Fear of a foreign railroad: Transnationalism, trainspace, and (im)mobility in the Chicago suburbs

Abstract: The fluidity and mobility of the twenty-first century are grounded in physical infrastructure such as airports and train stations, but also on the routes along which people and goods travel. Within recent work on the meanings, practices, and experiences of flying, driving, walking, cycling, or riding the rails, the focus has been on the travel of people rather than commodities and on network nodes rather than routes. Nevertheless, the transport of freight and its interaction with people and places along distribution routes has significant implications for understanding discursive constructions of the national and the foreign. In 2007, the Canadian National railroad began the process of purchasing a beltline railroad around Chicago to ease the passage of containerized freight from Asia to North American distribution centers. Suburban communities protested the transaction, arguing that the increase in trains would lead to traffic congestion, problems with emergency vehicle access, and water supply contamination. Despite the local scale of these concerns, opponents framed their protest in terms of a *foreign* railroad disrupting *American* communities, suggesting deeper underlying concerns about the transnational nature of the transaction and the resulting route. They also argued for considering the spaces of this mode of transportation, what I term trainspace, as consisting of more than the vehicles, infrastructure, and adjacent properties, underlining the importance of considering routes and infrastructure as a fundamental social component of transnational processes and of considering motility or potential movement along with mobility. *Keywords: transport, mobilities, transnationalism, railroads, freight, North America*

Introduction

Much of our modern era is based on the mobility of people and things around the world, enabled or discouraged by technology, physical proximity, regulatory frameworks, and flows of capital (Dodge and Kitchin 2004, Frändberg and Vihelmson 2003, Gogia 2006, Urry 2000, 2004). These mobilities and the flows they enable are grounded in physical infrastructure, including nodes such as airports and train stations. Such nodes or "non-places" (Augé 1995) have subsequently been argued to be as "placelike" as city centers or villages, constructed by the people and things that move through them in concert with technology, regulations, and cultural and material practices (Adey et al. 2007, Cresswell 2006, Cresswell and Merriman 2011, Dodge and Kitchin 2007, Fotel 2006). Recent work on mobilities has investigated the meanings, practices, and experiences that are part of flying, driving, walking, cycling, or riding the rails and that contribute to transnational processes such as migration, tourism, and business (e.g., Adey 2006, Budd 2009, Dodge and Kitchin 2007, Edensor 2003, Fotel 2006, Kesselring 2006, Law 2006, Sheller and Urry 2006, Williams 2011), while transport geographers continue to demonstrate the importance of the political economy behind the infrastructure and vehicles that enable these flows (e.g., Farmer 2011, Keeling 2009, Kwan 2006, Rodrigue 2006, 2008, Slack 1990, 1993).

These important contributions to understanding the ways that mobility and transportation shape places and spaces have largely focused on passenger travel rather than on freight, and on nodes rather than routes. Even calls to "follow the thing" (Cook and Harrison 2007) have focused more on the places at each end of a commodity's journey than on the vehicles or routes that enable it to move. Freight travel is underexamined despite its importance in enabling global processes, from physical infrastructure in the form of rail lines, to state or private railroads that build, use, and maintain the tracks, to the cargo they carry. In particular, railroads have a long history as nation-

building projects, whether as resource extraction networks, enabling and encouraging colonization and settlement, or asserting transcontinental dominance through physical presence (Osborne and Wurtele 1995). Additionally, within many metropolitan areas, railroad suburbs were established based on their combination of distance from and access to the central business district, and many still retain their identity based on this connection and the daily flow of workers back and forth.

Within North America, railroads and their tracks have been privately owned and operated in the US and both state- and privately-owned in Canada. 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, 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. For neighbors of existing tracks, this means increases in pollution, delays at crossings, and safety concerns. However, the global nature of the flows involved means that these concerns may be about more than just the trains and tracks—especially when foreign actors and spaces are deliberately invoked. This paper uses a North American case study of how increased freight rail traffic was portrayed as a threat to homes and livelihoods by nature of the national borders it crosses to argue for paying closer attention to the routes and infrastructure over which flows of people and goods travel.

In the fall of 2007, the Canadian National railroad (CN) applied to purchase the Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern (EJ&E), a 320-kilometer-long beltline railroad around Chicago, from the existing owner, US Steel. The main goals were to gain access to railyards for maintenance of railcars and to ease the passage of containerized freight around the central city bottleneck posed by Chicago's hub-and-spoke rail lines. US regulations required that the Surface Transportation Board (STB) review the purchase. The STB decided to require an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) because of the potential impact of increasing freight traffic from around five trains a day to around thirty through many of the area's fastest-growing suburbs. In most cases, US railroads are free to increase traffic on their tracks without any opportunity for public review; this case is therefore a rare and valuable example of how public opposition to a change in use of existing transportation infrastructure was framed and expressed.

The proposed increase in rail traffic spurred significant resistance from local communities. Concerns were raised over emergency vehicle access, water supply contamination, and pedestrian safety. While these concerns are not surprising, what *is* unusual is how often these issues were raised in the context of a foreign railroad disrupting American communities. There were three components to these objections: CN's safety record within Canada; the location of profits and jobs in relation to the location of the negative effects; and the origin of the freight that CN would be carrying. Residents and local politicians argued that the transnational nature of CN and its freight posed a different kind of threat or risk from other railroads already passing through their towns. The strategy of using foreignness to stop the acquisition of the EJ&E also made it possible for opponents to overcome paradoxes based on the appropriate place and use of transportation infrastructure within a metropolitan context. The acquisition was approved in late 2008, although some opponents have continued to fight it in court.

Economic and environmental constraints are leading to more intensive use of existing transportation infrastructure. At the same time, the worldwide trend towards the privatization of this infrastructure has led to fierce battles not only over the public vs. private nature of the ownership and operation of said infrastructure, but the identity of the proposed owners. For example, Dubai Port World's attempt to acquire the right to manage six US ports in 2006 revealed the xenophobia of Congress and the American public alike at the prospect of Middle Easterners (in this case, investors from Dubai) owning American port facilities (Smith 2008). Restrictions on foreign ownership of infrastructure exist in many countries around the world, and conflicts such as the one over the EJ&E are likely to repeat in many other locations because of the long-term, generally steady returns of infrastructure projects that make them desirable for investors in an uncertain economic climate (Vaughan and Basar 2009). Understanding how foreignness was constructed and used in this case study can therefore help us resolve future conflicts over transnational mobilities.

This paper proposes the analytical concept of *trainspace* to understand the effects of transportation infrastructure beyond the site of the infrastructure itself. Trainspace can be thought of as the space(s) constructed or maintained by the (im)mobility of trains, in both discursive and material terms. More than a scale of analysis or a “corridor place” along the tracks (Stilgoe 1983), trainspace can include multiple spatialities, from places to networks to scales, and it can be a highly contested space. In this case, opponents of the EJ&E acquisition attempted to demonstrate that the relevant trainspace included not only the rails and vehicles in their immediate vicinity, but a transnational network of shipping routes, and that the intersection of trainspace with other spaces such as road networks and aquifers could be disastrous. Federal

regulators, on the other hand, limited trainspace to the tracks within the region and some adjacent properties as they approved the transaction while requiring minimal mitigation from CN.

The following section outlines the mobilities and transport geography literatures on which this paper draws and goes into more detail on the concept of trainspace. This is followed by background on the EJ&E and CN and a brief discussion of methods. The fourth section describes how foreignness was constructed and invoked by acquisition opponents while the discussion section explores the connections among mobility, transnationalism, and trainspace. Finally, the conclusion argues for greater attention to be paid to the vehicles and routes that enable transnational processes and practices. The case study also shows how transportation geography and mobilities can be combined to advance both theory and policy (Goetz et al. 2009, Hall 2010, Shaw and Hesse 2010).

Mobilities and transport

For too long, transport geography has been considered as a moribund or disconnected subfield from the changes and advances occurring within human geography as a whole (Hanson 2003, Shaw and Hesse 2010, Shaw and Sidaway 2011). Even throughout the rise of the globalization and scale literatures, there were few detailed analyses of the transport of people or goods or the infrastructure that enables global mobility. More recently, the burgeoning field of mobilities has explored the social meanings of transport and how being in motion is a fundamental part of everyday life (Hannam et al. 2006, Sheller and Urry 2006).

The emerging mobilities paradigm is closely tied to work on transnationalism (e.g., Frändberg and Vihelmson 2003 , Hannam et al. 2006, Larsen et al. 2006, Conradson and McKay 2007, Sheller and Urry 2006). This approach argues that the long-held sedentarist understandings of people and places are too limiting. The supposed non-places (Augé 1995) of transportation

networks such as airports, train stations, and vehicles are emblematic of our era, temporarily-constructed as they are by travelers, workers, and others (Watts 2008). Transportation practices make transnationalism possible, historically as well as in the present (Nussbaum 2003, Ogborn 2005); conversely, the practices and processes that people engage in construct places as temporary configurations of flows of people and goods (Massey 1994).

Mobilities and trainspace

Cresswell (2006) distinguishes mobility from movement by attributing the former with displacement, a motion that takes place between locations, whereas movement is abstracted from a specific context. The study of mobility is as much a critique of the sedentarist assumptions of social science as it is a response to the faster, increasingly-prevalent mobilities that comprise our modern world (Cresswell 2006, Sheller and Urry 2006). For example, rather than assuming that staying still or "at home" is the norm and that travel is the exception, we should try to understand how identity is constituted through differential mobilities or abilities to move (Gogia 2006, Neumayer 2006). There is also an important distinction between the freedom to travel and being *required* to travel, as with forced migrants or homeless people (Sager 2006).

There is often a significant transnational component to mobilities. The global reach of capital necessitates the movement of labor to where it is needed, while national borders and immigration regulations play a significant role in shaping those movements (Collyer 2007, Winders 2007). Transnational firms require workers who are willing and able to travel, either for brief face-to-face interactions or on a longer time scale, raising the question of where "the office" is located (Beaverstock 2002, Frändberg and Vihelmson 2003, Faulconbridge 2008). And consumption is connected to both migrants and global commodity chains or circuits through the metaphorical and physical travels of commodities (Cook and Crang 1996, Cook 2004, Jackson 2006).

At the same time, immobilities or moorings are created by the structures and processes that allow some people and objects to move while others must remain still (Adey 2006, Bartling 2006, Fotel 2006, Hannam et al. 2006, Sheller and Urry 2006). Hurricane Katrina is a prime example of how differential mobilities or "mobility privilege" can be a matter not only of identity, but of life or death (Bartling 2006). On the other hand, the so-called freedom to travel in a personal vehicle means that fixed space has to be found for that vehicle at both ends of a journey, one of the reasons why travel to a city center is often better done by public transit (Hagman 2006).

It is also important to consider *potential* mobility as well as actual movement. The concept of motility takes into account the capacity to move, including technological and social access, skills, and appropriation of those skills and access (Canzler et al. 2008, Kaufmann et al. 2004, Kesselring 2006, Ureta 2008). Motility is a biological concept referring to an organism's capacity for movement, although its use in the social sciences generally incorporates social as well as geographic mobility. Motility can be considered a kind of capital along with financial, social, or cultural forms, related to the potential for action as well as actual motion and closely related to social inequality (Kaufmann et al. 2004).

While automobility (Urry 1999, Fotel 2006), aeromobility (Adey et al. 2007), and even velomobility (Spinney 2006) have explored interactions and co-constructions among people, things, places, and vehicles, there has been less work on mobility by rail. Furthermore, the mobilities approach to railroads has focused exclusively on passenger travel, including how train passengers (and workers, to a lesser extent) construct or craft space and place within the railway car and station as they journey (Bissell 2008, Letherby and Reynolds 2005, Watts 2008, Bishop 2002, Symes 2007). Letherby and Reynolds (2005) state that "The truism is worth noting that railways affect communities" (p. 72), but they do not discuss this truism beyond noting that

fewer people in small towns in the UK have access to rail travel than in the mid-twentieth century. The focus on the interior of the vehicle and the stations and platforms (Symes 2007, Watts 2008) may be a breakthrough in considering how quotidian practices construct space and place, but it leaves out the ways that spaces and places *outside* the train are constructed as well. The view is generally portrayed as one-way, with travelers looking out at the landscape or at each other (Bissell 2008, Schivelbush 1979).

One exception is Stilgoe (1983), who described the "metropolitan corridors" of turn-of-the-century rail lines as places outside of either the urban, suburban, or rural. For Stilgoe, "Every intersection of railroad and way represented a crossing of two kinds of space, one metropolitan and futurist in character, one essentially rural and traditional" (p. 167). Stilgoe incorporated the perspectives of travelers within coaches and looking out the window, farmers and drivers watching the trains pass by, and hoboes and others whose unauthorized use of the corridor space created its own set of problems. In a different vein, Bishop (2002) argued that a proposed rail line from Alice Springs to Darwin, Australia, "gathers" the corridor before it, drawing people and places into a multi-scalar space that is seen differently from within and from without. This corridor includes the spaces of national defence and identity, aboriginal land rights, Asian economies, and travelers seeking a connection with the landscape that is closer than the bird's-eye view from a plane, but still separated by the pane of glass in the traincar window.

Both Stilgoe and Bishop focus on the rail corridor as a specific kind of place, that which narrows the distance between some places while maintaining a separation between others. However, the spaces of trains are not limited to the tracks and cars themselves or the narrow corridor containing them. These spaces immediately within and outside of the train car are only part of what I call *trainspace*, a contested space that is constructed and maintained by the mobility,

presence, and possible presence of trains and rails. In short, trainspace is where trains go, or where they might go, in both the discursive and material senses. Motility and mobility both contribute to trainspace since the potential presence of trains can shape places and spaces as much as their actual, fleeting presence.

The closest existing analogue is airspace, which has been deconstructed as "a specific three-dimensional space that is brought into being through its repetition and the multiple activities of practitioners that enable aircraft to traverse through a delimited volume of air" (Williams 2011, p. 258). While we might think of "sky" and "airspace" as being equivalent, in fact there are a number of restrictions and conventions that delineate different airspaces depending on the type of plane, its purpose for being in flight, and even the body of the pilot (Millward 2008). Similarly, train tracks or rail corridors are not the same thing as trainspace. Beyond the infrastructure of tracks, stations, and switching yards, there are also vehicles and the people and goods they carry with their own origins and destinations. A commuter rail line has a different character than a major freight line or a short line, based on the frequency of trains, the nature of their contents, and their relationship to the areas they are passing through. Trainspace may also include the view out the window, to the extent that passengers include that as part of their journey (Bissell 2008), or the spaces of interaction within the train car itself (Watts 2008). The physical extent of trainspace may be based on one railroad track in a community, the continental network of a railroad, or railroads as a broad category of movement, as airspaces may be private, commercial, imperial, national, or at the scale of the body (Millward 2008).

Where airspace is continually performed, produced, and maintained through people, machines, and technology (Budd 2009), trainspace is as well. For a daily commuter, it is the crowded railcar and the journeys to and from the stations; for residents of communities with high-

frequency freight trains, trainspace includes the distant ports and factories that send goods through their neighborhoods; and for environmental activists, trainspace includes fragile habitats vulnerable to derailments. At the same time, this space is embedded in larger social and economic contexts, including the simultaneous senses of nostalgia and progress that modern rail travel embodies, as well as enhanced awareness of risk and safety. "Train travel keys into a whole series of discourses of risk, which illustrates the degree to which the presence of risk (actual or perceived) is interwoven with the fabric of our culture. Its presence suggests deep anxiety about the ways in which we conduct life in the Western world: desire for uninterrupted freedom of movement; maximization of wealth and investment; protection of the planet; and a sense of history permeated through our nostalgic memories" (*ibid*., p. 79). Trainspace therefore includes the places that are perceived to be at risk from rail mobilities in addition to the actual sites of travel.

In the literature on airspace, there has been little consideration of how this space intersects with others (whether connecting or separating them; see Stilgoe 1983), or of how different types of vehicles contribute to the construction of airspace (through speed, noise, the nature of their contents, etc.). Furthermore, the performativity approach to airspace has included little discussion of the effects of that space and its supporting infrastructure on surrounding communities even when there is not a vehicle passing through. For example, trainspace has long been part of urban landscapes, as in being from the "wrong side of the tracks," and the morally dubious mobility of "riding the rails" has influenced cities and rural areas alike, regardless of the presence of actual mobile vehicles at a given point in time (Cresswell 2004, 2006, Stilgoe 1983).

Understanding how trainspace is constructed and mobilized by different actors is a key, unexplored component of both transport geography and mobilities research. At the same time,

although flows and networks have become a dominant spatiality in describing global processes, there is a strong bias in research in favor of the mobilities of people rather than things, even among transport geographers (Rodrigue 2006, 2008). However, "Even if [shipping] containers do not vote, they certainly show where the real wealth is and the inherent redistribution of production taking place in the global economy" (Rodrigue 2006, p. 387-388). The following section explains this changing role of distribution in the location of economic activity and the value of incorporating freight in the study of transnational mobilities.

Containerization, global shipping, and the rails

Intermodalism and freight transportation

The invention of the shipping container in 1956 by trucker Malcom McLean was one of the simplest and most profound technological advances of the twentieth century. By shipping goods in a standardized metal container from origin to destination, the physical unloading of ships was reduced from hundreds of men taking many days to a handful of men taking a few hours (Levinson 2006). The resulting decline in labor costs and theft caused transport costs to drop dramatically and allowed companies to change production locations to minimize other costs such as labor or environmental regulations.

The success of containerization depends on a smooth intermodal transfer from ship to rail or truck. While American railroads were slow to make accommodations for what they saw as a maritime mode of goods transport, Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific both adapted to intermodal freight from the mid-1970s (Slack 1990). As a result, of the seven Class I railroads in North America (those with revenues of over $250 million per year), CN has the most experience in refining its network for global cargo transport. A series of mergers in the 1980s

and 1990s gave CN not only a line stretching from the Pacific to the Atlantic, but from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, connecting through Chicago.

CN was owned and operated by the Canadian government until it was privatized in 1995 (Madar 2002). Whereas US railroads were tied to national policy through land grants encouraging western settlement along rail lines, CN and its main competitor, Canadian Pacific (CP), were an even more explicit component of Canadian economic and social policy (Osborne and Wurtele 1995). For example, the Department of Colonization and Agriculture worked with the railroads to actively draw European immigrants into the Canadian prairies and even to discourage Canadian xenophobia in the early to mid-twentieth century. CN is thus symbolically important within North America above and beyond its role as a mover of freight—in particular, as a nation-builder on the northern side of the border.

With the deregulation of American and Canadian railroads in 1980 and 1987 respectively, along with the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA, transit costs dropped and rail became more common in moving freight within North America. The energy efficiency of rail is approximately four times that of trucking, so it is expected to grow even more in the coming years (Rodrigue 2008). At the same time, containerization has concentrated more traffic in fewer ports due to the ever-increasing size of ships (Slack 1993). Urban rail routes are therefore increasingly congested, particularly within key regions that have a concentration of infrastructure such as the Midwest.

Chicago, CN, and the "J"

The Chicago area is one of the most congested in the country due to its centrality within both the historical North American rail network and new global distribution networks. Chicago is unquestionably the center of rail transport in North America, its early prominence feeding back

through circular and cumulative causation and making it the only major freight gateway in the US not located on a coast or international border (Krmenec 2006). As a result, traffic traveling from West Coast ports to Midwest distribution centers almost has to pass through Chicago, leading to the commonly-stated (if apocryphal) measure that it takes freight two days to get from the West Coast to Chicago and another two days to get through the city.

Thanks to its history as a railroad hub and the congestion that goes along with it, the Chicago region has a complete beltline railroad about sixty kilometers out from the city center. Known as the Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern; the EJ&E; or the "J", this 320-kilometer-long line bypasses congested inner city rail lines and connects suburban industrial districts (Lewis 2008). The EJ&E has connected up to thirty different railroads over its history, providing an important bypass function as well as connecting manufacturers in suburbs across the region (Jaenicke and Eisenbrandt 2007). Although it carried passengers in the early twentieth century, it has always been above all a freight railroad.

Because of the low level of existing traffic (about five trains per day), there has been a proposal for over a decade to run a commuter rail line along the EJ&E tracks to be operated by the regional rail authority, Metra. The STAR Line (Suburban Transit Access Route) would be the nation's first suburb-to-suburb commuter rail line, running past many of the region's main employment centers, including the headquarters for Sears and O'Hare International Airport (Metra 2003). While the STAR Line is not yet in the final planning stages and has no secure funding source, most communities along its length support it because of the perceived benefits in reducing traffic and encouraging transit-oriented development. The STAR Line thus increases the motility of congested suburbs via the promise of new access to job centers.

In the fall of 2007, CN applied to purchase the EJ&E from US Steel. Under US railroad regulations, mergers and acquisitions have to be approved by the Surface Transportation Board to maintain competition within the nation's rail network. CN wanted to improve transit times through Chicago because of containerization activity at its new port in Prince Rupert, BC, which became the closest major North American port to Asia when it opened in 2007 (Berman 2007). While the port is currently small, with a capacity of 500,000 TEUs and planned expansion of 2 million TEUs (compared to Los Angeles-Long Beach at around 8 million), it is a node in the fastest route from Northeast Asia to the North American interior. Furthermore, it is second to only Los Angeles-Long Beach on the West Coast with regards to the size of ships it can handle, suggesting significant potential for growth (Fan et al. 2011). Although this growth is by no means guaranteed, it has been promulgated as a fact by CN and British Columbian boosters as a different type of railroad motility (Wilson and Summerville 2008).

CN's main distribution center in Memphis is linked to Prince Rupert through the neighborhoods of Chicago and its suburbs. The main impact of the acquisition would be to shift traffic from CN's radial lines into and out of downtown Chicago to the suburban beltline, resulting in a net benefit in terms of the number of people exposed to environmental effects. There are thirty-six municipalities along the EJ&E track; while a few were neutral regarding the acquisition, most were opposed. The proposed acquisition therefore became a tangle of local governments, global freight networks, and national regulation.

As part of its review of CN's application, the STB took the unusual step of requiring an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Eight public meetings were held to hear comments on the draft EIS (DEIS) (Figure 1); comments were taken in written or oral form at the meetings as well as by phone, e-mail, and regular mail. The analysis in this paper is taken from these

comments submitted to the STB and the transcripts of the public meetings, all of which are available on the STB's website. I also conducted in-person or phone interviews with city planners or elected officials in nine suburbs along the EJ&E.

Public meetings, of course, are only available to those with the time and mobility to access them, and there is danger in conflating the responses of those who attended meetings or submitted written or electronic comments with the public as a whole (Marston 1990, Staehli 2003). In particular, there was a strong geographical bias toward the northwest suburbs, which have higher income levels and fewer minority residents than the region as a whole. Additionally, the two meetings in Gary and Chicago, where net impacts would be neutral or positive, had the lowest number of comments. This obviously raises questions about the representativeness of the public comments and the localized nature of opposition to the acquisition, since it is unknown as to whether residents in the Gary and Chicago areas did not speak out because they were in favor of it or because they did not know about the proposed acquisition or the hearings.

This study also has a personal component which influenced both how I approached the topic and interpreted the results (McDowell 1992, Moser 2008, Rose 1997). During interviews in late 2007 with local planners in the southwestern Chicago suburbs—one of which was my hometown along the EJ&E—one of them mentioned the potential acquisition. After seeing a notice for a public rally in opposition to CN, I attended out of curiosity, expecting to be sympathetic to the residents based on my personal history and previous research on the negative effects of transportation infrastructure on neighboring communities (Cidell 2006, 2008). At the rally, while the expected issues of noise, traffic, and pollution were raised by local politicians and residents, I was stunned at how many people objected to CN as a *foreign* company for no reason other than that simple fact. At a public hearing the following night, representatives from CN stood near a

display board with handouts entitled "Myths and Facts" explaining that because of the geographical distribution of stock owners, they are actually an *American* company. This suggested that the issue of foreign ownership had already been raised enough times that the firm had prepared a defense against it. It also implied that the transnational nature of the company and the rail system mattered a great deal to the debate, as shown in the next two sections.

Foreignness and freight

In analyzing the public comments and transcripts that referred to the international nature of the proposed acquisition, three categories of issues emerged. First was concern about CN's safety record in Canada, usually accompanied by a list of incidents such as hazardous materials spills. Second was concern over subsidizing a foreign company at US taxpayer expense. Finally, there were less openly-stated fears about the contents of the trains that would be traveling along the EJ&E route.

The Canadian safety record

The DEIS considered the safety record of the railroads in question on operations within the United States. However, many of the speakers brought up CN's safety record within Canada. In the early 2000s, CN suffered a series of derailments in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec, including spills of hazardous materials. Speakers were concerned not only about the incidents themselves, but the fact that poor track maintenance and/or refusal to listen to employee concerns were credited with causing the incidents:

> "The safety record of Canadian National leaves a lot to be desired. In their country, Canadian National remains under scrutiny and heavy pressure. In 2005, the government of Canada found 54 percent of locomotives, 50 percent of train

> brakes and 26 percent of crossings defective. A 2007 report by the Canadian Parliament found a disconnect on safety issues on management and front-line workers. That report also highlighted what company employees call a culture of fear when it comes to reporting safety-related problems." (Eugene Dawson, Barrington Township Supervisor; Barrington public meeting, 08/27/08).

Speakers focused in particular on Wabamun Lake in Alberta, where a 2005 derailment led to twelve rail cars rupturing and spilling bunker fuel oil and pole-treating oil, contaminating the lake and local wells (Brooymans 2005). While the water contamination was of significant concern to people at the EJ&E hearings because many of them rely on local aquifers for drinking water, many speakers also objected to CN's slow response to the spill, seeing this as a portent of things to come along the EJ&E line should an incident occur.

The main objection seemed to be that the STB had not considered CN's safety record *within Canada*. A number of speakers mentioned that CN has been investigated by the Canadian government for its actions regarding these derailments and that these reports should be referenced in the EIS. This suggests that it is not the foreignness or Canadianness *per se* that is the problem, because speakers were willing to trust the Canadian government's findings. Nevertheless, the response given by the STB in the final EIS was that because it was the purchase of an American railroad that was being considered, only the American safety record mattered, and therefore the analysis had been conducted appropriately.

Subsidizing foreign competition

Another objection was the transfer of capital from public to private entities and the resulting effects on US economic development. First, many people objected to the public subsidy of a private entity. Federal regulations require that a railroad pay only 5 to 10 percent of the cost of

overpasses and other mitigation necessary due to increased wait times at railroad crossings. The rest is left to local and state governments, which are already short of funds. A number of local government officials argued that if a private (not to mention profitable) company had development plans in their town that would cause an equivalent increase in traffic delays, that company would be forced to pay for full mitigation. With very few exceptions, every speaker who made a complaint along these lines described CN as a foreign railroad: e.g., "private Canadian company", "rich foreign company", "exceptionally profitable foreign railroad." This foreignness was set in contrast to the American or US public, citizens, families, taxpayers, etc., who would pay through higher taxes for infrastructure improvements and/or by suffering the negative effects of delay. A typical comment was made by the US Representative whose district included the northwestern Chicago suburbs: "As this transaction has been initiated by and for the benefit of a private foreign entity, their shareholder upside should not be paid for by American taxpayers" (Melissa Bean, US Representative, Barrington public meeting, 8/27/08).

There was also the issue of competition for jobs and economic development. Prince Rupert's position as the closest North American port to Asia would, people feared, lead to a shift in traffic from US West Coast ports to those in Canada. Thus there would not only be negative environmental effects in the Chicago suburbs, but negative economic effects elsewhere in the country[i]. A related argument stated that lower transportation costs after the EJ&E transaction would further reduce manufacturing costs in China:

> "CN recently built a new container port in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. This port is closer to China than ports in the United States. The CN hopes to run 200 car trains from this port through the suburbs of Chicago to the CN's intermodal terminal in Memphis. Take a hard look at the fact that tax subsidies for items such

> as overpasses and underpasses will help the CN take jobs away from United States citizens who work for United States ports and for United States railroads. In addition, these tax subsidies will help reduce the transportation costs and products made in China, making United States manufacturers less competitive." (Jim Holland, Mayor, Frankfort, IL, Joliet public meeting, 9/11/08)

Through display boards and handouts at the public meetings, as well as one speaker on the record at each of the eight meetings, CN countered this position by arguing that they are actually an American company because the majority of shares are held by Americans[ii]. Furthermore, the US headquarters for the company are located in a southern suburb of Chicago. In other words, they argued that there *are* benefits of the acquisition that would accrue to the local community through jobs and revenues. However, this argument did not seem to sway subsequent speakers (or audience members who muttered and booed), who continued to express their concerns about the acquisition of a local rail line by a foreign company.

Fear of the foreign

While concerns about CN's safety record and their competition with US firms were in large part based on apprehension or fear, they were fairly well-documented. There were other fears that were fewer in number and voiced more speculatively but speak to the deep-seated concerns that residents of the Chicago suburbs apparently have about living in a globalizing world. These concerns were about things rather than people, and particularly about *unknown* things passing through under external control:

> "Our steel mills are now owned out of England. Our tollway: Spain, Australia. Even our beer, by Belgium. And now we're talking about our good friends in Canada. It's not so much that they're foreign countries, but the farther away that

> you are from where we are here locally, the more you care about the profit margin instead of the quality of life. It's just human nature." (George Van Til, resident of Gary, Gary public meeting, 9/10/08)

The above speaker was one of very few to specify *why* transnationalism was threatening. His rationale that distance from command and control centers leads to less understanding of local negative effects is straightforward and reasonable. Another mentioned the possibility of vertical integration leading to Chinese ownership of the railroad and the resulting lack of control over environmental impacts. While there may be an element of xenophobia (or sinophobia) at work here, the fear of loss of control over regulation is no doubt related to recent publicity over Chinese environmental and food safety regulatory failures.

The mobility of non-humans, enabled or hindered by bio-regulation (Perkins 2007), was reflected here as well. One speaker argued that "even more nonnative invasive species could be introduced here through the freight traffic from around the world. As it is, so much of our time, energy and money is spent battling nonnative invasive species here such as buckthorn, garlic mustard, purple loosestrife, Asian longhorned beetles, gypsy moths, and on and on" (Sam Oliver, Barrington resident, Barrington public meeting, 8/27/08). The Chicago area has been suffering a series of invasive species threats over the last few decades as referenced by the speaker. Since the transport of goods through global shipping networks has led to the introduction of invasive species in the past, there is reason to believe that the same might happen if CN's global network were to extend through the suburbs.

Other speakers, however, were more vague in their concerns. For example, some worried about the unknown nature of what would be traveling inside the rail cars along the EJ&E tracks:

> "What we are considering doing here is allowing a foreign company to buy our infrastructure and allow any country, company, entity who has the money to ship things right in the heart of our country, right through our country. What has Homeland Security said about this? How is Homeland Security going to be checking these cars and this freight? And the things that are coming in…How can you assure us we are going to be safe with what is coming through our community?" (Suzanne Branding, Lake Zurich village trustee, Mundelein public meeting, 8/26/08)

Within the US, while the Department of Homeland Security is responsible for policing the national borders, emergency response is based at the local level. This means that in the event of a hazardous materials spill, individual municipalities would be responsible for protecting public health and safety. Police and fire department representatives at nearly all of the public meetings argued that without knowing ahead of time what was traveling on a particular train, they could not be prepared in the event of an emergency, but CN was not willing to provide this information. CN's response was that they have highly-networked information systems that enable them to cooperate closely with local government in case an event occurs, but that *because* of national security, they can't provide the information on specific shipments ahead of time. The unknown materials in the train cars would have to remain unknown.

Freight, (im)mobility and transnational trainspace

There are two broader conceptual issues related to the above themes of foreignness and freight. First is the suite of problems that transnational commodities pose by simply passing through places, demonstrating that routes matter as much as nodes and that trainspace is broader than the trains and tracks themselves. Second, there is the question of how the concerns and fears

expressed by speakers might have been a deliberate strategy to use the specter of transnationalism in order to achieve other goals.

Just passing through

As previously mentioned, many speakers were well-informed about the transcontinental nature of CN's network, in particular their new port in British Columbia and their main distribution center in Memphis. Most of these speakers objected to the proposed transaction because the railcars and their risks would simply be passing through their towns while the benefits would be accruing somewhere else. As mentioned above, there were also fears voiced about the unknown and unknowable nature of the materials being carried through, including exotic species, hazardous materials, or uninspected manufactured goods. One could argue that "passing through" would be a good thing if the undesirable materials in question were headed for another destination, but as long as the possibility existed of leakage or accident, residents did not want anything unknown passing through their towns.

However, there was also the issue of the intersection of the new trainspace with daily activity spaces on the part of residents, commuters, schoolchildren, and emergency services personnel. Traffic impact studies showed that only a handful of crossings would experience delays serious enough to warrant the expense of a grade separation. However, many people said they cross the tracks multiple times a day and were concerned about waiting for trains that could be up to three kilometers long. Representatives from school districts worried about their ability to bus children to school in a timely fashion, as well as safety issues with children walking to school. Emergency services personnel explained how critical it is to get to a fire or a heart attack victim as soon as possible; some told anecdotes from their personal experience about not getting there in time to emphasize that this was not a hypothetical danger[iii]. In a few cases, the proximity of multiple at-

grade crossings meant that all of the routes across the tracks within a single municipality could theoretically be blocked at once, which was especially dangerous if all of a municipality's fire stations were on one side of the tracks. In sum, because the character of the trainspace would change, its intersection with other spaces and mobilities would be more disruptive and potentially more hazardous.

Another common argument was that the acquisition would shift train traffic from urban neighborhoods that had adapted to it over the years into relatively untouched and unprepared suburban communities. According to these people, freight traffic was more appropriately placed in the city and inner suburbs, where noise and congestion were more common and accepted and where grade separations of road and railroad already exist[iv]. In other words, suburban communities should not be made part of a trainspace with a higher frequency of traffic and transnational component. Largely used as a counter to the environmental justice claim of acquisition proponents who approved of shifting traffic to more affluent parts of the region, opponents' argument was that the demographics of city vs. suburb were not as important as the relative infrastructure and urban-ness of each place. In other words, opponents argued that a transnational trainspace with its noise and frequent disruption of other spaces and places was more compatible with a central city landscape than with the outer suburbs.

Anti-transnationalism as strategy

While the frequent mention of foreignness by acquisition opponents was impossible to miss at the public hearings, it was also easy to see that it was most frequently (though not exclusively) invoked by elected officials. Additionally, the issue of foreignness did *not* come up during the interviews I conducted with city staff. I finally mentioned to one planner (at the close of the interview, when the tape recorder was off) that I was surprised to have heard it so many times

during the public meetings, and she mentioned that it was one of the *strategies* that various communities had been using. This led to a need to revisit the public comments to understand exactly how foreignness was invoked and to what end.

On the one hand, "fear of the foreign" was used to set up the STB, the organization in charge of approving or turning down CN's acquisition request, as a federal agency obligated to defend local American communities against a foreign threat. This is suggested by the frequent references to American or US citizens and taxpayers, along with the mention of the role of the STB and other government agencies as protector from a foreign-owned corporation.

Another reason to invoke transnational fears relates to the nature of the trainspace. As mentioned above, many municipalities in the region have been hoping for a commuter rail line. CN's refusal to pledge that Metra would retain access to the tracks for the STAR Line became another point of concern: "This transaction will also seriously jeopardize the proposed STAR Line's viability to relieve the region's traffic congestion and improve air quality" (Dale Perrin, Lake Zurich Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director, Mundelein public meeting, 08/26/08). Others argued that the EIS should have included an analysis of the impacts of the loss of the STAR Line if the transaction were to go forward, as if it had already increased local residents' motility. In other words, in the contest over the role of trainspace as being for commuter or freight rail, Metra should take priority because of its local benefits.

However, this support for the STAR Line meant that objecting to increased train traffic *for its own sake*—i.e., because of noise or emissions—was not feasible. Furthermore, many of the municipalities in question are themselves railroad towns that are part of other trainspaces. Some like West Chicago include a train on their city seal in reference to their past and present reliance on commuter trains. Many such as Bartlett are actively encouraging transit-oriented development

around their downtown commuter rail stations, or even near stations and lines that do not yet exist, as in Plainfield. Of the few people who spoke up in favor of the transaction, most brought up the hypocrisy of this position, pointing out that some existing commuter rail lines share the tracks with freight trains and that the likelihood of the STAR Line ever coming to fruition is small. This difficulty in objecting to trains *per se* was partially overcome through raising concerns particular to freight rather than commuter rail, including the length of trains, the greater likelihood of them coming to a stop in the middle of a crossing, and the possible presence of hazardous cargo—in other words, arguing that CN would be redefining the extent and character of the EJ&E's trainspace. Opponents also attempted to overcome this paradox through invocation of a "foreign-owned company" and the particular hazards such an ownership structure could pose, drawing on comparisons to known incidents in Canada.

Finally, objecting to foreign ownership of a rail line traversing suburban communities was also a strategy of scale jumping (Smith 1993), confronting potential accusations of NIMBYism (Not In My BackYard) in advance as opponents argued, "I do not want this railroad in my backyard and not in the United States. Stay in Canada and build your own railroad there" (Charles Bolwin, resident of Aurora, Aurora public meeting, 9/09/08). Expressing concern about potential damage due to international economic competition raised the issue to a higher scale than a local community objecting to increased train traffic. It also attempted to circumvent the environmental justice argument made by proponents of the acquisition. Opponents argued that their concerns were based at a national or continental scale and that the implications mattered for more than their municipality, thus attempting to broaden the reach of the CN/EJ&E trainspace to include a wider network of affected people and places.

Conclusions and implications

This article introduced the concept of trainspace as a way to think through conflicts over transportation infrastructure in relation to the places it passes through and connects. In the same way that airspace is not equivalent to the sky, but is constructed and performed by people and machines in the air and on the ground (Williams 2011), trainspace is more than rails and switches. It is also produced by vehicles and their contents, distant places connected via the rail network, citizens, railroad companies, and regulators. It involves potential movement or motility as well as actual movement of people and goods, for good and ill. As a contested space, trainspace offers the opportunity to examine how struggles over its boundaries and its character reflect larger political and environmental struggles over the appropriate place and use of infrastructure in a metropolitan context. In this particular case, the conflict was not over new infrastructure, nor merely over the more intensive use of existing infrastructure, but the new space being produced: a more hazardous space in terms of the materials being carried through it as well as its intersections with the activity spaces of commuters, schoolchildren, and emergency personnel; and a transnational space in terms of the ownership of the railroad and the global flows of goods it would engender.

Opposition to the proposed acquisition of the EJ&E by Canadian National was, on the surface, an example of local communities throwing everything they could find at a regulatory agency and hoping something would stick:

> "A North American train from Asia…will come via the shortest water route through a super highway through our community. The STAR Line, a vital commuter link from Chicago and connecting communities will be lost for all time. Our West Coast ports will suffer and Americans will lose jobs, lost hours waiting for trains, pollution damage from waiting vehicles, thousands of homes

> along the track losing value." (Jim Johnson, village trustee, Lake Zurich, Mundelein public meeting, 8/26/08)

However, the underlying concern about a foreign corporation—as expressed in comments meant for the public record—suggests deeper anxieties at work. Undoubtedly, opposition would be equally strong were it an American railroad attempting to acquire the EJ&E. Why, then, did opponents use the "foreign" argument, and what does it contribute to our understanding of transnationalism, mobilities, and transport geography?

First, opponents called on the US government in the form of the Surface Transportation Board for protection from external threats in terms of economic competition, public safety, and regulatory control. Although opposition to infrastructure is often framed in terms of public/private conflict, the added international dimension placed greater responsibility on the STB to defend the rights of American citizens against a foreign corporation, including public safety through emergency vehicle access, public health through protection from unknown and potentially hazardous materials, and economic development through preserving American jobs. Ironically, part of this opposition was expressed through a request for inclusion in the EIS of a foreign government's findings on the safety of CN's practices. This indicates trust in the nation-state as an institution, particularly in regulating international flows of goods. To Leatherby and Reynolds' list of the ways that train travel taps into discourses of risk (see above), we might add the risk of national control being further eroded in a globalizing world.

Second, objecting to CN specifically as a foreign company removed the scale of discussion as far as possible from the backyard that it might otherwise be confined to. The regional benefit/local harm conflict that was apparently at the heart of the struggle could be counterposed against the clash between foreign benefit and national harm, expanding the scope of the issue from thirty-six

municipalities to an entire nation. References to similar conflicts such as the aborted purchase of six US ports by Dubai World Ports or the ownership of local tollroads by a Spanish-Australian consortium positioned the CN/EJ&E conflict as one battle in a larger struggle to preserve national integrity.

Third, opponents sought to expand trainspace beyond the tracks and immediately adjacent properties to intersections with major arterial streets, schools, and hospitals within their communities; sites of hazardous materials spills and investigative commissions in Canada; and a trade route stretching back to Asia. Because of their desire to see the tracks used for commuter rail, acquisition opponents could not frame their objections in terms of the physical presence of trains themselves. Rather, they spoke of potentially fatal disruptions to road traffic due to delays from long freight trains as well as the threat of unknown materials from foreign lands passing though. The route itself became part of the problem because of where it originated and how it would intersect with other routes, not simply because of the vehicles or objects passing along it or the nodes that anchored it.

For federal regulators, however, the extent of trainspace with regards to the purview of environmental review was simply the tracks themselves and the adjacent properties. CN's purchase of the EJ&E was approved by the Surface Transportation Board on December 24, 2008, and finalized on February 1, 2009, with a ruling of no significant environmental impact. CN was required to pay for mitigation at only two grade crossings along the 320 kilometers of track, although the railroad came to a voluntary mitigation agreement with about two-thirds of the communities along the EJ&E. Unfortunately, post-acquisition monitoring by the Surface Transportation Board in December 2010 found serious deficiencies in CN’s required reporting of trains blocking at-grade crossings for more than ten minutes: 14 as reported by CN vs. 1,457 as

detected through automated means. The STB fined CN $250,000 (the first fine in the STB's history) and extended the monitoring period for an additional year (Eldeib 2010). CN claimed it was only obligated to report blockages of grade crossings when a train came to a complete stop and that it was unaware that the STB considered slow-moving trains as worthy of mention. This illustrates how the definition of concepts seemingly as basic as mobility and immobility can be made flexible by actors in an attempt to meet their own goals.

While railroads have always been under private ownership in the US, the privatization of transportation infrastructure is a growing trend here and around the world. Because most companies involved in these transactions are based in Europe or Asia, there will likely be continuing conflicts over "foreign" companies controlling transportation infrastructure and services, making it imperative to understand how those flows and the spaces they help to construct are understood and mobilized by various actors in the places they pass through. Through examining a controversy over a beltline railroad in the Chicago metropolitan area, the concept of trainspace helps us better understand the conflicts over where trains go, the risks they are thought to pose along the journey, the motilities and mobilities they provide or hinder, and the ways in which transnational fears are invoked by opponents to avoid potential contradictions.

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[i] If speakers were aware of the local battles being waged against Los Angeles/Long Beach and other West Coast ports to reduce the environmental impacts from those facilities, as well as the desire of *those* Americans to spread out intermodal traffic and pollution beyond their neighborhoods, they didn't mention it.

[ii] On at least one occasion, the CN speaker mentioned that he himself was an American.

[iii] The village of Barrington, which led the fight against the acquisition, produced a three-minute video of a train passing a crossing to underline how crucial it is for emergency services to be able to get across the tracks. The video was displayed at the start of the public rally (not the EIS hearing) I attended.

[iv] Ironically, the number of at-grade crossings is nearly identical along CN's existing central city route and the EJ&E's suburban route: 99 vs. 100.

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Figure 1. Location of CN and EJ&E lines as well as public meetings concerning the DEIS, August through September 2008. Source: Author.