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The Public and the Personal: Mapping the NYC Subway System as an Urban Memoryscape

by

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Introduction

In “Axioms for Reading the Landscape” American cultural geographer Peirce Lewis describes human landscape as “unwitting autobiography…. liable to be more truthful than most autobiographies because we are less self-conscious about how we describe ourselves.”¹ In this pivotal essay, Lewis argues that human populations embed cultural meaning in the landscape over time. When an observer pays attention to the built environment they unravel histories of meaning. While Lewis was certainly thinking of the buildings, streets, and cities that make up America and the economic and social legacies they reveal, his words can also be used to describe the sentimental and memorial value individuals attach to everyday objects and infrastructural landscapes. Part of the daily experience of millions of New Yorkers, the New York City subway system is one of these core quotidian structures.²

The everyday use of the subway as a method of transportation from place to place allows it to slowly accrue the “unwitting autobiography” Lewis describes. Both a transport mechanism from place to place and an urban site within itself, the subway is a key point of reference for movement throughout the city. It is in the subway a traveler loses and finds direction. It is in the subway patterns of movement become regularized, the motivations behind where we are going, the journeys we choose to make, beginning to reflect back ourselves. Daily patterns of travel transform the subway ride from chaotic technological marvel into normalized travel ritual. Thus—as with normal daily life—the process of riding the subway becomes one littered with memories and experiences tied to the intricacies of using this

underground world: to its tiled stations, the specific orange color of the plastic seats, or the distinctive screech of the arriving train as it pulls around the bend. On a larger level, the subway metes the vastness of New York City into manageable chunks, regulating the way a user interacts with, perceives, and navigates the city. Individual stations become important urban foci and pressure points of the urban experience. Memories of urban space above become tied to underground subway stations which act as anchors of place, history, and identity.

As a mode of mechanized largely subterranean transport the subway has a unique ability to link these place-based memories in ways distinct from traditional forms of movement. The technological speed of the subway through underground tunnels creates an experience of traveling through time and space both in a collective present and a personal historical past. The transportation structure becomes an urban memoriescape, stringing together subway stations which can act as foci of personal meaning for individuals.

How does the subway become an urban diary? In what ways does it represent, reflect, and evoke changes in users’ own lives and in their understanding of the way in which their city has changed over time? How do urban structures like the subway exert influence on the way we live our lives, move through space, and create and think about place and urban community? In this investigation, I draw on diverse sources including psychology, urban theory, and anthropology. Given that I aim to explore the effect of the exterior world on the interior life of individuals, interviews and art also become key sources of information and data as reflected in the accompanying creative portion of my thesis—

*Routine Descents, Reverberating Routes*. My diverse set of sources reflects my prioritization of lived experience and personal reflection which are not always directly relayed, nor reflected in numbers surrounding subway ridership and external observations of subway use.

On a broad scale this essay hopes to investigate the relationship of the built environment, landscape, and space with memory, individuals, and time, using the subway as a specific example of this interaction. So far collective memory research has largely focused on communal responses to major traumatic events, but not on the daily implication of the everyday spaces in which we move on the
internal worlds of our lives. I argue that urban public space is heavily involved in urbanites’ own conceptions of self identity as we simultaneously live and map our own experiences onto these built environments, intaking and projecting. Simultaneously.

Section 1: Meaning and Memory in the Built Environment

In order to understand the way in which the subway system is implicated in self-identity and processes of remembering it is essential to explore existing notions of the intersection between the built environment, memory, and identity. To begin, I turn to the work of Emma Kiran Lee in her unpublished thesis which explores the interaction between memory and space through dance. Raised in New York City, Lee’s highly self-aware account of her process of remembering affirms the importance of first-hand accounts in an analysis of the intersection between memory and the built environment of the NYC subway. Lee’s thesis begins to fill gaps in theoretical work in memory and cognitive psychology with the substance that can not be substituted: the experience of the individual.

Personal Temporal Spatialities: Most Time and Involuntary Autobiographical Memory

“I am interested in how our experiences are visible, and how they are invisible, how time, memory, and identity changes this visibility. With time, I wonder how we hold certain parts of ourselves and how others claim they’ve seen us change….In this process, in this project, I am interested in exploring the fullness of these moments because they cannot be touched but have always been and will always be.” (Lee, 9; author’s italics)

In Emma Kiran Lee’s unpublished thesis “In Fullness and Most Time: Writing and Moving to What is Lost and Found in Time Suspended,” Lee coins the term “Most Time” as an understanding of time based in memory, space, and bodily experience. Lee defines Most Time as “the world we enter when we are struck by a sound, smell, taste or space, that conjures up a fullness in our memory.”

Lee’s introductory example to Most Time details an instance she consciously marks as evoked by the built environment. “Walking down 10th street,” Lee finds herself “suspended” in a memory of May

Suddenly her journey down the sidewalk becomes a dual experience of living in the past ("a late night...hand holding, small talk, and exchanges of sips from bodega tall boys") and the present ("it is the fall...I am alone"). In the same stretch of physical environment she experiences both starkly different realities. In cognitive psychological terms, the experience Lee describes is called involuntary autobiographical memory. Labeled by cognitive psychologists as a form of mental time travel, involuntary autobiographical memories are defined as remembrances of personal experiences that arise without any pre-conceived conscious attempt at retrieval. Lee’s adjective “most” allows for a comprehension of the fullness of such an experience in which a sense of re-experiencing the remembered event occurs at the time of recall. Lee explains this as a stepping outside of “real time” into a separate world that occurs both as an interruption and as a simultaneous reality.

Lee’s conceptualization of the experience of remembering in Most Time is highly spatial. “I take my small remote and pause my surroundings so that I can crawl into my own memory,” writes Lee, “…Whenever we wanted to, we could pick up the past and crawl inside....We’d do this until we felt like coming back out.” Lee describes Most Time as emerging in “pockets,” as both “a place of great significance” and “nothing at all,” and as a “swallowed space.” Lee is “suspended,” “enveloped” and located inside of nostalgia and memory which she identifies as “spaces” in which she “experience[s] the fullness of Most Time.” Lee’s attempt to represent the experience of Most Time through dance further illuminates her deep connection of the experience with space and movement, such that her inner life might be communicated by way of the choreographed control of time, space, and action. As such, space forms a key part of Lee’s relation to her own memory.
Lee does not only experience memory as a spatial experience, but it is the spaces around her that trigger the process of remembering. Triggers within the built environment voluntarily and involuntarily incite Lee’s spatial experience of memory. In Lee’s first description of Most Time—two years before the completion of her thesis—she identifies a string of places in which she feels she enters into Most Time. The cues or triggers she mentions can be categorized as auditory (“When I listen to the song about field days”), spatial (“When I walk past that stoop,” “when I’m quiet on my fire escape”), active (“when I’m crying and I’m screaming”), and olfactory (“when I smell that smell of New Robbins”).

Despite appealing to numerous senses all of these triggers are based almost exclusively in Lee’s personal place-based experience. Being within certain spaces leads Lee to regularly have specific memories and Most Time experiences. Psychological studies support the notion that memory triggers for experiences like the one Lee describes are often existent features of the external world. Writing about involuntary autobiographical memory, cognitive psychologist Dorthe Bernsten makes a simple claim foundational to the connection between an individual and their environment that Lee describes: “the lives we have lived have left traces and marks in our environment that subsequently serve as cues for our personal memories.”

In the field of urban studies, American journalist and urbanist Grady Clay offers a definition that can be used to complicate an understanding of environmentally-based memory. Throughout the nineteenth century, Clay wrote extensively on the process of reading the cultural landscape in American cities. In his 1973 book Close Up: How to Read the American City, Clay proposes the term “Epitome District” to describe regions of the city particularly rife with symbols that accrue layers of meaning for an individual over time. Clay identifies these regions as special in part because of their memorial capacity—as an individual changes and grows they can return to these urban places that are also changing

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13 Even sensory cues can reveal themselves to actually be linked to place. New Robbins is a student residence at Bard College and therefore this association is definitively tied to place; Ibid. 9.
14 Bernsten, Involuntary Autobiographical Memories, 60.
15 Ibid.
and growing. In revisiting, a city dweller can meaningfully reflect on their own personal change and the changes in the space around them.

Using Clay’s framework, Lee’s cataloging of her triggers can be seen as a kind of autobiographical epitome district. Whether it be a smell of the dorm building New Robbins at Lee’s university, a song, or a specific stoop, these triggers can all be conceptualized as sites to which Lee can return and reliably expect to experience Most Time and reflect on her past. Together these triggers rooted in the built environment allow Lee to engage in the iterative self-reflection that Grady Clay’s notion of epitome districts proposes.

Thus, urban space plays multiple roles in individual memory. For Lee the spatial environment does not only serve as a trigger for the memory, but also a means of experiencing, performing, and understanding the past. Returning to Lee’s opening example of walking down 10th street, her present environment is cold and solitary. It is the encoded traces of a meaningful past in the built environment that transport her into Most Time where she can re-conjure and re-experience the warm 10th street of two years prior replete with sensory information (the smell of spring air, the cool stoop, the sound of her companion, the sips of her drink). The physical space of 10th street is key to the duality that allows Lee to bridge the gap between past and present and thus link who she was in the past with who she is now. As a trigger for memory the built environment of 10th street allows Lee to establish a level of continuity between her past and present self in the continued shared frame of the built environment. Thus 10th street serves as the trigger for Lee’s Most Time experience, the site of the reliving of memory, and the means by which the nostalgia is expressed (as a pocket of memory, as a bodily re-enactment). Space is the trigger, back-drop, and medium of memory expression. Walking down 10th street, Lee experiences her urban context in all three ways.

The Built Environment as Active Participant

\[17\] Ibid.
While attributing power to the individual identity, concepts like Grady Clay’s notion of Epitome District importantly underscore the undeniable role that the shared built environment plays in these highly individualized experiences of memory. Such concepts suggest that an individual does not just invest themselves in their spatial surroundings, but that the built environment plays active roles in identity construction. While the individual may be the agent, the built environment too has agency. Stated more simply: spaces change and define us, not just the other way around.

Contemporary academic and journalist Carlo Rotella provides a compelling example of this in his urban cultural analysis, “Industry, Nature, and Identity in an Iron Footbridge.” Rotella writes extensively about cities and city life, turning an urban historical and anthropological lens on cities including Chicago, Boston, and New Haven with an attention to their embedded cultural landscapes. In a reading of an iron footbridge in New Haven’s East Rock Park, Rotella situates this seemingly innocuous artifact as an important local keystone with which he argues individuals develop relationships that change over time with each meeting.18 In a statement that echoes both Grady Clay and Peirce Lewis, Rotella writes that East Rock Park and the bridge within it “share the assumption that one’s identity does not necessarily stop at the borders of the body but instead extends to landscapes and objects charged with personal and communal meaning.”19 The bridge is not merely a bridge, but accumulates a unique identity for each of the visitors who use it regularly, leaving detritus, and occasional marks of graffiti which Rotella examines and reads as investments in the urban structure. It is not a one way street. Rotella describes an active relationship between the individual and the environment: “the recognition of an intimate bond—a flow of meaning—between subject and object would suggest that the two change one another.”20 Rotella suggests

19 Ibid., 204.
20 Ibid., 209.
that the histories and identities of the environment and the individual are linked and intertwined. The shared built environment is not merely the site of the memory, but an active participant in creating memory and shaping individual identity.

The spaces in which we live shape us. The memories attributed to certain spaces are shaped by those spaces—they occurred here, they ‘took place’ in this place. Thus when places change, we are affected. Turning to a subway example—if a station is redone will it still remind you of what it was before? Will you lose old familiar triggers? Will suddenly the urban history of that place surpass personal memories you have tied to details that are no longer there? How will that affect you and how you feel as you move through that space? Will you feel a sense of loss for what is no longer there? Or will you feel grateful for the repair of a step you always tripped on or a column you never dared lean on because of its flaky paint? A subway station is also not a private space—it is a public one, and the way in which it changes may affect different individuals and their already distinct relationships with it in unique ways.

Conversely, our own identities shape the spaces we inhabit. Equally central to the notion of an epitome district is the idea that as we change, our experience of place may also alter and deepen. Our moods, our frames of mind, our experiences may lead us to experience and reflect on spaces in a new way. This is the why Lee’s experience of 10th street becomes a dual one, colored by her nostalgia for a time past. Thus, the individual is the essential conduit between the encoded built environment and the history evoked by it. Lee’s body and mind link the external world and the internal world of her memory. Her identity is key to understanding the unique union between memory and space that she experiences. Only individual experience and testimony can decipher the personal intricacies of the built environment and one’s relationship to it. One cannot read someone else’s experience nor see someone else’s triggers and experience their memories without their help.

_Dwelling in Urban Space_

Anthropology serves as a valuable tool in exploring the relationship between the individual and the environment proposed by urban studies scholars like Clay and Rotella. In “Walking, Emotion, and

22 “Places of the city are not only spaces of movement but are “fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read...symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 108).” Bendiner-Viani, “Walking, Emotion and Dwelling,” 466.

The spatial experience of the built environment can trigger memory, serve as the site of its enactment, and be part of the physical experience of remembering. Individual identities define and create meaning in the built environment accessible only by way of a testimony of these personal relationships with place. Yet, the built environment does not merely serve as a repository for feelings. Close relationships with place mean that just as an individual affects urban space, so does urban space affect the individual. It is these mutually influential relationships that can ground individuals within a larger urban city. By relying on Clay and Rotella’s idea of intimate relationships to place and Lewis’ and Bendiner-Viani’s notions of cultural landscape, our everyday landscapes can be seen as repositories of amassed experience encoded in the urban everyday. The promise of investigating the built environment is the layering of personal histories encompassed in urban space—and accessed in memory experiences like Most Time.

Section 2: Subway as Memoryscape, “An Archive of Myriad Private Moments”

In *Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York* (1997), anthropological researcher Michael W. Brooks poses the transit system as a key urban synecdoche—an aspect of New York’s built environment that has become emblematic of its whole. Brooks’ book charts public reception of the subway from its conception in the 1860s to the late 1990s as well as its use by famous artists of the century in their work in an attempt to reassert “the centrality of the subway to the New York imagination.” The subway has continually played a key role in the cultural landscape of New York City. The prominence of popular cultural articles focusing not merely on the function of the NYC subway system, but on its many intricacies reflect the continued cultural importance of the urban structure, and pose it as an urban structure strongly present in many individuals’ lives.

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26 Recent Buzzfeed quizzes and articles include: “If You’ve Had Most of These Annoying Subway Experiences, You’re A True New Yorker” (2017) and “Only True New Yorkers Can Score a 7/7 On This
Clay’s theory of the epitome district helps elucidate the way in which the New York city subway brings together sites to which users can return to experience and reflect on their past selves. Clay’s terminology helps frame the subway as a memorial epitome district in the form of an urban transit system, each particularly meaningful subway station potentially serving as a layered symbol for an individual. The intricacy of the layering of memory permits this idea to operate on many levels. One subway stop could in itself also serve as an epitome district with even more specific aspects of the built environment—say the bench on the platform or the always broken turnstile—serving as triggers that motivate the layering of experience rooted in the space of a single station. Thus Clay’s notion of epitome districts helps ground Lee’s experiential definition of remembering within the city by posing urban space and the subway as a spatial constellation of memory triggers.

While places of meaning within the city may vary greatly for urbanites, the subway is an experience common to many daily experiences and serves as a shared space of possibility. Thus it can be seen as an informal shared neighborhood. Extrapolating from Bendiner-Viani’s examination of her own neighborhood and the way in which functional sites like the supermarket came to allow for individuals to inhabit their neighborhood and take ownership of it in different ways, when thinking of the subway the individual experience of this iconic urban space and the individual attributions of meaning be a powerful means of laying claim to a city vast and unknowable in its scope.

Subways and Identities

“Surely it is our own life that we confront in taking the subway, and in more than one way….For our story is itself plural: the itineraries of daily work are not the only ones we held in memory, and the name of this or that station that, for a long time, was for us merely one name among others, a common point in an invariable series, could suddenly acquire a meaning, a symbol of love or misfortune….To every station are tied knots of memories that cannot be untangled, MTA Quiz” (2018). A recent interactive New York Times article entitled “New York’s Subway Map Like You’ve Never Seen It Before” zooms readers through various parts of the subway map citing historical events in various geographic spaces and making the experience of ‘riding the subway’ between these places a narrative of its own; Antonio De Luca and Sasha Portis. “New York’s Subway Map Like You’ve Never Seen It Before.” The New York Times. 12/2/19. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/02/nyregion/nyc-subway-map.html (accessed 12/4/19).
memories of these rare moments, Stendhal used to say, “for which life is worth living.”” (Augé, In the Metro, 9)

As in Bendiner-Viani’s investigation of the neighborhood Prospect Heights, anthropology can serve as a useful tool for examining the intricacies of the relationship of the individual to the surrounding built environment. Yet, anthropological investigations into the New York City subway system’s unique effect on individual identity are relatively rare. In one of the handful of anthropological studies of the New York subway, International Express, ethnographer Stéphane Tonnelat and sociologist William Kornblum investigate the 7 train as a shared experience of immigrant populations in Queens.27 Like Bendiner-Viani, the researchers rely heavily on the walking interview hoping to gain insights into the “mental life of urbanites in a subway city,” yet eliciting mainly perceived social scientific information from their interlocutors instead of personal experiences.28

While specific investigations into the memorial potential of the New York subway system are lacking, an anthropological investigation into the Parisian Metro suggests the shared symbolic potential of urban transport systems in other cities to serve as a memoryscape for inhabitants.29 Published in 1986, In The Metro (originally titled in French Un ethnologue dans le métro) offers an intensely detailed analysis of cultural anthropologist Marc Augé’s internal relationship with the Metro along with that of his fellow Parisians. As a cultural anthropologist Augé is uniquely positioned to self analyze and explain his relationship to the built environment as a Parisian and as a keen observer of human behavior. Augé writes extensively of the interaction of history, memory, and culture in the subway in day-to-day use, as well as

28 A notable exception to this is in a walking interview with an interlocutor named Jack from his home to the train platform. On the platform, the sound of an incoming train prompts Jack to recall a time in which he advised a depressed friend to scream in the station as the train arrived, its roar swallowing up the sound and allowing her much needed release. The association of the platform with this personal memory elicits a vulnerable personal history absent from the rest of Jack’s comments around his neighborhood in the rest of the interview; Tonnelat and Kornblum, International Express, 52.
29 Ibid., 3.; Interestingly enough, Tonnelat and Kornblum conceptualized International Express with the late French anthropologist Isaac Joseph inspired by his extensive work in the Metro in Paris. Although both systems opened around the same time, the Metro in 1900 and the Subway in 1904, there appears to be more anthropological documentation of the Metro.
the systems larger philosophical meaning. The subway is deeply connected to Augé’s vision of his own life and the way in which he interprets it—he is able to understand phases of his past in terms of spatial regions identifying “a Montparnasse period, a Saint-Michel period, and a Bonne-Nouvelle period” corresponding to various regions of the city.30 Indeed Augé ties his own life closely to that of a subway route, emphatically noting the role that the Gare d’Orléans-Austerlitz-Auteuil line has always played in his life perhaps by “the chance of existence (or some secret personal gravity).”31

Though Augé identifies his use of the subway map as “a reminder, a memory machine or a pocket mirror” as a uniquely Parisian privilege, the experience he describes is similar to that of many postmodern New York writers writing non-fiction.32 In a book of essays about the city entitled *The Colossus of New York* (2003), contemporary novelist Colson Whitehead places the subway at the beginning of his process of creating what he identifies as his own personal New York—a version of the city that every New Yorker holds and builds up inside of them in contrast to those of the people around them.33 Novelist Jonathan Lethem similarly situates his local subway station Hoyt-Schermerhorn as a portal into his own understanding of his youth and adolescence in his 2004 essay “Speak Hoyt-Schermerhorn.”34 For Alfred Kazin writing of his Brooklyn childhood in *A Walker in the City* (1951), it is the train line that snakes through Brooklyn to his home, stringing along stops each with their own varied significance, that help him understand who he once was.

In each of these cases, the writers exhibit a deep relationship with the subway based in memory and identity. For Whitehead, the creation of a personal New York reflects Bendiner-Viani’s idea of dwelling and belonging in the city. By relating to the subway, Whitehead situates himself within an urban

30 Augé, *In the Metro*, 10.
31 Ibid., 5.
32 Ibid., 4.
33 Whitehead, *The Colossus of New York*, 5: “I started building my New York on the uptown No. 1 train. My first city memory is of looking out a subway window as the train erupted from the tunnel on the way to 125th street and paled up onto the elevated tracks. It’s the early seventies, so everything is filthy. Which means everything is still filthy, because that is my city and I’m sticking to it.”
metropolis that he knows and that knows him. Lethem and Kazin’s relation of their experience of the transit system to their adolescence also underscores the role the subway plays in shaping their conceptions of their identity and the connection between their past youthful and present adult selves. Augé’s identification with the subway system and map as a continual representation of his own life reflects a claiming of the structure as an emblem of identity, alongside an acknowledgment that his journeys within the system have also in turn shaped the self he feels embedded within its routes. Whether in Paris or New York, these writers and thinkers relate to their local transit system in ways that similarly engage identity, space, and memory.

Indeed, although the specificity of the Parisian and New York subway systems create their own unique complexities between them the subway as a memory space emerges as a common structure. The structural similarity of the underground urban transit systems situate them both as particularly suitable for reflection as a result of intrinsic characteristics. As a structure a subway system is unique in its ability to connect far reaches of the city to each other in a routine methodical traversal of urban space. Within the subway system, a subway car exists as a liminal space where one is often sitting and engaged in non-demanding activities conducive to daydreaming, reflection, and nostalgia all of which can foster involuntary autobiographical memory. One can people-watch, talk, daydream, listen to music, read, be on one’s phone, write, draw—all of which absorb varying levels of an individuals’ attention and require differing levels of awareness of the surrounding environment. Augé puts this succinctly: “Subway riders

35 For example, central to Augé’s interrogation of the Parisian Metro is the system’s attempt to bridge history with present-day Paris by way of Metro stop names that evoke monumental French figures. Augé identifies this as an effort to cultivate and maintain a shared collective memory while questioning whether in truth this creates a “copresence” of history in everyday life or instead makes history itself feel unreal and the names merely names (Augé, In the Metro, 33). An important caveat to this is Rebecca Solnit and Molly Roy’s reimagination City of Women map which draws attention to the patriarchal legacy behind some of what seem to be subway stations named after impartial urban landmarks, drawing attention to the ability of subway stations to act as honorary urban monuments. For example, in the 1 line’s thirty-eight stops, there are thirteen allusions to historical male figures (though technically only twelve stops include male names, Christopher St-Sheridan Sq refers to both the land owner Charles Christopher Amos and General Philip Sheridan). However, all of these allusions take their names from streets adjacent to the stations (Dyckman St, Columbus Circle, Christopher St-Sheridan Sq, Hudson St, Franklin St, Cortland St, and Chambers St) or nearby institutions or public spaces (Van Cortlandt Park, Columbia University, Lincoln Center, 34th Street-Penn Station, Christopher St-Sheridan Sq).
basically handle nothing more than time and space, and are skilled in using the one to measure the other." Given memory’s reliance on both time and space the possibility for nostalgia and memory rooted in the movement through time and space engendered by the subway system relies on a similar skill-set.

Routine Descents

Another key element of subway travel that lends itself to memory is the fact that it occurs largely underground. The subterranean nature of travel means that while the urban land above may change, the underground route can remain almost untouched. While a familiar bus route might evoke memories of past experiences and childhood, the process of riding the bus is likely to have changed drastically. On a bus the space between stations becomes a part of the journey—and the nature of street closures and roadworks means that a route is much more liable to be subject to change over time. The bus-stop’s backdrop are the surrounding restaurants, businesses, and houses that change as neighborhoods alter and develop. However, with the subway, despite major overhaul of the land above, the stations and journeys below can remain relatively static.

The New York City subway, despite a handful of notable technological developments, has remained a relatively constant system. The most recent addition at the writing of this paper was the development of part of the Second Avenue line, first proposed in the 1920s, revived in the 1990s, and finally begun in 2007. The opening of the Second Avenue Subway extension of the Q train in 2017 included the opening of three brand new stations on 72nd, 86th and 96th street and was the largest expansion to the system in over fifty years. The extension was celebrated with appropriate fanfare—in a highly symbolic move the line’s inaugural ride took place on New Year’s Eve and was celebrated in a party attended by local officials, NY Governor Cuomo, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

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36 Augé, In the Metro, 8.
Secretary and the U.S. Department of Transportation Head.\textsuperscript{38} The airy new stations feature large public art installations in a visible attempt to create new associations of safety, cleanliness, and modernity not commonly associated with the system.

Yet, aside from this very notable addition to the system, and the recent creation of the Hudson Yards station on the west side of Manhattan, the majority of stations remain constant landmarks below a built environment that is much more conducive to transformation. As Williamsburg and Bushwick become home to newly found hipsters and rents in the Lower East Side continue to rise, the stations underlying these blocks remain the same—people, businesses, and buildings replaced, yet subway stairs still marking routine descents. (It is important to note that some stations are not resistant to a little interior remodeling—for example in Columbus Circle where within the turnstile new businesses have sprouted, yet as you exit you pass a barbershop that has been there for years).\textsuperscript{39} Thus, the subway becomes a structure semi resistant to the passing of time—indeed this is most often the complaint about its unreliable service: its inability to adapt to the speed and modernization of life in a city. The rate of change on the surface built environment outpaces the changes in the world below.

The subway’s relative constancy is key to its role as a site of personal self-expression and understanding across time. In the system’s existence as both a collection of static places and a method of transport between them, it allows for movement through both space and time. Moments at various stations occur not only as interactions between people, but also altercations between one’s present self and all the selves one has been before. The importance of the seeming continuity of the subway system in urban time has also been noted by interdisciplinary academic Dr. Sunny Stalter-Pace who specializes in modernist performance, literature, and urban space. In examining the way in which postmodern writers utilize the

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{39} While I have Salonee Bhaman to thank for this particular story, the notion of the subway station itself as a place of change and a reflection of urban development above is something also noticed by Jonathan Lethem who places his first subway memory passing by the business windows in Hoyt-Schermerhorn’s Bond Street corridor. Thus, perhaps it is more accurate to say that the platform remains most static through time (although introductions of technological devices plotting routes and showing arriving times of trains provide a small caveat even to this assertion).
subway system as a means of identity formation, Stalter-Pace similarly identifies the perceived continuity of the system as key to its function as a mediator between personal remembrance and the impersonal city.40 As a result of its timelessness Stalter-Pace notes that the subway becomes an “archive of myriad private moments” that can be re-enacted through the repeated action of riding the subway which in its simplicity is unchanged.41 As in experiences of Lee’s Most Time, riding the subway becomes a spatially-triggered embodied process of remembrance in which Stalter-Pace notes “[artists and writers] placing themselves in the same position, riding the same train over the same route, can relive the same memory.”42

In Underground Movements: Modern Culture on the New York City Subway, Dr. Stalter-Pace reflects on the larger structural role the built environment can play in individuals’ lives: “How might the subway, and other technologies like it, help present-day city dwellers imaginatively relate to their pasts when much of the evidence of those pasts is erased?” (171). Clay’s epitome district provides an answer for the ways in which environments might trigger processes of remembering like Lee’s Most Time which is a model for what this kind of imaginative relation might look like. The testimonies of Augé and modernist New York writers suggest that a subway can be essential in allowing urbanites a method of relating to both a personal and collective past rooted in an urban past.

It is having memories in these spaces that helps me personally feel as though a city is or has been my home. The fact that a streetlight or a certain corner can be monumental, makes me feel as though I know these places, I am known by them—this is a home. This may very well be because of my own personally unique relationship to space, but it is something I am aware of. It is in a way because I have begun to project my own life onto the space around me (though this is complicated because I am not just projecting it—it has also been lived in those spaces) so that traversing the city becomes also traversing me, and traversing the city can also be passive or active time travel—an opportunity to escape into nostalgia for what I know was, for what I know I can state happened here: whether or not (like the memories, the people, and the time in which they existed themselves) the built environment in which they existed is still present as well. Perhaps that is why the subway serves as such a particularly good example. Because despite its

40 “The New York subway makes it possible for these technological tale tellers to visualize continuity even while the city changes around them: though some lines have changed names and others have disappeared, the basic structural elements of riding the subway remain the same. Like their modernist counterparts, these artists imagine the subway as a technology that mediates between individual memory and the impersonal city.” Stalter-Pace, Underground Movements, 167.
41 Ibid.
42 Stalter-Pace, Underground Movements, 170.
technological developments, it is for all intents and purposes a relatively static organism in the city. Though it may change, its connection to place remains. Stations are added, but stations are rarely ever closed. The places remain important though they might have changed—like you may have changed. (Thesis Journal, 10/13/19)

*The Subway as Collective*

“The ways in which…all my tour guides experience these places are important ways of understanding them; we cannot fully conceive of the environment without the emotional responses that continue to make and remake how we experience and build the lyrical neighborhood.” (Bendiner-Viani, 470)

Though the subway functions as something intensely personal—as exhibited by modernist and postmodernist authors framing their lives in terms of its lines—one cannot ignore its simultaneous existence as a form of public mass transit. As urban infrastructure it is used by many, which means—despite embedded patterns of inequality—on a large-scale it becomes a diverse space into which an incredible amount of New Yorkers descend regularly. The MTA estimates that during 2018 the New York City subway system had an average weekday ridership of about 8.6 million people with a total annual ridership of 2.658 billion people.\(^{43}\) While not everyone riding the subway is a New Yorker—this ridership must account for many tourists—the estimated population of New York City in the same year was 8.3 million people.\(^ {44}\)

For thinkers reflecting on the subway within their personal autobiography, the collectivity of riding the subway encapsulates the simultaneous possibility and loneliness of the urban experience. Augé frames the Metro beyond personal understandings as a space of overlapping intersections and missed connections. The ubiquity of the subway in urban life becomes a mode through which individuals are united by itineraries that are unimaginably different, yet structurally similar. Framing his argument in terms of arguments over cultural relativism, Augé poses the subway as a place where people are forced to


observe and identify with people whose differences they might otherwise choose to ignore. Using creative writing as a medium to express a similar sentiment, Lethem observes the movement of the diverse crowd at Hoyt-Schermerhorn in Brooklyn as “the lapping of human moments…like the lapping of trains…or like the Doppler-effect fading of certain memories from the planet, as they’re recalled for the penultimate time, and then the last.”

In a city lived in so many different ways, the aims at connection fostered by the subway are crucial. Throughout his narrative of New York, Whitehead struggles with this theme of connection: “You swallow hard when you discover that the old coffee shop is now a chain pharmacy, that the place where you first kissed so-and-so is now a discount electronics retailer…Thousands of people pass that storefront every day, each one haunting the streets of his or her own New York, not one of them seeing the same thing.”

Thus, even within New York, the subway along with its personal meanings gains power as a shared structure of individual lives. Though Lethem, Whitehead, and Kazin have all experienced New York in different ways they all hold the subway at the core of the way in which they understand their identities as New Yorkers. Whitehead positions his book as a narrative of his New York which “contains your neighborhoods. Or doesn’t. We overlap. Or don’t. Maybe you’ve walked these avenues, maybe it’s all Jersey to you. I’m not sure what to say. Except that probably we’re neighbors. That we walk past each other every day, and never knew it until now.” Within this uniquely ‘New York’ experiences from the everyday trials of the subway to shared tragedies like 9/11 serve as potential shared narratives even as they arise from irreconcilable individual experiences. Subway stories, subway lives—despite their different content—are lived in the same spaces with reverberating routes.

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45 Augé, *In the Metro*, 15.
Section 3: Mapping, Personal Mapping, Mapping the Subway, Nontraditional Mapping

Returning to Dr. Stalter-Pace’s question—“How might the subway…help present-day city dwellers imaginatively relate to their pasts when much of the evidence of those pasts is erased?”—another query arises: how do we represent these meaningful relationships to place that are both personal and overlapping? Geographical expertise is a key indicator of urban belonging—subway knowledge can become a rite of passage for New Yorkers as suggested by the popularity of quizzes like Buzzfeed’s “Only Real New Yorkers Can Name At Least 50 Manhattan Subway Stations From Memory” published in 2019 with the url “so you think you’re a real new yorker eh.”49 Cartography is a valuable means of preserving, eliciting, and celebrating urban cultures of memory in New York. The subway map is as important an emblem of New York City as the subway itself. Creative imaginations of the NYC subway system and collective mapping projects serve as testaments to the power of cartography to reflect personal and collective experiences of the city and provide important inspiration for my own cartographically-inspired exploration of the subway as a memoriescape.

Designing and Redesigning the Subway Map

The first systemwide subway map for New York was commissioned by the Metropolitan Transit Authority and completed by graphic designer George Salomon in 1958. Influenced by the prominent avant-garde artistic movement, Salomon’s map prioritized clarity and aesthetic beauty.50 In 1972, a radically new design by Italian designer Massimo Vignelli premiered in stations. Designers praised Vignelli’s geometric and diagrammatic design, but subway users questioned its validity and complained of visual and geographic inaccuracies. Pushback against Vignelli’s design led to the MTA’s adoption of the subway map we currently know and recognize. Originally designed in 1979 by John Tauranac and

Michael Hertz Associates, this newest map responded to customer complaints regarding Vignelli’s map.\textsuperscript{51} The primary designer on the project—Nobuyuki Siraisi—was a trained sculptor and painter who rode every train line with his eyes closed to feel curves of movement he then used to generate the hand-drawn swoops of the lines on today’s map. While the latest map is geographically inaccurate in areas like lower Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn to accommodate the intersection of more train lines, it includes more geographic attention to key features like Central Park and other avenues, allowing for it to not only be used as a map of underground, but as a tool for spatial orientation outside of the subway system.\textsuperscript{52}

Yet while the subway map may be one of the most recognized and iconic views of New York, this has not made it an untouchable icon. Beyond the confines of the MTA, the map has been designed and redesigned by the public many times. Some redenizens are more functional—suggestions for a more visually coherent map emerge periodically—while others capitalize on the popularity of the system to map other transit systems in the city.\textsuperscript{53} In addition to planners and journalists, numerous artists over the years have turned to the subway map as source material for various interrogations of the city and their personal experience of it, often hoping to get at a cartographic representation of some sort of underlying shared New York experience.

\textit{Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas} is one of a trilogy of atlases by author Rebecca Solnit, geographer Joshua Jelly-Schapiro and cartographer Molly Roy which creatively reimagine geographies in the cities of New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco. One of twenty-six specially designed maps, the map \textit{City of Women} takes the standard NYC subway map and erases the station names replacing them with the names of women who have been important to New York City (figure 1). Women

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\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} De Luca and Portis. “New York’s Subway Map Like You’ve Never Seen It Before.” \textit{NYTimes}.
\url{https://projects.newyorker.com/story/nyc-dollar-vans/} (accessed 12/12/19).
are placed roughly geographically near the places they have lived, worked, and thrived.\(^{54}\) (For example, tennis players Venus Williams, Serena Williams and Billie Jean King are placed along the 7 near Flushing Meadows park Tennis Center). *City of Women* conceives of the subway map as a network of monumental stations reconceived to memorialize women. The map erases markers of geographic location along with the names of historic men whose names permeate parts of the city’s urban landscape. In her description of the project, Solnit imagines its activist potential going even farther—as a challenge to the experience of moving through a city that she had: “I can’t imagine how I might have conceived of myself and my possibilities if, in my formative years, I had moved through a city where most things were named after women and many or most of the monuments were of powerful, successful, honored women."\(^{55}\)

Solnit describes the map as recreating the city as a center of “recovery and possibility,” calling attention to the fact that at the time of her article only five statues of real historical women existed in New York (not including statues of fictional female characters like Central Park’s famous Alice in Wonderland statues or the Statue of Liberty).\(^{56}\) Since publishing the atlas in 2016, Solnit has updated the map filling in empty stations with new powerful female icons like New York politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. In its powerful use of renaming, Solnit’s project recalls Simon Patterson’s “The Great Bear” (1992) an iconic reworking of the London Underground map built upon a similar theoretical framework of the monumentality of stops—though here lines are themed and the monumentalized figures are not united under a single common characteristic.

Other attempts to reimagine the subway map have focused on charting unique experiences of the city. Cartoonist Rick Meyerowitz and Artist Maira Kalman’s “New York City Sub-Culinary Map” (2004) is a hand-painted piece complete with food illustrations that pays homage to a year the pair spent

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\(^{56}\) Solnit, *Nonstop Metropolis*, 85.
Figure 1: *City of Women* takes basically all of its visual language from the traditional New York City subway map and accordingly displays the same distortion of landforms and framing. Despite the erasure of a few modes of transport (airports are missing, the Verrazano Bridge is gone), and the new color scheme which trades beige land and blue rivers for pink earth and yellow water, the maps are largely identical. (Credit: Solnit and Roy)
Figure 2: The New York City Sub-Culinary Map takes a hand-painted replica of the NYC Subway Map as its base. Station names were added in Adobe Illustrator. Meyerowitz notes that the additional food illustrations around the edge of the frame add “dimension and make the map more than just a list of names.” (Credit: Meyerowitz and Kalman)
exploring food stalls around the city, taking notes and renaming neighborhoods, parks, cemeteries, waterways for a total of 650 new monikers (figure 2). While Meyerowitz and Kalman’s map archly details their shared culinary journey and romps around the city, Asma Ahmed Shikoh’s *Vanwyck Blvd* takes a more personal approach, using the subway map as a means of mediating an identity in transition as she struggled to feel at home as an immigrant in a new country and city. In this work Shikoh copied the entire subway map by hand translating it into Urdu in a process of both claiming and familiarizing herself with the key urban network (figure 3).

However, perhaps, one of the closest cartographic expressions of memory using the New York city subway map comes in the form of the project “The Memory Underground” created by developer Brian Foo in 2014 which literally imagines the NYC subway map as a memory map. “The Memory Underground” invites users to input various important people in their lives who are represented by distinct subway lines with important moments shared with these people forming stops where various lines intersect (figure 4). Moments are arranged chronologically along lines and when shared with multiple people form stations with transfers. These personal “memory transit map[s]”—as Foo calls them—position the individual interestingly within the context of a community. While a memory underground map centers solely around the experience of the maker—it is built in such a way that the important moments in the maker’s life must be ones of connections with others. An interesting map is one with a tangled web of lines made beautiful in its intricacy.

57 Rick Meyerowitz—a noted cartoonist—is also famous for his map New Yorkistan which divided New York into various tribes and territories and was the cover of The New Yorker on December 10, 2001; Meyerowitz, Rick. “The New York City Sub Culinary Map.” *Rick Meyerowitz*. 2018. [https://www.rickmeyerowitz.com/rick-maira/new-york-sub-culinary-map/](https://www.rickmeyerowitz.com/rick-maira/new-york-sub-culinary-map/) (accessed 11/20/19) [artist’s website].


Figure 3: Asma Ahmed Shikoh’s Vanwyck Blvd is named after her home subway station and part of a collection entitled Home created from 2003-2005. (Credit: Asma Ahmed Shikoh)
Figure 4: Screenshots from Brian Foo’s “The Memory Underground.” (Top) Instructions and overview of model map created by Foo. (Bottom) Zooming in reveals how tangled and convoluted the map becomes as it relates complex and overlapping memories of collective experiences. (Credit: Brian Foo).
Though “The Memory Underground” relies on the monumentality of stops—which in this case serve as important moments—these stops are placed in time, but not in space. Foo proposes a subway map loosened from geographic ties which cuts across country lines and city boundaries with no real sense of the space between these places or moments. Instead Foo’s re-imagining seems to suggest an innate aesthetic visual quality of the subway map that invites processes of memory attribution in its structure. Foo uses the subway as a metaphor for memory and identity, relying on lines, stops, and junctions to evoke life trajectories, pivotal moments, and social union respectively. Such a desire to represent meaning through the map also recalls the psychological research on inherent desires to map and the use of a subway map network as a means of explaining certain types of memory recall.

Reimagining the Subway Map as a Network of Stories

“I can’t see the metro map of Paris, or hear the roster of its stops—Chateau Rouge, Gare de l’Est, Chateau d’Eau—without feeling myself in Paris on a summer Sunday on the way to the flea market. The map is a stronger version of the trip than a video might be; it is almost a stronger version of the trip than the trip is. What’s more I look at the subway map of New York, see the dull line of New York numbers—33, 42, 51, 59—and they fill up at once with memory. Maps, especially schematic ones, are the places where memories go not to die, or be pinned, but to live forever.” (Adam Gopnik, foreword to Mapping Manhattan, 10)

In order to understand the role the subway plays in allowing individuals to experience personal memory, Stalter-Pace positions the subway as a technology that can help mediate the individual life—

“Subway stories spin away from grand narratives of urban prosperity or decline, instead focusing on local experience as the only truth worth sharing.” The subway serves as a tool to mediate the overwhelming urban experience. Mapping—in the role it plays in translating a thing into a representation—is also a technology. Thus the subway map organizes the subway system which organizes life. The mapping

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61 In a 1970 study, Collins and Quillian found that an analogy of semantic memory was well approximated by maps of the Paris metro for its representation of memories as nodes and various paths linking them.
63 Stalter-Pace, Underground Movements, 174.
process like the subway riding-process is a key act of comprehension, distillation, and representation of meaning.

In creating my own artistic cartographically-based interpretation of the New York City subway using subway stories collected from a handful of ethnographic interviews as source material I hope to celebrate the idea that cityscapes can become personal monuments when we attribute personal history to them. Thus, my aim is to acknowledge the power of the individual in making everyday landscapes meaningful and enlist the experience of the urbanite as co-collaborator, source, and cartographer of urban life. This visual collection of maps is not necessarily trying to change anything, but instead to celebrate, pay homage to, and acknowledge the strength of personal meaning-making in urban space and the diverse experiences that arise as a product of diverse cities. The city exists together and apart and the subway exists as a symbol and an experience of this unity and fragmentation. In sharing comes tension and overlap.

I center my artistic exploration in the context of a long history of personal mapping of urban space. The French philosopher Guy Debord is famous for coining the term psychogeography which he described as “the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.” Yet Debord’s experience and the maps it produced center around the lone male wanderer, focusing less on the everyday experience or the shared and varied experience of a diverse urban collective. Instead, my project can be more usefully framed in the context of the increase in collective mapping projects in New York City that occurred in the early 2000s—a phenomenon reflected in Katherine Harmon’s extensive anthologies of maps documenting personal geographies, one of which is exclusively dedicated to New York: You are Here NYC: Mapping the Soul of the City (2016). While these projects continue map art tendencies exhibited above in the

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reformulations of subway maps, the emphasis on collaborative efforts mark these project as unique in their positioning of individuals as valuable expert sources of knowledge and repositioning of the map as a product of the collective. Below, I highlight projects that have been instrumental to my own understanding of my project.

In Nobuta Aozaki’s ongoing project *From Here to There (Manhattan)* (2012-), Aozaki poses as a lost tourist on the streets of New York City and solicits hand-drawn maps from passersby directing him from point a to point b. Aozaki then assembles these individual understandings of the city into a collective collaged whole (figure 5). Each piece of drawn-on paper ephemera—notebook pages, pizza plates, post-its—is a stand-alone map representing an individual understanding of the city and an interaction between Aozaki and a stranger. Together these personal understandings come to create a contiguous patchwork of the shared urban space of Manhattan. Thus, *From Here to There (Manhattan)* captures individual experiences of Manhattan while alluding to the complexity of a larger incomprehensible whole. Yet, while Aozaki alludes to the importance of urban community, his many co-collaborators never become aware of the product they have inadvertently helped create serving thus as unwitting source material in Aozaki’s larger structure.

Conversely, Kate Ray’s *Crying in Public* (2018) directly enlists individuals to be cartographers sharing a key motivation of my own project. Envisioned by Ray as a “love letter to NYC,” *Crying in Public* invites users to drag emojis onto an open source map thereby marking points where they have cried. Each geographic pin noted by an emoji is then visualized with a google street view preview and epitomized by a small user-written narrative. Ray frames the project around a simple personal desire: “I would like to be able to walk around this city that means so much to me and see a spot that was meaningful for you.” As Whitehead notes—urbanites all carry around their own personal New Yorks, some which overlap and others which don’t. Collaborative mapping and storytelling provide a powerful

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Figure 5. Nobutaka Aozaki’s *From Here to There (Manhattan)* is an aggregation of hand drawn maps solicited from pedestrians by the artist. Unaware of Aozaki’s true identity as a New Yorker and an artist, passersby provide the artistic material unwittingly drawing a piece of Aozaki’s collective cartographic collage. (www.nobutakahaozaki.com/maps.html)
opportunity to complicate this individualized experience of the city. Collective cultural cartography—even around something as simple as urban spaces in which we’ve cried—provide an opportunity for people to see beyond their own New Yorks reflecting on what the New Yorks of the people around them might look like and encountering points of intersection and detachment. This notion is reflected in Ray’s cartographic process—individual users create personal maps of sites of meaning around the city which are then compiled into an anonymized megamap of sites contributed by all the users (figure 6). Thus the individual is invited to create their own personal narrative that also contributes to a larger whole. Ray also offers her own personal map of places she’s cried as a vulnerable starting point—so that although she is the artist who has created the structure she is also an equal collaborator who has shed many a tear in the city streets as well.

While Ray’s project lives in a digital world, projects like Becky Cooper’s *Mapping Manhattan* (2013) and Yumi Roth’s *Meta Mapa* base cartography in analog interactions between the cartographer and their collaborators. In *Mapping Manhattan* Cooper amassed hundreds of hand drawn maps of what she asked her collaborators to define as “your Manhattan” which Cooper then curated into a book.68 In a similar vein to Aozaki, Roth had individuals draw maps on her hands for directions to places in the neighborhood they would recommend and then took pictures of these and printed them out as maps she used in discussions with other residents, bringing different interpretations of urban space into discussion with each other by inviting participants to look at each other’s work.69 Thus, these projects generate a multiplicity of maps in an attempt to create conversation and community as opposed to a comprehensive product. Indeed, Cooper’s invitation and prompt—for people to map their own Manhattan is a testament to the idea that one map could never truly express a full image of the city. Though the urban space may be shared it is experienced in infinite ways and no one representation can encapsulate them all.

69 Yumi Roth, “Meta Mapa: Bronx,” *Yumi Janairo Roth* 
https://spot.colorado.edu/~rothy/metaMapaBronx.html (accessed 12/10/19) [artist’s website]
Figure 6: Screenshot of the homepage of Kate Ray’s *Crying in Public* map once a user has created a rudimentary account. Ray’s invitation to users to create their own map which then is automatically contributed to a larger whole, enables the individual complete control over their own cartographic endeavor, while also placing them as part of a larger communal product which has been defined on Ray’s terms. (https://cryinginpublic.com/)
Jake Barton’s project *City of Memory*—made in collaboration with the organization City Lore—is an example of the union of artist, community, and institution as it creates a repository of urban stories based in urban space (figure 7). The project was first run at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and involved people pinning vellum sheets which written memories to enlarged maps of boroughs with pins. Zeitlen, head of CityLore, identifies the goal of the project being “to rediscover the city through the memories of others”—an aim my own project shares as well.⁷⁰

By balancing user submitted and curated stories *City of Memory* aims to create a diversity of experience rooted both in valuing personal memory and urban history. Tours which connect sites form narratives of movement throughout the city, situating individual memories within an urban network. The variety is refreshing: a spotlighted tour of sites relating to the Nuyorican Poets Café created by two City Lore staff which includes the laundromat where two poets routinely did their laundry alongside a three-part tour of a contributor named Andy Ollove about a long afternoon bike ride in Brooklyn to a falafel place, a juice bar, and a bakery. Posts range from elegiac to mundane. Particularly powerful is a series of “I am New York” poems made as part of the 2006 People’s Poetry Gathering as a collaboration between City Lore and Bowery Poetry Club which includes pieces such as “I am the Park Slope Food Coop…” “I am Belvedere Castle…” and “I am a muggy fly filled day in the Bronx…” Iconic places are side by side with spots of local legend and more personal spaces. The most viewed user-submitted story is the poem “I am the corner of East 10th Street…” posted in 2008 which marks where the Second Avenue Deli used to be. The poem is a testament to the lost city as it evokes a past moment in which an individual asserted the deli would always be there only to end with the writer Adrienne Press’ closing lamentation: “I stand here wishing he was right.”⁷¹

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Figure 7: (Top) Vellum sheets pinned to corkboard at the Smithsonian Folklike Festival in 2001 allowed visitors to share their memories and experiences of geographical experience in the neighborhoods of New York allowing for a build-up of individual stories that then fed off and inspired each other. (Bottom) The digitized version of City of Memory strove to preserve the feeling overlapping narrative—colored dots distinguish between user submitted memories and curated memories uploaded by the CityLore team from its archives. (Source: https://localprojects.com/work/memory_maps, www.cityofmemory.org)
Yet while a striking repository of urban memory—both personal and institutional—in its digitized form City of Memory becomes an overwhelming archive of stories sprawled across New York’s form. The span of the entire city makes the archive interesting, but daunting. In collecting subway stories and journeys, I aimed to narrow down the urban experience cohering it around a contextual structure. New York City is full of street corners, but it has a limited number of subway stations and those who ride the subway relate to these same stations regularly.

**Routine Descents, Reverberating Routes**

My own visual interpretation of ethnographic interviews I conducted during April 2020 entitled *Routine Descents, Reverberating Routes* draws from all of these influences. Like Aozaki and Ray, my exploration prioritizes the enlisting of the interviewee as the ultimate source of urban knowledge, amassing numerous individual maps as a means of garnering collective knowledge. Drawing from Cooper and Roth’s emphasis on interpersonal interaction, my project is based in personal interviews I conducted in which a dialogue around the subway and each interviewee’s personal experiences is at the heart of each diagram. Lastly, I drew inspiration from City of Memory whose digital interface emphasizes the importance of the journey in connecting sites of importance within a meaningful narrative. I asked my interlocutors to take me through a journey they routinely experienced and walk me through memories or associations they had surrounding any stops along that journey.

Maps often refute the journey which is the personal narrative of the user. By beginning with the journey in my own project, I hoped to re-insert the user of the map as the narrator within the representation of urban space, leading me along their own experience of the subway. The idea of a tour also calls back to Bendiner-Viani’s method in Prospect Heights in which she asked individuals to similarly take her on walking tours in which they strung together meaningful places. However, the

72 The idea of the spatial story as a means of expressing the power of individual narrative in contrast to the inherent totalizing power of the map is expressed perfectly by Michel De Certeau in the chapter “Spatial Stories” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.” (129); Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
embeddedness of the journey within the subway system is unique, as it is movement that creates the individual memories, but also highlights the way in which memories are strung together across time along an underground journey.

Conclusion

“…[A]s a self-contained system that enables myriad different pathways through it, the New York City subway models the kind of community desired by these contemporary writers…the wish to describe a shared history without suggesting that it is the only history. A focus on subway planners and builders might imply a master narrative, but a focus on subway riders fragments in a thousand different directions. The subway system, then, is the structure that brings together both points of view.” (Stalter-Pace, Underground Movements, 182)

Memory, meaning, and identity intersect in the subways of New York. A shared infrastructure sedimented with individual experience, the underground transit system is uniquely positioned to be a valuable archive of personal and collective urban narratives. Visual and cartographic endeavors become ways in which to express complex relationships to place that allow individuals to root themselves within a large impersonal city. Relying on these the creative part of my own project—charting the meaning of subway stations to individuals through experiences of routine journeys—aims to participate in this tricky balance between the private and the public urban experience. The project—Routine Descents, Reverberating Routes—recognizes individual experience while also suggesting that one of the most beautiful powerful things about the cities is the way in which they garner collective meaning that can be held both inside oneself as well as shared.

Indeed as Stalter-Pace notes, by imagining the subway as an urban memoriescape, the potential for an ideal community emerges—one that acknowledges a diverse history based in varied individual experience, one that complicates broader systemic narratives. There is magic in the everyday and the way in which it piles up across space and time. In cities this process is one of overlapping and intersection. These everyday stories are ones of pain, beauty, that reflect inequality, courage, and hope. Taking time to celebrate and reflect on these stories, is taking time to celebrate and reflect on life, to learn from others, to accept and acknowledge that the spaces in which we live—as everyday as they might be—are implicated
in our own lives. It is a way in which to bridge ourselves and our experiences across time and to connect them together, through junctures and shared commutes.

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Roth, Yumi. “Meta Mapa: Bronx,” Yumi Janairo Roth https://spot.colorado.edu/~rothy/metamapabronx.html (accessed 12/10/19) [artist’s website]


Routine Descents, Reverberating Routes

Routine Descents, Reverberating Routes is one half of a creative thesis created by Soledad Tejada in April 2020 in completion of the American Studies Intensive Major with a concentration in Material Culture and the Built Environment at Yale University. “The Public and the Personal: Mapping the NYC Subway System as an Urban Memory-scape” is the written paper that investigates the theory and grounds behind considering the subway an intersection of memory, identity, and the urban built environment with both personal and collective narrative potential.

Artist Statement: I created these maps based on five interviews I conducted during March and April of 2020. They represent a sampling of what could be the beginnings of a larger project that continues to explore individuals’ relationship to subway infrastructure and the meaning these trains hold both for personal lives and the shared urban history of a changing city. By examining these maps and seeing each New Yorker’s ‘piece’ of the city alongside narratives tied to place that emerge for them along these journeys, I hope similarities and differences will emerge, with stories that resonate both in familiarity and in contrast. Thank you.

Some Notes on Methodology: In these interviews I asked participants to take me through a journey they had taken regularly at some point in their life. They would begin by describing the journey, what it meant to them, and why they took it. Then—with us both looking at a subway map—my interviewer would take me through the journey stop by stop as though we were sitting on the train. These were open dialogues. Sometimes stations held nothing for my collaborators and other times stations held many stories. Some collaborators were more invested in the subway than others, some shared vulnerable moments, funny moments, unique moments, lingering perceptions. I have included this variety because it is true to the experiences of the individuals with whom I spoke as well as to the way in which meaning and memory ebb and flow throughout the built environment. After they had taken me through their journey I invited individuals to speak about any other stations they felt particularly attached to and reflect on the subway at large as they wished. I transcribed these interviews, edited them, and arrayed them visually in these sets of maps. Given the limitations of only a few interviews these maps by no means are comprehensive—nor could they ever be. Certain lines are favored and certain regions of the city—notably Queens—went unexplored and unrepresented. Despite this, a wide array of stories and experiences still emerge.

A Few Words on Visual Cues: Empty stations mark stops along a journey my interlocutors had nothing to say about, but that still were part of their routine movements. Dotted lines indicate the passing of unlisted stations between stops that individually held meaning for those I talked to. The principal journey is shown on a white background, while other relevant stations are on a black background. Each interview is represented by an opening page and a map diagram. The closing pages begin to imaginatively explore the overlapping of these journeys signifying common themes and geographical junctions.

Image Credit: At points this work draws on a 2019 version of the New York City Subway Map as source material. The subway map is property of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of the State of New York.
In high school I took the Q from Beverley to Avenue M at like the crack of dawn early because I remember that I was always trying to get to class at 7:10, cause I got there crazy early to take ballet in the morning which is wild to me now. And I remember I figured out that because it was so early in the morning no one was on the train so it went faster. So I could get on at like 6:50 and get there by like 7:05, run to Murrow High School, and be in class by 7:10. Which was the stupidest way to live my life.
**Beverley Road**
Beverley Road in the morning was always empty except sometimes I would see my friend Tatum on the other side of the platform and we would wave at each other.

**Cortelyou Road**
Sometimes I would get off the train early at Newkirk to walk home in the spring because all the houses around there are really pretty. Generally as a kid rollerskating always happened between Beverley and Newkirk. That was my neighborhood to rollerskate around, so I knew that neighborhood really well.

**Newkirk Plaza**
Newkirk Plaza is often where I would get off the train early in the spring. Sometimes I would get off the train early at Newkirk to walk home in the spring because all the houses around there are really pretty. Generally as a kid rollerskating always happened between Beverley and Newkirk. That was my neighborhood to rollerskate around, so I knew that neighborhood really well.

**Avenue H**

**Avenue J**
Never been there in my whole life.

**Avenue M**
Leaving school, Avenue M at like 3:05 was always crowded and sometimes I would go all the way to the end of the platform and hang out with my English teacher because he was the best and he went all the way to the end of the platform to not run into students.

**Kings Highway**
Closer to Kings Highway they opened up a Chipotle and that was a very big deal because then there was a Chipotle and the Starbucks and you could either take the train or walk like 10 blocks to Kings Highway if you had the last period of the day off to get again Chipotle and Starbucks and then take it back to school before rehearsal. Because I was always a theater kid a lot of my life was around when you could get food around rehearsal which is so dumb.

**Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue**
We took the train there a lot when I was really little cause they were doing construction on Coney Island. Like it was kind of between things so it was all these kind of temporary like kind of shitty rides but they were all very cheap. So my parents would take me—it was so crazy—they would take us in the off-season right at the beginning of the season when it was still too cold, because you didn’t have to wait in any lines and they were super cheap. So we would all be shivering on these shitty carnival rides.

But I remember very specifically when you pull into the Coney Island station as you round that corner you can see the whole skyline of Coney Island and I remember as a kid thinking that was the coolest thing ever. That whole subway station is Coney Island themed with all these beautiful tile mosaics. I just—I love that station a lot. And then in I think early high school we would go—me and the beginnings of my crew of friends—went to the mermaid parade and that was another big ‘I’m a grown-up doing things by myself’ milestone.

**Going over the Manhattan Bridge**
I had just seen a play by myself and it was kind of the first time that I had my own little journey into the city with no agenda, just to go out for a day, and I felt very grown-up. I went to the MoMA, I saw a play, and then on the way back I remember this crazy guy sat next to me on the train and he told me his whole life story and asked me what I was doing in the city and I was like, “Haha, nothing.” And he told me about how he was cheating on his girlfriend, about how he was lying to his girlfriend, and then over the bridge the girlfriend called him and he was like, “Where are you?” And he was like, “I’m almost home,” and he mouthed to me, “I’m not almost home.” And he was like, “Now’s the best time of your life. Take it easy,” and I was like, “I don’t know man.” That’s my most visceral Manhattan Bridge train memory.

**14th Street - Union Square**
Sometimes if we didn’t have rehearsal Murrow kids would take the Q to 14th Street Union Square to go to the Chipotle.

My other memory at 14th St Union Square was the time that Ethan Lotta—after breaking up with me before we got to go on even one date—met me at 14th St Union Square Station to go see the 50th Anniversary Screening of Jaws because he felt bad that he dumped me before we even went on one date. We met like right outside the station and then we walked to the AMC, saw the movie, and then took the train back together. And I remember it was like almost a date, but it was like definitively not a date. It was terrible. I actually spent a lot of time at 14th Street Union Square. Yeah, I did two No Pants Subway Rides so I guess minimum two romantic humiliations at 14th Street Union Square.

**Times Square - 42nd Street**

Times Square gets a lot of shit but I actually think it’s fun. Just because I think I’m the only New Yorker that likes Times Square. Like don’t get me wrong, within reason. Like I don’t want to spend a whole lot of time there. But once a year I’m like, this is nice. Also it’s kind of a maze and I think that’s cool.

Then there’s the weird like record store weirdly in the Times Square station, do you know what I’m talking about? There’s like a CD store that sells postcards and tourist shit and CDs in the Times Square station and it super feels like it shouldn’t be there. It’s right at the bottom of those escalators and there’s always people playing music outside of it. Live music. Like right behind them there’s a weird tiny store because I remember buying a Hamilton postcard for my ex-boyfriend Tom there which blegh—um yeah I don’t have any specific sentimental value attached to it, it’s just always felt odd that it was there.
I'm going to do the journey from home to school. So I usually walk to Prospect Park, the entrance near the Western Beef and at this entrance it's usually crowded because—I don't know—it's like every time I go into the station people from the S train are getting off so it's a crowd of people going against me. And then I take the B train it goes really fast between Prospect Park and 7th Avenue. At 7th Avenue all the businessmen get on. And then we go to Atlantic and its usually crowded at 7th Avenue, but at Atlantic almost everyone gets off and then by Dekalb Ave its still empty but thats when it definitely clears out. Near Grand Street the train goes so fast like I thought it was about to crash when that happened and then lots of people get on at Grand Street. At Broadway-Lafayette people from the F and the M transfer because its on the same platform to the B and that's crowded so its probably crowded from Broadway-Lafayette to West 4th Street and then I get off at West 4th street. Then I just take the C and the E one stop and its Spring street and I get out, then I walk a block and then I'm at school.

ST: Do you like riding the train?

Sometimes, because I like how people I don't know like—yeah I don't really have any problems riding it. It's just a nice environment I guess. Sometimes, sometimes. But I feel like people get really mad when you accidentally touch them, but like I get it, I get it, it's fine.
Prospect Park
The Prospect Park station is probably the most memorable station because that's the station I've been getting off for like my whole life. Yeah so like everyday in school I've been getting off there and I always go to Prospect Park which is right there. Something memorable that happened at this station? Probably when me and Sarah were standing there and a train went into the station and it was like, "This train is going out of service, the train ahead of us got stolen"—or something—and we were like, "What?" We were like, "How?" That was probably the craziest moment, yeah. I also like that it's the first station outside.

West 4th
It's right next to that basketball park where everyone goes. I haven't really got off there. It's a weird transfer because there's this escalator, but if you take the escalator it goes straight to the uptown A/C/E instead of the downtown. You'd think it would give you access to the other way, but it doesn't so then you have to go back under and then cross to the other side which is what I do. Then I take the C and the E to Spring Street because the A is express and that's where I see like a lot of my friends so that's cool.

Broadway Lafayette
I've got off there a few times. To go to SoHo shopping and stuff. I know the Supreme store is on Lafayette street like a block away from it.

Grand St
Going over the Manhattan Bridge
When you’re about to cross the bridge you see that art thing underground which they have which is really cool and then the bridge is long so I usually check my phone during that time.

DeKalb Avenue
There's usually kids on the train, but they always get off at DeKalb Ave. I don't really see any kids going to Manhattan on the train. I used to get off there. I don't like that stop though. I don't know its just bad vibes. Like there's always water dripping from the ceiling or something or the escalator's always messed up so you have to walk down the stairs and it's usually crowded. I've been there and there's a train in the station, but there's two people walking really slow ahead of me and I can't pass them because the staircase is so small so I always miss the train and that was the annoying part.

Atlantic Avenue
That's when everyone gets off.

7th Avenue
Besides all the businessmen like pushing by you, you get shoved a lot at 7th Avenue, that's all I have to say.

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My journey is from my home which was on 92nd street and Broadway to where I used to go to high school which was 55th street and two over from Lexington. I used to live at 92nd and Broadway and I used to take the 96th train station for the IRT or the 1/2/3 line. The nice thing about 96th Street was that you could take the express and the local at the same time so it was always nice to be able to take the express down to Times Square and switch over to the N and the R. I took the N and the R going towards the East Side, going towards Queens, so then I could get off at 5th Avenue and 59th street. It was kind of interesting because the Upper West Side—which was 96th street—was always really residential and kind of not a lot of stuff going on at the time when I was taking it and then when I got out on Lexington Avenue and 59th street it was busy.

Going to high school was the first time that I actually rode the subway in earnest. Going down to 72nd street where I had gone to middle school was kind of easy because I knew it, I had walked it, as a kid I had played there. But, going to high school was like wow I'm going you know—out. I'm graduating, you know? Suddenly I am going to get to know New York.

The last time I used to ride the train was somewhat briefly when I was living with my parents and I had made it into college at Cooper. Then I would take the train down to Astor Place. So then at 42nd street I'd transfer over to the N and the R going the opposite way, going downtown, and I'd take it down to 14th street. That kind of opened up New York for me because the only time I had been in that area was when my parents would take us to visit my dad's aunt down in the Lower East Side cause she lived right near Orchard, down on Rivington Street. I actually ended up living with her. Taking the trains that way began to open up more of Manhattan as I was beginning to go down.
I would take the train at 96th street and you always got this traffic. Since it was going to Washington Heights and Harlem it got full of Dominicans coming down you know and stuff like that, but then there was this small sprinkling of white folks and others and I think that had to do with the fact it went through Columbia.

72 St
72nd street is where I actually ended up going to middle school. I had gone to a small charter program for studying medicine located on half of the top floor of a public middle school. So I always got out there on 72nd street. That area was big for me growing up from when I came to America. I’d ride the subway to 72nd street and sometimes I’d walk or you know I’d ride the subway, walk back, it was great. I’d go to Riverside Park and walk along Riverside Park and pop back out into the streets. It was always fun. And there was always that option. The train was kind of a mix or match because it really wasn’t that big of a distance, but I’d ride since they gave us these cards that would allow us to use the bus or the train. Mainly I would use the train I’d have to say, not the bus. I’d walk or take the train—it was easy to jump on the train because the train stop was right there. And there was something interestingly impersonal about riding the train as opposed to the bus. I don’t know, somehow the idea that there were other people in little capsules made it feel like everyone was just being impersonal so it was okay and quick and anonymous.

While riding the bus you were in this thing that was navigating the city as a singular thing and you were ‘all in it together’ kind of feeling.

When I’d take the train to high school I’d go down through Lincoln Center which evidently was fun. As a kid I used to skateboard a lot in Lincoln Center. When I got into skateboarding between Riverside Park and Lincoln Center that was kind of my haunts for a little bit—and Central Park.

Columbus Circle was kind of strange. Although I was always aware of it, I didn’t really go out into it that much because the times I had gone out into it, it just felt so crazy or an intersection. I didn’t feel like there was a reason for me to be there. Which is funny, considering now that I have to go there to teach at Fordham University. Now when I come from Brooklyn, that’s where I get off. But it was a wasteland for me. It wasn’t really important although it was such a big intersection.

Also it began to feel like that was where a lot of wealthy people got on the train. It felt more like old white New York which was something I didn’t really know that much about other than the people that I knew from my building. But somehow they felt different—also just because I got to know them. It felt a little alienating to me the people that were starting to go there. 59th St-Columbus Circle was sort of the beginning of ‘I’m in a different world feeling,’ you know? I had just gone past my neighborhood and now I was in a New York, a different New York.

Times Square - 42 St
You know you kind of always tried to go to 42nd street because there was a lot of excitement, but at the time 42nd street was actually a really nasty place to go to. There were lots of porn shops and stuff like that. Although there was always that excitement, it was a little seedy you know. There was also the whole theater aspect to it which gave it another feeling of a different New York. But I didn’t really go out there so it didn’t matter that much. There I would change to the N or the R which would take me east going towards school at 59th street and Lexington. This was the BMT—but those were just names. To me they were just the number lines and the alphabet lines and that was it: I went from the number lines to the alphabet lines. Now in the N and the R it was kind of interesting because you were getting more Latinos and Blacks. Suddenly it was more people going to Queens and people going to the East Side so it was a different mix. That was early in the morning too, so it was a strange mix of people.

96 St
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I started at 110th St-Cathedral Parkway and then ended at 242 St-Van Cortlandt Park. It takes like 45 minutes to get from 110th Cathedral Park to Van Cortlandt Park so I’d wake up like an hour and 30 minutes before school, get on the subway, and then I would like bring a book or sometimes I would eat breakfast on the train. My dad works at Columbia so he would often get on the train with me and take it—especially in the winter when it was cold or rainy or snowy. He would get on the train with me at 110th and take it one stop and then he’d get off. Then I would take it to the end of the line. Often because I was taking it to the end of the line and it was the train that made the most sense to get to my school a lot of kids from my school would take it. So as you went further down the train line you would see that it would empty out and it would be mostly students from my high school on the train. So it was like a school bus, but it was a train.
157 St

My boyfriend used to live on 157th St so senior year of high school I used to wait for 157th. Sometimes he would get on the train and then he would come and sit with me and we would eat breakfast together. Or when I was coming back from high school in the evenings I would sometimes get off at 157th or we would get off the train and like talk or like make out a little bit and then he would go home and I would get back on the train to go home.

You know how everyone goes back to high school like one time when they come back from college because they’re like—‘I’m free!? I remember taking the train to high school when I came back—I had broken up with him at this point—and I took the train and I was so afraid that he would get on at that stop.

145 St

It goes below ground again at 137th. Both 137th, 145th, 157th are below ground.

125 St

125th is the one that’s above ground.

116 St - Columbia University

116th is Columbia University, I would go there a lot to visit my dad after school—especially in middle school when you have nothing better to do than to like hang out with your parents. I would take the train to 116th and I would walk to my dad’s office and I would sit there. There were obviously a lot of students. I think that going uptown the majority of the people on the train would get off at 116th and it would sort of be—empty, after that.

I think of it as the part where the train ride gets nice because after 116th, 125th is above ground and you do go briefly below ground again, but it’s really really nice. I would look out the window and you can see—they were building this giant building and it may already have been built, like the Columbia University Brain blah blah nonsense—but before that you could see all the way to New Jersey and you could see the West Side Highway and it was really beautiful. Especially coming back in the evening I always used to sit facing the Hudson River and you can see the sunset. In the morning you can also sort of see the sunrise—I don’t know why you would want to wake up that early. But yeah, it would warm you up.

Cathedral Parkway is not a big station. It’s that edge where its like not quite Columbia University so you have some professors and students, but the majority of people when I was in high school were still mostly residential people. So we would see people from our building getting on the subway on the other side of the track or sometimes I would see my mom on the other side going downtown to her work. But it was like a small community, not a lot of people on the platform. A lot of people that did get on would probably get off at 116th for Columbia. Often my dad and I would go and get a bagel from Absolute Bagels which is around the corner from our apartment and we would stand on the platform and eat our bagels waiting for the train to come.

168 St

168th is where the Columbia Hospital is so I have a lot of memories of going there with my parents when my mother was getting chemotherapy. Also when she sees the oncologist for her annual oncologist check-in to make sure it hasn’t come back when I was in New York I would go sometimes. I would leave school early and I would meet her at 168th and then we would all take the train home together. It’s also where my gynecologist is. So I think of that as the medical stop.

It’s one of the old style train platforms so the roof of the station is curved like it is in Europe and so it’s really beautiful station. I think they’ve been renovating it for a few years now. I think that’s also where you get the A so sometimes when I used to go to ballet still, the best train to get or the fastest one to get to 59th St—my dance class was on 55th St—is the A so I would transfer to the A there and then I would take it down to 59th St because its like 168th, 145th, 125th and then it goes straight to 59th street.

181 St

Dyckman St

Then I think at Dyckman St it comes above ground again. 207, 215, 225, 231, 238, 242nd are all above ground. Then it’s sort of like you have a few more stops, you see the big field where the Columbia kids I think have their football games and then you cross over the river which is really beautiful. Then by the time you get to the Bronx there’s basically no one on the train except for people who are going to my high school because it’s like seven in the morning. You have a few commuters but if there are commuters they’re people that we often know just because we see them so often. Or sometimes we would see professors get on the train.

Inbetween

I have a very strong memory of applying to college early, getting deferred, and being between 207th St and Dyckman St going home and just starting bawling. And everyone was like this woman is cuckoo. Everyone just got off the bench and I was like, At least I have a bench to myself! I cried a lot on that train in hindsight, but you know everyone does what they need to do on the subway. I think that’s just what I needed to do.

207 St

215 St

Marble Hill - 225 St

231 St

I had a professor that I really liked who would get on the train at 231st Street so sometimes I would talk to her.

238 St

238 isn’t really significant, it’s just the one before 242nd.
At 242nd street we would get off at the far end of the train so if you weren’t already at the far end of the train you would slowly be making your way there because that’s where the exit that was closest to our school was. The trains don’t come very often—I mean they come very often in the morning, but when I would leave school I would stand on the platform often for like 10 minutes. It’s the last stop so there would always be a train on the other side and it was very peaceful and quiet. I don’t know. I think of it as a really reflective space. Like if I had a bad day I would sit on the platform.

The station is outdoors, it’s really beautiful, you can see the park. You recognize the houses, it’s in a little valley. It’s really beautiful especially in the summer there are lots of flowers and it’s very green. The other thing that’s really beautiful is when it would snow and you would be wrapped up in your jacket and cold and you would look out the window and there would be flurries and the whole city would be turning white. Especially that part where you cross over the river you can see New Jersey and you can see parts of Manhattan and the South Bronx being covered in snow and it’s really gorgeous. It’s really beautiful if you need time to think. When I was in New York over the summer there was one point where I was thinking about something and I was really stressed about it and I was already on the subway so I was just going to go home and then I just stayed on the train and went all the way and then came back. Helps with thinking.

Well I’ve lived in a lot of places, so a lot of subway stops have been home for me. 103rd was home, 110th was home, at one point 86th was home, at one point the Wall Street 2/3 station was home, at one point Utica was home, at one point Bedford was home.

I have a funny story. It was New Year’s Eve and I think it was like the beginning of high school. My parents and I had gone out for dinner and we were taking the train back. We got on at Broadway-Lafayette and there was like a very elderly Chinese man playing Auld Lang Syne* on the saw, and there was this young white woman and then this older black man and they were dancing to it. Anyway, when I think of New York I think of that scene because everyone’s crazy but it’s great. And I think the subway really embodies that. I love the subway, I miss New York.

I think the only train that does not have big personal significance to me is the G train. I actually had a nightmare about the G train the other night. I got on the G and it took me to some weird part of Brooklyn and then I got off and was like—oh I’m somewhere...I must be somewhere in Brooklyn because I took the G.” And then they were like, “You’re in Staten Island,” and I was like, “Nooo!” So that was funny.

* Auld Lang Syne is a traditional New Year’s Eve song sung all over the world.
** The G train is the only subway line that remains solely in Brooklyn without going into Manhattan at all (aside from the Franklin Avenue Shuttle in Brooklyn, but this is only has three stops.)
So we used to live right by 2nd Avenue and previously I’d taken the F train three stops to 14th St for work, but then around 2000 I got a job in Brooklyn and I would take it four stops into Brooklyn to Jay St-Metrotech. Except for it wasn’t called Metrotech back then I don’t think, Jay Street - Borough Hall. And I guess if I was taking the train it was probably rainy or snowy because otherwise I’d cycle. First I used to do the Brooklyn Bridge and then when they opened the bike path on the Manhattan Bridge I would cycle across the Manhattan Bridge.

For the first five years that I worked there, I did normally bike to Jay Street from when my daughter was two to then she was seven. But then we moved to Brooklyn so I had to take the the B train from Prospect Park to Broadway Lafayette, change to the F to 2nd Avenue, walk her to school all the way on Avenue B, walk back to 2nd Avenue and take the F train back to work. And I had to do that everyday for a few months before she moved school and I couldn’t take my bike. I used to hate that because I was pregnant with my son. I used to leave at 7:30 and I didn’t get to work til 9. I had thought we’d keep her at the school in Manhattan, but that experience of getting up at 7:30, going all the way across—which maybe took half an hour, walking to her school, walking back and then taking the train back, that whole hour and a half trip was like—There’s no way I’m going to keep doing this for multiple years, we have to find a local school. And it became like—Wouldn’t it be great if we could just find a school across the park and just cycle there? And we did. No trains.
I particularly don’t like that station, because it was a bad news stop: “Oh shit! That was a D not a B and I... Dumbo. But I didn’t really know the station very well. I used to work there.

Between East Broadway and York St

I used to sometimes go there with my work colleague who would wait for the F. It took me a while to realize I could get out the same exit I came in at—and how to do that. I used to sometimes go there with my work colleague who would wait for the A or the F because he was getting off at West 4th, but I had to wait for the F. Not that I really knew the outside of that. That was not a station I go in and out of.

I did love 2nd Avenue in some ways. You could see across the platform to both directions. I remember one day there was this Mexican singer singing such a beautiful song, I missed a couple of trains just to listen to him.

I did love 2nd Avenue in some ways. You could see across the platform to both directions. I remember one day there was this Mexican singer singing such a beautiful song, I missed a couple of trains just to listen to him.

2 Av

So I’d get on at 2nd Avenue at the entrance at Allen and Houston St right opposite the playground we went to the whole time and the little café—First Street Park. Although I always went in the same entrance, sometimes I would get out the 2nd Avenue rather than the 1st Avenue exit so I could pick up my daughter from her family daycare which was right by that exit.

The next stop was Delancey Street which I did know pretty well because at times we would take the J train across the bridge and it was right by friends of ours and I knew where the station came out with its little narrow escalator by Essex Market.

Delancey St

The building and I burst into tears and asked him if I could borrow money to get back in the subway. So he took me back to the subway and there were the two plainclothes cops who were like, “Why didn’t you scream? We know that people get mugged down here. We were waiting for someone to scream and we would’ve come and saved you.” And I was like, “Oh—cheers.” Then they were going to give me one token to get in, but I asked, “Well can I have two subway tokens? Because I need to go measure still, and then go back to work.” Then when I got back to work they were like, “Why did it take you so long? We thought you must’ve been mugged.” And I was like, “I was.” And they were like, “What?!” Then they got the whole story and were like, “You were mugged and then you went and took the measurement anyway?” and I was like, “Yeah” [laughs].

Essex St

I thought was Dekalb was Atlantic and now I have to go back on and go all the way back to Atlantic and get on a B.

East Broadway

East Broadway I didn’t really know very well. I think it’s by Seward Park. But I don’t know the outside of that. That was not a station I go in and out of.

Bedford Pk Boulevard

I got mugged at—I think it’s changed its name—5th Avenue and 53rd. I was at work when I worked by Broadway-Lafayette and I had to go pick up the keys from someone who worked at 5th Avenue/53rd Street and then go to their apartment on the Upper West Side to take a measurement that had been forgotten. It was the middle of the day, it was so normal, but it’s not a very well-used stop. I think somehow that entrance wasn’t that well used and I don’t know, it was quiet enough. Someone grabbed me from behind and told me to give them my wallet. Which I did. I didn’t even see them. And then seconds later some people came down the steps, and I was like—How could they be right here? It just seemed so oblivious for these guys to be talking, coming down the stairs, and I had just been mugged. But I didn’t say anything to them I was so shocked. I went up the steps and someone was having a cigarette outside the building and I burst into tears and asked him if I could borrow money to get back in the subway. So he took me back to the subway and there were the two plainclothes cops who were like, “Why didn’t you scream? We know that people get mugged down here. We were waiting for someone to scream and we would’ve come and saved you.” And I was like, “Oh—cheers.” Then they were going to give me one token to get in, but I asked, “Well can I have two subway tokens? Because I need to go measure still, and then go back to work.” Then when I got back to work they were like, “Why did it take you so long? We thought you must’ve been mugged.” And I was like, “I was.” And they were like, “What?!” Then they got the whole story and were like, “You were mugged and then you went and took the measurement anyway?” and I was like, “Yeah” [laughs].

Between East Broadway and York St

I definitely was aware of going under the water rather than over the bridge.

“Yeah” [laughs].

York St

I vaguely knew that Erica lived near there in Vinegar Hill, but that was before it was very popular Dumbo. But I didn’t really know the station very well.

We’d go and visit my in-laws up there. It would take almost an hour on the train at the weekend and my daughter when she was a baby would scream and scream. Probably soon after Rockefeller Center she had had enough and would start crying and people would look at me. I didn’t bottle-feed her, but I would bring a bottle of milk just to show them: she was not hungry. And once or twice I was like to my husband, “Let’s just try, let’s step out,” cause we had to change and whenever we stepped out to change she’d stop crying. So I was like, “Let’s just step out at you know 145th St.” And then she’d be like, “Boo be boo be boo be boo,” everything fine, and we’d get back on the train—screaming. Blue murder, screaming, like I was attacking her. It was awful.

Jay St

Jay Street was a busy station—confusing. I would get out different exits although I would always go in the same exit. But my motto was just get out as soon as you can and walk above ground. But there was scaffolding and escalators and I think it took me a while to realize I could get out the same exit I came in at—and how to do that. I used to sometimes go there with my work colleague who would wait for the A or the F because he was getting off at West 4th, but I had to wait for the F.

MetroTech

Not that I loved that station particularly.

Broad Channel

I loved Broad Channel because that was amazing to me when I first came here—that you could go to the beach by subway. And there’s all these little houses on stilts. It just seems amazing that you can do that with the subway in New York City.

36 St

I particularly don’t like that station, because it was a bad news stop: “Oh shit! That was a D not a B and I was thinking it was going to be Atlantic, but actually that one I thought was Dekalb was Atlantic and now I have to get back on and go all the way back to Atlantic and get on a B.”

36 St

That station always meant a lot because that was the first project I worked on with my new firm. We did the solar panels on the train station. And I took my daughter when she was two down on the tracks there. I didn’t actually get certified to be able to be on the tracks, but my coworkers did so they could be in that narrow thing between the columns where the train goes by. It was the first train station to have solar panels on it—maybe the only one still.
On the Q line, it’s like the most crowded station so I feel like it’s cool. And it’s just cool to walk around Times Square there’s also lots of people playing music there which is nice. I think it’s one of the most interesting stations.

You know you kind of always tried to go to 42nd street because there was a lot of excitement, but at the time 42nd street was actually a really nasty place to go to. There were lots of porn shops and stuff like that. Although there was always that excitement, it was a little seedy you know. There was also the whole theater aspect to it which gave it another feeling of a different New York. But I didn’t really go out there so it didn’t matter that much. There I would change to the N or the R which would take me east going towards school at 59th street and Lexington. This was the BMT—but those were just names. To me they were just the number lines and the alphabet lines and that was it: I went from the number lines to the alphabet lines. Now in the N and the R it was kind of interesting because you were getting more Latinos and Blacks. Suddenly it was more people going to Queens and people going to the East Side so it was a different mix. That was early in the morning too, so it was a strange mix of people.

Times Square gets a lot of shit but I actually think it’s fun. Just because I think I’m the only New Yorker that likes Times Square. Like don’t get me wrong, within reason. Like I don’t want to spend a whole lot of time there. But once a year I’m like, this is nice. Also it’s kind of a maze and I think that’s cool. Then there’s the weird like record store weirdly in the Times Square station—do you know what I’m talking about? There’s like a CD store that sells postcards and tourist shit and CDs in the Times Square station and it super feels like it shouldn’t be there. It’s right at the bottom of those escalators and there’s always people playing music outside of it. Live music. Like right behind them there’s a weird tiny store because I remember buying a Hamilton postcard for my ex-boyfriend Tom there which bleh—um yeah I don’t have any specific sentimental value attached to it, it’s just always felt odd that it was there.

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I had just seen a play by myself and it was kind of the first time that I had my own little journey into the city with no agenda, just to go out for a day, and I felt very grown-up.

The last time I used to ride the train was somewhat briefly when I was living with my parents and I had made it into college at Cooper. Then I would take the train down to Astor Place. So then at 42nd street I’d transfer over to the N and the R going the opposite way, going downtown, and I’d take it down to 14th street. That kind of opened up New York for me because the only time I had been in that area was when my parents would take us to visit my dad’s aunt down in the Lower East Side cause she lived right near Orchard, down on Rivington Street. I actually ended up living with her. Taking the trains that way began to open up more of Manhattan, as I was beginning to go down.

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59th St-Columbus Circle was sort of the beginning of ‘I’m in a different world feeling,’ you know? I had just gone past my neighborhood and now I was in a New York, a different New York.

Well I’ve lived in a lot of places, so a lot of subway stops have been home for me. 103rd was home, 110th was home, at one point 86th was home, at one point the Wall Street 2/3 station was home, at one point Utica was home, at one point Bedford was home. I think the only train that does not have big personal significance to me is the G train. The train lines that I’m most familiar with are the 1/2/3, but only in Manhattan and parts of the Bronx which is where I used to take it. Definitely the A/C throughout all of Manhattan and Brooklyn. The N/R/Q in Manhattan because we used to go to back in the day when there wasn’t a big grocery store in Bed-Stuy or in Williamsburg. Yeah, the A/C, the J/M/Z, the L.
I remember very specifically when you pull into the Coney Island station as you round that corner you can see the whole skyline of Coney Island and I remember as a kid thinking that was the coolest thing ever. That whole subway station is Coney Island themed with all these beautiful tile mosaics. I just—I love that station a lot. And then in early high school we would go—me and the beginnings of my crew of friends—we would go to the mermaid parade and that was another big ‘I’m a grown-up doing things by myself’ milestone.

I would look out the window and you can see—they were building this giant building and it may already have been built, like the Columbia University Brain blah blah nonsense—but before that you could see all the way to New Jersey and you could see the West Side Highway and it was really beautiful. Especially coming back in the evening I always used to sit facing the Hudson River and you can see the sunset. In the morning you can also sort of see the sunrise—I don’t know why you would want to wake up that early. But yeah, it would warm you up.

I have a very strong memory of applying to college early, getting deferred, and being between 207th St and Dyckman St going home and just starting bawling. And everyone was like this woman is cuckoo. Everyone just got off the bench and I was like, *At least I have a bench to myself!* I cried a lot on that train in hindsight, but you know everyone does what they need to do on the subway. I think that’s just what I needed to do.

I definitely was aware of going under the water rather than over the bridge.

I had just seen a play by myself and it was kind of the first time that I had my own little journey into the city with no agenda, just to go out for a day, and I felt very grown-up. I went to the MoMA, I saw a play, and then on the way back I remember this crazy guy sat next to me on the train and he told me his whole life story and asked me what I was doing in the city and I was like, “Haha, nothing.” And he told me about how he was cheating on his girlfriend, about how he was lying to his girlfriend, and then over the bridge the girlfriend called him and was like, “Where are you?” And he was like, “I’m almost home,” and he mouthed to me, “I’m not almost home.” And he was like, “Now’s the best time of your life. Take it easy,” and I was like, “I don’t know man.” That’s my most visceral Manhattan Bridge train memory.

When you’re about to cross the bridge you see that art thing underground which they have which is really cool and then the bridge is long so I usually check my phone during that time.

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