

HORSING AROUND: A COMPANION FOR THE URBAN EXPLORER



CHRISTOPHER “BOWTIES” MILLER & COCONUT

What is my exploration?

I am a walker. What began as dog-walking in rural Pennsylvania slowly grew into an academic practice in which I seek to find myself in poetic situations and document my travels around Boston.

My current iteration began with an alignment of opportunities:

- 1.** The Billerica Yankee Doodle Festival celebrates the American Revolution song in which one goes to town riding on a pony.
- 2.** I can ride a "pony" i.e. walk with a hobby horse to the Festival.
- 3.** Dada means "hobby horse," thus calling back to the precedent walking art of the Dada Visite.

So I ordered a horse - and a feathered 18th century tricorne hat to complete the song.

Yankee Doodle went to town
A-riding on a pony,
Stuck a feather in his cap
And called it macaroni.

Who is my companion?

Coconut is of the finest only breed with 2-day shipping to Cambridge, MA:

Linzy Hobby Horse, Galloping Sounds with Adjustable Telescopic Stick, Brown, 36", All New Polyester, Made In China, for Ages 3 And Up

Named for the galloping sound created by banging coconuts together in Monty Python & The Holy Grail, Coconut is destined for a career of situational comedy.



A quick photo before our first walk.



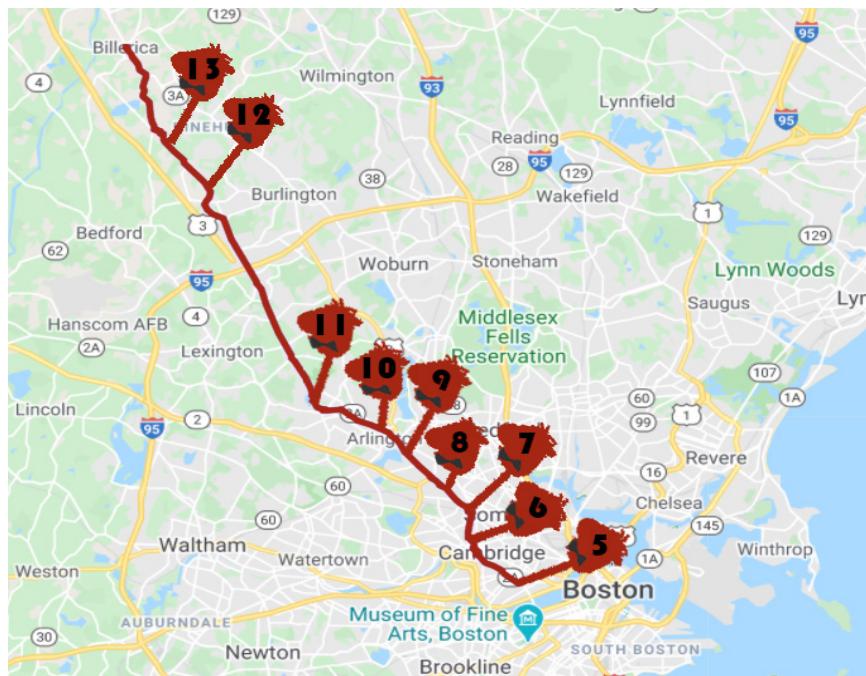
Cambridge-Billerica

2020-09-20

18.9mi/30.4km

The Billerica Yankee Doodle Homecoming Festival honors Thomas Ditson of Billerica who was tarred and feathered by the redcoats in 1775 - after which the song Yankee Doodle became a pro-revolutionary hymn.

Due to the pandemic, the Festival with its exciting tar-and-feathering reenactment was cancelled. Just as well, Coconut and my hat arrived one day late. Neither stopped us from walking to it.



We over-prepare for the big day with the best MIT Dining has available for brunch: bagels.

What we'll carry is simple:

- Masks to fend off coronavirus
- A colonial hat to mark the occasion
- A camera to document
- 2 bottles of Vitamin Water to keep hydrated

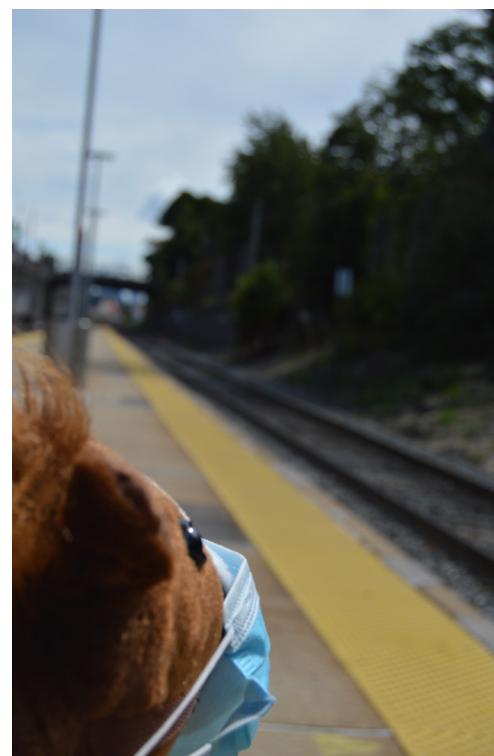




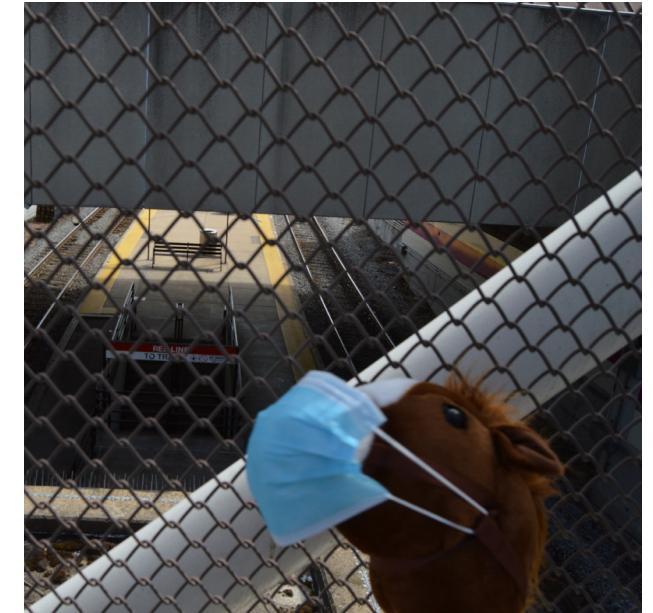
By Harvard Yard, I am wearing the hat to avoid the morning sun. Coconut stops to drink out of a well to find it is only a monument.



By Porter Square,
Coconut is
toppling over.



But is enthused by
the idea of the mighty
train and its many
horsepower.



At the Alewife Linear Park, we rest in the shade.

At this point, a woman asks if she can take a picture of us to send to her friend. Her friend always wanted a pony as a child so she bought her a very similar hobby horse.



But the innocence of childhood doesn't last long:
In this park in Arlington,
I must introduce Coconut to the realities of war.





Horses are banned from the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway, so Coconut disguises himself.



Coconut is concerned for a safety of a cat, but I'm more concerned about the coyotes.





Not much scenic lies in the strip malls and office buildings past the I-95 Corridor except the odd overgrowth or misplaced construction debris.



Our journey to Billerica ends along the Middlesex Turnpike - with its multi-year road rehabilitation project.



BMT I: lechmere-airport

11.7mi/18.2km

2020-10-10

Interpreting the previous walk as a parody of colonial reenactment, we can easily enter postmodern discourse about colonialism.

Since the previous walk, I have signed Coconut up for such a large-scale walking project: The BMT.



What is the BMT?

The Boston Metropolitan Trail is a project by Boston-area academics to write walking paths which explore the diverse expansion of the city rather than follow a popular tale of colonization.

BOSTON METROPOLITAN TRAIL MANIFESTO:

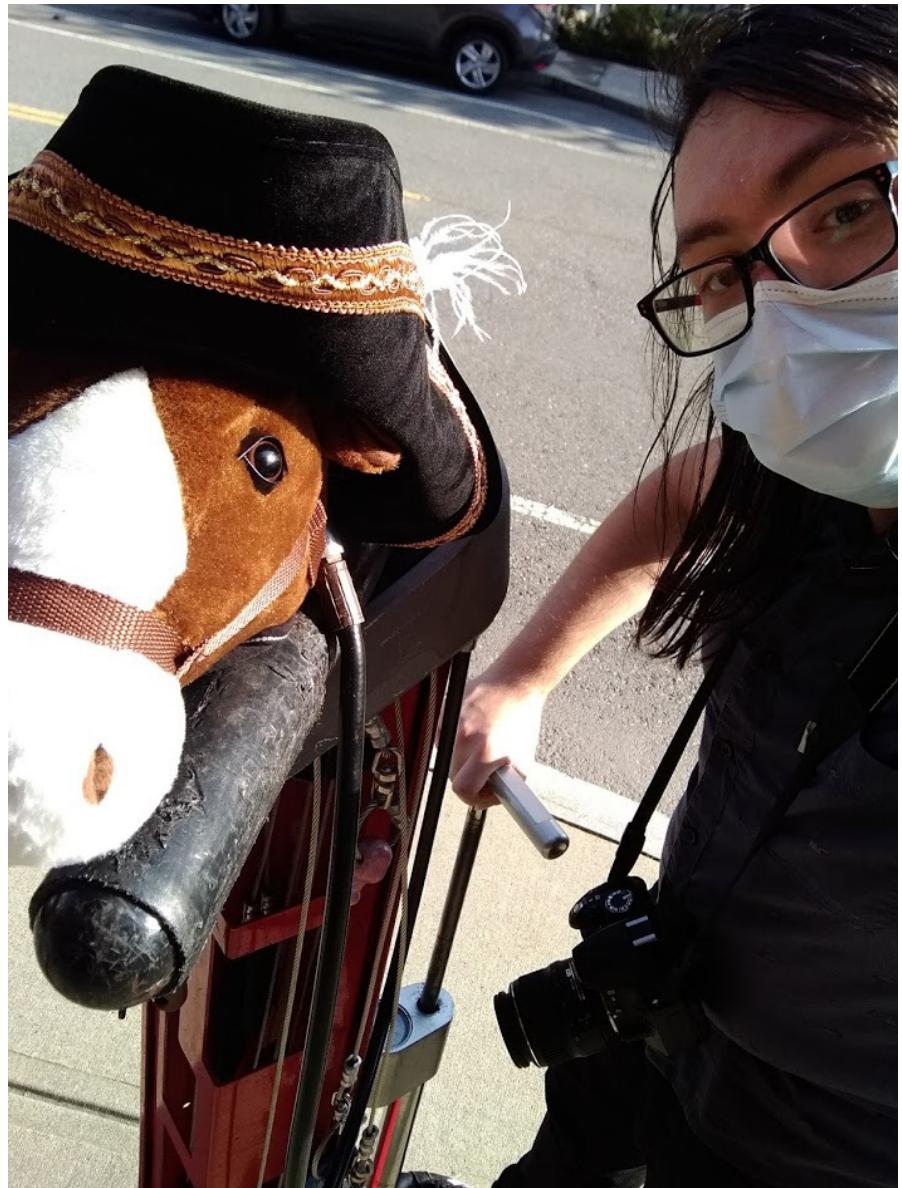
- 1)** Walking is not only a complement, but sometimes an alternative to transit.
 - 2)** The city of today is more suburban than urban.
 - 3)** The image of the city is still dominated by settler-colonial, racist fantasies.
- ...





The project's epoch lies at 9AM in the
(old) Lechmere station.

We moved slowly, playing with nearby
architecture, in case any other walkers
arrived.



It turns out the bicycle emerged from a hobby
horse with wheels called the dandy horse.
So inflating Coconut is not as surreal as you
may expect.





Choosing a companion who is not a dog provides numerous loopholes for colonizing private property.



In Charlestown, Coconut enlists a trusty steed to conquer the New World.



We spy on Coconut's childhood friends at the suspicious colony in Everett, MA known as Amazon Fulfillment.





Disaster strikes as we catch a breeze on the US-1/Tobin Bridge off-ramp.

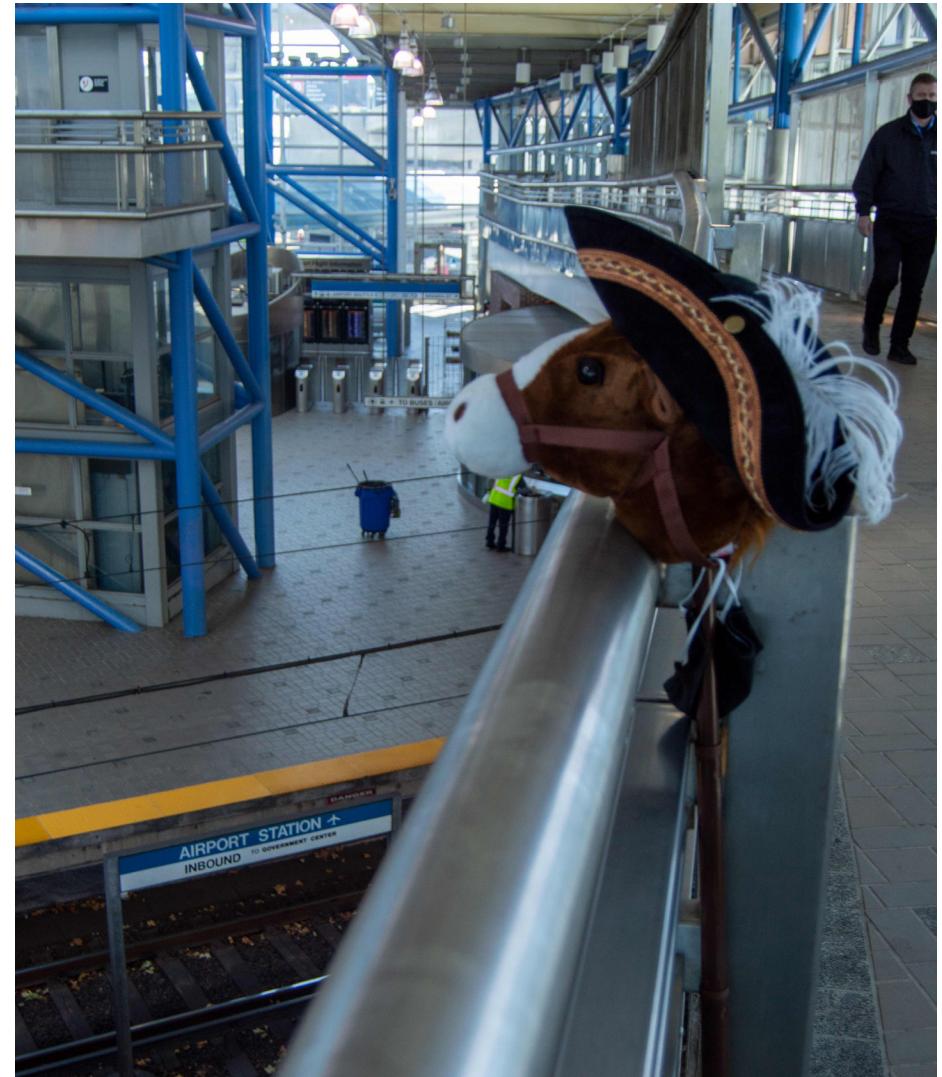


To celebrate recovering the hat, we play daringly with the geometry of some public art.





At last - a plane.



Airport station is lacking in victory celebrations for today's multi-modal explorers.





After 30 hours of walking, I decide to invest another 4 to provide my companion with a set of legs to stand on. Luckily, I still have staff access to the Edgerton Center Student Project Lab during the pandemic.

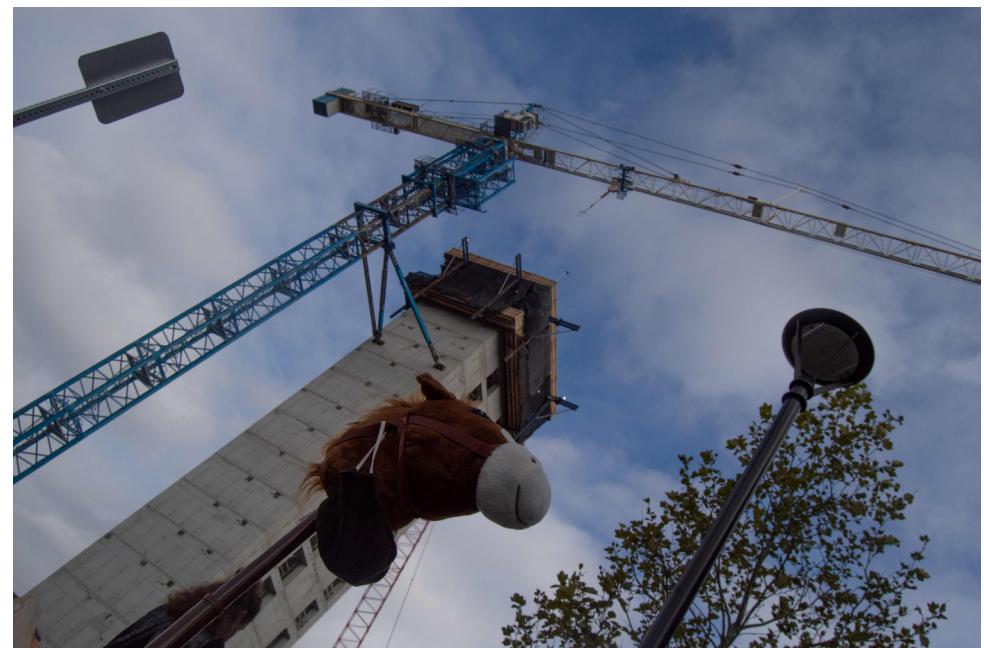
BMT II: lechmere-alewife

10.7mi/17.2km

2020-10-24

This walk is meant to traverse the hills - ideally within only a few hours. Due to waiting for the documentation and exploration of all 10 walkers, it takes nearly all day.

We no longer bring the hat because A.) I'm focusing more on Coconut as my companion rather than a portrayal of colonization and B.) I forgot it.



With newfound legs, Coconut stands freely in conquering posture like the tower crane.





Who is walking with us?

Kwan Queenie Li - Lara's advanced class TA; MIT ACT'22

Hilton Simmet - PhD student in Public Policy and STS at Harvard

Me and Coconut - MIT physics senior; ACT minor

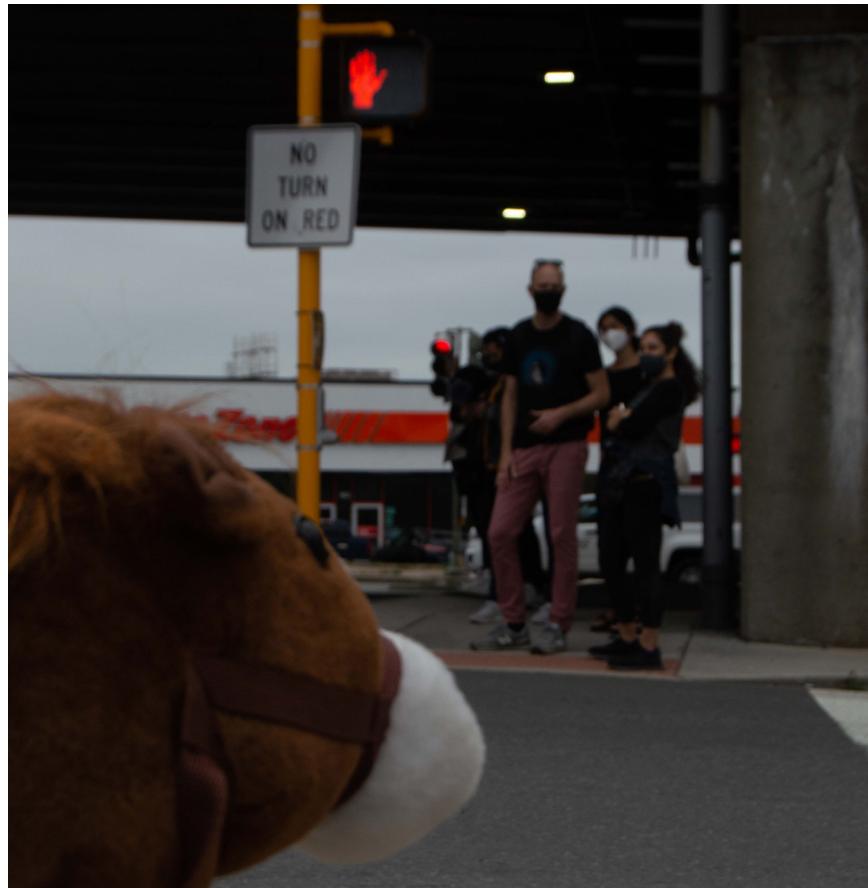
Pascal Menoret - Founder of BMT project; anthropology professor at Brandeis

Lara Baladi - my photography lecturer; MIT ACT

Carina (sp) - Catherine's friend

Catherine Lie - MIT M. Arch '20; former photography student

Chucho (Jesus) Ocampo-Aguilar - MIT ACT'21; introduced me to walking art



I teach my companion to follow me in ignoring crossing signals, leaving the rest of the pack behind -
Atleast until we reach stairs which are frightening to many companion creatures.



We constantly find popular representations of animals from which Coconut tries to gain wisdom.
My only wisdom to the group is the history of the Chex Mix upon which I'm snacking while waiting.



Legs give Coconut the stability to conquer his fears.

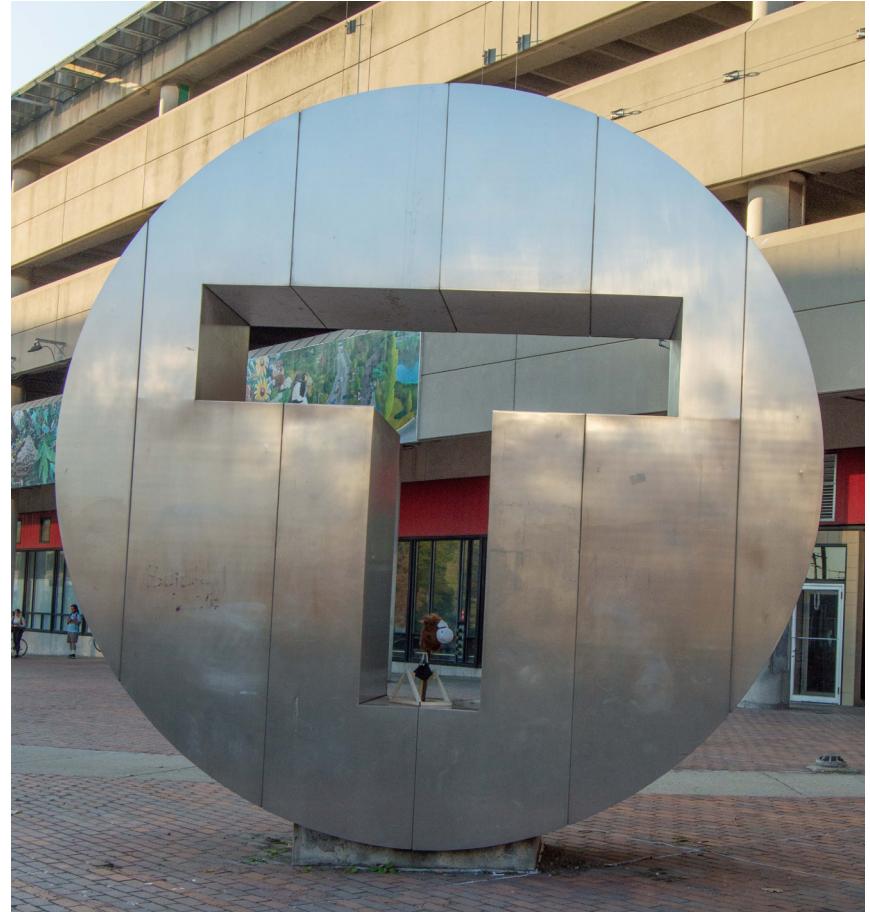
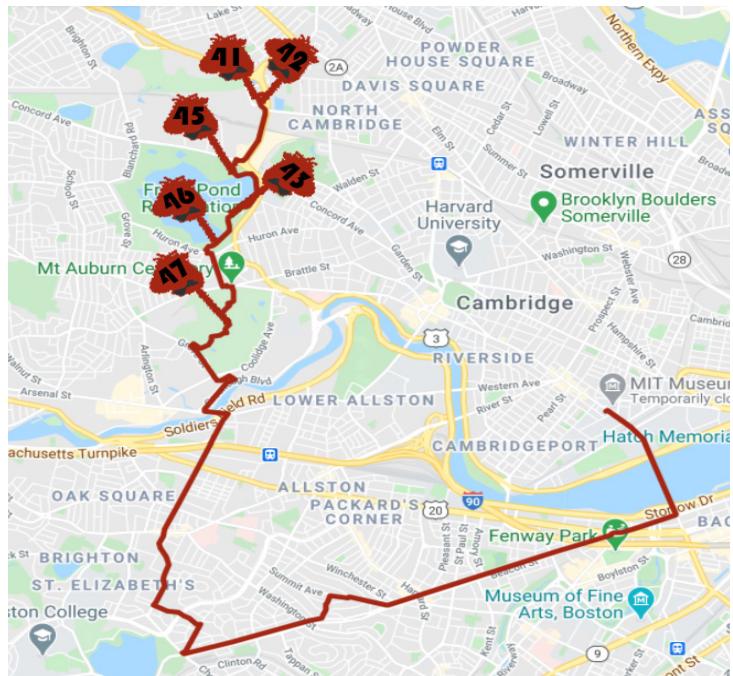
BMT II½: alewife-cleveland circle

10.1 mi/16.3 km

2020-11-04

From our own desire to walk, we make our way around our water supply at Fresh Pond through Mt. Auburn Cemetery before dark. This is technically part of the trail but we travel unscheduled.

Not pictured is our bad idea to climb the stairs up the steepest part of Corey Hill on the way back.



The signage at Alewife is fitting for a station named after a brook named after a fish named after the idea that the wife of a tavern owner eats too much...





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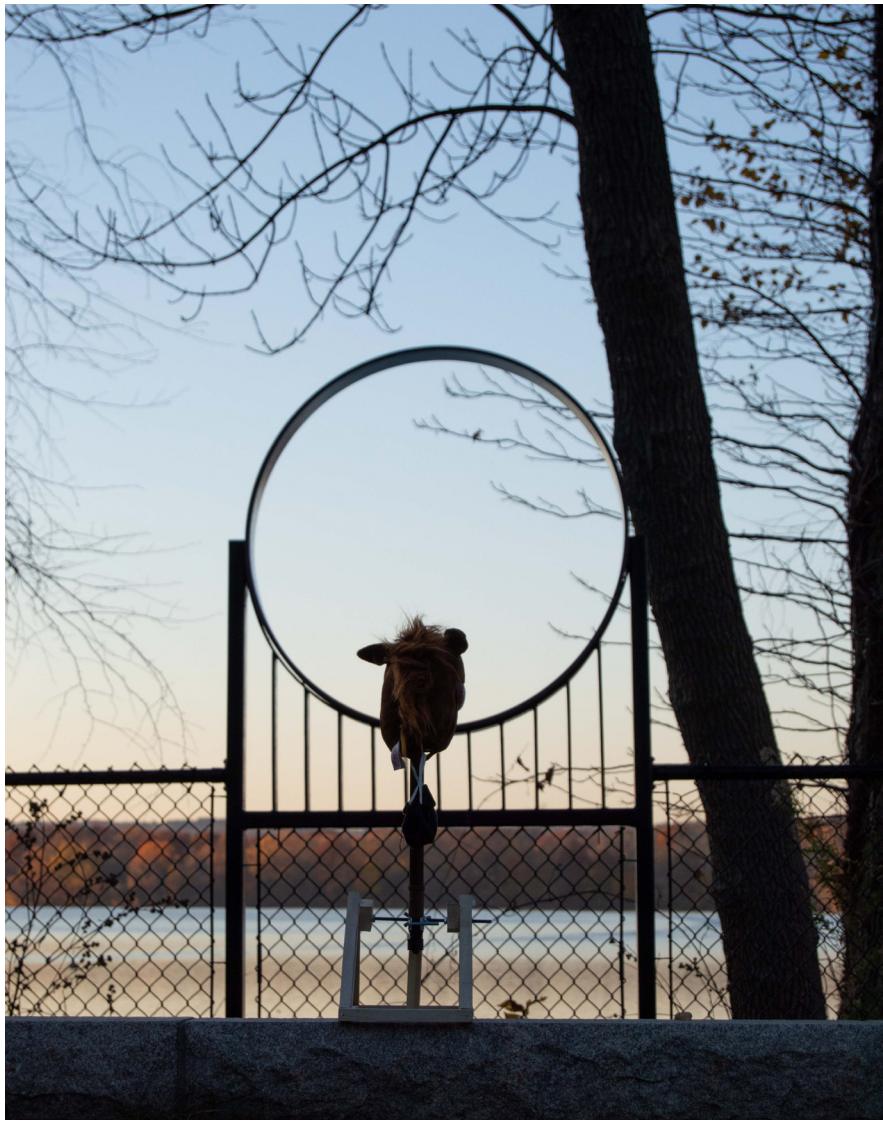


Willingness to trespass is a necessary trait for the companion of any explorer.

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At Fresh Pond, my companion commandeers another mighty steed while coming to terms with the technological world and its many horsepower.



Coconut still has a lot to learn and spends his time gazing as the sun sets on our last moments between our water supply at Fresh Pond and the obscure Sphinx at Mt. Auburn Cemetery.

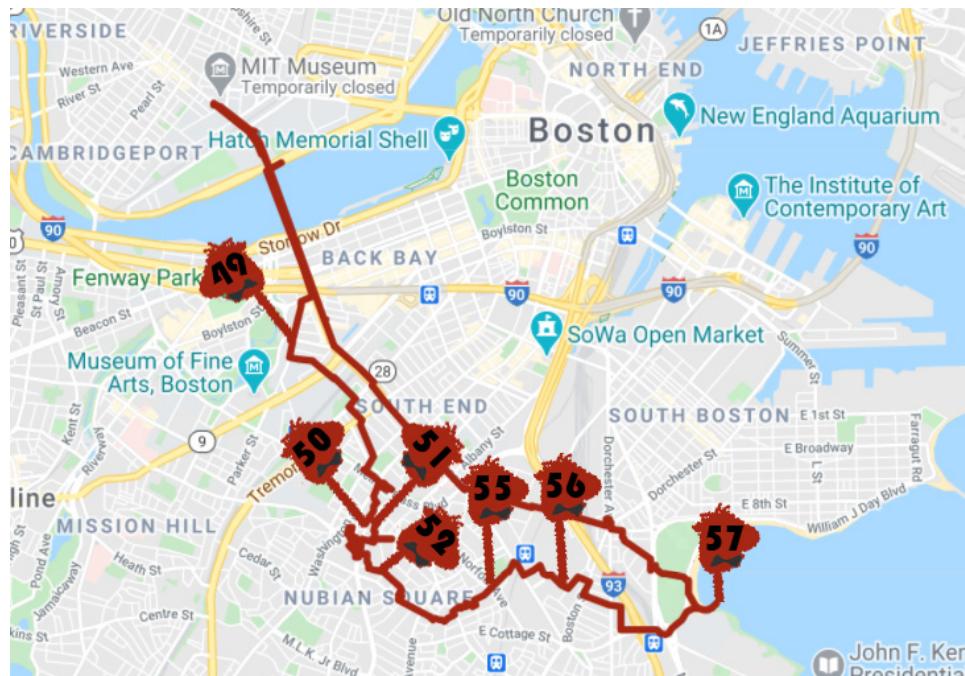
BMT III: MIT-nubian-JFK

11.7mi/18.8km

2020-11-21

The goal is to travel to the beach from Nubian (formerly Dudley) Square. Most of the time is spent walking to/from MIT.

I decided to give Coconut a bowtie instead of a mask to appear more sophisticated.



In the Fens, Coconut wonders if today's lion and last week's Sphinx may provide profound wisdom known only to cats.





Waiting for the crew in Nubian Square, we pace about the rough neighborhood where the phones are missing and the park is full of needles.



On a break, while the others talk about urban planning and dating, I show Coconut how to play in a pile of leaves - always an annual tradition for my family photo album.



After a dull half-hour waiting at a community garden for one walker to grab basil, we are on our way again as we run into an elderly donkey planter .



Ignoring the odd looks from the Wahlburgers waitress, I let Coconut use a grown-up straw.



Arriving at the beach, Coconut teases about jumping in and testing my knowledge from my required MIT swim class 3 years ago.





After presenting this work on Decemeber 8th for MIT's 4.341 Intro to Photography, I was still in need of a photo of the city. Thus, on December 16th, we travelled to Route 2 in Arlington, MA for the cover photo.

Like most carry-on animals, Coconut usually sits calmly in a bag.
This time, however, the Red Line was empty and stopped, so I let him onto the seats.

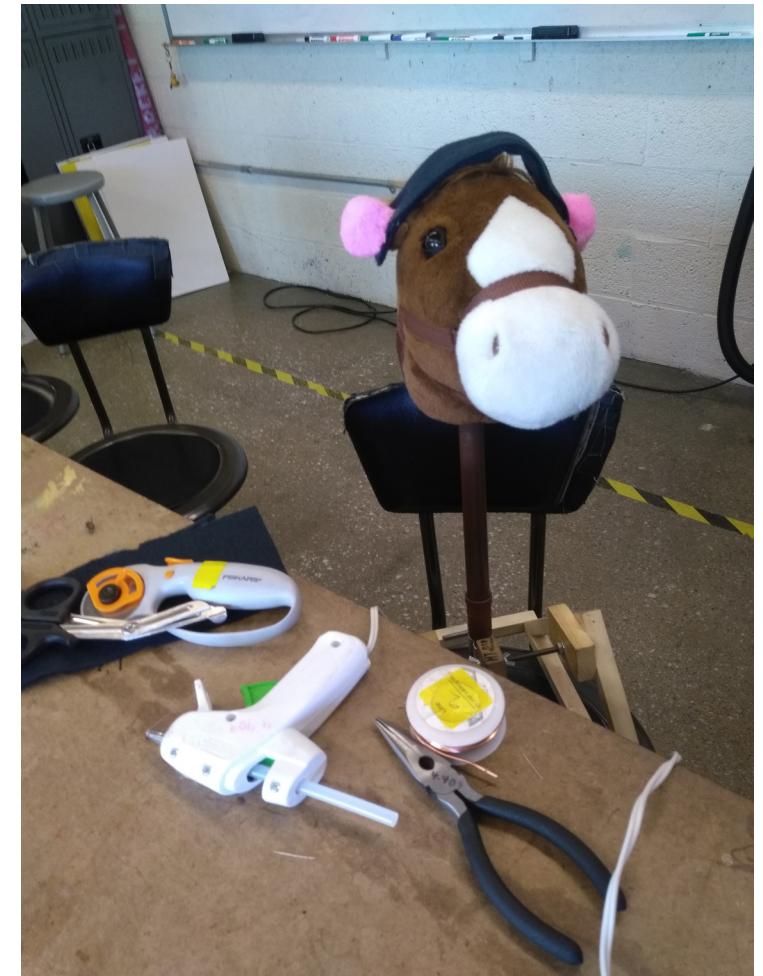
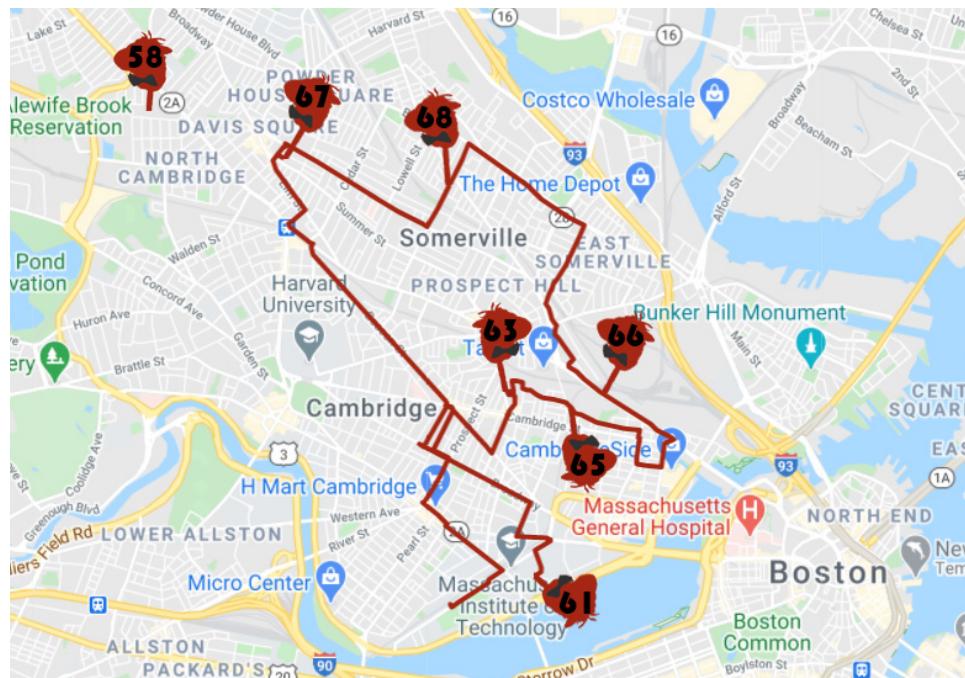


BMT IV: lechmere-Oak Grove?

12.0mi/19.3km

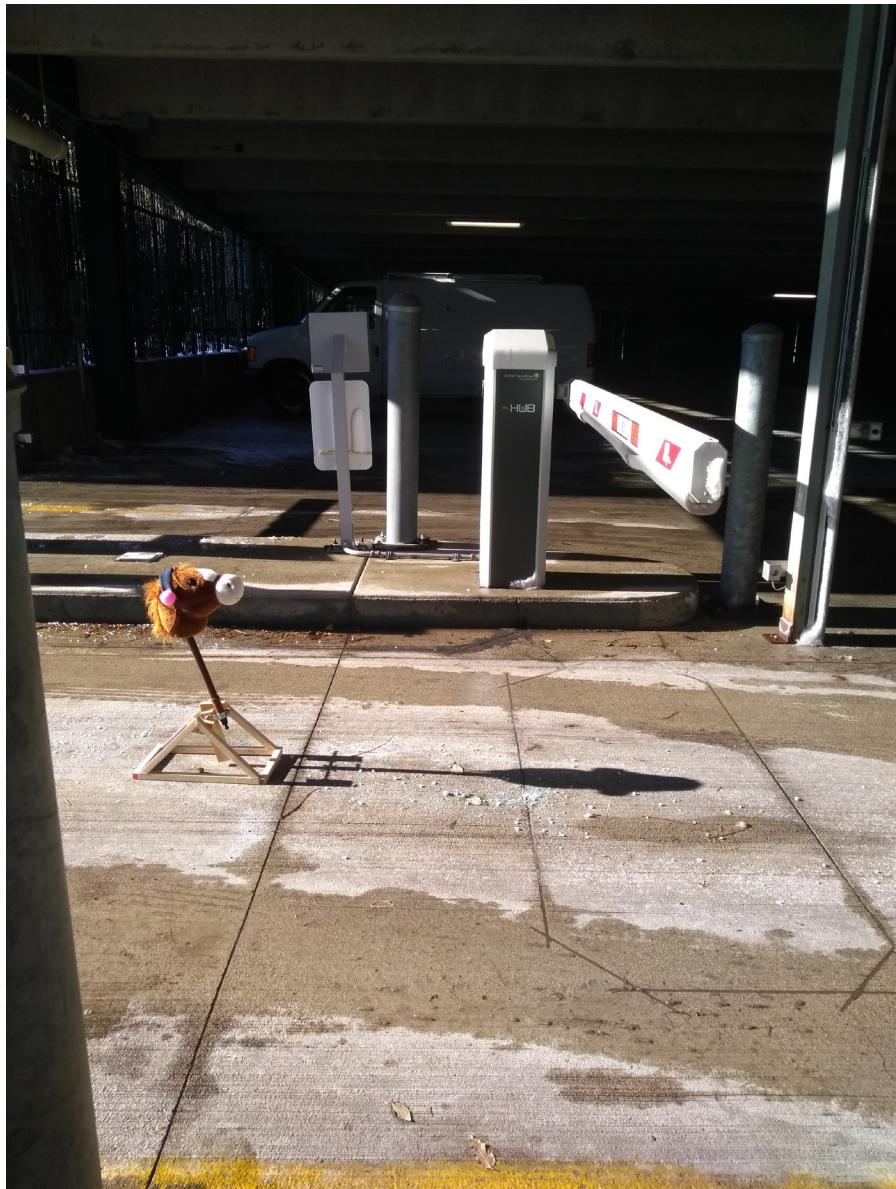
2020-12-19

Ultimately, the temperature was below freezing and the foot of snow on the ground was intermittently plowed so everyone's shoes became wet. The group thus ironically decided on a 45 minute uphill detour to a restaurant in Davis Square to warm up. Afterwards, nobody was willing to carry on to Oak Grove.



To make sure he stays warm, I rush into MIT to build Coconut a pair of earmuffs.





The group decided to detour up a 4-story parking garage to check out the view after the season's first snow storm.
If only the gates would open.





Photobombing the birds.



After his first taste of human food, Coconut cannot help himself but sniff it out. Cherishing the taste of soda, he volunteers to guard our drinks.





Coconut must be dreaming to have met Amazon's Choice for "Christmas unicorn yard decoration".

The Present

To explore the city in relation to new contexts, I documented travels while developing a relationship with my hobby horse, Coconut. I was hoping to remain structured in my documentation while searching for poetic situations in which to place my companion.

Overall, a hobby horse makes for a great addition to the practice of the contemporary urban explorer by providing a companion perspective on the city. Otherwise, one could easily skip past those elements/images/experiences most valuable for their attributes in relation to an animal/vehicle/child/reenactor.

Surely other companion species fulfill a similar role such as a live dog - but the hobby horse itself falls into a history of play and art as well as the narrative of New World colonization. Thus these narratives can be easily rewritten by documenting a journey with such a companion.

The Future

Many segments of the BMT remain to explore with Coconut - as do many other possible walks through the city of Boston and elsewhere - and Coconut is sure to come along.

