

On Living in (and Leaving) New York City

Like many New Yorkers,¹ I have a love-hate relationship with this city. Sometimes when I reflect on this city, I imagine it in black and white with Gershwin à la *Manhattan*. “[S]he was as tough and romantic as the city [s]he loved...New York was [her] town, and it always would be.” One of my favorite contemporary writers, Michael Chabon, wrote a stunning homage to my hometown of Berkeley² and I feel, for no particular reason, compelled to do the same for this city in which I have loved and lost, and perhaps most importantly defined my career and thus the decades ahead as an academic nestled comfortably in the ivory tower.

This is not an easy place to live, if for no other reason than certain Kafkaesque qualities that need not be elaborated, or the bang for buck (or more accurately, lack thereof) living in the city, leading my favorite comedian, the late Bill Hicks, to report the exchange, “Hey, you’re living in New York City. You get mugged yet?” to which he replies, “As a matter of fact, the first of every month. They’ve got it systematized. Apparently it’s legal.” Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area reduced the shock of cramming my 1,200 books into a single over-priced room.³ My first apartment here was a fourth-floor walkup above a 24-hour bodega, across from a liquor store, next door to a less-than-stellar psychiatric institution outside of which stood a number of its quirky-though-sometimes-excessively-kvetching inhabitants,⁴ across the street from a housing project, and with a bedroom facing the above-ground subway, which of course runs 24/7 and becomes a strange inner-city white noise (as well as an excuse to take certain pauses in conversation until the train passes, presumably for factors relating to the noise but also sometimes buying one a few moments of reflection before delivering a more strategic than top-of-the-head response). And did I mention that there was no laundry, let alone the postal workers’ propensity to not deliver packages or specify later delivery times, but rather to write on the paper slip the word, “other,” leaving much to the imagination in that neighborhood? I did not renew that lease.

There was, of course, one perk about that location, which was that despite the apartment’s lack of thermostat, the local homeless man’s degree of nudity served quite well as a makeshift thermostat as he lay slumped against the liquor store gripping his pint of Wild Turkey. Full frontal, and I could safely spend the day in a skirt and halter. Pants draped loosely across his body but his bulging chest still bare, and it was a jeans and t-shirt sort of day. Fully-clothed, and it was time to bundle up. So there were some advantages.

Fittingly, my first day in New York was unforgettable. On October 8, 2009, I had

¹I moved here in August 2011 and thus have not technically satisfied the requisite number of years to call myself a New Yorker. Some say five, others seven, others say when you’ve lived here longer than where you grew up, though in my own defense (I think), I’m often mistaken for a native until the subject of deep dish pizza comes up. I will defend to the death Zachary’s in Oakland or Lou Malnatti’s in Chicago over anything that New York has yet offered me this past four years.

²<http://are.berkeley.edu/howardrr/berkeley.html>

³No, I have not read them all. No, I have not opened many of them since my last move. And no, I will not purge *any* of them.

⁴One such man had a propensity to stand outside with a surly expression, overpriced cigarette, and a two-liter bottle of Hawaiian Punch from which he drank directly, with purpose and gusto.

taken a Greyhound bus (“down the Hudson River line...”) to a Springsteen show at the Meadowlands and at which he took my sign request, which read, “I Came From California FOR YOU”⁵ but did not have a ticket to his final show on that tour, in which he would play the entire *Born in the USA* album, which is not my favorite but which translates beautifully to stage and which had a number of songs I had not yet heard live (namely, “Cover Me”). My newly-made friends in the general admission pit⁶ convinced me to find a way to make it to the next day’s show, though I did not have a place to stay for the night. And so I wandered the Port Authority Bus Terminal and then planted myself at the local 24 hour Starbucks for prime people watching as I (successfully) scoured Craigslist ads for floor ticket availability. The next day was October 9th, which fellow Beatles fans know is an important day in music history (John Lennon’s birthday), and my aunt on Manhattan’s Upper West Side showed me around Greenwich Village and parts of uptown where we sang “Imagine,” “Strawberry Fields Forever,” and “In My Life” at Strawberry Fields just across the street from the famous Dakota building, after which I made a mad dash to New Jersey. There, just behind the barrier to the pit but still on the general admission floor, during “Hungry Heart,” Bruce climbed onto the railing directly in front of me, singing and holding my hand as time stood still. I was in love – with him, with the adventure, with the city and all its liveliness and adrenaline pumping through our veins as we danced and sang and drank the night away. Only encountering my beloved Woody Allen himself would have made that day more extraordinary.⁷

My first New York apartment hunt (for the apartment described above) was also quite noteworthy for its quintessential New York-ness. I was moving from Charlottesville, Virginia, where I had a rather brief stint in graduate school at the University of Virginia, whose uniformity most praise and I found perfectly lovely but uninteresting (I may or may not have directed a lost person to “the brick building with white trim” when in a bad mood after my regression model failed to converge),⁸ and on 48 hours notice had been invited to check out this room in a shared apartment that I had found on Craigslist. With New York hostels booked weeks if not months in advance, I had few options with respect to where to stay when I took the train up and immediately was offered and accepted the room (no, that is not the quintessentially New York part... that would be reserved for my next “23rd time’s the charm” experience of apartment hunting for my current place). Fully aware of New York’s reputation as “the city that never sleeps,” and feeling bold having not only gotten admitted at Columbia and Princeton (choosing Columbia) and getting the first apartment at

⁵To clarify, he did play my same song request at the Hartford show in October 2012 (albeit the acoustic version), shortly before we experienced the wrath of Hurricane Sandy.

⁶We had tailgated in the parking lot for several hours prior to the concert after the distribution of lottery wristbands, as the Meadowlands arena is not in a prime location for spending time going on excursions, though there was a Goodfellas Taxi circling the area, perhaps with direct service to the Bada Bing.

⁷At a later concert, on the *Wrecking Ball* tour, Bruce crowd surfed over me, and it just so happened that the most convenient place to support him was that which was featured prominently on one of his noteworthy album covers.

⁸My frame of reference was my undergraduate alma mater, UC Berkeley, whose campus design quite mirrors its students, with each building in the style preferred by the donor and thus contributing to a heterogeneous quality not found on the rival and more conformist Stanford campus.

which I looked, I opted to spend the night until the next morning's train to Charlottesville wandering what would be my new home city from the evening hours until the crack of dawn.

Though I am on the receiving rather than providing end of psychotherapy, I found fascinating the psychological profiles of these many people who, for reasons unbeknownst to me, *had* to have latkes and blintzes not at dinner or dessert time but at 3 a.m. (admittedly at the scrumptious establishment Vasselka on the lower east side, and carb-conscious though I am, I was quite smitten with those Platonic blintzes whose last traces I noisily scraped from my plate and almost as smitten with their virtually unlimited free coffee refills, with "free coffee" being two words happily heard in conjunction with one another). Perhaps they were psychoanalyzing me too – the young (though not quite so young as I appeared) woman with the Amoeba Records tote bag, highlighter, and copy of *Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* in hand. (For whatever reason, the book wasn't a conversation-starter, at least not in that crowd. Perhaps a greater bonding experience might have emerged had I chosen a more local classic such as Woody Allen's *Without Feathers*). Making my way through (though occasionally off) the grid system of New York and over to the candlelit French Roast once I had gotten every indication that I had maxed out on free coffee refills sans new food orders, the city streets – still littered with garbage and the pests that go with the territory – began to awaken as the sun came up, and I felt comfort in knowing that as I sat on the local 1 train to Penn Station (while unphased walking at 2 a.m. in a new city, I was strangely fearful of express trains well into my setting into the city) I would be back not just for another Springsteen show outside my reasonable financial means, but to *live*, to become the New Yorker I always had a strange sensation that I was meant to be. And there is always the added excitement of recognizing the locations of movies set in New York – that scene at the Essex Street stop, that other scene on the east side of Union Square, another in central Harlem – though perhaps the mixed feelings about Law and Order S.V.U. being the most commonly-shot television show in one's own neighborhood. There is also no city in which there is greater applause to the line in the greatest film of all time – *yes*, there is one and only one correct answer – when shown on the big screen: "There are certain sections of New York, Major, that I wouldn't advise you try to invade."

The release of a new Woody Allen film, or better yet the replaying of an old Woody Allen classic, is a particularly splendid New York experience. Right after seeing *To Rome With Love* at the Angelika, the Film Forum was showing *Annie Hall*, which ranks second only to *Casablanca* among my favorite films. I made a mad dash to the theater for the early screening but was five minutes late. In keeping with one of the first scenes of the film, I left the theater ("I can't go in in the middle") to have coffee for two hours and I caught the next show. And who hasn't sighed or had to bite their tongue listening to others' (indulgent, sometimes intellectual masterbatory) pontifications in line? Alas, we rarely have the actual Marshall McLuhan appearances ("Boy, if life were only like this...").

There are a handful of myths that people tell about living in New York. One is that you will see famous people. If I hadn't watched "Top Chef" marathons on Bravo, I wouldn't have known about these "celebrity" sightings such as Chef Eric Ripert around the corner from his famed restaurant Le Bernadin. True, I stood five feet away from Tom Colicchio in the general admission pit at a Springsteen show at Madison Square Garden and we walked

down the broken escalator side by side. I didn't want to reveal my "type" as a giddy fan so I gushed over Bruce's performance of "Rosalita," though a foodie friend of mine said that I ought to have capitalized upon the situation and said something to the effect of, "My roast is dry. What do I do?" The truth is, if there were a follow-up question, I'd have been outed as a fraud. If there is anyone more prone to inadvertently turn a recipe into some sort of flambé, it would be me. I saw Jake Clemons perform at the Rockwood Music Hall with a friend and we stayed behind, trying unsuccessfully play it cool as we had beers and took pictures with Jake and then immediately post them to facebook, still in disbelief about our exchange as we regrouped over the scrumptious Colombian street food across the street. Other than that, my sole celebrity encounters have been at Daily Show attendances, during which I had the pleasure of talking with Jon Stewart about our favorite Springsteen songs. It was a magical moment. (For the record, he expressed his top three as "Land of Hope and Dreams," "Jungleland," and "Lost in the Flood." My top three are "Thunder Road," "Badlands," and "Atlantic City." My top five would be rounded out by "The River" and "Brilliant Disguise."). My love for New York is sometimes rivaled by my affection for New Jersey, or perhaps more specifically the idea of certain parts of New Jersey that are of course associated with Springsteen, and there were few on the New Jersey transit train who understood my exclamations upon our passing through such places as Red Bank (home of Clarence Clemons) or Long Branch (Springsteen's hometown), or who understood the value of taking pictures of Kingsley Street or Madame Marie's in Asbury Park (while naturally en route to the Stone Pony in hopes of a sighting of the Boss or at least Southside Johnny).

Another myth about living in New York is that of anonymity. I have lost track of the number of unwanted run-ins with colleagues or ex's on the subway (inevitably leading to the conversation to the effect of, "Why on earth are you taking the 1 to the A to the F instead of the 1 to the 2/3 to 14th and then the F from there?" which invariably leads one to remind the other of the length of the walk through the 14th Street station to catch the F train and the subsequent time lost), at a bar, in line at Starbucks. Is there any other city in which people micromanage others' (even strangers') transit routes with such unsolicited confidence?⁹ And even absent those people, memories never fade. Webster Hall – where I met the love of my life, now happy with someone else. Irving Plaza – where we had our third date at Dylan Fest. Blarney's Pub – where I had one (or three...) too many Guinneses during the last game of the ALDS while rooting against the Yankees, which is rarely the way to make friends in a midtown bar.¹⁰ And Rudy's. Things rarely end well when they begin at Rudy's, especially when tipsy enough to brave consuming the free hot dogs...¹¹

But when the world seems to fail, there are (at least) three sources of salvation, depending on your taste: Strand Books (literary bliss but not quite as good or expansive as Powell's,

⁹Another brand of unsolicited advice is in New Yorkers' provision of directions, which might well take the form of the following exchange: "Can you tell me how to get to this restaurant?" "No, you don't want to go there. You should go down that street to this other restaurant."

¹⁰I was instructed as a child in the Bay Area that while I was not obligated to root for the Giants or the A's (though I do), I was *not* allowed to root for the Dodgers or the Yankees, or as Scarlett O'Hara might have said, "*the dirty Yankees.*"

¹¹I am of the firm belief that a great social anthropological study could be done of those who wait for the first batch of Rudy's hot dogs at 8 a.m.

though they're far too snarky to admit it, and I unabashedly spend hours basking in their rare books room), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (can one ever spend enough time in the company of Van Gough or Picasso paintings? I think not, and thankfully New York city is lacking in neither, though some exhibits at the Guggenheim have elicited in my mind philosophical "What is art?" questions), and Central Park, that oasis of nature that is just enough for a city person such as myself, perhaps thanks to the comfort of knowing one's precise proximity to Central Park West or 5th Avenue, on which I confess I often feel underdressed when wearing jeans.¹² East Side/West Side alliances are very quick to form upon moving to the city, and I will forever be a West Sider.

I have contemplated how best to leave my mark on the city as I prepare to depart upon the completion of my doctorate this summer. I have read parts of my unfinished (perhaps perpetually unfinished) novel in Bushwick and Harlem cafes to audiences that, not surprisingly, exceeded the audiences at most of my political science conference presentations (combined). I have had branded on my body symbols of my favorite musicians in an establishment within mere feet of where the cover of *Freewheelin'* was shot. I have karaoke'ed to "Glory Days" and "Because the Night" in a local bar on my 27th birthday (and unlike many of the others that night, sang in the proper key). I have cheered on marathoners (or perhaps more specifically, my favorite marathon runner, Caroline, who will always be an inspiration to me).

But ultimately the great thing about New York is its constant transformation – with gentrification admittedly being both for better *and* worse – and evolution of its neighborhoods, establishments, residents, and New York has left its permanent mark on me. And among true New Yorkers – whether native or adopted – there is a unique feeling that people often have of "getting gotten" here, where madness, creativity, and genius somehow come together in perfection. Might I have been rendered too abrasive for other cities? *Perhaps*. Will I always wish that those in front of me on the sidewalk walked faster? *Most assuredly*. Will I need reminding that "How much do you pay for rent?" is not a conventional opening question when conversing with a stranger? *Probably, though it is a prominent point of conversation both with respect to living here and with respect to my impending move from New York's city limits*. Will I be indignant upon realizing that delivery does not extend beyond 9 p.m.? *Naturally*.¹³ But there's not a moment of living in New York City that I'd take back, even though it will make leaving it all the more difficult. And perhaps the next time my transit route gets micromanaged I will look fondly upon these New York days rather than dismissively roll my eyes.

¹²Said comment does not apply below 14th Street, where it once again becomes acceptable to rejoin the island of misfit toys that is New York City.

¹³My lack of driving experience over the years goes without saying.