, children move slowly away from home and into railway space; thus even running away may be a process more gradual than one might assume.

Consider here again the story of Javed (the now-grown co-proprietor of the bit of roof known as “our place”), whose own passage from Bihar to Delhi reveals the profound extent of the railway’s reach into the intimacies of selfhood. Javed’s life story is inextricably imbricated with trains, even from birth. His father was a railway employee in Bhagalpur, an area from which an exceptionally high number of runaways depart. At eight years, Javed became a sort of “accidental” runaway by virtue simply of boarding a train to Delhi, and for eight years he had no further contact with his family while he lived in the city’s railway station. In a remarkable further elaboration of his relationship with the railway, Javed now runs for a nonprofit a “reality tour” of Delhi’s railway station and works with new child arrivals from the countryside.

Though he claims that life in the village “was good…not even that bad” and though “there wasn’t too much poverty” there compared to other villages, he chose the Delhi Railway station over home. He further didn’t “come” to Delhi, he insists. That would be too intentional a characterization:

I was taken.

I was with my friends. I was excited to see Delhi, to know new things. Delhi is different from the countryside, you know. People in my village always talked about how great Delhi was. So I said: I’m going.
I did not come on my own. I had some friends, they had some railway tickets. They wanted to go for vacation, for eleven days. Come to Delhi, they said, Delhi is great, there are strange things there, there’s a lot of electricity there [i.e. “it is an electric sort of place”], so I became very excited. I came with my friends, and then they abandoned me [on the train]. I had no idea what Delhi was, I was totally senseless [i.e. “bewildered”]. So when the train stopped, some people said we’re getting to Delhi, it’s the last stop. And I got off.

I saw how different everything was, what my nation is like. On my first night I slept on the platform. In the morning I met some other kids. I was hungry. I saw some of them eating. You see, they noticed me because I was well-dressed when I first came.

And I lived in the station two years.

Javed sheds some light on the process by which railways mold lives in places like Bhagalpur and continue to do so in Delhi, sometimes even after “street childhood” is abandoned.

II

Nation’s Capital(ism):

Labor, Production, and the Runaway Train

The Indian railway system was built under British administration of the subcontinent, as a joint stock venture, in particular in the expansion of an industrial infrastructure designed to profit English commerce (see Kerr 1995, Andrew 1884, Tiwari 1941, Thorner 1950). Under the independent postcolonial state, trains remained a most basic component of efforts at nationalization, including both symbolic efforts at “integration” and strategies of accumulation. The imperial structure of trains and tracks themselves (see Kerr 2007, Aguiar 2011, Bear 2007)
are imbricated in complex ways with the rending of families by other imperial forces. Dirks (2001) sees the history of the “steadily increasing economic investment in imperial power (propelled in particular through the joint stock arrangement of the railways and other infrastructural projects)” (43) as a most basic engine in the transformation (through its extension into the domain of culture) of colonial rule. The train delivers such mobile and marginal subjects as runaways to the very cities whose growth generates the anomic conditions which mandate their departure. They move along the lines themselves laid by labor, and along which flows labor, but these children exist at some level exterior to that labor; discerning their role and place in systems of production is complex indeed.

On the broadest level, clearly, postcolonial South Asian railways are a space associated with but not confined to labor. They are of course themselves a product, in their physical existence, of human labor. But more generally they are also a product, if not a precondition, of industry and manufacture; at the very least they serve its requirements and exigencies. They are, further, a generative producer of labor, and they encourage and allow participation in dominant systems of production. They thus constitute an assemblage that sits in a complicated and orthogonal but complementary and intimate relation to capital.

9 Marx himself of course emphasized the role of the railways in the development of capital, even in tracts as short as “History as Class Struggle” (1848), and even in India itself; in The New York Daily Tribune in 1853, in a piece entitled “The Future Results of British Rule in India,” he offered that “modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power” (as quoted in Bear 2007: 2).
And despite all this, for “platform kids” the railways’ relationship to capital means something rather different; in the local genealogies of their departures from home capital has played a significant role, and indeed both the presence of trains in their villages, and the place of trains in their villages has everything to do with relationships between systems of production and local life. Village children of the sort that end up alone in the city could certainly be said to be doubly disenfranchised, as poor people and as children, by capitalist relations. But runaways are not part of even the very same labor flows that have strained and stressed local lifeways and their own families; rather, though they use its fibers and ride its drafts, they are a by-product of those constellations, embodiments not only of material constraints but of emotional reactions to material constraints.

But it is the plastic bottles, perhaps, that reveal the most, provide the greatest window on these subjects’ position in systems of production and consumption. Consumer comforts, provided by Nestlé or Pepsi, emptied, rendered shells or skeletons, ghostly refuse of completed train journeys, and translated into their own forms of subsistence for people on the very edge (by virtue of their age, their location, their social status in the village and their subsequent or consequent social status in the city). What is to be made of collecting bottles in a postcolonial and global capitalism? Scavenging illuminates well, as material reality and metaphor alike, the peculiar relationship between these children and histories of relations of production—a window onto the meaning of the children’s experiences in a larger economy.
Scavenging of plastic bottles is an activity that follows acts of consumption (in its most basic form) and makes life from waste. It is an activity that relies on vessels emptied by the wealthier users of the trains. It is an activity that happens on the very peripheries of the stations (and of economies), in the forbidden zones: between tracks, under trains, in borderland dumps and emptied and closed cars (see Chakrabarty 1992). It is an activity that constitutes a system that survives only because of children, and only because of their marginality. And it is an activity that is made possible by virtue of a quasi-commodity (water bottles), void of the content that gave it its original value, only available in late capitalist modes of production, only legible as an idea (and as an object of desire) by virtue of globally-circulating norms, and only recyclable by individuals situated in postcolonial modes of subjection.
III

Signals and Semaphores:

Reading Ideology in Railway Space

It is in relationship to these formations and aggregations (of power and production and their intersections to each other) that railway space is endowed with ideological value, and thus becomes a charged space, and an object of contestation and struggle, somatic and semiotic and material alike. But what kind of ideologies?

I started this article by asserting that runaway children’s location is only legible as violation or defiance in relation to some ideological formation which decrees or prescribes what railway space should be and what children should be, makes assignments of who should be where. I suggested that the power relations that shape children’s lives in postcolonial railway space emerge from the ideological valuation of the space in question by observers, from the simple presence of aberrant and anomalous subjects who are seen to violate that ideology, and from the active rejection of ideological prescriptions by the children; ironically, perhaps, it is the same ideological framework that assigns both children and railway space their imagined value, expects them to be in the same space, and then denies that possibility.

The ideological imaginary of the railway is itself tied to its location in the matrix of nation and capital: the great and heroic engine, so to speak, or vehicle, or locomotive, of Progress, Production, National Unity and Cohesion. Railway space, most generally, is assessed ideologically according to notions firmly established in that framework or set of frameworks to which the label “modernity” has been affixed (see Todd Presner’s (2007) Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains for a compelling account of the entanglements of railways with visions of nation and modernity). Railway space in India is supposed to be the exclamatory, triumphal(ist)
incarnation of the truth that is invested in the modern; on that steed, envisioned the colonists and their allies and heirs, India would be carried forward to a new and glorious age. The heirs tempered their visions, perhaps, as the more mundane exigencies of administration and corporate production took over from the grand projects of empire and early nation, and in that moment railways began to become what they remain: the elementary filament of daily life, as in Javed’s history. If the railway is an ideology, then, it is one that has constructed itself around the idea of the modern.

David Harvey (1998) has suggested that high modernity was/is characterized by a “belief ‘in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders’ under standardized conditions of knowledge” (35) and that high modernism was associated with a “surface worship of the efficient machine as a sufficient myth to embody all human aspirations” (36). De Certeau (1984) evokes something similar to this idea in his own way, calling the city “simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity” (95). I suggest here that the railway stations, trains, and other spaces whose rules the children defy by their presence represent an embodiment of some larger form of knowledge if they are not self-sufficiently a form of knowledge themselves. The implication then becomes that runaway children in railway space are seen to constitute a violation of proper modernity, and of its aesthetic(s).

Poignant iterations of such metadiscourses of railway modernity are written right onto the walls of the city’s stations and train sidings, inflecting the space with an elaborate commentary on itself, telling readers how they are supposed to be interpreting its meaning and purpose. Sweeping across the side of one train, in multiple pieces (and in other iterations on other cars) and swallowing even windows and doors with its digital mural, stretches an image of a ravishing palm-fringed golden beach, at dawn, a few bathers in the cerulean water. The image, in front of
which the children sort their bottles and sniff white-out, reads *Go Kerala: God’s Own Country*. The train, once more, as a distinctly luxury-class vehicle of deliverance (and advertising). The side of another train, the words punctuated with photos of thrillingly happy middle class lives, reads “Life Plans/Growth Plans/Health Plans/Pension Plans/Child Plans: Get More Out of Life. A Plan for Every Need.” A third bears a mural, sponsored by the venture “Max New York Life Shiksha Plus II,” showing a manic teenager, jumping, surrounded by bourgeois teenagery sorts of things (electric guitars, basketballs), hemmed in by giant textbooks (Economics, Biology, Maths, English, Physics). The text reads “Child Plan for Education. Plus Talent.” Again, directly beneath this visual insistence on what sort of truth rolls across the tracks, as with the others, the railway children sift, sort, sniff.

Nearby, at the National Railway Museum, a remarkable space of alternate imaginaries and faded utopias, lie further (and anxiously uncertain) elaborations of an ideology of what trains are and should be. On a trip with my two-year-old, I ride a mini-train, its locomotive in the imperial style, and its passenger cars bedecked with Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and the rest of the Disney cast of characters, which travels, as if a time machine, through a fantastical landscape encompassing all of India’s railway history. On the slow circuit, which includes a real “engineer” and a ride through a mock tunnel, we pass viceregal sleeping cars, workhouses of early industry, oddities of local experimentation, and the extinct dinosaurs of everydays past. For many children, this is the Indian railway: an image, an idea, a trivial fantasy best kept in the realm of fun, a checked box in the logbook of modernity’s completed accomplishments. An object of consumption, play, and pleasure.

At the visitor center, near where the toy train leaves from its “station,” the gothic title text of a large interpretive placard reads *India’s Rail Heritage*, the letters in the colors of the national
A railway map overlaid with icons and what appear to be 1970s stock-photo bubbles suggests some ways that the railway serves as a unifying filament, tying together a landscape of difficult diversity. On one side lies a list of “landmarks,” a timeline equating progress with the progress of the railways. And in the lower corner, a meta-text explains:

**INDIA’S REMARKABLE RAIL HERITAGE, UNIQUE ROLLING STOCK, CONSTRUCTIONS AND MANY WORKS OF GENIUS MAKE THE INDIAN RAILWAYS A UNIQUE EMBLEM OF CONVICTION AND INNOVATION SPANNING ABOUT 152 YEARS. DURING THESE YEARS, THE INDIAN RAILWAYS HAVE SERVED AS A LIFE LINE FOR ECONOMIC, SOCIAL CULTURAL & TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS. FROM ITS HUMBLE BEGINNINGS IN APRIL 1853, TODAY INDIAN RAILWAYS DIVIDED IN 16 ZONES & SPAN 63,122 ROUTE KMS., CONTINUE TO SERVE AS A LIFELINE OF PROGRESS UNDER SINGLE MANAGEMENT.**

**IV**

*From Station to Nation:*

*Railway Children and the Problem of Citizenship*

But where might one find that “single management”? At the top right corner of the placard in the Rail Museum is an emblem of the National Railways which reads:

**“IN THE SERVICE OF THE STATE.”**

Back in the stations, along the grittier and smellier living tracks of the real railway, the truth of this is perfectly visible: there, indeed, the runaways’ zones of movement are patrolled by agents of the state: the Railway Protection Force, the ever-present elite military police, beautifiers or modernizers from Delhi’s Municipal Commissions, functionaries of children’s homes. The same
agents who were so annoyed by Petu’s body and our questions. And as with so many things, in the railways the state is the heir of empire (see Chatterjee 1985, 1993, Dirks 2001), and the place of the railway in the triangular constellation of production and polity, though altered, bears an intimate relationship to the past.

Figure 8. Dinesh in Trouble, March 2011

And for the children too the railway serves as a line of subjective connection to nation and state, a hitch between their mobile lives and their (self-designated) anomic homes, on the one hand, and the unruly formation that is India, on the other. As the Railway Museum placard suggests, and as Amrit demonstrates in asserting his ability to leave at any moment for Calcutta or Goa or the Himalayas, just as he originally left his father’s unkind hand in a distant district of Madhya Pradesh for Delhi, for runaways and other classes of child migrant-mendicant, whether on inceptive or intermediate journeys, the railway serves as a unifying filament for the entire nation. Whenever I wish, whenever a breeze of freedom (as they call it) touches me (and what is
freedom, here?), they say, I can leave: watch me. They ride its length and breadth, thus delimiting its very shape with the circulation of their bodies, manifesting and performing its existence with their pilgrimages and journeys. And if the postcolonial runaways mark the shape of the nation with their rail journeys, in turn and inversely they also mark their own narratives with the shape of the nation. The cartography of their own longings is circumscribed by it just as the cartography of the nation is circumscribed by them.

Not, of course, a new notion, all of this. On the idea of rail as nation, the colonial-era Indian statesman Madhav Rao wrote in 1885:

> What a glorious change the railway has made in old and long-neglected India!...In passing from the banks of the Tambrapurny to those of the Ganges, what varied scenes, what successive nationalities and languages flit across the view! Tamil, Telugu, Canarese, Marathi, Guzerati, Hindustani, Bengali—populations which had been isolated for unmeasured ages, now easily mingle in civilized confusion. In my varied long journeys it has repeatedly struck me that if India is to become a homogeneous nation, and is ever to achieve solidarity, it must be by means of the railways as a means of transport.

(As quoted in Kerr 2007: 4-5)

Recall Javed’s retrospective assessment, 125 years after Rao’s journey, of his arrival in Delhi: “I saw how different everything was, what my nation is like.”

If railways are at least in part spaces of the state (just as they were once a space of empire and just as they are simultaneously a part of global systems), then a question of citizenship arises. Citizenship entails subjection, of course, but it also includes new elements of membership and rights less present, or differently articulated, under colonial administration (and rights that the interaction of globalization with sovereignty and capital is changing) (see
Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). If railway space is now an interstitial point of contact between solo children and the state, what is the status in that encounter of the subject within the polity? I have said that this railway space is a site of governance and governmentality and their resistances; if this is the case then the state is primary among the assemblages doing the governing, and the children are thus subjects of the state in particular in this domain. They are governed in it. While they mount, as I have suggested, a substantial resistance, they also acknowledge it as the power operant in their living space, and, as is the case with all hegemonies, they are on the broadest level compliant. Even evasion suggests acknowledgement.

Subjects, then, yes. Indeed the children are more subjects of and to the state here than they were in the village. But citizens? This is a more difficult question. In the village the children who became runaways were perhaps more citizens than they are in the railway space, where they become, as I offer here, subjects of a different sort of rule, discipline and governance. From the perspective of the state, they should and cannot be seen as citizens yet, at their age, anyway, even if they are people who will eventually become citizens through some process of passage. In its schizoid consciousness, they are simultaneously stains of shame, to be purged, and targets for a terrible sort of surrogacy, to be either coddled or corrected (see Cunningham 1991, Sen 2005, Foucault 2004, Ariès 1965).

The children certainly play with the notion of their potential (and unrealized) citizenship. In their own view they clearly have some claim and stake in the political idea called “India” and they exercise its possibilities and push its limits. The stories of many permanent platform kids emerged, during my time in Delhi, in which running away was presented as an effort to obtain social services and benefits not available in the village, or if not, to enhance social status, earnings, and opportunity until the point that parents would accept a transgressive child back into
the home. This amounts to an insistent demand placed upon the state, if not for recognition then for rights, and it raises an interesting question: are railway children, to subvert Ong’s (1999) formulation a little bit, flexible non-citizens? Does situating one’s self in railway space, in others’ transi(en)t zones, afford a way for non-citizens to exercise flexibility and fluidity in their navigations of power (and in their non-citizenship)? To optimize the benefits they might reap and the possibilities they might realize, and minimize constraints, depending on the circumstance and desire of the moment? To make the most out of invisibility and null status, to exploit all of its possibilities?

Back to Petu.

Petu’s case, thanks to Khushboo, is being heard in the Supreme Court of India. It hardly needs to be said that Petu is being presented in the transactions of the case as an emblematic token of a type, a synecdochic or metonymic iconic index for all children in his former situation. His parents still have not been located; in the roll sheets the only geographic information for him is listed as “Bihar.” All of his “friends” from the station cannot be found: such is their fear of retribution and sanction, of imputation for a death embarrassing and bothersome to the officials.

The Petition being presented before the court for Petu’s case points to a number of legal discrepancies. First, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act of 2000 theoretically illegalizes the incarceration of “neglected” and “delinquent” children into conventional prisons or detention centers (though their detention in “remand homes” remains unchallenged). The act simultaneously stipulates that children in “need of care and protection” are required to be presented before the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), and a child in “conflict with law” is produced before the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB). At the same time, The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 illegalizes the presence of self-employed
children working at railway platforms. This makes “railway children” “delinquents” or “criminals” and nulls the requirement to provide “care and protection.” Under the Indian Railway Act of 1989, further, children traveling on trains with no tickets can be charged as “delinquents.” And finally, under the still-active Indian Penal Code of 1860, a seven-year-old can be charged as an adult, and a twelve-year-old, when in conflict with the law, is always an adult.

What all this does, in effect (in a kind of legal impossibility not unlike the one Beth Povinelli presents in *The Cunning of Recognition* (2002)) is guarantee that the only manner by which railway children can receive any benefit or recognition from the law (national and colonial alike) is to interact with the very structures that deny and forbid their existence. The law thus cancels itself out. It becomes nearly impossible for a railway child to gain access to citizenship and legal benefits: the illegality and criminality of her existence makes it very difficult to access the very pathway to a machinery of the law that they are required to appear before in order to exist. When their fear of such structures is entered into the equation, the probability that such children will be given any form of due process becomes practically nil. The structure of the law as applied to such children contains so many obstacles to its real application, and so many contradictions, that it emerges neutered.

Legal voice for solo children is thus attainable only by virtue of contact with the very structures that refuse to acknowledge them. Recognition under the law is required to provide citizens’ rights to children, but law proscribes their presence in this place. The law puts railway children, then, in an impossible situation: it will protect the subjects whose existence it will not recognize. It will require their presence in contexts where their presence is not permitted. Thus it negates its own provisions.
The Supreme Court Petition is a demand for a more proper recognition, under the law, of children in railway space, for acknowledgement of their presence as a starting point for intervention.

Recognition has its perils, of course. It licenses a more sweeping criminal categorization of all such children, and allows, in some readings, for a crackdown more thorough than any before. After all, if the law is to recognize children in such situations, urban improvers might say, then at least we will be newly able to cleanse the space, and at last with legal license. If the state recognizes such children, the recognition it bestows will certainly be deployed in the service of greater control, both of the children and the aesthetics of space. Once recognized, they will hold no longer (or will hold even less fully) the right to exist. Railway children’s lives thrive in the murky in-between space between visibility and recognition. They circulate as they do in part because of the tension between their tacit acceptance and their administrative non-existence. But the best scenario, such planners and political aesthetes usually suggest, is to leave them unrecognized. To grant them legal recognition means acknowledging failures of the state and society better unmentioned, and mandating resources for new services and entitlements better allocated to outposts in Kashmir or Olympic bids or MMRCA combat jets. Let the kids scavenge the trash (say the architects of Delhi-the-Modern-Asian-City): giving them rights and making them citizens enshrines in law a repulsive landscape incommensurate with the one India is forcefully projecting, and requires us to do something about them (which is in turn usually addressed simply by deportation to avoid the new injunctions).

The notion of parentless children aboard trains as an embodiment of illegality or criminality, and thus of something less than full citizens or members of society, or justifying their treatment as less than full rights-bearing citizens, is of course nothing new; long have solo
children on the rails been associated with outlaws, brigands, and bandits. It is perhaps with the idea of such children as delinquents or criminals that society and the state (national and colonial alike) is most comfortable (see Radhakrishna 2001, Anderson 2004, Sen 2005; and Foucault 1995, and 2004 on institutional productions of criminality). If such children are in any sense citizens, it is as criminals that their citizenship is rendered relevant: a citizenship of deviant externality to state norms that nonetheless forms an intimate relationship with the state. A citizenship defined by relationships to what is disallowed, by contrast to citizenships of propriety and patriotism, but nonetheless a relationship of fosterage and surrogacy by the state, with a telos that brings such subjects back into spaces of the state: corrective institutions of discipline.

Long, indeed, has the state interpreted and recognized children on trains through the lens of criminality. Almost all gangs of “railway thieves,” wrote Rai Bahadur M. Pauparao Naidu in his History of Railway Thieves, with Illustrations and Hints on Detection, in 1915, contained numbers of boys, and further numerous of their adult members were either kidnapped or recruited as children (70). In the ranks of the Bhamptas, children kept guard and provided warning signals to adult members; sometimes children were employed as bluffs to allow the real robbers to escape. Among the Barwars, however, the boys would “usually do the actual thieving.” A captive child was usually "pitied by the other passengers or bystanders owing to his tender age, and upon their interference [would be] let off with a slap or two" (33); the Koravars, he wrote, guessed that the "natural softness of the Indians will generally prevail, making them reluctant" to render to the authorities a “juvenile offender” (33). The boys were sworn to protect their superiors, and never revealed "their places of abode or the names of [their] parents” (33).10

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10 As quoted in Vinay Lal’s introduction to the 1995 reprint.
Thus even a century ago solo and parentless children on trains were associated with criminality and with essentialized cultural traits.

So it is now, and so it was with Petu; the Supreme Court Petition, in its review of relevant laws, makes it clear that the state and widely-circulating popular ideologies still imagine railway children primarily as delinquents out of place engaged primarily in a wrongdoing that violates rules for the proper and modern use of space. A criminal citizenship is what the law is likely to accord to railway children if it accords them anything at all.

Coda:

Death at (a) Capital’s Margins

As we come to the corpse, Arshad looks away in something like shock, and perhaps disgust.

“It happens,” he says, “two or three times a month; not to everyday kids, but to this type of kid.”

“Why?” I ask. “Just from the danger of it?”

“No,” he says, “it’s from scavenging bottles.”


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