Passengers

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It is almost impossible live in Japan, particularly in an urban area, without regularly becoming a passenger on subways or commuter trains. It is just a part of life, so ubiquitous that few people ever give a second thought to being compressed into metal boxes with hundreds of strangers twice a day.

The systems for moving so many thousands of people to and from work every day function with a clock-like precision. The trains are fast, on time, and almost antiseptically clean. They are safe enough that mothers can deposit armies of primary school students into their care every morning with absolute confidence. The slashed upholstery, graffiti, and random violence we associate with subways in the U.S. is virtually unknown. In the stations, commuters politely form lines at the exact spot that an incoming train’s doors will open. These trains and subways are one of the many ordered systems that serve to create and maintain Japan’s ordered society.

It is often said that the Japanese have had to create mental privacy to compensate for their lack of physical space. With 125 million people living in an area the size of California, there is little room for conflict. Thus, the ability to conceal oneself behind a psychic veil is often an essential part of living and being happy in Japan. This can make the Japanese seem distant to outsiders, and has perhaps contributed to an unemotional, even mechanical stereotype. But this veil, which helps preserve the social order and makes it possible for so many people to
live peacefully in a tiny area, only conceals feeling. It does not eradicate it. And sometimes, during a monotonous train ride, fatigue and the lull of anonymity can make the veil slip. These faceless undramatic moments, when what is hidden emerges, are what attracted me to photograph fellow passengers on my way to and from work each day.

During the four years I was in Japan, photographing on the trains never ceased to interest me. Perhaps it was the fact that I grew up in a rural area, and subways seemed to me exotic and otherworldly. But once that initial fascination wore off, I continued to be amazed at how much of life in Japan passes through the hissing doors of a commuter train in a day. Every level of Japanese society could be found in the tunnels, all bound by nothing but the desire to be somewhere else.

These pictures in this essay were, for the most part, taken in the Osaka area. In selecting the individual photographs I sought to represent a wide range of people and relationships. A subway can be a museum of emotion. In it pass moments of intimacy and of isolation, the fragments that make up lives. I photograph these moments because I believe that somehow they can tell us something. I believe they can be like navigational points telling how close we are, and ultimately, how far away from each other we also are.
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Passengers
Preventive police action, considered sufficient for preventing robberies, has no way of distinguishing between criminals and citizens.

— Editorial criticizing police prejudice in randomly searching bus passengers. (Jornal do Brasil 9 May 1982)

Introduction

Rio de Janeiro has always had an uneasy relationship with its hinterlands. Ever since freed slaves first built favelas with improvised materials atop Morro da Providência hill overlooking the city in the late nineteenth century, it has never been clear what the relationship between the "Wonderful City," as Rio de Janeiro is affectionately known, and its surrounding slums ought to be. On the one hand, elites and reformers have historically seen the slums as a place of moral degeneracy. Municipal leaders have initiated a variety of "civilizing" projects aimed at "bringing in" this periphery, and these have ranged over the years from vaccination and hygiene programs to favela urbanization programs, and more recently, to aggressive security campaigns. On the other hand, it is from the slums that much of Rio de Janeiro's allure originates: Samba, Carnaval, soccer players who learned to play in the streets, the mulata. In 1980, this metropolis of five million had almost a million of its citizens living in one of the 500 or so favelas scattered throughout the urban landscape (Caval-