

Buskers Underground: Meaning, Perception, and Performance Among Montreal's Metro  
Buskers

by

Nicholas Wees  
B.A., University of Victoria, 2015

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Anthropology

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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Dr. Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier (Department of Anthropology)  
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## Abstract

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This thesis explores the practices, motivations, and sensorial experiences of Montreal's metro buskers. By examining the lived experiences of 'street' performers in the stations and connecting passageways of Montreal's underground transit system, I consider what it 'means' to be a metro busker from the perspective of the performers. Informed by my ethnographic fieldwork among metro buskers, I detail their performance practices, 'staging' strategies, uses of technology, bodily dispositions, and subjective perceptions in relation to the public, each other and the spaces of performance. In the process, I make visible—and audible—the variable and improvisational nature of busking practices, and how these are constituted in relation to the physical features of the performance sites. More broadly, I explore the co-productive relations between body and space, the sensorial experiences and spatial practices of everyday urban life, and the potential for moments of micro-social encounter and appropriations of spaces that are not designed to foster conviviality and creative engagement. I locate 'the busker' within these questions not as a fixed identity or subject-position but as an embodied assemblage-act that is socially and materially situated and subjectively enacted through highly variable practices, perceptions and experiences. In detailing the moments of social encounter precipitated by metro buskers, I propose understanding busking as a form of Gift-performance that finds certain parallels in sensory ethnographic videography. I show how the influences of diverse participants—human and material—on the filming, editing, and distribution processes changed the course of the audio-visual production in this research. Finally, I introduce a notion of 'expanded trajectory' that links performer and space, researcher and participant, and may enable new acts of encounter and exchange, new processes of social and material circulation, new forms of Gift.

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Note: All illustrations in this thesis are photographic images made by the author. Illustrations 1,2,3,10,14,16,18 are still photos. Illustrations 4,5,6,7,8,9,11,12,13,15,17 are video still images. Photos have been cropped to match the 16:9 ratio of the video stills.

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Finally, I acknowledge the support of the people I love and who have variously assisted, encouraged, challenged, and inspired me in so many ways during this research.

## Dedication

For all the Montreal metro buskers who so graciously shared their time and thoughts with me. Your gift to me is one that I cannot repay.

For all buskers everywhere, poets of the urban soul, street performers of every stripe, who, whatever your reasons, do what you do, regardless of what others may think. You help keep the streets alive and the public spaces public.

For my parents, who instilled in me a love of learning and music, and taught me the values of creativity and of paying close attention to the world all around us.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction: Parameters and Procedures

### Introduction

This thesis investigates the lived experiences of buskers (i.e. street performers) who perform in the stations and connecting underground passageways of the public transit rail system, known as the metro, in the city of Montreal, Canada. In the following pages, I draw on three months of ethnographic research I conducted in Montreal over the summer of 2016, to explore the motivations, self-perceptions, practices (musical, technical; but also bodily, spatial), and sensorial experiences of metro buskers. My central questions are: What does it *mean* to be a metro busker? What are the social and sensorial experiences of the performers, and how do they think of themselves, as buskers? And, what sorts of relations do they have with passersby and with the performance spaces? In addressing these questions, I build a case grounded in my fieldwork for an understanding of the busker as being less of an identity than as a process, less of a subject than an assemblage – a temporally and spatially specific subjectivity that can only be apprehended in the singularities of its enactment. In this research, I engage with a range of issues, including: the physical and social features of the metro (its acoustic qualities, the bodily and social dispositions of passers-by and their relations with metro buskers, metro infrastructure, etc.); the regulation of busking activities; and, how buskers may precipitate moments of micro-social encounter and exchange in public spaces designed to facilitate pedestrian movement rather than social engagement. By detailing the motives, practices, and perceptions of metro buskers, I explore the relations between subjectivity and sense-experience; the co-constitution of body and space (both social and physical/material); and, the ways in which arts-based research practices may precipitate improvised social encounter. Finally, I investigate the relations between creativity, performance, concepts of Gift, and trajectories of social and material circulation.

In a very broad sense, I have been interested in how buskers perceive themselves *as buskers* – that is: what does it “mean” to be a busker, for the performers themselves? How do they understand themselves in relation to their work/art, to the “audience”, to the spaces in which they perform, and to each other? What are the practices, dispositions, and

discourses (legal, social, historical) by which “the busker” may be defined? To address these questions, I have explored the subjective experiences of metro buskers through extended observation (direct and mediated by audio-visual recording); shared reflections from numerous participants, on what it “means” to be a metro busker; and, reflected on my own busking experiences—all of which has been put in conversation with relevant literature on buskers and street art, urban space, subjectivity and embodiment, creativity and everyday life. My approach is informed by phenomenological perspectives on body, world, and spatial relations; on theories of practice and creative acts; and concepts of assemblage and becoming. I propose understanding the metro busker not as an identity, profession, subject-position, or member of a community, but as an assemblage, an event that only exists in its enactment, as a set of practices that must be taken up by a practitioner, that can only be described, beyond the most simplistic terms, in its particularities as it is practiced. Typologies and strict definitions of busking can say little beyond that it must involve a performance (musical, theatrical, or otherwise), that there must be the opportunity for remuneration from the public (a hat, instrument case, or other receptacle set out for donations), and that it must take place in a public or semi-public space (otherwise it becomes something else again—for busking is intimately tied to the street, to public spaces). However, as I will argue, buskers in general, and Montreal’s metro buskers in particular, can only be apprehended—become visible, and audible—in the singularity of their performances. And, these are too varied and variable to allow for any broadly encompassing definition that captures the range of practices and motives, let alone the details of encounter and subjective meaning that buskers may provoke. As I will demonstrate in the following pages, an account of busking practices and experiences must take into account the social and material character of the spaces of performance, as much as those of performer and public. Finally, I will show how participatory ethnographic research—here, specifically involving audio-visual production—may itself engender new trajectories of social and material circulation.

### **Plan of the Present Work**

In the following pages, I discuss specific details of the experiences, perceptions and practices of metro buskers; I explore their relations with passersby and public space; and, I consider the forms of encounter and exchange their activities may precipitate. In this

first chapter, after dealing with some terminology, I outline the context and research questions for my thesis project, then turn to a survey of academic literature. This is followed by my theoretical framework, and then details of my research methods. The final pages of this chapter consider the metro as a space that is both firmly within, yet with some appearance of autonomy from, the city as a whole. In Chapter 2, I examine buskers' reasons for taking up this practice, how they think of themselves in their capacities as buskers, and show that "the busker" cannot be defined as a profession or identity. I also, in that chapter, provide a sense of the subterranean world of the metro and the designated spaces of performance therein. In this way, I present busking as a *situated* set of practices, that brings together performer and passersby, performance and space. Chapter 3 explores these practices, including musical repertoire and style; staging practices (how performers "present" themselves; their bodily and spatial practices); how performers secure busking spots and produce the space of performance; their uses of technologies (especially amplification and musical accompaniment tracks); and, the acoustic qualities of the busking spots and how performers may (or may not) adapt to these features. In Chapter 4, I delve into the social encounters and exchanges occasioned by the presence of buskers, and relate these to theories of Gift and social and material circulation. I then reflect on the audio-visual component of this research, in the field and in the production phase; how the outcome was altered by unforeseen participants; and, on my role as ethnographer-researcher and as a creative agent. Finally, I suggest a concept of "expanded trajectory," stemming from the busker videos that I produced within the context of this research.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 4 is followed by a general Conclusion in which I summarize the main points of each chapter and, on the basis of these, lay out the overall argument of this thesis, then end with some considerations for further research. There are two appendices: Appendix A is a map of the metro system, and Appendix B lists the videos, with a few details about each and the web links to view them.

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<sup>1</sup> The audio-visual aspect of this research culminated in the production of a series of short busker "music videos." The videos are listed, with a few details about each, in Appendix B. They can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/wees>. Accessed April 6, 2017.

I understand anthropological research as an inherently creative endeavor that can be, and has been, productively inspired by an engagement with a range of arts practices (see for example Clifford 1981, Reichert 2016, Schneider & Wright 2006). My use of audio-visual production was motivated as much by a creative impetus as by a desire to document for research, and finds support in the work of others (see for example Grimshaw & Ravetz 2015, Møhl 2011, Simpson 2010). Likewise, to some extent, in writing this thesis, I have not completely resisted a temptation to be slightly more literary in some places (as opposed to *literal*—yet, surely all writing is imaginative). While editing these pages, I have found parallels in the process of editing video—itself a creative, not merely technical, aspect of film and video production (Marcus 2013b). This present introductory chapter follows a more formal style. Chapters 2 and 3 contain the bulk of the ethnographic detail (and of the photographic illustrations). They are written with the intention of conveying a sense of narrative, of movement—of trains and commuters, of the itineraries of metro buskers, of myself, as researcher—and of the spaces that shape and are shaped by these movements. My approach finds inspiration in the idea of walking—the self-propelled movement of bodies in space—as a creative act by which individuals produce and are produced by the polyphonic rhythms of the city (Edensor 2010, Wunderlich 2008); on the notion of walking as a form of reading (Certeau 1988); and, on the close relationship between ethnography and literature, as forms of world-making (Hollier 2006, Schwab 2012). In this work, I speak of *trajectories* as routes followed by individuals negotiating their way through daily life in the city, and as traces of social and material circulation. It is in the routes followed, the pathways forged (trajectories in space and time) and the unfolding narratives of the everyday (trajectories of imagination) that lives are lived, and that busking is assembled and expressed. The central portions of chapters 2 and 3 are framed as trajectories followed in the metro over a day. They are not factual descriptions of two actual days (though, Chapter 2 comes very close). Some details may be from other days; or, sequences of events and comments made may be temporally adjusted for clarity of argument. All of it is drawn directly from my fieldwork among Montreal metro buskers. This narrative approach emphasizes the spatial and temporal dimensions of metro busking. Chapter 4, in contrast, stills contains ethnographic detail but is not framed within a narrative form.

Instead, it moves into more theoretical territory, and examines the social and material processes of encounter and exchange of metro buskers, notions Gift, and of performance, working toward a conclusion that suggests possible new openings, new trajectories of becoming (Biehl & Locke 2010).

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau, discusses the tactics of creative agents who operate within but against planned space, "in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires," and he names these "trajecto[ies]... suggest[ing] a temporal movement through space, that is, the unity of a diachronic *succession* of points... not the *figure* that these points form on a space" (1988, 34-5. Italics in original). This is an expansive sense of trajectory—of circulation of things and people, of power and imagination, through channels that both form and are formed by the currents that flow through them (Tsing 2000). Trains follow set routes, but commuters follow their own paths; architecture and regulatory apparatuses variously guide, enable, constrain, action, but individual actors delineate divergent pathways, create new meanings, appropriate spaces. And, in the midst of the polyrhythms of the urban underground, the busker engages, arrests, redirects, the lines of flow, the trajectories of social and material becoming. Further, unanticipated routes of circulation open up with the production of a series of videos of metro buskers. First participant involvement, then the editing process and online viewing and sharing of the videos, suggest a notion of expanded trajectories, one in which the metro busker assemblage flows into the digital realm, while retaining traces of its social and material history. Trajectories, are then, understood as being routes of circulation of people, things, experiences and memories; they are not deterministically structured, nor are they open fields of boundless choice. They are the maps, the tales, and the melodies whereby we make our way in the world.

Chapters 2 and 3 are each punctuated by a coda. I employ this term, borrowed from music, to indicate that the pages in question are intended as concluding remarks within the narrative trajectory of that chapter, while also standing on their own. The online Oxford dictionary defines a coda as "the concluding passage of a piece [of music] or movement, typically forming an addition to the basic structure"<sup>2</sup>, while Merriam-

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/coda>. Accessed April 6, 2017.

Webster's adds that a coda "serves to round out, conclude, or summarize and usually has its own interest."<sup>3</sup> I adopt the term for those closing sections as they are illustrative vignettes of the central discussion of the chapters, while also assuming quasi-independence, satellites of those chapters, suggestive of the creative productivity of ethnography, of busking—and of ethnography as performance. Chapter 4 is focused more on theoretical explorations than on ethnographic detail and does not include a coda. However, the series of short busker videos that emerged from this research, as discussed in that chapter, may be seen to stand as a coda, of sorts, for this entire thesis. As in the more usual sense of "coda", these videos act as independent works but emerge from specific conditions, and contain a distillation of their origins. They are "events", in their own right, that mark a culmination—a closure—and an opening into new trajectories of circulation.

### **Some Notes on Terminology**

The term *busker* is used to designate performers (usually, but not only, musicians) who perform in public places. It is a heterogeneous group, in that there are many different kinds of performers, with varying skill levels, and differing relations with potential audiences (see, for example Carlin 2014, McMahan 1996). Immigrants from diverse origins brought their forms of street entertainment to North America's rapidly expanding cities (Zucchi 1992) where busking has experienced varying levels of tolerance (Campbell 1981). In several North American cities, buskers can be found performing in and around the public transit systems that run under and through urban centers (Smith 1993, Durso 2011, Tanenbaum 1995).

Busking has been legal since the early 1980s<sup>4</sup> in the Montreal metro, the city's underground commuter rail system. The metro is under the jurisdiction of the *Société de transport de Montréal* (Montreal Transportation Society), hereafter referred to as the STM. The STM's jurisdiction includes the stations proper and much of the network of underground passageways that connect many stations (particularly in the downtown core) to office complexes, shopping malls, and to street level exits that can be a city block or

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coda>. Accessed April 6, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> <http://MusiMétromontreal.org/the-association/history/>. Accessed April 6, 2017.

more from the actual train station.<sup>5</sup> Upon paying the required fare, commuters enter what is termed the *controlled area* of the station. Different sets of rules governing public behaviour apply within and without the controlled areas (a term I use in following pages). Busking is permitted at designated sites only. These sites are commonly known as *spots*—a term widely used by buskers (Tanenbaum 1995, 57), that has both temporal and spatial dimensions. Buskers variously speak of individual spots (as a precise location), of getting, having, or reserving a spot (indicating the time-space for a performance), and in the sense of the span of time for a performance, also sometimes called a *set*, or so simply referred to as a time slot. Throughout this thesis, I use “spot” to indicate physical locations sanctioned by the STM for busking. Where I use spot in the temporal sense, I note this distinction. The French equivalent of “spot” is *emplacement*. Within the areas under the jurisdiction of the STM, there are two systems of designated busking spots.

In the early 1980s, a consensus emerged between musicians who played regularly in the metro for a *list system*, to reserve spots. Whoever arrives at a spot first in the morning makes a list with two-hour time slots on a piece of paper (three-hour at some stations), picks a time, writes in their name and, folding up the paper, tucks it behind the sign that designates the busking spot, for the next person. This system has been in place ever since and is generally respected. But, problems can spring up, lists get tampered with, disappear. At the most lucrative spots, unless you get there early in the morning, it can be hard to get a time to perform. Out of various attempts by metro buskers to create some sort of organization has come the *Regroupement des Musiciens du Métro de Montréal*, known also as *MusiMétroMontréal*, the RMMM, and most commonly, *MusiMétro*<sup>6</sup> (used throughout this thesis). Membership depends on passing an audition and paying a required fee. In conjunction with the STM, MusiMétro oversees the *Étoiles du métro* (“stars of the metro”) program. MusiMétro members may join by passing a second audition and paying an additional fee, which allows them to reserve times slots online, at specially designated *Étoiles* spots in the metro. Membership is for one year,

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.stm.info/en/about> for information on the history and regulations of the STM. Accessed April 6, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> See [http://MusiMétromontreal.org/?lang=en\\_us](http://MusiMétromontreal.org/?lang=en_us) for information on MusiMétro and the *Étoiles* program. Accessed April 6, 2017.

with auditions usually taking place in September. Only some are Étoiles spots; most operate on the list system, allowing anyone to play there—Étoiles musicians and freelancers alike. Chapter 2 provides some historical context on this, while Chapter 3 details the differences between these two regulatory systems for metro buskers. Freelance busking spots are indicated by a sign with a stylized lyre (a small harp-like stringed musical instrument), referred to in the following pages as a *lyre sign*. Buskers will occasionally simply use the shorthand “lyre” when speaking of these signs. Spots that are reserved for Étoiles musicians have a different, larger, sign to indicate this.



**Illustration 1 - Lyre sign at Namur station.**

Note the public address loudspeaker directly adjacent to the sign. The booming—and barely intelligible—announcements are a source of aggravation for many buskers

### **Context and Research Questions**

This research investigates the lived experiences of the buskers who perform at some of the designated sites in Montreal’s underground public transit system. As will be seen, there are many challenges to busking, such as mixed financial rewards; the public perception (perhaps not dominant, but pervasive nonetheless) that equates busking with begging, the “street”, with the underclass and with crime; the potential barriers of regulation, or of competition with other buskers for the better spots; potential harassment

by police or private security, or simply by anonymous individuals (a busker is in a certain position of vulnerability); the need to travel to locations, requiring time (unpaid) and usually cost to get there, sometimes with no guarantee of securing a spot (on a variety of these points see, among others, Boetzkes 2010, Marina 2016, Masson 2009, Simpson 2008). And yet, there are many individuals who, for various reasons, choose to busk underground, from talented professional musicians all the way to the performer who sings or plays an instrument with little proficiency – and sometimes none whatsoever (Tanenbaum 1995, 25).

The central focus of this research is on who, and what, the busker “is”—in the sense of the reflexive self-conceptions, sensory and affective experiences, and sets of social, material and corporeal practices. Considerations of the spaces of performance, and the sensory engagement with these spaces, are all-important—e.g. acoustic qualities, and how buskers may work with and against the challenges of these often sonically unfavourable, and at times very noisy, spaces. My investigation of the practices and experiences of these ‘underground’ performers blurs the boundaries between space and self, between structural constraints (both physical/material and social/legal) and individual(ized) practices. The general question underlying my research is: “What does it ‘mean’ to be a busker in the Montreal metro, as an embodied, self-consciously produced and socio-historically located subjectivity?” And, more specifically: “How do buskers think of themselves, in their capacity *as buskers*?” What *motivates* them to perform as, and where, they do?” and “What are the sensorial experiences, particularly in relation to the spaces of performance, that inform busker subjectivities and practices?”

In my fieldwork, I proceeded first from my personal experience with Montreal’s metro system. In this, I have approached this research project from the inside, first from my own bodily knowing of the Montreal metro system, and second as a musician and former busker. In this sense, I take up the position of a “native anthropologist” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984), as someone who adopts recognized anthropological research methods to study a cultural setting within which one’s own worldview has been formed. Having grown up in Montreal, commuting regularly by metro and spending a considerable amount of time during my formative years hanging out in and exploring the underground world of Montreal’s metro system, I consider myself to be “at home,” and a “native” of this

underground world—a space that can be both alienating and liberating, associated as much with the cultural ‘underground’ as with the movement of citizen bodies (Labelle 2010). As I adopt a methodological and theoretical position that places sense perception and embodied experience at the center of knowledge and practice, both in terms of academic knowledge, of creative production, and of everyday life (Ingold 2013), I understand my position as researcher as experimental and largely improvisational (Cerwonka & Malkki 2007), and as proceeding first from my own experiential embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 2012).

### **Literature Review**

My survey of existing academic literature has shown that, while there is some important published work on busking and buskers, the central questions concerning the nature of busking—as practice, as experience—have remained largely unexplored, especially from an anthropological perspective. Much of the academic writing that deals with street performance does so cursorily (Augé 1986, Labelle, 2010), lacks the thickness of detail required for a more comprehensive treatment (Kushner & Brooks 2000, MacMahan 1996), or treats it largely from an outsider perspective, that may offer insights into public perceptions of busking but lacks any sense of the performers’ subjective experience (Boetzkes 2010, Coletta, Gabbi & Sonda 2008, Doumpa 2012, Oakes & Warnaby 2011). There are a few works that treat busking practices in detail (Campbell 1981, Harrison-Pepper 1990), and, of particular relevance here, that examine those in the New York subway (Tanenbaum 1995) and the Paris metro (Green 1998). However, detailed as these works are, a more immersive ethnographic approach is needed to comprehensively treat the questions that I have outlined above.

There is a tendency on the part of some authors to rely on reductive definitions of buskers and busking, or to impose simplifying typologies that homogenize what is in fact a set of heterogeneous motives, practices, and understandings. Green (1998) and Tanenbaum (1995), while stating that there are no absolute busker “types”, nonetheless both present a cast of busker characters that they take to be representative of busker experiences more generally. However, as I will demonstrate, the ways in which buskers think about their craft, their reasons for performing where and as they do, and how they actually go about the practice of *being busker*, are so varied among individuals—and

variable, for individuals—that any generalized definition is bound to fall short. While McMahan reports that some New York subway musicians “are very serious about their identity as buskers” (1996, 178), she also notes that increased regulations push buskers who do not hold permits into the category of beggar. This equation is vehemently denounced by buskers themselves (Lief 2008). It also highlights a problem with a busker *identity*, namely: who defines it? Performers themselves, regulatory agencies, the general public? A further objection to “identity” is “not that a particular term is used, but *how* it is used,” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000, 4), and “identity” tends to be understood as a fixed (if not necessarily permanent) category. As is suggested by much of the existing literature, and was borne out by my fieldwork, while some of those who perform in the metro may subscribe to a busker identity, many—perhaps most—decidedly do not. The concept of a busker identity is, therefore, highly contestable (Marina 2016).

In his study of New Orleans street musicians, Lief (2008) lists a range of activities, pressures, challenges, and rewards that, he argues, qualify buskers as a professional class, not unlike doctors or lawyers (if not in income). However, many of the professional qualifications he cites appear to apply exclusively to the performers he includes in his study (i.e. they work full-time as street musicians, they maintain a certain air of ‘authenticity’ regarding their craft, and busking is their primary, if not exclusive income, when the ethnographic evidence suggests otherwise). Finally, he distinguishes “professionals” from “dilettantes” (28), a problematic distinction. As will be seen, buskers can be motivated by many different aspirations. Both Green (1998) and Tanenbaum (1995) report that many buskers will only perform underground periodically, and do so for diverse reasons. Likewise, Marina (2016) demonstrates the heterogeneity of New Orleans buskers, both in terms of motivations and performance practices, undermining definitions of busking in any but the broadest terms. And, although busking is a “situated” practice, in that it is bound up in the social and material particularities of its enactment, one cannot speak of buskers being apprenticed into a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger 1991), for there is no consistent sense of community among metro buskers.

If busking cannot be equated with a profession, standardized practices, recognized forms of training, professional (or other organizational) certification, or other processes

of legitimization, it is nonetheless visible, and audible—an identifiable urban practice in many cities (Smith 1996). As is indicated by the extent literature, and as has been confirmed by my fieldwork, the only strict criteria for busking is that it must involve an artistic (musical or otherwise) performance or other form of entertainment, carried out in public, for which members of the public may show their appreciation through financial (or other) reward. But this catch-all definition is too vague to be of much use, to be able to *say* much of anything about busking, as it is actually practiced. A better understanding of the experiences of these urban performers requires examining in detail their motivations for, and the meaning they ascribe to, being buskers, and paying attention to the social, material and corporeal characteristics of their practices and perceptions.

The existing work on buskers comes from a range of disciplines, including anthropology, economics, history, law, literary studies, musicology, urban geography, and sociology. While this provides a wide range of perspectives, it challenges any sort of consensus or comprehensive treatment of the subject. Yet, despite these various limitations, there is a substantial enough body of literature that deals with some aspect of busking, spanning the last three decades, within and against which my research may be situated. This literature discusses busking in a range of North American cities, including Boston (Durso 2011), New Orleans (Lief 2008), New York (Harrison-Pepper 1990, McMahan 1996, Tanenbaum, 1995), San Francisco (Carlin 2014), Toronto (Smith 1996), as well as in Melbourne and Sydney, Australia (McNamara & Quilter 2016), Paris (Green 1998), Prague (Carlin 2014), Thessaloniki, Greece (Doumpa 2012), Trento, Italy (Coletta, Gabbi & Sonda 2008), London and Bath (Simpson 2008, 2011), and Warsaw (Masson 2007). A very few works take an ethnographically informed approach in attempting to grapple with this inherent messiness of what constitutes busking (Marina 2016, Simpson 2010, Smith 1993). What emerges is a sense that, while too varied in all its characteristics to be comprehensively defined, busking can nonetheless be apprehended as a loosely unified set of practices involving artistic or other entertainment performance in public, that is centered on the body of the busker but that is equally produced by, and productive of the space in which it unfolds (Bywater 2007).

In addition to works concerned specifically with busking, I have surveyed a range of writings on infrastructure and marginal/interstitial urban spaces (Imai 2013, Jonas &

Rahmann 2012, Kärholm & Sandin 2011, Larkin 2013, Madanipour 2004, Smith 2001, Tonnelat 2008); the acoustic experience of urban space, in general (Amphoux 2003, Feraud 2010, Boyd & Duffy 2012, Strong, Cannizzo & Rogers 2017), and of underground transit systems, more specifically (Augé 1986, Labelle 2010); musical practices, as embodied and/or intersubjective experience (Brashier 2013, Downey 2002, Rice 2003, Schutz & Kersten 1976); arts practices and creative engagement in and with urban spaces (Boudreault-Fournier & Wees 2017, Brighenti 2010, Calzadilla & Marcus 2006, Paquette & McCartney 2012); the use of audio-visual recording, editing and distribution as creative research tools (Giraud 2015, Hollenwerger 2013, Marry 2010, Westerkamp 2002) and film more specifically (Grimshaw & Ravetz. 2015, Møhl 2011, Schneider 2011, Willerslev & Suhr 2013); and, at a more historical and theoretical level, the creative convergences of anthropological research and Surrealism and surrealist-inspired arts practices (Clifford 1981, Hollier 2006, Sansi 2015, Sheringham 2006). These works have informed my approach in this research. While in some cases they provide models for applied research, they constitute, more generally, much of the groundwork for the theoretical framing of this thesis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I am interested, ultimately, in the subjective and sensorial experiences of metro buskers, and how they frame these within their own understandings of what it is to be a busker. In my approach to answering these questions, I draw on phenomenological anthropology (Csordas 1994, Desjarlais & Throop 2011, Ram & Houston 2015) and sensory ethnography (Low 2015, Pink 2009), in conversation with Deleuzean concepts of *assemblage* and *becoming* (Biehl & Locke 2010, DeLanda 2006, Deleuze & Guattari 1987). I draw, as well, on surrealist-inspired traditions of creative practices aimed at reclaiming the everyday spaces and experiences of urban life (Gardiner 2002, Sansi 2015), and on the significant and growing anthropological literature on subjectivity (Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007, Ortner 2005), the senses (Howes & Classen 2014, Imai 2013), and the body and embodiment (Downey 2002, Van Wolputte 2004)

Subjectivity, the “ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects” (Ortner 2005, 31), can be conceived of as the nexus of social and material forces, of cultural forms, and of a biological bodily presence

in the world, all mediated through the conscious and unconscious thoughts, sensations and emotions of a single person. Bound up with the specifics of the socio-historical moment within which the individual is located, subjectivity may be understood as internally experienced yet mediated by, and expressed through, the cultural norms, habits, and structures of that particular time and place (Bielh, Good & Kleinman 2007). Subjectivity expresses an affinity with what is frequently referred to as a “self” (Van Wolputte 2004); however, *self* typically carries with it implications of a unitary, bounded, subject. This individual-centered definition is, however, undone by an understanding of an emergent subjectivity that is decentred, unstable and always unfinished, always in-the-making. It is through such an understanding that, recognizing the “variability, heterogeneity, and contingency of our subjectivities as they unfold within in the realm of experience” (Kleinman & Fitz-Henry 2007, 53), we may grasp the subjective, sensorial and affective experiences of metro buskers. This view of subjectivity is largely a phenomenological one, proceeding from the assumption that experience and consciousness emerge in and through the body and its interactions with, and co-production of, space and of other bodies (Merleau-Ponty 2012). I thus take the body and senses as both subject of analysis (Howes 2003) and vehicle through which to conduct research (Jackson 2013). Attending to the everyday bodily practices of individuals shows that they are largely reproductive of existing normative patterns of behavior (Mauss 2006). Despite the tendency of these habituated daily practices to reproduce the pre-given and the un-assumed, the naturalized (Bourdieu 1977), they are largely improvised (Ingold & Hallam 2007), cobbled together from the at-hand (Certeau 1988), in a continual process of holding together the threads that make material the social (Nakassis 2013), that “make things stick” (Barber 2007). The case of metro buskers is a prime illustration of this, as I argue throughout this thesis. For, strict definitions of what a busker “is” fail if they exclude actual performers: busker motives, self-perceptions and, especially, practices are so varied, individualized and, to a degree, improvisational, that they defy comprehensive labelling; yet, there is something in the practice of busking that makes it “stick—makes it durable enough to be recognized as a contemporary urban practice (legitimized, or not, in varying degrees). As I will demonstrate in this thesis, it is only in the particulars of lived experience that “the” busker is to be located.

The bodily and social practices through which the world is constituted and that constitute the possible world of a sensing subjective being (Schutz & Luckmann 1973) unfold within particular spaces. Furthermore, space itself is not merely a container to be inhabited, an empty space that is taken up by social actors; rather, it is both pre-existent to the individual (i.e. socio-historically produced), and always made anew, through the actions of individual social agents (Lefebvre 1991). How space is organized formally regulates, to a large degree, the movement of bodies; conversely, it is the movement of bodies that define that space (Edensor 2010). Performance embodies space, and the production of space is performed: it is an act of performativity (Rose-Redwood & Glass 2014). As such, the body is the gauge of the varied rhythms of the lived world, but is also itself comprised of a multiplicity of rhythms—not simply movement itself, but the variations and irregularities that give each moment its unique characteristics (Lefebvre 2004). This can be observed, as will be seen, in the habituated and continually negotiated spatial practices of metro commuters, as well as in the practices (musical, social, bodily) of buskers. In musical (or, indeed, other forms of creative) performance, practitioners embody and project emotional content, while modifying their own bodily practices, through acquired skill and knowledge (Brashier 2013). Taking the body and subjective sense-experience as locus of conscious ways of knowing and doing, by which individuals position themselves in relation to existing forms and conventions (Gieser 2008), I detail the ways in which metro performers, in the specifics of their busking practices, create meaning for themselves and (for some) passersby. In these details are found the co-productive nature of body and space. Although urban space, within the logic of modern capitalism, is a resource to be exploited and a locus and means of control (Lefebvre 1972), due to its unstable always-in-the-making nature, there is an inherent potential for play and encounter, for the production of the new (Smith 2001). The spaces of the metro thus allow for a reterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) by the urban populace. Drawing on the “power of resistance contained in the everyday” (Sheringham 2006, 149), individuals may recast everyday moments and encounters within their own understandings (Certeau 1988), provoking a sense of engagement with the immediate environment (Boyd & Duffy 2012).

Always being remade, always an imitative but improvisational process of reproduction, space presents fissures through which those who use it, who move through it and (re)produce it in their daily practices, may appropriate it by their own means, to their own ends. However, it is not simply a matter of unitary agents acting freely; the phenomenological subjectivity is one that is relational, intersubjective (Schutz & Luckmann 1973), and bound up in the materiality of the physical world (Wilf 2011). In the subterranean world of the Montreal metro, for example, architecture and train schedules, regulations of space and the activities of passersby all inform and reflect the practices and experiences whereby buskers are made manifest. As much as busking is a performance activity, it is also a process of drawing together, an assemblage-act that binds sense-perception, internal mental states, socio-historical processes, and the materiality of things, of the world as we find it (DeLanda 2006). This is a subjectivity that is dispersed, never complete, always in the process of being made and unmade. To better comprehend it, it is necessary to attend as much to the spaces of performance as to the performing body. Illustrating this point, it will be seen how the architecture of the metro system participates in the busking performance. The perspectives discussed above inform my methodological approach, just as my theoretical framing has been informed by ongoing methodological adaptations. I would argue that, similar to street performance, research generally is, itself, a creative act (McCormack 2008). Relying less on clearly defined (and category-defining) strategies, and more on flexible, improvised and improvisational tactics (Certeau 1988) suggests a theoretical and methodological pragmatism that recognizes that, as with artistic creation, knowledge production is a creative act through which the researcher engages with and transforms the world as theorized and as lived (Cerwonka & Malkki 2007).

### **Methods: Researching Under the City**

My field research methods included extended observations, short informal conversations, semi-structured interviews (most of them audio recorded, a few taken down in shorthand), and use of photography and audio-visual recording. As participant-observer, in addition to engaging directly in the world of the metro and in busker encounters through reflexive observation, I also busked on several occasions in the metro. In my approach to

being and performing in those particular spaces, and engaging with buskers and busking practices, I take the sensing, feeling, knowing body as subject of, and means for anthropological inquiry (Jackson 2013). I thus proceed first from my own sense perceptions to examine “senses of place... [by] draw[ing] both on the individual everyday practice, experience and memory of the user and the wider network of different forces in and outside that place” (Imai 2013, 65). This does not mean that I presume to be able to know the mind of another; instead, I take my own situatedness as an indicator of certain social and material relations at play, and from this, attempt to better understand the experiences of metro buskers. Adopting audio-visual recording technologies provides a multifaceted perspective that can get closer to an understanding of a common (human) sensory embodiment (in the biological sense, at the very least) than writing alone (Pink 2009). My use of audio-visual recording and editing, in addition to being research technologies, are means of distribution—of knowledge production, but also of aesthetic enjoyment. As will be seen, due to the influence of some participants, my use of video precipitated a new, and unforeseen process of collaborative participation, centered on music and sharing—on performance and Gift (dealt with explicitly in chapter 4). I outline here the methods I used during my fieldwork (including participant recruitment and research ethics and informed consent), carried out from June 1 to September 3, 2017.

The first phase of my fieldwork was a survey of all the designated busking spots in the metro. I carried out this initial observation by visiting every station that has one or more officially designated spot. In some cases, it was difficult to locate the spots. If one does not know where to begin, the only guide is a list on the MusiMétro website, of all the stations with spots. Included in this list are such details as whether it is a designated Étoiles spot, if it is inside or outside of the controlled area, and some notes on the level of comfort (e.g. “draft”, “cold in winter”) and qualities or particularities of that spot (e.g. “good acoustics”, “do not play loudly”, “little traffic”). But, at times, one must wander through the underground passageways to try and locate a spot. These passageways are, in most cases, part of the metro system itself; but some fall under the jurisdiction of another body, usually a shopping centre or business complex. With one exception (discussed in some detail in Chapter 3), all of the recognized busking spots in the metro system are under the jurisdiction of the STM.



**Illustration 2 - Busking spot at Assomption station.**

The spatial lay-out of this spot is near-ideal: at a widening in a corridor, mid-way between stairs to the surface and escalators leading down into the station. But, adjacent to the lyre sign, a large outlet for the metro ventilation system is the source of a constant droning noise—a major acoustic nuisance. I did not see any evidence of buskers using this spot.

My goal in this initial survey of the metro busking spots was to locate them, determine how well, if at all, they seemed to be used, and note some details about their particular features and characteristics. Toward this end, I took photographs of every spot, often taking several photographs, so as to show not only the spot itself, but its setting within the surrounding space of that station. Many spots are either in a long corridor or at a level that is part way in between the train platform and the stairs and/or escalator that leads up to the exit (See Illustration 2). Determining how well a particular spot is used can be tricky, but if no one was playing at the spot, I would check for a list tucked behind the lyre sign. In a few cases—mainly at stations in or near the downtown area—I saw buskers at the spots, but for the most part, there was an absence of performers, and in a few cases it appeared that it was rare, if ever, that a busker would set up there. This assumption was based on 1) the absence of any list, even a very old one, tucked in behind the lyre sign, 2) the relatively low number of passersby, 3) the poor placement of some of these spots, and 4) my personal knowledge of these metro stations and the presence (or

absence) of buskers in specific stations. Despite this, I re-visited a number of these “unused” spots throughout the summer; in almost all cases, I continued to see no evidence of their use.

### **Observations and Participant Recruitment**

The next phase involved locating and observing metro buskers while they performed. To do so, I merely travelled from station to station, regularly visiting those where, based on my initial survey, I was most likely to encounter buskers. This step opened the way for participant recruitment. Typically, when arriving at a spot where someone was performing, I would attempt to blend with the crowd of passersby and observe unobtrusively. This was sometime relatively easy when large numbers of commuters were present. The physical lay-out of the spot and the surrounding space could also facilitate or hinder this form of observation. For example, some spots are located where commuters may pause nearby, such as at the open area at the bottom of the escalators at Guy-Concordia station. At other spots, such as those in the middle of a long corridor, this is impossible: stopping there is unusual for most passersby, and rarely escapes the attention of the performer. Indeed, buskers are generally (though by no means always) very aware of what goes on around them. An initial challenge to speaking with performers is that they have limited time at the spot, and some musicians move from one song to the next without a break. I had to be tactical in how and when I approached a busker, to introduce myself and my research. If they were amenable to the idea, I gave more detail about participating. I carried with me, at all times, copies of the letter of informed consent that I devised for my fieldwork (Ethics Protocol 16-119, approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board, June 13, 2016). A few individuals were willing to participate right then. However, in most cases I left the consent form with them; some said they would contact me via email (a very few did), others specified where I would likely find them performing again in the coming days. Some said that they would participate at another time, but were vague about when. Often it was a matter of hit-and-miss: sometimes I was lucky enough to meet a busker who was ending a set and was interested in participating, but this was rare. More frequently, it was a case of catching them at just the right time, or arranging to meet for an interview some

days away. In only a few cases did a busker, when asked, outright refused to participate; almost all were enthusiastic about the research.

During observations, I took field notes in small notebooks. I considered such things as the physical infrastructure of the site and how this may influence the rhythms of the crowd and of the performance. I paid special attention to the acoustic properties of the spaces. I attended to the performances themselves, the buskers' bodily dispositions and projection of themselves (their "act" or "stage persona") and what reactions this may elicit from passers-by. Throughout, I also reflected on my own sensory experiences: the sounds of the spaces, of the performer, the rhythms of passersby and their effects on me, as well as the temperature and the tactile and visual characteristics of these spaces (e.g. the surfaces, textures, colours, lighting, etc.). This informed my overall impression of the world of the metro—which is crucial for an understanding of buskers' experiences.

### **Language and Translations**

Montreal is a bilingual city, and though English is dominant in terms of buskers' repertoire (despite, as will be see, there being a wide array of genres being performed, the Anglo-American rock traditions are frequent voices in the underground chorus), French was the predominant language during my fieldwork. French is my second language, but I grew up in a largely bilingual milieu in Montreal and am fully fluent in both languages (written and spoken). Of the nineteen semi-structured interviews that I conducted, ten were in French; three of these were with musicians whose first language is Spanish. And one, with a bilingual musician, was conducted in English (the participant's preference) though this is her second language. French-speaking Montrealers use many English loan words—a fairly common one being "busker." There is no French term with precisely the same meaning, although many French-speaking participants spoke, variously of street musicians (*musiciens de rue*) and metro musicians (*musiciens de métro*). Well over half of the thirty-plus shorter, informal conversations I had with metro buskers, were in French. In the following pages, I do not, on the whole, identify a participant's language. All translations from French to English are my own. In a few places, I have included the original French in parentheses, as an attempt to capture the full meaning of what was said; for the most part, I simply give the English translation.

### **Conversations, Interviews and Informed Consent**

I conducted nineteen semi-structured interviews, ranging from as little as ten minutes to over an hour. All but four were recorded; I took shorthand notes for those four. I had numerous short informal conversations—in many cases, these were with participants with whom I also conducted more detailed interviews. Some participants I saw only once during the course of my fieldwork; most I saw, spoke with, and observed while they performed on at least two occasions, and some of them on numerous occasions. In addition to these full participants, I spoke informally with many more metro buskers: in some cases, they were happy to talk to with me, but were either unwilling or unable to set aside time to speak in more detail, others were willing to share their thoughts with me, but unwilling to participate beyond that. These informal participants either were hesitant about greater participation, including signing the informed consent form, or simply never seemed to get around to doing so. This is, in part, due to the transitory nature of busking in general: many buskers move around and, especially in the case of freelancers, may be unable to specify when and where they will next be performing. I had short, informal conversations with over thirty metro buskers (this excludes those few who outright refused to participate). I spoke with a few of these individuals on several occasions, over a period of months; others were one-time exchanges that lasted less than ten minutes. Of the buskers who participated fully (i.e. signed the letter of informed consent), only one chose not to be identified; all others wanted to be named in the research. Most used their legal names (a few, a first name only), a few go by stage names, and in two cases, by a band (musical group) name. In the following pages, where names are used, these are the names the buskers provided. Otherwise, anonymous participants are simply referred to as “a busker” or “a performer”, etc.

Semi-structured interview questions included:

- How long have you been busking in the metros?
- What motivates you to busk? How did you get started?
- Do you busk regularly? Do you have favourite/preferred spots? Why these ones?
- Do you/have you busked elsewhere – in Montreal? In other cities?
- How much of your income/time/lifestyle is it?

- Do you consider (would you label) yourself a “busker”? A professional? Artist? (How, or do you, identify with the term/concept ‘busker’?)
- Do you feel that there is a community of buskers in Montreal? What sort of relations do you have with other buskers? Are you a member of MusiMétro?
- Do you play music in other capacities? (i.e. professionally or semi-professionally, teaching, entertainment, in bands, etc.)
- What is it *like* to busk in the metro (in terms of acoustics, the atmosphere of the spaces, relations with the public)? How does it *feel* to busk in the metros (placing emphasis on sense perception and subjective impressions)?

This last set of questions lead into discussions of performance style and “staging” techniques (how buskers position themselves and the hat or case they set out for donations, within the performance space; how they project themselves and/or interact with passersby); how they may (or may not) adapt their performances according the particularities of the performance space (particularly in terms of acoustic considerations); and their repertoire and/or musical styles. Informal conversations touched on a limited number of these questions. Other questions came up during conversations and interviews, either as expansions on those listed above, or as a result of specific details raised by participants (for example: issues of safety and security, conflict, and theft). Those listed above provided the framework for more in-depth treatment of some aspects of buskers’ experiences.

### **Audio-visual recordings and Participant-collaboration**

During my fieldwork, I carried with me at all times a digital SLR camera (Nikon D5000), audio recording device (Zoom H4n), and an additional microphone (Rhode NTG1). I connected this directional (“shotgun”) mic to the Zoom recorder, to capture a more focused, “cleaner” sound than that of the camera’s built-in stereo microphones. The latter, however, provided greater spatial sense to the audio. Going into the field, I had two goals in mind, for the use of audio-visual recording: to record raw “data”—events as they unfold, which can include many details lost to, or perceived differently during direct observation (Simpson 2010)—for later review, as material for analysis; and, from the recordings, to produce some form of audio-visual work representative of metro busker experiences. In two cases, I was asked by participants to film them playing a certain song,

from beginning to end. They had slightly different reasons for this request. This caused a change in direction of what I had originally intended to do with the audio and video recordings I made during the fieldwork. This change in direction involving participant-collaboration is detailed in chapter 4, where I discuss the process of audio-visual production, including the editing phase. I shot video of twelve buskers (or ensembles). All of them, except for the duo Bucket of Change, were also interviewed. One interviewed participant did not want to be photographed or video recorded (but elected to use his real name).

### **Sensory Ethnography**

This thesis explores the lived experiences of metro buskers—implying a focus that is as much on the body as on social processes and material relations. I proceed from the premise that we come to know the social and physical world through our bodily senses, (Rodaway 1994); that the world, as it is for us, is constituted by and through our senses (Merleau-Ponty 2012); and that sense-perception is bound up with the social and emotional experiences of the individual (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987). Consequently, I attended to my own subjective perceptions and experiences during fieldwork. While not a central focus of this research, my sensory interactions with the people and the spaces of the metro helped feed this ethnography. I estimate that, during my fieldwork, I spent in excess of five hundred hours actually underground. In this time, I rode trains, walked, stood, sat, watched, listened, conversed, ate, took notes, filmed, made recordings. I spent many hours in subterranean coolness in the early days of summer, and oppressive heat, heavy and humid, later in the season. I felt exhilarated, exhausted, pleased, irritated, dejected, rewarded. At the end of long days, my feet and back ached, speaking of hours on hard surfaces and the constant weight of a backpack. And, I watched, listened to, and was entertained by dozens of metro buskers. Reflecting on these impressions allowed me to engage more deeply with the world of the metro, and the experiences of metro buskers. I do not, however, suppose that there is a sensory equivalency between bodies, that two individuals will know the world in precisely the same way. Within the particularities of a given socio-historical setting, how the world is sensed and what those sensations signify, is inextricably bound up with the social norms and cultural framework of that time and place (Howes 2003). Further, within any social setting, not all beings sense in the same

ways, nor do they all interpret those sensations in the same way. Bodies are not all the same, nor are all bodies treated in the same way by others (Horton & Barker 2009). Thus, rather than postulating the body and senses as a transcendental given, an attendance to the singular, sensing body undermines conceptions of sense experience as abstract universals.

To further enrich my understanding of how it *feels* to be a metro busker, I turned to what was, in large part, the original inspiration for this research: my own past busking. I had played, periodically, in several North American cities, during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This past personal experience provided me with some insight into buskers' experiences and some knowledge of busking as a practice (a way of knowing and doing). On six occasions during my fieldwork, I played guitar and sang in the metro. I played once each at Jean-Talon and Square-Victoria-OACI stations, and three times each at Sherbrooke station and in the corridor in between Atwater station and the Westmount Square office-shopping complex. In doing so, I was reminded that busking can be physically demanding and psychologically exhausting; it can also be also deeply rewarding. This hands-on (and ears-on) approach of attending to the body—mine, as researcher, those of participants—is a central aspect of an immersive sensory ethnography (Pink 2009), and is way of entering into a close relationship one's immediate environment (Imai 2008). This insider perspective allows for an immediate, embodied knowledge, which can only be accessed by the actual practice of busking. I do not treat my own busking sessions in detail, but touch on them periodically throughout the following pages.

### **As Above, So below: The City and the Metro**

Modern urban settings have often been understood as depersonalized and depersonalizing, alienating loci of social isolation (Simmel 1921), and while subways and underground metro systems can feel particularly inhospitable and dehumanizing, they can also be sites of sociality and creative engagement (Augé 1986). As with other modern subterranean worlds, the Montreal metro can be a dirty and noisy place that one is typically eager to escape from; yet, it can also be thought of as a liminal space that engenders encounter and exchange (McMahan 2004). Although the metro was not built to foster sociality, this is what buskers may do there (Tanenbaum 1995, 48). However, it is far from certain that they will: some buskers reported times when they felt invisible—

or worse, reviled, even abused. For, just as music can encourage a strengthened sense of shared experience (Schutz & Kersten 1976), busker practices unfold in specific times and in particular spaces. And these are spaces built with a functional purpose in mind: to move bodies—worker bodies, consumer bodies—efficiently about the city. The metro is an infrastructural system upon which the city is deeply reliant, and like so much of the modern technology around which our lives are centered, it is largely taken for granted, treated as the always-at-hand (Star 1999). Yet, as is evinced throughout this thesis, it is an infrastructural space that is informed and reformed by human agents, in their everyday practices. The activities of buskers make this visible—and audible.

Deep under the city, it is easy to forget how directly connected the metro is to life above ground. It is a space that is displaced and displacing—a disconnectedness, a buried rootlessness. Yet, through repeated familiarity with stations and their locations throughout the city, metro users can develop an internal map relative to the above-ground. This map, however, represents a different spatial and temporal relationship with the city than does the more familiar surface map. It represents a thickening of the city; it is a spatial performance in itself (Park 2014). All maps are a flattening, and ones that depict both streets and metro lines compress vast depths into the thinness of asphalt. Metro users know the city as not limited to the surface—its skin—but as extending down and laterally out – a parallel city, where the citizen relies less on sight than sound and a kinesthetic sense, a bodily awareness of movement and depth. However, without direct reference to familiar landmarks or other means of orienting oneself, to changing weather, the light of day disappearing into night, etc., one is easily disoriented in the subterranean environment. This was mentioned by a few buskers, who described spending many hours, sometimes an entire day without going up to the surface, and of losing track of time or feeling cut off from the life of the city. I felt this alienation from the city, from the light of day, on occasion during my fieldwork—especially on days when I spent up to eight hours or more underground.

Because many stations, particularly in the downtown core, connect to shopping and business complexes, it is possible to access amenities (e.g. food, bathrooms, etc.) without going above ground. Yet, while a metro system represents a sort of world unto itself, it is nonetheless an integral part of the city and every station has its own unique

particularities, with a direct relation to the above-ground within which they are located (Augé 1986). The proximity to work-place and businesses, educational and cultural institutions, the characteristics of the neighborhoods, all colour life below ground and have an effect on the busking spots in the metro. Buskers know this and, as will be seen, may adapt their practices accordingly. And they, in turn, modify the character of the station, further thickening the sonic texture of the underground. For if the metro is a space where sense of place, of physical location, is transformed, and takes on specific qualities, it is also one where acoustic experience is markedly different from that above ground. It is characterized by pervasive reverberation, the hallmark of the underground (Labelle 2010) that can enhance or hinder busker performances, depending on instrument and repertoire, the particular sonic qualities of a given spot, and the presence (or absence) of commuters. A mass of moving bodies in an enclosed space transforms its acoustic character—passersby, too, are active participants in the busking performance.

In the thickened texture of the underground, the busker is sometimes lost sight of. At times celebrated artist, at others mere mendicant, or erased altogether, an inconvenient body. As will be seen, the busker is an individual performer – with all the unique experiential characteristics that entails – who adopts a set of social-material practices, enacted in particular spatio-temporal moments. It is an assemblage act that draws together performer and passerby, architecture and regulatory mechanisms, the movement of trains and bodies, the rhythms and counter-rhythms of the city. It is into a reverberant, grimy, inhospitable, at times hostile, environment that the busker descends, to earn some money, to practice an instrument, perfect an art, and offer a gift of sociality, of pleasure, of fleeting beauty. Following after this transitory urban performer, I too descend under the city to locate, in the individual motives, the particularities of practice, the scenes of encounter and exchange, Montreal's metro buskers.

## Chapter 2 – Locating the Busker: Motivations and Self-conceptions

“Some do it for life experience... I say, it’s good school. It’s a tough school, but it’s good school.” - Gérald Cabot

### Introduction

This chapter explores the motivations and self-perceptions of metro buskers, *qua* buskers. I am interested, fundamentally and most generally, in what it ‘means’ to be a busker, specifically from the perspective of the performers themselves. Therefore, their motivations and understandings of themselves, in terms of their busking practices, are central to an examination of their subjective, sensorial experiences, and what roles these may play in fostering spaces of encounter and exchange. Self-understanding and motivations—intentions—are key components to any analysis of subjectivity, creative practices, and everyday engagements with and in social space. In this chapter, I focus not only on the reasons given by metro buskers for performing where and as they do, but also, more simply, for busking in the first place. Closely associated with the reasons given for busking are participants’ own understandings of what a busker “is”—what is entailed in the practice, and how they think of themselves, in relation to the idea of “busker.” That is: Do they think of themselves first and foremost as buskers, as musicians? Does busking constitute a profession? Is there a “community” of buskers? These are the sorts of general questions that underlay my fieldwork. In the following pages, I also begin to detail the spaces of the metro, and how buskers operate within and in relation to designated performance spaces. This theme is taken up in earnest in the following chapter, but as I am concerned with the performers’ perceptions and self-conceptions, I situate my encounters with metro buskers in within the concrete spaces of the Montreal metro.

A discussion of motives for busking must, necessarily, address earnings: one of, but not the only, primary motives for busking is for the money. I did not ask participants how much they earn, but I did ask how much of their incomes derived from their busking activities. The answers to this varied greatly, from those who busk only periodically and not primarily for the earnings, to those for whom busking is their principal, or only,

source of income. But, the monetary dimension of busking is only one aspect of the questions considered here. At its core, the aim of this research has been to explore buskers' perceptions and self-perception—by this, I mean their sensory experiences and how they perceive themselves—the details of their practices and understanding of themselves *as buskers*. Consequently, I questioned participants about their motivations for performing not only in the metro stations, specifically (including which stations and times of day), but also how they arrived at the idea of busking, more generally. The central question here – usually among the first things I asked participants, during my fieldwork – is, put simply: “Why do you busk?” And, elaborating on this: “What got you started busking, in the first place?” And thence to: “Why play in the metro stations?” While, for the majority of buskers (but not all), the potential of earning some money is a prime motive, it is not the only one. In no single case did a participant indicate that making money was their *only* motive for busking; they all mentioned other reasons in addition to earning money. The most common replies fall into two groupings: “practice” (or “improvement”) and “sharing/encounter/giving something to the public.”

### **Who busks? Why busk?**

While many buskers describe themselves as professional musicians (“It’s my job,” as one participant succinctly put it), busking is, for most of them, only one part of part of their musical activities. They may also play concerts and at private events, or give music lessons. Nonetheless, there are those for whom busking is their only source of income. Many participants reported that they think of their music as less of a job, then as a vocation. Lalo Orozco summed this up as: “It [music] is what I love, and what I know.” He went to talk about the social aspect of busking, the many people he has met his way, and the importance of the sense of encounter with others busking can provoke. “You make these transient little connections,” Justin Kozak said. “I think that has something to do with [the appeal of busking].” Laci Harmon and Chris Stork, two young musicians I met at Place-des-Arts station, said busking is a fairly new activity for them; they are both in Montreal studying music and that they decided to try it, in part just to practice, but also for the pleasure of playing, for the enjoyment they get from sharing music. This underscores the social nature of busking, and of music more generally: buskers enable and participate in a shared experience that is as affective as it is sensorial. This can be

found in the physical performance of playing music (Brashier 2013), as much as in its aural perception—itself a socially-located, intersubjective experience (Downey 2002). Most of the metro buskers I spoke with said that this aspect of performing in Montreal’s underground transit stations—the social encounter and engagement—is central to how they conceive of the practice of busking and their own positions as public performers. Importantly, for some of them—though, decidedly a small number—making money doesn’t even really count as a reason for busking at all. That is, contrary to what one might expect, they perform publicly for reasons that have nothing to do with earning money. This supports my overall claim that busking is a highly heterogeneous set of practices that cannot be easily defined in simple terms, cannot be reduced to a simple matter of Gift as economic exchange or reciprocal social obligation—much less to being a profession that is delineated by a shared set of practices and understandings.

One of the appeals of busking is that one is not held to the same standards as performing for a paying audience, as in a concert setting. Several participants reported that playing in the metro allows them to put in the hours of daily practice that are required to excel at one’s chosen instrument. “I can’t really practice at home... the walls are paper thin,” Geof Holbrook said, “... why not go somewhere where other people might enjoy it”—a sentiment echoed by other participants. Alexandra, who plays traditional folk music on the violin, says playing in the metro is a way for her to improve her skill at, and comfort with, performing in public. Playing in the metro is a challenge to herself (*C’est un défi personnel*), a way to push herself in terms of musical practice and her ‘on-stage persona’. FX said that his original reason for playing in the metro was similar to Geof’s: simply as a place to practice. He started playing the guitar about ten years ago (he had been playing the piano for a long time before that), and would practice on his lunch break, in a park by his workplace. But by October, it was too cold to play outside, so he started playing at the spot in Bonaventure metro station—near his work, and which generally goes unused except when there is an event at the nearby Bell Centre (this detail is important, as it is but one example that illustrates the interconnectivity of the underground world of the metro to the events and activities at the surface of the city). The following year, FX became involved with MusiMétro, eventually serving as treasurer

for a time. He said that busking has changed his playing from being simply a personal experience to a means of engaging with others, allowing him to contribute something to a space that is “built precisely to not be comfortable, so that people don’t want to remain.” He feels that street performers, of any kind, are responding to a “public need... a demand [that is] more than just a material need.” And that they do so by “producing something right there, live on the spot... a living performance” (*Un spectacle vivant*).

On a stop at Bonaventure, along the Orange Line, I met a busker who plays the recorder in a Baroque ensemble and who performs occasionally at one of the spots in that station. Like FX, he works in a nearby office building. He plays at this spot about once a week, simply to practice. “It’s not to make money, that’s for certain!” he says, looking up and down the long corridor that, except for the two of us, is completely deserted. I estimate an average of three people coming through every five minutes, during the time that I observe him playing, though there are a few coins the instrument case on the floor. This illustrates quite clearly that earnings are not the only motivation for busking. The other most common reason for busking, as reported to me—one that nearly all participants touched on in some respect and that, for many of them, works in conjunction with other motivations—is some variant of the theme of “giving something to the public” and, in the process, of beautifying the (typically less than pleasant) spaces of the metro. This evocation of ‘Gift’, as process engendered by buskers is not one that I had sought at the outset of my fieldwork; rather, it suggested itself with regular insistence. Nonetheless, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, so far as metro buskers are concerned, this Gift relation cannot be reduced to a simple case of social interaction through gifting and mutual obligation. Rather, this form of Gift is one that is both central to, and supplementary to, busking practices—it is both directly tied to the act of the performance and opens new routes of social and material circulation that are *in excess* of, superfluous to, the assemblage-act that is *being busker*. Consequently, as will become evident in the following pages, it is impossible to completely untangle issues of meaning, motivation and self-conception from the particulars of practice, and that these are, in turn, intimately entwined with the mutual effects of space and performer, and, finally, the social and material circulations that converge on and flow through the performing busker.

### **Profession, Identity, and the “Stereotypical” Busker**

In Chapter 1, I demonstrated that busking cannot be defined as a profession; applying criteria of professional vs. non-professional or “dilettantes” (Lief 2008, 28) does little to further an understanding of those who actually perform on the streets (and in the metro, as is the case in Montreal). As I emphasize throughout this thesis, the motivations for busking, performers’ own conceptions about what they do and what it means to them, the sorts of relations they have with passersby, and the practices by which they *become busker*, are too variable, varying and tied to both individual practices and spaces of performance to fit durable notion of profession, identity, or subject-position. Rather, as will be made evident, “the busker” can only be defined in the very general sense of someone who engages in busking activities. And, this last may be defined very simply as a musical, or other artistic, performance or entertainment act geared toward some sort of audience, carried out in a public, or semi-public space, in which there is the possibility of some sort of financial (or other material) recompense for the performer. While some New York subway musicians are, as McMahan reports, “very serious about their identity as buskers” (1996, 179), there are many for whom busking is simply an occasional, incidental activity, who do not define themselves as buskers. In her study of Paris metro musicians, Green (1998) argues that there is no busker “type”, subverting a common urge of many a researcher to create typologies so as to categorize so-called “field data.” Yet, despite this, she then goes on to devise and describe sixteen representative types of busker, though she acknowledges the limitations of such an approach (110).

I have resisted this sort of typological analysis from the outset, for the very reasons that Green states, then ignores (*ibid*, 75ff.)—i.e. that buskers constitute a much too fluid and heterogeneous group, in everything from their instruments, repertoire, and personal performance style, to their reasons for busking and how they think of busking, as a practice, for any tenable typecasting or bounded definitions of buskers and busking. And yet, I will venture that there is one particular busker-assemblage of instrument, repertoire, and other key features, that is encountered in varying but similar enough instances to be identified not as a *typical* busker, but a *stereotypical* busker—emphasizing that this is as much a fictional character type as an actual representative descriptive that pins down reality, as it is. Fictional as this character is, he (for this

stereotyped busker is nearly always male) is nonetheless found reflected in numerous buskers that, for over three decades, have been commonly encountered in the metro. I base this statement both on my own past experiences and on what was reported to me by a few key participants. This “type” once made up, if not the majority, then certainly a very high percentage of street performers, generally (i.e. not only those playing in the metro), and can be seen as a historical heir to traditions of street performance that stretch back through the centuries (Cohen & Greenwood 1981). Mobility is a key feature of these antecedents to modern buskers, and may be reflected most strongly now in those whose instruments (or other materials of performance) are light and easily portable. These characteristics are perhaps best exemplified, among the varieties of busking practices, by the guitarist-vocalist, who are by far the most widely encountered buskers in the cities of North America (though there is a high degree of variability among them).

Other significant common features of this “character” center on instrument and repertoire: he sings and plays guitar, his repertoire is made in large part of commonly recognizable songs, and these are generally performed without significantly deviating from the original version. Examples of such covers are songs by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and commonly recognized folk and blues tunes. This is not to suggest that such songs are not routinely played by other buskers; the point is that they make up the common, shared repertoire of this frequently encountered performer. His age ranges from early 20s to late 50s. He is invariably a “white Caucasian.” In Montreal, he is more typically Francophone, but only by a small majority. Regardless, his repertoire is usually all sung in English. In terms of earnings and number of spots played per week, there is as much variation as there is amongst all buskers, as a collectivity. I should note here that, in terms of my own past busking activities, I largely conformed to this “type”: male, guitarist-singer playing mostly ‘covers’, who took to busking the way an adventure-seeking youth takes to the road and seeks a free agent lifestyle. I invoke this stereotyped busker because 1) it allows me to show how varied, in fact, buskers and busking practices encountered in the metro really are, and 2) because even in the case of this fictional type (who can nonetheless be located in actual buskers encountered) it is evident that it is still not possible to arrive at a bounded definition of who or what a busker “is.” Some of the performers I met who conform most closely to this fiction—at least in so far as

instrument and repertoire as well as general demographics—live exclusively from their busking earnings while others only busk periodically; for some, making money is a secondary concern, while others will play only until they've earned a specified amount. For some musicians, busking is an opportunity to play some of their own material, while others play only covers songs and try to do so as faithfully to the original as possible. Some may explicitly define themselves as buskers, as much a profession as an identity, while others think of themselves as musicians who just happen to be busking. During the course of my fieldwork, I met a number of musicians who conformed, in varying degrees, to this stereotyped character. In several cases, we spoke on numerous occasions, usually for short periods of time, but, interestingly, it was most often these buskers who chose to remain anonymous in the context of this research—unlike the majority of buskers I spoke to, who were not only willing, but frequently eager, to be identified.

In the account that follows, assembled into a narrative form that emphasizes the mobility and temporality of metro busking, I focus primarily on participants' understandings of the practice of busking, including their motivations for taking it up in the first place. While this may seem to suggest notions of "identity", I avoid this sense. As has been argued heretofore, and will be demonstrated by the evidence from my fieldwork, this rejection of a unitary definition of what it "is" to be a busker is supported by the heterogeneity of performers' motivations and self-perceptions (Bywater 2007). Additionally, in sketching out in some detail the underground world of the metro, I highlight the situatedness (localization) of busking practices, indicating that the questions of motivation, meaning, and self-perception at the core of this chapter are invariably tied to the shifting social and material relations of the wider contexts of infrastructure, space and embodied subjectivities on the move. In this respect, some of the specific details concerning the performers encountered in this chapter can be seen as foreshadowing the concerns of subsequent chapters (namely: busker practices, themes of encounter and Gift, and recording technologies as performance and participation).

### **First Underground Forays: Jean-Talon Station**

At noon, on Wednesday June 22, I leave the bright midsummer day and descend into Jean Talon station, where the Orange Line intersects with the Blue Line. This station is located roughly at the edges of three traditionally working-class neighbourhoods that

have seen a steady rise in income in recent decades: Villeray, Little Italy and Petite Patrie. There are four entrances into the station, spaced out over a couple of blocks on Jean Talon street, a main thoroughfare that stretches across the central part of the city. Of three designated busking spots at Jean Talon station, one is at street level and is rarely used. During my entire fieldwork period, even though I passed it dozens of times, I never saw anyone performing there. One participant later told me that he had played there a few times, but his was the only use of that spot reported to me. As with other street level spots, it is subject to strong winds when someone comes through the doors, and would be completely unplayable in the winter. In addition, though there is fair degree of foot traffic passing by, it is extremely variable throughout the day, becoming very slow at times.



**Illustration 3 - Street-level spot at Jean-Talon station.**

The lyre sign is visible on the back wall. As with many other street-level spots, this one is rarely used, and in the winter it is usually too cold to perform there.

The two spots inside the station, past the fare turnstiles, are used quite frequently. The first one is a freelance spot, meaning that anyone can perform there, whether they are members of MusiMétro or not. On this occasion, as I approach, I see two men in white collarless shirts with a whole range of instruments and equipment: a harp, guitar, bamboo “pan” flutes, microphones on stands, amplifiers, and miscellaneous small percussion

instruments. They seem to be taking a break: one is checking the tuning of his harp, while the other retrieves a bottle of water from a pack. I approach them and introduce myself. Oscar, the man with the harp, continues to fine-tune his instrument, while his brother, Ramiro, suggests that we sit on a nearby bench and talk while he eats his lunch. They are from Bolivia and have only been in Montreal for six months. Prior to that, they had been travelling for several years, primarily in various parts of Europe, at times together, at times independently from each other. They have both played music since an early age and were trained in traditional Bolivian folk music but as a duo, performing under the name “Raymi”, they incorporate a range of other musical styles and instruments. Ramiro says that, although their point of departure in their own personal musical trajectories is their Andean heritage, they continually expand on this, mixing in new material that they have picked up during their respective travels. This includes musical elements and instruments from Spain, France, Hungary, Rumania, and Gypsy/Roma musical traditions. They also include popular Western pieces, such as songs by the Beatles, and other widely recognizable melodies, such as wonderfully instrumented version of “John Brown’s Body/Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Although they don’t feel that they have yet established themselves here, they reveal an intimate knowledge of Montreal metro busking. They play at least five days a week, normally taking Saturdays and sometimes Sundays off. While they aim to live exclusively off their musical activities, Ramiro says that they have not yet quite achieved this goal since arriving in Montreal. He feels that this may, in part, be due to the fact that they are still establishing themselves: “No one knows us here yet.” Ramiro says that while their primary motive may be to make money, to try and live from their musical art, this is because they “love art” and see themselves first and foremost as artists who have something to share, something that he believes is essential to the human spirit. They would like to have a manager, he says, to develop local contacts and promote their work. But, he admits, they have not yet pursued this strategy in earnest. For now, they are busy playing in the metro stations and, increasingly, on the street in Old Montreal. A few weeks later I catch up with them while they are taking a break between sets in the Place D’Armes square, in front of Notre-Dame Basilica, a popular tourist destination in Old Montreal. The ambience there is very different, with many people stopping to take in the

performances. Ramiro comments on this, saying that it is a very different experience from playing in the metro, where few of the people passing by stop to listen. He prefers a setting where the ambience is a little more leisurely, where passersby tend to have the time to stop and enjoy the music. But, he notes, there are exceptions to this general rule: on the day when I first met them, he told me that earlier that morning, they were playing at another spot and a woman stopped to listen for at least twenty minutes—indicating that they are no hard and fast rules for behavior of buskers’ “audiences” any more than there are for the motivations and practices of the buskers themselves.



**Illustration 4 – Raymi at Jean-Talon station.**

Finally, he rejoins his brother and they start performing while I shoot video of them. During a short break, where they check the tuning of their instruments before launching into the next piece, I thank them, say I will get in touch and, wishing them best of luck for the day’s performances, take my leave. I descend to the lower level of the station where the Blue Line runs through the station; there, at the designated Étoiles spot, I meet another busker, one who has been playing in the metro and on the streets in a number of different Canadian cities for over twenty years. He grew up in the Maritime region of Canada, but says that he first started busking in Toronto. He has been in the

Étoiles program for a few years, and says he likes it because he can book his spots online ahead of time, which assures him a minimum number of sessions per week. This frees him from going out early in the morning to sign up for spots, and the attendant uncertainty that comes with this. He plays on the street as well, but prefers playing in the metro: in addition to being sheltered from the weather, there is less noise to contend with than on the street. Still, while I watch and listen to him playing, the disembodied voice of the public address system comes booming out of speakers placed throughout the station, creating a confused cacophony in which neither the announcement nor his music is clearly discernable. He talks at length about being a busker, and the uncertainty of earning enough to get by on; yet, he also emphasizes the pleasure it gives him, the enjoyment he derives from sharing music with others, most of whom are and will remain part of the anonymous crowd that files past. His repertoire is made up mostly of folk and rock songs from the 1960s and 1970s, tunes by the Beatles, Neil Young, Bob Dylan, and others that he says are known to many passersby – and he feels they appreciate his music, for its familiarity. In many respects, he conforms to the stereotypical busker, previously described. Unlike most of the others I meet who most closely resemble this fictional “type”, he plays with amplification. Between songs, he tells me that he is “playing overtime,” as the next scheduled performer is not there yet. Some fifteen or twenty minutes later, this next busker arrives and the two converse amicably, clearly well acquainted with each other.

As the first busker counts out his earnings and packs his gear, the newly arrived musician sets up. He opens up a case and arranges CDs, business cards, and a variety of bracelets, “dream catchers”, and miniature bamboo “pan” flutes, creating a colourful, eye-catching display that he places in front of where he positions himself to play. William Navas, now in his early forties, started playing music in his native Ecuador at age sixteen and began earning money from it at twenty. He says that, although he played a great deal publicly, playing in the Montreal metro was a new experience for him, as there is no equivalent in Quito. It was difficult at first, he says but, he learned about the spots, and what songs people would know and like. He has been busking in the metro for eight years. He plays Tuesday to Sunday, all year-long, typically playing two or three spots a day, rarely four. For three years, prior to that, he worked in a retirement home—

work that he described as “exploitation.” During this time, he busked on weekends and sometimes in the evening. But, he now lives exclusively from his music, which he enjoys both for the economic independence it affords him and because he feels that this is “what he does”, that being a musician—and the sense of sharing that comes with this—is a central aspect of his life and his sense of self.



**Illustration 5 - William Navas at the Étoiles spot at Jean-Talon station.**

### **Downtown on the Green Line**

I take the Orange Line south to Berri-UQAM station, where I switch to the west-bound Green Line, and get off at Guy-Concordia. This is a busy station at almost any hour of the day, as it is situated in the downtown core, serving Concordia University in addition to shoppers, residents, business people, and a whole range of other inhabitants of, and visitors to, the city. A few blocks away is the Montreal Fine Arts museum, popular with city dwellers and visitors alike. This creates a very heterogeneous crowd moving through the station. The spot at Guy-Concordia is a freelance one, situated in a relatively large open area above the metro tracks, near the bottom of the escalators that lead up to the exit. It is a very popular spot among metro buskers, both because of the physical lay-out that makes one visible to the foot traffic travelling both into and out of the metro, and because, with its steady flow of shoppers, students, tourists and others, it can be highly

lucrative to play there. The demographics of passersby vary, depending on the day and time of day, and many buskers who play here regularly indicated that they have preferences for certain days and times, depending on their own performance styles. When I arrive on this occasion, I hear music coming from above as soon as I step off the metro: warm, reverberant tones fill the air. When I get up to the level just above the train platform, I see a young man playing steelpans—a metallic, tuned percussion instrument, originating in Trinidad—while a teenaged girl films him from a slight distance, holding her smartphone out in front of her face. For several minutes, she takes in his rendition of the theme from the Disney film *The Little Mermaid*—“takes in” the performance, both in the sense of appreciating and experiencing it sensorially, and in the sense of “capturing” it as an experience that is mediated by and through her smartphone, imparting a ‘thingness’ to the performance. It acquires its own discreet materiality: a video file on her phone that she can show to others, a Facebook post that may be re-shared online, a digitally encoded memory of a moment, a place, a person, that begins its own trajectory, assuming different meanings as it travels.

When he reaches the end of the piece, she walks over and engages him in conversation for several minutes, asking about his instruments, when and where he learned to play. With his novel-looking instrument and the at-once familiar but exotic seeming sound ringing through the station, his is an unusual musical act in the metro, one that attracts a great deal of attention. When she leaves, he starts up again, looking only occasionally up at the passersby, most of the time concentrating on his playing and the dented curved surfaces of the pans. He barely pauses between pieces, as he moves evenly from a Beatles song to one by Bob Marley, and finally J.S. Bach’s “Air on a G string.” Finally, he pauses to pick up a water bottle resting at the base of his instrument stand.

Joseph Fox is from Cleveland but came to Montreal to study music at McGill University, where he completed a Master’s degree in percussion. He is still relatively new to busking, still getting to know which spots work best for him, and developing his busking repertoire. When I congratulate him on completing his degree—and at a very prestigious music school—he says: “Yeah, thanks. So now...”, looks around at the space of the metro, holds out his hands palm-up, and shrugs his shoulders slightly, as if to say: “*and now I’m playing here...*” We both laugh, and I tell him that I might be joining him

when I complete my own degree program. Nonetheless, he enjoys performing in public, and tells me that he plays five days a week, typically playing two and occasionally three sets in a day. When I ask him if he thinks that the novelty of his instrument works in his favour, he agrees that it does and says that people frequently stop and ask him about the pans, adding that many seem to be intrigued, or even perplexed by them. It is true that it is an unusual and very distinctive sound. He demonstrates and explains the sound produced by striking the surface with padded mallets: the bright attack of the tone is followed by a warm ringing of one of the overtones of the particular note played. He says that, in this, every pan is unique, as each one is hammered out by hand, taking on subtle tonal particularities. While they may be tuned to the standardized Western tuning system known as equal temperament, which overtones stand out and how much they do varies with each instrument. Thus, unlike a piano, for example, with its universal tuning and dominant harmonic frequencies, each set of pans (they are frequently played in pairs) requires pannists to subtly modify their playing, as they get to know its tonal idiosyncrasies.



**Illustration 6 - Joseph Fox at Guy-Concordia station.**

While it is not rare to see a busker being photographed or recorded, Joseph decidedly attracts much more of this behavior. But, he says, as with the young woman, it is rare that someone who takes a picture or video will put any money into his case. When asked if this bothers him, he indicates that although he accepts that it may simply be an unavoidable reality of busking, it is clear that he does feel that it is unfair in a way, that it bothers him just a little. He is providing a service, beautifying the dull space of the metro, relying on his skills which he has developed through hard, disciplined practice; a few coins dropped into his case is a small price to pay in recognition of that, as a way to express appreciation for his art. Busking is currently his only source of income, and when I first meet him, he says that he is not quite making enough to get by, and is in the process of figuring out the best times, spots, and pieces to play. By the end of the summer, he reports that he has worked out a system and is able to make enough to get by on, paying his rent and buying groceries and whatever necessities, though he adds that he lives a fairly simple lifestyle and does not have very large expenses. He hopes, he tells me in late August, to make enough that he can save up for a plane ticket home to Cleveland for a visit at Christmas. Joseph resumes his busking session, and I move back to the spot where I had been observing from (about ten meters away) to watch a while longer, finally descending the metro platform, where his playing is still clearly audible.

### **On the Margin of the Margins: The Westmount Square Corridor**

The ride from Guy-Concordia to Atwater, the next station to the west, takes barely over a minute. Atwater is the last station in the downtown core along the west-bound Green Line. Here, the atmosphere is subtly different than at the downtown stations to the east: somehow slightly more disheveled feeling, with the higher end fashion outlets, shiny office buildings and multiple universities replaced by bargain stores, wearied looking storefronts, and a single CEGEP (what, outside of Québec, might be thought of as junior college). A few blocks to the west, one enters Westmount, a municipality that has maintained its status as separate from the City of Montreal. Populated by an Anglophone majority, it is historically associated with the English-speaking upper class of Montreal—an association which it has not entirely shed.

There is no longer a designated busking spot at Atwater station. But, there is a spot nearby that has been popular with many buskers for decades, one that is unique in

the scope of my research. In many respects, this spot is much like many of the others. It is situated mid-way in a long underground hallway—connecting Atwater station to Westmount Square, a nearby office complex and small shopping center. Metro busking can be seen as taking place with marginal spaces (Butler Brown 2007), that is, ones that are treated as secondary to the daily life of the city, though they are integral and essential to its functioning. From this perspective, the spot in the Westmount Square corridor can be thought of as doubly marginal, a performance space that is at the margins of the margins. This spot is distinct in that, although it is in a subterranean passageway connected to the metro, it is not a part of the metro system proper. Rather, it is part of the Westmount Square property, and thus outside of the jurisdiction of the STM. Nonetheless, it is listed as a designate spot, on the MusiMétro website; and, the list system of reserving a spot that is employed at all freelance spots in the metro is also followed here. This spot is very popular with many buskers, for several reasons: it is relatively quiet (one busker said that even if he made half the money there, compared to what he does at other spots, this one is still his favourite), and performers have a relatively captive audience—they can be heard from the time a person enters the hallway at one end and turns the corner at the opposite end, over a hundred meters away. It takes over a minute for most passersby to traverse the hallway, creating a longer and much less sonically cluttered acoustic window (than spots within the metro system proper), in which the busker hopes to entertain, engage and, perhaps, solicit a donation.

Because of the relative quiet of this spot, it holds special appeal for musicians who play without amplification. There are others that are similar in this respect. For example, the spot at Peel station is also mid-way in a passageway that connects to the commercial district above ground, but it is shorter and noisier than that at Westmount Square, and there is less foot-traffic, becoming very quiet for most of the weekend. Likewise, one of the spots at the Square-Victoria-OACI station is similarly situated in a long underground hallway; but there, the issue is that when large numbers of people are moving through, as happens particularly during the afternoon rush-hour (which, in fact, can last for a couple of hours) it can become quite noisy. Because these spaces are constructed of hard, sonically-reflective surfaces, the sounds of a multitude of footsteps and voices echoing through the long corridor can completely drown out a musician who

is playing at a fairly low volume level. This was discernable when I observed other musicians playing there and was particularly evident on the one occasion when I played there during my fieldwork. I never observed anyone using amplification or accompaniment (pre-recorded or produced on the spot, as might be done with a loop pedal) at the Westmount Square spot, though I did observe the use of amplification by a few buskers at Square-Victoria–OACI.

Entering the corridor to Westmount Square, I hear a male voice and a guitar. A unique feature of this spot are the mirrors lining both walls at the midpoint of the corridor, which—as they face each other—create an effect of infinitely repeating and receding mirror images of all that passes by. It is here that buskers set up to play. Interestingly, most do so on the south side of the corridor. Only on rare occasions do I see someone playing opposite, on the north side. These mirrors allow performers to clearly observe themselves, unlike any other spot in the metro system—a detail that, according to a several buskers, adds to the special appeal of this spot. In addition, there are mirrors on the wall at the 45 degree turn, at the Westmount Square end of the corridor. This allows a person, from the vantage point of the busking spot, to see if anyone is entering the corridor from that end. Several musicians said they can time their playing more easily with the flow of traffic that way—taking short breaks or starting up again, based in part on whether there are people entering the corridor.

The man I encounter playing here conforms, to a large degree, to the stereotyped busker sketched out earlier: a male guitarist-vocalist, who plays old rock and folk covers, without amplification. He says that he plays regularly at this spot and that he is also frequently at Peel station (another spot popular with the fictionalized busker type) and has been living off busking full-time for two years. When I outline my research to him, he is interested in participating, but says that he has to go meet his daughter when he's done his set. This is the beginning of a pattern of semi-participation that I encounter with a number of metro performers over the coming months. Most buskers I meet express a keen interest in my research, and many of them respond favourably to my request for participation. But, actually arranging for this proves to be more challenging, as busking is, by its very nature, a highly mercurial practice, characterized by a high degree of spatial and temporal transience. Freelancers cannot know for certain where and when

they will be playing the next day, let alone a week in advance, as they have to sign up for available spots that very day. And while the Étoiles performers can book spots in advance online, even many of them can have a last minute change of plan and not show up for a reserved spot, or end a set early. Reasons for this can include: allowing for travel time to the next scheduled spot, equipment problems (e.g. a broken instrument string, dead batteries in a portable amplifier), being tired and simply deciding to end early, or dissatisfaction with how that set was going or the particular conditions that day (for example: a loud, pushy panhandler nearby).

One of the big appeals of busking, for many, is the freedom it affords: one can decide if, and for how long to play that very day, it permits a great deal of individual freedom in terms of repertoire and it affords a great deal of mobility. Several participants reported playing in other cities, and tied busking to the “on the road” income it can generate, as well as possessing a certain romantic appeal that is frequently associated with both travel and musicians (Justin Kozak: “There’s something romantic about being on the spot... everyone’s just watching you... I like being in the moment and performing.”). Gérald Cabot says: “At twenty-one, I wanted to travel... I wanted to be like one the guys in the movies, jumping trains, with his guitar.” This aspect of busking ties it historically to traditions of travelling musicians that stretch far back into the past (Cohen & Greenwood 1981), and simultaneously locates the traces of its mobility in Montreal’s mass transit system. This transitory and itinerant aspect of busking also links it to street life—the life of, and life on, the street—and with marginality and the marginalized. Ben Evans, a student at Concordia University who started busking at the Guy-Concordia spot during breaks between classes, says that some of his friends from school were surprised to see him busking, because they may associate busking with begging. “I can tell that they might be thinking: ‘What? That’s Ben, my friend: he’s not homeless. What’s he doing here?’”

### **Place-des-Arts**

I go back the way I came, riding the metro to Place-des-Arts station, where there are two designated busking spots, one reserved for Étoiles buskers, the other open to freelancers. For this reason, Place-des-Arts provides an interesting snapshot of metro buskers. The Étoiles spot is located at the entrance to the Place des Arts arts complex that houses

Montreal's principal opera company and symphony orchestra and hosts a wide range of performances, primarily musical. It is also the location of the *Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal* (Montreal's principal contemporary art museum). This station is centrally located in the *Quartier des Spectacles*, the staging grounds for Montreal's International Jazz Festival, the Just For Laughs comedy fest, and a succession of other summer festivals that affect the demographics and numbers of passersby at those spots. Aside from the fluctuating crowds associated with these festivals and the performances taking place within the Place-des-Arts complex, there is generally a significant amount of foot traffic moving through the metro station—people who work, shop and frequent this part of the downtown core for other purposes. The Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), one of Montreal's two French-language universities (the other being l'Université de Montréal) occupies a complex of buildings adjacent to Place-des-Arts. These buildings comprise one portion of UQAM; the larger, original campus is centered around Berri-UQAM station. When I arrive, I go first to the Étoiles spot, but there is no one playing there. It is mid-afternoon and relatively quiet, ahead of the rush-hour crowd that descends into the metro every weekday. This station holds special significance in the history of busking in the metro, for it was here that a major victory was won when the Place des Arts management officially permitted musicians to perform in the passageway connecting the arts centre to the metro. In the intervening years, the designated spot has migrated to where it is now, just inside the actual station, in a short passageway into the open space that fronts the metro's turnstile entrance. On this day, small groups of tourists gather and a few UQAM students and other commuters filter through.

At the opposite end of the station, located at the bottom of the escalators that exit to De Bleury street, is the other designated busking spot—a freelance spot, open to all. The foot traffic there is generally lighter, though it gets heavier toward rush-hour and during the summer if there is a large festival taking place (this is particularly true when there are free evening concerts during the Jazz Festival). This spot is used less than many of the other ones downtown. It has, however, proven to be fairly popular with some buskers, especially (but by no means only) with those for whom busking is an intermittent activity. I base this on fieldwork observations, what was reported by many participants, and on my own prior experience with this spot. As I approach, I hear the

sound of a violin echoing through the station. At a distance, the normally distinct contours of the instrument's sound take on a muddled warmth, blending with and blurring into the open space above the metro line. Coming closer, I turn a final corner and see a young woman playing what might be described as 'traditional-style folk music'. She stands with her back to the wall, facing the metro turnstiles, about 25 meters away. Her violin case is propped open, the lid leaning against the wall, and she actively watches passersby, smiling at those who acknowledge her, and bowing slightly when someone drops some coins into her case. I watch from a distance. She plays with precision and concentration, but seemingly always remaining aware of the comings and goings around her. She pauses for a break and chats with some passersby who have stopped in front of her (Illustration 7).



**Illustration 7 - Alexandra at Place-des-Arts station.**

A micro-social moment: a small crowd has gathered around Alexandra. A man drops some money in her case, while she chats with a family that has paused to listen to her.

Alexandra is a newcomer to busking, telling me she has only done it a dozen times or so, first trying it out during the winter, but says that now that she has the summer off from her studies, she plans on doing it regularly. However, as she lives in Joliette (where she is studying music, and now working for the summer), about 75 kilometers

north-east of Montreal, she only gets to come in to the city about once a week. She is enthusiastic about participating in my research, and becomes one of the buskers with whom I speak on multiple occasions over the summer. She came to Quebec from France, specifically to study traditional Québécois folk music. She studied classical music for fourteen years then, for about five years, simultaneously studied traditional Irish music. At some point, she was introduced to Acadian music, which has its roots in the British Isles, and then to traditional Québécois folk music, which, musically speaking, she says is a close cousin to the Acadian forms. To my ears, there is a clear affinity between these respective musical traditions (though I must note that I possess limited knowledge of them). She played with a group in her native France, but had found public performances stressful. She was also aware that when onstage, she did not engage much with the audience but remained inwardly focused, rarely looking up at audience members. She set out to change this by busking, and indeed when I watched her playing, she looked directly at passersby, smiling at those who acknowledged her, and very much projecting herself out. She says that playing in the metro is good practice: “People aren’t paying to come see you, so there’s no pressure.” She adds that she feels that she is “contributing something positive... to a ‘good mood’,” and that this mood is reciprocal. “When people walk by and smile at me and say thank you, it motivates me.” She says that, certainly, the money is nice, but it is not really the goal: it is more about challenging herself, and giving what she considers to be something nice to the public. While listening, I note a moment when a five-dollar bill donation seemed to translate into a sudden boost in her playing, a charge that re-energized her playing. She confirms my impression, saying: “It gives you a boost.” Nonetheless, she insists that while the earnings are nice, and help to confirm that others enjoy her music, the point is to get over her discomfort with performing in public, to improve her skill as a professional and to make some contacts in Montreal, as she knows no one in the city. When I see her a month later, she tells me that she has been hired to play at a private *vernissage* (art opening) at a small gallery. The only pay she will receive will be in the form of tips from the attendees, but that is completely beside the point to her: she has secured her first ‘gig’, through her busking activities, without even really trying. I don’t want to interrupt her for too long, so I retreat and she resumes

playing. From a distance, I watch and listen for a little while longer, then descend back to the Green Line and travel on east.

### **The Central Hub: Berri-UQAM**

Berri-UQAM is by far the busiest station in the whole of the metro system. Here, three metro lines converge: the Green and Orange Lines, linking the central parts of the city to the downtown core and to each other, and the Yellow Line, cutting underneath the mighty St. Lawrence and connecting the island of Montreal to the heavily populated communities on the south shore of the river and, midway across the river, to Sainte-Hélène and Notre Dame islands, the sites of an amusement park, aquarium, Formula 1 racetrack and summer music festivals. According to the MusiMétro website, there are four busking spots at Berri-UQAM; however, this turns out not to be the case during the period of my fieldwork. One spot seems to have simply vanished. Where I expect to find it, in a long passageway, there are the signs of ongoing construction, with a temporary plywood wall running the length of the corridor, reducing its width by half. Another corridor, where the Étoiles spot is normally located, is completely closed due to construction. Consequently, the spot at the Saint Catherine street exit, normally a freelance one, is the designated Étoiles spot in the interim. Finally, there is a spot in a long gently curving corridor, leading to the Yellow Line, deep under the city. It is relatively quiet as I descend the final escalator to the lowest level of the station, though there are a few others making their way down the stairs and escalators. Typically, the foot traffic comes in large periodic waves: either from above, as trains on the Orange and Green Lines disgorge commuters who pour down the escalators and through the corridors, as though drawn down by the force of gravity into the deepest spaces, or, in the opposite direction, with thick waves suddenly surging up from below, as with each arriving train a human mass swells up from the bowels of the city, channeled up by concrete and tile and steel, a heterogeneous multi-vocal crowd with varying internal rhythms, yet moving as a whole, until finally breaking up into smaller rivulets and individual currents, as the wave crests at the upper levels of the station.



**Illustration 8 – Commuters descending to the Yellow Line at Berri-UQAM station.**

When I reach the bottom of the escalator, I see a young woman in the corridor ahead, with acoustic guitar, small amplifier and head-set microphone. A few seconds later, she starts up a song. The crowd coming down from above is thickening, and I slow to listen and watch from a short distance for a few minutes. Part way through the song, the Yellow Line train arrives and, in a moment, the corridor is flooded with moving bodies, some seeming to take notice of the busker, most simply hurrying by, concerned with their varied destinations. A few coins are tossed in her case and she nods in acknowledgement. When she reaches the end of the song the corridor is virtually deserted again. She introduces herself as Conley (a stage name that she has adopted for her music career), and says that this is her most regular spot. She started busking a year and a half ago. As of April, she has been busking full-time, attempting to live solely from her music. She said she made the transition from doing it periodically on the weekends to relying solely on busking, after another, more experienced busker convinced her she would easily make more money than she earned at her minimum-wage job. “It’s been going well,” she says. “I make the same, and more, now.” But, she goes on to say “I’m actually afraid of what it’s going to be like for me in the winter... there’s a lot more competition [for spots].”

Nonetheless, she is confident about her ability to support herself this way for the time being. She started playing in the metro primarily for the earnings, but making new contacts as she builds her career is also a central motive. She also connects busking with mobility, saying that she has played on the street in a few other cities, and appreciates the freedom that comes with it. She occasionally gets a gig playing at a bar, café, or a private function, and is working on an album of her own material. She thinks of herself first and foremost as a musician—but one who busks. Roughly half of the songs that she plays are her own compositions. For her, being a busker is not so much an ‘identity’ as something that she does, in her capacities as a musician. Whereas, being a musician is a central part of who she considers herself to be. I don’t want to interrupt her for long, and she starts up another song. As I turn to go, I hear a great raucous rumbling signaling the arrival of the next human wave swelling up into the corridor and beyond.



**Illustration 9 - The Orange Line at Berri-UQAM station.**

Arriving at the top level of the station, I make my way through the thickening rush-hour foot traffic, past the turnstiles, and walk down the corridor to the Étoiles spot, past an exit that leads directly into part of UQAM’s central campus. From a distance, I hear the strains of an acoustic guitar. The spot is situated at a final turn in the

passageway, facing the bottom of the short flight of stairs and escalators that lead to the street above. A middle-aged man plays an instrumental piece (i.e. without vocal) on a twelve string guitar, watching passersby and smiling at those who seem to respond favourably. I stop near the bottom of the stairs to listen, and he spots me immediately. I smile and nod in recognition and he does the same in return. I think that I recognize him, as someone who I used to see busking in the metro, over twenty years earlier, when I played there on a semi-regular basis. Though I can't be certain, I suspect that he might even be the more experienced busker who, those many years ago, explained the list system to me and instructed me in other protocols of metro busking.

G erald Cabot is one of the original metro buskers – certainly one of those who has been doing it for the longest. He, along with a few others, can be credited for fighting the ban on busking in the metro until it was finally made legal (for him, this fight included numerous fines and even a few days in jail). He first started busking as a young man, travelling through Canada and the United States. By the time he returned to Montreal in 1979, he considered himself a professional street musician. He arrived during the winter, broke and with no local contacts, and so started busking in metro stations out of pure necessity, although to do so was illegal at the time. He and others played a cat-and-mouse game with enforcement agencies, at best being told to pack up and leave, at worst being given fines. He was one of a few buskers who played regularly in the passage that connected the Place des Arts complex to the metro—which was different in form, at the time, as there have been significant architectural modifications in the intervening years. This spot was outside of the metro system proper, and eventually he and a few others were granted permission to perform there, by the Place des Arts authorities. He thinks of himself primarily as a musician, but his skill as such was honed through years of performing in the metro and on the streets. “You play and play, but you also learn humility—a lot of things,” he says. “I’ve never regretted it. It’s the thing in my life that’s taught me the most. I had some amazing years playing in the street.” He has, in fact, only started busking again in the last few months, having stopped for a number of years. He is working on an album of his own material, and hopes that this can be a launching pad for a tour, and will likely spell the end of his busking days: “I’m getting too old for it.” He says that he still enjoys it for the people, for the positive responses he gets (“I love

people,” he says emphatically), but that it’s tough financially, physically and mentally. Because it can be demanding and it often does not pay well, “you have to really love it, to believe in your music.” In addition to the financial motive for busking, he repeats, it allows musicians to perfect themselves, through many hours of playing in public, in generally less than ideal circumstances. But, more than anything, it’s about giving something beautiful, in “a setting that is difficult...stressful. There’s a lot of misery [in the metro], and the music I play is gentle, joyful... that’s what I’m good at, there. Many people thank me. I try to make it a comforting ambience.”

### **Discussion: Motivations**

As stated at the outset of this chapter, the reasons why performers decide to take up the practice of busking in the first place is central to proceeding toward an analysis of their subjective experiences. Further, to arrive at some sort of a definition of what a busker “is”—what and who constitutes the practice of *being-busker*—it is necessary to consider practitioners’ self-understandings, as buskers. As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, there are varied reasons for busking in the first place and while the possibility of some sort of monetary transaction must be considered as an essential feature of busking, the emphasis here must be put on the *possibility*. In other words, the goal of the performer may or may not be to extract some form of financial reward; all that matters is that there is the *potential* for a passerby to make a donation, regardless whether this is likely, sought after, or even matters to the performer—and for this, it is necessary for the performer to set out a hat, instrument case or other receptacle for donations. Although this receptacle—what it is, where it is placed in relation to the performer and the surrounding space—is obviously linked to considerations of busker earnings, I treat this particular feature in the next chapter, where I detail busker practices—musical, material and corporeal. The point that for many, making money is not a primary consideration (if even a consideration at all) is well illustrated by buskers who play in locations where hardly anyone passes by: they do it, quite clearly, not for money but for other reasons. Nonetheless, for some, earnings are a primary motivation for busking.

### **Monetary Considerations**

About a quarter of buskers with whom I spoke, said that their music was their only source of income. However, it is questionable how reliable this self-reporting is. For one thing, some buskers may tend to exaggerate their earnings for the simple reason that they may not want to admit to performing for a couple of hours and only earning a few dollars an hour, which can sometimes be the case (although typically, especially for seasoned buskers, it is more than that). To admit to making less than minimum-wage may seem to diminish one's standing as an artist. Conversely, some may under-report their earnings, so as to not deter further donations. "If people think I'm doing really well [financially], they might be less likely to give money," said one occasional busker. Ben Evans said that some acquaintances have offered widely divergent estimates of what they think buskers typically make: "Some people will be like: 'Oh, I heard that buskers make \$100 an hour', or other people think buskers make 25 cents an hour." A few participants said that they don't allow too much money to accumulate in the instrument case or other container that they use for donations (although, what is "too much" was not defined). The reasoning being that if it looks like they're doing really well, passersby may be less prone to make a donation; conversely, some buskers feel that if there is no money in the case, this may discourage people from giving, suggesting that it is a good idea to put at least a few coins in at the beginning of a set, so as to encourage others to follow suit. William says that he does this at the beginning of a session, adding that sometimes people will give \$2, even occasionally \$5 bills – and suggests that "seeding" is in part responsible for this. I ask both Gérald and FX if they follow this practice, when I see them one day at Place-des-Arts station, as one is succeeding the other at the Étoiles spot there. They both say that they normally do, but when I ask if they think it makes a difference, Gérald says that he think it does, though maybe not much, whereas FX says: "No, it makes absolutely no difference." Then, laughing, he adds: "But, I do it anyway." Conley, on the other hand, never puts seed money in her case. She says that, when she looks into her case while she's playing, she wants to know that everything that is there, she earned since she started playing that set. Nonetheless, by far the majority of participants reported that they normally use seed money at the beginning of a set.

### **More than Money: Sharing, Practicing**

In discussing the use of “seed money”, I am again taking up an issue that spills over into “practices” (as with the receptacle used for donations), the subject of the following chapter. It is difficult—maybe impossible—to completely segregate aspects of buskers’ experiences such as motivations and self-understanding, from the practices (musical, material, spatial, social) that make up what it means, what it is, to be a metro busker. I nonetheless attempt to deal with these various features on their own, while emphasizing their inter-relatedness. In any case, as has been amply detailed, busking may be taken up for reasons other than monetary considerations. One of the most common reasons given is to improve one’s craft, to put it in the requisite hours of *doing* that the mastery of any skilled practice demands. Being an accomplished performer means more than being a highly proficient musician (or dancer, etc.). Conjoined with developing one’s skills through practice is the goal of overcoming discomfort with public performance (Conley: “When I first started, I would get nervous. But, I don’t, really, now.”). Further, if one needs to put in many hours of practice, why not do it in a public space, habituating oneself to performing in front of others, with the added possibility of earning some money? This reasoning that was cited by numerous buskers I spoke with. For Geof Holbrook, busking is tied explicitly to his musical development. He has a degree in composition, writes music of his own, largely in a “contemporary classical” vein (some of it for the ensemble he is a member of), but he is relatively new to playing the viola. So, he takes to the metro primarily to practice his instrument, and, to a lesser degree, to develop musical ideas that may carry over into his own compositional practice.

Finally, for most buskers, a fundamental motivation has to do with contributing something to others, to public space, and bringing something pleasurable into people’s daily lives. Numerous buskers explicitly understand the metro as being a space that is largely dehumanizing, in that it fosters a separation from others and can produce a low-level physical anxiety that individual commuters seek to alleviate by escaping from the confining mental and social claustrophobia of a subterranean transit system. This may tend to drive commuters further into an internal world, not infrequently abetted by the use of music with personal electronic devices and headphones or earbuds (Bull 2007), a process that may amplify the seeming detachment from one’s immediate surroundings. A

challenge for buskers—and sometimes cited as a goal—is to reach passersby, to connect with them, eliciting recognition and fostering social interactions, through the performance. Here, themes that emerge are those of “encounter”—of social exchange and of the possibility of contributing something good, something of beauty, in the grey existence of the urban underground. These considerations relate to a core concept within anthropological theory, that of “the Gift.” This idea, first explicated in detail by Mauss (1967), has assumed a primacy in numerous anthropological considerations of social exchange and interaction. While the notion of exchange is bound up with people’s motivations for busking, I explore this in-depth in chapter 4, along with other aspects of the social interactions of, and fostered by, buskers.

### **Self-conceptions and “Identity”**

The busking motivations that have been discussed in this chapter—earnings, practicing and developing technical and “stage” skill, and the possibilities for social encounter and exchange, including making professional contacts—can all be tied, in some ways, to the question of buskers’ self-conception, in terms of their busking activities. An underlying question here is whether buskers *identify with* the concept of busker—that is: how do they think of themselves, in relation to notions of busker, of street performer? What has emerged from my research is that some would identify themselves as buskers—as what they do to earn a living, and as part of who they are. As one freelancer at Square-Victoria-OACI, told me: “It’s my job” (*C’est mon métier*). However, this is not true for most of those with whom I spoke: for them, they are musicians, first and foremost. They started performing in the metro for a variety of reasons that are clearly linked to their lives as musicians—a “title” that many of them do explicitly identify with—but whether they busked or not, they would still be following their musical pursuits. Nonetheless, there can be exceptional cases where the pattern of *musician first, busker following this*, is reversed. Justin Kozak was drawn to busking because of what he considers its romantic appeal; but, in the process he has developed what very limited musical skills he had before he first tried busking. He thus upends the assumption that a busker is always already a performer who then turns to busking for various reasons, underscoring the extremely varied and variable approaches to busking that may be taken. Some performers I met in the metro are only occasional buskers. They may be travelling, and

busking is simply a way to make a few dollars and meet people; or they may just have been passing by an unoccupied spot, with their instrument, and decided to stop and play for a little while. Others may simply set up to play for no other reason than to perform in public—all of these reasons were cited to me, indicating a high degree of flexibility in terms of motives, and is influential in terms of individual practices. When and how much to play; what to play (in terms of repertoire and instruments) and how to conceive of and deliver one's "act"; the mobility that busking affords; the differing views of busking as a practice—all these are examples of the possibilities for improvised meanings and approaches to busking. And while I have suggested that there may be a more stereotypical busker—a fictional type under which might be subsumed a significant minority of those performing in the metro—I have nonetheless shown how even those who seem most to conform to this construct vary considerably in terms of motivations, self-perception, and practices. I end this chapter with a few final examples of performers who busk for reasons other than those that are most commonly identified, who busk for reasons beyond what has been discussed so far, who further unsettle any firm theory of busker identity.

### **Coda: Busking for Salvation and Enlightenment**

Late in the day, during one of my early surveys of busking sites, when I was gaining greater familiarity with each one's particularities and beginning to establish contacts with a few metro buskers, I met a person performing a vocal act in Jean-Talon station—an act that one would be hard pressed to call "singing", at least as it is generally understood. It was more of an oration that meandered erratically in terms of pitch, melodic contour and rhythmic repetition and variation, and was broadcast into the cavernous space of the station with an amplifier and microphone. I could barely make out any words, and was uncertain if the language was French, English, a mix of the two, or something else again. The amplification system was of poor quality, further muddying the largely unintelligible words. I was able to speak with this unusual metro performer, but only very briefly, and was told that it was "The Word of God" that was being preached, in hopes of reaching out to passersby, although it is forbidden to preach in the metro—or on the street. However, by singing rather than simply declaiming, this restriction could be circumvented. A small case sat open with a few coins in it—along with some religious

literature—thus establishing that this was indeed busking. “I preach, but I have to sing, otherwise I’m not allowed—they tell me to leave.” I was unable to ascertain whether “they” meant the police, STM authorities, or simply passersby, nor to what extent the performer was aware of the unintelligibility of the performance, or how much this might matter. I never saw the busker-preacher again, but I take this to be an excellent example of how individuals will attempt to subvert existing social and legal restrictions, re-appropriating public spaces in novel, unexpected ways, so as to insert their own goals, meanings and relations into those spaces. As I learned during the course of my fieldwork, there are others who use designated metro busking spots as platforms from which to broadcast their own visions of salvation or enlightenment. On several occasions, I observed three or four followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, commonly referred to as ‘Hare Krishnas,’ chanting with an accompanying hand-drum. Their motives may differ from those of most buskers; the Hare Krishnas have a reputation for active proselytizing. Indeed, on several occasions, I saw the same devotees attempting to engage passersby on the street outside Guy-Concordia station. Nonetheless, they had a container for donations on the floor in front of them, and I witnessed a few donations while I observed their performance—thus fulfilling a key requirement of what constitutes *being busker*. Similarly, on one single occasion, I saw an inter-generational religious choir singing at the same spot. They, too, seemed to be performing more as an act of proselytization or declaration of their faith, with religious pamphlets propped up in the open donation case on the floor. These last examples, along with much else that has been detailed in this chapter, establish quite clearly that busking is not always—and almost never only—a transaction in which someone provides a musical (or other) performance, in exchange for (a hoped for) financial remuneration from passersby. And, finally, that what constitutes busking—and buskers—is as much about practices, processes, and spaces, as it is about motivations and any notion of identity. In the next chapter, I examine some of the specificities of metro busker practices, and show how these are produced by, and productive of the spaces of performance.

## Chapter 3 – Practices and Perceptions

“The busker may be one of the freest musicians, in terms of musical choices.” – FX  
“You have to adapt—every spot is different.” – Ramiro (of Raymi)

### Introduction

The previous chapter dealt with the performers’ motivations for busking in the metro and their self-conceptions in relation to their practice—what it “means” to be a busker from their perspective, thus addressing the general question: “*Why* do you do what you do?” In this chapter, the focus is: “*How* do you do what you do?” More specifically, I address the question: “What are the practices—musical, spatial, social, and material-technological—through which a performer engages in being a metro busker?” One such practice concerns buskers’ choices of playing spots, and how they go about securing spots—a process with features unique to the architecture and regulatory structures of the Montreal metro system. Since most buskers are musicians, the following discussion explores musical repertoire and uses of technologies—in terms of actual musical instruments, as well as use of amplification, pre-recorded accompaniment tracks and other equipment. Important to these considerations are the spatial and, especially, acoustic properties of the designated busking spots and how buskers may adapt their performance to the particular features of these sites. Some of the buskers to whom I spoke were quite explicit about the importance to them of the acoustics and overall layout of the space, while others seemed to give little thought to such matters. As stated, in chapter 1, I take body and space to be not discreet elements in themselves, but relational terms that are co-productive of each other (Lefebvre 1991). Bodies move in and delineate space, defining and internalizing the uses—meanings—of specific spaces. Conversely, space is socially produced; it ‘makes material’ social relations. This production is done both as a collective, historically-situated undertaking—one that largely reproduces existing relations of power and material realities—and through the singular practices of the individuals who move in and through a given space. Physical space is not strictly determinative of how individuals relate to and use that space. This is demonstrated by how buskers engage with, consciously and deliberately or not, the spaces of the metro: in, for example, the varied

ways performers position themselves in relation to the surrounding space and passersby, in the placement and particulars of the instrument case, hat, or other receptacle used for donations. The specifics of the practices that metro buskers engage in are as varied as their motivations, further supporting a concept of busker as ‘assemblage-process’ (as opposed to a bounded, discrete profession, identity, or subject). It bears repeating here that what a metro busker “is” can only be effectively conceptualized as existing at the intersection of numerous social, material and personal (i.e. specific to individual buskers) factors. Further, the act of *being busker* is enacted in lived practice—consequently, never completely fixed but always in-the-making, socially produced (thus bearing inherent constraints) and individually performed (therefore singular in its myriad concrete manifestations).



**Illustration 10 - Tactical responses to material constraints: the spot at Joliet station.**

The lyre sign (top right) is about ten feet from the ground, and there is nowhere to store the list nearby. So, buskers get creative. A list on a small slip of paper is tucked into a coiled piece of rusty wire protruding from the concrete wall (bottom left).

The term ‘spot’ suggests spatial and temporal dimensions: it may refer to a location, to a time slot, or session, for performing. The equivalent term in French, used by metro buskers, is *emplacement*. Whereas *spot* implies something discrete, precise, defined (spatially: X marks the spot; or temporally: a two-hour limit, bounded by the

clock), emplacement suggests a process of bringing into being, of making-place, that cannot be divorced from the surrounding social and physical relations of the wider space. Thus, a spot, here, is a process of becoming—not a pre-existent position (spatial, temporal) that a busker occupies, but an assemblage-act emerging from numerous factors, including physical space, regulatory mechanisms, individual practices (of buskers, but also of passersby and others who operate in the space of the metro), and broader social mores and practices (e.g. the role of music and musicians in society, associations of busking with begging, what is deemed to be proper public behavior, etc.). Thus, while I employ the English term ‘spot’, the unitary fixedness it suggests is undermined by the French ‘emplacement’, emphasizing the dynamic character of ‘bringing into place’ and of ‘being placed in’. The busker, thus, both ‘brings into place’—spatializes—the spot, and is ‘emplaced’ there—is, to a degree, produced by the spot, in terms of its acoustics and other physical characteristics, the relations with passersby, the time constraints of the location, etc.

Some spots in the metro are set aside for *Étoiles* musicians only, and are reserved up to two weeks in advance through an online lottery sign-up system. *Étoiles* musicians don’t always get their first choice of spots, but they can still avoid having to wait to add their names to a list. In contrast freelancers must contend with a much higher degree of uncertainty and need to be more strategic in getting a spot, since they may have to go sign up at a spot many hours before playing. The two systems reveal their temporal and material situatedness, with each emerging out of particular historical contexts that are entwined with specific technologies. The list system was arrived at by the first sanctioned metro buskers, and by general consensus and practical convenience became the accepted practice, eventually becoming codified by MusiMétro with support from the STM. The list system is tied to the specific social conditions around the efforts to legalize metro busking, conflicts over spots, etc., as well as to individual social actors (the “pioneers” of metro busking). It is a practice produced both institutionally and through individual actions. Likewise, the *Étoiles* program is the creation of certain buskers but the form it has assumed is linked to the social and regulatory changes surrounding busking in the past few decades, as well as, importantly, to the technological changes associated with the Internet (e.g. members booking spots online and sharing information about available

spots with each other through a private Étoiles page on the MusiMétro website). Although these two parallel systems may seem to create a class system of sorts among buskers, none of those with whom I spoke expressed any sense of serious conflict around this. Only a couple of buskers seemed to think that the Étoiles program might be perceived as unfair and divisive, but they were Étoiles musicians, themselves.

When it comes to choice of spots, most participants express decided preferences, although their preferences and the reasoning are varied. Important considerations include: acoustic qualities, amount of foot-traffic passing by, the physical lay-out of the space, over all comfort and security (including ambient temperature, and the absence of panhandlers at spots within the controlled parts of the metro), proximity to one's place of residence, and sometimes more personal attachments to certain spots. The particulars of their preferences, and how they go about getting spots are as varied as the spatial tactics through which the spaces of performance are produced (although, as noted, for the Étoiles, securing a spot is greatly simplified). This enactment of a public space of encounter and exchange—the time-space of the performance—opens new trajectories of social and material circulation. It is a “liminal spacetime” (Bywater 2007) centered on, and that flows from the performing busker, who both inhabits and produces this performance space (Masson 2007). It will be shown in the following pages that the act of busking is not so much a *state* of being, much less a profession, but a *process* of becoming, defined by the actual particulars of practice—a subjectivity, rather than an identity, that is always in-the-making. This is a subjectivity experienced internally, bodily, but mediated by and expressed through the cultural norms, bodily habits, and social-material structures of a particular time and place, “at once a product and agent of history; the site of experience, memory, storytelling and aesthetic judgement; an agent of knowing as much as of action” (Bielh, Good & Kleinman 2007, 14). And, it is on, and within, the body of the busker, the thinking, feeling performer, that the assemblage-act of *becoming-busker* is visible, and singular. Busking is, as a set of social and material practices centered on music and sociality. It is, above all, a sensorial and affective experience.

## **Emplacement: Getting a Spot, Enacting a Space**

### **Act I: Alexander**

On a hot midsummer day, with humidity level rising, I descend into Jean Talon station. At the spot where I had met the Bolivian brothers a few weeks earlier, a young man is checking the list for available spots. He wears a backpack and holds a large speaker-amplifier. When I ask him what he plays, he grins and with a slight laugh, says: “Actually, I dance.” He explains that he practices what is known as “popping”, a street dance he connects to the funk music scene of 1970s California. It is sometimes characterized as “robot dancing.” By its very nature, it is a social performance—that is to say, shared. Unlike, for example, sitting at home and playing a musical instrument with no other participants or witnesses, street dance only makes sense when it is *in the street*, so to speak. It can often involve competitive “dueling” where dancers try to outperform each other. But, it can also involve sharing moves and co-creating and sharing a performed space. For a dancer, spatial considerations, in terms of the physical lay-out of the space, are paramount.

Alexander Shattler is in his early 20s, has been dancing various forms of street dance since he was fourteen, and first started busking in the metro at age seventeen. For the past year he has supported himself exclusively by dancing in the metro. He provides a markedly different perspective from musicians on a number of aspects of busking practices—most notably, those related to the space of performance, and how space is performed. He dances at Jean Talon and Guy-Concordia stations because only they offer what he considers to be good performing spaces. Until quite recently, he had also been dancing at Lionel-Groulx station but has stopped, because he has been fined too many times. There used to be a designated busking spot there, but it was eliminated by the STM sometime in the last few years (he is not sure exactly when). However, buskers have continued to perform there periodically. An important hub in the metro system, Lionel-Groulx is unique in its lay-out, with trains from the Green and Orange Lines arriving opposite each other, with a wide open platform in between. Large numbers of commuters transfer between the two lines, especially at rush hour. As they wait the few minutes for the next connecting train, such crowds offer a momentarily captive audience for buskers who can enact a transitory “stage” for their performance (Boetzkes 2010). For Alexander,

the wide open space, combined with the large number of commuters, made it the ideal spot. He says it was by far his favourite place to perform but, after numerous warnings and fines (running into the hundreds of dollars), he has finally stopped dancing there. He has performed on the street a few times, but as that requires a license, he limits himself to dancing at Jean-Talon and Guy-Concordia stations for the time being.

He had hoped to get a spot for the evening rush hour at Jean-Talon but the list is full. He is unconcerned, however: he has a time reserved in the afternoon at Guy-Concordia. Alexander illustrates well the improvisatory approach of buskers in securing spots. He normally starts at Guy-Concordia because he lives nearby (a tactic common to many metro buskers), then, as he has to pay to get to that spot, he takes the metro to Jean-Talon, adds his name to the list if there is an opening that appeals to him, then travels back to Guy-Concordia. By staying within the controlled area of the metro, he pays only one fare. Institutional bodies may impose constraints on individuals, bounding and limiting access to spaces, and monetizing movement within those spaces, but social actors try to turn these constraints to their advantage, when and where they can (Certeau 1988). Alexander says that the general acoustics of a space are perhaps less important to him than for a musician, but it is still something that he considers. Volume and clarity of sound are “important... [for] the energy, the vibe... if the volume is too low, the vibe doesn't really come across.” Occasionally, “the STM security will tell me to turn it down... so it kind of kills my vibe a bit.” Because of its proximity to the train platform, the spot at Guy-Concordia is noisier than many others, but Alexander does not mind this. He likes it there because it is a very mixed crowd, with a lot of young people, who he feels may be more appreciative of his dancing than other demographics. But, he is quick to add that he gets positive responses from all sort of people, young and old. I witnessed several older people give him money and smile in appreciation. What he really enjoys is the looks of joyful surprise on the faces of passersby who appear both perplexed and pleased by the odd sight of someone dancing in the metro.

He consciously engages with his surroundings, creating a stage-like space through his movement and, importantly, with the positioning of the bright blue plastic bucket he sets out for donations (see Illustration 11). Its colour makes it highly visible, and he sets it further out into the path of passersby than most musicians would typically place an

instrument case—all deliberate tactics, on his part. Just as a busker constructs a space through the performance, it is a space in which commuters also participate. Regardless of their outward reactions, whether they openly acknowledge the performance, silently negotiate their way around it, or simply ignore it altogether, passersby are participants in an ongoing process of spatial co-production (MacMahan 1996). At the same time, their own trajectories (spatial, sensory, affective) may be rerouted by the presence of the busker (Masson 2007). Although temporally and materially fleeting, the performed space/space of performance assumes a durability, and is ‘made real,’ for the duration of the performance (Boetzkes 2010).



**Illustration 11 - Alexander Shattler at Guy-Concordia station.**

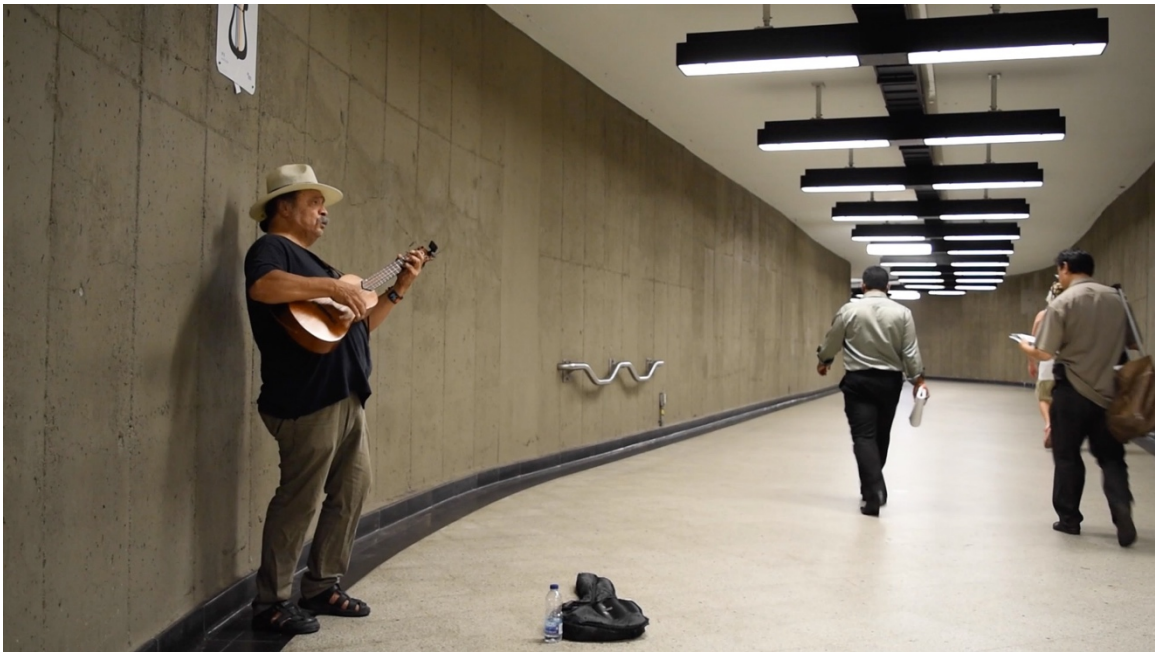
In contrast to most buskers, Alexander deliberately enacts this stage-space and simultaneously tries to break the barriers that it creates—“breaking the bubble,” as he says. “Sometimes I might try to disrupt the flow of traffic, with my bucket, and with my movement. I’ll start roboting (i.e. dancing in robot-like movement) out in the open where you would never see any busker or performer going out there. I’ll kind of go in the path [of passersby] and start roboting and then go back, just to get their attention.” For Alexander, busking is, at its core, about engaging with passersby. His entire practice

hinges on a sociality that is both the motivation for and product of his performance. He says that he got interested in this form of dance after seeing friends do it, and that he enjoys the sociality of the performance. “Sharing ...[and] busking [are] in the culture [of street dance]”, he says. When people stop and watch it adds to his own enjoyment and gives him a boost that feeds into the “vibe” of his performance. He welcomes me to come see him dance later in the day at Guy-Concordia, and agrees to be video recorded then. I then take my leave and board the Orange Line, south-bound.

### **Act II: Lalo**

Arriving at Berri-UQAM, I descend to the Yellow Line, where I encounter a mustachioed middle-aged man singing and playing a small stringed instrument. He sings in a strong voice, mostly in French and Spanish, and, occasionally, in English. As do many of those who perform at this spot, he allows himself only short breaks in between the crowds streaming past from arriving trains. This spot is extremely well used and is especially coveted when there is a music festival or other event on Sainte-Hélène or Notre Dame Island. The Yellow Line links Berri-UQAM to the populous suburbs on the south short of the St. Lawrence. During rush hours, large numbers of commuters file through the long, gently curving corridor where the designated busking spot is located. Rather than simply signing up on a list, buskers who want to perform here must come to a draw at 11:00 P.M. the evening before. The first round is restricted to MusiMétro members. Their names go on pieces of paper, into a hat, and a MusiMétro representative draws out names and the musicians, each in turn, pick time slots for the next day. If there are any spots left open—as there often are—freelancers can then sign up. If there are still spots available (more common in summer than winter), performers can sign up for those by adding their names to the list on that day, just as at any regular freelance spot. Most participants have preferred spots, but they are far from unanimous on which ones. The most frequently cited were those at Jean-Talon, Guy-Concordia, the one at Westmount Square, the Étoiles spot at Berri-UQAM and the one at the level of the Yellow Line in the same station. Some buskers spoke of the sign-up system at the Yellow Line spot as being a big advantage for them, as they can book a spot for the next day, guaranteeing at least that one spot. Others were less enthusiastic, saying that they are required to go to that station in the evening when they would normally be at home (and, in some cases, necessitating

considerable travel). In order to get a spot one must be present for the draw precisely at 11:00 PM. It means that if a busker is already performing elsewhere in the metro around that time, they must pack up early and get to Berri-UQAM in time for the draw. There is no point in arriving late: the whole affair is carried out in about ten minutes or less, and everyone goes on their way immediately after.



**Illustration 12 - Lalo Orozco in the corridor to the Yellow Line, Berri-UQAM station.** One can just make out the list sticking out at the bottom of the lyre sign, directly above Lalo.

Lalo Orozco says that he had been playing periodically at that spot, signing up that day if there was an opening, for some time, when another busker told him about the particulars of the spot. He is now a regular at the nightly draw. He has been busking full-time in the metro for a year, with all his earnings coming from this. For most of his life he has worked as a musician, giving concerts, teaching, writing advertising jingles. He also worked as a graphic artist and says that he is working on a series of short graphic novel vignettes, based on his experiences and the people he has met in the metro. His busking practice can thus be seen to extend beyond the scene of the metro, opening new pathways of social and material circulation (see Chapter 4). When he came to Montreal, several years ago, he tried finding work as a graphic artist but despite his many years of experience it was hard, in part because he is self-taught and lacks professional training.

He ended up working in a factory for three years. “I didn’t touch the guitar during that time... and I really missed it... I was becoming very unhappy, sick... I was miserable. Angry. Sad.” Finally, he decided to go back to music and try and make a living exclusively by busking. “I want to make my living as musician, and I’m putting all my efforts into it. And I find that there’s a good response. People here are very supportive.”

He plays a *jarana*, a traditional instrument from his native Veracruz state, in Mexico, that is descended from the baroque guitar. He uses no amplification, and the instrument’s diminutive size allows him to move freely when playing, as well as when travelling to and between spots—exemplifying the links between busking and mobility. He says that other Mexicans are drawn to the music he plays, as well as “people from all over... who know the music—Latin American music... who appreciate it.” The social aspect of busking, the encounters and moments of exchange that it can engender are important for him. He talks about how people can connect through music, suggesting that music is about “sharing”—underscoring the intersubjective communication that is a fundamental characteristic of music (Schutz & Kersten 1976). Drawing on his many years as a graphic artist, he has started working on ideas for a series of mini-graphic novels, a few panels each, depicting some of the stories that people tell him, and the scenes he has witnessed while busking in the metro. He hopes to some day make a book of the vignettes or maybe publish them online. In them, he recounts the story of the homeless man who comes by periodically, gives him money and stays to dance for a song; the young woman who asks him to play John Lennon’s “Imagine”, then breaks down in tears and says she is on her way to the hospital; the little boy who stops dead in his tracks, sits on the floor to listen, and meticulously digs through his little backpack to find a total of six dollars that he put in Lalo’s case. “Playing in the metro: it can give you a lot of inspiration,” he says. “The Life that you see...”

### **Act III: Bucket of Change**

I leave Lalo and head back up from the cavernous depths of Berri-UQAM. At the upper level of the station, people come and go in all directions. In the large open area at the centre of the turnstiles, young people gather to meet friends, while outside of the controlled area people of all ages, nationalities, and socio-economic backgrounds go about their business. Travellers arriving from the airport express bus make their way past

the panhandlers and charity canvassers that are a ubiquitous presence in all the busy stations (and even some of the quieter ones). The general atmosphere is very different from the lower levels of the station, where people are clearly in-transit. Here, at the level of the exits, there is more a sense of inhabited space, with a couple of fast food outlets and a few small retail businesses, including a book store in the corridor that leads to the Étoiles spot. The air is warm and humid and a strong, intermittent breeze that barely has any cooling effect blows through the corridor. Two young men are set up at the Étoiles spot. As I approach, one of them leaves, saying to the other that he will be right back. I begin chatting with the remaining musician, a banjo player. He says that his friend broke a string on his guitar and has gone to buy a new one at Archambault, a large music store directly across the street from the metro exit. We talk while he waits for his friend's return. They used to play in the metro stations regularly, when they both depended on busking more for the income. Now, he says, they do it mainly for their own enjoyment.

They are not members of the Étoiles program, although he knows about it. He says that they came by and decided to play there since no one else was, adding that if an Étoiles musician who has reserved the spot arrives that they would respect that and pack up. On another occasion, I witnessed this very situation: a freelancer singer-guitarist was playing when an Étoiles busker arrived. The freelancer was set up three or four meters away from the Étoiles sign, more in-line with the bottom of the escalators. When the Étoiles musician arrived, he simply started setting up by the Étoiles sign, without acknowledging, and barely looking at, the freelancer. The first busker, who did seem to make an attempt at eye contact with, and acknowledgement of, the other, quickly ended his song and immediately packed up. We exchanged a few words as he made to leave, while the Étoiles musician went straight into his first song, still barely acknowledging the freelancer. Drawing on Certeau (1988), I take this practice—or, “tactic”—of freelancers playing at Étoiles spots as a form of “poaching” whereby an individual “transforms another’s property into a space borrowed for a moment” (xxi). It illustrates the ways that individuals circumvent official regulations and other structural constraints, and exploit the circumstances at hand to their advantage. It is a form of half-breaking the rules: in this case, busking is technically permitted at this site but it is reserved for certain buskers only. While the whole idea of the Étoiles program is, ostensibly, to maintain a certain

standard in terms of technical and performance skills, so that not just anyone can play at those spots, a couple of Étoiles musicians said that if no one is playing at an Étoiles spot and a freelancer wants to play there, then they have no objections, though it is against the MusiMétro and STM rules.



**Illustration 13 - Bucket of Change at Berri-UQAM station.**

The two young men allow me to shoot video of them, so I move off a distance and they start up. A piece of hand-lettered cardboard propped up in the guitar case set out for donations displays their stage-name: Bucket of Change. They play a mix of blues, folk, and bluegrass music, without amplification. One plays a steel-string guitar and sings. He sits on a large wood box, keeping time with a kick-drum pedal that he uses to strike the box, with one foot, and with a foot-tambourine with the other. The other musician, standing, plays a banjo and sings harmony parts for some songs. Adding that pounding beat to their performance goes a long way in filling out the sound, and gives it a compelling drive. It is a practice that is not uncommon among metro buskers, for example: the shell anklets worn by one of the two Bolivian brothers I met at Jean-Talon. But, a few musicians rely primarily only on their bodies for an extra rhythmic element. A guitarist-singer I see frequently over the summer will, occasionally, during a passage in a

song with no vocals, tap his foot in time—really more of a gentle slapping of his sandal-clad foot on the tiled floor to add a subtle, extra sonic element to his playing. Alexandra sometimes audibly taps her foot in time with the music, a practice she says is common in the traditional folk music that she plays.

#### **Act IV: Klank**

I take my leave of the two ‘poaching’ buskers and descend again to the level of the Yellow Line but no one is playing there, so I go back up and take the Green Line to Place-des-Arts station. Arriving at the De Bleury street end of the station, I hear the sound of a trumpet. Back against the wall, by the lyre sign, is a middle-aged man, head shaved, playing a somewhat uneven rendition of “What a Wonderful World.” He wears a small grey backpack, a long white cane hangs from one wrist, at his feet a bottle of water. At a slight distance in front of him is a small metal bucket, tethered to his ankle by a short cable. He hunches a little as he blows into the instrument, his face flushed with exertion, his gaze blank, eyes unseeing. Since beginning my fieldwork, I have been hoping to locate him. I’ve known Klank for many years, from the period when he was the drummer in a local punk band (and I was a slightly younger punk kid). Now, as a result of illness, he is completely blind. To my surprise, he remembers me (we had not been close), and he greets me warmly. Klank has been busking in the metro for many years, and now earns most of his income this way. He says that the metal bucket is a deliberate choice: when somebody drops money in, it makes a sound. “So I know when to say thank you.” Other than that, he doesn’t know how much attention passersby pay him, nor does he know if someone stops to listen. I first assume that the bucket is tied to him simply so it is easy for him to find; but, there is more to it than that. He has been robbed more than once, so now he pulls it to himself and empties it periodically, while busking. “It used to be longer,” he says of the cable securing the bucket to his ankle. Recently, however, someone snuck up while he was playing, cut the cable (“I don’t know if they had a knife, or scissors... I don’t even know if it was a man or woman”), and ran with the bucket. “So,” he says, “I ran after them. I tried to follow the sound of them running away but my hearing isn’t too good anymore, and I went the wrong way.” A passerby found his empty bucket nearby and returned it, also giving him a twenty-dollar bill. He appears amazingly good humoured about it all; perhaps it is simply a resigned acceptance that allows him to

laugh when he says: “You’ve got to be pretty badly off to rob the blind guy.” Klank’s experience speaks of a very different relationship with the donation receptacle, and his strategies for securing spots is also markedly different.

He plays most often at Place-des-Arts station, and walks the few blocks from his nearby apartment. But, in the winter he cannot always make it down the icy sidewalks. Other buskers talked about the added difficulties of travel to and from the metro in the winter—typically more of an issue for those who have a lot of gear, or heavy instruments. For example, because of their size and weight, Joseph Fox loads his steel pans onto a small cart when walking any distance. Indeed, I help him carry them up the stairs to exit the station on one occasion: I am amazed at how heavy they are! Simply going from station to station is challenging, but, when the streets and sidewalks are covered in snow and ice, he simply can’t go out to busk. FX, who, like many musicians, carries more than just his instrument (guitar, amplifier, cables, microphone and mic stand, in his case), said that he prefers to walk to his downtown office where he stores his gear. But, in the winter he can’t walk the distance with his gear, so his choice is to contend with a crowded metro or simply not busk. Klank, by contrast, fits everything into his backpack, but his mobility is limited in different ways. But, perhaps his biggest challenge to securing a spot is actually getting his name on the list.

He first checks to see if there is a list or not, but either way, he next tries to hail a passerby. He usually plays the mornings, when there are many commuters. And though he can, to a degree, judge the approach of passersby by sound, hardly anyone will stop for him. Commuters are used to ‘making invisible’ the panhandlers, itinerants, and those apparently dealing with serious mental health challenges that may be encountered in metro stations—an erasure of vulnerable bodies, and the discomfort they may induce. The sight of a man looking around aimlessly, trying to address people at random as they hurry to work, is unlikely to move many people to stop. When someone does, Klank has to make very clear where to put his name on the list. He says that, more than once, he arrived for his scheduled time, only to find someone else playing there—with this other busker insisting that Klank’s name wasn’t on the list, or that it was at a different time slot. As he is unable to verify this, he now makes very explicit, to whoever puts his name on the list, the importance of writing it clearly in the correct spot. He has not, recently,

had any more problems and over time, a few regular commuters have gotten to know him and will stop to help, if they see him. He doesn't know their names, what they look like, who they are; he only knows them by their voices. While all buskers may struggle, at times, to make themselves heard, Klank must first make himself visible, underscoring the centrality of not only *the body* to busker practices, but of the specificities of individual *bodies*.

## **Musical Practices**

### **Technology and Repertoire I: Effem**

When it is time to part ways, I walk Klank to the metro turnstiles. At the other end of the station, a young-looking man is playing at the Étoiles spot. He sits on the amplifier that his steel-string guitar is plugged into, and watches the people going by. He is an extremely skilled musician, playing instrumental pieces in a loose jazzy-style, colouring them with improvised lines and harmonic ornaments. Effem (his stage name) has been busking in the metro for four years, becoming a member of the Étoiles almost from the beginning. He had busked a few times in his native France, and does so on rare occasions on the street in Montreal, but his busking experience is largely tied to the metro, where he usually plays a few days a week. He prefers spots within the controlled area of the metro, in part because of the ambient temperature (especially in winter) and because of the absence of panhandlers, who he says can be very disruptive for buskers. He often plays during the morning rush-hour, and says that the music he plays, which is both energetic and soothing, is likely more appealing than something more upbeat or intense. He wears protective earplugs while playing. The metro is a noisy place, and he sits on his amp while playing—for several hours at a time. Even though the volume is modest, it can take a toll on one's hearing over time. "If there are two things that I want to protect, it's my hands and my ears," which are essential to him as a musician. The hazards metro buskers face may include compromises of one's bodily performance abilities.

The degree to which individual buskers consciously reflect on the acoustic qualities of a given spot is, as with all the particulars of practice discussed herein, highly variable. Some participants said they are not too picky, that good visibility or overall comfort were just as important. To some degree, this also depends on their instrument,

and whether they use amplification. Klank's trumpet cuts through the ever-present droning hum of lights, machinery, trains and moving, talking bodies, but for most singer-guitarists playing without amplification, for example, quieter busking spots are essential (the Westmount Square spot is highly valued for this reason). Even though he is very conscious of the acoustics, Joseph Fox feels that the brassy and slightly distorted sound of the pans works quite well in the metro, whereas Alexandra is less concerned about the spatial acoustics than the chance to engage and entertain. A professionally trained musician playing Bach partitas told me that the acoustics in many stations are like those of a cathedral, which is precisely the acoustic environment that the music he plays was composed for. Ben Evans said that the sound at the Square-Victoria-OACI spot (in a long brick-lined corridor, with a large round echoing chamber-like area at one end) has a lot of low-end bass frequencies, so he adjusts the tone on his amplifier accordingly. But, when he arrives to play at Guy-Concordia, he must change the settings again, or his guitar sounds thin, flat. Gérald Cabot said that when he busks in the metro, he always plays his twelve-string guitar, as it is louder and brighter sounding than the more common six-string, and projects the sound better.

Here at Place-des-Arts, Effem turns his amp to face the wall directly behind him, otherwise the sound bounces off of the wall about five meters in front, oversaturating the narrow space; but, if he simply turns down the volume, he gets drowned out when a large group of people pass by, all talking. As it is, he can still hear himself clearly enough and doesn't get completely drowned out while also respecting passersby and others (such as the nearby vendors, and, importantly STM employees) by not subjecting them to excessive volumes. FX, who plays regularly at that spot, turns his amplifier slightly toward the entrance of the Place-des-Arts complex, and away from the booth where transit workers spend the day taking fares and giving directions. While Effem says that he likes the Place-des-Arts spot, the one at Berri-UQAM has much better acoustics. He occasionally plays at McGill, especially in the winter, when it is warm in the station (during my fieldwork, I never saw anyone playing at that spot). But, he notes, there are frequently panhandlers there and that he has had to try and wake someone sleeping, or passed out, right at the busking spot (which is in a sort of alcove). And if he can't wake them? "Well," he shrugs, "what can you do?" His ambivalence underscores the

vulnerability busker may face, not simply in how much they may earn, but if they will be able to perform at all.



**Illustration 14 - Effem at Place-des-Arts station.**

Effem’s repertoire is comprised primarily of his own renditions of popular tunes: instrumental pieces with added improvised lines. He gets a good reaction from many passersby, and says that he occasionally recruits music students while busking (as noted above, the exit is opposite a large music store, meaning numerous musicians pass by this spot). While there is tremendous variety in the repertoire of metro buskers, most play some songs and genres of music that are widely recognizable to the public. The ratio of covers to originals varies between performers and, for some, the site and time of a particular session. Boetzkes (2010) identifies an element of nostalgia in buskers’ effects on the public, derived from their repertoire. But, this rests on a narrow definition of busking and an exclusion of a wide range of musical (and other) street performances. In fact, this delineation of buskers would best conform to the “stereotype” busker I sketched in the previous chapter. But, as evinced by the range of practices encountered during the course my fieldwork, at least in the case of the Montreal metro, nostalgia as a definitional feature of buskers is untenable. While it is true that many buskers do attempt to engage

passersby by playing widely known songs, and these *may* be typically associated with a certain era, and *may* carry an emotional charge, this is at least as often not the case. However, Kushner and Brooks argue that “busking performers are more likely to perform outside of aesthetic mainstreams, in avant-garde or other little-known genres” (2000, 69). The downside of this musical freedom, as FX notes, is that it doesn’t pay very well. “It’s the price of freedom,” he adds, laughing. Buskers are, arguably, amongst the most varied and variable artists and performers most inhabitants of the city are likely to encounter. A few more examples will suffice: Ben Evans plays mostly his original interpretations of pop and rock tunes, with a few of his own pieces mixed in; Gérald, FX, Conley and Effem, and others, play a mix of well-know and more obscure or original, compositions; the handful of folk/bluegrass musicians I observed; a young man, trained in classical Indian music, playing a sort of flowing free-form jazz with a strong harmonic structure, on the saxophone; a young clarinetist playing challenging (to both performer and audience) contemporary classical pieces; and, the mandolinist playing *choro*, a musical genre specific to his native Brazil, who appears as the final busker I encounter within this particular trajectory.

### **Technology and Repertoire II: Rodrigo Simões**

The rush hour has passed. In some metro stations this means things quiet down dramatically, but Berri-UQAM remains busy though there is a marked change in the atmosphere as evening draws on above ground. It is relatively quiet at the Yellow Line spot and no one is performing there, so I head back up toward the surface, to check the Étoiles spot again. There, I find a man playing the mandolin to a pre-recorded accompaniment track. He sits on a small folding stool, leaning back slightly against the wall behind him. His apparent ease with his repertoire and with the performance space contrasts with the energy and precision of his playing. He watches passersby, giving a nod and slight smile to those who drop some coins into his case.

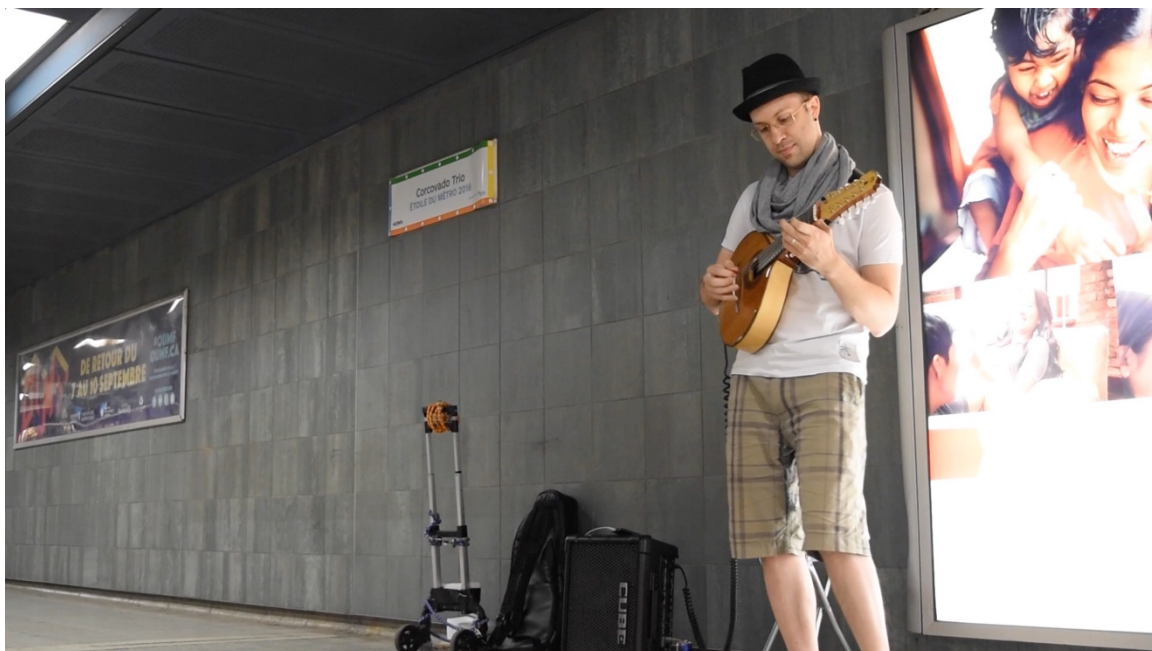
Rodrigo Simões is from Brazil and has been in Montreal for almost a year. He typically performs as one of three musicians who comprise the Corcovado Trio, but is playing alone today. His bandmates had other obligations and were unable to join him, but he doesn’t mind. It allows him to play material other than what he usually plays with the trio. The mandolin, he notes, is not all that impressive by itself: it doesn’t fill the

acoustic space in the way a guitar can, hence his use of accompaniment tracks. He says he makes many of his pre-recorded tracks himself, because it is difficult to buy good quality ones, and they usually feel too clean and polished: “They don’t sound natural.” He has tried using a loop pedal, but found that he would become preoccupied with working the pedal, and that it was too constraining: “It doesn’t let you do things... how you want.” He also plays the guitar, but usually sticks to the mandolin when busking, in part for its portability. While performing, he goes from one song right into the next, barely pausing in between. He creates a set at home and loads the accompaniment tracks onto his phone, which he hooks up to his small amplifier. Amplification, he says, “makes all the difference”—not only for the pre-recorded tracks, but also because the mandolin is not a very loud instrument on its own. When he first busked, several years earlier, in Australia, he played without amplification but says he quickly understood that he would do better with amplification. He comments, with some apparent bafflement, that buskers are not allowed to plug equipment into electrical outlets (although I observe that such outlets are rare, outside of the controlled areas of the stations), noting that “the STM and MusiMétro, they work together.” Instead, buskers are forced to use batteries—which means extra costs and extra weight to carry around (and the risk of a session being cut short by dying batteries). On one occasion only, during my fieldwork, did I see a busker with an amp plugged into an electric outlet. He was not playing at a designated spot, but in a long corridor with few passersby. He said that he was playing there precisely because of the outlet, and said that the security and other STM employees never come by there. While for Rodrigo, battery use is an inconvenience, Gérald notes that the portable amplifiers available now are lighter than those being sold when he first started busking.

Rodrigo plays *choro*, a distinctively Brazilian style of music with a high degree of improvisation, and though he identifies himself with his music, and his music with his nationality and cultural upbringing, he occasionally includes a song that is more popularly known in North America, though rendering it in a *choro*-style (further emphasizing the improvisational nature of busker tactics). He contrasts busking with performing in a concert setting, in that he feels less pressure—noting that busking is a means of gaining confidence as a performer, of learning to be more expressive, of “coming out of yourself.” While for some buskers it is a chance to experiment and try

new material, others—those who are doing entirely, or nearly so, for the money—play what they are certain pays the most. A few (rare, admittedly) go so far to play the same song—or even just a passage—over and over for a half-hour and more: “It’s one song on repeat, when you’re playing on the street,” in the words of one enterprising busker. This only works because the audience is present only long enough to hear a fraction of the piece. A few participants say they have composed songs in the metro, inspired by their experiences there. Some buskers pause occasionally to chat with passersby, others go from one song right into the next, barely pausing. Some buskers follow a playlist—more frequent if playing to a pre-recorded accompaniment. One regular singer-guitarist who plays at Westmount Square says he sometimes watches people coming through the long corridor, and thinks: “That person looks in a certain kind of mood, so I try to play something that I think will go with it.”

Like a number of metro performers, Rodrigo has CDs for sale, which include his original compositions. When I ask if some of the pieces he has been playing just now are his own, he tells me that he doesn’t play his own compositions when busking. “Why not?” I ask. He becomes bashful, laughs, and says that he’s not happy with the accompaniment tracks he has made for his pieces. He continues to play while I set up then begin shooting video of him. After a couple of songs, he calls me over and asks if I will film him playing a particular song, the accompaniment track for which he recorded with a close friend back in Brazil. He would like his friend to see him playing it, here. When I agree, he says: “You will make two guys very happy!”—suggesting a sociality centered around music that is not only translocal (in that it connects this specific moment in this metro station to his life, and his friend, back in Brazil), but that also draws me in, transforming me from witness to active participant. His request precipitates a new turn in the course of my research: the production of a series of short video clips of the dozen metro buskers who I filmed over the course of the summer—which did not originally figure into my research outline (as discussed in the final chapter of this thesis).



**Illustration 15 - Rodrigo Simões at Berri-UQAM station.**

Visible in this image are Rodrigo's amplifier and the small cart he uses to transport his equipment. On the wall, above, is the magnetic Étoiles sign for the trio he usually plays with in the metro.

When I stop shooting and pack up, Rodrigo calls me over. "I have a gift for you," he says, handing me a CD. I am moved by his unexpected generosity—and try half-heartedly to refuse his gift, knowing that he will insist, and that it would be an affront to not accept: a nod toward a Maussian perspective of gifts and gift-giving (more on this in the next chapter). And, I thoroughly enjoy his playing, so I am happy to have the CD. However, an irony imposes itself, for the technologies that allow for the dissemination of music also impose strictures of their own: I have no CD player, so I can't play it (I do have an external CD player that I can connect to my laptop computer, but it is in storage and it is several months before I can listen to his CD). With the greater distribution possibilities opened up by digital technologies, there is a concomitant reliance on other technological devices, themselves subject to change, failure, or possible obsolescence—illustrating how, as technologies become more specialized, their use become more embedded in ever widening technological networks over which the individual has ever decreasing control. This can be found, concretely, in busker practices: on the one hand, a performer who relies on nothing but what they can do with their own body and a portable instrument that requires no electrification may be much freer in terms of mobility; on the

other hand, the use of electrical amplification and, especially, digital technologies, may open new busking opportunities—e.g. being able to play in much noisier environments, filling out one's sound with accompanying tracks, etc.

He sits for much of the time while performing (but he stands when I film him). Many of the other buskers I speak with, especially those who play multiple spots in a day on a regular basis, also sit or, more frequently, alternate between sitting and standing. Several participants mention the physical fatigue from standing for long hours in one place, on a hard surface. Indeed, the tile and concrete floors of stations and corridors were not designed for standing, but to resist the daily wear caused by thousands of walking feet. Klank notes that, in winter, his heavy insulated boots make long periods of standing even more uncomfortable. Rodrigo, as he stands to play, is conscious of how he positions himself, closely watching the people going by, making eye contact here and there, nodding when someone makes a donation. Spatial acoustics, as for many buskers, are a consideration in where and how he plays. He says that the usual Étoiles spot near the St. Denis street exit (which has been temporarily displaced by construction) has too much echo, whereas this one—the interim Étoiles spot at the Saint-Catherine street exit—has a more pleasant reverberation to it. And, like most others, his motivations for busking are varied. Originally, it was mainly just to make money, but he found this more difficult than he had expected. At the same time, he came to appreciate more the sociality of busking, noting that, as a relative newcomer to Montreal, it is a way of meeting people, of making new personal and professional contacts. And, it is a great way to practice difficult material and prepare for a concert—“kind of a rehearsal,” he says, noting the improvisatory nature of busking, in terms of repertoire and of individual performance tactics. It is a practice that is ‘always-in-the-making’, a product of its own activity that situates the specificities of practice and subjective understanding within wider social and material processes.

## **Discussion**

The notion of practice can be understood as the mediating process between body and space, technique and technology, personal disposition and shared traditions, embodied subjectivities and social conventions and institutions. ‘Practice’ is understood here as both the enacting (*verb*) and the form (*noun*)—the process of becoming-busker and the

momentary (seemingly arrested) intersection of various lines of becoming—a perspective that owes a great deal to Deleuzian conceptions of assemblage and becoming (DeLanda 2006, Deleuze & Guattari 1987, Marcus & Saka 2006). Rather than *practice*, it might be better to speak of *practices*—emphasizing the plurality of experiences and expressions, and that it is only in the specificities of lived experience that we can situate a sensing, knowing I. And, from thence to: sets of practices—foregrounding the hybrid nature of creative urban social and material engagement and production (Diamanti 2015). In the next pages, I elaborate on three central lines that run through this chapter, lines that converge in busker practices. These concern staging practices (notably, the centrality of a case, hat, or other receptacle for donations), the roles of infrastructure and technologies (as deployed by buskers, but also by other subterranean actants), and busker bodies, in the plural, underscoring the singularity of individual busker practices.

Preferences for certain spots among buskers coincide to a large degree, but this is by no means always the case, as some prioritize acoustics, potential earnings, ambient temperature, accessibility, absence of panhandlers, or other factors. Many expressed preferences for certain spots based on ease of access and how financially rewarding they find those spots to be (which also varies between buskers). The most popular spots are in the downtown core and/or in stations where metro lines converge. Many of those in stations toward the ends of the Green and the Orange Lines (excepting those that are important bus route hubs) are very rarely used, if at all. This may be due to poor placement in terms of acoustics (e.g. adjacent to noisy air vents, or too close to the tracks), or of wind and weather (those at street level, or otherwise close to entrances, are often very windy and nearly always unplayable in the cold of winter), because of too few passersby, or a combination of factors. One (French-speaking) busker said it isn't worth his while to play in the dominantly-francophone east end of the city, because “English people give more.” I was unable to ascertain if he felt this might be linked, in turn, to socio-economic standing (which might provide a more plausible account).

Other considerations include minimizing travel time, the number of (paid) entries into the controlled areas of the metro, and accessibility in terms of moving music gear and other equipment. William Navas lives in Laval; although connected by metro to the Island of Montreal since 2007, this still adds considerably to his travel time; being able to

book spots in advance, as an Étoiles musician, has eliminated much needless travel time. Alexandra takes an hour-long bus ride into Montreal, then connects to the metro at Radisson station, in the east-end. When she comes into the city she usually tries to play at the Radisson spot during the afternoon rush hour, as her last (typically second) set in a day of busking. In contrast, Joseph Fox lives a ten-minute walk from Sherbrooke station and he makes this one his regular spots, in large part because of the challenges of transporting his steel pans. Several of the guitarist-singers I met who do not use amplification are much more mobile and thus can be somewhat more spontaneous in their efforts at securing spots. Conversely, the Ecuadorian brothers who perform as Raymi play several spots a day; because they have so much gear to transport, they need to be certain of securing spots, so they set out by car early in the morning. To play at Guy-Concordia, they may arrive as early as 5:30 AM, when the station opens but the metro is not yet running. It can be a very lucrative spot, as reported by numerous buskers, and it can be difficult to get to a time slot there—especially in the winter, when it is too cold to play on the streets and there are more buskers vying for spots in the metro. This effect of seasonality indicates how the underground is itself constituted in relation to the “above-ground”, where changing conditions in turn influence busker practice in the metro.

## **Staging Practices**

### **Hat, Sign, Space**

While it may be difficult to definitely and exhaustively delineate what constitutes busking (and *the* busker) there are three features which, as discussed in chapter 1, are indispensable: there must be some of sort of artistic performance or form of live entertainment; it must take place in a public or semi-public space; and, there must be some sort of receptacle for donations, set out by the performer(s). This is typically an instrument case, but a hat or small bucket may sometimes be used. The ‘hat’, is, in a sense, the focal point, the axis, around which is centered not only a particular performance but busking-as-practice. Some metro performers put a great deal of thought into where the ‘hat’ is placed and how they position themselves, in relation to the surrounding space and the flow of passersby, as well as to its overall appearance and utility. Just as Klank chose his metal bucket so that he can hear when coins are dropped into it, Alexander uses a bright blue bucket, selected for its visibility (see Illustration 11,

page 64). He, perhaps more than any other participant, makes the donation container the fixed point around which his performance unfolds. He deliberately draws attention to the bucket, as he simultaneously constructs a stage-like performance space in relation to it, and breaks through the invisible barrier of the “fourth wall”—inviting passersby to also engage in this reproduction and subversion of habituated spatial practices. This contrasts with performers who stand, or sit, within a couple of feet of the donation receptacle, either to one side or directly behind. Others consciously allow for some distance between the ‘hat’ and themselves, saying that being too close to it may dissuade passersby who may be a little shy or self-conscious about making a donation. Unlike the circular performance space enacted in an outdoor public place (Harrison-Pepper 1990), the metro performance is delineated by metro architecture, with the wall where the lyre or Étoiles sign is mounted becoming the back of the stage-space.

Instrument cases are occasionally set on a stool or otherwise elevated (Joseph stacks his pan cases on top of each other), and one occasional (and anonymous) busker fashioned a sort of tripod-mounted basket, so as to “make it easy for people to put money in, so they don’t have to bend over.” Performers with CDs for sale typically have these displayed in, or against an instrument case. While some simply set an empty case, or sometimes a colourful piece of cloth, out for donations, others add additional decorative elements. For example, in addition to the CDs he has on sale, William’s case displays bracelets, miniature reed-flutes and “dream-catchers” (all of which he makes himself). These, he says, are mostly for decorative purposes—it creates a presence by visually embellishing his performance (see Illustration 5, page 38) But, he occasionally gives away one of the bracelets or mini flutes—to people who make a particularly generous donation or maybe buy more than one CD, or perhaps to a child. He mentions the displays of other buskers: the guy with his “boat” costume, a woman who sets out flowers, some who display photos. He feels that it’s a good idea to have a display, and that it helps boost CD sales. A few buskers have some kind of signage in their case, ranging from small professionally printed displays of name, or CD prices, to the hand-lettered cardboard signs that I see in the cases of Bucket of Change, Ben Evans, and a few others. Propped in her violin case, Alexandra has a hand-lettered sign that says *Pour mes études en musique trad. Merci!* (“For my studies in trad(itional) music. Thank

you!”), and a small reproduction of the flag of Brittany, where she is from (Illustration 16). She says that other Bretons (there are many in Montreal, she says) will sometimes see it, and stop to talk to her. Some performers have business cards on display in or next to a case.



**Illustration 16 - Alexandra's case.**

Some performers seem to give little thought to watching passers, and/or making eye-contact (in a couple of cases, I observed musicians wearing dark sunglasses that hid their eyes; neither, however, appeared to play frequently in the metro). Other buskers say they make a point of trying to catch people’s eye, but make sure not to hold their gaze for too long, so as to not cause any discomfort for passersby. One regular at Guy-Concordia hardly ever, if at all, looks up or even seems aware of passersby. Another busker commented that she had to practically step around him to get to the list tucked behind the sign. (He was so engrossed in his playing that he didn’t even look up as a group of young summer camp children filed past him, a few of them making little dance movements to his Jimi Hendrix-style riffing). The MusiMétro rules prohibit buskers from standing directly in front of the lyre sign—they cannot impede someone else from checking the list—but they must remain close to the sign, with equipment occupying a space “less

than 2 metres in length and 1.6 metres (5 feet) from the wall behind”<sup>7</sup>—likely one of the most precise measurements of busking practices. Most buskers stay close to the sign; a few stray slightly farther. All stay within a distance that cannot be accurately defined yet is ‘simply known’ to all—a spatial recognition of the sort that become an implicit bodily knowing, internalized and reproduced through habituated social behaviors (Mauss 2006). The lyre sign, in its fixedness, becomes a corollary of the ‘hat’: both are material pivots around which flow a host of underground currents, indexing moments of converging practices, perceptions and self-conceptions—material moments upon which practice is inscribed (with ink and cash), through which subjectivities are experienced.

### **Performing Space**

Practices that make up the “staging” of the performance concern both how the performance space is enacted—in terms and acoustics (including volume) and physical space—as well as “presentation of self”, in Goffman’s phrase (1990). This hinges on the body of the busker: positioning of self, outward dispositions—eye-contact or not, smiling or serious-looking; staring straight ahead or moving as to continually face toward the crowd passing in waves; keeping track of what is going on in the surrounding space, or turned inward, focussed more the performance than on passersby; etc. Some buskers sit, others always stand, while many alternate between the two—when they do, they will usually time this with movement of passersby. Some musicians are very physically demonstrative as they play, moving with the rhythms of performance and passersby, expressing the music with their entire bodies. As previously noted, this can include keeping time by audibly tapping a foot on the ground while playing, or other added rhythmic elements. Conley says that she has gotten to know the frequency of the trains, as they change throughout the day at different stations, and will time herself partially in relation to these. These bodily practices can be carried out with conscious attention to positioning and disposition toward passersby, though this is not always the case. At times, a particular practice may be perceived differently by performer and passerby. For example, a young violinist I observed on several occasions stood not with her back toward the sign-bearing wall, as most busker do, but facing roughly 90° to the wall.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://MusiMétromontreal.org/how-to-play/code-of-conduct/>. Accessed April 6, 2017.

When asked about this, she said she stands so the sound holes of her instrument face out, toward passersby, and that she turns, but only slightly, to read the music on the stand in front of her. But, she insists that she does face forward while playing. She demonstrates, standing in front of me, feet pointing straight ahead; but, as soon she resumes playing, she shifts back to her prior position, facing more toward the exit escalators than the turnstiles, feet pointing somewhere in between.

Deliberate, minor deceptions may also be used, as part of a busker's staging. An example: the guitarist with sheet music on a stand, but who keeps his eyes on his hands as he plays, never seeming to actually look at the sheet music—and no wonder, for when I pass by, I see that it is a book of music not for the guitar but for the recorder (the musical instrument)! While this may be an exceptional case, it is not entirely unlike the use of “seed money”—indicative of the range of practices, deliberate and not, through which busker subjectivities are performed and spaces of performance produced. Busking can be an opportunity to experiment with one's ‘performance self’ and to be playful with the space. That playfulness is central to Alexander's dance practice, and he derives great pleasure from the transformation of space and engagement with passersby. Others commented how busking allows them to try out things that they wouldn't in a concert setting, often in relation to the space and passersby. “When I see a group of people coming, I know it sounds very different to them when they're farther away than when they're close,” Geof Holbrook says. He describes how he will model his playing on movements of passersby: “I'll play very very slowly when their far away, and as they're coming I'll start to seed up. I speed up and I start to quiet down. So, it's like this mobile audience... and so you adjust in real time as they go by. It's kind of fun game, that I like to play.” Similarly, Ben Evans says that he plays more fast-paced music at Guy-Concordia, because the window in which people hurrying by will hear him is less than a minute, versus spots in long corridors. He is quite conscious of the rhythm of the footsteps of passersby, and likes to play in time with these rhythms, speeding up if someone runs by—“fun little stuff like that.” But, he also notes that he is constrained by the technology he uses, with his loop pedal dictating the beat, once he sets in motion.

## **New Technologies**

Many buskers use some form of electronic equipment for amplification, accompaniment, or both. Gérald Cabot has been using electrical amplification since the early days of his busking career. A large portion of his repertoire consists of his own instrumental (i.e. without lyrics) pieces, and without amplification, he says, they just don't work very well in the noisy space of the metro. He is ambivalent, however, concerning the use of accompaniment tracks, saying that he recently saw someone playing in the metro with a pre-recorded track "and from a distance... Wow! He's really good! [But] he was actually just playing a few notes into the accompaniment... That, I'm not in favour of." There has been, he says, a dramatic increase in this practice in the past couple of years, largely because of advances in digital sound technologies (with the reduced cost to the consumer, typical of increased mass production). One busker told me he had just started using a loop pedal in recent months (a foot-controlled device with which to record a sequence of notes and/or chords played on the spot, then play it back continuously, until it is manually stopped by tapping the pedal again) and was still getting used to performing with it, but prefers it to busking with another musician "because it can be hard to reliably coordinate schedules with others." He suggests that buskers may be particularly prone to an independence of spirit (a sentiment expressed by some other participants), "and some guys have... big egos, or ego problems," he says, then adds, with a laugh: "We're musicians." As self-deprecating and banal as this statement may appear, it illustrates how uses of technology interact with self-conception and subjective reflection—themselves forms of practice by which individuals are situated within wider social and material constellations. Busker technologies and performance in turn influence public perceptions and aesthetic expectations (Doumpa 2012). A few participants suggested that the use of accompaniment (whether pre-recorded or "looped" live on the spot) is altering what may be thought to "sound good" and make a positive impression on commuters, and that this trend will have more and more of a negative impact on those who do not use such devices, regardless of their actual talents as performers. Another recent technological device that is changing the busker experience, is the use of earbuds connected to smart phones or mp3 players, creating a technological bubble that may impart a sense of empowerment in the individual (Bull 2007) while simultaneously distancing commuters

from their surroundings and each other. “This doesn’t just affect buskers; it’s society at large,” FX notes. But, it does make it even easier to not see (or hear) a busker. Yet, several buskers said that sometimes someone walking by will slow and remove an earbud, so as to better hear the music, perhaps giving a thumbs up or making a donation. When that happens, says Lalo Orozco, “I know that I’ve touched that person, I’ve connected with them, with the music.”

### **Busking Bodies**

If busker practices—musical, spatial, technological—cannot be reduced to simple typologies, neither can busker bodies; and, the particularities of singular bodies are integral to individual practices. The individual bodily characteristics of a busker are relevant not only to their actual performance. Some participants mentioned the physical toll of busking: moving gear, being on one’s feet for much of the day, and spending many hours at a time underground, where it is noisy and grimy, and the air quality is generally less than pleasant. In this context, Ben Evans says that sometimes after a day of busking in the metro “I’ll blow my nose after I get home, and it’s all black.” Conley notes the poor air quality in the metro, and says that she drinks extra water in preparation for a day of busking. “I try to get well-hydrated before I go out.” For her, one of the appeals of playing in the metro is that it is indoors: “I’m not a sun person,” she says, then adds: “I’m a redhead—I burn easily.” Gérald Cabot says that busking is “tough financially, physically and mentally.” He, like others, mentions busking-related injuries (typically from transporting equipment). While he still loves it for the interactions with other people, he feels he is nearly at the end of his busking career. “I’ve been doing this for a long time,” he says, “I’m getting too old for it.”

Women comprised just over one quarter (5 of 19) of the buskers I interviewed. This may be a slightly higher proportion compared to the overall population of metro buskers. How gender plays into their experiences is, again, varied and variable. Of those I asked directly about this, a couple of them didn’t seem to count it as an important factor. However, one young woman said that, when busking, she sometimes gets attention that makes her feel uncomfortable, citing men who stand a little too close, or stare openly and directly at her, gazing at her in an unashamed assumption of male privilege. On the day when, as prearranged, I arrive to shoot video of her at Berri-UQAM, she is already

playing. A middle-aged man stands less than ten feet away, closely watching; another stands about the same distance, directly in front of her, while another man, older, standing farther off, also watches her intently. One of them leaves before the piece is over, but the other two linger on for some time. While some other female performers seem to be less conscious of gender, in terms of their performance and of audience relations, Conley turns her youthful good looks to her advantage when busking. She makes a point of wearing a “cute little dress,” especially when performing on a Friday or Saturday evening, noting that most of her donations come from young men. Conversely, for male buskers, if they give much thought to such matters, it appears to be more in terms of their own (potential) appeal to female passersby, with some participants associating a sexual freedom—and appeal—with busking, and with being musicians, more generally. Justin Kozak, whose first busking experiences were at Beaudry station, in the heart of Montreal’s Gay Village, linked this directly to his sexual orientation, even writing a song about going “down to Beaudry station” and singing for to “all the lonely men” there. However, he says that most of his donations come from women, some of whom, he notes with a certain irony and obvious amusement, will openly flirt with him.

Performing in a public space that is itself a place of displacement, a marginal space of in-between-ness (Butler Brown 2007), involves a risk on the part of the performer. Though busking provides a privileged vantage point from which to both affect and observe with a certain detachment—a busker can skirt everyday social conventions and watch passersby more closely than is usual in the metro, hold eye-contact, even smile at strangers—it also means a degree of risk, of vulnerability. The busker body is made public for all to observe, critique, acknowledge or ignore, approve of or otherwise. The vulnerability and risks involved are physical and immediate (e.g. in terms of gender or ableness—but also in terms of the economic precarity, for those more reliant on their busking earnings), as well as musical; but, it is always personal, always centered on the person—the performing body—of the busker. Negative reactions to, and treatment of, busking bodies includes ignoring, resenting, sexually objectifying, harassing, even robbing and, in the extreme, assaulting. More positive reactions range from tacit approval to overt expressions of appreciation. More than one participant said that, in so many words, musicians have delicate egos, and that it is necessary to be tough to make it as a

busker; and, that it is indispensable to truly love doing it, to derive a high degree of personal pleasure and satisfaction from busking.

### **Coda: The Wind**

The Saint Catherine street spot at Berri-UQAM has long been popular with many buskers, despite its drawbacks. These are primarily related to two spatial/physical aspects of that spot. The first is architectural: although the general lay-out is very favourable for busking (at an L-bend in a corridor, with lots of space in front the performer, where passersby may linger to listen for a few minutes), it is subject to the recurrent winds prevalent in so many stations: winds that blow down from the city above; winds from the moving trains, further underground; displaced air, moving through long passageways, forced into doorway bottlenecks, gusting out onto open platforms. At some spots (e.g. the long corridor at Square-Victoria), the wind can be nearly constant, while at others (especially those near street-level), the wind will come in intermittent blasts, as steel and glass doors are pushed open, allowing more air to rush through. On many occasions, I witness the challenges caused by the wind: signage and music stands blown over, sheet music carried away, hair blow in the face. Several buskers mention its dehydrating effect, or that it can blow paper money out of an instrument case, or de-tune an instrument, and that it can just generally be unpleasant: warm and humid in the heat of summer, biting cold in the winter. At many stations, the area just inside the entrance from the street will be subject to very strong winds, which may blast down into that station below. The second cause of complaint at this spot relates to the particulars of its location within the city. The exit is at the corner of Place Émilie-Gamelin, a park that has long had a reputation of being frequented by the homeless, the mentally ill, and dealers and users of street drugs. As noted previously, busking itself is associated with life on the street (Smith 1996). Although the park has been undergoing a beautification program, including summer festival concerts and the creation of a community garden, it continues to be a hub of activity for a large number of downtown Montreal's street-affected individuals. This translates into a prevalence of panhandlers inside the metro, in addition to those who may simply have nowhere else to go.

Coralie sits on a cloth she has spread out on the floor. She usually has a small folding seat, but says she forgot it today. The sound of her harp, with the help of a small

amplifier, fills the space. It is rich and warm, and some notes ring out with bell-like clarity. She has positioned herself below the Étoiles sign, a few feet out from the wall. Four or five meters to one side, it is possible to make out, from the bolt-holes and a faded outline, where the old lyre sign was mounted. The position of the lyre sign was such that the performer faced the bottom of the escalators that lead to the entrance—a more favourable positioning, according to several participants, than the current Étoiles spot which places the performer just past the L-turn, where the corridor into the station narrows. When I interviewed Coralie, a week earlier, she mentioned that the wind is a special challenge for her. It detunes her harp; but, worse than that, it can cause the strings to start vibrating, producing a tone. This is the principal of the Aeolian harp, an instrument “played” by the wind: air moving over and between the strings causes them to vibrate, and a vibrating string creates sound. Sound is, in fact, the movement of air pressure, a vibrational force moving in air (space, as material), that arrives at a sensing system such as the human auditory complex, and is reconstituted as intelligible sense experience (Rumsey & McCormick 2009). The wind picks up as I set up to film Coralie. Soon the strings of her harp are vibrating audibly. She pauses in the middle a piece to place both hands across the strings, bringing the droning hum to a stop. “It’s really a problem,” she says. “The wind blows in, down the stairs and hits the wall right here where I’m sitting.” I walk over to where she sits and note that it is less windy directly facing the stairs, where the old lyre sign was mounted. I tell her this; she moves and confirms my sense, adding “and the light is better here, too.” She sets up facing the escalators.

For about twenty minutes, I shoot video of her playing. I reflect on this effect of the wind: how it binds performer up with the physical space of performance, altering the details of particular busker practices—and how I too have been drawn into the wind. By being there to observe and film, I became implicated in, and altered, Coralie’s performance. But, when I go up to street-level, so as to get a shot of her as I come down the escalator, the complexity of the wind as assembling event is made further visible to me.



**Illustration 17 - Coralie at Berri-UQAM station.**

Coralie is re-tuning her harp. Although she needs to do this periodically when playing in any conditions, the wind causes her instrument to go out of tune more rapidly than usual.

It is not uncommon to see a panhandler holding the door for commuters in metro stations, most often proffering a paper cup for donations. Presumably, this suggests that some sort of service is being offered, in exchange for which passersby may choose to give the panhandler money. Arguably, the only critical differences between this and busking—and, most would agree, this *is* a critical difference—is that buskers engage in some type of artistic performance or other form of entertainment. And yet, here, this man with weather-worn skin, a slight hunch, grey stubble on his face, and fingers stained from cigarettes, grime, and the weary life of the street, is implicated in the busking performance. He stands inside the station, one hand holding the door open for all who pass by, the other gripping a dirty paper coffee cup. And it is this open door that allows air from the street to come rushing in, down into the passageway below, gathering force where it hits the wall and squeezes into the narrower corridor past the turn, transforming Coralie’s performance in the process; and, by being present and noting the different spatial wind factors to Coralie, I too have been caught in this current. Actors blur into each other. Movement pervades all, as differing rhythms overlap, resonate, conflict, break apart. Musician, instrument, panhandler, observer—performance, space: all caught up in

blowing currents of air and flows of becoming. The wind can be understood here as a mediating presence, an actant unto itself, the “glue” that momentarily “makes things stick” (Barber 2007), as well as being the field of action in which sense-perception unfolds. It binds, in its turbulent movements, all manner of people and things, yet possesses little in the way of substance itself: it is the movement of air in relation to other things, changing air pressure in space. And that is also, precisely, what sound is: a vibrational movement of air. But, we can only call it sound when there is a hearing, perceiving subject (human or otherwise). Likewise, the wind, though purely a relational process between other actants (people or otherwise), here acts as an assemblaging that momentarily binds and makes visible various actors and features of the daily world of the Montreal metro. The wind moves on—air currents dissipate, flows of becoming disperse—but it leaves traces of its passing in the modified actors and things it has swept across, suggesting ever other possible linkages, other social and material trajectories, other futures.

## Chapter 4 – Encounter and Performance, Circulation and Gift

“I like busking in the metro... it’s like: anytime you want, we’re ready for you. Here’s your audience, they’re already here.” – Justin Kozak

“People say thank you... for what I bring as an immigrant, for my music” – Lalo Orozco

“[Busking in the metro] is a joyful thing!” – Klank

### Introduction

In this chapter, I detail moments of social engagement provoked by buskers’ performances and explore themes of encounter and exchange; conflict and community; and performance as Gift. In tracing the lines of social and material circulation that flow through these micro-social encounters, I consider my own involvement as both researcher and participant-performer, especially in terms of my use of digital video. I propose an understanding of busking as a type of Gift-performance that has parallels in ethnographic videography. First, I explore the social encounters of buskers and those that they may foster with others; then, by illustrating how audio-visual recording and editing can be seen as performances in their own right, I suggest a relationship between ethnography and busking, as forms of Gift. Throughout, I consider the materiality of metro and music, of camera and microphone, and detail the unanticipated turn the videographic component of this research took. I contend that the production and circulation of the series of short videos of metro buskers that came out of this research creates new openings for creative engagement and conviviality, new trajectories of becoming.

If my approach in the preceding chapters has been to emphasize the relationality of busking, as a set of practices, it has also been to sketch out some of the ways in which metro buskers may precipitate moments of improvised social engagement between strangers in a space that was not designed not to foster such encounters. All participants in this research indicated that, to some extent, a sense of encounter and sharing with passersby and an opportunity to beautify public space, is central to how they understand busking. Several of them described this explicitly in terms of giving something to the public, and of participating in—even initiating—a social circulation of giving and exchange. Alexander Shattler, the dancer, spoke of picking up on the “rhythm of people

going by... You're right in it... you can kind of change [the rhythms]." In this way, buskers may be seen as redirecting urban lines of flow and initiating new trajectories of exchange. This is performance-as-Gift: public artistic performance as process of encounter and exchange, a constructed situation that precipitates new social and material relations (Sansi 2015). There are, however, several key differences between participatory arts practices—theorized as Gift-events in Bourriaud's "relational art" (2002)—and the encounter initiated by a busker in a marginal urban space. The latter performs regardless of what interactions arise, and does so from within a loosely defined, yet durable enough to be historically traceable, set of practices that holds together only in the doing (as opposed to a textual knowledge, which can be preserved and transmitted, to a large degree, outside of the context to which it is a witness). This is not the case with arts performances that are planned as such, and that are framed within a definition of "art performance", "installation" or, more colloquially, "show" (concert hall and nightclub performances, participatory art installations, etc.). While these certainly present possible openings into a sense of shared experience, they lack the quality of being at once surprising and mundane, both an unexpected disruption—significant or barely registered, pleasant or otherwise – and a reminder that the depersonalizing public spaces of urban life are built intentionally so as to be passed through but not (re)claimed and redefined in other ways (Lefebvre 2002). When attending a concert, visiting an art gallery, or viewing a film, for example, we may expect to be entertained, perhaps challenged, possibly invited into a social encounter outside the usual trajectories of our daily lives. When we enter a space constructed to serve the functional requirements of urban modern life—when we, in other words, enter into an infrastructural mode of being—we do not, in general, do so with the same expectation of some encounter with the new. On the contrary, such spaces—of which the underground world of the metro is an exemplary case—encourage us to draw into ourselves, to retreat into a personal bubble (Bull 2007) and maintain only enough awareness of our surroundings so as to get to where we are going, prompting an erasure of all but the essential details of the environment (Simmel 1921). We may, in the process, render invisible disquieting presences (panhandlers, for example, or other bodies that may unsettle our daily routines). In this environment, the metro busker may also be erased, relegated to a background role as part of the urban

infrastructure; yet, in the performance-event, in the act of becoming-busker, these underground performers can disrupt habituated interactions with public space and may foster moments of encounter and exchange.

### **Encounters and Exchanges**

During my fieldwork, I witnessed many incidents of micro-sociality provoked by metro buskers. This can be as simple as a passerby stopping for a few minutes to listen and possibly exchange a few words with the performer—something that many participants said can be deeply rewarding and may be central to how they may conceive of busking, as a practice. Such encounters were frequently cited as being a strong motivator for keeping at it, given the financial uncertainty and that the more typical response from passersby is indifference, and in rare cases, outright hostility. While incidents of overt conflict happen, they are rare. Much more frequent are convivial exchanges and instances of passersby interacting favourably with buskers. I list here a few illustrative examples (all of which expose material, as much as overtly social, aspects of busker-inspired encounters):

Passersby joining Alexander Shattler's dance performance: an acquaintance of his, who happens to be going by joins in briefly, as Alexander "passes" the dance over to him for a few minutes. A few more passersby stop to watch the two of them. A more frequent occurrence is when someone dances a little as they pass by, either with overt dance "moves" or simply by adjusting their gait and bodily posture in relation to the music. "The other day," he says, "this old guy with a cane started dancing... he joined in for a minute," then went on his way.

A Brazilian couple who stop to listen to Rodrigo Simões: when he reaches the end of the song, a lively conversation ensues. He later says that this sort of thing happens often enough because *choro*, the style of music that he plays, is instantaneously recognizable to other Brazilians, and frequently elicits a positive response that may have to do as much with a sense of shared (Brazilian) identity as with what he is actually playing.

Joseph Fox, with his steelpans, attracts a great deal of attention: either those who are acquainted with the instrument and are keen to ask him questions or simply talk about the pans, or those simply curious about an instrument that is unfamiliar to them. Such encounters range from people who stop to peer under the pans as he plays, as though trying

to understand how they work, to those who want to know where he got them, how long he has been playing, or talk about their own experience playing the pans.

The group of teenagers playing stringed instruments I see several times playing at Sherbrooke station: on one occasion, first two, three, then more people stop to listen, and I see complete strangers sharing enthusiastic praise for the music, the young musicians, and their capacity to transform the space into one of shared enjoyment. It cannot be overemphasized how, in general, most commuters seem to recognize the presence of others merely so as to avoid colliding with them as they make their way through the station; it is not all that usual for strangers to engage in friendly exchanges with each other.

An account of the sociality surrounding buskers would be incomplete without discussing children. Adults become habituated in the subtle art of avoidance of others in public spaces—those designed and interacted with as a purely functional components of the urban infrastructure (Fisch 2013). Young children, however, have yet to completely embody and naturalize for themselves normative social behaviour. On many occasions, I saw young children stop dead in their tracks, completely absorbed in a busker's performance. Occasionally, a very young child (typically under the age of five) had to be actively coaxed away or even lifted up and carried off, so that adult and child might continue on their trajectory. On the other hand, many adults (generally parents, though this is not always easily assessed) encourage children to stop and listen to buskers (though rarely for more than a couple of minutes). When this happens, it is not rare for the adult to give money to the child, directing them (verbally or with hand gestures) where to place the donation. Sometimes, much hilarity ensues when a child is unclear as to where to put the money or, on approaching, freezes and stands stock still in front of the performer. This may be witnessed by other passersby who may then direct their attention to the performance; it will also frequently elicit smiles and friendly comments and laughter from the newly-formed transitory audience. Many buskers enjoy seeing children absorbed in their performance, and a few feel they are educating children—both in the sense of inculcating an appreciation of music, but also in terms of how music can enliven the drab space of the metro. One busker recounted an occasion when three young mothers lined up strollers, with child inside, so as to watch him play; he spoke explicitly of parents wanting

to expose their children to live musical performances. Lalo Orozco derives a great deal of pleasure from engaging children with his music: “They’re my biggest fans!” He has even written a lullaby for, and inspired by, the young children he encounters while busking.

One of the more striking moments I witnessed of a micro-social encounter precipitated by a busker was at the spot in the corridor between Atwater station and Westmount Square. On a warm humid afternoon in July, a middle-aged man plays what looks like an undersized nylon-stringed guitar, singing in Spanish. A book of sheet music stands open on a stand in front of him. He speaks no French and barely any English. With his few words of English and my correspondingly limited Spanish, I gather that he recently arrived in Montreal; that is the extent of our conversation. I retreat a slight distance to watch him play a little longer. Just then, a woman and man passing by stop in front of him, point at his instrument and say something to each other in Spanish. This sets off a lively conversation between the three of them. Despite my limited comprehension of Spanish, I decipher that the couple and the busker are from neighbouring South American countries. In her study of New York City subway buskers, Tanenbaum (1995, 91) describes a nostalgia for one’s homeland and sense of shared ethnic identity that some South American New Yorkers describe to her, when they hear buskers playing “Andean” music. But, she notes that this cultural identity is specifically diasporic and may bear only a partial relation to an actual common regional heritage. I feel as though I am intruding on the warm exchange taking place. I walk slowly away, still writing my impressions in my notebook. Suddenly, I hear a female voice raised in song. A third passerby has stopped: a woman in smart business attire sings a verse in Spanish while the other three listen. She has a very good voice. When she stops, all applaud, smiling and laughing. The busker strums a few chords and hums a line, as though demonstrating something about the way the music is constructed. Although linguistic barriers prevent me from grasping the details of this impromptu music lesson, it is obvious that there is a pleasant camaraderie being shared among the four. I am certain that, excepting the man and woman who were already walking together, they did not already know each other. A few minutes later, the woman who was singing leaves in the opposite direction that the couple was going in.

I see this event as exemplary of how the presence of a busker may occasion unexpected moments of micro-social encounter. Further, I see this encounter as being precipitated as much by material features of the performance as by other factors. It was the musician's instrument that first seemed to catch the attention of the passing couple. And, the ensuing "music lesson" appeared to be centered as much on the instrument as on the actual music (as least so far as the busker's contribution to this exchange). I would also mention that he played while sight-reading from his book of sheet music, hinting at the affordances contained in its printed pages. I take this encounter as indicative of how the material is an essential component of what is sometimes thought of in, more abstract terms, as the "social." The social is, in fact, seen to be material. The encounter illustrates how the social exchange between busker and passersby is embedded in the objects and materials of the particular moment, of that encounter: architecture, instrument, sheet music, even my notebook, if I am to include myself in the material trajectories that are opened up in the busking performance. During my fieldwork, I often witnessed how musical instruments, amplification equipment, donation hat or case, handmade signs, money and other "little gifts," enable, participate, make connections.

The materiality of acoustics in the metro has already been treated, in the previous chapter; here, the concern is with how the "material agency" of infrastructure (Dominguez Rubio 2016) contributes to acts of engagement between buskers and passerby, and indeed, among passersby as well, and ultimately, to the video production in this research. To begin with, the hat/case and sign are material features that "participate" in the encounter. This is obviously true in the sense that, as previously stated, the busker's hat/case may be seen as the focal point of the performance. Without it, there is no busking, *per se*—thus no possibility of the same sort of social encounter (there are, of course, many other kinds of unexpected encounters and moments of micro-sociality that take place daily in the metro; but, these are not the concern of this thesis). Likewise, the lyre or Étoiles sign emplaces such possibilities for encounter—though in a less essential way: busking itself is not dependent on these regulatory signs. In terms of the buskers' hat/case and other staging practices, I have already provided a few examples of the sociality engendered by the material features. Consider: Alexandra's little flag of her native Brittany, that prompts other Bretons to stop and chat; William Navas' miniature pan flutes and other items that he

gives as gifts on occasion. Or, in another vein: Rodrigo Simões gift to me of one of his CDs, a token of his appreciation, expands my own material-digital engagements.

### **Community and Conflict**

Although busking has a certain air of communality (it is an offer to join in a shared experience, in a public place) and buskers may “forge a... sense of community among listeners” (Lake 2012, 1117), the performers themselves cannot be said to comprise a community in the usual sense of the word (Tanenbaum 1995, 105). While some metro performers may identify with busking, as a personal or professional designation, the majority do not; nor do they see themselves as belonging to a community of buskers. There is a strongly independent spirit among buskers. For many, the independence that comes with busking is one of its appeals. Joseph Fox sums this up as “You’re not tied down to a schedule.” For Lalo Orozco “[playing] four hours a day is usually enough... the rest of the day is all mine,” and Ben Evans notes that “I just play whatever I feel like playing.” “To speak of community among [metro] buskers is maybe a bit strong,” says FX, but he adds that there is a sense of “mutual understanding.” “Everyone’s doing their own thing,” says Alexander Shattler, “but we relate to each other... because we’re all busking in the metros.” (For more on this independence of spirit, see Chapter 2). Nonetheless, some performers who are relative newcomers acknowledge those who came before them. Ben Evans, for example, says; “I’m grateful for the people that [made busking in the metro] legal... I wouldn’t be able to do it, if it weren’t for them.” Among the MusiMétro members, and especially those in the Étoiles program, there may be more of a sense belonging to something. “It gives you a certain... safety,” says Conley, “if something happens, you can contact [the MusiMétro organizers] and they can see about it. They can’t always do anything, but... it’s something.” But, even among the Étoiles musicians, most see themselves as independent operators. While Gérald Cabot does feel a certain sense of community, he says that whether someone feels that way or not is more a reflection of that individual’s personality, not because there is an actual cohesive community.

Those who perform regularly in the metro, especially if they have been doing so for more than a few years, will often get to know each other simply from running into one another at busking spots. These interactions tend to be limited in scope, but they may involve sharing information (in particular, about other spots). Newcomers will often learn

from more experienced buskers about the different spots and the list system (and the conventions this entails: e.g. who makes the list and when; how long the time slots should be; what to do if you'll be late, or if someone's name is on the list but they're not there, etc.). Buskers may also exchange information concerning spots—which ones are preferred (whether for earnings, acoustics, or other reasons), if any are closed due to construction, etc. For my part, I was introduced to the list system by another performer, when I first busked in the metro in the late 1980s. I also picked up busking habits such as “seeding” my guitar case with some money at the beginning of each set, and trying pick up on, to play in time with the rhythms of passersby. However, to speak of this type of knowledge transmission as a form of apprenticeship or initiation into a set of standardized practices would be misleading, for the simple reasons that; 1) there is not a cohesive group into which one might be initiated, and 2) because there is no standard set of practices by which buskers may be defined. Furthermore, although the organization MusiMétro may instill some sense group identity in some members, the accessibility of information concerning busking spots is available online, meaning that newcomers can learn about the regulations and conventions of metro busking without ever speaking to other performers. Indeed, most of the younger (under 30 years old) participants said that they learned about metro busking protocol online. This reveals how technological change can significantly impact (enabling as well as limiting—transforming) busking practices.

So long as buskers abide by the appropriate regulations, they rarely come into conflict with the STM. Occasionally there are complaints about volume; Alexander Shattler, the dancer, has been told by STM security guards on a few rare occasions, to lower his volume—which he says “Kind of kills the vibe.” One day, I watched a STM employee, frustrated by a very loud busker who regularly plays his electric guitar there, implore a group of police cadets, who just happened to be going by, to put a little fear of the law into him. I knew that this musician does play at a volume that many find excessive (indeed, several participants said as much). “I told him to turn it down,” the transit worker complained. “It’s too loud—and all day! He’s unreasonable, that kid...!” The cadets listened patiently. When she returned to the fare booth they discussed the situation amongst themselves, seemingly unsure what to do. When they did descend the escalator, the guitarist had started playing again but at a noticeably lower volume. The cadets slowly

filed passed and said nothing. Regulatory enforcement in the metro generally rests with the STM's own security personnel, but city police are also assigned to the metro. Effem says that the police make their presence known in the metro, but they rarely actually intervene. Some participants find police officers are typically easier to deal with than the STM security personnel, and that the former seemed more attentive to what is going on about them and more likely to engage buskers in casual conversation. Subjective and anecdotal as it may be, my own impression (as researcher, commuter, and busker) is much the same.

Conflicts between buskers and passersby are rare, though this has not always been the case. When Gérald Cabot started playing in the metros, over thirty years ago “people could harass you, call you a lazy parasite. . . . There were people who would lodge a complaint with the security, to say that there was a musician in the hallway! That gives you an idea of the mentality at the time.” The general acceptance of buskers by the public has been one of the biggest changes in his years of busking. But, he says that in recent years the regulation of busking has become stricter, in the metro and especially on the street—a sentiment echoed by other participants. A few of them said that conflicts with panhandlers were more frequent than with the average commuter—and that alcohol or other substances, and possibly mental health challenges may play a part in such conflicts. Some buskers prefer spots inside the controlled area of the metro, where panhandling is forbidden—largely for this reason. I witnessed a few instances of conflict during fieldwork. For example, as I filmed the duo *Bucket of Change*, a man passing by started “singing” along to the song and began pacing back in forth in front of them, swinging his arms in time with the music. He was not actually singing, but talking-singing in a steady stream of barely comprehensible French. Part way through the song, the musicians stopped and demanded, angrily, “What are you doing? What do you want?” (I stopped filming). After repeated requests from the increasingly aggravated buskers, he left. Ten minutes later he was back. Again, he began passing in a circle in front of them. Again, they demanded that he leave. As he resumed his semi-musical breathless monologue, one of the musicians got up, took him gently but firmly by the arm and walked him part way down the corridor, telling him to clear off. He protested but left. Occasionally, someone will start panhandling right in front of a busker. In such cases, FX says that he explains to the panhandler that they both lose out from this, that neither of them will make any money, and that, while busking is

restricted to specific sites, panhandling is permitted anywhere outside of the controlled zone. They usually agree, even if resentfully, and leave. He has never had any serious problems. One musician described being yelled at by an angry, drunk panhandler who, when he told him to move, flicked a lit cigarette at him (the busker). A few buskers mentioned panhandlers or others they described as indigent or homeless, looking into their hat/case, as though assessing how much money there was. While I watched Joseph Fox at Guy-Concordia station, a woman came up from the metro platform, walked over to him and asked, in a slightly whiny voice: “Do you have two dollars?” He shook his head “no” without pausing in his playing. She looked at him, then into his case, for more than a few seconds. She looked back up with a pleading expression and again asked: “Do you have two dollars?” Again, he simply shook his head “no.” “No...?” she asked, but he continued playing. She took a final look at the contents of his case, then at him, then left – but, not before approaching me to ask “Do you have two dollars?” (I said no, and she left).

While apparently rare, theft is nonetheless a concern for buskers. Klank, as noted, has been subjected to theft, in addition to being harassed and even physically assaulted. William Navas says that he has been robbed twice when busking. Now, he empties his case of larger sums, not letting it build up too much if he is having a good session. A busker playing alone, he says, is more vulnerable—even more so if one has an instrument and case and maybe additional gear: “You can’t do anything.” In the first years that busking was permitted in the metro, what Gérald Cabot describes as gangs took over certain stations. In some cases, he says, they were a cabal of professional musicians who, through sheer numbers and by being organized together, prevented anyone else from playing those spots; in others, they were transient types who were as much panhandlers and petty drug dealers as they were musicians. While he says that these problems were eventually eliminated, Lalo Orozco said that, more recently, a street gang was operating at Honoré-Beaugrand station, where they were involved in theft of money and equipment from buskers. Conflict among metro buskers seems to be uncommon. When it does happen, it often concerns access to spots. A few participants recounted incidents when someone tampered with the list, so that upon arriving for the time-slot they had reserved, someone else was there performing in their stead. As an attempt to safeguard against this, some buskers will make a second sign-up list and tuck it behind the edge of a billboard or wall-

mounted garbage can a few metres from the lyre sign. This is not an issue for the Étoiles spots, as those are booked online and other (and only) Étoiles musicians can consult that list.

Overt conflict between buskers and passersby is quite rare; more common are what might be termed micro-conflicts. These can include being given hostile, or “dirty,” looks; being told to “get a real job”; being compared to panhandlers (“It so sad, seeing people begging on the streets,” one busker was told by a woman who made a great show of placing a few coins in his case); or, simply being completely ignored. To be made invisible is an act of symbolic violence against the person—all the more so when the person is actively soliciting attention, and is reliant on recognition—visual and acoustic. “What do you think the worst insult is, for a musician?” Lalo Orozco asked me. Before I had time to reply, he answered his own question by covering his ears and grimacing. “The other day, someone going past did that to me – as though it was painful to the ears... That, for a musician, is the worst insult.” Another example of the small but sometimes disruptive difficulties that buskers face involves musical requests, or expectation of what a busker should do, what a busker should “be.” A man video-recording Effem at Place-des-Arts station wanted Effem to sing, to make the video “more complete.” Effem does not sing, but plays purely instrumental pieces. The man seemed frustrated, and attempted for some time to coax him into singing—as though this might furnish a more “authentic” busking performance for him to film. He finally gave up, but continued talking to Effem, until the latter had to thank him for his interest but point out that, if he just talked to people, he wouldn’t be able to play and would never make any money. The man finally let him continue playing. This pressure from the public can be felt in small ways, such as when a busker covers a song—plays a piece by other, usually well-known, musicians. Depending how faithful to the original this is, it may, on rare occasions, prompt comments to the effect that “That’s not how it goes” or “You don’t do it [i.e. the song] like so-and-so”—regardless of whether the performer is aiming for a literal interpretation or a personalized adaptation.

Although the theme of conflict was touched on by most participants, that of convivial encounter and exchange with the public was much stronger. Indeed, for most buskers, a sense of engaging with the public, of creating an opportunity for encounter, is a

central aspect of busking. Some spoke of this in terms of a gift to the public, and of creating unexpected moments of social encounter. Coralie, for example, spoke of “making music more accessible to the public” and of the pleasure she derives from this. For Alexandra, there is sense of “contributing [to a] pleasant mood,” that is “reciprocal” because the recognition and appreciation of some passersby bolster her performance. FX spoke of “busking as a form of exchange,” Alexander Shattler of “disrupt[ing] the flow of traffic,” and Justin Kozak of the “transient little connections” busking precipitates. These various small examples illustrate ways in which busking may be seen as a relational, embodied, performance-as-Gift—a “constructed situation” that, by exploiting fissures in the naturalized order, attempts to provoke an engagement with the immediate environment and a shared claiming and reshaping of space (Debord 2002).

### **Performance, Circulation, Gift**

I did not intend, at the outset of this research, to explore how the concept of Gift might inform busker practices. Yet, it quickly became apparent that for many metro performers, an important aspect of busking is a sense of giving something to the public: a gift freely offered, for which there is the opportunity but not the obligation to reciprocate (with money, or simply by showing appreciation). This understanding, on the part of many participants, of busking-as-Gift aligns with a Maussian view of gift-giving (1967) as enacting, and expressing, processes of social and material circulation. The precise details of what constitutes a gift and the relations this entails are not, however, homogenous universal givens; they must be understood as situated within specific socio-historical processes (Strathern 1997). In the context of metro buskers, ideas of Gift can be found, more obviously, in the financial remuneration in exchange for a service freely given—and certainly this is an important component of the circulation of Gift precipitated by buskers.

Yet, even when this exchange centers around money, there is still often a conviviality between performer and passerby—one that bears an indelible mark of intimacy of the sort that does not arise when, for example, handsomely tipping an especially helpful taxi driver, or the restaurant staff after a particularly pleasant meal (although, in the first case there can be much the same sense of the customer being given more than expected, and in the second, the encounter is at least as intimate as the pleasure derived from live music—the staff is, after all, preparing and serving substances to be

taken directly into the body). Tipping a busker is different from tipping a musician in a café or club, for the distinctive feature of the busker's practice is that it is *freely* given and, crucially, that it is unexpected and unsolicited. Unlike most of the descriptions of a Gift in anthropological literature, it is given with no obligation of reciprocity. Indeed, such an expectation would negate one of the basic assumptions many have about busking—that the performance is freely given and that passersby may show recognition as they choose, if at all. It might be argued that the busker's Gift comes close to Derrida's (1997) impossible Gift – one that, unsolicited and in excess of any need or desire, ceases to be a gift as soon as it is acknowledged as being one. The commuter neither asks for the performance nor is expected to pay for it—and may simply pass by, oblivious and uninterested. “You're sort of intruding on [commuters'] little world,” says Conley, “they didn't ask for you to play there.” And while a few buskers told me that the public often doesn't appreciate what they do, only a few feel that they should earn more—money, and respect—for what they give to the public. MusiMétro representative Clément Courtois insists, however, that “in the metro, it's the space of the STM. We [buskers] are guests there.” Klank, for his part, says that “it's a privilege to play in the metro. I feel *honoured* that people would listen to me!” he says with enthusiasm, adding: “And that they'll give me money for *playing music*!?”

That buskers are motivated by much more than simply earnings has been amply demonstrated thus far. When Coralie says “You can't just do it [i.e. busking] for the money, you have to really love what you are doing” this points to the intangible rewards that help maintain the appeal of performing in public. Acknowledgment and appreciation cannot be measured in dollars, but they are essential aspects of reciprocation-exchange initiated by buskers. In some cases, however, it is much easier to trace the material trajectories of the busker Gift. Non-monetary counter-gifts from passersby, for example, can assume many forms. There are the various unexpected, sometimes unusual, items placed in the hat/case. These are termed *dons insolites* by many francophone buskers—from *don* (gift, donation) and *insolite* (unexpected, unusual, surprising), a near homophone of, though etymologically unrelated to, the English “unsolicited.” (This poetic analogue emphasizes the Gift-relation engendered by the busker performance as being devoid of expectations, both in the sense of being unanticipated by passersby, and of not requiring them to reciprocate in any way). These “little gifts” include food, such as sweets, fruit, and

various other snacks, but may also be more substantial: whole pizzas, a roasted chicken. A young woman gave the duo Bucket of Change a large bag of a score or more sandwiches: they were from from the deli where she works—and had closed for the day—and they would have been thrown away. They, in turn, tell me to take as many as I like (I take two), another small gift precipitated by the busking performance. Other non-pecuniary donations I witnessed or was told about include: bus tickets, cigarettes, flowers, a little toy animal figure, the printed “fortune” from a fortune cookie, a drawing by a young child, and an invitation to a Hare Krishna “feast and festival.” Rare, but not completely unknown to some buskers, are gifts of alcohol and marijuana. Foreign currency sometimes also appears in a busker’s hat/case. It is generally unclear to recipients if this is an intentional symbolic gift, or if the donator didn’t realize the lack of utility (with the exception of the odd donation of U.S. currency, they are generally financially valueless), or if, for the passerby, it was simply an opportunity to get rid of the currency while appearing to be generous.

Mauss’ (1967) discussion of the Kula circle underscores the ongoing cyclical nature of the exchange—and that it must be continually maintained and renewed. An act, an exchange, even when expressed within existing social forms (e.g. the Kula circle; busking regulations and conventions), must always be performed, simply to *be*. As with social space, the act that defines, and requires that space must always be *re-performed*; thus, there are always possibilities for novel variations (Rose-Redwood & Glass 2014, 15ff.), of genetic mutations that may transfer to subsequent performance-acts. This suggests creative possibilities in the performance, that may be generative of new social acts, may enable new circulations. Busking is thus a relational process involving much more than simply the gift of performance in exchange for potential appreciation and recognition (monetary or otherwise). It may produce new trajectories of becoming that entangle agents in unforeseen ways. Klank first started busking in the metro playing a pennywhistle. “But,” he said, what I really wanted was a trumpet.” He already had a mouthpiece, so he busked with just that. “I’d cup my hands to be like a mute [affecting the tone rather than the volume].” He demonstrated this, playing a range of songs with surprising agility. “I was just [busking in the metro] to try and make enough money to buy the trumpet,” he says, laughing. “I had a sign that said: *Please help me buy a trumpet.*” It took about four months to earn the required sum. “So that was it... I wasn’t going to busk

in the metro anymore. But, then I felt like: All these people helped me to buy my trumpet... I wanted to thank them, and show them where their investment went..." His original intention for busking was both occasioned by, and culminated in the object of the trumpet, which, rather than signaling the completion of this process of circulation, was the catalyst for an expansion of the trajectory of his busking practice. Here, we might identify a process of "entrainment" (Bauer & Kosiba. 2016), whereby material objects participate in social action, enlisting other objects in the process: Klank's desire becomes the mouthpiece's desire for the body of the trumpet. Yet, this need not imply a flattening of power relations, of equal agentic action. Surely the entire process – desire, action, reward, new cycle of action—is initiated in a foundational moment ("What I really wanted was a trumpet.") by the actions of "key movers" (Appadurai 2015, 234)—Klank himself, in this case.

Another example of the engagements of objects and materials in busker practices that may foment new trajectories is Lalo Orozco's series of drawings, inspired by his busking encounters. As with Klank's trumpet, the development of Lalo's mini-graphic novels suggests new routes of circulation that have stages, critical junctures (e.g. the performance, the conversation, the laying down of ink on paper), but that assume quasi-independence from their originators. I have illustrated how busking is a catalyst for, and a product of, multiple lines of social and material flow. The stories that others share with Lalo are themselves precipitated by his performance (simply put: it is only because he is there busking, at that moment, that someone stops to share their story). These social encounters then become the material for, and materialize in, his drawings—which themselves may take up new routes of circulation in the form of a book, or possible on-line distribution. Parallels may be drawn here, with the production and online sharing of the busker videos that came out of this research.

### **Assembling the busker**

When one of the freelancers who regularly plays in the corridor between Westmount Square and Atwater station, says: "It's a beautiful day, the mood is good... I feel it and I give it back" (*Je le ressens et je le redonne.*), this presents the gift-exchange between busker and passerby as a socially mediated emotional experience. These trajectories of social and material exchange are ones of shared pleasure, circulations of affective and

sensorial experience (Biehl & Locke 2010), as much corporeal and material as they are social. The playing of an instrument, the vibration of vocal cords, the perception of sound, the movement of bodies, a coin tossed into an instrument case, a smile and a bow, the acoustic participation of tile, glass, cement, steel: it is at the confluence of these particulars and others that the act of *being busker* is made visible, audible. The metro itself is an assemblage of diverse, changing elements, mediated through the memories of the individual actors who move through its spaces (Augé 1986). The busker is, likewise, an assemblage-event, temporally and spatially localized at the convergence of multiple lines of flow (trains, commuters, sound waves, circulation of currency, changing regulations of space, etc.), not a fixed identity or position. This need not imply a flattening of social and material relations, or a strict equivalency between various agentic forces. An analysis of social assemblages and creative practices that accounts for material agency need not negate the uneven influences of various constituents (Appadurai 2015). Certainly, metro architecture participates in busking practices and perceptions, but without a perceptive apparatus endowed with a reflexive awareness and encultured system of meaning, of making sense of world—in other words, a living human body—there “is” no music, no occasion for social encounter and exchange, no Gift. An illustration: while the hat/case may be thought of as an essential feature, the focal point of the busking performance, it is the placing of the hat/case by the performer that sets in motion the performance. It is a deliberate, conscious act, involving the subjective “*reasons and motives*” that are constituents “of social assemblages” (DeLanda 2006, 19. Italics in original.), that initiates the possibility of *being busker*. And, though this material enactment, this *emplacement*, is constrained in its possibilities by infrastructural and regulatory limits, it is *the taking up* of busking-as-performance that signals the assemblage-act, of a process of becoming. And this, as has been demonstrated, is in no way foreordained: some musicians (or other artistic performers) busk but most do not; and, for those who do, how and why they do, and what it means for them, is highly subjective. The heterogeneity of busking motivations and practices attests to this, and the non-necessity of busking, the excess-value of the busker’s performance (Conley: “They [the passersby] don’t owe me anything.”) shows it to be a Gift that is at once localized in its temporal and spatial specificities—it is fundamentally

linked to the conditions of its enactment—and, by virtue of its “excess-value,” capacitates new, expanded trajectories of encounter and exchange.

As researcher, I was invariably implicated in the social-material circulations of metro busking: not only in the more obvious sense of the influence of my presence, on the scenes I observed (particularly in terms of the effects of the camera), and my direct interactions with performers (including, in some cases, sharing what I had learned about metro busking), nor simply because of the busking sessions I undertook so as to better reflect on busking as embodied practice—although those are all partial, and important, reasons in themselves. Rather, the unexpected outcome of my use of audio-visual recording opened up new channels of exchange, proposed different lines of inquiry, suggested new trajectories of social and material circulation.

### **Participation, Materiality, and Audio-Visual Ethnography**

Participant involvement in this research ranged from short casual conversations to more in-depth discussions. This process—the “collecting” of stories—may be seen as participatory in that (aside from the obvious: that certain comments prompted further questions from me), when asked by participants, I shared what overall insights about the metro busking scene (if one can call it that) I had gained from others. This information might then inform their own practices. Participants queried me occasionally about conditions at other spots (e.g. how well used) and especially about aspects of their own performances, as they cannot normally know how they appear, or sound, to passersby. My position as researcher may have been most beneficial, as it were, in this respect. When asked, I told them what I could from my direct observations. More importantly, perhaps, I gave participants copies of the better takes of the audio and video recordings I made (due to my inexperience, a great deal of the video footage was of poor quality)<sup>8</sup>. A dozen buskers generously allowed me to film and record them. I asked them to perform as they normally would, as much as possible as though I were not there. I hoped to capture as much of their performance habits and style as I could. The presence of the

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<sup>8</sup> Audio and video files and a few still photos were sent to participants via WeTransfer, a free web-based file sharing service. These were mostly unedited “raw” files; the additional audio takes were not integrated into the video files. In some cases, I also sent participants this separate “cleaner” audio track as well as the video, with the camera’s audio only (see Chapter 1 for more detail on equipment and types of recordings made).

camera, however, “radically alters the fundamental relational and epistemological conditions of the fieldwork” (Møhl 2011, 228). The filmic record that remains is not a perspective on the world but a perspective on the world-as-it-was-filmed. This does not suggest a lack of utility of audio-visual research technologies anymore than the limits to what one can do with writing would invalidate the ethnographic enterprise. It does emphasize the positionality of the research, that any perspective is always partial and all forms of knowledge production are socio-historically and materially situated (Haraway 1998).

In most cases, participants did seem to ignore the camera (and were very patient, and forgiving of my intrusions when I moved in for close-ups) and it is doubtful that they substantially altered their performances due to my presence. Where I noticed a change, this was more a matter of performing in relation to/attentive of the camera—e.g. deliberate positioning—or musical choices. One participant was decidedly unenthusiastic about being filmed, though not opposed to it. He was concerned that passersby, not wanting to go into the shot, would not give him money while the camera was going. Conversely, a few participants felt that the presence of the camera helped their performance, that the extra attention gave them a boost. It may also have prompted passersby to focus more attention on the performer. Buskers are often extremely aware of what is going on around them, but the ability to ignore surrounding distractions and focus on the performance is an important ability for buskers. The buskers I filmed were very cooperative and generally very appreciate to receive video recordings of themselves.

### **Participants**

The input of participants on the videography was varied and uneven, and except as noted below, they had limited direct influence of this aspect of the research. Most seemed content to leave it entirely to me, which presented me with something of a dilemma. I wanted to show them in the best light possible—I am grateful for their participation, and I know the sense of vulnerability of allowing oneself to be filmed *and* consenting to the public release of some of that footage. Above all, I wanted to honour the wishes of all participants. Although they had consented in a signed form to allow me to use the footage, I assured them all that I would clear with them any footage I wanted to release publicly (this created a considerable time-delay, as some participants took many weeks, even months, to reply to

my emails on the matter of public release). While the participatory relationship in this aspect of my research involved multiple agents—human and material (more on this point below)—it was not a fully collaborative process. I remained, for the most part, in control of the production and final outcomes, yet it can still be seen as a “production of shared knowledge” (Hikiji 2010, 331). It was mutually informative and co-productive, to a degree. Video and audio were recorded by me, from my perspective, and I remained the sole editor, in the post-field production phase. Comments and requests from busker-participants did have some influence on the video production, and the individual performances, with their own particularities, coloured my aesthetic sense for the videos, but for the most part they had little if any impact on how shots were framed, length of takes, etc. However, in two instances, specific requests from participants did dramatically alter my approach with the video.

Several weeks into my fieldwork, after I had begun filming participants, Rodrigo Simões asked me to film him playing a particular song. His pre-recorded accompaniment track was, in this case, made by himself and a friend, in his native São Paulo. I agreed, and he was quite excited by the idea that his friend would be able to hear, and see, him playing the song they worked on together.<sup>9</sup> I had not been interested, at the outset of this research, in simply making short videos of individual performers, but I was pleased to be able to give something in return for his participation. This was one of the first indications of the unforeseen trajectories that might be opened up by my use of video. It also prompted me think more closely about the filming process, about the audience for the audio-visual work I hoped to produce, and what form this might take. Several weeks later, at Guy-Concordia station, Conley asked if I would film her playing a song she had just written. She hoped to use the footage to produce a music video of the song (possibly as a collaborative co-production with me) that she would post on YouTube. However, due to complications with sharing the audio and video files, the different editing software we were each using, and problems with the raw files (the audio: a constant low-pitch rumbling from the metro ventilation system, plus the comings and goings of commuters and trains—the video: mainly due to my inexperience as a videographer), she never did use the footage I shot.

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<sup>9</sup> The video of Rodrigo Simões that I produced can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/190933981>. Accessed April 6, 2017.

She did, some months later, produce and release her own video of the song. In the meantime, I produced a video from my footage.<sup>10</sup> This was one of the few times that I filmed a busker playing an entire song, without cuts. For the most part, I shot short sequences of a few of minutes or less, and often cut during the piece or simply left the camera running while I moved around to reframe the shot, and capture the surrounding space. The result was a lot of footage of uneven quality: at times shaky, out of focus, or poorly framed. This had consequences for how I engaged with the video in the editing phase. The challenges that I experienced in the video aspect of this research (filming and editing) made evident to me the participatory role of the materials and the technological processes that I worked with.

### **Montage and Material Agency**

At the outset of this research, my intention had been to produce less of a straight-forward ethnographic documentary film than a more experimental, impressionistic work, influenced by an anthropological engagement with experimental film (Schneider 2011). This approach understands the ethnographer as researcher-creator (Boudreault-Fournier & Wees 2017), and the camera not as an objective recording device but “as an instrument of personal exploration and interrogation of the world” (Carta 2015, n.p.), suggesting an inherent creative potential to audio-visual production, as ethnographic method (Pink 2009). This is more than just “another way of mediating already acquired knowledge; it [is] a completely different way of experiencing.” (Møhl 2011, 228).

Although digital film in the field affords creative possibilities unavailable to analog film (Nicoletti 2014, 166), the greater part of the creative work took place post-fieldwork, while reviewing the audio and video files and then assembling various sequences (which may or may not bear a direct, or obvious relationship to each other) into a finished work. Drawing on the “disruptive power of montage” (Willerslev & Suhr 2013, 5), I aimed to represent a sense of the experiences of metro busker. Toward this end, when filming, I was concerned less with capturing “a performance”, much less a single entire song by a

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<sup>10</sup> Conley posted a video of her song “Austin” on her Facebook page, in autumn 2016. As of April 7, 2017, it no longer appears there, nor is it among the videos on her YouTube channel (IAmConley). I have been unable to ascertain why. The video that I produced can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/191687437>. Accessed April 6, 2017.

musician. Instead I took shots from numerous angles, close up (hands on an instrument, a foot tapping in time with the music), medium shots (variously framing the busker in the immediate space), and longer shots, so as to indicate the wider spatial relations. I moved around during shots, and focused as much, at times, on surrounding details (e.g. the feet of commuters streaming past) as on the body of the performer. With camera and body, I explored, probed, recording spaces and performances, which in turn were shaped by and shaped my partial perspective.

While I did end up producing a dozen short videos of individual buskers (in two cases, musical duos)—what might be thought of as more pedestrian forms of video production—I was nonetheless influenced by productive interface between experimental film and anthropology (Pasqualino & Schneider 2014). It was several months before I completed the videos of Rodrigo and Conley. I did, however, while still conducting fieldwork, spend some time putting together a few video “sketches,” one of which I later posted online.<sup>11</sup> In experimenting with the footage, I was guided by a montage approach, whereby the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate elements make visible aspects of time, space, social processes, and human experience that normally go unseen (Willerslev & Suhr 2013). The elements that are “thrown together,” that inhabit the two sides of the cut may be whole images or specific image qualities (such as colours, forms, or actual objects). They may also be acoustic features, suggesting additional creative possibilities in musically-centered digital audio-visual production (Boudreault-Fournier 2016). My previous familiarity with sound production (non-professional, but a product of many years of periodically working with sound) provided me with a basic understanding of digital editing. It also served me well when trying to “clean up” the sound on many of the recordings. Montage techniques can rely on analogy and similarity to suggest what is present but hidden (Stoller 1992) but can also, by stitching together images that may startle and shock by their seeming incommensurability, produce new meanings, new creative possibilities (Gardiner 2010, 36). However, as I worked with the recordings I had made, I found that much of the footage, or sections of longer takes, were unusable because they were out of focus, shaky or poorly framed, and, there were sequences that were fine in

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<sup>11</sup> The videos are listed in Appendix B. The short “sketch” can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/187751460>. Accessed April 6, 2017.

those respects but made passersby clearly identifiable. I had hoped to avoid using shots in which people other than participants might be recognized. This proved to be nearly impossible and in the final videos, although I avoided making faces clearly visible, there are many individuals who might be identified by themselves or those known to them. Even though within a public space it is generally understood that one cannot presume to maintain anonymity, it was important to me that no passerby be clearly identifiable in the video footage I would release publicly. This, combined with the uneven quality of my footage created a lot of challenges, as I worked to produce the twelve short videos of metro buskers. For, even though I had not anticipated making individual videos of the participants, after I finished the ones for Rodrigo Simões and Conley, I decided to make a couple more—in part so as to work through more of the material, and further my editing skills through practice, and in part as a challenge to myself, to see what I might be able to produce. By the time I had over half of them completed, I came to see that the amount of material and lack of overall working plan of what I would do with it, would likely have been overwhelming. As it is, guided first by participant input, then by the possibilities and constraints of the materials and media, I produced what in fact is likely a more useful output, from the perspective of the participants and of a possible viewing public. Reflecting on the various levels of collaborative input in this process, I came to see how the intentions and desires of these other participants—human and non-human—guided the outcome nearly as much as my own calculations and objectives did.

Certainly, the primary focus was on the performers themselves, but the process of filming and of editing also brought into view the materiality of the performance and of the filmic process. Just as the camera fosters a “close personal relationship with subjects” (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, 6), it entails one also with objects. In filming, I paid conscious attention to the architecture of the spaces, including the actual building materials and the objects and materials used by buskers in their performance—the “thingness” of busking. These include musical instruments, amplification and accompaniment play-back equipment, the hat/case set out for donations, as well as small seemingly incidental objects that are nonetheless constituents of the materiality of busking: a plastic water bottle, a set list (performance sequence of song) on a scrap of paper, a broken guitar string or worn-out batteries lying on the floor. My use of digital recording devices fostered an engagement

and exploration that was visual, and, importantly, acoustic. The original draw of studying metro buskers, for me, was in part as an expansion on my previous interest in the acoustic experience of everyday spaces (Boudreault-Fournier & Wees 2017). Since most buskers are musicians, I attended to the sonic qualities of the performance spaces. As discussed in the previous chapter, some, but certainly not all, metro buskers are very aware of the acoustic challenges of playing in the metro (e.g. the noise of trains, public address systems, escalators, ventilation and other machinery; noisy crowds of commuters; excessively reverberant spaces; etc.). I too, in the audio recordings I made—and especially in the editing phase—had to work with and around these challenges.

### **Videography as Performance**

Just as the camera can promote a visual intimacy with the scenes being filmed, a fundamental feature of sound recording and composition is intensive listening, both directly with the ears and via the microphone (which alters listening/hearing), a process that engages both creator and listener directly in an environment (Westerkamp 2002). Sound composition, both as a process and a finished work, can tie the experience of sound back to the environment and foster an increased spatial awareness (Labelle 2011). Technologies plays a significant role in the perception of the acoustic environment—both in recording, but also the material participation of architecture, infrastructures, etc.—and consequently in the subsequent practice of composition (Truax 2012). The goal can be less about a finished product than about close listening and a heightened awareness of creative potentials (Freeman, Disalvo, Nitsche & Garrett 2011). Similarly, the soundwalk—an activity at the confluence of two active practices (walking and listening)—can be used to promote a direct engagement with the urban environment (Paquette & McCartney 2012). Listening to an environment through a microphone is a focused listening that is no more partial than simply listening with one's ears. For, in fact, we hear with our entire bodies, and every body has its particularities. Bones conduct sound waves (obviously true for the tiny bones of the inner ear, but also true of many other of our bones); the chest cavity can act as an acoustic diaphragm; and, the head, shoulders, and chest all cause sound reflections and shadowing, affecting what we hear with our ears (Rumsey & McCormick 2009). Likewise, the acoustic perception of a space is always singular—it involves the sensorial apparatus of an individual, the particularities

of the space and the presence and sonic participation of other sensing beings. Furthermore, the capacities and uses of digital technologies alter our perception of and engagement with our surroundings, “dramatically chang[ing] the life of the senses” (Howes & Classen 2014, 92).

This sort of sensory-technological relationship with space and others—an engagement with and through lens and microphone, cables and recording devices—suggests parallels between the busker and the ethnographic videographer: both can be understood as performances. The busker participates in the everyday social and material life of the metro with body and instrument, informed by particular spaces and iteratively (re)performing them. Similarly, I did the same but with camera and microphone instead of a musical instrument. In both cases, the performance underscores the inter-relations of body and technology, self and space, and self and others, and presupposes performance as a form of embodied knowledge (Brashier 2013). The busker’s practice unfolds within existing social norms while simultaneously expressing individual life courses including, but not limited, to musical training. The ethnographic videographer draws upon academic and technical training (which, as for the busker, may be extensive or quite limited)—suggesting that both busker and videographer are situated practices, unfolding within existing ways of knowing and doing while also delineating their own subjectively embodied positions (Van Wolputte 2004). Further, both center on the performance as Gift. The Gift-exchange of the busker may entail material rewards, but is also about social encounter and the desire for recognition. While the possibilities for financial gain for the ethnographic videographer are limited indeed, less tangible rewards may accrue in the form of academic recognition and increased social capital. Finally, both busking and filmic immersion in a scene—a social and physical setting—foster an intimate, sensorial engaged experience of space, people and things. Taking dialogic art as site, means, and product of a constructed moment of engagement, Calzadilla and Marcus (2006) argue that such an encounter can result in an “othering of the self” (103)—a blurring of the lines between self and other, and self and space. This emplacement of “sensory space [within] social space” (Lefebvre 1991, 210), situates the self as a localized reflexive subject, constructed in relation to other sensing subjects (Merleau-Ponty 2012). The Gift-performance of both busker and ethnographic videographer, as the actions of liminal

urban performers, generate new social and material circulations that may “open up new fields of possibility” (Sansi 2015, 94), new trajectories of becoming.

### **Underground Assemblages and Expanded Trajectories**

An important aspect of much experimental film is its reflexivity—an acknowledgement of its own (partial) perspective and the artifice of filmic representation (Schneider 2011). This view coincides with a reflexive sensorially engaged anthropology. Rather than shy away from the implied subjectivity of such an approach, I recognize the productive contributions to anthropological knowledge of arts-based ethnography (Clifford 1981) that is both critical and creative and embraces experimentation (Marcus 2013a). This approach assumes the centrality of the sensing, knowing person, and the potential (always partial) for mutual intelligibility between various persons. One of the strengths of film, as a form of engagement and representation, is the phenomenological bodily-recognition of self in others: film, as time-bound moving image, “replicate[s]... the dynamic perceptual and expressive processes... of individuals as conscious, embodied agents” (Yacavone 2016, 164). Reflecting seriously on the technological mean of engagement and representation, and on the phenomenological basis that we recognize something of ourselves in others (Merleau-Ponty 2012), promotes “an observational sensitivity [that] brings the anthropologist closer to certain kinds of contemporary artists by virtue of a shared interest in the being of others in the world” (Grsimshaw & Ravetz 2009, 161). Thus, viewing a film (and perhaps to a somewhat lesser degree, listening to a recording) is participatory in nature.

Just as I had not anticipated the direction that the audio-visual components of this research would take, in terms of the impact of Conley’s and Rodrigo Simões’ requests, I had also not foreseen how the actual digital recordings (especially the visual) would emerge as participants in the video production. I had, from the outset, considered the acoustic participation (Masson 2009) of material features of the busking spots (noise, reverberation, sonic qualities in terms of a buskers’ placement, etc.). I was also conscious of how the spatial practices of performers and commuters are informed by architecture as much by formal regulations and tacit social norms. What I had not predicted was the participation of *things* in the outcome of the audio-visual work, including the footage that I had (much of it of inferior quality) and the editing software I used. As with any

technology of knowledge production, these have their own inherent affordances and constraints, as does the sharing and distribution of digital materials online.

Once I had produced a finished video clip of one of the participants, I asked them to preview it, so they could make comments or suggestions for changes, and give me clearance to post it online. There were no real criticisms, and only a few very minor suggestions. In constructing the videos, I focused on the performers themselves. By selective use of fills shots, shots of buskers framed so as to accentuate their emplacement, their spatial practices and relation toward passersby, and the material features of busking and of the metro, I attempted to convey not just the performance, but to show it to be a relational process that binds together many people, activities, and things. I deliberately sought to emphasize that a defining feature of the metro is movement, with shots of moving trains, moving bodies, and the movements of the camera/observer. The challenge caused by the subpar quality of much of the footage meant that there were times, while editing, that I struggled to find a usable fill sequence and, at times, spent many working hours on a single cut. On some occasions, embracing a surrealist-inspired approach to art-making that recognizes the creative potential of the unplanned and the accidental (Grant 2005), I simply dropped a section of a shot into the cut, just to see what it would produce. More than a few times, I was surprised and pleased with the results, often finding unexpected visual correlations across the cut. In the video of Lalo Orozco, however, I deliberately played with the spatial sense in the audio, so that when it cuts from a longer, full-body shot of Lalo, to a close-up, the audio also shifts in close (from a separate take, in fact), losing the heavy reverberation of the wide shot. But, while the camera lingers up close, tightly framed on Lalo's instrument and hand, the sound shifts back out to the reverberant take from farther back, creating a momentary visual/sonic disjunction intended to draw attention to the spatial characteristics of that spot. For the most part, however, I treated the audio mainly for clarity, and where I stitched audio cuts together (in several of the videos), I tried to not make this evident (see Appendix B for detail of the individual videos). In producing these videos, my intention was not so much to create an ethnographic "text" that might attempt to provide a direct understanding of metro buskers; certainly I did not at any time aim for a didactic presentation. Instead, I have been more interested in providing a sensorially engaged glimpse of metro buskers. The

aesthetic framing of the videos is a product of the people, spaces, and sounds depicted; of my own personal choices and style of working, in both the filming and editing stages; the constraints and openings posed by camera, editing software, and online distribution; and, the pervasive influence of the music video style institutionalized by MTV.

Once posted online, these videos may be said to assume lives of their own, travelling along new trajectories, via the internet, engendering new sensory experiences and moments of sociality, by being viewed and shared beyond my knowledge or control. Some of the videos have been viewed less than a dozen times (as of April 10, 2017). One of them had over a hundred views, a day after being posted, and a couple of them have been reposted elsewhere online. I do not presume to have produced anything of substantial quality (aesthetic or otherwise) but I know that for many of the participants, this was one of the first times they had been able to view video of themselves performing in the metro. This, I believe, is the most important gift that I have given them. Like the busker's Gift, the series of videos, as I ended up producing them, was unanticipated (on my part), unasked for (by the participants), and superfluous, unnecessary—unnecessary in the sense that this research could have been carried out without the use of video, though it would have been a different (and less rich) research project; unnecessary in the sense had I didn't need to follow those initial suggestions—from buskers, from the processes and materials involved in the filming and editing—that culminated in the series of videos. Yet, in these ways, it can be compared to the excess-Gift of the busker. Both are subjectively produced, socially and materially mediated, and suggest forms of expanded trajectories that are tied to the lived experiences of metro buskers while opening up new circulatory routes of exchange and encounter. These openings may be of a different nature than the context within which they were conceived and produced (and from which they dislodge themselves, to some degree), yet they invariably bear the traces of their antecedents, the imprint of the processes and agents that lead to their production and dissemination. In this, the videos, while potentially following new trajectories of their own, nonetheless maintain ties to their coming-into-being—keep open the pathways they have travelled—while initiating new possibilities. This suggests that such pathways exist within the temporal and spatial bounds of their production and dissemination, and

may simultaneously produce novel forms of encounter and Gift-performance, new routes of social and material circulation, ever expanding trajectories of becoming.



**Illustration 18 - Ascending to the surface: commuters at Montmorency station.**

During the evening rush-hour, commuters stream to the surface, to disperse along their own lines, to follow their own trajectories.

## Conclusion: Assemblages and Trajectories

In this thesis, I have explored the practices, perceptions, and self-conceptions of buskers (“street” performers) in the underground stations and connecting passageways of the Montreal metro. The questions at the core of this research have been: What does it “mean” to be a metro busker, from the perspective of the performers themselves? What are the social and sensorial experiences of the performers, and how do these figure into their relations with passersby and with the performance spaces? What are practices—musical, spatial, social—through which buskers make themselves manifest? And, what are the potential social engagements and exchanges that buskers may capacitate? In examining these questions, I have addressed the question of “What is a busker?” and demonstrated that, rather than thinking of the busker as a professional, a member of a community, or simply an identity, the metro busker is an assemblage-event that can only be located in the particularities of its enactment. I have explored the trajectories of social and material circulation that metro buskers precipitate, and postulated that the production of a series of busker videos, in this research, constitutes a Gift-event in its own right, that may open up new trajectories of circulation.

I understand any lived experience to be multi-dimensional in source, scope and site: sense perception and subjective introspection, social conventions and regulatory regimes, objects and materials, bodies and practices flow into each other, unfold in multiple spaces and times. This poses challenges for the ethnographic writer. How to deal singly, and in detail, with themes, concepts, experiences that are entirely bound up with each other? How to separate individual sensorial and affective experiences from the social and material conditions within which they unfold? How to draw boundaries between perception and self-conception? How to disentangle actions and events from the objects and spaces that enable them—and that they produce? In the case of metro buskers, I saw that motivations and practices, subjective impressions and social relations, busking spots and busker bodies, performance and public, were inexorably entwined. Yet, for the clarity of argument, to simply make sense of the mass of detail I had accumulated during fieldwork, it was necessary to impose an organizational structure, and treat certain features and themes separately, in turn. I summarize here the main points

of each chapter, and in the process establish the basis for my broader argument. I then condense these main points into the building blocks for my principal claims, and summarize the overarching argument of this thesis. Finally, I consider the implications for further inquiry and suggest new openings that this research generates.

### **Summing Up**

I opened this work by introducing my topic—the perceptions and experiences of metro buskers—and outlined the scope and structure of this thesis. In doing so, I discussed the concept of trajectories, and how I have employed it to describe the physical routes taken through the metro, as well to signify the processes of social and material circulation that enable metro busking and that, conversely, are initiated by the busker performance. I provided a review of relevant literature—on busking, but also on creativity and street performance, subjectivity and embodiment, and the nature of, and relations between, body and social space. I showed there to be a dearth of anthropological research on busking and buskers, and raised the problem of categorizing busking as a profession, identity, or community of practice. I detailed the theoretical framing of this research, and showed how a sense-based approach informed my fieldwork. Chapter 1 continued with the details of my research methods, which included extended observations, informal conversations and semi-structure interview, and the use of audio-visual recording equipment. I again noted the phenomenological basis of my approach and discussed the sensory-orientation of my fieldwork. Finally, I began constructing an image of the underground world of the metro and showed how it is related to the rest of the city above ground.

In Chapter 2, I introduced the metro busker by locating this urban performer within the designated performance spaces of the Montreal metro. I first examined buskers' motives for performing in the metro, including why they choose certain sites. I addressed the question of busker identity, and discussed the problems with trying to categorize the busker as a profession or member of a community. As I demonstrated in that chapter, the very different motivations for performing in the metro unsettle attempts to define busking as a profession. These motivations include practicing an instrument, or new musical pieces; gaining confidence at playing in public; making new contacts and advancing a musical career; contributing something pleasant to public space, and the

returned pleasure this entails; and, earning money. Significantly, there are those buskers—a minority, to be sure—for whom making money is not a consideration. This too, disrupts labeling busking as a profession. Nonetheless, while earnings are a central consideration for most buskers, the sense of giving, and of the social exchange this may engender, is an even more pervasive motivation for performing in the metro. What busking “means”, for the performers, is shown to be highly variable and tied to the particularities of their own individual practices and trajectories. A final few examples—of busking as forms of preaching and praying—further unsettled notions of busker identity.

Chapter 3 considered the different practices that buskers engage in, and how these relate to the spatial and regulatory features of the metro. I demonstrated that as much as the spots – as the designated performance sites are called – are produced by the architectural characteristics of specific locations and the regulatory apparatuses of the transit authority, they are also performed, brought into being, by the busking-act. I discussed the various tactics that performers use to secure spots. I detailed how their spatial practices involve objects such as musical instruments and the hat or case used for donations, and how they deploy these in relation to the surrounding space and the movement of passersby. I considered the ways that some performers consciously adapt their performance to the particularities of the different busking spots—with particular attention paid to acoustic characteristics of the spots. I then dealt with buskers’ musical repertoires and the use, by some performers, of amplification and accompaniment technologies. Finally, in grounding busking, as a set of practices, firmly in the subjective embodied experiences of the performer, I illustrated how individual busker bodies have, and produce, differing relations with space, passersby, and each other. The closing pages of that chapter showed that the busker can be understood as assemblage-event, caught up in, and giving voice to, the dispersed agency of multiple participants.

In Chapter 4, I expanded on themes that emerged in the previous chapters—specifically, the micro-social exchanges that buskers may provoke and the material relations and objects that are complicit in fostering such improvised moments of encounter. These may be small moments, small spaces of encounter, but it is in the small that the details large may be found (Bachelard 1994, 150); it is in the micro-processes of

the everyday that are to be found insights into the nature of creativity, of social encounter, and of subjective experience. I have shown how, in the particularities of person and performance, buskers may precipitate such moments. Crucially, I have also shown that such encounters are in no way inevitable. Indeed, I have demonstrated that the metro busker is in a marginal position, easily relegated to the background by passersby. I have also shown that not all exchanges between buskers and others in the metro are amicable, and that, though rare, outright conflicts do occur. Nonetheless, for most buskers, there is a strong sense of giving to, and of participating in, the social life of the metro. I then considered busking as a form of Gift, and showed the Gift-performance of the busker as being one that may enable new circulations of exchange, new forms of Gift. In the Gift-performance of busking, I found parallels in the videography aspect of this research. I detailed how the course of this audio-visual production was transformed by the unforeseen influences of diverse participants—buskers, but also the material conditions of the video work, itself. Finally, in discussing the series of busker videos that came out of this research, I proposed a notion of “expanded trajectory” that links performer and space, researcher and participant, and enables new acts of encounter and exchange, new forms of Gift-event.

### **Putting it All Together**

From the preceding summary of this thesis, I distill these main points from each chapter, so as substantiate my broader claims:

- Chapter 1: (1) Applying strict definitions or typological analyses to busking fails to grasp the variability of motivations for, and meanings attributed to, busking by those who perform in the metro. (2) To best understand busking experiences, it is necessary to adopt a sense-based research methodology.
- Chapter 2: (1) Montreal metro buskers have multiple, and extremely varied motivations for performing where and as they do, the details of which are linked as much the specific characteristics of the spots as to their own personal tactics and reasonings. (2) These motivations are largely inseparable from what busking “means,” for the performers—that is, how they conceive of busking, as a practice, and what significance they derive from this.

- Chapter 3: (1) Busking can only be apprehended in the particular details of the living performance; it is time-bound and productive of and produced by, the spaces and practices of its enactment. (2) The busking performance is not a contained act, but an assemblage-event that links subjective sensory and affective experiences, social conventions, legal regulations, material objects and physical infrastructure, performers and public, and the wider spaces of the metro, and the city beyond.
- Chapter 4: (1) Buskers can provoke moments of improvised social encounter that momentarily reconfigure the spaces of the metro from functional infrastructure to encounter events, and these may then engender further trajectories of social and material circulation. (2) Busking is a form of Gift-performance, of which parallels may be found in ethnographic videography. (3) The outcome of the audio-visual production in this research was redirected by the active influences of busker-participants *and* of the material conditions and processes of filming, editing, and online distribution. (4) The busker videos themselves suggest new trajectories of circulation, of encounter, of Gift.

Thus, from the foregoing, it is evident that the heterogeneity of buskers' motivations and self-perceptions, the multiple practices (musical, spatial, etc.) that buskers engage in, and the material participation of technologies and infrastructures—that is, the disparate elements that enable the act of *being busker*—cannot be contained in narrow definitions that relegate the busker to a profession, member of a community, or simply an identity. Therefore, I have argued that the busker is best conceived of as an assemblage-act at the convergence of multiple lines of urban flow, that can only be apprehended in the specificities of its enactment. This “busking-as-assemblage” may then redirect existing trajectories of social and material circulation while also engendering new trajectories, new moments of encounter and exchange. Finally, I have suggested that the series of busker videos that I produced in the context of this research exposes the collaborative influences of research participants and of the material conditions of the video production, and opens up new circuits of circulation, new expanded trajectories of becoming.

## Final Thoughts

In sum, this thesis is not only about the lived experiences of Montreal metro buskers, nor just about how arts practices within contemporary urban settings can enable individuals to inhabit and redefine everyday spaces in novel ways (and be productive venues for anthropological inquiry), but also about the question of what makes things *stick* (Barber 2007), what makes things *hold*? I have proposed a conception of the busker-as-assemblage: a performing self that encompasses varied motivations and self-conceptions, wide-ranging and ill-defined sets of practices, the effects of the performance spaces and of other users of those spaces, etc., all centered on and flowing through the embodied subjectivity of the busker. While such a definition may appear unwieldy, this is the cost of taking seriously the participation of the multiple, and highly heterogeneous agentic forces that constitute the lived experiences of metro buskers.

What this research has shown, in addition to the points that I have summarized above, is that there is still a great deal that remains to be examined. For example, one might ask: How do the practices of Montreal metro buskers compare to those of performers on the street? How do they compare to those of buskers in other cities? How have busking practices changed over time—or remained the same? And what of the perspective of the public? How do passersby perceive buskers? A multi-sited, and/or cross-cultural comparison might produce intriguing results. What of the regulation of busking? What about places and times where performing in public spaces is prohibited? In another vein, the ambitious researcher might ask: what is the relation of public performance, more generally, to creativity, to social mores surrounding music, the arts, and public space? While I have briefly touched on some of these questions, they are, by and large, well beyond the scope of this thesis. What I believe I have contributed, with my research, is a strong argument for understanding the metro busker as inseparable from the social and material conditions within which performances take place, that the busker constitutes an assemblage, an event, situated at the convergence of various lines of social and material circulation, that may then redirect these lines of flow, engendering new trajectories of circulation, new possibilities for encounter and exchange and Gift.

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## Appendix A – Map of the Metro System



Map downloaded from: [http://www.stm.info/sites/default/files/pictures/a-plan\\_metro\\_blanc\\_2016.pdf](http://www.stm.info/sites/default/files/pictures/a-plan_metro_blanc_2016.pdf). Accessed April 4, 2017.

## Appendix B – The Videos

Listed here are the videos that I produced in the context of this research, with a few details concerning each. As discussed in the body of this thesis, these videos differ from what I had originally foreseen for the audio-visual production aspect of my research—largely due to the prompting of some busker-participants, as well as the participatory influences of the spaces and conditions of the buskers’ performances, of the recording and editing technologies, and of the images themselves. All the videos were uploaded to my Vimeo page between November 2016 to January 2017. They can all be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/wees> (accessed April 5, 2017), or singly by using the individual web links listed below.

### The “Buskers Underground” videos:

- 1) Rodrigo Simões: “Brasileirinho.” (Song composed by Valdir Azevedo)  
 Rodrigo plays mandolin, with amplification, to a pre-recorded accompaniment track that he produced with a friend of his, in their native Brazil. He asked me to film him playing this song so that he could share it with his friend. Producing this video was my first attempt to “smooth” over the poor quality of some of the footage with fill shots, while also attempting to make it visually interesting with those fills and different angles on the performer. Filmed at Berri-UQAM station, St. Catherine street exit.  
 URL: <https://vimeo.com/190933981>. Accessed April 5, 2017.
  
- 2) Bucket of Change: “St. James Infirmary.” (Traditional/Anonymous composer)  
 These two musicians were among the first that I filmed during my fieldwork, and were very tolerant of my intrusive use of the camera. One of them sings, plays guitar, and keeps the beat with a foot-tambourine and a drum-kick against the wood box he sits on; the second musician plays banjo and sings accompaniment. The biggest challenge when filming this duo was the presence of a man who disrupted their performance on several occasions, to their great chagrin; I had to

stop filming a few times, while these conflicts resolved themselves. Filmed at Berri-UQAM station, St. Catherine street exit.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/190956470>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

- 3) William Navas: “El Condor Pasa.” (Song composed by Daniel Alomía Robles)  
William alternates between a wood recorder and a set of curved bamboo “pan-flutes” (that differ somewhat in structure from the traditional South American siku). He also, briefly, employs a bracelet of shells as a percussive accompaniment. He plays to a pre-recorded accompaniment. The items in his case are made by himself; aside from the CDs, they are more often given than sold. Filmed at the Étoiles du métro spot at Jean-Talon station.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/191113625>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

- 4) Conley: “Austin.” (Song composed by Conley).  
Conley plays steel string acoustic guitar and sings. She uses amplification for her guitar and voice. She wears a headset microphone. Conley was the second musician who asked me to film her playing a specific song. She had recently finished composing this piece, and wanted to use some of the footage I shot to produce her own video; however, she ended up not using this footage. Filmed at Guy-Concordia station.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/191687437>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

- 5) FX: “Exil sur planète fantôme.” (Song composed by Hubert-Félix Thiéfaine)  
FX plays steel-string acoustic guitar and sings. He uses amplification for his guitar and voice; his microphone is mounted on a stand. He typically plays a mix of cover songs and his own compositions. Filmed at the Étoiles du métro spot at Place-des-Arts station.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/197545990>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

- 6) Alexandra: “Jerusalem Ridge.” (Song composed by Bill Monroe).

Alexandra plays folk music on the fiddle. Though her training, and studies at the time of this research, are in Acadian and Québécois fiddle music, here she plays a piece by American bluegrass great Bill Monroe. Filmed at the freelance spot at Place-des-Arts station.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/197585231>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

7) Lalo Orozco: “Si Dieu existe.” (Song by Claude Dubois).

Lalo sings and plays the jarana, a traditional instrument of his native Veracruz state, in Mexico. Lalo sings songs in Spanish, French and sometimes in English. Here, he plays a song by a Québécois singer-songwriter; I see this a wonderful example of the cultural interface at which many buskers operate. Of note, is the booming reverberation of this particular corridor. In the close-up shots of Lalo, the audio track also “moves in” closer, becoming more intimate; this sonic feature is then further highlighted by some deliberate mismatching between soundtrack and image, in terms of the proximity/reverberation. Filmed at the Yellow Line spot, at the lowest level of Berri-UQAM station.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/197644517>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

8) Alexander Shattler: Popping in the metro. (Soundtrack: various artists).

Alexander was the only non-musician busker in this research. He performs a style of street dance known as “popping.” This video contains several sequences of him dancing. The soundtrack is a mix of some of the music that he dances to; it plays from the amplification speaker Alexander has placed against the wall. Filmed at Guy-Concordia station.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/198007319>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

9) Coralie: “La valse du printemps égaré.” (Song composed by Élisabeth Vellia).

Coralie plays a Celtic harp. She uses amplification. Although she sits on a cloth spread on the floor in this video, she usually sits on a small folding stool when busking. This footage was shot during “The Wind” event described at the end of

Chapter 3 of this thesis (page 89ff). Filmed at Berri-UQAM station, St. Catherine street exit.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/198014006>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

- 10) Raymi: “Mamita.” (Song composed by the Bolivian musical group Kalamarka). Oscar and Ramiro Ledezma are Bolivian brothers who play a variety of instruments. Here, Ramiro play a nylon-string guitar (his instrument is, in fact, a composite of a guitar and an Andean charango), and also plays a set of Andean pan flutes, know as the siku (or, variously, zampona). He wears shell anklets that he uses for percussive accompaniment. Oscar plays the harp and, like his brother, also has a siku on a neck-worn mount, which he uses for some occasional accompaniment. This video is of an excerpt of a much longer rendition of this piece. Filmed at the freelance spot at Jean-Talon station.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/200695341>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

- 11) Effem: “Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough.” (Song composed by Michael Jackson). Effem plays a steel-string acoustic guitar, with amplification. He plays instrumental pieces only, with extensive improvised ornamentations. Filmed at Berri-UQAM station, St. Catherine street exit.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/201073459>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

- 12) Joseph Fox: "Super Mario Bros. Overworld Theme." (Song composed by Koji Kondo)

Joseph plays the steelpans, a traditional Trinidadian instrument—his main instrument for his Master’s degree in percussion. This video is of an excerpt of a longer rendition of the piece. Filmed at Guy-Concordia station.

URL: <https://vimeo.com/202567140>. Accessed April 5, 2017.

The video sketch that I produced (and uploaded to my Vimeo page) in August 2016, using footage of Bucket of Change, Alexander Shattler, and Raymi, can be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/187751460>. Accessed April 5, 2017.