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Boarding Mumbai Trains: The mutual shaping of intersectionality and mobility

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Abstract

This article analyses *how intersectionality and mobility shape each other* in the case of deaf women who board the Mumbai suburban trains, which have separate compartments reserved for women and for people with disabilities. These compartments being adjacent, deaf women often make last minute decisions where to board, and even happen to switch compartments at a further station. Here, *intersectionality shapes mobility* in that it entails a complex and changeable, context-dependent set of strategies and decisions. *Mobility shapes intersectionality* in that by being mobile, people assert or develop different aspects of their lived experiences, preferences and aspirations.

Introduction

Figure 1: Overhead signage for the HC.

Figure 2: Overhead signage for the LC.

Imagine a deaf woman - let's call her Nalini - standing on a platform in a crowded train station in Mumbai. Nalini is positioned in-between the overhead signages indicating the adjacent waiting zones for women and for disabled people (see figure 1 and 2). These waiting zones correspond with the location where a designated train compartment will stop. When the train rolls in, Nalini glances in the compartment for disabled people, quickly scanning the passenger body through the open doors and windows. She does this because she wants to assess how crowded the compartment is, the gender distribution of the passengers, the appearance of the male passengers, and the presence of deaf people. At this point, Nalini makes a decision whether to board the ladies compartment or the compartment for disabled people. Nalini's intersectional experience of being deaf and being female, thus leads her to consider two sensible options, which both have specific implications.

The Mumbai suburban trains are the city's main form of public transport. Eight million people per day (one fourth of them women) travel these trains, which are used across different income categories. During peak times, most passengers are pressed against each other in 'super-dense-crush loads', in segregated spaces. While not the most comfortable, the Mumbai trains are by far the most affordable and fastest option in relation to other modes of transport in the city (Bhide, Kunde, Tiwari 2016). The suburban trains contain the following compartments: general (the largest part of the train), general first class, ladies, ladies first class, luggage, and the 'handicapped compartments' as the compartments for disabled people are called in popular discourse (see figure 3). The design of the Mumbai suburban trains thus demarcates categories of commuters, related to gender (ladies), class (first class versus second class – and class is gendered too), the purpose of travel (vendors transporting loads in the luggage compartment which has a reduced number of benches), and to physical ability (the HC, and the reservation of some sections in the general compartment for senior citizens in particular time slots). These specialized compartments are not gender- or class-segregated, and are male dominated second class compartments, which inevitably impacts on the boarding decisions and travel experiences of female passengers.

Figure 3: The order of compartments in a 12-car maroon old (as opposed to white-purple new) train in Mumbai.

The ladies compartments (LC from here onwards) often get equally crowded as the general compartments (abbreviated to GC from here onwards) where the travelling body is overwhelmingly male during peak times. Because the Mumbai trains are characterized by high-density crowding and packed beyond capacity, forms of harassment (especially unwanted touching and pinching) on the platforms and in the trains happen frequently, leading to feelings of fear and insecurity, humiliation and disgust (Bhide, Kunde and Tiwari 2011). For women, the crowd in the LC generally does not feel as threatening as the crush of male bodies would do (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011).

The 'handicapped compartments' (abbreviated to HC from here onwards) are reserved for people who are disabled, heavily pregnant or chronically ill, who often have difficulties with boarding, alighting and inhabiting the other dangerously overcrowded compartments. Passengers need a certificate of disability or a medical certificate in order to be able to prove their entitlement to travel in these compartments. Even though the compartments are male-dominated, they are a valued travel option for deaf women, because the relative availability of space in the HC allows deaf people to travel together and to communicate in sign language. Indeed, the compartments are regular meeting places for deaf people in Mumbai: deaf people of different backgrounds, ages and genders meet each other strategically and incidentally in the HC. Because the compartments provide a diverse range of deaf people a space for daily meetings on the way to and from their (mostly hearing and non-signing) work places and families, they are very important spaces to maintain and expand networks in the wider Mumbai deaf community (see Kusters 2009, 2017a, and see the 15-minute documentary 'Deaf spaces on Mumbai trains' at <https://vimeo.com/172930705>).

Let's go back to Nalini and the decision she's going to make. Perhaps both the LC and the HC are crowded, and Nalini decides she feels safer and/or more comfortable in the LC, pressed against other women's bodies. Alternatively, she might spot one or more deaf friends in the HC and decide to board the HC in order to have a conversation in Indian Sign Language before arriving home. On Sunday, Nalini might travel by train to visit friends or family together with her husband and son and they might travel off-peak in the GC. Some deaf women also use the less crowded first class LC as alternative to the HC. Thus, in terms of boarding the Mumbai suburban trains, Nalini's and other deaf women's travel choices are more contingent than those of deaf men, hearing women and hearing men, since generally speaking, deaf men mostly travel in the HC, hearing men in the GC, and hearing women in the LC (and occasionally in the GC during off-peak moments). This observation leads to the following question: how and why do deaf women make decisions as to which compartment to board?

In the process of exploring this question, the article is greatly inspired by the rich scholarly tradition of studying gender and mobility. The study of gender and mobility includes two sides of the same coin: exploring how *gender shapes mobility* (thus 'gender is the premise and mobility one of its outcomes') and how *mobility shapes gender* (ie, 'mobility contains transformational power in its own right, able to affect gender relations') (Elliot 2016, 77). Many approaches have focused on either the former or the latter but not both, while the two are inseparable (Hanson 2010). Researchers following the first approach, how *gender shapes mobility*, have mostly produced quantitative studies using large samples. Its main themes are travel patterns of commuting women and the impact of the fear of violence on travel patterns. Only studying how gender shapes mobility 'somehow privileges the complexity of movement over the complexity of gender, taking the latter category as a starting point to analyze the former' (Elliot 2016, 77). It gives insight in broad *patterns* rather than in *causes* of women's differential travel choices (Hanson 2010). In contrast, the second approach, how *mobility shapes gender*, 'has emphasized gender to the neglect of specifics about mobility' (Hanson 2010, 11) and consists of mostly qualitative studies using small samples, eg. focusing on women's movements in different spaces: public/private space, in the household, their families, and how mobility is interrelated with other intersections such as race, ethnicity, class.

In uniting the two strands of the study of gender and mobility, Hanson (2010, 14, my emphasis) argues, researchers need to look at '(1) whether any observed aspect of mobility or confinement in a particular social, cultural or spatial context is the *result of choice or constraint* (which is often

complicated and difficult to discern), and (2) what observed mobility patterns *mean* to people.’ In order to study these two questions, Hanson suggests close attention to *context*, ‘to see how context affects the relationship between gender and mobility’ (2010, 17). Focusing on contextual travel choices, constraints and meaning of travelling in the Mumbai trains thus unites both strands of the study of gender and ability: my approach has in common with the first strand (how gender shapes mobility) a detailed focus on the segregated spatial organization of the Mumbai train and how it impacts travel experiences. Analysing *how and why* deaf women make these travel choices, my approach has its qualitative and intersectional focus in common with the second strand (how mobility shapes gender).

While this article thus builds on an important tradition of studying gender and mobility, I use the more holistic concept of *intersectionality* (rather than gender) as a central analytic in the study of deaf women’s mobilities. In other words, I suggest that this article’s main contribution is that, rather than approaching the mutual shaping of *gender and mobility* in an intersectional way that puts gender on the forefront, I investigate *how intersectionality and mobility shape each other*. Indeed, in the case of deaf women travelling in Mumbai trains, treating either gender or disability/deafness as main variable would do no right to the complexity of deaf women’s travel experiences. I was puzzled at the lack of focus on disabled women’s travel experiences in Bhide, Kundu and Tiwari’s (2016) extensive report about the gendered experience of traveling the Mumbai suburban trains. Being female and deaf, and holding disability certificates, deaf women straddle the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘disabled’ as embedded in railway design and regulations. I discuss the relationship between the existence of these pre-defined categories and deaf women’s contingent travel choices and experiences. Doing so, my approach to intersectionality is what McCall (2005, 1779) calls the intracategorical approach, which is ‘critical of broad and sweeping acts of categorization rather than critical of categorization per se’. An example of this approach is the focus on social groups existing on neglected points of intersection, ‘ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations’, such as black women (McCall 2005, 1780). In this case, this point of intersection is being deaf and being a woman. Here, the category of ‘deaf women’ is temporarily stabilized for the purpose of analysis. The approach does not aim to homogenise this intersectional group, but allows for complexity to arise and for diversity and variation to be revealed (McCall 2005). Indeed, in addition to gender and disability, the axes of class and age also appear as impacting travel choices significantly. Other axes such as caste and religion were not mentioned much by my participants, although that does not mean that these do not impact on travel experiences at all.

In my intersectional approach, the intersection of women and deaf is not primarily approached as one causing multiple marginalization. I rather adhere to the following definition of intersectionality as posited by Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013, 795, my emphasis):

what makes an analysis intersectional (...) is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of *sameness and difference and its relation to power*. This framing - conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always *permeated* by other categories, *fluid and changing*, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power - emphasizes what intersectionality *does* rather than what intersectionality *is*.

This definition includes traditional intersectionality approaches’ focus on marginalization, power, inequality and oppression, but it also allows to account for the fact that intersections can produce opportunities, choices, options and empowerment. As I will show, deaf women experienced having options (as to which compartment to board) as giving them autonomy and allowing flexibility, and they strongly valued the deaf sociality in the HC, but at the same time, they also feel their perceived and experienced gender renders them vulnerable in the Mumbai suburban trains, hence the great importance they attach to considering crowds, risk and comfort when making travel choices.

My methodology is ethnographic. I am deaf, female and white, I lived in Mumbai from 2010-2013 and have regularly travelled in the Mumbai trains since 2006. I travelled alone, with my deaf husband (who is a Mumbaikar) and/or our hearing sons, with white deaf friends, with Indian deaf friends and with my Indian deaf family-in-law. I travelled during rush hours and during quiet times, in the GC, LC

and HC. In addition to participant observation in the Mumbai trains, laid down in extensive field notes, I base this article on interviews (in 2013) with six deaf women and girls aged between 12 and 55. I also interviewed three *hijras* (transgender women) but because their travel experiences and gender identities are rather different from those of cisgender women, it wouldn't be possible to do right to their experience in the frame of this paper and as such this data is not included in this article. All interviewees are from lower- and middle-class backgrounds, and have different marriage statuses and caste affiliations. A third set of data consists of video-recorded discussions organized in three local deaf clubs in 2013 and 2014: India Deaf Society (mixed gender but mainly attended by deaf men); Yuva Association of the Deaf (a mixed gender club for deaf youth aged 18–35); and Bombay Foundation of Deaf Women (attended by deaf women of all ages). The audience (50–100 attendees) were asked questions about travelling in the suburban trains and whoever wanted to reply or comment took the stage, which led to lively discussions, given the paramount role the suburban trains play in the lives of the average Mumbaikar. The interviews and discussions were held in Indian Sign Language by myself and my husband Sujit Sahasrabudhe, who is a leading figure in the Mumbai deaf community.

Going forward, I start with a consideration of ladies compartments, and then the HC, discussing the specific characteristics of these compartments and which meanings deaf women ascribe to them. Indeed, deaf and girl or woman cannot be seen as additive or mutually constitutive, but as *mutually shaped* instead. I then consider how this intersectional position shapes, and is shaped by mobilities, focusing on deaf women's strategies and decisions regarding which compartment to board.

Ladies compartments

In the nineteenth century, there existed women-only cars on train lines in various countries where sex-segregated travel is not current anymore. For example, in the UK, Ladies Only compartments existed from 1874 on the Metropolitan Railway to protect women from sexual assaults and lewd comments - however they were so under-used that they were phased out after a few years (Turner 2013). In the US, ladies compartments were in use throughout the 19th century (since 1836) and were initially first class compartments – for ladies to travel in more comfort than in the mixed-gender smoking compartments (Richter 2005).

Provision of separate travel space for women in public transport (both buses and trains) has made a comeback since approximately the year 2000, with the aim of preventing/avoiding sexual harassment, particularly in crowded urban public transport (rather than in intercity transport), for example in Cairo, Seoul, Manila, Bangkok, Rio de Janeiro, Karachi and Tokyo. In Mumbai, all suburban trains have a number of ladies coaches, and while some of these coaches are ladies-only for 24 hours, others are reserved for ladies during rush hours. There also run a number of Ladies Special trains; which are trains for women only. In locations worldwide where ladies compartments exist, women generally continue to be allowed in the general compartments, so women travelling with male companions or women who resist separation can still travel in mainstream public transport provision.

Separate travel provision for women has been greatly debated and naturally reflected common discourses of the time. In nineteenth-century US, in the spirit of the time of the Victorians, ladies of higher class were considered to be too good, genteel and pure for the rough world of public transport (Richter 2005). White gentlemen with female travel companions also were allowed in the ladies cum first class compartments, to which working-class men and women, white gentlemen travelling alone, and black women did not have access. In this case, gender separation was thus inextricably related to being of privileged class background, which was challenged in a series of court cases during the 1880s in which people of non-privileged backgrounds (such as black women) asserted their claim to ride in these cars. The notion of women being too pure to travel in mixed companion shifted to the perception of white women being selfish and demanding.

In the case of Mumbai, discourses about gender separation in the train were the subject of passionate discussion between those who believe that reservations are a legitimate means of affirmative action and those who think of it as parochial patronizing. Another argument is that these spaces of segregation are pre-modern, denoting the seclusion of women, or suggesting that men are not sufficiently mature to travel with women. (Phadke 2013, 182)

These comments are reminiscent of the reactions when sex-segregated transport was introduced in other cities, eg Tokyo (Freedman 2011). Those arguments notwithstanding, many female Mumbaikars take a pragmatic standpoint, admitting that the LC make it easier for them to physically access the extremely overcrowded suburban trains, and some families or partners would not allow women to travel if there were no LC (Phadke 2013, Bhide, Kunde and Tiwari 2016). A crowd of women fighting to enter the train is considered to be more equitable to negotiate than a male or mixed-gender one. People start alighting and boarding through the open doors when the train has not yet come to a standstill, pushing and shoving, frequently leading to injuries and bruising (figure 4). Inside, bodies are squashed against each other (figure 5) and fall into each other when the train brakes. It gets hot and often smelly (particularly sweat) and it happens regularly that people faint or fight (Sonam 2014). It's not uncommon for people to be unsuccessful in boarding, or to miss stations because they cannot get out in time during the very brief stop times.

Figure 4: Women boarding the LC in a new train.

Figure 5: Women in the LC.

In these crowds, the risk on verbal sexual harassment and groping is high. 'Eve teasing' is the most common form of harassment faced by women, defined as 'lewd comments on the physical beauty of women or the way they dress, whistling, staring, stalking, singing songs or even some form of physical assaults such as groping, fondling and pinching' (Bhattacharyya 2015, 1345). Eve-teasing in the Mumbai train stations and trains typically goes unpunished: crowds are a cover for men to harass women since there is no time or space to turn around, it is often impossible to identify the perpetrator, and women generally think it is not worth reporting it (and often don't know how or where, or face procedural complexity) (Hirsch et al. 2016, Bhide, Kunde and Tiwari 2016). Most women in Mumbai carry tools to protect themselves, eg. pepper spray or sharp objects.

The LC are not only experienced as relatively safer as the GC. When the level of crowding allows it more or less, the functions of shopping mall, kitchens, cooking classes, beauty parlors and counseling are all replicated in the train. Women exchange gossip, chop vegetables for their cooking at home, buy clothes and accessories from mobile vendors, have manicures, and they celebrate birthdays and retirements, and religious ceremonies and festivals together. The LC are thus important female spaces in everyday life, in practical and social respects, which is significant since at most work places, men are in charge; and at home women have to cook and care for their husbands, children and other relatives, and to do the housekeeping. Also, public life is male-dominated: men hang out, or loiter, in pubs, on the streets etcetera – and there are far less spaces where women can do so (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011).

Phadke, Khan and Ranade (2011, 75-76) write that there is also another side to the LC: there are arguments, tensions and hostility especially in overcrowded compartments and in the first class LC, partially fueled by prejudices:

Commuters in the first class [ladies] compartment are very aggressive in barring the entry of others 'not appearing like first class pass or ticket holders', that is, lower class in habitus. *Hijras* are met with annoyance mixed with anxiety. Transgender people and lesbian women who dress ambiguously face reactions ranging from feeling welcomed and accepted to confusion to hostility. Women who do not look indisputably feminine are therefore directly or indirectly excluded from these spaces.

Becoming a HC traveler

Installing separate compartments for women seems to be a more widespread phenomenon (historically and contemporarily) than separate compartments for disabled people. Instead, regular public transport has generally become more accessible for disabled people (such as space for wheelchairs, accessible toilets, reserved seats, elevators at train stations).

In Mumbai, the HCs were started in 1993, and measured about 1.5 by 3 metres (Figure 6), containing a bench with barely enough space for 5 people to sit (I have counted up to 16 people standing there during rush hour). In addition to a small HC, a larger HC of about 5 by 3 metres was made available in 12-car trains which started to ride in addition to the older 9-car trains (as in figure 3). Between 2002 and 2011, new trains were implemented, which are better lit, more spacious, and there are two (in 12-cars trains) or three (in 15-cars trains) large HCs (about 6 or 7 by 3 metres) per train (figure 7).

Figure 6: Small HC.

Figure 7: Large HC in a white-purple train during non-rush hour.

In the past when there were only small HCs, passengers were mostly male and deaf women generally avoided these. In my earliest years of travelling in the Mumbai trains (2006-2007) I did not observe deaf women in the small HC, in contrast to deaf men who travelled in small HCs alone or in small groups. A deaf couple or a deaf mixed group travelling together typically split up along sex: the men would board the HC or GC and the women would board the LC. The first class LC are significantly less crowded (and significantly more expensive) than the regular LC, thus were an appealing option to the few deaf women who could afford it. At that time, Sana, a Sunni Muslim woman aged 28 who travels back and forth to college where she studied for a Ba degree, tried the small HC a few times:

When I went in the small HC with deaf people it was really not comfortable to talk, [...]

handicapped men stood/sat in front of me, and they don't care about how they use space. So I decided not to go anymore and next time I went in the first class LC (...). Also some people drink and they touch your body. I'm not comfortable there, I'm good-looking, so no... Even if there were deaf people, I did not want to join.

The presence of deaf women in the HC had greatly increased a few years later, due to the growing size of the compartments and their changed design. Yet it was not a straightforward process nor was there a sudden switch in deaf women's travel patterns. In an earlier study (Kusters 2009), I document the gradual process for deaf men to become HC travelers in the small HC: initially, some deaf men felt uncomfortable using the very limited space reserved for disabled people because they were not mobility disabled, and there were tensions between deaf and other disabled people for this reason. Upon realizing that the HC are places where they had more space to sign without being physically crushed by other travelers' bodies, they became regular meeting places for deaf men.

Similarly, and even more so, for many deaf women, becoming a HC traveler was a gradual process, characterized by a set of turning points. For many, the first step would be to board a (large) HC *together with deaf men* (eg after work, or when travelling to/from a deaf event). Thus, deaf women did not start boarding the HC because of identifying with a more general or abstract category of 'disability', most disabled people in public space being male hearing non-signers. Rather, engaging in deaf sociality and sign language communication with deaf men (who already were regular HC travelers) was an important factor in deaf women becoming regulars in the compartments: deaf men's presence in the HC acted as a stepping stone. In a later stage, many deaf women would also board the (large) HC when they would travel alone and would, standing on the platform, either spot women (who might be hearing), or deaf people in the compartment. (While not aiming to interact

with hearing women, some deaf women prefer not to be the only woman in the compartment.) Now, some deaf women also board the HC when there are no deaf people or women present.

Passengers in the HC carefully police who is coming in and question people who do not look disabled at first sight and are unknown to them, especially because the presence of (mostly male) non-disabled encroachers makes the space less comfortable and less safe for them to board, travel and alight (see Kusters 2017a). In this context, Heena (30), a Sunni Muslim woman who travels to and from work as a sign language teacher in a course for hearing non-signers, narrates the process of becoming a *known* HC traveler:

Many people asked me what I was doing there. They thought I was looking normal, they didn't realize that I'm deaf. So I constantly had to confirm that I was deaf. When I got fed up with that, I resumed travelling in the LC. But later I re-considered and decided that I would regularly travel in the HC instead. (...) If I was lucky a deaf person would come in and we would greet and talk. The other passengers would then look at me and realize that I'm deaf. (...) So I regularly caught the HC and at last the other passengers kept quiet, as they started to recognize me and remembered that I'm deaf.

There are overlapping bodies of regular passengers who travel in the HC at particular times and recognize each other. Also, now that more women travel in the HC, the passenger body is more used to seeing good-looking and well-dressed young women like Heena and Sana whose disability is not visible on first sight (none of the interviewees wears hearing aids). Deaf people's travelling in the compartments has resulted in the existence of friendships between deaf and otherwise disabled men, greeting, chatting, and engaging in horseplay. Many hearing men who travel in the HC know (basic) Indian Sign Language or can communicate fluently through gesturing about topics such as politics, cricket matches and the job market (see Kusters 2017a). Travelling the HC is not free from conflict though: deaf people constantly have to negotiate their right to space and especially seats in the HC (see Kusters 2017a for an in-depth analysis of informal hierarchies that exist in the HC). Fewer disabled hearing women than men travelled in the HC and they are much less involved in social interactions than the men in general. Deaf women do generally not interact with disabled women even though the presence of other women increases feelings of comfort. Some deaf women feel comfortable interacting with disabled men, especially with acquainted regular travelers who also interact with deaf men. It seems that the existence of friendly and communicative relationships between deaf and disabled triggers or impacts interactions between deaf women and disabled men.

Gains and challenges

So why did many deaf women go through this process of becoming a regular HC traveler even if many of them were initially reluctant? The main two reasons are: comfort and community. The HC is associated with physical comfort in that there generally is more space and there often are seats available in off-peak hours. Deaf women in Mumbai used expressions such as 'light head', 'cool', and 'safe' to describe their experience of this space. Comfort of travel and convenience matter since the average of time spent in the train is 45 minutes for 2/3 of the commuters (Bhide, Kunde, Tiwari 2016). Boarding and alighting the train, which is often a physically and socially challenging process, is often easier when travelling in the HC. When the LC and GC are crowded, it is a laborious process for passengers to move nearer to the compartment's doors and to position themselves there in time to get off, among others who will get off at the same stop. When repositioning themselves, people communicate verbally with each other: requesting to shift, informing others of the station where they will alight, or asking where the other will get out, so that people who have to alight sooner can position themselves closer to the doors. In these contexts, deaf people's strategies vary from typing on their phone, speaking, or gesturing. Deaf people are at a disadvantage in this context where people constantly speak with strangers, since in the crowded circumstances it is harder to gesture or to use the phone. Sometimes deaf people miss their stop because of communication barriers.

Figure 8: Mumbai, its train lines and some of the larger stations.

For deaf people, the gains of the HC do go much further than mere physical and social comfort though. Mumbai has a peninsular geography with the city centre located in the tip of the peninsula, and along its length, it is dissected by two unidirectional train lines (figure 8). This geography in combination with the fact that trains are the fastest and cheapest transport means into the city, means that there is a commuting wave down into the tip in mornings and upwards in the evenings (Kusters 2009, 2017b). With almost eight million people travelling the Mumbai trains every day, this in its turn means that every train (and trains run every few minutes) in the direction of the wave has deaf commuters. Sana contrasts the LC with the HC, associating the LC with solitude and the HC with sociability:

In the crowded LC there is no communication. I travelled alone. Sometimes there was one other deaf woman with me to talk with, but that was it. Never talking in a group with more deaf people. But in the HC there are more deaf people, if you were lucky there could be four or five deaf people coming in and you could chat with them until getting off the train.

The HC is connoted with community, communication, and learning. Deaf people interact with other deaf people from different suburbs in Mumbai but also from all over India. They talk about the news, deaf community events, religious festivals, problems at work. They exchange gossip and learn from each other eg. about finding suitable marriage partners, conflict management, and financial management (Kusters 2017b). Deaf people generally have limited access to a good education and limited literacy skills, hence the significance of deaf knowledge exchange. Also, non-fluent signers improve their signing skills by interacting with fluent deaf signers. This is significant since deaf schools in Mumbai (and India) generally do not provide education in Indian Sign Language (rather through speech and gestures).

When deaf women started to travel in the HC more often, deaf women and men interacted more frequently during travel than roughly ten years ago. In combination with other developments in the city, including peer education programmes for deaf adults where they improve their written English and train as sign language teachers or for other jobs, this means that there is an increase in opportunities for young deaf women to develop, to learn, and 'to talk politics' by interacting with other deaf men and women (also see Friedner 2015). For Sana, training as a sign language teacher and becoming a HC traveler were connected processes: becoming more confident as a deaf woman meant navigating deaf spaces in male-dominant settings. Mona (35), a Gujarati Hindu woman who works as a sign language teacher and is part of a large deaf family, reflects: 'Before, the girls did not like politics [related to the deaf community], now more awareness [ie confidence as a deaf person] has spread so they feel brave and go in the HC.' Consequently, Mona used the label 'narrow-minded' for deaf women who would habitually board the LC and never travel in the HC: 'those who have good awareness prefer to go in the HC.' Not boarding the HC entails a certain risk, since it comes at the expense of access to deaf sociality and to general knowledge (which is accessed through sign language).

However, choice of topics of conversation in the HC are often male-guided. Some deaf women were not comfortable with deaf men's talk about love, sex, their 'nonsense talk', 'dirty talk', and their 'politics'. Some deaf women who are more sheltered and have hearing families, who have not much communication at home and not much 'awareness' are uncomfortable with this way of talking and this sometimes impacts on travel choices. For example, Riya, a 12 year old Marathi Hindu girl who has deaf parents and a deaf brother, commutes to and from her school for deaf children by train and struggles with male talk:

They think children understand nothing. But really I know what they mean [when they talk like that]. I kept quiet. I felt not comfortable [in the HC] (...) My father told me that I should not be afraid or nervous but remain seated and composed, not ask others for help but stay cool and ignore them.

Here, Riya is talking about the need for “embodied adaptations” (Butcher 2017) when travelling in the HC as a young female deaf person. At the time of interview, Riya commuted in the first class LC, alone, in the same commuter train as her father. Even though she appreciated the importance of having the right mindset and the need for embodied adaptations such as maintaining composed conduct, her parents decided to let her travel in the first class LC so that she would be more comfortable. Riya uses her travel time to study and her exam results improved drastically when she started traveling in the first class, where she studied and had casual brief interactions with the other passengers. She described travelling in this compartment as ‘coolness, first a bit of talking and smiling and then quietness, no disturbance and no confusion.’ Here, a sense of command of bodily space and material comfort plays out with this schoolgirl as age, gender, and class intersect. Her mother Sudha (43) also has a pass for the first class LC, and travels in the HC when she wants to travel with friends who don’t have a first class pass, but typically only during the non-peak hours. Only a minority of deaf women own a pass for the first class though, so for the majority of deaf women this was not an option. Also, some deaf women who earlier avoided the crowds in the LC by travelling in first class LC (such as Sana) habitually use the HC now. By becoming HC travellers, they did no longer need or choose to invest in higher class travel in order to access social and bodily comfort.

While deaf women may choose not to travel in the HC, sometimes it is the case that their husbands forbid them to. A middle-aged woman who took the stage during our discussion in BFDW (the club for deaf women) vividly narrated how she challenged a deaf man in the HC:

I asked him where his wife was. He said that she was in the next one [LC]. I asked him why (...) He said: ‘Because all deaf [men] look at my wife. They like her so will ask her to give them her number to SMS her. They will tease her and spoil her.’ I told him that this is not true. He should advice his wife to be strong. (...) She will ignore what they say to her. (...) It looked like his wife was oppressed by him. (...) Such husbands will learn later that they made a mistake, because their wives become difficult persons: they do not understand things if they do not meet deaf people and do not develop their signing skills.

This is an example of the moral policing that is common in India, by families and husbands: monitoring and controlling female bodies in order to ensure they conform to the Indian core value of respectability (Butcher 2017, Parikh 2017, Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011). Here, crowds and religion may play a role: a deaf Muslim man whom we interviewed admitted that he asks his deaf wife to go in the LC when it is crowded because of Muslim customs. Deaf women in BFDW recognized moral policing by deaf husbands as a broader pattern and criticized it intensely. Because of the contrast with the HC, where deaf people can talk and learn, the LC is seen as a space of oppression and a space associated with solitude, invisibility, lack of knowledge and lack of development. Deaf husbands are characterized as oppressors when their wives do not get the chance to engage with other deaf people in the HC. While boarding the LC is a way to stay away from annoying and harassing men, the HC is a space where deaf women do (learn to) ignore or stand up to these men, as indicated by schoolgirl Riya’s comments. Also, many women (deaf as well as hearing) try to strategically position themselves in the HC in a way that minimizes the possibility of men’s gazes and touch eg. in corners, next to windows, avoiding the middle seat, and sitting with their back to people standing in the hallway. This is another example of embodied adaptations.

In evenings, the passenger body and the atmosphere in the HC is generally less appealing for women: in the morning trains, the established passenger body is relatively established, and the atmosphere is amicable, while in the evening it’s always a different crowd since passengers’ travelling times in the evening more strongly diverge. More importantly, in evenings there are generally more inebriated men in the HC. Deaf women in BFDW shared stories about having observed women being touched or otherwise abused in the HC, urging each other not to travel in the HC after 9 or 10 pm. Some women feel very strongly about their right to travel in the HC at any time though. Reena, a woman in her forties with a very confident personality preached to the audience in BFDW that deaf women should show they exist, should be visible, and that it is their right to travel in the HC. In this sense, she asserted herself explicitly as being a part of an intersectional group crossing two axes (deaf

and woman). Reena narrated that she takes an active role in sending encroachers out of the HC and in berating people who are drunk or soil the compartment. The embodied adaptations Reena adopts, and suggests to others, are to hide fear, to carry themselves in a confident way, to carry chilli powder and to be prepared to make a lot of noise if they are harassed. It seems age is a factor here though: in BFDW and the interviews, women aged above 40 seemed more confident and comfortable in the presence of men. Alka (Gujarati Hindu, 55) who mostly travels in the HC and regularly chats amicably with disabled men in the HC signed: “I'm old now. When I was younger, I was afraid. But I'm old now.”

Strategies and decisions

After having outlined what traveling in the HC or the LC means to deaf women, I now take a closer look at deaf women's contingent decisions to travel in either of them. Many deaf women alternate between the LC and the HC, and their decision where to board is often made on the spot. Women usually position themselves where they can board either the HC or the LC. On trains with two HCs, the other HC is positioned next to the GC, not enabling women to make such last-minute choices nor to quickly switch between the HC and LC (via the platform) at a further station. Making last-minute decisions or switching was not common in the past: in the older trains, the HC next to the LC was a small HC, which most women dislike; and the HC next to the GC was a big one, which did not enable women to make last minute choices or to switch quickly at a further station. In the newest trains, all HC are big ones. The HC next to the LC also holds the potential to deaf sociality more than the HC next to the GC because the former often stops at a better position in relation to the foot over bridge (FOB) (figure 9) in most stations, which means people can navigate the station more quickly when they get off (see Kusters 2017b).

Figure 9: Stairs to FOB and overhead signage for HC (top right).

Both the spatial dimension of travel, ie the materiality of different trains and different train stations, and the temporal dimension of travel, ie the time of the day impacts on the amount of crowding and the constitution of the passenger body. Deaf women's mobilities are “staged from above” (Jensen 2013) in that (segregated) transport provision is designed, orchestrated and planned by institutions, but deaf women's mobilities are also “staged from below” in that they take into account a number of factors in their decisions where to board, having positioned themselves in the best spot to do so. Looking at these factors shines light on the relationship between intersectionality and mobility.

First, deaf people in general feel more inclined to board a HC if they spot deaf friends through the window and might let the train pass if they are eager to chat but see no deaf people in the HC (see Kusters 2017b). Also, as outlined above, the size of the HC matters: Mona would rather let an incoming train pass if it is an old train with a small HC rather than a big one, and would wait until a new train with two big HCs arrives: ‘saving time is not an issue then’. This is echoed by other women in interviews. ‘But in the afternoon between the hours that there are no crowds I just get in the small HC. I'm fine with it then’, Mona added. Other women explained that they would catch the small HC if time is tight.

Another factor that influences decisions is the level of crowding. Women would eg. board the HC if it is significantly less crowded than the LC, or board the LC when it is less crowded than the HC. However, the LC could fill up much more quickly than the HC, especially near the rush hour. Boarding the HC was thus generally more effective to avoid crowds, but a downside is that a crowded HC will contain mostly men. In addition, while a very crowded compartment is not pleasant to travel in, women pointed out that there also needs to be a minimum number of passengers in the HC, explaining they would feel at risk for abuse, rape, or kidnapping if there were no other women in the HC, or if there were less than 4 or 5 people, and would board the LC instead.

However, the LC can feel threatening too, at certain times of the day. Men gatecrash some LC when they are less crowded than the neighboring GC, and in the quieter late evening hours such as after 9 or 10 pm, eve teasers board the compartment. The first people to keep the LC safe, are the women themselves, protesting, scolding and beating intruders. Strength is in numbers though, so in less crowded hours this is not self-evident and often, women don't confront men then. Policemen who guard the compartments at night often come in groups and occupy the last row of seats, from where they have a good view on the whole compartment, so women feel ogled and not comfortable. The partition between sections in train cars has been subject of much debate too: sometimes it is a solid wall with a small window, in other trains it is a wire grill (such as in figure 10). In the LC bordered to a GC, there are continuous leers, lewd remarks, sexually overt songs blaring on cell phones, therefore this compartment is nicknamed the 'TV', 'video coach' or 'View wala' (compartment with a view) (Phadke 2013). Sometimes when it is quiet, the GC may feel safer for women when the LC has few people and no guards: the GC are not overcrowded then and 'the crowd was seen as a protective entity, rather than a source of risk' (Hirsch et al. 2016, 77).

Figure 10: Separation between LC and HC.

The choice to board in the HC or the LC also depends on who deaf women are travelling with, especially when they are alone or travel with one other deaf woman. In this case, Sana would quickly skim the passenger body of the HC in arriving trains, glancing inside through the doors and windows: 'I look at their faces, I don't board unconsciously (...) First I see who's there and if it seems fine, then I accept to board.' Sana observes what people radiate, their face, their attire, their body language, and if she is uncomfortable, she will board the LC. She has this strategy in common with many other deaf women who travel alone or in pairs. Importantly, the scanning of clothes and behavior indicates the role of class (see Kusters 2017a on class-related discrimination in the HC). The presence of people who look sick, drunk, drugged or disheveled, or the presence of vomit or human waste in the compartment, impacts the decision whether to board the HC or the LC, or whether to catch the next train instead.

One could say that Sana, by scanning the HC, assesses the 'affective atmosphere' (Bissell 2010) in the compartment. Bissell (2010, 272) writes that 'rather than being inert, background, or ephemeral phenomena, atmospheres are forceful and affect the ways in which we inhabit these spaces'. Orienting toward affect 'prompts us to think about how different configurations of objects, technologies, and bodies come together to form different experiences of 'being with' whilst on the move.' (Bissell 2010, 272) Sana and Nalini, and many other deaf women with them, are actually not assessing each individual passenger separately and then calculating risk and gain in a rational way. Rather, by looking and sensing, they perceive the affective field of the compartment in a visceral way and pre-assess their travel experience before making the decision to board. 'As such', Bissell (2010,272) argues, 'affective atmospheres are central to everyday conduct whilst on the move since different atmospheres facilitate and restrict particular practices and, in doing so, precipitate particular structures of feeling'. I concur with Bissell (2010, 272) that 'thinking through affect helps us to attend to and account for the changeability of different journeying experiences, particularly those that are experienced on a routine basis.'

Because of this changeability, boarding decisions might happen on a whim and are influenced by mood, and of course there are interindividual differences. Some deaf women generally tend to board the HC most of their trips whilst others vary considerably between the HC and LC. For Mona, boarding the LC is a way to avoid the eternal conversations about politics in deaf clubs, and male 'dirty talk'. Sometimes she simply does not feel like talking because she is tired, especially since she works and lives with deaf people (she is part of a large deaf family) and already has gotten plenty of 'deaf talk' everyday. Deaf people have strategies to avoid particular people and conversations in the HC itself, including busily texting, pretending to sleep, and women also occupied these strategies in the HC (Kusters 2017b). However, deaf women also used the option of not boarding the HC for this

reason. Mona explained that she then stands on the platform, signing to deaf people in the HC that she 'does not want to be with boys only', to cover it up with an excuse, and then boards the LC. She thus strategically uses a gender-based argument, while for her, avoiding male talk is only part of the reason for avoiding the HC. The ladies compartment offers anonymity and invisibility. In the morning, sometimes Mona likes to sleep (in the LC) without risking being woken up by deaf people, and in evenings she loves to look around her in the LC, appreciating what other women wear and do, and appraising wares for sale (eg. hair pins, socks, earrings). She appreciates the particular female affective atmosphere of a non-crowded LC. Going back to Mona's earlier comment that women who *only* board the LC are narrowminded; her opinion is that women who alternate between the HC and the LC can have the best of two worlds and can make informed decisions.

Not only do women make last minute decisions on where to board, they also may switch to the adjoining compartment at a further station (it is not possible to move between compartments in the train itself). This happens for example in the form of switching to the LC when feeling threatened in the presence of inebriated men in the HC, when deaf friends leave the HC or when the HC is getting almost empty. The other way around also happens: deaf women could be in the LC and observe conversations of deaf passengers in the HC through the window or grill, and switch over. Here we see that the partition not only causes feeling of discomfort (as in the case of the "video coach") but also makes it possible for deaf women to observe from a distance what's going on in the HC while being in the LC. Bissell (2010, 273) suggests thinking of affective atmospheres as 'a propensity: a pull or a charge that might emerge in a particular space which might (or might not) generate particular events and actions, feelings and emotions.' Deaf women's decisions are impacted by this push or pull that comes with the constant shifting of the passenger group at each stop (every few minutes) which impacts on rapid shifts in affective atmosphere and in feelings of comfort.

Discussion

Through the intracategorical approach to intersectionality which I have adopted here, I treated deaf women as an intersectional category specifically because of the choices they face in the context of train stations in Mumbai by virtue of them being entitled to travel in both the ladies and 'handicapped' compartment, both of which are viable and sensible options for many of them. This approach allowed me to investigate how categorization itself (imposed by the segregated train design), and the overlaps of categories (gender and disability) are experienced and negotiated by deaf women. Decisions to board the HC or the LC are not simply made because someone feels more deaf than lady, or more lady than deaf, and also does not lead to deaf women negating their gender in the HC or their deafness in the LC. Deaf women are experiencing and performing gender in the HC by being uncomfortable with male talk, by being sensitive to the affective atmosphere before boarding, by their embodied adaptations, or by explicitly asserting and advocating deaf women's entitlement to this space. They also experience and perform being deaf in the LC such as being able to switch off from conversations around them by closing the eyes, by their way of communicating with hearing people, or by signing with deaf female co-passengers. Travel time use, transport space and transport time are integral to how intersectionality shapes the contingencies of decision making. Therefore, in the case of deaf women on the Mumbai trains, intersectionality and mobility mutually shape each other in context-based ways.

For deaf women travelling on the Mumbai trains, *intersectionality shapes mobility* in that they take into account a number of factors which are related to physical and visceral experiences as well as to language and communication: the presence of a small versus big HC, the location of the HC in relation to the FOB, the amount of crowding in the HC and LC, the time of the day, the affective atmosphere in the HC, gender balance in the HC, the presence of deaf people in the HC, the smell in the HC, their own mood and energy level, being in a rush or having time, the gender of their travel partners, and the relationship with their travel partners. This enumeration does not reflect a mere

checklist of factors nor can they be arranged in a simplistic deterministic schema: the weight of factors is context-dependent, and some factors weigh heavier for some people than for others. Most of these factors are not specific to deaf women: in Kusters (2017b) I outline travel behavior of deaf people with regard to which HC to board and when (since a train can have up to three HC). Yet the deaf women whose experiences were described in this article alternate the LC with the HC, which further complicates the decision. And as Sudha's case indicates, being able to afford a first class pass can even further complicate the decisions. *Becoming* a HC traveler was a gradual process featured by a series of tipping points initiated by the changing train design, and meant getting used to an environment that is not only 'more deaf', but also overwhelmingly male.

Also, *mobility shapes intersectionality*. To go back to Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall's (2013) definition, intersectionality leads to oppression and uncomfortable feelings but can lead to specific opportunities – and these are experiences that deaf women have had in both the HC and the LC. While both the HC and the LC may feel safe and comfortable, depending on the circumstances, *both* the HC and the LC can feel unsafe and uncomfortable (in terms of crowding, "dirty talk", eve teasing, harassment, and male gaze). Feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in one compartment (ie HC or LC) does not necessarily lead to switching over to the other, although it might. Importantly though, the (perceived or experienced) risks to be harassed or to be uncomfortable in extreme crowds impact deaf women's mobilities and might matter *more* than their preference to travel among women in the LC or among deaf people in the HC. However, we also see that the social aspect is paramount too: sometimes deaf women choose to board the HC, potentially feeling less safe or comfortable (with men or crowds) but feeling more socially connected. The HC is a space associated with learning, community, personal strength and courage, where deaf women can flourish if they are prepared to be strong and engage in certain embodied adaptations. Not boarding the HC *also* brings a certain risk with it: the loss of opportunity to engage in deaf spaces, to learn and flourish in these pockets of sociability. This is reminiscent of Parikh's [2017] account about female Mumbaikars who travel at night not necessarily choosing the safest route, for that route implied less sociality. My approach to intersectionality is reminiscent of Werbner's (2013, 401) criticism of accounts of intersectionality that *only* 'disclose hidden intersections of multiple inequalities – of class, race, ethnicity, age and gender'. She argues that we also need to recognize 'everyday sociality whenever actors highlight a shared identity held in common that enables them to engage in positive communication and shared performance across their differences.' (Werbner 2013, 402)

Vehicles such as boats, cars, bicycles, and in this case, trains, 'often become the fundamental medium or trigger for a change in gender relations' (Elliot 2016, 83); in this case deaf women travelling together with men on a regular basis is one of the ways deaf women develop a more prominent presence in deaf networks in the city. In combination with other developments in the city, travelling in the HC has changed the position of deaf women. At the same time, 'movement can also consolidate unequal gender relations and/or be a detriment to a specific gendered category' (Elliot 2016, 83), and we see this in cases where women feel they have to tolerate men's talk in the HC, or are told by their husbands to travel in the LC. Both the HC and LC can thus become a space of gender-related oppression. For deaf women, choosing autonomously to board the LC is different from having no choice but travelling in the LC. Making informed and autonomous choices means being strong deaf women.

Mobility thus *changes* people, rather than merely repositioning them (Elliot 2016, 84). In the case of deaf women *intersectionality shapes mobility* in that their intersectionality leads to a complex and changeable, context-dependent set of strategies and decisions on train platforms in Mumbai. There is a 'subtle but fundamental correlation between exterior movement and interior transformation' (Elliot 2016, 85). And this is how *mobility shapes intersectionality*: in that by being mobile on the segregated Mumbai suburban trains and thus making decisions in which spaces to dwell, deaf women assert or develop their experiences, their strength, their knowledge, their aspirations. Here, rather than approaching the mutual shaping of gender and mobility or of deafness

and mobility, studying how intersectionality and mobility shape each other does right to the complexity, the contingency and the potential of travel choices.

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