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July 6, 2016

Lost in Williamsburg

An Asian mother in her 40s pulled out a cup of bubble tea, got rid of the plastic wrapper and stuck the straw into the cup. She handed the cup to her 8-year-old son sitting next to her, and her son opened his hands, caught the plastic cup, and lowered his head. In the black tea mixed with milk, bubbles slowly moved up through the straw into his mouth. The mom started to talk, in a voice that nobody could hear when the cacophony of the outdated wheels grinding against the rail overwhelmed eardrums. The thin, long lights in the dark tunnel gave way to strong and persistent sunlight. Faraway, mist blurred the edges of buildings.

With the shaking of the cabin, the J train stopped at Marcy Avenue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Williamsburg borders Greenpoint to the North, Bedford-Stuyvesant to the south, Bushwick, East Williamsburg, Ridgewood, Queens to the east, and Fort Greene and the East River to the west. Through the Williamsburg Bridge on the East River, ten thousand vehicles shuttle between East Manhattan and Williamsburg every day, connecting a borough crammed with tall buildings with a small neighborhood that is the new melting pot of New York.

In the train station, dark green bars divided the white wall into squares. Yellow, blue, green, and red triangle-shaped pieces of glass were mixed into concentric circles. Going down the platform through the narrow zig-zag stairs, Williamsburg finally stood in front of your eyes. Train tracks expanded high above the sky, shadowing the Broadway street beneath them. Water dropped from the edge of the railway covered with dark yellow rust. Deafening hip-pop music echoed in the street with the roar of Mustang engines. To the right, three kids were playing basketball in a small court. To the left, pink roses grew in the yard of an apartment with red bricks. A flag hung on the apartment window; A white star rested in a blue triangle, and among red and white strips, it printed "Puerto Rico."

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Williamsburg was originally inhabited by a group of American Indians who planted corns and tobacco and fished in the rivers. The Dutch came to Manhattan in the early 1600s and began to buy lands across the river. By the 1680s, the native people had lost all claims to the heavily forested landscape, the beginning of foreign immigration. After the Revolutions of 1848, Western European Jews from Alsace-Lorraine and Germany were established in Williamsburg, and World War II made refugees from war-torn Europe stream into Brooklyn, including the Hasidim whose populations had been devastated in the Holocaust, Hispanics from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Thousands of second-generation Americans fled from the overcrowded slum tenements of Manhattan's Lower East Side and came here through the Williamsburg Bridge in the early twentieth century. It soon became the most densely populated neighborhood in the United States.

Walking along Bedford Avenue, people were drawn to the loud electroclash music from two big black acoustic speakers on the front step of the Sweet Chick. A man with mop-top haircuts, a bow tie, and suede chukka boots, held a microphone and shook his body while looking at the crowds in front of him. The crowds blocked the crossroad at 8th Avenue; there were young girls in fashionable yellow and blue bikinis talking and laughing, a group of five middle-aged man around a small desk eating chicken legs and salads on their plastic red plates, and tourists simply standing there enjoying the music.

Some of the best parties in New York City go down in Williamsburg for its live music, new bands, and hipster scenes. The neighborhood was the hub for indie music and the birthplace of electroclash, a genre fostered by self-styled New York celebrity Larry Tee and his Berliniamsburg parties. Unlicensed performance and music venues operated in abandoned industrial buildings and streets around Bedford Avenue in the late 1980s. In 2002, Bedford Avenue became the battlefield of hipsters and Satmar Hasidic community who cannot look upon women who aren't covered from head to toe.

Bike lanes on the Hasidic side of Bedford was sandblasted away as more-than-half-naked, music-loving hipsters rode to the Williamsburg Bridge. Under the support of a lifestyle magazine for "women that love dicks," Hipsters who dressed like sluts repainted them at night with spray cans, rollers, and stencils, leaving Hasidim bewildered.

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"Welcome to the Northside Festival!" a woman said. She disappeared among the crowd.

Two barricades blocked the road; the entire road were filled with pedestrians. A house with three walls were set in the middle of the road. On one side, a forty-year old woman drew with two black markers. She had brown hair and wore blue trousers with suspenders and a t-shirt tucked in with red and black stripes. A brush was placed downward in a white cup standing next to the edge of the wall. She drew a circle with several tangent branches, leaving some spaces unfilled with black paint inside the circle, creating the shape of seven girls. The sunlight filtered through the leaves, projecting the shadow of a tree on the right half of the wall, creating white and black shadows as if it was a part of the painting.

In the distance, a man with a blue flannel shirt and a pair of round glasses was setting up a tent. He untangled brown threads and intertwined these with four pillars on each corner. He then took out a bag of clothes pegs and a pile of papers from his backpack leaning against the sidewalk curb and fixed each paper with clothes pegs on the threads. The tent soon became a wall of white. Wind flew by and bent the corners of papers with the crispy twisting sound. A pair of old couple walked by, stared at the papers, and approached that man. Without asking, he started to talk.

"My name is Brandon, these are all hand-written stories about people sharing their lives, I have been to 60 cities so far, and there are about twenty-thousand stories—It's all anonymous, it's a story about your life, and I also share them online and in my book." He raised his tone at the end of every sentence. "I've been to New York for five years, and I think there are lot of art stuffs going on—I really like this event where they shut down the whole street, it's really neat."

Since the 1980s, a flood of artists out of areas like SoHo began to move into Williamsburg for cheap rents and convenient transportation, one subway stop from Manhattan. After the opening of Williamsburg Art & Historical Center in 1996, Williamsburg attracted artists through its art galleries, museums and activities. Today, Williamsburg is the largest art community in the world with over 10,000 artists, many coming from overseas. It is the home to some highly regarded artists like Terrance Lindall, the producer of the show Brave Destiny, the world's largest gathering of surrealist artists.

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A loud and deep music came from the center of the street where seven women and a man was lying on a turf, bare feet, eyes closed. Around each body were six thin strips of wood connected in quadrilateral shapes. With the sound of deep, slow violin echoing in the street, they flipped their bodies, struggled to rise up, expanded their arms, and turned around while jumping and punching in the air.

In a cyan tank undershirt, Maira was the director of the dance. She panted and her cheek was pink. As a Latino-immigrant artist, she has lived in New York for 8 years and wanted to speak about the issues south of the border.

"As a bilingual, bicultural person, I want people in the U.S. to be better informed on the issues affecting those who came here to mostly farm, cook, and serve their food, who are doing it because there's real social-political and economic stress in Mexico, and to question the role of U.S. Government in those issues." She spoke with calm.

"Letting everybody know it is often the hardest part to do it, right?" She added, "it's the thing you will never know" She raised her lips, her eight front teeth shining under the sun.

On the way home, three 18-year-old men boarded the J train at Marcy Avenue. With a bam of two old-fashioned door closing, the train suddenly reached a point of complete silence. Wearing a grey hoodie, a young man sitting on a speaker raised his eyebrows and stood up.

“Shall we begin?”

Outside the window, wired fences and the color of ocean blue down the railways replaced the buildings covered with graffiti. With the clash of wheels entering a connection gap between two tracks, the other two stood up and gathered at the center of the train. The hoodie guy picked up his iPhone on the ground, touched the screen with forefinger, and dropped it down. The speaker’s red light was up and an electroclash song came out of the speaker. He proceeded to the middle of the aisle, jumped up to grab the pole with two hands, and crossed his legs. With the rhythm, he lifted his arms, let the upper torso falling down, and performed a somersault on the pole.

Soon the music stopped. The cabin was engulfed in the darkness of the subway tunnel. The hoodie man and his mates were submerged under the crowd trying to rush through the narrow platform doors. “Delancey Street” was reflected on the window.

“Welcome to Manhattan,” a woman sighed.

This is a piece of travel writing I wrote during my summer at Columbia University in the City of New York. For one and half month, I traveled to different places in and around NYC by subway, and I was especially fond of Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Special thanks to Columbia Adjunct Assistant Professor and travel writer Porter Fox who taught me literary journalism and edited my rough draft.