

Cyd Charisse Fulton
Major New York Authors Section II
My New York Project
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MY NEW YORK

Jennifer Egan, Pete Hamill, Oscar Hijuelos, Jonathan Lethem and Sapphire, are just a few of the major New York authors I have immersed in since my studies this semester. In this paper, I reference some of them to fortify the “My New York” project.

Although I struggle with structure (which I continue to closely examine), my project is motivated by much of their styles and craft. My attempt to incorporate writing techniques of some of the authors mentioned is a far cry from their brilliance, yet I discover a voice I now realize I have. The narration and text in the many New York author books I have read stimulate me to include social references in my pieces.

Societal relevance in books is essential because it reveals that no matter the social status, problems and dysfunctions abound in some form or another. In Lethem’s book *Chronic City*, characters suffer from dependency issues as a result of excessive behavior. They depend on each other and they rely on stimulants. In Sapphire’s book *The Kid*, poverty and neglect determine a turbulent life for the protagonist. In her book, the main character wants to belong and his misguided efforts create problems. *Thoughts Without Cigarettes*, by Oscar Hijuelos uses affluence as well as oppression to stimulate emotion to describe portions of his life. At times when things go well for Oscar, he seems to sabotage his own chances as if he cannot deal with stability anymore than he can handle struggle.

New York is a character in those books as well. In Lethem’s novel, Chase and his cronies do not preserve and respect much of New York’s fine qualities due to their over indulgence and self-pity. Their drug induced demeanors warp their mindsets and New York appears over rated. In Sapphire’s book, the uphill climb and distortion of J.J. makes New York seem unsympathetic and callous. I notice similarities and differences in the mentioned work which enables me to understand reasons for structure and form. Character orchestration is something I must work on, but I am doing better when it comes to context and word choice.

Jonathan Lethem’s satirical irony emerges bold yet subtle on the page with New York natives immersed in a backdrop of New York settings. Therefore, while the characters are somewhat at play, so is Lethem’s use of language. In this case, subtext is vivid as a firefly behind onion skin.

Like Lethem, Sapphire relies on both oral and physical language to describe characters and mood. Lethem sort of beats around the bush, but Sapphire states clearly the thoughts and emotions of her protagonist to make evident his transformations. Lethem and Sapphire describe New York settings to aid in the preparation of what change is being established or hopefully will come.

The noted authors include many landmarks and areas of New York in their stories. In doing so, New York becomes personified, a character of which the other characters are threads to its fabric. The inclusion of New York with its borough babies, baptized bridges, relative roadways, peppered people and more, authenticates novels. Use of dialect is important as well. It illustrates attitude. This includes physical idiom, “body language” if you will. New Yorkers have a flavor of movement and speech all their own. Check out my influenced work:

THAT'S WHAT I'M TALKIN' 'BOUT (Pizza Shop Boogie)

Yo, let me get a slice. Put some extra cheese on that bad boy. Ay, I want it hot though, not warm. Hot! How much for Snapple? Yo, you gotta be kiddin' man. Why Manhattan stores be robbin' people man?

Hello, hello. Who dis? Yo, let me call you back son. They tryin' to rob a brotha in this pizza shop and shit. What? Yo, I'm in Manhattan muthafucka. I said I'll call you back.

Hold up! Don't put my slice in a bag. I'ma eat it right here. Yo man, where's the salt? That ain't salt man, that's garlic or some shit.

How much I owe you Poppy? You know you the man and shit right?

You got the best pizza in Manny Hanny, yo.

Whoohoo! Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' 'bout. Hot stretchin' cheese and shit. Good lookin' out Poppy.

SUBWAY ATTITUDE FOR THE HOMELESS

Night school ran longer than usual and I am late to catch the 9:30 bus at New York's Port Authority so I can get home in New Jersey before 11:00. Thank goodness trains are running on time. The E train arrives first, so I hop on. Dimples of blue hard plastic seats shine a space for me to sit. Crevices on the sides of the two-seater corner chairs are dirty and smell of homelessness. I envision a human draped in dust and lice embellished dark wool sprawled across those seats balancing a piled high shopping cart with his or her feet. Therefore, I decide to sit next to a woman who is texting like crazy on her cell phone. Her manicured nails look like red electronic dots on an office switchboard. Her right hand holds her handbag and her left holds her phone while her thumb wipes back and forth on the key pad. The train slows to a stop. The woman does not lift her head or harness her thumb, but her eyes summarily glance up past her long red tresses like a shy maiden pretending not to notice an admiring Prince Charming.

Bing Bong. This stop is Fourteenth Street. Change here for the L, A, and C trains. The next stop is Twenty-Third Street.

Automated messages get on my nerves. Most likely, they probably help people who do not know their way around the city. Sometimes, weary commuters make mad dashes to get off of the train when their sleep is interrupted by robotic voices.

For some reason, Fourteenth Street station looks animated among the bone white walls, marble black numbers and mud green support beams. Maybe it is the energy of the man singing a cappella Sam Cooke songs on the Downtown platform that paints the mood with vibrancy. Maybe it is the brass sci-fi gargoyles mounted in several directions on platform rails near stairwell tiles. At least I think they are gargoyles. It would be ridiculous if the genius who designed those rails used rodents as models for art. Their fat round behinds remind me of the rats I see scampering between the tracks sloshing through brick red water with intelligence. Their compressible bones manage not to get shocked or flattened while locomotives fret in and out of the station.

As the train approaches Thirty-Fourth Street, I get up and lean on doors on the opposite side of those about to open. I prepare myself for the next stop, Forty-Second Street. I totally ignore the PLEASE DO NOT LEAN ON DOORS adhesive sign at the crown of the panels. My shoulder braces me while I stand sideways as if that is going to make my incline any safer. The Thirty-Fourth Street crowd bum rushes to enter the train in mindless direction and absorbs all semblance of air. Now my chin floats to my chest, eyes down, and eyebrows crooked because a man in a suit faces me and widely yawns without covering his mouth. I don't want to smell his breath. It already smells like dirty air conditioner filters in this subway car. Suddenly, a melancholy cadence expounds.

Excuse me ladies and gentlemen. Due to unforeseen circumstances, I am homeless. Yes, my clothes are old and I haven't eaten all day. If you could spare some change I would greatly appreciate it.

No need for me to look in his direction. I know it is the same man who sings Marvin Gaye's ***What's Going On*** every time I ride the E train at this hour.

How 'bout you sistah?

I know he ain't talkin' to me! Finally. Forty-Second Street. I'm outta here.

HOMELESS EASTER

The dreams your cave contains are like doorstops never kicked.
When it rains, your skin spits soot for occasional coins.
For asylum, you muscle wool into make-shift condos scorned
by cardboard carpets in shanty town posture.
You can't even get water when you want.

Boots don't bother blood sitting curbside.
There are no walls for butterfly art, only sun
to see veins surge against Venus.
No cart for you this month, just bags of mustard clothes.
You can't brag when you want.

You flick pests and stick precious underneath your sleep.
How many brownies, if any, can you keep hot in winter?
Devoured fingernails,
lopsided chin,
elbow...
You thought you bought candy for children who twist hair.
Can't despair when you want?

You want glass arms and rock glares to visit whispers that babies
reach for when wheels vault on paved gardens above sewers.
You want peaches and hoppin' john to say prayers at your feet
because carrots with blended cream hurt your belly.
Silly, bunnies live in holes not caves.

WHERE AM I?

Is this Brooklyn? The Brooklyn I grew up in? Oh, they don't call it Bed Stuy anymore? Where did all of these White people come from? Do they know where they are? Don't they know they better not jog around here after dark? Do they think the projects are condos or something? Could it be, they heard Jay-Z is building an athletic arena on Atlantic Avenue, so they think it is safe? What happened to all of the pizza shops and Chinese restaurants? Didn't the B54 Myrtle Avenue bus go pass the Fort Greene Projects to Jay Street? The Marriott cuts off Myrtle Avenue? What the fuck is Metro Tech anyway? Fort Greene Park closes at a certain hour now? Why?

SOUND NAG

Broadway and West Fourth Street samba
for donut carts, mamas to hot dog stands.
Lunch for three dollars resonates louder than pitch
and louder than asphalt arms squeezing commuter winds.

Displaced trombones from New Orleans cake-walk
past subway stations and storefronts. Come on somebody!
Guitar strums and white basin drums bolster clusters
of back packs and strollers in Washington Square Park.

Bom bom beat, bom beat greases against loins
as Africa calls Djembe fanga back to its labor.
Repetitive blood and competitive sweat nudge cool arson
around open banjo cases for coins and bills to play dead.

New York reeks of evicted jamboree and overpricing.
Tsk, tsking earbuds never notice must have handbags
when lashes are down and volume is up. Necks curtsy
to a bass tempo as outside ears suck treble.

It is sound New Yorkers stomp and pout about.
Its unrivaled pulse keeps them alive.
New York IS what it is.

New York is
an airplane engine that rambles, towering over high-rises with resounding rumble.

New York is
train rails sampling streets to screeching stops so uptown and downtown can swap neighbors.

New York is
a taxi transmission whose banana body blasts crab cake pedestrians and hustles potholes.

New York is
night blinks on concrete stalks in boroughs whose fireworks talk to the Hudson.

New York is
the scuff and splat of skateboard daredevils swerving past skin tight angels.

New York is supposed to be heard,
so shut up.

BOY

I had a name but now I'm boy.
My address was fourteenth floor,
Buildin' Five in the projects
in Brownsville Brooklyn.

Magic marker I put on I.S. 33 bafroom
wall made stuff diff'rent for me.
I'm ten, ain't even sure when to say
numbers or my last name first.

Always gotta git on a bus
to go wherever.
Now, boy gits over here,
shuts up and sits down, hurries up too.

Group Home is house, don't know street.
Food in lunchroom goes fast.
Slow chew ain't easy 'cause
front teeth got knocked back
when boy akst for more o' somethin'.

I don't like bein' called no boy.
Boy reminds me of the time Uncle Jake had red
junk drippin' down his forehead tellin' Moms
how cops treated him like some kinda boy.
Guess they got diff'rent kinds.

Boy, reminds me o' the time my Pops'
sleeve smashed snot on my face
'cause I cried to go to the movies.
Pops said *shut up boy*.
I don't hear his voice no more.

I cry and smile when I smell
Moms on my back pack.
She smelt like salt and cookies
the day she said *boy git outta
my face and go to school*.

Moms was too busy gittin' faded.
She forgot to tell me I was goin'
somewhere diff'rent and I bedda not
aks for nothin' when I git there.

Seem like boy don't mean good.
Mean people say boy in a mean way.
I ain't mean, I'm twelve. Ain't even sure
when to say numbers or my last name first.

Ain't even sure how long I'ma be at group home.
Pro'ly won't see the projects or I.S. 33 no more.
Brownsville pro'ly too far for Moms to come see me
'cause on visit days, nobody calls my name.

WASHINGTON IN NEW YORK

Miss Washington is a single parent to her six year old son Zeke. They live in the eclectic Lower West Side of New York in the Village. The spring leaves on trees expand and green consumes the wind. Alternate side of the street parking rules are disregarded as cars are parked on both sides of the streets near early morning steam from pothole yawns. They trace curbs on each side like police barricades during a parade.

Miss Washington's third floor apartment is under construction since a year ago and every now and then the electricity goes out. She bears with such interruptions because she cannot afford the rent anywhere else in New York and she refuses to live in public housing.

Wednesdays are half days for Zeke's school, so on occasion she and her son travel to the Upper East Side. Most times it is to meet her best friend whom she calls Cousin Paula. Paula is the mistress of the Mayor of New York. Her hourglass frame sneaks attention through her business suits, yet she invites Miss Washington and Zeke to public events with the Mayor to masquerade her true intent. Miss Washington is aware of the charade, but marvels in being temporarily a part of social status.

The Mayor has several houses and chooses not to reside in the usual residence where most mayors dwell during their terms. Nonetheless, he allows the public to visit the historical building where floor to ceiling windows reveal its faux elegance.

Every now and then the mayor has official business inside the edifice after which he privately rendezvous with Paula. Without hesitation, Miss Washington revels in the enchantment every chance she gets.

Today is Monday, but schools are closed for Memorial Day. Therefore, Miss Washington and Zeke are able to meet Cousin Paula uptown at 11:30am. They scramble to get dressed as Miss Washington makes sure her hair chemical enhanced hair is curled and Zeke's special occasion shoes are shined. She plans to catch the M82 and transfer to the M86 and ride it to the last stop. "Come on Zekie. Hurry up. We are going to miss the bus" she laments.

"Coming" Zeke shouts as he decides which action figure to bring.

They arrive at 86th Street and East End Avenue at 11:20am. Cousin Paula is nowhere in sight. Miss Washington decides to stand across the street from the bus stop so she can see people walking in all directions. Women in designer garb whose strides are as delicate as their perfume in mid air. Men with high nose stride and facial expressions of purpose sniff past life's true meaning. The color of the men's suits, shoes and hair is their only distinction from each other. Their little boy admiration is manifest in their middle-aged charm.

Like most six year old boys, Zeke talks a lot. On the buses, his knees pinch and burn on the seats. He asks a million questions while looking out of the window, watching his reflection, a part of every New York scene as adventure wipes by. Now he talks about everything and everyone his eyes wander upon. The grassy gasoline scent of the sky intoxicates him. His mother shushes him mid sentence just to get a word in edge wise.

"Zekie you need to listen to me now," she interrupts. Do me a favor and help me keep an eye out for Cousin Paula. She should be getting off of the next M86 bus that arrives across the street. Okay?"

Zeke feels important because he has a job. He stands at attention like a soldier.

"Okay Mom."

He remains stiff and quiet for all of thirty seconds. He looks behind him at a big house and admires its wrap-around porch. It reminds him of the outdoor track on the roof of NYU's Coles Sports Center on Mercer Street. At home he stands near a window he is not allowed to touch and watches people the size of action figures run the span atop the University gym. Imagining himself on the massive porch, he thinks to himself, *I bet I can run around that whole porch five times without getting tired, but I know Mom won't let me.*

“Mom, let’s go to that building so we can sit down and wait for Cousin Paula. I promise I won’t jump around in there,” Zeke assures as he points to his fantasy.

“No Zekie.”

“How come?”

“Because I said so. Did I not tell you, no one lives in that house right now. It is just for meetings and public functions? Plus we will not be able to see Cousin Paula in there.”

“Isn’t her friend in a meeting in that house? Won’t she know to walk over there if she doesn’t see us?”

“It is a surprise for him Zekie. We are all going to lunch after his meeting.”

“How much longer? I’m hungry already?”

His mother bends down and begins to talk in his ear through clinched teeth. “If I tell you one more time to be quiet Zekie, you are going to be in a world of trouble. You understand?”

Zeke reluctantly nods in private refusal to continue to help watch for the next M86 bus. A slight breeze brushes his ears and forehead. It makes him feel it is okay to speak.

“Mom,” Zeke rings out.

His mother does not respond and looks forward as if watching a fire.

“If no one lives in that big house, maybe we could tell the lady, who sits in front of the bank like a yoga teacher, to come here. She could bring her friends and that man who walks around wearing a cape that looks like a blanket.”

“Zekie, I do not want you talking to those people. You understand?”

“I don’t, but you do.”

“No I do not Zekie.”

“So then how do you know the lady’s name who sits in front of the bank?”

“I do not know her name Zekie.”

“You mean, you forgot,” he assures. “I almost forgot too. You told me her name is Tracy. Remember?”

“No, I do not remember and I do not care what I may have told you. Do not speak to any of those people, they are strangers. Do you understand?”

He sullenly nods suffering from acute boredom. Suddenly, a thought brings him to life. “Mom, that house is probably hers anyway.” Zeke ignites with a smile.

Reluctant to react his mother asks, “her who Zekie?”

“Tracy. The lady who sits in front of the bank like a yoga teacher.”

His mother’s eyes roll half way up as she takes a deep breath. Zeke continues his thought. “That big house is probably hers and she can invite the man with the blanket to visit.”

“Why in the world do think that beautiful house is hers? She does not have anything Zekie. That is why she sits in front of the bank asking for money.”

“She doesn’t ask,” Zeke defends. People just give her money. You gave her five dollars and she didn’t ask you for money.”

“Do not worry about those people Zekie. They know how to take care of themselves.”

The breeze that once brushed Zeke’s forehead begins to softly stroke the back of his neck. “I know Mom, ‘cause you told me that that big house is hers.”

Short tempered, his mother stomps, “I never told you any such thing Zekie. Do not tell fibs. It is wrong.”

“I’m not fibbing. You told me the big house is Tracy’s man son.”

Humor softens her tone as she enunciates, “Gr, Gr, Gracie Man, sion, Gracie Mansion Zekie. Not Tracy’s man son.”

“Okay then, let’s ask Cousin Paula to ask her friend to ask Gracie to ask all the people with boxes, blankets and yoga classes to come here if they don’t have a house. I bet that building could hold a lot of people.”

Zeke's mother bends to hug Zeke with zest and pride. "I am proud of you Zekie because you care about people. You are a fine little boy with a compassionate heart."

Zeke wiggles himself free and yells "Here comes Cousin Paula." He stands directly in front of his mother and says, "Since her boyfriend is important, she can ask him today to send someone to pick up all the people with no place to go and bring them here. Gracie might be at the meeting too. It's her house."

Zeke's mother feels her cousin will get a kick out of it, so she tells Zeke, "make sure you give Cousin Paula a kiss first then ask her about it."

SUN DAY DONOR

Park Medical is on an avenue
where square shade conquers sunlight
Once, Jacqueline Kennedy adjusted her sunglasses
to catch a cab on its very corner
Seems classy enough
I think I will go there
to shamelessly give away blood

People from housing projects
in Brooklyn who go downtown
to cancel mistakes come home
crooked and pierced
I am not people
I am a pot of dirt where split seeds
plunge without spite

I know I can't take care of flowers
fostered on one root
so I take a ride uptown
with plague in supple stride
My tongue dries purple
as my mind sips
where I come from

I come
from a single mother whose singed destiny
bitters her roses. Their thorns bruise me

I come
from lows and more lows
of never ending brittle

unprotected in living rooms where
children play in smoke as talk shows babysit
their mothers

Where I come
from, sunshine is nose cold, yet no one
cares about my unknown,
not even me
Dignity slides down my sleeve near Park Med's revolving doors
where picket line voices taunt my stomach's audacity
and dents my armor with Planned Parenthood pamphlets

But...
So what?
I shamelessly give away blood anyway
The sun tries to hold me up
on my way home,
but
shade leans on me too hard

MANHATTAN TO BROOKLYN

My favorite way to Brooklyn
from Manhattan is the Williamsburg Bridge.
Delancey Street whore, painless to penetrate.
Its narrow spine keeps traffic
slim, bigheaded to impatient rages,
symptoms of late
scurry. No bicycles dare.
No pedestrians ford.
J, M or Z trains
soar over Luger steaks
and languished lofts.
Brooklyn Queens Expressway
is Broadway's gateway.
Broadway minus Manhattan's
razzle dazzle marquis.
Bushwick Avenue takes
shortcut babies.
The East River is heartless.