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Meagan Kittle
HONS 3360H
Drs. Cavalier & Grant
Travel Narrative

A Young Woman in the Crowd: Experiencing New York City

Introduction

New York, New York! The City that Never Sleeps, in the Land of Opportunity. The City So Nice They Named It Twice. The home of over eight million people. The fashion capital of the United States. The financial capital of the world. A tourist destination for millions of people every year.

However you describe it, New York City is certainly an experience. The people, the buildings, the taxis, the monuments, the sounds, and the scents all exude a certain aura belonging to the city. For our Modernisms class, the trip was an opportunity to see in 3-D how modernism has affected New York's landscape and its people. It was clear to see that the movement left a lasting impression on the city, just as it left one on us.

Paintings, Performance, and Poetry

“If the ‘eternal and immutable’ could no longer be automatically presupposed, then the modern artist had a creative role to play in defining the essence of humanity” – David Harvey

The biggest shock factor for those traveling to big cities for the first time is often the enormous cultural differences that they experience. Having grown up outside the capital of Canada, I eagerly looked forward to visiting once again a city with oodles of culture, a place where I could see the concepts of our class material come alive.

Broadway, The Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum, The City Center, and other cultural sites all beckoned.

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) possesses arguably the greatest collection of modernist art in North America. It was so thrilling to see so many great works of art all under one roof. My favorite room was that showcasing some of Piet Mondrian's pieces. The exhibition was fascinating, as it chronicled his progression from traditional art – Dutch landscape scenes – into what we see as modernist art. While this could be seen as “following the times” and not being unique, I feel that Mondrian had a very distinct view of modernism. The concepts of cubism can be seen in his “Composition” paintings, but they are visibly his personal take on the movement. He incorporates some of the movement's basic principles and then makes the painting his own. This is one of the keys to Modernism – the idea of making the art your own and not following rules set by previous artists.

MoMA not only brought the paintings that we had studied previously off the page and into real life, but also demonstrated all the hustle and bustle of New York City inside a single building. Each individual or group moved about in their own way, with no regard to the others around them. It was as if the crowd on the street corner had been transplanted right inside the museum. People moved in every direction, stopped in random places, and turned at inopportune moments, all of which led to an overall chaotic sense of movement in the building. There were many tour groups there, it was obvious, but there were also families, many with small children, who were visiting the museum for the day. I wondered how the parents' experience of the museum would have been different because of the fact that they had small children with them, unsure if they would be able to get the same level of knowledge and understanding out of the exhibits they

would have had they come alone. The smaller children certainly contributed to the overall disorder of the museum.

The one source of organization that I found on the trip was at the Broadway show that a small group of us saw, “Curtains.” After a roundabout and harried journey to the theatre, two wrong subway lines and one long sprint down Broadway Avenue later, we arrived just in time for the curtain call. On the stage at the Al Hirschfield Theatre, every single movement, every raise of the arm, every smile, every eyebrow furrow, and every tilt of the head was meticulously planned. This level of orchestration seemed so out of place in the enormously chaotic city that I was experiencing, so in that way, the show seemed to suck me in. I became lost in the brilliant costumes, harmonic voices, and high-energy dancing. New York City residents are so lucky to have such great performances in their own backyard. For me, the biggest draw of larger cities is not the easier access to goods or services, but the richness of culture that springs forth due to the abundance and diversity of people.

Visiting a large city can also give tourists a sneak peek into the lives of the artists who make all of this creativity possible to them. I especially enjoyed our lunch at the White Horse Tavern, a sight often frequented by Dylan Thomas and the like during their lifetimes. While I do not consider myself a “celebrity hound,” I thought it was really neat to sit in the café and order a meal in the same place where this legendary poet did when he was alive. Looking out the window, I wondered what kind of inspiration came to him when he did the same thing many years ago. Greenwich Village, where the tavern is located, is a different animal from Manhattan. With many less skyscrapers and more distinguished facades on the buildings, it seemed like a haven for the artsy crowd. There

were so many unique shops, hole-in-the-wall restaurants, and neat areas in the general that I could only imagine how much inspiration painters and poets could find there. The entire city was such a phenomenal cultural experience, and I can now see how it is seen as “the place to be” for paintings, performances, and poetry alike.

Green in the City

*“And it was only through such creative heroism
that human progress could be assured” – David Harvey*

Practically every American (and even Canadian) knows about Central Park. All you have to do is watch one movie set in New York City, and it will certainly feature this famous section of Manhattan. After visiting it for the first time, I wondered, “How can I describe Central Park?” We sauntered in so nondescriptly that we could have been visiting a much smaller park area. However, I quickly became aware that this was not your typical walk in the park. The farther we ventured in, the more I realized how astounding the park’s presence in the city actually is. As Dr. Cavalier mentioned on the trip, it is incredible to think that some person had the forethought to know that one day in the distant future, the city of New York would need this breathable space in order to survive. The tranquil area is an attempt to balance the hustle and bustle and overall chaos of daily life in Manhattan. For those who live in the area, the park is a nearby escape from concrete and steel. For those who visit, it is an escape from the overwhelming sense of being a tiny goldfish in a fish tank packed with pickerels. The respite from pounding the pavement was a welcome one. Taking a few moments to appreciate my surroundings, I noticed how tall the trees overlook the people who walked by them, how old and wise they appeared to be. I wondered how much those trees had seen over the years. As the

facades of buildings are constantly being given face-lifts, or entire structures are torn down and rebuilt, the trees in the park remain one towering element that does not change. What kind of stories would they tell? What secrets do they hold? It is interesting to imagine everything that has gone on in their presence over the last century. I think of comparing it to all of the ephemeral elements of modernism and how their lasting, continued presence would be the antithesis of this feature of the movement.

This green heaven stood in stark contrast to another part of the city that I explored on our final day: Canal Street. In an attempt to head back to the World Trade Center one last time, I took the subway and had to switch lines about halfway there. Of course, I had no clue which direction to go to get to the other subway entrance, so I spent almost half an hour going up and down Canal Street trying to find it, much to my chagrin. I wasn't upset that I was wasting time, but simply disgusted at how absolutely filthy that area of the city was. Certainly, I knew that such a large city would in no way be considered "clean," but this section of the city was repulsive. Even the *people* were dirty! I could not get out of there fast enough. However, none of the people I encountered were very helpful in doing that. I stopped three people to ask them where the E-line was, and they all responded in different accents, giving me different directions.

These two distinct areas each left me with very different impressions of the city, but they were impressions that I could relate to other metropolises that I knew. In every city, there is a pretty park or attractive downtown area that its citizens would call picturesque. But, every city also has its eyesores, such as broken down industrial buildings and ghettos. The brazen contrast really was an eye opener into the state of living that many New York residents suffer through.

One in Eight Million

*“Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over [Brooklyn] Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet”
– T.S. Eliot, “The Wasteland”*

Although it is renowned for its culture, fashion, and money, New York is unmistakably a city of people. It was impossible not to notice the hoards of people around the city. Each person moved with a specific destination and individual purpose in mind. Those who were NYC natives moved solo, familiar with their surroundings and confident of their path. Those who were just visiting traveled in packs, screaming, “We’re tourists!” to all those around, something that we were certainly guilty of.

The city’s residents faithfully went about their commutes to work every morning, their determination in their walk a sign of the dedication they have to their jobs. They all battled through the crowds on the street, dared to cross the intersection while the pedestrian street light still flashed yellow, and elbowed their way onto the subway, catching the door just in time to be punctual for yet another day of work. Fighting for yourself and keeping to yourself is a common theme for those who make the city their home. Living in such a hot tourist destination, they constantly have to share their daily commute and coveted traveling space with aliens. One of the most common coping mechanisms I saw was the use of personal electronics. Nearly every person on the subway preoccupied themselves by listening to her iPod or tapping away emails on his Blackberry. In a world where many people of older generations bemoan the loss of

personal interaction because of electronics, I thought that I was seeing the origin of the iPod obsession right before my eyes.

At every time of the day, people poured out of subway entrances, buses, shops, restaurants, and hotels. They packed the sidewalks, forming this massive, perpetually moving blur of limbs with dark winter coats. When I was able to catch a brief moment standing still, I just stood and looked out across the street, staring up several blocks, watching the people. My eyes glazed over, and I had a moment where I saw the concept of “stream of consciousness” playing out right before me. The people never stopped coming; like the brain’s thoughts, they were always there. They shifted, though, in type, by size, shape, and color, just as a person’s thoughts do. They jumped from one mode of life to another, starting with a wealthy business executive, then a Broadway performer, then the guy that grills the pizzas at Ray’s Brick Oven Pizzeria every night, just as a person’s thoughts can jump randomly from one to the next. They shifted suddenly, with no clear cut thread that attached them. They were just there. This concept of free recollection is a very modernist writing technique, and it is appropriate that I could see this happening in the very city we had visited to gain a greater understanding of the movement.

The Individual Experience

*“No one stands round to stare.
It is nobody else’s affair.
It couldn’t be called ungentle.
But how thoroughly departmental.”
– Robert Frost, “Departmental”*

Despite the fact that there are over eight million people in New York City, I know without a doubt that every person experiences the monstrous urban area in a different

way. This was demonstrated with our very first interaction with someone in the city. The shuttle bus driver who took us from the airport to Grand Central Station would probably tell you that his experience of New York is with clueless and cheap travelers. After we boarded his bus, he asked us if we had purchased our tickets. When Dr. Cavalier responded that we hadn't, the American-Asian blurted out an expletive that rhymes with "schmuck" and darted off of the bus. What a first impression that left! His response was clearly shaped by his previous daily experiences with others who held up his route by not having pre-purchased shuttle tickets. As a result of his rude outburst, he also did not receive a tip, which I doubt was the first time he was shunned for his colorful vocabulary.

This scene affirmed for me the previous notion that I had of New York City when thinking about the daily lives of the people: it is a very individualized experience. Unlike those in the "friendly South," New Yorkers do not stop to talk to each other on the street corner while waiting for the light to change or while taking the subway. Instead, they keep to themselves. This idea goes back to my technology point: by using personal electronic devices such as an iPod, it is much easier for a person to keep to him or herself. In this way, people are able to perpetuate the stereotypical notion that I had of isolation in large crowd.

My trip to New York City was also shaped by a unique experience that I had where I felt this idea of being separated from everyone around me despite the fact that I was amongst large groups of people. After I keeled over in the café entrance, the only people who noticed were the two people I was accompanying that morning. Even after shouts of "Call 9-1-1!" by a valiant Dr. Cavalier, it still took the eatery owner several moments to realize that he was being spoken to and a request was being made of him.

Around me, people continued their walk to work and tourists went on wandering about the sidewalks (not that I expected the world to drop everything just because I had). But no crowd had gathered, nobody had stopped to stare; it was as if nothing had happened. But I suspect that the reason for this is not that people didn't realize what had occurred, but that a person in distress is not an unfamiliar sight to those in the area. Fainting tourists are more common than you think (at least according to the snippy nurse who grilled me in the ER), so no one bats an eyelash anymore or thinks anything of the situation. The health problem is not theirs; it is not a part of their individual New York City experience. So, they go on about their day, without giving any scene like that a second thought or glance.

Parting Thoughts

*“The whole thing remains for me, however, I repeat,
a gorgeous golden blur,
a paradise peopled with unmistakable American shapes.”
– Henry James*

So what impressions am I left with after our whirlwind four-day tour of the city? How can I sort out the *mélange* of experiences that we had? The biggest impression that I am left with is that big cities are about movement and change. Nothing stands still in New York City, and nothing stays the same for very long. Buildings are constantly being updated. In any one day, construction employees work to improve yet another skyscraper. As soon as new alarm or computer technology comes out, it becomes outdated. The business cycle is so short nowadays because it is constantly changing and others are trying to keep up. Life in the city is not about enjoying what you have, but instead about always striving for more.

New York City is definitely not a place for everyone. It was a blast to visit for a few days, and I could have stayed a few more. The combination of lights, buildings, and people creates a brilliant visual experience that everyone should see in their lifetime. However, the impersonality of the city does not necessarily mesh with everyone's living style. While I could understand the harried rush of everyone walking the street, it would be difficult to live like that every single day. At least in North Carolina, I know that it is socially acceptable to go for a Sunday stroll on a Wednesday and just take the time to enjoy my surroundings. I look forward to returning in a few more years when I am little older, a little wiser, and more financially stable so that I can enjoy everything the city has to offer!

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