

The Crowd and Citylife: Materiality, Negotiation, and Inclusivity at Tokyo's Train Stations

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Abstract

In the history of urban thought, density has been closely indexed to the idea of citylife. Drawing on commuters' experiences and perception of crowds in and around Tokyo's Shinjuku Station, this article offers an ethnographic perspective on the relationship between urban crowds and life in the city. We advance understandings of the relations between the crowd and citylife through three categories of 'crowd relations' – *materiality*, *negotiation*, and *inclusivity* – to argue that the multiplicity of meanings which accrue to people's encounters with crowds refuses any *a priori* definitions of optimum levels of urban density. Rather, the crowd relations gathered here are evocations of citylife that take us beyond the tendency to represent the crowd as a particular kind of problem, be it alienation, exhaustion, or a threshold for 'good' and 'bad' densities. The portraits of commuter crowds presented capture the various entanglements between human and non-human, embodiment and mobility, and multicultural and the civic, through which citylife emerges as a mode of being with oneself and others.

Keywords: Crowds, Citylife, Density, Transport, Tokyo.

Introduction

“So, what’s your strategy for boarding the rush hour train?”, we asked Ahmya¹. Ahmya, a local government officer in Tokyo, in her mid-30s, takes the train to and from Shinjuku Station every working day. She smiled. The first thing you need to do, she advised, as a train comes in, is to become part of the crowd. Don’t push your way to the front, because then it just becomes a fight. Accept that as you board you will get nudged around, even kicked.

Then, she went on, once you are in the carriage, you must get away from the doors. Push your way inside and find a handrail to hold onto, otherwise with each station stop you will get caught up in the shoving and shuffling on and off the train. But don’t be too far from a door, and try to be within a few steps of a door that will open near the station stairs, so that there will be less of a fight from the platform after you disembark. Watch out for sudden speed changes or quick stops, because people will rock from side to side and then you need to not fight back but move with the crowd. Movement is what keeps you steady, she insisted. You can’t stay fixed to the spot if you want to keep your balance.

If all of this has become routine for Ahmya, none of it is easy. “I feel apprehensive and sometimes scared”, she said, anxious that “I can’t escape”. In response, she has resolved not to fight too much, but not to be passive either. What works is moving with the crowd, giving way – but not too much.

¹ Name changed at request of the interviewee.

In the history of urban thought, there has been a tendency for scholars, policymakers, and planners to define 'good' and 'bad' levels of density *in advance*, i.e. by defining the parameters or points at which density spills over from something that enlivens citylife, to something that suffocates it (whether socially, economically or environmentally). This threshold of good density/good citylife to bad density/bad citylife, is typically defined without recourse to the *lived densities* in the city, i.e. to the experience and perception of densities by different groups in place or on the move.

We examine the lived experienced of high densities in one particular site in Tokyo. Our aim is both to reveal the range of experiences and perceptions that become attached to high densities in a busy transport hub, and to reflect on how these stories provide insight into the nature of *citylife*. We ask: how might we gain an understanding of citylife from the variegated experiences and perceptions of a crowded transport hub? Shifting from normative understandings of density to a focus on its experiential worlds allows us to apprehend the meanings and significances of densities of urbanites themselves, and as a result we are better placed to understand how density matters, and in what ways to different people, in the making of urbanism. This widens the scope both of the issues that we might consider pertaining to everyday densities, from gender and race to forms of mobility for different groups, as well as what might be done to enhance, support or change it.

We advance understanding of the relations between crowds and citylife in urban studies by identifying three inter-related orders of 'crowd relations' that animated people's experiences and perceptions of density: *materiality*, *negotiation*, and *inclusivity*. By 'materiality', we have in mind the capacities and porosities emergent in the human and non-

human interactions of the station and carriages, and the micro-adjustments, negotiations and improvisations that result. 'Negotiation' refers to the practice of navigating commuter space, including the small pressures, flows, rhythms, obstacles, alterations, sensorial experiences, bodily comportment, and harassments – especially gendered harassment – that propel and differentiate the commuting crowd. 'Inclusivity' follows on, and refers to the lines of cultural power that separate out along all kinds of lines, from race to depictions of the 'weird' and unacceptable.

The 'crowd' is an expression of high-density urbanism that can take multiple forms, and in some histories of thought, especially in urban sociology and psychology, it is understood less through external criteria and more through the narrative crowd participants themselves bring to it, and this is the approach we advocate here (see Borch, 2011; Canetti, 1981 [1961]). Citylife here is not only a shared collective idea, although it is shaped by historically specific cultural norms as we'll see. Nor is it just the practices that go on in midst the dense relations of place, or the materialities and structures that compose them. Instead, citylife emerges relationally across all of these, and in dialogue with people's own experiences and lifeworlds.

Rather than begin with formulations of what constitutes optimum or good crowds, typically defined in relation to particular normative perceptions, we build our arguments from the micro-politics often not apparent in such approaches. Our focus and contribution lies with the perception and experience of the compressed passenger-body as a basis for understanding the urban crowd as a signature of citylife. We argue that a focus on the experiential dimension of crowds can disclose a politics of the crowd. The crowd is a practical working through of everyday social differentiation of issues of body, gender, race, and

anxieties around cultural difference (and see Wilson, 2011; Ocejo and Tonnelat 2014; Qamhaieh and Chakravarty 2017). The narratives of commuting that we examine reveal and everyday politics of inclusion through which citylife is reproduced.

Shinjuku Station is the world's busiest train hub, and the city's largest and densest. The area in which the station is based, Shinjuku, has been a hub both as a train station and as a site bringing together different cultures, forms of urban life, and political change. It is an historically multicultural area where migrants from across Asia – Taiwan, Korea, China – and further afield, have concentrated. Historically predominantly middle class, it has also been an economically mixed part of Tokyo. The area was developed in the mid-1920s, following the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 that damaged other parts of the city. In the inter-war years, the terminal emerged as an icon of urban modernity in Japan, as a vortex of metropolitan life, often emblemized in the swirling crowds that gathered there (Freedman, 2011).

Through the early decades of the 20th century, trains became so thoroughly enmeshed with urban living in Japan that the major train stations, and the social and economic activities they impelled, became a metaphor for the modernising city, and were closely woven into what it meant to live in the city (*ibid*). Shinjuku Station accrued several of the themes that began to describe Japanese urban modernity – technologies of mobility, new venues for commercial and entertainment activities, and the advance of Japanese capitalism.

At the same time, it became an embodiment of Japan's post-war economic growth and a conduit for workers commuting from domesticated suburbs to the centre. Meanwhile, especially in the 1960s, the area emerged as key sites of political protest, especially student-

led movements, and became associated with romance, illicit trysts, youth cultures, and as a zone of free expression (Eckersall, 2011). This combination of activities fashioned Shinjuku Station and its environs as a zone where disparate energies converged. The area continued to urbanise, including through numerous high-rise corporate offices to the west, and a range of leisure and shopping venues to the east, adding to the traffic of commuters (Japan Quarterly, 1974).

The station, then, has been a site of staging and performing citylife variously expressed socially, culturally, economically and politically. That multiplicity continues today. The crowd at Shinjuku Station is always in flux and people pass through it for all kinds of reasons: getting to and from work, meeting friends, making an interview or appointment, returning from restaurants or bars, and so on. School kids in the late afternoon give way to workers in the evening, while later a night-time crowd takes their place. Some areas take on atmospheres of quickening movement, while others create points of waiting and quiet, sociality, consumption and rest. The changing soundscape - of footsteps, luggage wheels, the occasional outburst of laughter, steady announcements, and more - drift in and out of sensorial fields.

This paper is based on 32 interviews with people living in Tokyo, conducted between July and August 2019, exploring how people experienced and perceived the crowd both in the station and on trains. Our respondents comprised 12 women and 20 men, between the ages of 19 and 74, who have various degrees of engagement with Shinjuku Station. Some used it regularly in the past, some frequent it now, others have only a passing familiarity with the area, and others still work as rail staff or in stores inside the train station. Interviews were in Japanese, English, Hindi, or Bangla. The interviews in Japanese were conducted with the help

of two student research assistants who are native speakers and proficient in English. In addition to identifying respondents across social structures such as class, gender, race, ability, and so on, interviewees were selected bearing in mind demographic trends and social characteristics peculiar to Tokyo and urban Japan more widely: for example, 'freeters', 'salarymen', single people, the elderly, and migrants from other parts of Japan and overseas.

Density, the crowd and citylife

In his encyclopaedic survey of the history of 'the crowd' – its multiple forms, expressions, temporalities, and the changing cultural power attached to it – Elias Canetti (1981 [1960]) examines the crowd as an historical force, changing and moving depending on its social and political aspirations. Urbanisation, as Canetti shows, led to the proliferation of new crowds as people were brought together through distinct social, economic, and political activities. The crowd became a signature of urbanisation: the 'slum', the 'ghetto', the busy street or public square, the mass, the rabble, the protest, and more (and see Sudjic, 2017; McClelland, 1989).

The crowd is a particular expression of high density in the city. If density has been historically linked to the realm of modernist urban governance and regulation, the 'crowd' is often a less controlled phenomena, more likely to carry qualities of improvisation and elasticity.² Following Christian Borch (2010) and John McClelland's (1989) investigations of the idea of the crowd, we do not seek to define the crowd or identify its ontological status, but instead to 'populate' it as an experiential phenomena. We come to know the crowd through how it is seen and instantiated in the lives of the people we interview. The crowd in protest is distinct

² For an excellent discussion of the history of 'crowding studies', and the relations between 'density' and 'crowds', see Roskamm (2017).

from that at say a festival or a concert. Historical analyses of rioting crowds in Tokyo between 1905-1918 – often dubbed a period of popular violence – identified the crowd as remarkably self-aware in its choice of targets and sites, patterns of internal organization, and expression of ideas (Gordon, 1988). The crowd that is formed in transit at stations and on trains is a looser formation, with less of a sense of purpose or identity beyond the experience of journeying. Our approach means that there is no neat way of conceptually separating out density and the crowd. Whether it is density or crowds, our approach is to approach them not through number, a priori definition, or technical categorisation (eg for optimisation), but as experiences of urban compression. We use ‘crowd’ rather than ‘density’ because of the historical semantic openness of the crowd figure as compared to the more classically demarcated and bureaucratic idea of density.

The historic connections between the crowd and citylife have emerged as a part of the wider and recurring encounter between density and the city. Density has always been closely indexed to the idea of citylife, from historical imperatives to control and tame it to contemporary celebrations of what it might achieve (McClelland, 1989; Glaeser, 2012). We see this in histories of urban thought, including research, policy and practice, from densities that are valued for enabling socially vibrant, mixed neighbourhoods and city spaces, or low-carbon ecologies. We see it too in depictions of densities that are devalued for exacerbating human ‘character flaws’, damaging bodies, or preventing life from just going on through congestion and blockage. And we see it in the history of the idea of the crowd as it has been variously depicted, for example as ‘unruly’ mob, or as enlivening collective, or as estrangement and alienation (Amin, 2012; Merrifield, 2013; Sudjic, 2013).

For Jane Jacobs, whose influential *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (2000 [1961]) has armed generations of pro-density urbanists with ammunition through which to take on sprawl and social homogeneity, density was indispensably linked to citylife. For Jacobs, to enable citylife to 'flourish', density had to be not too high, and not too low. She argued in favour of 'in-between densities', which she described as "the point at which lively diversity and public life can arise" (2000 [1961]): 223). Citylife here emerges through an imagination of dense proximities that enable encounters across difference. The crowd becomes a threshold that marks the point at which citylife is threatened. The claim is that as sites become too compressed, at whatever culturally and locally determined point that is, citylife can no longer flourish, becomes suffocated, loses its vitality.

This idea of dense, diverse in-between urbanisms as central to good citylife is now more pervasive and popular than ever (Sim, 2019). In *Happy City* (2013), Charles Montgomery argues that suburban sprawl in the United States has made people less happy. Like Jacobs, Montgomery is cautious of 'hyperdensity' – which we might think of here as a form of crowding - as too much noise, jostling, and sensorial impositions, not enough space and solitude.

For citylife, the claim so often made is that density is good and crowding is bad. Good citylife, argues Montgomery, is enabled by the stimulating serendipitous encounter enabled by dense environments – but only so long as it doesn't overwhelm. It is important to note that these are often political claims. They carry with them imaginations and demarcations of what counts as a good encounter, what is deemed to be overwhelming and from whose perspective, and tend to pay little attention to the power relations – gender, race, ethnicity,

sexuality, disability, and more – that are folded into perceptions of good citylife. If density is portrayed as vital not just to urban planning, the climate crisis, and economic growth, but to citylife itself, it is no surprise that it has become so pervasive in discussions of the future of cities across the global North-South divide (Perez, 2020).

In the face of a general global decrease in urban density (Angel, *et al*, 2018), densification and compactness are often positioned as vital for social cohesion, economic innovation, carbon reduction (eg Power, 2016; Florida, 2014). As Jamie Peck (2015) argues in his critique of economist Ed Glaeser's (2012) influential arguments for dense living, some density proponents critique state subsidy and redistribution, argue for pro-market urbanism, and offer an explicit acceptance of poverty. Urbanists are increasingly developing new insights into the politics of urban density based on how it is produced and experienced, from planning, architecture, and changing patterns of suburbanization, to ideologies of densification, environmental claim-making, and their inflections with class, race and gender (eg Dovey and Pafka, 2016; Keil, 2018; McFarlane, 2016; Perez, 2020; Simone, 2018; Wachsmuth *et al*, 2016).

We are inspired, for example, by scholarship that looks to understand the crowd from the 'inside', from the relations, perceptions, activities and experiences of crowd participants themselves rather than through pre-given thresholds of good/bad crowds and their implications for good/bad citylife. Writing about Mumbai, for instance, Vyjayanthi Rao (2007, 2015) argues that the high densities we often see across urban Asia demand constant forms of 'adjustment,' where adjustment figures as negotiation across all kinds of urban domains, from energy or water to making room on overcrowded trains. The images associated with the

Mumbai overcrowded train - people hanging from carriages, frantic shoving on and off packed commuter 'locals', and the compressed squeezed together shuffling through stations – are quintessential to the idea of urban navigation and experience as adjustment.

As Rao (2007: 231) points out, the crowd of the Mumbai train commute has been both vilified as an aggressive 'mob' and romanticised a space of togetherness, but is in practice "a complex intermingling of otherwise disparate universes," where office-mates seek each other out, conversations ebb and flow, micro-social worlds are negotiated, and the day goes on. In the proximities of dense encounters, everyday urban life is organised in the relations between materials, infrastructures, and individual subjects, and "the city makes itself felt through the forms of the crowd...where extremely fine-tuned and fast-paced calibrations are taking place in the production of everyday urban life" (*ibid.* 247; and see also Simone, 2018). For Jonathan Anjaria (2016), writing about street densities in Mumbai, this includes all kinds of intersecting temporalities: the repertoire of tea and newspaper sellers, fruit and *paan* vendors, vegetable sellers pushing carts, mobile barbers, stalls fixing shoes or cooking food, and more.

We build on this work by investigating the different relations that people attach to the crowd and how those relations offer insight into how we understand citylife, rather than argue that this or that level of density or crowding is 'good' or 'bad' for citylife. In distinction to Rao, we focus in on the descriptions and explanations commuters themselves give of dense proximities, and examine the tensions and materialities that are compose experiences and perceptions of the station crowd.

There is now a substantial body of scholarship that has rescued commuting from being understood solely as an isolating and enervating urban experience, to capture the wide array of social meanings that accrue to public transport in cities (Shaw and Sidaway, 2011; Hansen 2017; Bissell 2018; Chowdhury 2019). Alongside this cluster of writings that has recuperated the complex social subjectivities entailed in shared movement through urban space, anthropologies of traffic in the non-west have interpreted road congestion as narratives of paralysis and relief in Jakarta (Lee 2015), production of everyday moralities in the navigation of traffic in Istanbul (Nuhra 2020), the bottleneck as a metonym for shrinking opportunities of urban life in Dakar (Melly 2017), the links between governance of traffic snarls and deepening urban divides in Beirut (Monroe 2016), and the politics underpinning infrastructural projects to decongest roads in Bangalore (Gopakumar 2013). In the analyses it offers of the micropolitics of commuter crowds in Tokyo, this article shifts emphasis from vehicular congestion to compression of commuters in shared transport and concerns itself as much with the infrastructural body of the train carriage and rail station as the passenger-body. Moreover, while studies of urban traffic are concerned with compression in transit zones as a social phenomenon, they seldom relate their discussion of urban congestion to the everyday politics of density, which has been a defining feature of citylife. Our article focusses on the compressed passenger-body – as an individual and a collective formation – as a conduit for theorizations of urban density and the character of citylife.

What, then, of 'citylife'? For Steve Pile (2005), citylife can be read as a shared collective idea, a kind of urban persona that values certain forms of sociability over others. In the 1980s, for instance, a plethora of textual and visual representations saw the re-scripting of Tokyo's image from a drab, polluted city to the cool capital of consumer urbanism (Waley, 2006). If

these are stories of citylife writ large, we can think too of citylife writ small. We might follow Massey (2005), to think of citylife as a kind of ‘throwntogetherness’ – a density of relations, or a coming together of ‘sheer life’ as Kishik (2015) has put it. Others call upon us to see how citylife signifies different meanings in the mundane, everyday realism of different parts of the urban world. Sassen (2010), for instance, argues that if a bus shelter in Western cities might have a purely utilitarian function, in a Chinese city it may be a site where citylife takes place through particular kinds of transitory sociability.

The *sakariba* of Japan, literally ‘a place where many people come together’ for entertainment, food, and drinks has, been historically linked to the experience of crowded city living (Cybriwsky, 2011). Major train stations in Tokyo like Shinjuku not only facilitated the development of *sakaribas* in their vicinity but also function like *sakaribas* themselves (Traganou 2003), in the sheer volume of people who pass through them and the array of leisure and commercial activities that they assemble. Urban commentators in Tokyo have linked the very definition of what it means to live in a big city to the sociability of *sakaribas* (Linhart, 1998). If some urbanists identify crowding as detrimental to a happy city, popular reactions to the institution of *sakariba* capture the distinctly urban pleasures generated by the bustling sociability of crowds. At the same time, the literature on Tokyo itself has not systematically examined how urbanites themselves perceive and experience the train station crowd, and the impacts on citylife.

In examining the variegated relations that bind the crowd to citylife, we work with all of these registers of citylife: as urban persona and norms, as the intensity of togetherness in place, and as a mundane everyday routine. The crowd relations we describe are evocations of

citylife that take us beyond a view of the crowd as a particular kind of problem – be it fear, anxiety and alienation associated with Georg Simmel’s early writing on the crowd (Borch, 2010), or as a number that might be optimised – to one focussed on the shared and differentiated experience of life in the city. This matters, not because normative claims about crowds aren’t themselves valid – that is not our argument – but because, as Christian Borch (2012) avers in *The Politics of Crowds*, crowds are a vital part of social life, often with their own collective and individual behaviours and performances, routines and surprises, singularities and distinctions. Not only are crowds difficult to discern a priori, defining crowds externally is also a political task – hence, as Borch argues, the long history of attaching political valances to different crowd descriptors, such as ‘mob’, ‘mass’, ‘rabble’, ‘audience’, ‘gang’, ‘horde’, and so on (and see too McClelland, 1989). A focus on the experiential realm of the crowd opens up a potentially different politics, through which we can identify concerns and issues emerging in ways that we might not always otherwise expect, such as around practices and exclusions linked to urban multiculturalism, gendered power, and other forms of prejudice or differentiated mobility.

Crowd relations I: Materiality

The first set of concerns are the *relations between the crowd and materiality*. At Shinjuku Station, a recurring theme from the interviews was the confusing nature of the space. The building has five floors, connecting underground and over, twenty tracks and multiple entrances and exits. It does not cover a particularly large horizontal space, but instead has to be read three-dimensionally. Even seasoned travellers can find it difficult to navigate the multiple floors, corridors and escalators that weave tightly around the building, pivoting and

channelling flows of people to different train lines. For one man in his 70s, the station is “a maze”; for another a “labyrinth”.

There are, several respondents despaired, too many train companies, lines, and platforms, and the routes to get from one to another amongst the constant flows and movements of the station crowd are unclear. One woman summed up the problem of the station as the combination of “the number of people and the organisation of the station...I know which way to go, but still I have problems!”. A staff member at a nearby Tourist Information centre remarked that multiple floors and confusing signage means she is constantly fielding directions to lost tourists.

And yet, Shinjuku Station manages to coordinate over 3.5 million passengers per day. Michael Fisch (2018) has described the carefully crafted timetable of the Tokyo train network especially during the morning rush hour, when a delay of even five seconds at each station on the Yamanote line can lead to massive overcrowding on platforms. The station is constantly busy, surrounded as it is by intersecting shops, malls, restaurants, cafes and bars, cinemas, as well as several large state and metropolitan government buildings. Something in the design, then, is clearly working, and yet largely – with a few exceptions – this did not come up in the interviews. Perhaps passengers tend to see the station in the same way that urbanites so often relate to infrastructure: that in a largely reliable well-run system, infrastructures can become taken for granted, and small frustrations can become amplified (Marvin and Graham, 2001; Leigh Star, 1999).

An important dimension in how the crowd relates to materiality in and around Shinjuku has to do with *porosity*. Porosity is not a characteristic of flow itself, but of absorption. In urban thought, it is most readily associated with Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis's 1928 essay on Naples, in which they drew attention to the capacity of the city to absorb multiple activities at once, even in the same site as places were put to work for different domestic, social or economic uses (Benjamin and Lacis (2009 [1928])). Porosity becomes a coordinating device in the station design, where the numerous entrances and exits at regular intervals and the combination of narrow corridors and wider expanses allows crowds to flow, rest, inhabit, pause, speed up, meet, eat, drink and shop.

Walk the station perimeter, and you see this porosity in the socioeconomic diversity that is variously at rest and in movement. There is the constant sound of luggage wheels, steady traffic on the wide and busy roads, occasional rumbles of the trains below ground, and large groups stood head down, looking at their phones while waiting for the lights to change. There are pockets of homeless people, mainly older men, in makeshift cardboard structures. Nearby you might find a charity collecting for dogs, then a Big Issue seller, then volunteers distributing fliers for a Christian group promoting good parenting, then a group with leaflets and a megaphone campaigning for LGBT rights, next to a small queue around a florist.

The malls attached to Shinjuku Station – which have a significantly lower temperature than the station during the summer – are used by commuters and train staff as a zone of relief from the hyperactivity and heat of the station area proper. Then there is the plethora of *things* that people negotiate as they walk around the station - rows of lockers shunted flat against walls so that they don't obstruct people, bikes stacked for hire, bins and signs, queues of

people outside popular cafés, ‘Evacuation Maps’ detailing fireproof buildings and assembly points, and so on. The object worlds inside the train carriages too, interact with commuter experiences to differently absorb densities on-the-move. While some women said they prefer women-only carriages during rush hour to avert the pervasive problem of sexual harassment on trains (a theme we return to below), several others said that they actively avoid carriages reserved for women because they feel overwhelmed by perfume, and frustrated at being stepped on by pointy heels in congested spaces. Women also conveyed a sense that unwanted contact on trains increases after winter, when women stop wearing thick coats that would shield them from intrusive touch during the colder months. Commuters absorb and shape the different material capacities of the train carriage and station area generated by the dense body–technology assemblages of transit life in the city.

The materiality of porosity has its own history, including in the management of the trains. In the 1920s, when the traffic of people in Shinjuku grew exponentially, transport planners in Tokyo sought to handle the growing crowd of commuters by narrowing the time margins between trains. Then, in the 1950s, which saw a further influx of people to Tokyo in pursuit of employment, new strategies had to be adopted. A train technology was developed that minimized vibration and jolts so that the noise and atmosphere of high-density mass transit could be calmed. The manual ticketing system – which caused a massive bottleneck of commuters during rush-hours – was automated in the late 1980s, after the Japanese National Railways was privatized (Fisch, 2018).

The materialities of stations and train technology have been harnessed to absorb and lubricate the movement of crowds through the transit system, enhancing porosity. These

different non-human configurations inform the experience of urban compression, and feed into – as we go on to show - how people perceive, form expectations of, and deal with this domain of citylife. Urban architectural historians have shown the links between shifting mythologies of the commuter crowd – for example, from the mass of passengers being read by transport planners as uncontrollable nature to being acknowledged as an urban public – and changes in the design and material arrangements of major transport hubs in cities (Raynsford 1996). These connections between the material and the social are important to our larger argument here about how urban scholars might conceive and research densities and crowds, as others – Vyjayanthi Roa (2007, 2015) and AbdouMaliq Simone (2018), for instance – have argued. It is in the relational co-constitutions of people and things that the adjustments, negotiations and improvisations of citylife are in part worked out. In what follows, we develop these connections by setting forth the micropolitics of negotiation and inclusion through which urban density – in the form of the commuter crowd – emerges as a stake for diverse urban actors in the mundane routines of navigating citylife.

Crowd relations II: Negotiation

A central set of experiences and perceptions connected to high density at Shinjuku emerge through *negotiating the crowd* itself, and here the materiality matters too. A number of intersecting concerns were raised: having to move in and around people and things, the moments of pressure onto the body and into the senses – including harassment – occasions of aggression or intimidation, and ways of tuning out.

As one fruit seller near the station put it, people are constantly finding ways of moving into, dealing with, avoiding or withdrawing from concentrations of “unknown people”. Within the

station, there is a geography of flow and rhythm associated with the arrival and departure of trains, which can mean flows meet, intensity builds, and negotiation becomes more challenging. Most people have either learned their route or are visibly concentrating on the next point they need to get to. As they walk, they make frequent and slight changes in speed or direction, a lift of a shoulder to indicate a shift in movement or to create an extra inch of space needed to avoid someone.

Most respondents felt that negotiating the crowd is a source of frequent, if minor, irritations. One woman in her 30s said she struggled to avoid “people moving in different directions”, adding: “I get frustrated...I can’t go straight and keep changing direction”. Another woman remarked: “If I’m in a hurry and people are moving slowly and I have to walk in the same pace. If I can I zigzag and try to run”.

Travellers repeatedly find themselves in zones of adjustment where they must make small shifts and alterations. For example, one man, who has Asperger’s Syndrome, described the sound of the crowd as overwhelming: “My auditory sense is a little sensitive so the crowd’s auditory information is too strong for me. I hear more volumes and it’s very loud...”. He went on to distinguish between a ‘crowd’ as a conglomeration of diverse cultures, and a ‘mob’ that can be loud and physical, with “shoulders and shoulders crushing”.

Others talked about how the crowd in the station has changed for them as they’ve got older. One, an office worker in her 30s, complained that the more people use smart phones, the less attention they pay: “People do not see in front when they walk, because people see smartphones while walking. I felt the number of times that I am about to be bumped [has]

increased...there are too many people”. Another man complained that while the station was “cool” and “enjoyable” when he was younger, now there’s too many “drunk people”, and just “way too many people”, making it difficult to move quickly through the area.

Zones of adjustments are not always external but can also be interior states. One such interior adjustment is *tuning out*, which takes different forms. One woman talked about music “as a tool to distract my subconscious from the train being crowded, physical discomfort, and heat...[to] concentrate somewhere else. There is no space to read books so I feel like the only thing I can do is to listen to music”. Another said she had to “learn not to care” – to choose to ignore the heat, humidity, press, and smell. Others talked about building in more time for you’re a journey so that they could skip busier trains.

Many respondents talked about tuning out from the noise of the station, particularly the repeated announcements. One older man complained: “I hear noise from the headphones worn by young people....there used to be fewer announcements...[but now] ‘next station is blah blah blah’ in Japanese, and English also recently.” One woman, a social worker in her 40s and who works near the station, said that while she finds “so many people are talking, walking, and making sounds” difficult to cope with, she had developed a way of tuning out and turning the throng into background noise: “At this point, it is like silence for me”. Some see the only respite in escaping altogether – one man talked about how he visits his grandmother in the countryside, and the sense of peace that the quiet brings, adding “in Tokyo it is too busy to be relaxed”.

The *body* was a recurring theme in how commuters adjust to the crowd. One woman, a 20-year old who works in a pastry shop across town from the station, discussed a theme that came up a lot – the compression of getting on and off the train, and of being squeezed together, while in transit: “I have to push people to get on the train. Also, the train gets really hot and I feel discomfort....there are a lot of bodily contacts when it’s crowded. I always feel like I will bump into people or they will bump into me”. She laughs: there is “nothing good about the crowds”.

One woman, in her early 30s, said she sometimes felt “like I’m going to break my bones”. She squeezed her arms to her body and raised her shoulders to indicate being packed in. “I hate it”, she added. One staff member in Tourist Information at the station said. “I can’t escape – it’s dangerous”. In the crowd, anxiety can quickly heighten. There was, however, a wide spectrum of ways in which the crowd registered on the body. While one man talked about how he has friends who suffer from ‘panic’ because of the crowds in the station, others laughed off the more everyday obstacles, from horizontally-held umbrellas to phone-absorbed walkers.

In these narratives, the body does not always feature solely as an individual entity. There is a frequent slippage between the *body of the individual* and the *crowd-as-body*. One of the ways in which this is expressed is in relation to *speed*, and the frustration of stop-starting. For example, a company manager in his 60s complained that “the crowd determines the speed”, adding that he gets irritated by others, including people who are old or disabled. His relation to crowdedness was a generalised set of minor irritations, not just due to the crowd-in-place but also because of it spilling out and leading, for instance, to queues of up to 10 minutes for

the station toilets. These minor irritations varied across respondents. “What is annoying me the most right now”, a woman in her 50s reflected, “is *backpacks*. They push me from the back so I put my backpack in the front but then I have more bodily contact”. In these accounts, the relations between body, crowd and object – bags and umbrellas for example – blur, both in the experience of movement, and the frustration of speed inhibited.

The result, in some occasions, is the break-out of minor aggression or intimidation. One woman, 36 and from Tokyo, said she felt the station and trains might intensify feelings of aggression. The “humidity and lack of oxygen”, the constant people in the way, the regular encounters with bag and luggage, the stop-start flow of the crowd, all of it adds up to a pressing sensorial experience. Ideally, she went on, there would be constant flow and minimum contact, almost a machine-like choreography that was predictable, calm, ordered. Another young woman talked about the minor intimidations, and even occasional violence, of the train at rush hour. Some people “glare fiercely”, people “step on my feet”, passengers occasionally fight as they get pushed or baggage hits them, or get irritated as rain from umbrellas drops on them.

The experience of the body is intensely gendered. While the pervasive sexual harassment of women on Tokyo’s trains, especially groping, can happen when trains and platform are quiet, it is often in crowded situations that it occurs. One woman, in her early 30s, described how “men will put their hands in my skirt or when I am waiting at the station, some drunk guy will come up to me and try to do something inappropriate to me”. Some women talked about falling asleep and waking up realising a man was or had been touching them; others spoke of their vulnerability to abuse on both quiet and crowded trains, and some talked about how

they would feel hands on their bodies but could not see who had committed the act in the squeeze of bodies around them.

Women spoke of trying to always stand behind a male co-passenger on a crowded train, and not in front. Others said they try to be near other women as much as possible while commuting. They hug their bodies or hold a bag near their breasts to prevent male passengers from touching them. Some women with flexible working hours said they avoid getting on a train during rush hours. A few women said that there is no strategy to deal with the groping, other than marshalling a spirit of endurance, reminding themselves that such intrusions are time-bound. Others noticed that some men take advantage of the movement of bodies off and on a train, using those brief moments of rushed movement to grope. Almost every woman we spoke to said they had been assaulted most frequently while traveling to and from school, wearing their school uniform. The fact that some of this harassment takes place in sparsely occupied spaces means that woman cannot take sanctuary from harassment and abuse in urban emptiness. The gendered relations of urban crowds reveal the everyday violence of citylife for women and non-normative genders, where negotiation is a daily management of threat and risk.

The tactics of negotiating the crowd are continual, ongoing processes and inventions that are mediated by gender, age, and – as we will see – race, ethnicity, and class - and which people shape in radically different ways. But across these stories, there is no particular point in which high density spills over into a crowd that inhibits citylife. Instead, there are situated and socially differentiated perceptions and experiences of negotiating the crowd, and the effort to demarcate this or that level of density as ‘good’ for citylife and this point as ‘bad’, is a stark

oversimplification of what it means to be in and around the crowd. There are implications here for how we conceptualise crowds and densities in urban studies, because approaching them as experiential phenomena can open up understandings, imaginaries and possible pathways to intervention that might differ from more technical categorisations. If transit zones have been read as a space where new social skills are developed (Löfgren 2008), our focus on the everyday negotiations of dense commuter crowds identifies the differential pedagogy of high urban density through which such skills of urban inhabitation are acquired and become enmeshed with citylife. In other words, city crowds impart different lessons to different urban publics. What counts as an encumbrance of daily travel and the skill of eking out a modicum of comfort among a throng of strangers on-the-move are products of a wide array of social meanings conjured by the commuter crowd. Thus, the crowd negotiations captured in this sub-section uncover the highly differential relations between everyday urban mobility, high-density urbanism, and citylife that individuals forge in the course of urban living.

Crowd relations III: Inclusivity

This third and final crowd relation draws attention to the social and cultural lines of power that respondents drew around the crowd, and the light they shed on the experience and perception of citylife. There are two key issues that came up here: first, *urban multicultural*, and second, a relation between *designations of the 'weird' and the civic*.

An important relation between the crowd and the station has to do with urban multicultural, a set of relations that have become more intensified over the decades. One man, 31 years old and currently unemployed, spoke with enthusiasm about the crowd as a gathering of citylife,

where citylife surfaces as a combination of curiosity around difference and the aesthetic of distinct styles thrown together:

Crowds mean that so many different people gather. There are different cultures and different ideas gathering... For example, in Shinjuku, there are foreign people like Muslim people, European, American, Canadian gathering... sometimes I can hear their conversations and I sometimes think of what they like. For example, maybe they like Japanese pop cultures like animation or manga or music. Another case is that I see different Japanese people, so I see more gangster style Japanese or geeky style Japanese and maybe they have different ideas from me but they have their own purpose in coming to Shinjuku.

One woman commented that the stress of the crowd might be easier if only people talked to one another a little more, and felt not doing so was a product of social norms in Japan. “I would prefer if people spoke to one another a bit. In Europe [she had previously lived in London] people talk to strangers a little, but in Japan it’s not that common...[It] could reduce stress to talk to other people...but [if I did]...people will think this is a strange person. It’s cultural”. Another woman said: “On crowded cars – people never talk. It’s always 100% foreigners if anyone’s talking. Culturally, it’s strange to talk to strangers, unless you are officially introduced. Only if you know someone. Unless you drop something. Typically, you even avoid even making eye contact – it’s weird and uncomfortable.” A Chinese university student in Tokyo remembers that as a young woman in Beijing she would sometimes find sociability between co-passengers on transit systems a little intrusive; but having now experienced the indifference of commuters on Tokyo’s trains – she describes commuters as ‘cold’ and ‘self-absorbed’ – she finds greater value in spontaneous conversations with strangers in the city.

If some of these accounts of the crowd and multiculturalism were reflective and sometimes progressive, it was more common to hear negative accounts of the multicultural nature of the Shinjuku crowd. One older woman who owns a kiosk at the station said: “Recently, there are a lot of people from other Asian countries coming to Japan. And they talk really loud and they have a loud voice. How can I say it... they don’t care about the surrounding”. An older man made a similar comment: “Recently, there’s a lot of foreigners like Chinese or Korean, other Asian countries, so many foreign languages come into my ears. It is a great change compared to the past...But very loud! Especially the Chinese and Koreans”. Prejudiced views towards other Asian groups came up a few times, sometimes accompanied by a dose of national superiority.

The invention of a tradition of Japanese racial purity has, historically, been a strong foundation for political leadership in Japan and part of claims of ethnic superiority over other Asian cultures (Sugimoto, 1997). Japan’s economic growth since the 1960s and its political stability is often explained by reference to the myth of Japanese racial and ethnic homogeneity. Tokyo has recently implemented ‘crowd behaviour analysis technology’ with the objective of tracking abnormal patterns in human congestion and flow as an urban security measure. The identification of suspicious situations and behaviours in crowded environments in Tokyo betrays racial bias against other Asians in ways that tie crowd surveillance to racialized constructions of urban insecurity (Nishiyama, 2018).

The experience and perception of the crowd is culturally specific, and differentiated too by class, gender, age, and ethnicity. One man from India who works in an Indian restaurant felt that, in comparison to stations and trains in India, “things are so easy here”. For him, trains

in Tokyo were more ordered, more “mannerly”, more disciplined, better air conditioned. People were helpful, offering advice on which trains and lines to get. Yet there are moments of racism too:

Some people look visibly uncomfortable when I take a seat next to them on the train, they will draw their bodies in to avoid any kind of contact, with some people you do sense that strongly. On one occasion, a young Japanese girl maybe 18 or 20, she was seated next to me, there was hardly any space in the compartment, and I could sense she became really uncomfortable. It did make me feel bad, but you have to ignore these things. You can't let it get to you.

Another man, in his 40s, from Dhaka in Bangladesh shared this sense of the Japanese being especially accommodating of other people. He described the rush hour trains in Tokyo as being “so crowded it becomes difficult to breathe... people are standing so close you can actually feel someone's heartbeat on you.” However, he felt that in Dhaka the crowd was more hostile, less considerate of personal space, more likely to stamp on your feet or question your presence. While he hadn't experienced racism, he talked about a friend from Senegal who had experienced people avoiding him and, on one occasion, a passenger coming up to him and asking ‘you people live in among wildlife, right’?

A second way in which boundaries are drawn up around the crowd and citylife has to do with projections of the ‘weird’ and, by extension, the ‘civic’. Many respondents talked about strategies of avoidance on trains and platform, particularly around unruly or ‘weird’ people. There was a generalised sense in the interviews of a desire to conform to a particular sense of civic normalcy while moving through trains and stations, and the sense that with the crowd

comes peculiar and threatening identities and behaviours. 'Weird' became a recurring term for all kinds of differences that people sought to avoid.

One young woman talked about avoiding "drunk people", or people wearing strong perfume. "It's hard to explain", another young woman remarked, "but those weird people you often see in Tokyo...who start raising their voice out of the blue. Like middle-aged women who are around their 50s? They say mean things to you. If you accidentally bump into them, they start getting mad at you". One older man connected the crowded train to the sensorium, and especially smell and eating: "You wouldn't like people who are unsanitary and filthy right? And also, people who smell bad. If there are people like that, I move away from there". A teacher talked about how he'd come to see certain types of people to avoid, and laughed as he described the "irritated office man" who might barge you out of the way. Asked what she avoids in crowds, one woman in her 50s did not hesitate: "Homeless. They smell bad and they are filthy", then added that "there are a lot of weird people on the train so I wear my earphones and try not to get involved with other people". Another woman commented that she avoided "people who talk to themselves" or who wear "weird clothing": "Over-scruffy, or men dressed as a high-school girl, or carrying something too big and God knows what's inside it".

Another respondent attached the idea of 'weird' to people with disabilities: "I am not discriminating disabled people", he claimed, "but I do get scared by them sometimes. Like when they start mumbling or start having abnormal movement." One particular encounter in the field connects the two issues – multiculturalism and civic norms – that we have been highlighting here. On a Thursday evening, around 9pm, we were standing next to a suited

salaryman in a train carriage that still had a fair bit of standing room in it. At Okubo Station, which is located in a neighbourhood that has a sizeable South Asian population, a group of four people (two women and two men), dressed in traditional Nepali clothes (*daura suruwal* and *gunyu cholo*) boarded the carriage and took their place near where the salaryman was standing.

The entry of this group caused an instant shift in the mood of the salaryman, from indifference to outright contempt. He began grinding his teeth in anger and seemed to become consumed with hate every time he glanced at this Nepali group. He appeared to be especially disgusted by one young man in the group who, either drunk or unwell, was struggling to stay on his feet. As it happened, the indisposed young man then threw up and a few drops of vomit landed on the salaryman's left shoe. Even as his companions offered profuse apologies, the Japanese salaryman exploded into a tirade about uncivilised foreigners and the choicest of abusive words, threatening to beat them up and ordering them to return to their ugly country. No co-passenger intervened. The Nepali group continued to apologise until they realized the salaryman was not likely to calm down. At the next station, when the train stopped for its usual dwell time of thirty seconds, they quickly got off this carriage and entered an adjacent and much more crowded carriage.

The claims about 'weird' people and reactions to racialised and disabled bodies marked by class disadvantage reflect a range of prejudices and expectations around what the urban crowd should look like and who belongs, particularly in a public space like a station or on a train; these prejudices and expectations are driven by a loose sense of what constitutes the civic in Tokyo. Casual identifications of the 'weird' capture the politics of urban estrangement,

the everyday ritual of naming and avoidance through which particular characters (the drunkard, the unkempt, the sartorially deviant) and certain social groups (homeless, transgenders, disabled) become strangers in the city, and draw into relation particular lines of 'city' and 'life'. The diagnosis of the weird and aversion to it, through repetition, harden into an urban reflex to the crowded environment of the mass transit system. The cultivation of such habits of managing everyday life in dense urban commons is simultaneous with the estrangement of particular publics in the city.

Social disciplining in Japan – a process which has been described as 'friendly authoritarianism' – operates, in part, through 'physical correctness' and a 'community of sanctions' (Sugimoto, 1997). Physical correctness includes training in personal and public hygiene and correct ways of carrying one's body in the company of others. Indeed, in response to our question about what explains civility between commuters on Tokyo's crowded trains, several respondents referenced such pedagogy in schools and families. Moreover, the emic idea of *seken* – an imagined intermediary community that connotes the social world that is immediately outside one's kin, neighbours, and colleagues, but not the whole of Japanese society – regulates proper ways of inhabiting the city by exacting compliance with traditional norms of behaviour. Such modes of social disciplining seek to inculcate a culture of conformity and become the yardsticks for reacting to the behaviour of cultural others in shared spaces of the city.

Public transportation as a site of urban multiculture where social exclusion is negotiated has received considerable attention in urban studies (Wilson, 2011; Ocejó and Tonnelat 2014). Some of this literature has tangentially noted the social values ascribed to specific commuter crowds, for instance, through middle-class associations between bus riders and bodies of

migrant, working-class male passengers in Abu Dhabi (Qamhaieh and Chakravarty 2017). Our discussion of multicultural and social exclusion on Tokyo's trains foregrounds the commuter crowd as an urban social formation through which issues of race, body, anxieties around cultural and aesthetic difference, and identity threats manufacture citylife. By bringing social difference, density, and everyday urban mobility within one conceptual frame, the narratives of commuting documented here point to the everyday politics of inclusion through which urban crowds are inhabited and civic ideals of citylife are produced. Being among crowds emerges as a practical workshop for differentiating people and behaviours in public spaces and the cultivation of a politics of urban belonging through which citylife – always shaped by social norms, inheritances, and changing city persona – is negotiated and remade.

Conclusion

The association between density and citylife is as old as cities themselves, and an increasing focus of concern in urban studies. We have sought to advance understandings in urban studies of the relation between crowds and citylife by focussing on three crowd relations. We have tried to show that the experience and perception of the crowd – as one expression of density in cities - are a multiple and ongoing set of urban relations. Precisely because of this multiplicity there is no singular dominant form or threshold that allows us to identify a point where high density shifts from being 'good' for city life to being 'bad' for it. Rather than defining density optimally, our position is to call for greater attention to lived densities, i.e. to the everydayness of densities as encountered by different social groups in place or on the move in the city, and to build an understanding of what citylife is from that position.

Seen through the crowd, citylife is profoundly differentiated by gender, race, ethnicity, class and age. It is both shaped through inherited social norms and contingent on particular sociomaterial configurations. It is an experience that people look variously to avoid, mitigate, cope with, endure, tune out from, and sometimes embrace. It is a source of minor irritation and life-changing harassment and abuse. It is an experience of passivity and control, and one of excitement and possibility. There are shared features of crowd relations that resonate across different accounts – materiality, negotiation, and inclusivity, as we've argued, came up repeatedly – but they are shaped in highly particular and individualised ways.

The narratives documented here suggest that a generative understanding of citylife can be found not through a position *external* to density and the crowd, but *through* it. Tackling sexual harassment or racial abuse, for example, cannot be done by getting the density level right, nor can it be blamed on crowdedness alone. These are sociocultural and political issues that relate to but exceed the specificity of the crowded situation. The crowd matters significantly to citylife, but citylife cannot be viewed as reducible to it.

By harnessing the ethnographic mode, we have gestured towards the value of thick descriptions and vignettes of quotidian urban encounters for rendering the analytical object 'citylife'. In these descriptions of crowd relations and citylife we are some way from the imperative that haunts strands of mainstream urban thought and practice to define urban density optimally. The lived world of high-density is continually recalibrated in practice, through encounters between materials and people, between competing views of urban propriety, and in the movement of bodies. This does not mean that optimums are impossible,

but that they should be borne out of the socially differentiated nature of lived experience and perception, and here the key question would be 'optimums' for whom and defined by whom?

As the world urbanises, the question of the crowd is not going away. It is a quintessential feature of citylife. And yet, there is a surprising absence of research exploring how everyday urban habits, struggles, possibilities, and identities are cultivated through routine encounters with crowds. There is a need to develop further understanding of how being in crowded environments relates to the cultivation of the practical competencies of citylife, including the social functions of mythologized city 'types', the lines of power that structure crowds and set the ins and outs of citylife, and how these capacities and ascriptions are contingent on differentiations of urban space.

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