

Conrad Mahr
5/27/14
Prof Swanson
English 325-105
2, 165 Words

Identity Crisis

I love maps. City maps, state maps, world maps, you name it. New York City's subway map particularly fascinates me because the lines are so complex and the city is so huge that it's easy to get lost marveling at all the different transfers and pathways one can take. Amazingly, it cost the same \$2.50 to travel one stop, or as far as you can make it. This even includes unlimited transfers, as long as you don't leave the station. When you do this right, you can link between multiple boroughs and across the entire city. Anyways, as I looked intently at the many route options I had at the map on the subway car, I must have given off the vibe of an outsider, because within a few moments I was approached by an older man, asking if I needed help.

I hate being a tourist. When I travel to a new city, I seek an authentic experience. What interests me above all else is to see how people from different areas and other cultures live. I partially attribute my powerful fascination with cultural observation and appreciation from growing up in a relatively homogenous, outer-ring Detroit suburb. The lack of economic and racial diversity in my hometown has probably made me hypersensitive to social issues in urban areas. In order to maximize the chances of observing or experiencing a truly authentic occurrence, being unobtrusive is crucial. Or, so I thought at least. I was also a firm believer that being a tourist is an insurmountable barrier to encountering the true culture of a city.

I also love New York City. As the most cosmopolitan city in the entire world (yes, the entire world), the chance of having such an authentic experience is exponentially higher. Blending in is easy in New York. In the vast array of public spaces, people rich and poor, from every culture and ethnicity, fit in and belong. This is in stark contrast with the city of Detroit.

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There, most areas outside of Midtown and Southwest, you don't fit in if you're white. Your appearance alone makes you lose authenticity. With "suburbanite" written all over you, much like a tourist, you don't belong.

It was my fourth time in New York, and I finally felt comfortable enough navigating the subway without referencing the map. The train had come within a minute or two of waiting and I had hopped on. Relieved for there to be open seats available, I took the first one in front of me. Yet quickly realizing I had no idea where I wanted to go, I found myself standing up and moving towards the map located at the far end of the train. It was here that this older man had initiated an encounter with me.

In the brief time I was waiting in the station before the train had arrived, I had taken great pleasure imagining the different circumstances that led me to be here in Manhattan, catching the Brooklyn bound C train at the 42nd street station. Maybe I was in the midst of transferring lines, coming back from spending the weekend with my father on the Upper East Side, heading back to Brooklyn to return to where my mother lived. Or where I lived. Or where my girlfriend lived. Since there are several stops before the train crossed into Brooklyn, maybe I wasn't headed to Brooklyn at all, but rather I was headed to work downtown from way uptown. But then again, it was a Sunday, and my attire consisted of an Iron Maiden t-shirt, cut off jorts, some checkered Vans slip-ons, and a skateboard underneath my arm. So maybe I worked at a skateboard shop in lower Manhattan. Or a music store. Or whatever. The roles I could have taken on were infinite.

Having been on the train for a few minutes, I had been so caught up fantasizing these fictional roles that would relieve me of my identity as a tourist, that I must have lost track of how

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long I was actually staring at the map. I had also failed to notice that despite how empty the train was, I was standing quite close to a rugged white man with thick, oily white hair, most likely in his early 60s. It is normally an unspoken rule that strangers on the subway keep to themselves. In fact, if you are talking to strangers, most people will think you are crazy. But both this implicit social norm and notion of sanity were broken with the interruption of this man's thick Brooklyn accent, unmistakably directed at me.

“Young man, do ya know where you ah tryin to get to?”

If I had to guess, I would've said that he was Italian. There were a couple other individuals on our half of the train within ear shot, but alas, it was only I looking at the map.

What his question really meant was: “Do you know how to get to your desired destination?” Truth is, not only did I not know how to get to where I was going—I had no idea where I was even going in the first place. So no, I didn't know how to get there.

I had boarded this train with somewhere around an hour or two to kill while my dad was busy during our last day in city. I knew I wanted to go to Brooklyn, but exactly where, I hadn't decided yet. Because this was a complicated situation to explain to a stranger, and because I was in the “anti-tourist” self-sufficient mindset, I saw no reason that I needed any assistance.

I paused for a moment, collected myself, and replied, “Yeah, yeah I think I've got it all figured out. Thanks, though.”

“Are ya sure? You've been starin' at that map for an awful long while now!”

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Here I let out a good chuckle. He is right, after all. Maybe a few minutes is longer than most New Yorkers would need to spend looking at the subway map. His tone seemed friendly and almost sympathetic, as if he was hoping I needed assistance. I laughed because from my observation this was not the kind of interaction one New Yorker would have with another.

Had this man had seen right through my disguise? Was it really that obvious? For the sake of conversation, partially because I indeed was lost, and partially because I eventually would need to choose a destination, I decided to play along. I remembered hearing that Williamsburg was an interesting neighborhood. I quickly decided that if the C line ran anywhere near there, I would choose that as my destination for the hour or so I had.

“Okay, actually yeah I could use a bit of help; I’m supposed to meet up with a buddy of mine that lives in Williamsburg. I’m not from New York, but will this train take me anywhere near there?”

At this point the train was coming out of the underground and starting to climb up the bridge it was going to take over to Brooklyn. With my cover already well blown, I took no shame in moving to the other side to the man to get a good view out the window of the Manhattan skyline that we were slowly distancing ourselves from.

“Ohh no kidding I grew up around Williamsburg ya know that? But man I got bad news for ya friend, this train ain’t goin’ nowhere near Williamsburg. Ya shoulda taken the A, that one’ll take ya straight there. Honestly ya best bet might just be ta get off a the first stop in

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Brooklyn, turn around and go back to Manhattan to where you can take the A—but hold lemme check and see if there's a better way.”

The first thing that comes out of my mouth is, “Hey thanks sir, shoot I really appreciate it!” But at this point I feel a little guilty that this stranger is going above and beyond his call of duty to help me and my imaginary journey. I've whole-heartedly convinced myself that at this point that playing along is my best option—and as a result had nearly convinced myself I was actually traveling to see a friend living in Williamsburg.

A man standing nearby has overheard our conversation and he seems like the most suitable candidate for the older Italian to ask for help. I guessed correctly.

“Excuse me sir! This young man is tryin' ta get ta Williamsburg...I told him his best bet would be to take this next stop and head back inta' Manhattan where he can catch the A...is there anything else he could do?”

This man was darker in complexion, probably in his mid-30s, but with just as heavy of a Brooklyn accent. “Ohh ya ya that's a tough one...ya this train ain't gonna take ya anywhere near Williamsburg. Ya know, I'm getting off at the next stop anyways, that's where my work is at, I can take him with me to point him in the right direction. No problem.”

The Italian then talking to me said, “Where in Williamsburg exactly are you trying to go?” I somehow managed to make up that my friend lived on Clark Street. He misheard it as Hart Street, but there was no point in correcting him. He said that even though he had grown up

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there, he hadn't heard of the street. I wondered if either Clark Street or Hart Street existed in Williamsburg at all.

The darker man then asked me, "So, where are ya from?"

"Detroit sir, how about yourself?" Technically, another lie, but at this point what did it matter, it was an acceptable one.

"Ahh Detroit, well I'm Dominican but I've been here in Brooklyn my entire life." He asked me what I thought of New York and I told him how I was infatuated with it so far. We made a bit of small talk and then the two men start talking about their respective neighborhoods. Suddenly, with the jostle of the train, the glasses the Italian had been wearing fell to the floor and the glass fell out of on one of the sides.

"Oh this day, this day! Everything has gone wrong today. Every single thing since I got outta bed at seven this morning!" There was a sharp hint of sadness to his voice.

"Nonsense man you can't talk like that! You got the whole day ahead of you!" the Dominican responded.

They went back and forth for a while, but the Dominican got the last word in. He bent down and popped the glass back into the frame of the Italian's glasses.

"See! This ain't even broken! I'm tellin ya." The Italian thanked him.

"Ya know, my wife just passed a couple months ago, too much work takin care of the place myself, sometimes I don't know what to do..."

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The Dominican responded with real, heartfelt sympathy. Soon he was talking about a recent loss of his own and how it had affected his own life.

I was in awe. I couldn't believe the conversation between these two men, coming together to help me, had so quickly become so intimate. Here I had been, arrogant and naively confident in my ability to attract authentic cultural experiences as a visitor to a city. But had I not just had the most genuine encounter of my entire trip? And it had it not been a result of admitting I was tourist? I realized that on most of trips to New York, despite my attempts to seek out authentic experience, I had never participated in such a personal moment. The conversation I was a part of was raw, unfiltered, and deep. I had gotten a true glimpse into the lives of two working class New Yorkers.

The train came to a halt. "Okay follow this good man," the Italian said. "He'll take care a ya. Good luck with ya travels today."

"He's a white boy from Detroit! He'll be fine!" the Dominican assured him.

I thanked the Italian again and followed the Dominican out of the subway and after talking to the conductor he gave me a series of instructions, pointing me in the right direction of the first train. I told him it was great to meet him and wished him well on his day, and he did that same to me.

I stepped out of that subway terminal thinking about these two strangers and their shared grief. They had taught me an invaluable lesson. Sure, the purpose of visiting a friend in Williamsburg had been a lie. But just as with the lie about being from Detroit, it was an

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acceptable lie in the sense that I stayed true to my identity in a broader sense: I am an outsider to New York. It was strangely comforting not to have to pretend. Sometimes to have a real experience; it is okay to just be *real*.