

Please cite the Published Version

Latham, A, Edensor, T, Hopkins, D, Fitt, H, Lobo, M, Mansvelt, J, McNeill, D and Bissell, D (2020) Commuter lives: a review symposium on David Bissell's Transit Life. Geographical Research, 58 (1). pp. 94-106. ISSN 1745-5863

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12382>

Publisher: Wiley

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/625229/>

Usage rights: © In Copyright

Additional Information: This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of an article published in Geographical Research by Wiley.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

Transit Life commendably extends thinking about everyday mobilities and counters simplistic assumptions that commuting is a banal, largely negative experience. Scholarly accounts of mobile practices have all too often conceived journeys as blank occasions, only punctuated by irritating delays, discomforts and unsociable behaviours. Accordingly, much attention has focused on the technical expertise required to develop efficient transit systems. David Bissell thoroughly dispels such misconceptions and preoccupations, providing a compendium of rich, evocative empirical material that testifies to an admirable capacity to empathetically engage with those involved in experiencing, reporting and managing transit around Sydney. He shows how as an integral part of the sensory and affective experience of everyday living, commuting can provoke surprise, inform discourse and sustain intimacies. Judiciously chosen, provocative ideas are backed up by an array of conceptual tools that align with many contemporary geographical concerns, but a light touch always ensures that the non-academic reader will not be overwhelmed by rarefied theoretical discussion. In resisting the temptation to seek recourse in dense, joyless prose, this text is exemplary in its lively, grounded and personable narrative.

The varied experiences of commuting, its affective intensities, sociabilities and sensations are all richly rendered to highlight that the commuter is neither a passive nor blank figure. Indeed, commuting is revealed as part of an ongoing flow of experience, replete with shifting tones that flit between frustration, boredom and anxiety as well as animated conversation, reverie and productive forms of work and leisure. Emphatically refuting generalisations, we learn that each commuter's experience and outlook are shaped by different dispositions and attunements, and by distinctive journeys, individual routines and family and work trajectories. Indeed, the commuter can never constitute a singular category, for even individual experience continuously shifts.

In responding to the wealth of stories and ideas that course through *Transit Life*, I offer five considerations

Firstly, I believe that an exclusive focus on Sydney provides one of the book's strengths. This approach identifies the distinctive commuting patterns, regular experiences and articulations that occur in one place, while inviting the reader to draw parallels with commuting practices and experiences elsewhere, thereby undergirding the geographical specificities of the forms of transit with which our everyday lives are entangled.

Secondly, one particular story has particular salience for considering how we manage disruption, mishap and disaster: following several unpleasant, scary incidents with motorists, experienced cyclist Brian suffers a loss of confidence; he must subsequently aim to restore his self-assurance so that he can once more confidently commute by bicycle, for him an important quotidian habit. This case offers a profound insight into the everyday forms of management and maintenance we undertake to ensure that our routines and favoured practices are sustained. Brian's fortitude offers a minor yet profound insight into the intrinsic quality of the unnoticed endeavours through which everyday social and embodied practices are maintained, repaired and amended.

Thirdly, I want to focus more critically on David Bissell's foregrounding of the becoming and immanence of commuting. This certainly has the virtue of highlighting how each daily experience is different, charged with different intensities, dispositions and moods and shaped by what is happening around us. This also underpins the important argument that transit space, like all social space, is continuously emergent. Yet this emphasis comes at the cost of rhythm, as becoming overwhelms repetition and reiteration. It is true that commuting is often hyperbolically conceived as emblematic of repetition, a signifier of the tedious mechanical reiteration that pervades contemporary urban life. Nevertheless, commuting is surely replete with regular rhythms, with systems governed by timetables and the regulation of traffic flow, not to mention the ceaseless practices of maintenance and repair that facilitate smooth transit. Furthermore, commuting involves acts of synchronisation that ensure that people meet, clock on and organise social routines. Such rhythms are part of the temporal norms that organize social interaction: the 'when, how often, how long, in what order and at what speed' that are governed by a host of 'norms, habits and conventions' (Adam 1995: 66). This does not infer that rhythm is endlessly repetitious. As Henri Lefebvre emphasises, there is no 'rhythm without repetition in time and space, without reprises, without returns, in short, without measure', but also 'there is no identical absolute repetition indefinitely... there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive' (2004: 6). Accordingly, transit rhythms are dynamic; some commuters create their own rhythms, while traffic jams and accidents generate arrhythmia. I want to ask: how might we more plausibly account for the tension between becoming and repetition in commuting and across social life more generally.

Fourthly, another critical point. While rich descriptions of commuting provide compelling accounts of stations and vehicular interiors, the space travelled through is somewhat blank, with the exception of the commuter who delights in the vision of Sydney Harbour en route to work. This absence contrasts with Paola Jiron's (2010) depiction of the daily commuters on Santiago's Metro system who enjoy recurrent scenic views of distant mountains and verdant landscapes. In *Transit Life*, the impression is that a sense of place is solicited solely in the interior of a car or train, yet a thickened, extended sense of place might emerge over time along the same stretch of road or railway (Edensor, 2003). During an oft-repeated journey, familiar landscapes, landmarks and buildings are serially experienced, while a newly constructed house, freshly daubed piece of graffiti or peculiar vehicle stand out from the usual scene, at certain points, tickets, food and newspapers may be purchased.

Finally, and somewhat revelatory for me, was the prominence accorded to notions of voicing. Besides the travel reports, utterances of road rage and journalistic accounts, I was struck by the internal monologue that accompanies transit as well as other everyday experiences. Such reiterative phrases are difficult to access because they only arise in the moment. Sometimes, when there is no-one around, this transmutes into actual outbursts of speech, but I am aware that my mundane engagement with the everyday is replete with multiple phrases, nonsense words, banal extracts of song and guttural refrains that are wholly immanent and never the focus of reflection.

They somehow mark the unfolding things that happen and articulate with moods and affects.

Adam, B. (1995) *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time*, Cambridge: Polity

Edensor, T. (2003) 'M6: Junction 19-16: defamiliarising the mundane roadscape', in *Space and Culture*, 6(2), pp.151-168.

Jiron, P. (2010) 'Repetition and difference: rhythms and mobile place-making in Santiago de Chile', in T. Edensor (ed) *Geographies of Rhythm* Aldershot: Ashgate

Lefebvre, H. (2004) *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. London: Continuum.