



Close contact: skin & the space of the 19th-century omnibus

This paper offers an exploration into reading transport and mobility histories through the lens of the skin. Amid wider critical attention to embodied experiences of travel, the outermost surface of the body holds much potential as a site of visual, tactile, and sensory encounter with transport spaces. In this talk, I focus such a reading on the especially “close contact” of omnibus travel as it appears in 19th-century visual and literary representations. Whether in the confines of the omnibus interior, or exposed to the elements outside, skin is situated as intermediary between the surrounding space and the sensing, moving subject; it is also a site for visual inspection by and of others, with the potential to be (mis-)read through and in relation to social and cultural discourses; and it holds the possibility of direct, potentially transgressive, bodily contact between passengers. Meanwhile the commercial sphere of skincare percolated through the visual field of travel in the form of advertisements inside and around the omnibus. Reading omnibus travel through appearances of skin is illustrative both in extending commentary upon its particularities as a public transport space, as well as positing broader perspectives for reading the bodily, social, and spatial interactions of transport and mobility histories.

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