Uncanny trains: Cities, suburbs, and the appropriate place and use of transportation infrastructure

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I. Introduction

> "The dwelling places of modernity embody the material connections that make the social construction of bodies possible, by first materially constructing 'others', in the form of natural or social processes, and then keeping them outside" (Kaïka 2004, p. 272).

Despite their important role in nation-building in the 1800s, for much of the later twentieth century railroads were largely considered relics of the past (Stilgoe 1983), with hundreds of miles of branch lines abandoned on a yearly basis (Russell et al. 1996). However, after regulatory reform in 1976 and 1980 reduced government controls on pricing and allowed railroads to both merge and abandon rail lines more easily, the railroads slowly regained their competitiveness against trucking. They increased revenue while lowering prices and abandoning over 100,000 miles of track, leaving approximately 140,000 miles in place (Slack 2013; compare to 47,000 miles of the Interstate Highway System). Long-distance freight rail has become an integral and growing component of logistics networks across the continent. The rapid growth of container shipping, the deregulation of the railroad industry, and the push for more sustainable transportation led to significant increases in rail traffic from the 1980s on, to the point where urban centers and rail hubs have become extremely congested (Thomas and O'Laughlin 2007). Because of high capital and land acquisition costs, particularly within metropolitan areas, this often means making better utilization of existing rail lines rather than building new track. Bulk goods such as wheat and chemicals as well as auto carriers and intermodal containers regularly travel on networks that were built in the 1800s, not only through rural areas but alongside Main Street and through the heart of the largest cities. This juxtaposition of century-and-a-half-old infrastructure and modern urban and suburban environments, concentrated along many fewer miles of track than before, is increasingly leading to conflict.

On the one hand, this opposition concerns the trains themselves and the goods they carry, since their mobile nature sets them apart from traditional understandings of risk (Cidell 2012a, 2012b). Although infrastructure may remain fixed, vehicles are not constantly present but transition in and out of the landscape. Existing regulations and policies, however, often mean that project proponents can take advantage of the temporary and mobile nature of the risk to put certain forms or sites of analysis as outside the scope of environmental review. On the other hand, opposition to railroad operations can include a fear of something more sinister than the inconvenience of waiting for a train to cross the road, a fear I interpret through the theoretical framework of the uncanny.

Within urban geography, the concept of the uncanny has been most thoroughly explored by Maria Kaïka and Erik Swyngedouw, who draw on Freud to consider how the familiar or routine conceals the threatening, and how the threatening pops back up no matter how we try to suppress it or cover it over. In an urban context, this means that the infrastructure which enables our daily lives and routines, selectively letting some people and things flow while keeping others at bay, can also become a threat to those routines and the places they help to construct when those flows

are disrupted. Disruptions therefore become undesirable not only in and of themselves, but because they remind us that there are inequities in access that are built into the system.

This fear of disruption and the uncanny can be seen through the opposition to a railroad acquisition in the Chicago suburbs that took place in the late 2000s. The proposed acquisition of the beltline Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern Railroad by Canadian National met with fierce resistance from many of the communities located along the EJ&E, citing concerns over increased traffic, blocked road crossings, and greater risk of hazardous materials spills. Additionally, for many suburban residents, transferring train traffic from urban to suburban lines represented the social and environmental inequality that they had moved to the suburbs to try and escape but would continue to haunt them through everyday activities such as waiting for a train to cross the tracks. Opponents of the acquisition were therefore trying to suppress the *uncanny* as represented by freight trains and their disruption of everyday suburban mobility. In so doing, they revealed how they were constructing the urban and the suburban through the flows and disruptions, or mobilities and immobilities, found in each type of place.

The following section introduces the theoretical part of this argument by explaining four elements of the uncanny in more detail: the naturalization of the urban, the exclusion of the other, selective porosity, and disrupted rhythms. This is followed by an explication of the details of the case study and the a discussion of that case study through the lens of the uncanny. The conclusion considers how mobility sets this conflict apart from other controversies over changing suburban land uses.

II. The uncanny in urban political ecology

In their discussions of urban infrastructure and the uncanny, Maria Kaïka and Erik Swyngedouw consider how the incorporation of utility networks into the landscape hides not only the physical manifestation of the flows along those networks, but the production process behind those flows: They trace the history of the incorporation of water networks into the home, from public spectacles meant to celebrate modernity and progress to taken-for-granted pieces of infrastructure that are meant to be hidden away (in part because the vision of modernity for all was impossible to achieve). They also argue that this veiling of the processes that go into commodifying nature and bringing it to our doorsteps is necessary in order to construct the home as a place of safety and security: "Thus, excluding socio-natural processes as 'the other' becomes a *prerequisite* for the construction of the familiar space of the home. The inside becomes safe, familiar and independent not only by excluding rain, cold and pollution, but also through keeping fear, anxiety, social upheaval and inequality outside" (Kaïka 2004, p. 272, italics in the original). The *naturalized urban* that is excluded from the home through utility networks includes both the negative effects of the urban environment and the parallel social inequities.

Of course, complete separation of home and nature or home and city is not desirable: commuters need to get to work, water needs to get into and out of the house, suburbs need to be leafy and green, etc. "By keeping outside the undesired…natural and social 'things' and processes, and by welcoming inside the desirable ones (filtered, produced and commodified), the modern home has acquired a *selective porosity* which is enabled by a set of invisible social and material connections" (Kaïka 2004, p. 275, italics in the original). Sociotechnical networks have to

simultaneously keep in the good and exclude the bad, which means they also have to be able to parse out what is good and what is bad. *Selective porosity* can be seen in terms of transportation in that access is necessary to get to work, school, shopping, etc., but too much access for too many people, or the wrong kind of people, can be a problem.

It takes considerable work to maintain both these networks and the security they provide, work which cannot always be achieved. Inevitably, networks fail or are disrupted, due to natural disaster, worn-out materials, human error, or deliberate actions. If the security of the home depends on the hidden yet functional state of utility networks, the disruption of those networks not only means a break in service but a crack in the façade of security. This results in an eruption of what Freud called the "uncanny," or "when the predictable nature of the familiar acts in unpredictable ways" (Kaïka 2004, p. 277). The anxiety the uncanny brings about comes from not only the disruption itself—the failure of electricity, the leak in the roof—but from the reminder of how fragile such networks are and how difficult it is to keep them functioning. Being able to *exclude the other* is a feature of sociotechnical networks, either deliberate or as a byproduct, and disruption threatens that exclusion.

It is not only the domestic sphere where the disruption of networks can bring forth anxiety, however. Gibas (2012) considers this same question in his study of the Prague metro, arguing that since the experience of the metro is defined as motion in a regular rhythm, any delay or disruption to mobility becomes a source of anxiety: "As for the metro, the rhythm – or better, the polyrhythmia of the everyday – gives birth to a preoccupation with the futile effort to perfect the rhythm, to prevent disruptions. It gives birth to the fear of disturbance symbolically embodied in the struggle to purify the metro space" (Gibas 2012, p. 496). Instead of security being found in the protected space of the home, Gibas argues that that security and normality on the metro consist of being in motion, enabling people to keep their regular routines of travel intact. *Disrupted rhythms* are therefore a disruption of security and space, even outside the home.

There is a long history of writing about the suburbs as non-city space, which like Kaïka and Swyngedouw's commodified nature (Swyngedouw and Kaïka 2000), require the city as the other side of a binary in order to exist. However, most of this work neglects the suburbs and the city as spaces of flow, whether the daily travel of commuters or schoolchildren, the provision of goods to retail establishments, or longer-distance flows that happen to cross suburban borders. When looking at the scale of the metropolitan area, we are reminded that "spatial claims made by the private sphere (domestic or other) are always translated into the deprivation of the public sphere from these same spaces and the reduction of spaces of the margin" (Kaïka 2004, p. 273). In order to claim space for private yards, public parkland was reduced. In order to enable swift commutes into the city, urban neighborhoods were bulldozed for interstate highways. In order to enable the easy travel of automobiles, pedestrian spaces were reduced or eliminated. Any action that might threaten the rhythm of automobile-based life in the suburbs, such as shifting freight traffic from a central-city railroad to a bypass line, must therefore be fought not only on its own terms but as a reminder of the uncanny underside of the suburbs: people can only enjoy the lifestyle they have because others are excluded from it. The following section gives the background information on the case study which will illuminate this argument.

III. The case study

In the fall of 2007, Canadian National (CN) applied to purchase the Elgin, Joliet, & Eastern (EJ&E) to transfer its transcontinental intermodal container traffic from the congested center of Chicago to this bypass. Under U.S. railroad regulations, mergers and acquisitions have to be approved by the Surface Transportation Board in order to ensure competitiveness. In this case, the STB took the unusual step of requiring an Environmental Impact Statement as part of their review process. The main impact of the acquisition would be to shift traffic from CN's radial lines into and out of downtown Chicago to the beltline through the suburbs, increasing traffic on the beltline from about five trains a day to twenty-five to forty trains a day. The draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) noted that since traffic on the urban lines would decrease, the environment would improve in those neighborhoods and municipalities. For the most part, the thirty-six suburbs along the "J" are more affluent and whiter than the inner suburbs and city neighborhoods traversed by CN's urban lines. The DEIS therefore also noted that existing environmental injustice would be alleviate by the shifting of traffic to suburban areas, which certainly played a role in how opponents of the acquisition framed their arguments.

As part of the environmental review process, public meetings were held, and comments on the DEIS were taken in written or oral form at the meetings as well as by phone, e-mail, or regular mail. The analysis in this paper is taken from both the comments submitted to the STB and the transcripts of the public meetings, all of which are available on the STB's website, as well as the record of final decision issued by the STB. The STB received approximately 9,500 comments on the DEIS in written or oral form, identifying over 55,000 individual issues (STB 2008). I analyze these comments according to four elements of the uncanny identified above—disrupted rhythms, selective porosity, excluding the other, and naturalizing the urban—to demonstrate how fears over the proposed transaction reflected deeper concerns about the risks that flows of people and freight pose to urban and suburban places.

Gibas argued that disruption in the regular rhythms of life can lead to anxiety or concern, one way in which the uncanny manifests in the urban environment. Disruption was indeed of major concern to CN opponents. According to the STB's summary of the comments received on the DEIS, the most frequently raised issue was traffic delays and congestion, mentioned by nearly 5,500 of the 9,500 comments (STB 2008, p. 3.2-4). In particular, the increase in both frequency and length of trains would lead to longer periods of time with the crossing gates down at at-grade crossings. People described how their daily routines involved crossing the tracks multiple times per day, expressing concern over the uncertainty of whether or not that crossing would be blocked by a CN train.

> "I'm Melissa Bean, and I have the honor of representing the Illinois 8th District in the U.S. Congress and many of you that are here tonight. I'm speaking to you not just on behalf of those that I serve in this district, but as a mom in the community. In fact, I just missed both of my daughters. So like many of you I have to cross the EJ&E tracks to go to the grocery store, to go to school, to get to the hospital, and it affects us on a personal level as well." (U.S. Representative Melissa Bean, Barrington public meeting)

For many suburban residents, daily scheduling of themselves and their children is tightly choreographed, involving multiple car trips and carefully-planned schedules with little room to spare. Having to wait for a train or drive to the nearest separated crossing would disrupt that schedule and throw the day into chaos. More seriously, the second most common issue for opponents was increased emergency response times, found in roughly 5,000 comments. Multiple police and fire representatives spoke at each public meeting about their concerns over having crossings blocked, some sharing personal experiences about having to wait for trains while trying to get to a fire or accident. Here, the disruption was emphasized to be not only an inconvenience, but a matter of life and death:

> "The police department fears that with the additional trains, we'll have difficulty getting to where we are needed. When we're responding to nonemergency calls, waiting on trains is frustrating. However, when we have to get to an emergency call, it's much more than an inconvenience. It's life threatening" (Chief of Police, Aurora, IL).

Here, fear of disruption tapped into deeper concerns about not having access to emergency services. Commenters spoke of senior centers, schools, and neighborhoods that would be temporarily inaccessible were a train to go by at the wrong time. The village of Barrington even made a video that counted down the seconds that the average train spent blocking a crossing, relating it to the urgency of getting help to a heart attack or stroke victim as soon as possible. The video was posted on an opposition website and shown at public rallies held by acquisition opponents.

For many members of the public, Kaïka's concept of selective porosity was the whole purpose of the STB's decision making process: to allow certain flows of people and goods to continue through their towns (namely, themselves on their way to work, school or shopping) while keeping other flows out (freight traffic, residents of nearby towns taking shortcuts). For example, the contrast between commuter and freight trains was sharply drawn based on their function—not their physical presence:

> "We appreciate the role that a railroad plays in the development of Barrington. Without the Northwestern, now Metra, we would not be among the most desired communities in which to live. However, the CN acquisition would overwhelm our community with increased freight traffic, a condition that if preexisting would have prevented the community from attaining the quality of life we now enjoy, one that is reflected in our home values and the tax base to support our excellent school system. That is the reality we must give priority to" (Director, Barrington Area Development Council).

The "reality" being referred to here is that for decades, the porosity of the transportation networks have allowed commuters to travel to downtown Chicago without having to drive, while keeping noisier and more hazardous freight traffic near the people who cannot afford to live in Barrington and its equally well-to-do neighbors. This quotation makes explicit the connection between the quality of life in the suburbs and the absence of freight trains, framed not through quiet and safety but through high property values.

Beyond selective porosity, urban infrastructure also enables people to completely keep out that which they feel doesn't belong as part of making their homes safe. There is a long history in the US of suburban exclusion by race and by class, using tools such as redlining, steering, large lot sizes, and even outright violence to keep the "wrong people" from moving out of the city. Transportation infrastructure itself can be part of the process of exclusion; the "wrong side of the tracks" is a well-known euphemism for a disadvantaged neighborhood. Kaïka argued that this exclusion of the other is *necessary* in order to define the home as safe, both in material terms by keeping particular bodies or objects out of sight, but also by repressing the fear and anxiety associated with the "other." In the case of the EJ&E, that fear was on display for those who saw increased train traffic as posing a threat to the home and community as precisely that place of safety and security. Many commenters, not only in the official record but at public rallies held to increase awareness, spoke of how they had chosen to move to a particular place because of its peace, quiet, calmness, or other expressions of non-urbanness. For these people, the train would be a crack in the suburban façade, bringing the city and their fears along with it:

> "I, along with many others, moved to this community and made time to shepherd its development for the same reason, that it is unique in the Chicago area…Many consider it a kind of sanctuary to which residents can retreat after a day of heavy traffic, noise, and hassle experienced elsewhere…[With transaction approval] increases in noise, traffic, pollution, danger, and frustration would be our new normal. That's not what we came here for" (Planning Commission Chair, Hawthorn Woods, IL).

The security and desirability of these communities is described in explicit contrast to *other* places outside the municipal boundaries: "urbanity" that is "elsewhere." However, these people are not denying their reliance on the "other." They need larger cities for employment, shopping, recreation, and other activities that are not possible in their "sanctuary." Kaïka would remind us, though, that this is not the only way in which the "other" is being excluded. Anxiety over social inequality is present as well, since the only reason these municipalities' residents can have the "sanctuary" they seek is by excluding others: placing them on the wrong side of the tracks. The noise and emissions of CN trains would be a reminder that they are still part of an urban area, with all the economic and social inequality that entails, as much as they have tried to avoid it. Moreover, a decline in property values might make it possible for those previously-excluded people to be able to afford the same "sanctuary," reducing its exclusivity and desirability.

Finally, Kaïka and Swyngedouw argued that as utility networks become part of the landscape, they are naturalized or taken for granted. Here, the connection between "urbanity" and transportation infrastructure was explicitly developed and used by acquisition opponents to delineate the places where freight trains were and weren't appropriate. Cities are where noisy, disruptive, hazardous trains have always been and should always be; the suburbs are for peace and quiet and are not equipped to handle international flows of freight. This argument was made both through reference to the material presence of infrastructure and the consequences of having it within the landscape:

> "Remember that the communities Canadian National currently runs trains through have had many decades in which to adjust themselves to their current level of rail traffic. Houses, schools, and businesses have been located with an eye to the railroad tracks. Underpasses and overpasses have been planned and gradually constructed." (Resident, Mundelein, IL).
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> "People who currently live in the area today where the trains are running have dealt with this issue for many years. Their property values reflect already the high volume of train traffic. Who is going to pay our homeowners because of their home values being reduced because of these trains coming through?" (Village Trustee, Frankfort, IL).

There are two components to this naturalization of the urban. First, "the urban" supposedly has infrastructure that "the suburban" does not, namely separated grade crossings that allow flows of automobile traffic to continue unhindered no matter how many trains go by. While Chicago did require all railroads to separate grade crossings in the 1800s, that practice did not continue in the adjacent suburbs. Nevertheless, the Draft EIS notes that there are 99 grade crossings listed along the EJ&E tracks, but 98 along the current CN line. In other words, there is no difference in terms of how many rail-road intersections would be affected were train traffic to be shifted from one line to the other. Since the existing lines are within denser urban areas, it is likely that there are more cars waiting at those intersections than the corresponding grade crossings in the outer suburbs, further casting doubt on opponents' claims.

At the same time, opponents claimed that outer suburban communities have grown up around the EJ&E tracks with their five trains a day and therefore should not be subject to more. However, this ignores the fact that residents of these same communities have themselves changed the character of the "quiet" and "rural" locations by moving there. The village of Frankfort, for example, has more than doubled its population in only twenty years, from less than 8,000 in 1991 to just over 18,000 in 2011. The more-than-doubling of population has surely resulted in a similar increase in automobile traffic, and yet there was little awareness on the part of speakers that they might themselves have contributed to traffic congestion. In other words, they argued for maintaining the status quo with regards to the presence of rail traffic and the uncanny reminder it poses of the urban landscapes they are trying to escape, while continuing to ignore their own contributions to the increasing density of the suburban fringe. In fact, the STB's final report noted that the majority of delays at suburban railroad crossings were due to inadequate provision of road capacity in the face of rapid population growth, *not* increases in freight traffic, and therefore CN should only be financially responsible for a portion of a few new grade separations.

This critique of the suburban opposition to the EJ&E acquisition should be balanced against some questionable decisions and practices of both CN and the regulatory authority. The STB approved the acquisition of the EJ&E by CN on December 24, 2008—arguably the day of the year on which opponents would least be able to mobilize any sort of response. All the STB required of CN was that they pay the majority of the costs of two grade crossings, the installation of monitoring equipment at more key intersections to enable emergency dispatchers to reroute first responders, and that they report on the number of minutes their trains blocked grade crossings along the EJ&E for five years. Approximately a dozen of the municipalities located

along the EJ&E made their own private mitigation agreements with CN. After only a year, automatic monitoring of the crossings demonstrated that CN was underreporting the number of incidents where a crossing was blocked for more than ten minutes by a staggering factor of one hundred, leading to the first-ever fine issued by the STB (Eldeib 2010). CN claimed they had reported a mere 14 incidents because they thought they were only required to report when *stopped* trains blocked crossings, whereas the automatic monitors' observations of 1,457 incidents were based on *slow-moving* trains. This distinction between mobile and immobile trains was irrelevant to residents of municipalities such as Barrington, whose concerns about uncanny disruptions have been justified to some extent by CN's actions since the acquisition.

V. Conclusions

The transport of hazardous materials is contentious because of the potentially deadly consequences of an accident. In contrast to the siting of a nuclear power plant, landfill, factory, or other undesirable land use that stays in one place, train traffic poses a more complicated risk: sometimes it is there, and sometimes it isn't (Cidell 2012b). When proposed actions would increase the number of shipments and/or introduce new and more hazardous substances to the route, objections are to be expected, which is why an environmental review was conducted in the case of the acquisition of the EJ&E by CN. However, the conflict over the acquisition demonstrates how other kinds of risks were brought into the space of the debate, highlighting how the very distinction between city and suburb is based on the presence and use of transportation infrastructure. Acquisition opponents portrayed "the city" or "the urban" as the appropriate place for freight trains, in part because of the supposed presence of overpasses and underpasses to enable automobile-based flows to continue, but also because the suburbs were supposed to be quiet, exclusive, free-flowing, and otherwise non-urban. Accepting the presence of freight trains in their home community would mean that the suburban-urban line would have blurred, and their security and safety along with it. For acquisition opponents, the daily routine of commuting, going to school, and enjoying a high quality of life was at stake. Importantly, this routine is based on the presence of rail and road infrastructure and suburbanites' ability to use that infrastructure for their own unrestricted mobility. Allowing a significant increase in intersecting freight traffic would do more than cause a few minutes of delay: it would threaten the foundation of the suburban lifestyle, namely unfettered travel by automobile.

It is not surprising that an individual or family who moved to the outer suburbs to avoid the congestion and hassles of "the city" would be opposed to a rail transaction that would increase freight train traffic, allowing the uncanny urban to pop up near their new home. I do not mean to brush aside opponents' concerns as completely unjustified: access to emergency services and the threat of hazardous material spills in areas that rely on local aquifers for drinking water are very real concerns (albeit ones that inner suburban and city residents already faced). CN's failure to properly report its activities subsequent to the acquisition's approval shows that opponents' fears about a large corporation not doing as it was told were largely justified and that ongoing monitoring is necessary. However, I would like to emphasize that part of the desire to keep the freight traffic in the city is also, no doubt, the desire to not have to think about "those people" who currently have to deal with it. Keeping a separation between city and suburb is fundamental to this understanding of the appropriate place and use of transportation infrastructure, including the risks which that infrastructure poses.

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