EVERYTHING BUT THE CHICKENS: CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY ONBOARD THE CHINATOWN BUS 1

Nicholas J. Klein and Andrew Zitzer
Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

Abstract: Since 1998, the so-called “Chinatown buses” have grown from a niche service for Chinese immigrants to an important mode of intercity travel throughout the Northeastern United States. We argue that these buses serve as moving advertisements, containers for passengers’ perceptions of Chinatown. The Chinatown bus allows riders to explore their conflicted relationships to the Other, and to urban life. We present findings from focus groups with bus passengers in Mandarin and English. Participants rendered Chinatown and the Chinatown bus as an “authentic” urban experience. These participants sought to establish thematics as an expert, in order to share “inside knowledge” of the Chinatown bus that outsiders would not know. For some, the Chinatown bus is a liminal space where calculations of safety and risk are interwoven: danger is part of the appeal. This paper situates these responses in literatures of authenticity, cultural tourism, and mobility. [Key words: authenticity, tourism, mobility, race]

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 15 years, the intercity curbside bus industry has reshaped mass transit in the Northeast United States and beyond. Curbside buses travel from city to city, picking up and dropping off passengers from street corners rather than traditional bus depots. They are able to offer competitive fares and frequent service. Curbside buses take two main forms: the corporate curbside buses, operated by multinational transit companies; and the so-called “Chinatown buses,” immigrant-owned and immigrant-operated buses that travel from Chinatown in one city to Chinatown in other cities.

This paper examines the cultural and experiential dimensions of intercity bus travel, specifically focusing on the Chinatown buses throughout the Northeastern United States. We conducted a series of focus groups in Philadelphia and New York with intercity curbside bus passengers to learn more about the habits of these travelers. The initial objective of the focus groups was simply to understand why and how participants decided to take these buses, their satisfaction with the buses and how their behavior has changed over time (Klein, 2011). During the focus groups, however, participants repeatedly brought up several topics beyond the original research objective. Participants routinely framed the Chinatown bus as an authentic urban experience, a thrilling and danger-enhanced departure from daily life, and as an engagement with the multicultural city.

These unexpected stories encouraged us to pursue this paper examining the popular perceptions of the Chinatown bus as a liminal space of exotic travel. We sought to understand what about these buses generated such strong responses. Three primary themes emerged from our focus groups. First, participants characterized travel on the bus departing from Chinatown as an authentic urban experience. Second, participants described the bus as risky, dangerous and outside of the ordinary. Finally, the Chinatown bus was framed as exotic, a different and difficult space where the rules and norms of “home” do not apply. Some of these stories are troubling and the narratives reveal participant prejudices even as they express affinity for the Chinatown bus. We are not interested in evaluating the participants’ claims of authenticity but rather in understanding the various ways that authenticity is deployed.

We begin with an overview of the Chinatown bus to provide a context for the focus groups. We outline the growth of this sector of the intercity bus industry, highlighting its rapid growth and ongoing transformation. Following this, we review the literature to provide a context for our research. Next, we discuss the research methods and findings from a series of focus groups conducted in the summer and fall of 2009, in Philadelphia and New York. Finally, we will draw conclusions as to the meaning of participants’ evocative stories.

INTERCITY BUS INDUSTRY

The Chinatown bus is at the heart of a remarkable transformation in intercity bus travel. What was a moribund industry under the control of an oligopoly has become a competitive and growing travel sector. Understanding the Chinatown bus is central to understanding this turnaround.

In the middle and late 20th century, intercity bus travel’s ridership fell precipitously in the United States as travelers shifted from buses and trains to automobiles and planes. We use the term “the Chinatown bus” to refer to a number of independent companies. This is consistent with the way many of the focus group participants described the buses that operate in Chinatown. This may be caused by language barriers for non-Chinese passengers and because many of the bus companies in Chinatown operate generic white coach buses that are not adorned with company names or logos. The confusing of different bus companies into a single idea of “the Chinatown Bus” was brought up by one of the non-Chinese focus group participants. “We call it ‘the Chinatown bus’ because for us, we just see Chinese ... we don’t even try to see the different companies” (Sofia, 29h).

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(Schwieterman et al., 2007). During this era, intercity bus travel became the mode of last resort, primarily used by people with no other choice: the old, the young, and the poor (Meyer et al., 1987). Deregulation of the industry in the early 1980s failed to provide the promised benefits of resurrecting the industry or generating competition, until the arrival of curbside buses (Klein, 2009).

The recent introduction of “curbside buses” in the late 1990s has transformed the business. For the first time in 50 years, ridership on intercity buses is increasing (Schwieterman et al., 2007). Traditional terminal bus companies, such as Greyhound Bus and Peter Pan, which dominated the industry, are being eclipsed by the growth of these new “curbside” buses that eschew bus terminals in favor of picking up and dropping off passengers on city street corners. The pioneer of the curbside buses is the Chinatown bus.

In 1998, the Chinatown bus began to serve the Chinese immigrant communities in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. The first company, Fung Wah, began as a charter service between New York and Boston, and quickly began to offer regular passenger service for Chinese immigrants (Farivar, 2005). Soon competing companies began operating throughout the Northeast Corridor. In this way, the Chinatown buses can be seen as a prototypical example of immigrant entrepreneurship in which “the immigrant community has a special set of needs and preferences that are best served, and sometimes can only be served, by those who share those needs and know them intimately, namely, the members of the immigrant community itself” (Waldinger, 1986, p. 19). With their inexpensive fares and frequent service, these buses have attracted a large ridership beyond the Chinese immigrant community.

Since 2008, the ethnic entrepreneurs in Chinatown have had to compete with a set of corporate-owned curbside buses. Large multinational corporations own the two primary corporate competitors, BoltBus and Megabus. Thus, we refer to these buses as the “corporate curbside buses.” BoltBus is jointly owned by Greyhound Bus Lines and Peter Pan and is a direct response to competition from curbside operators in Chinatown (Klein, 2009). Megabus, owned by the UK-based Stagecoach Corporation, has been operating curbside bus service in the United Kingdom since 2003.

The Chinatown buses and corporate curbside buses are distinct in several ways. Corporate curbside buses are owned by large corporations and primarily operate out of the central business districts but, unlike the Chinatown buses, do not pick-up and drop-off in ethnic neighborhoods. The Chinatown buses category includes a large number of small bus companies that mostly operate point-to-point service whereas the few corporate curbside buses are much larger companies with hub-and-spoke style bus networks. Additionally, the corporate curbside buses differentiate themselves from the Chinatown bus by selling almost all tickets online, using brightly branded buses and advertising on-board amenities such as complimentary wireless Internet service and power outlets.

The impact of these buses has been dramatic. Between 1998 and 2007, intercity bus ridership on the Northeast Corridor has more than doubled to over 7 million, with curbside buses accounting for more than half of the passenger trips (Greyhound Bus Lines, 2007). Curbside buses now provide service well beyond the Northeast Corridor; yet the major destinations are Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, DC (Fig. 1). Corporate curbside buses now have hubs in New York, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Chicago, Toronto, Pittsburgh, and Atlanta.

In the past year, curbside buses have come under intense scrutiny after five accidents killed over 20 passengers and injured over 100 since March 2011 (Fasell, 2010; National Transportation Safety Board, 2011; Norton and Marsh, 2011). A recent study by the National Transportation Safety Board (2011) found that curbside buses are less safe than traditional terminal buses when comparing fatality rates and driver training and qualifications (the study did not compare the different types of curbside buses). In addition, a recent inspection of curbside buses by the U.S. Department of Transportation found one in ten curbside buses was out of compliance with regulations (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2011). While the safety of curbside buses is currently the paramount policy issue for intercity buses, this was not the case when we conducted focus groups in the fall of 2009. Among focus group participants, safety was an important concept but it was not yet as important a public policy concern.

Passengers who ride the Chinatown bus have an alternative but they choose to stick with the Chinatown bus. Five years ago, the Chinatown bus was the cheapest option for travel along the Northeast Corridor but this is no longer the case. Corporate curbside buses offer comparable fares to the Chinatown bus and traditional terminal bus companies have lowered their fares. In general, curbside buses have lower cost and higher frequency than other modes, though their travel time can be longer (Table 1). Passengers could choose intercity rail (Amtrak) and air travel, both of which are faster but considerably more expensive. This paper is not primarily concerned, however, with riders’ rational choices. Instead, we
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The present findings from focus groups that indicate how riders react to cultural, emotional, and experiential factors when choosing to ride curbside buses. These will be discussed at length in the following sections.

**ORIENTALISM, CHINATOWN AND AUTHENTICITY**

In order to understand the dynamics that undergird the relationship between Anglo-American passengers and immigrant riders and operators, we must acknowledge the history of the cultural encounter between these groups. Said and others have argued that the Orient is created as a category in need of correction by western institutions (Said, 1978; Anderson, 1987; Anderson, 1988; Lin, 1998). Orientalism is a “durable idea” that did not stop with the end of colonial occupation; it persists into the present day (Said, 1978, p. 42). It is a continuous way of interpreting difference and is constantly reformed by revisions in Orientalist thought. The setting up of these kinds cultural categories has a pernicious effect, “limit[ing] the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies” (Said, 1978, p. 46).

Over time, the spaces known as Chinatown in North America have been constructed by the dominant society as a dangerous and immoral neighborhood of “outsiders” (Anderson, 1987). The dominant White society classified Chinatown as morally deficient according to the “European assumptions about the inherent dirtiness, amoral, criminality, cunning, and unassimilability of ‘John Chinaman’” (Anderson, 1988, p. 135). And the notion of unassimilability has been transposed from the people onto the place as Portes shows by connecting Chinatown with the Orient, which is “only a bus ride away” (Portes, 1992, p. xiii). The problem with treating Chinatown like the Orient is that it limits the terms and the depth of human encounters. Chinatown is considered another world, instead of a local and valid part of one’s city.

Chinatown also stands apart from the perceived homogeneity of contemporary urban spaces such as the “Disneyfication” of Times Square in New York, which transformed an unruly crime- and vice-ridden district into a family-friendly urban playground, and the creation of “non-places” devoid of history or identity. In the Disneyfied playgrounds, the logic of these urban transformations is derived from the service industries, and is supported by four pillars, “efficiency, calculability, predictability and control” (Hannigan, 1998, p. 81). The city is no longer a locus of dangerous and unpredictable behavior. “Non-places,” on the other hand, are the generic spaces that one travels through but which lack history or identity (Augé, 2008). Augé contrasts “non-place” with “anthropological places” which are rooted in a local history and communication and relationships among people. The archetypes of these “non-places” are the spaces of modern travel where interactions are mediated by impersonal interactions with texts and screens such airports and highway. In both the non-spaces and Disneyfied spaces, “easy-to-decipher signs and ritualized behaviors, no matter where you go in the world” eliminate the complexity once thought to be inextricable from city living (Hannigan, 1998, p. 81). Tourists and residents alike can participate in city life without fear of the unexpected.

Both the Olinding of Chinatown and the creation of new generic urban spaces challenge us to consider whether a space can be deemed authentic under any circumstance. Setting up categories and setting people and places in opposition to one another calls forth an anxiety about the way places are represented in a city, and the truth behind those representations.

The concept of authenticity derives from the practice of finding out whether an object, for sale at auction, is what it purports to be, contemporary fascination with authenticity reflects “our anxiety over the credibility of our existence” (Trilling, 1972, p. 93).

Sharon Zukin (2009) concurs with Trilling about the link between authenticity claims and cultural uncertainty. She states:

> Claiming authenticity becomes prevalent at a time when identities are unstable and people are judged by their performance rather than by their history or innate character. Under these conditions, authenticity differentiates a person, a product, or a group from its competitors; it confers an aura of moral superiority, a strategic advantage that it can use to its own benefit. (p. xii)

Authenticity is about lived experiences, like riding the Chinatown bus; it bears “a degree of rough concreteness or extremity”—authentic experiences are hard and durable (Trilling, 1972, p. 94). And the bus is a fitting mode to experience the authenticity of New York, since mobility allows riders to evaluate different neighborhoods in a broader context, as Zukin notes:

> We can see “authentic” spaces only from outside them. Mobility gives us the distance to view a neighborhood as connoisseurs, to compare it to an absolute standard of urban experience, to judge its character apart from our personal history or intimate social relationships. (2009, p. 20)

The process of authentication is a relative one; we need to relate our experience to absolute standards of urbanity so that we can decipher the nature of the places to which we are exposed. These places range from sites of comfort and domesticity to the exotic and contingent spaces of transit and tourism.

Zukin (2009, p. 21) draws our attention to a complementary trope, “the habit of identifying authenticity with the downward mobile.” Trilling (1972, p. 102) makes this link as well, stating that “certain exemptions to the criteria of authenticity are made: the poor, the oppressed, the violent, the primitive.” According to this logic, the poor can be presumed authentic by nature and do not need to proclaim it by their actions—there is no other way they can conceive of being. It follows that Chinatown and the Chinatown bus experience are perceived to display this quality of being authentic-in-themselves. The trope of identifying the authentic within particular communities has been noted by Susan Fainstein. Concurring with Trilling and Zukin's framing, she rejects the claim that "spectacles and
pageants are authentic if they are produced by their participants” (Fainstein, 2001, p. 209). Fainstein (2001, p. 209) sees this essentially as a moral argument that “virtue lies in material production and that producing for one’s own consumption is better than purchasing mass-produced goods and services.” Access to these insights allows us to combat the stubborn persistence of the ideal of the “authentic urban place” among many scholars and citizens. Yet this desire to experience authenticity appears as durable as the idea of authenticity itself. And a primary way individuals search out authenticity is through travel—particularly through encounters with the Other. Through travel to destinations where consuming the Other in the absence of people like themselves outside of the mainstream tourist industry, young Western tourists use travel to foreign-countries as a way to elevate their own social position relative to both foreign cultures and people in their social circle when they return home (Desforges, 1998). But one need not travel abroad—similar experiences can be found closer to home. As Conforti notes, “ethnic urban neighborhoods have always been places where members of the dominant society can go to see ‘somewhat alien places that are quasi-foreign, where interesting food can be found, exotic people can be observed, and even a lurking danger can be sensed’” (Conforti, 1996, p. 831, as quoted in Santost et al., 2008). Beginning in the 1980s, “sensation-hungry” White tourists began to visit Chinatown to glimpse at the supposed (or performed) depravity as well as to consume the food of the ethnic enclaves (Light, 1974, p. 368). By visiting Chinatown to eat, browse curio shops, and people watch, cultural tourists participate in the ethnic experience without significant investment or prior knowledge about the culture, or, “to gaze into the world of the Other without becoming overtly involved in messier politically or ideologically oriented interactions” (Santos et al., 2008, p. 1003).

Understanding travel experiences through the lens of cultural encounters calls for new approaches to studying transportation. The emerging mobilities literature questions long-standing assumptions about transportation, namely that decisions about travel are rational, travel-time is wasted time and travel is a derived demand (Lyons and Urry, 2005; Schieffelbusch, 2010). Relaxing these assumptions allows researchers to acknowledge that travel itself can confer meaning, thrills, status and identity upon travelers and locations are intertwined with the experiences of travel.

Much of transportation research has traditionally focused on commuter trips, modeling travel behavior as a function of time, monetary cost and other easily quantifiable measures. While commuter travel is routine, repetitive and relatively stable, lending itself to forecasting with a rational model, nonwork travel, including leisure, social visits and tourism, tends to occur within a different milieu where the social experiences of travel are more readily apparent (Schieffelbusch, 2010). Tourist travel is distinctly separate from the norms of everyday travel and is marked by the “trance-like suspension of the everyday” (Craik, 1997, p. 114).

Further, acknowledging these social dimensions of travel requires addressing the relationship between movement in space and representations of this mobility in constructing new theories about travel (Cresswell, 2010). Spaces, such as bus stops on street curbs and corners, can engender temporary “interspaces,” bringing together passengers and bus companies in particular social environment (Urry, 2007, p. 12). According to Sheller and Urry (2006, p. 214) “places are ... not so much fixed as implicated within complex networks by which hosts, guests, buildings, objects and machines are contingently brought together to produce certain performances in certain places at certain times.” These networks of signification can set new meanings in motion. Frow highlights this issue, explaining that tourist essences often precede the experience of the place (Frow, 1991). In the case of Chinatown, the received reputation flattens meanings and makes divergent perceptions more difficult. But when a new signifier enters the mix it becomes possible to “reseal” the places that have become settled in the cultural imagination.

**DATA COLLECTION**

This paper presents the results of five focus groups conducted in Philadelphia and New York between August and October 2009. The focus groups served the exploratory nature of this relatively unknown sector of intercity transportation, allowing researchers to hear from participants about their attitudes, opinions and travel experiences. Focus groups are used to generate theory based on the “everyday knowledge and experiences” uncovered during the group discussion (Fern, 2001, p. 7). Finally, focus groups provide a guide for the development of a subsequent passenger survey that will quantify aspects of bus ridership and travel behavior.

We conducted focus groups in both English and Chinese. The Chinese-language focus groups were conducted in Mandarin. We recruited focus group participants at intercity bus stops in Philadelphia and New York. Bus passengers generally line up on the sidewalk, preparing to board the bus 15 to 30 minutes prior to departure. For the Chinese language focus groups, recruiting at bus stops was not as successful. In addition to the language challenges, recruitment was hampered because many Mandarin-speaking bus passengers were embarking on trips of longer duration and would not return to New York in time for the focus groups. While this was also an issue with the English language recruitment, it was much more common among Mandarin speakers. Because of these challenges, we posted a flyer online on a Chinese language message board (http://www.mtbbs.com) to recruit participants.

A limitation of having only one Chinese language focus group is that this paper omits the voice of a diverse body of Chinese immigrants. We chose Mandarin for the Chinese-language focus group because it is the lingua franca of China. However, during the recruitment process we did encounter language barriers. A number of prospective participants for the Chinese-language focus group spoke Fuzhouese and claimed not to speak Mandarin. This is reflective of the changing nature of Chinese immigration to New York. Since the 1980s, the majority of immigrants arriving to New York City from China have come from the Fuzhou region and, in Manhattan, Fuzhouese now rivals Cantonese as the dominant Chinese dialect (Wilson, 2006; Guest, 2011). Fuzhouese entrepreneurs own and operate both intercity Chinatown buses as well as local jitneys that travel between Manhattan’s Chinatown and satellite Chinatowns in Sunset Park, Brooklyn and Flushing, Queens (Guest, 2011). However, due to constraints on time and budget we limited our focus groups to Mandarin speakers. Thus we cannot disentangle the experiences of other Fuzhouese, Mandarin and Cantonese speakers, nor can we describe the different role the buses play for Chinese students at universities and colleges and undocumented workers who use these buses to travel to and from employment centers in New York to jobs throughout the country.

We held focus groups on weekday evenings in the offices of nonprofit or community organizations that were easily accessible and near curbside bus stations. Each session lasted...
approximately 90 to 120 minutes with six to nine participants in each session. Participants were paid $75 each for their participation in the focus group at the end of the session. We moderated the English language focus groups, and a native Mandarin-speaking graduate student moderated, transcribed and translated the Mandarin language focus group. We analyzed and coded all the transcriptions using the Atlas.ti software.

We administered a questionnaire at the conclusion of the focus group discussion to gather basic demographic data on the participants and information on their intercity travel in the past years. Because little is known about the universe of intercity bus passengers, it is impossible to know whether or not the focus groups are representative. In total, 37 people participated in the focus groups. Nineteen of the participants were female and 18 were male. The average age of the participants was 51 and ranged from 20 to 58. One quarter of the participants were full-time students, half were employed full-time and the remainder were either out of work or did not provide an answer. Nineteen percent of the participants earned less than $25,000 per year and 22% earned $25,000 to $50,000, 41% earned $50,000 to $100,000 and the remaining 19% earned more than $100,000 per year.

We collected information on participants' intercity travel during the previous year for trips on the Northeast Corridor. The figure below summarizes the total trips and frequency of trips on all modes during the previous year (Fig. 2). Air travel was not included, though one participant had flown from New York to Washington, DC in the past year. Additionally, travelers between New York and Philadelphia can take commuter rail ("SEPTA/NJT") between the two cities. Several participants commuted for work between Philadelphia and New York several times per week, accounting for approximately 150 trips within the past year. All participants used a variety of different modes throughout the preceding year.

As we stated above, the recurring stories and tropes that came from the focus group participants were not our initial impetus for conducting the focus groups. We were surprised by the importance these stories held to the participants and, as we began to analyze the data, we sought to triangulate the stories through other means. One method of triangulation involved monitoring online media and commentary (newspapers, magazines, and blogs) that mentioned Chinatown buses. To do this, we set up a Google Alert for the keywords "Chinatown bus." We also took note of spontaneous conversations that occurred with friends, acquaintances and strangers that referenced the same themes of the Chinatown bus experience.

Finally, we want to issue a caveat. As researchers, we are part of a representational process, and Wong issues a warning that we take to heart. He asserts that Chinatown is "usually framed by observers who did not live in Chinatown, and who had little connection to or stake in the community" (Wong, 1995). While we work with the words of our focus group participants, we are nonetheless conscious that we participate in another construction of Chinatown by researchers from the outside. Additionally, as White authors, we are cautious of perpetuating the history of framing Chinatown as exotic. Lin (1998, p. 173) describes the phenomenon, "White outsiders with some insider knowledge of Chinatown have also periodically sought to capitalize on their familiarity by creating exotic photographic images for affluent armchair voyeurs, or by drawing ogling tourists into Chinatown for popular amusement." Our analysis is meant to describe and analyze what we encountered in the focus groups, not to sensationalize it.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Authentic Urban Experiences

Participants in the Mandarin language focus group experienced Chinatown as familiar and comfortable. To them, not only was the location spatially convenient, but in one participant explained, "Psychologically, Chinatown just feels more convenient" (Ellen, 30s). This is reinforced through the familiar food available and the fact that they felt safe in Chinatown. Even late at night, participants felt comfortable with their access to Chinese taxicabs. They felt that if "something happens it would be easier to communicate and solve the problem" (Ellen, 30s).

In contrast, many participants in the English language focus groups articulated their desire to participate in an authentic urban experience. Positioning oneself as an insider can help overcome the instability of contemporary urban identity, as Zukin (2009, p. xii) notes, "people are judged by their performance rather than by their history or innate character." Insider knowledge, especially when claimed by outsiders, forms a belkward against claims of inauthenticity. Consistent with previous literature on outsiders with some insider knowledge, the English language focus group participants had an urge to share the insider knowledge about Chinatown and the Chinatown bus that they had learned from their travels (Lin, 1998). The desire to demonstrate insider knowledge was more prevalent in conversations about the Chinatown bus than in the corporate curbside buses. Indeed, for the focus group participants, the corporate bus was bus experience held less interest beyond its function as a utilitarian mode of transit.

Many of the participants positioned themselves as experts based on their self-proclaimed status as pioneers on the Chinatown bus. Several of the English language participants did...
this by asserting that they have been riding these buses since before they became popular with non-Chinese passengers, “When I started taking it, which was about 8 or 9 years ago, there were a lot of Chinese people on it and there were hardly any non-Chinese people on it” (Susan, 40s).

Some English language focus group participants went further and used their insider knowledge to divulge the supposed secrets of Chinatown that other “outsiders” would not know. For example, one participant claimed that there are different prices for Chinese and non-Chinese people. “This Chinese girl once told me that there are different rates for Chinese people than there are for White people that ride the bus” (Mollie, 30s). This was not confirmed by the participants in the Mandarin language focus group, and was the only time this claim was made in the focus groups. We highlight it because it points to the false premise of insider knowledge and underscores the different ways that the bus is experienced and understood by non-Chinese and Chinese passengers.

Riders saw Chinatown as a kind of frontier space in New York that has been spared from the homogenizing influence of gentrification. As one participant said, going to Chinatown to catch the bus “makes me feel like I’m in New York” (Ben, 40s). Presumably traveling in midtown Manhattan to catch a corporate curbside bus, to Port Authority or Penn Station does not have the same significance. As Hannigan (1998) discusses, contemporary urban spaces are sites of predictability and safety. Chinatown is at a temporal and geographic distance from the world of the everyday and Chinatown becomes somehow more of a New York experience than other neighborhoods.

Another participant agreed, and described the journey to the Chinatown bus as:

Such a New York experience … walking through Chinatown in New York is wild and it’s awesome and there are so many scents and people and it feels like you’re almost going back in time and that’s really cool. (Mollie, 30s)

When focus group participants talk about Chinatown and the Chinatown bus as a “wild” and “awesome” New York experience, they are making claims about their knowledge of the city, of Chinatown—just as they might talk about a “hole in the wall” ethnic restaurant—as an authentic culture that they can consume. But for some, the foreignness of the experience went beyond the sensation of travel in time. They felt that they were leaving New York, and America, behind. Participants in the English language focus groups represented the Chinatown bus as existing outside of the norms of United States. One participant said, “I don’t have the same expectation from the Greyhound driver as the Chinatown bus driver … because I don’t expect him to obey the laws of the United States” (Susan, 40s). This passenger went on to describe a passenger smoking on the bus and explained it this way, “You’re in China when you’re in the Chinatown bus” (Susan, 40s).

These attitudes comport with the observation that travel allows “transcendence from everyday life through engagement with otherness or escape from the familiar” (Craik, 1997, p. 114). Other participants compared their travel on Chinatown buses to foreign bus experiences (travel on buses in Peru, Cambodia, and Mexico).

In the above exchange, the U.S.-based Chinatown buses are explicitly compared to buses in the developing world, not to other modes of U.S. transit. The fact that participants compared the Chinatown buses with buses in other countries marks these buses as foreign. Zukin (2009, p. 21) notes the connection often made between the authentic and the constellation of ethnic stereotypes, the “downwardly mobile,” that tends to mark the immigrant neighborhood as authentic. There was one instance where a participant compared the Chinatown bus to the U.S.-based Greyhound. He expressed his preference for the Chinatown bus environment, saying “Greyhound just smells weird” but “Chinatown smells foreign … but I’m actually more comfortable with that” (Thomas, 40s). There are, of course, differences among the varieties of downward mobility. This is what the participant means by the “weird smell” of Greyhound—it is the odor of domestic poverty—not the experience he is looking for. The foreignness of the Chinatown bus smell conjures up other, more evocative images. The smell calls forth Chinatown as a place of difference, of squalor, danger and otherness—therefore, a more “authentic” form of travel.

Whether the Chinatown bus is interpreted as a foreign experience, a New York experience or a way to reconnect with some elements of one’s own culture, the experience is one that is perceived as authentic by the perceiver. These descriptions contrast sharply with those of the corporate curbside buses, which were described in more utilitarian terms. Participants talked about the appeal of the low prices, the location of the stations, and the onboard amenities (wireless internet and power outlets allow people to work onboard the buses); these appeals are clearly rooted in traditional travel metrics of travel cost and time. One participant contrasted the corporate curbside buses with the Chinatown buses by saying, “it is not just like a company who said ‘Oh, we’re just going to transport people from Philly to New York’. [The Chinatown bus] has more to do with that it comes from Chinatown to another Chinatown” (Sofia, 20s).

This statement gets at the heart of the way that participants interpret the experience of the different buses. The participant makes a distinction between these two operators based her subjective experience, when the two companies are both offering similar intercity transportation options. These two companies are in fact “just going to transport people from Philly to New York,” and yet to the participants, it is so much more because it is situated in the cultural context of Chinatown.

Following Fainstein (2001), we posit that there is no Chinatown that is authentic in itself. Instead, there is a tangible physical place and its moving analogue, the Chinatown bus, which is a container for the perceptions of the experience by riders who ascribe very different characterization to the object of their experience.

Safety and Danger on the Chinatown Bus

Another recurring theme in our focus groups was the safety of the Chinatown bus and Chinatown itself. Many of the participants in the English language focus group told stories of the kind of “lurking danger” that associated with touring ethnic urban neighborhoods (Conforti, 1996, p. 831, as quoted in Santos et al., 2008). Among the Mandarin speakers, there was concern about the safety of the buses, but participants felt that these issues might be overstated, and that Chinatown itself was safe. As noted above, several recent deadly accidents involving curbside buses have increased concerns among the public and regulators about the safety of curbside buses (National Transportation Safety Board, 2011). While there were few accidents prior to these focus groups, concerns about the safety of these buses has become much more pronounced after our focus groups were conducted.
Participants' concerns about the safety of the Chinatown bus began at the boarding stage, which one participant called the "bum rush." She prepared herself both mentally and physically for the boarding of the bus:

"People will try to trick you, like their babies, like, "you can't squish my child to get on the bus!" And I'm like, "Yes I can, I want to get home tonight." So I know, OK, put on sneakers, comfortable clothes, cause you're going to have to elbow your way onto the bus because it is going to be packed and it is absolutely nuts ... it definitely requires some dexterity and athleticism. (Joy, 20s)"

In the Mandarin focus group, a participant attributed the chaotic boarding process to impatient drivers blocking each other's buses out of loading zones:

"It is chaotic ... in selling tickets, loading luggage ... They do not always follow rules or guidelines. There is a bus company [name omitted] which attracted passengers improperly. The later bus will hurry the earlier buses to leave soon because the earlier bus's time is due ... there was no order. (Ellen, 30s)"

Further, for some participants in the English language focus group, Chinatown itself was perceived to be dangerous in a manner consistent with the long-held stereotypes of Chinatown as a place of vice (Anderson, 1987). One participant spoke about the danger perceived while waiting for the bus in New York's Chinatown, "do not stay down there!" (Isaiah, 40s). He advised a female participant, "If you miss your bus, get a cab. Get out of there. After 1 o'clock it turns and you see the women, the ladies of Chinatown, the Mafiosos" (Isaiah, 40s).

Yet participants in the Mandarin-language focus groups felt that the opposite was true. "When you get off the bus at 2 am and feel hungry, it is easier for you to find someplace to eat in Chinatown than in Midtown. Also, after you get off the bus, you can call the "Chinese Taxi."

 Unsafe driving was also reported in the Mandarin language group, but not because the driver was a lunatic. One participant described a driver chain smoking to stay awake, "He told me that he had to keep on driving for over 12 hours and he has to drive another round. The driver had to keep on smoking ... he opened the window when he was smoking" (Ben, age not reported).

A few focus groups arrived at the subject of bus accidents. Some participants, particularly in the Mandarin language focus group, felt that accidents happen with every bus company, but the Chinatown accidents are reported more sensationally in the press. "These American buses will also have traffic accidents. They just do not report their accidents in the newspapers in an impressive way. [laughs] Every bus will have the risk of traffic accidents." (Tim, 30s)."

This was echoed in an English language focus group by a participant who struggled to reconcile the "all tales" with her own experiences.

"I've never taken the Chinatown bus so it's all second-hand or even worse, tall tales ... the tales of spontaneous combustion, breakdowns, drivers who don't speak a bit of English... [But] it can happen on any bus. I've had a couple incidents on other bus lines; it's just not their fault. (Mara, 30s)

Another participant in the English language focus group disagreed. This person felt that Chinatown buses are more accident-prone, "I don't think it was an accident that it was a Chinatown bus that got in an accident. Because that has never happened to me on another bus" (Susan, 40s).

One participant described an accident where the bus hit a car, both drivers got out, and then the bus driver approached the car driver:

i swear to god, he pulled out a wad of cash and he gave her like 300-400 bucks, got back into the bus and drove away. No cops, no report, no nothing. That was how they solved it ... I was like, "Well, I guess that's not legal but I'm happy," because I wouldn't want to wait for the cops or the reporter or anything that would happen on the Greyhound. (Mollie, 30s)

And many riders continue to use buses they consider unsafe. As one participant said, "You know, I heard stories about breakdowns and, like, accidents a lot ... But it just wasn't enough for me to deter me from taking the Chinatown bus" (Kenneth, 30s). Tolerance for these types of risk and inconvenience is anticipated in the tourism literature. Woodward states, "Consumers of tourism services might display the behavior of risk-takers, rather than risk-avoiders" (Woodside, 2008, p. 57). Tourism is "a transitional state in which conventional calculations of safety and risk are disrupted" (Urry, 1992, p. 182; Shields, 1991). Bus riders' enhanced tolerance for risk is one of the ways in which we perceive them to have entered a tourist space, without necessarily being aware of that change.

**Orientalism and the "Chicken Moment"**

The last theme we want to explore is what we call the "chicken moment." In the focus groups participants related details or stories that verged on the fantastic. We dubbed these "chicken moments," named after the following exchange. One participant begins:

Participant 1: In fact, there was a Chinese man smoking right next to me. You're in China when you're in the Chinatown bus. (Susan, 40s)

Participant 2: [Like] a bamboo cage with a chicken in it? (Kevin, 30s)

Participant 1: Yeah, practically. You are in China. I don't want to sound ... I mean, you're in China. (Susan, 40s)

The idea of passengers on urban intercity buses in the United States bringing live poultry on commuter buses is far-fetched. Yet, as we speak with people about this research, we
have heard similar stories repeated many times—almost always told second-hand. What matters is not the veracity of these claims but the prevalence of the idea.

What does the “chicken moment” mean? It calls to mind the early 20th century photographer who retouched his photos of San Francisco’s Chinatown to remove “White pedestrians and English signage” so that the photos would look more authentic to a middle-class audience (Lin, 1998, p. 173). This selective tourist gaze, a central and definitional act of tourism, allows the tourist to edit the story to fit her own experience (Urry, 1990, 1992). These retouched “chicken moments” serve as metaphors for the heightened passenger experience of the Chinatown bus.

Another “chicken moment” occurred when a focus group participant told a similarly fantastic story. She described an incident that happened as she walked off the bus and “this guy in the back was just peering on seats” (Mollie, 30s). Again, we cannot vouch for the veracity of this claim, but by telling the story she made it clear that such a breach of social protocol felt possible and probable on the Chinatown bus. Presumably, this would not have happened—or would have caused more of a reaction—on another type of transportation.

A third “chicken moment” involved a singing driver, “I want to say that I’ve had some drivers that, they like to sing Chinese karaoke at the top of their lungs ... I’m like, I don’t want to hear a Whole New World’ in Chinese” (Joy, 20s). These “chicken moments,” we want to stress, may or may not be true. But they have a sort of talismanic value to the storytellers that outweighs their value as simple reporting of facts. The “chicken moment” encapsulates the assumptions and prejudices that non-Chinese participants have about Chinatown bus and by proxy, about Chinatown and Chinese immigrants. The “chicken moment” allows the participants to make claims that the Chinatown bus is foreign, exotic and existing outside the norms of the dominant society.

We include the “chicken moment” to demonstrate just how far removed people are from the actuality of their travel experiences and their suspension of disbelief in their repeating these stories. In the context of the rest of the focus groups, the “chicken moment” seems to act as an outer boundary, a limit to the kind of fantastic stories and becomes shorthand for the way people demonstrate their exoticizing of the Chinatown bus.

CONCLUSION

The Chinatown bus represents an important new lens through which Chinatown is understood in contemporary cities. The bus joins other carriers of culture such as food and media that are consumed by outsiders and form knowledge about immigrants and immigrant communities. Further, it has expanded the space of Chinatown, becoming a moving representation of the social relations and the idea of Chinatown. Finally, for many of the individuals who take the Chinatown bus, the bus strikes at the heart of the contemporary preoccupation with authenticity and what Trilling calls “our anxiety over the credibility of our existence and of individual existences” (1972, p. 93).

Unlike driving, flying or taking the train, the Chinatown bus is embedded within the idea of Chinatown and the ethnic enclave. The Chinatown bus captures Augé’s (2008) notion of “anthropological place” and stands in stark contrast to the characterization of many contemporary urban travel spaces as non-places. Whereas the focus groups did not relate to corporate curbside buses as emblematic of any particular culture, the Chinatown bus clearly is situated within a place that has a history, tradition and identity.

The focus group data supports this notion of Chinatown as an experience constructed through ridership on the Chinatown bus, moving beyond what Lyons and Urry (2005, p. 214) call the “ontology of distinct ‘places’ and ‘people’.” Our findings suggest that the Chinatown bus signifies as a metonym, a symbolic stand-in for the place itself.

The Chinatown bus lends support to the central hypotheses of the new mobilities paradigm—that social relations and experiences can be core aspects of travel behavior. In our focus group forum, the participants experienced the Chinatown bus through the particular cultural lens of Chinatown, which is rooted in a historical social construction of a place and race (Anderson, 1987, 1988). The cultural lens is manifested in the way that participants experienced the Chinatown bus and influenced the choices that individuals make when they travel, their social relations during travel, and the stories they tell after they travel.

These cultural encounters have consequences for the relationships among immigrant entrepreneurs, ethnic minorities, and members of the dominant White culture. The balance of power traditionally lies in the hands of the latter. As Said asserts (1978, p. 40), “Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world.” Passengers may be unaware of the framing effect their participation in these exchanges has on the broader culture’s understanding of Chinatown. Their appreciation, their bewilderment, and their scorn are all passed along through a cultural continuum of bus stories shared among acquaintances, colleagues and friends. Highlighting this paradoxical relationship of desire and repulsion towards the authentic urban experience, Zukin (2009, p. xiii) concludes that “Authenticity, then, is a form of cultural power over space that puts pressure on the city’s old working class and lower middle class, who can no longer afford to live or work there.” As the domain of intercity curbside bus travel continues to expand and change, the stories told by riders will serve as a key ingredient in the evolution of Chinatown for all those who experience it.

Curbside buses are still in the midst of a rapid evolution towards an uncertain future. Will the Chinatown bus continue to coexist with the corporate curbside buses? Is the cultural appeal to non-Chinese passengers just a fad? Or will the tendency towards cultural tourism lead to the Chinatown bus becoming a completely staged authentic experience, like the “elevated sightseeing buses, gaudily decorated with Japanese lanterns” that, in the 1920s, took thrill-seeking White tourists to Chinatown (Lin, 1998, p. 175)? These questions have economic as well as cultural implications for the ethnic entrepreneurs who operate Chinatown buses. As Desforges (1998, p. 177) notes, “representations of the Other ... are somehow linked to the interests of Western power, and ... they have material consequences for the place represented because representations are lived as reality.”

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