

Next Stop: 180 Feet Below Street Level

by Kacie Johnston

New York City. The Big Apple. Home of Central Park, Ground Zero, and Times Square. Popular tourist attractions include the Statue of Liberty, Carnegie Hall, and the you-either-love-'em-or-you-hate-'em New York Yankees. Every year, millions of people flock to the big city for Broadway shows at Gershwin Theater, shopping on Fifth Avenue, and the annual New Year's Eve ball drop. But below the hustle and bustle of the big city, the ground shakes and trembles, revealing an entirely different kind of world. Life below the sidewalks in the New York subway system is full of countless sights and sounds that many people unfortunately don't get to experience or don't take the time to appreciate the way they could.

One of the first images that comes to mind when someone hears the word "subway" is a dark, filthy underground cave with graffiti lining the walls, trash littering the ground, and rats scurrying across the tracks. After all, the subway is known for not being the cleanliest or most sanitary place around. Vandals without faces scribble words all over the walls, and the subway cars and hoodlums nonchalantly dispose of trash throughout the stations and on the subway tracks. In addition, the overcrowding of the subway is often cited as a source of animosity. The New York subway system transports 4.5 million people per day on an average weekday, totaling 1.4 billion travelers per year ("Subways"). To put things into perspective, that's almost the equivalent to two-thirds of the entire population of Virginia riding the subway in only a twenty-four-hour time period! Being confined to such a small space, especially during rush hour when crowds are largest, can be stressful and debilitating for countless individuals. After all, everyone deserves a little personal space. Many other people dislike the subway because of all of the crime that takes place in the stations and the cars. According to the "New York City Transit Guide," however, crime on subways and in subway stations has been decreasing substantially in the past few years, making New York itself the safest "large" city in the country. One may also lower the risk of crime by following some simple common-sense precautions, including not wearing or flashing anything expensive or irreplaceable, avoiding the typical "tourist" look—which usually involves an "I Love New York" t-shirt—and avoiding eye contact with anyone who looks like they might pose a potential threat (Gladstone and McDermott). While each may be considered valid reasons for a person to detest the entire New York subway system, I experience things a little differently.

Once again, I find myself on the outskirts of New York City. Looking to travel to the heart of The City That Never Sleeps, I seek the nearest pole representing the existence of a subway station. Finding one, I descend the stairs and wait for my eyes to adjust to the artificial light below. Once my eyes have adjusted, I find the MetroCard machine that will allow me to pay for my trip into the city. I reach into my pocket and pull out two wrinkled one dollar bills, quite the feat for a college student who has to spend most of her extra money on textbooks and utility bills. A brand new MetroCard paid for and now in hand, I slide my card through the slot in the metal turnstile in one swift move and walk through the rotating bars. I hear music playing from around the corner, so I go to investigate, only to find a man who appears to be at least in his early thirties playing guitar and singing next to a wall covered in a mosaic mural of brightly colored flowers. As I wait the five minutes for my train to cruise into the station, I listen to the man, who's now playing Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl." *Standing in the sunlight laughing, hiding behind a rainbow's wall, slipping and sliding, baby, all along the water fall with you my brown eyed girl.* Just as he reaches the chorus, my train arrives, so I scrounge up another wrinkled dollar bill, drop it into his case as he nods thanks, and scramble onto the nearest subway car. Since it's early in afternoon, around 2:30 p.m., the subway isn't yet jam-packed with people going home for the evening. I take a seat across from a young businessman in a crisp, black suit and opposite the aisle from a middle-aged mother with a small child. The lady, struggling to contain a spirited child of about three, smiles warmly at me and I smile back; the businessman merely goes about reading a newspaper. Permanently stuck to the window next to me, I read a sticker, similar to the ones found across the JMU campus, that reads, "You are beautiful." I smile even wider. As I sit there with the world racing past me—my subway train seeming to know exactly where to go in a wide maze of tunnels—I stop to think about why I love the New York subway system so much, and why I'm not upset that I've temporarily forgotten where I was planning to travel to in the first place.

As a college student who has tuition and bills to worry about, it's not that difficult to appreciate the efficiency of the subway with regards to money and time. Aside from walking, the subway is the cheapest and

quickest way to get around. With 26 routes serving 468 stations, the subway can take me anywhere in the city at a minimal cost; all I have to do is pay for a MetroCard, figure out where I want to go, hop on the appropriate subway line, and wait until I either arrive at my destination or have to transfer to another line. If I wanted to, I could even travel over thirty-one miles, from 207th Street in Manhattan to Far Rockaway in Queens, without getting out of my seat or paying one cent over the two dollar bills I pulled out of my pocket earlier (“Subways”). If I were to climb in a taxi cab and request this type of mileage, I’d be paying a minimum of thirty-eight dollars plus tip—two dollars to climb into the taxi and thirty cents for each quarter mile—assuming that it wasn’t nighttime and traffic wasn’t bad, for both of these would hike up the price even more (Gladstone and McDermott). Attempting to navigate the streets of New York on my own would be even more stressful and risky, seeing that the “combination of traffic, crazy drivers, and one-way streets makes driving a nightmare for the inexperienced” (Gladstone and McDermott). Rather than emptying out my wallet or trying to pilot my own vehicle through the countless one-way streets, I can instead pay a minimal cost, consult a map located in a subway station or car, and assure that I will still reach my destination.

While waiting, I find myself thankful for the writing and the illustrations on the walls, whether found inside of the subway car or plastered all over the station. The individuality created by each station through the graffiti and other wall art displayed there creates a unique atmosphere that is never duplicated from one station to the next. Each piece of art brings forth the essence of the person who created it, leaving a legacy behind for each person who tagged the walls with his or her own thoughts and ideas. The mosaics, ceramics, and other art forms scattered throughout the stations were initially created with the purpose of “aiding the traveler in the rapid and easy identification of his whereabouts” (New York Transit Museum 46). For example, if I look up and see a large ceramic emblem of an “industrious beaver,” I can be confident that I am standing in the middle of the station at Astor Place (Stookey 26); if I look to the ground and see a brass sculpture of an alligator chomping the legs of a man in a business suit with a bag of money for a head, I know that I’m in the station at 14th Street and 8th Avenue (Pirmann). In addition, graffiti also brings color to the otherwise dark and drably colored subway walls, giving each station its own individual character. The graffiti portrays everything from names to pictures to philosophies on life, all created in a way that makes the audience stop and think, whether by forcing them to try and interpret the words actually written, or merely to reflect upon them. I’ve come across graffiti encouraging others that “Life’s O.K.” and that the person reading the graffiti is loved or beautiful.



“Love Graffiti” (15 March 2005), photo taken at Bleeker Street Station, New York, NY
by Holly Northrop. @ [holly northrop 2005](#)

All of the different art forms found on the subway bring beauty, life, and personality to the station they call home, allowing travelers to “look back on one hundred years of surprisingly captivating art and architecture in a place where most probably never thought to look for it—the subway” (New York Transit Museum 14). Once I’m finally able to peel my eyes away from the art and history covering the walls and the floors and the ceiling, I look around me and witness what might be considered an even more intriguing sight: the people.

The diversity of the subway ensures that I come across many people of different ethnicities, professions, ages, and life experiences. Sometimes when I find myself on the subway, I like to play a little game inside my head. I love to look at a person and try to figure out what he or she is thinking and feeling at that moment, to question his or her hopes and dreams. Occasionally, I'll catch myself making up an entire life's story for that person—all because I've been confronted with the image of someone whom I have never seen the likes of before. The diversity can be overwhelming, but it makes me appreciate the subway even more. Where else can a person come face to face with individuals from all walks of life without ever moving an inch out of her seat? With over 36 percent of its population hailing from a foreign country, New York claims the title of being the most diverse city in America; in fact, "the term 'melting pot' was first coined to describe Manhattan's densely populated Lower East Side" ("New York"). These statistics hold true below ground as well as above. During my travels, I've seen African American couples cuddling in corners, Korean mothers quietly bottle-feeding their young infants, Caucasian teenagers rocking out to the music in their headphones, and Puerto Rican men dressed in their Sunday best. I've come across millionaires and homeless people, adolescents and senior citizens, blacks and whites. I've flipped a coin or two to several different musicians who may never become famous, but who are working hard to make a living with the help of "Music Under New York," which books gigs and allows acts to earn from fifty to over one hundred and fifty dollars a day (Jeffrey 11). I've stopped to watch break-dancers of about my own age showing off their moves to the beat of some hip-hop song. The subway gives me the opportunity to sit back and observe different ways of life—some preferable, some undesirable—and allows me to consider another way of approaching life that I might not have otherwise contemplated. The subway gives me a new perspective on life through the people I meet and the things I see.

So the next time you go to The Big Apple or find yourself wandering around The City That Never Sleeps, remember that there is more to the "New York experience" than just shopping and Broadway. Remember the subway with its efficiency in transportation, its art and culture, its overwhelming diversity. Maybe I need a more powerful prescription for my glasses, or maybe all of the air pollution on the surface level of New York has just gone to my head. Whatever the case may be, I find that, while everyone else around me races through the labyrinth of tunnels on their way to wherever, I can't help but stop and love every second I spend in that different kind of world, the one that shakes and trembles beneath my feet.

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