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I took out my wallet, slid out the card and swiped it through, all done in three seconds. Sometimes you can tell if a person is a New Yorker by the speed he/she swipes her/his MetroCard. A clumsy swiper is usually a foreign tourist or a newcomer. But it is not an absolute sign. It's an indicator.

Ting, sixteen years old, Sunday, June 4, 2006

In 1999, following the nomination by the Queens Council on the Arts, the 7 train was designated a “National Millennium Trail” by the White House Millennium Council, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. It joined fifteen other trails, such as the Underground Railroad, that are deemed “emblematic of American history and culture.” Nicknamed the “International Express” by the City Planning Commission, the train was advertised to New Yorkers and visitors as a symbol of the American immigrant experience and a celebration of cross-cultural encounters.

Aboard the International Express

A report by the New York City Department of City Planning, *The Newest New Yorkers, 2000*, helps us understand the situation better.¹ Briefly, it states that the city gained fewer than 100,000 people between 2000 and 2003 because of the massive flight to the suburbs or to other states in the United States (−475,000). However, the strength of the city’s natural increase (+200,000) and immigration flows (+340,000) massively compensated for the loss, actually saving the city from depopulation. The result of these in-and-out movements is a city that in 2003 had reached an extraordinary

level of diversity, in which the foreign-born accounted for 36 percent of its residents, close to the peak of 41 percent in 1910, when the city stood at 4.8 million (in 2015, 8.5 million). The next report, released in 2013, confirmed this trend toward greater diversity.² The borough of Queens is the main destination of immigrants in the nation (Brooklyn is second), with almost half of its population being foreign-born. If we add the second generation of immigrants, well over half of New York City’s dwellers have recently adopted “hyphenated identities.”³ In terms of race, no single group can now claim a majority. In a landmark study of Elmhurst, a neighborhood along the 7 line and at that time the nation’s most ethnically diversified neighborhood, anthropologist Roger Sanjek and his colleagues revealed the slow but seemingly inexorable emergence of interethnic cooperation on local community board committees and political forums during their fifteen years of fieldwork. Sanjek focused on “whites,” and his coresearchers studied “blacks,”⁴ “Chinese,”⁵ “Hispanic women,”⁶ and “Indians,”⁷ attempting to identify the spheres of political encounters. Citing these signs of comity and intergroup understanding, Sanjek observed that diversity was growing everywhere in the nation and that white Americans would soon lose their majority status. In that regard, Elmhurst, with its tensions and its breakthroughs, was a laboratory for the “future of us all.”⁸

Following the landmarking of the 7 train, the Queens Council on the Arts put out a brochure listing museums, arts centers, and restaurants located at the different stops in Queens. The council’s advertising campaign was part of an effort to enhance the image of the borough, which trails behind Manhattan and Brooklyn as a desirable place to visit. The brochure was directed to both cosmopolitan New Yorkers and tourists curious about the cultures (especially the food) of the borough’s inhabitants: “The International Express is a trip around the world in one borough. People from approximately one hundred and fifty nations have settled in Queens. Communal memories permeate the streets: stores and restaurant names recall a variety of native lands.”

The 7 train was thus used as the link to all the many-flavored places below its tracks, though the train itself seemed to offer no specific interest.⁹ In addition to declaring the 7 train a landmark, or celebrating intergroup local leadership, we argue that studying interactions on the 7 train offers a neglected view of daily life in the New York melting pot: the experience of the 7 train reflects a cosmopolitan environment mixing people of many

origins and cultures. As opposed to restaurants, where New Yorkers and tourists look for exotic flavors and experience, the subway requires a different skill in order to get along with riders with whom they haven't chosen to spend time. Indeed, the subway environment can be overcrowded, harshly competitive, and enervating. The gritty cosmopolitanism of the 7 train is not for everyone.

The most famous denunciation of the subway was that of Atlanta Braves pitcher John Rocker, talking to a local sports reporter in 1999. The reporter asked Rocker if he would mind being traded to play in Flushing for the Mets:

I would retire first. It's the most hectic, nerve-racking city. Imagine having to take the [number] 7 train to the ballpark, looking like you're [riding through] Beirut next to some kid with purple hair next to some queer with AIDS right next to some dude who just got out of jail for the fourth time right next to some 20-year-old mom with four kids. It's depressing.

Of course, Rocker never became a regular rider on the 7 train. An even more serious problem for him was the city and the train's cultural heterogeneity:

The biggest thing I don't like about New York are the foreigners. I'm not a very big fan of foreigners. You can walk an entire block in Times Square and not hear anybody speaking English. Asians and Koreans and Vietnamese and Indians and Russians and Spanish people and everything up there. How the hell did they get in this country?¹⁰

The 7 line is one of the system's busiest lines, accounting for more than 10 percent of overall traffic. More than 400,000 riders take this train every day, and their number is growing.¹¹ The ride from Flushing to Times Square draws a range of passengers whose origins are truly global. The densely crowded train treats them daily, for better and sometimes for worse, to an experience peculiar to New York. Since most trips on the subway are from home to work, home to shopping, or home to leisure activities, much of the actual diversity of daily life in New York is on display day and night on the subway and on the streets around the stations.

More than that, as increasing numbers of New Yorkers ride the subway trains, they end up spending a significant amount of time in their life in motion throughout the city. For many of these riders who maintain ties to foreign countries and cultures, their “home” may seem merely a temporary point in a network of links and movements. They are neither totally American nor foreign. Their lives may make them feel what anthropologist James Clifford called “dwelling in travel,” an increasing phenomenon on our urbanized planet.¹² Clifford asked: “What skills of survival, communication and tolerance are being improvised in today’s cosmopolitan experience? How do people navigate the repressive alternatives of universalism and separatism?”¹³ The fleeting interactions on the 7 train are part of an urban middle ground between the parochialisms of family and neighborhoods, and the larger horizon of America. On their way to becoming American, riders of all origins are helped by the subways to first become “New Yorkers.”

In their remarkable collective study of second-generation immigrants to the city, Philip Kasinitz, John H. Mollenkopf, Mary C. Waters, and their colleagues described the ways that their young respondents “balance notions of foreign-ness and native-born entitlement, of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status”—a tension that, as they often point out, makes them very much “New Yorkers.”¹⁴ By looking at the daily subway commute, we aim to show that becoming a New Yorker can also entail a set of values and skills, some of which are more or less universal aspects of life in urban public spaces, and others are peculiar to New York. Indeed, one of the main satisfactions in mastering the subway system is to gain access to the entire city territory, which may in turn help inhabitants identify with New York City. As Kasinitz and his colleagues wrote, “The changes necessary to become a ‘New Yorker’ are not nearly so large as those required to become an ‘American.’”¹⁵

This assertion rests on the assumption that sharing the experiences of daily life in the city, including daily subway ridership, builds a common stock of competences and attitudes necessary for inhabitants of New York. In fact, our data show that as young people and newcomers to the city gradually gain these “getting-around” skills, they also increasingly identify themselves as savvy New Yorkers. It may take time to cherish the New York City they come to know on the 7, and some never will, but veteran riders often mention the feeling of pride and belonging they experience when

standing on one of its elevated platforms toward sunset, they watch a silver ribbon of train cars against the city's gleaming skyline.

While real and significant, such moments remain infrequent. Riders more commonly mention having to endure crowding and uncertainty and that relief comes with having secured a seat and the opportunity to lose themselves in self-involvement such as reading, listening to music, or doing homework. Nor do our conversations with riders indicate that they celebrate ethnic and racial diversity for its own sake, contrary to the hopes of the city's boosters. "People who don't take the 7 train sometimes have a tendency to romanticize that train," said John Liu, a Flushing-area city councilman and later city comptroller and mayoral candidate, in an interview in 2007. "Getting on the train, there is nothing romantic about it; it's just the only way to get to and from work, to and from school."

During his tenure in the City Council and as Flushing's first elected official of Asian origin, Liu established a reputation as a plain-talking and effective urban innovator. He often clashed with Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) officials about the pace and scheduling of repairs along the 7 line. Indeed, it was his ability to put the issues in class terms, avoiding any sentimental references to diversity, that also helped him become the first New York politician of Chinese origin to develop a strong citywide reputation in New York's populist-leaning political culture:

The rich kids have the express buses. When I was a kid, it was \$3 to take the express bus. It was a 20-minute ride from Flushing to Bronx Science. It was a 1-hour-and-45-minute ride taking the subway into Manhattan and then to the Bronx.

People don't get up in the morning thinking, "I got to ride the International Express!" No one thinks of it that way. People wake up and say "Shit, I got to get on that train again!" And as much as they hate the train, when they take it out of service, it's even worse! 'Cause then they cannot get to work. Or they get to work 45 minutes late and they risk losing their job.

It is helpful in this regard to ask who, precisely, are the 7 daily riders to whom Liu is referring? What do we actually mean by diversity as a daily experience on the subway? Do the 7 train riders represent all the groups living along the line? How do physical and social aspects of the subway

environment shape riders’ experiences of diversity? We structure our inquiry by looking for answers in the scenes that occur every morning during the weekdays. We begin at the Flushing–Main Street terminus of the 7 train and continue to examine the changing ridership as the train proceeds to Manhattan.

Boarding the 7 Train in Flushing: Who Gets On, Who Gets a Seat, Who Cares?

Main Street, Flushing, and the Flushing–Main Street subway station have never offered subway riders a pleasant start to their workday. Even before the 1970s, when it began its transformation into a major urban hub of North Shore Queens as the influx of Chinese and Korean immigrants accelerated, the Main Street station was cramped and antiquated (for more on this subject, see chapter 8). Today the streets around the station are congested and noisy, and the air is laden with the fumes of bus, truck, and car traffic. Although downtown Flushing is often termed “Little Hong Kong,” it would not be unfair to say that parts of the Main Street area make Hong Kong seem like a city in Switzerland.

Flushing–Main Street is a major bus-to-subway transfer station serving a large area of northeastern Queens. Commuters from College Point, Murray Hill, Bayside, Whitestone, Beechhurst, Little Neck, and other neighborhoods east of Flushing leave their homes early to catch a bus to the Main Street station, where they have the option of a free transfer to the 7 train (figure 2.1). According to the 2006–2010 American Community Survey (ACS), compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau, the population in the catchment area of the Main Street subway station in Flushing was slightly more than 300,000 inhabitants during this five-year period and growing.¹⁶ More than twenty bus lines bring commuters from the confines of northeastern Queens to Main Street, where they can choose to forgo the transfer and take the more expensive but faster Long Island Rail Road (LIRR). This singular situation in New York City makes Flushing–Main Street the busiest station in Queens and one of the top ten stations (in 2007) in the entire system, despite being served by only one subway line.

In order to compare the 7 train riders with the population of the Queens neighborhoods it serves, we looked at the census data on the ethnicity and

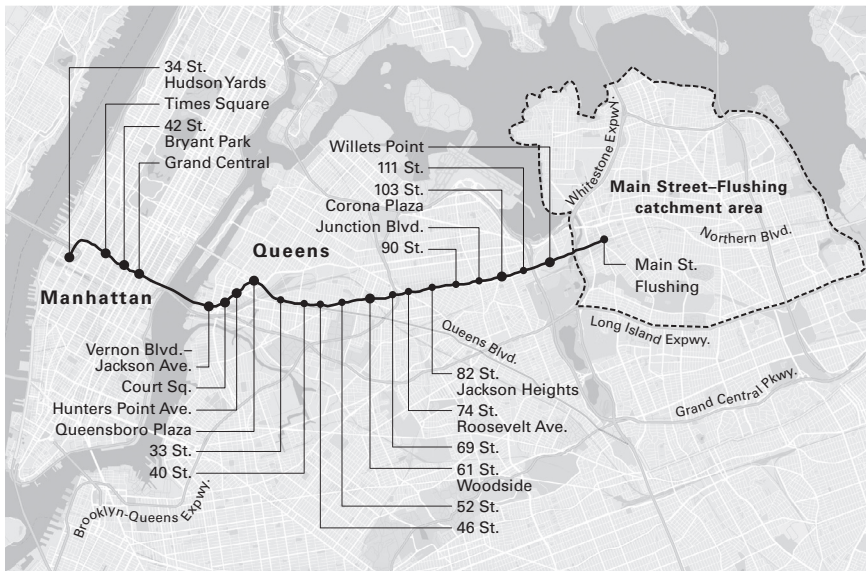


Figure 2.1 Catchment area of the Flushing–Main Street station.

race of the residential neighborhoods around the major stations and the census data on the means of transportation to work. We also conducted our own turnstile counts of riders according to gender and race/ethnicity for 1-hour periods at the Flushing–Main Street and 74th Street/Roosevelt Avenue stations during weekday morning peak times and compared them with the relevant census data.

In Flushing, about 39 percent of the working population relies on public transportation (U.S. Census 2010). Fifty-two percent drive to work in automobiles, a proportion lower than that of the city overall (56%). Table 2.1 shows that the racial and ethnic characteristics of the population living in the area and of those using public transportation to get to work are largely consistent. That is, the riders who begin their mornings on public transportation are largely representative of the residential population in the area.

The segments of the population not well represented in public transportation, based on our counts, are children and people older than sixty, which is hardly surprising given the preponderance of commuters. People of Asian and European (white) origin make up 46 percent and 31 percent,

TABLE 2.1

Population Living in the Flushing Catchment Area Compared with Population Using Public Transportation to Go to Work

	Population of Flushing Area	Percent	Population Using Public Transportation
Total population	302,789	56,460	
Male	146,382	48.34	49.91%
Female	156,407	51.66	50.09%
RACE			
White	132,079	44.43	41.31%
Black or African American	8,067	2.71	3.08%
Asian	137,617	46.30	46.53%
Asian Indian	11,115	3.74	
East Asian	121,417	40.85	
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	48,379	15.98	18.96%
White non-Hispanic	10,4737	34.59	31.09%

Source: United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006–2010, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>.

respectively, of the population taking public transportation to get to work, proportions very close to their share of the overall population. But since these census numbers combine bus, subway, and LIRR riders, they cannot be used to estimate the composition of riders that enter the Main Street station.

The 7’s Adult Game of Unmusical Chairs

The morning rush hour at Flushing–Main Street starts for many riders as a competition for a seat or at least a good standing spot on the train. Of course, competition for seats is ubiquitous in the subway system and accounts for many positive and negative interactions. The stakes are elevated when riders looking for seats face a 35- to 40-minute daily commute—as is the case at Main Street—as opposed to a brief ride of a few stations.

Our own turnstile counts of subway riders at Flushing–Main Street showed that an average of 8,000 people entered the station in the morning rush hour between 8:00 and 9:00 A.M. on a weekday. At this time, local trains were scheduled to run every 4 to 6 minutes and express trains, every 2 to 5 minutes. On average, this is a train departing every $4\frac{1}{4}$ minutes,

amounting to a total of fourteen trains between 8:00 and 9:00 A.M. The 7 train is one of the longest (600 feet) in the New York City system, with eleven cars each seating 42 or 44 passengers. Even if riders were split evenly between express and local trains—and they are not—that would amount to 570 passengers per train, or 52 per car. This is already 10 more than the number of seats. In addition, we know that a preponderance of daily riders who fail to find a seat then seek to stand by the same doors, in the same car, in order to exit at the most convenient location.

These elevated stakes help explain the volume of negative comments about older Chinese women that we’ve heard and that abound in the social media, which emerge from the specifics of demographic diversity on the platforms and train cars on weekday mornings in Flushing.

Pushy Little Old Chinese Ladies, Debunking a Subway Stereotype

Owen (his English-language name) is a thirty-one-year-old computer technician. He emigrated with his brother and mother from Taiwan thirteen years ago, settling in Flushing in an apartment provided by his uncle, who was already living in the neighborhood. Owen usually takes the Q28 bus to Main Street. Like most commuters, he complains about the station’s crowded conditions in the morning:

Owen: It’s very crowded in the morning. People are like monsters. They don’t yell at each other. They just run to grab a seat like crazy.

Stéphane: They don’t say “sorry?”

Owen: No. no. They just grab a seat like little children.

Interview, 2007

This remark echoes many posts that riders leave on websites such as yelp.com, where the 7 train was rated in 167 posts. In these posts, amazement at the diversity of riders vies with their aversion to crowding and the rudeness of riders. “Chinese women” seem to have acquired a reputation of ruthless efficiency in the competition for a seat:

Hundreds of little old Chinese women with red shopping bags who will push you down, or rudely jump in front of you, to get a seat when the train

doors open. Now, subways are always every person for themselves, but Flushing takes it to a new level of utter rudeness and chaos.

Luca M., Kew Gardens Hills¹⁷

One thing I always hate is getting off Flushing Ave., the last stop, people there, especially the older Chinese women always try to push me back onto the train as I was stepping out. They are so afraid they are not able to get a good seat! Really people! Let the passengers off first! Thank you =)

Ling Z., Jackson Heights¹⁸

Are these representations of a stereotype, a reflection of cultural proxemics and gender norms, or are they mainly an effect of overcrowding associated with the nature of the population at Main Street?

East Asian women are a predominant demographic rider group during the later part of the morning rush hour. Our turnstile counts show that more women (55%) than men were taking the 7 train at the morning peak hours, a proportion higher than that in the census data. We also found that the proportion of whites and Hispanics entering the subway was lower than that of the residential neighborhoods. Conversely, the proportion of East and South Asians also was substantially higher than census figures indicate. Only the proportion of African Americans, low in any case, did not vary much. The underrepresentation of white riders is undoubtedly due to the alternative offered by the LIRR, an ethno-racial preference linked to income levels, since whites tend to live in the more suburban and well-off neighborhoods of northeastern Queens, farther from the subway. Indeed, only in the census tracts immediately around the station does the proportion of non-Hispanic whites fall to 10.5 percent, much closer to their representation on the train.

Finally, we also observed that most passengers of East Asian origin board the express train, making it crowded from the first stop, whereas most riders of Hispanic origin board the local train. Only the local train stops in the Corona neighborhood, a stronghold of Hispanic residency. And only the local 7 stops at the key transfer station at 74th Street/Roosevelt Avenue, where many riders switch to the express E and F trains. After the morning rush hour, all the 7 trains run as locals. On those trains, the unintentional racial and ethnic sorting during rush hour is absent, and the competition for seats is not as fierce.

The 7 morning express train is the most crowded train to depart from Flushing–Main Street and likely the most crowded train to depart from its terminal in the entire city. It is populated by a majority of riders of East Asian origin, more than half of whom are women of predominantly East Asian origin. Based on mere probability, therefore, Main Street is the New York subway station where riders are most likely to be in competition with “Chinese women” for a seat. Moreover, since they are the most numerous group, it seems statistically logical that they would win out overall.

Beyond demographics is the implicit or explicit notion in the blogs, in our students’ diaries, and in our interviews, that “Chinese women” are particularly aggressive or otherwise adept at winning seats in the competition. Notions of cultural proxemics are no doubt at play here: “they” come from a culture in which densities are greater, so “they” have become used to pushing and darting. But the “Chinese woman” category is not homogeneous. It lumps together women from very different regions and cultures, so that references to, say, the Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei, or even Seoul subway are risky. The density in all these places, however, is extremely high, and jostling is common. Aside from opportunities to create ethnic stereotypes, what Flushing–Main Street may give its riders is a foretaste of how the increased crowding in public transit is challenging subway norms of conduct and heightening levels of commuter stress. Indeed, such crowding as we experience on the subways may also be the “future of us all.”

The Main Street station also offers ways to master the system. Some riders, including many “Chinese women” with an intentional strategy, do not have to push to get a seat. Instead, they exploit the peculiar configuration of the station, where every other express train, running on the middle track, opens its doors on both sides; first on the local platform and then on the express platform. This means that the most savvy passengers hoping for a seat on the express will be waiting instead on the local platform in order to increase the likelihood of getting a seat.

Ting, a high school student from China, described the problem:

There are always more people on the express platform. You would think they’d figured this a long time ago. Usually, the express on the middle track opens the doors on the local side first, letting the passengers out. We express passengers stand beside and around the closed doors, watching people exit

the other way and, worst of all, watching some enter the other door with ease. At that moment, it seems like we just lost a big battle.

Tuesday, June 6, 2006

Riders of the express train leaving Main Street are thus left with a choice. They can either save a few minutes’ travel time by waiting on the express platform but lose out on seating, or wait on the local platform and have a better chance of securing a seat if the express leaves before the local. In the end, who gets a seat has less to do with cultural background or proxemics and much more to do with riders’ individual needs and local skills. Riders who have not yet figured this out may see it as a problem with “Chinese women.” Those who have figured this out are far more likely to see it as a consequence of “subway smarts” involving specific choices between time and comfort.

Willets Point: The Mets Games, the U.S. Open, Fans, and Commuters

A few minutes after its departure from the Flushing–Main Street station, the 7 train emerges from a dark tunnel under Roosevelt Avenue into the light. It climbs up to a bridge deck, which is itself elevated over the Roosevelt Avenue Bridge; crosses Flushing Creek into the most highly urbanized section of Flushing Meadows; and pulls into the Willets Point station, where passengers have access to Citi Field (home of the Mets baseball team), the United States Tennis Association (USTA)’s Billie Jean King Tennis Center (home of the yearly U.S. Open tennis tournament), the World’s Fair marina, and the facilities of Flushing Meadows Park on the site of the city’s 1939 and 1964 World’s Fairs. All trains stop at Willets Point, where some riders transfer from their cars to the train, but hardly anyone walks here from home. Indeed, in 2007, there was only one official resident in the surrounding census tract, but there were 255 auto-parts and repair businesses.¹⁹ This traffic is likely to increase as a Bloomberg-era condo development replaces this remnant of the area that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* narrator called the Valley of Ashes.

The Willets Point station is elevated above Roosevelt Avenue, and its exits allow fans access to the tennis complex south of the tracks and Citi

Field on the north side, toward Flushing Bay. Often deserted and bleak, on game days or during festivals in Flushing Meadows Park, the station suddenly becomes extremely animated. The MTA adds special trains to bring spectators back to Manhattan, so as not to disrupt the already tight schedule of regular commuter trains.

The MTA recognized the need to accommodate thousands of extra passengers who must move through the station in relatively quick time bursts before and after events. Accordingly, it reconfigured the old station in ways that facilitate fans’ access to the venues and to the trains, including the adjacent LIRR. In a 2008 interview, the deputy line general manager for the 7 train explained that during the construction of the new Citi Field, which replaced the older Shea Stadium in 2008, the original station rotunda where passengers went through the subway turnstiles was demolished:

We had to move the turnstiles into the confines of the station, and what that did is that it allowed Long Island Rail Road riders and people parked on the other side of Flushing Meadows Park to use what had previously been the pay zone in the station as a free passageway across Roosevelt Avenue and onto the passerelle [bridge] that led into the park.

That in itself is not remarkable in any way, but it caused us to have to introduce a new service that we never had before. We had always handled the crowding there with a local service only. We would just increase the pulse. Diminish the headway. That is how we would manage the crowding.

Well, with the turnstiles inside the confines of the station, that created unacceptable levels of crowding within the station. We were pressured to do it by the Mets to provide a more attractive alternative to driving and parking. We did not want to do it as an agency, but we were forced to do it. So we introduced the “Mets Express.” It is a limited-stop express: three stops in Queens, transfer points, and three stops in Manhattan.

The Mets Express runs only after games or tennis matches. On their way to the stadium, many baseball fans join the usual rush-hour crowds. These changes in rider demographics on game days, which are even greater during the U.S. Open, reveal much about the class differences characteristic of the 7 train. Subway professionals are practical social empiricists and keen observers of human behavior. They tend to use coded references and intentional ellipses regarding issues of class, race, and national origin. “The Mets

game injects a whole other element . . . into the usual mix of age, gender, ethnicity,” the deputy line general manager observed:

And you know, the Mets fans economically are much more homogeneous, and ethnically they are more homogeneous. But Mets fans are also pretty reflective of the line. People are affiliated with that, and those people tend to mix on the line. Like at 6 o’clock, when the trains are coming out here [to Willets Point, Queens], you have people that have met their friends in Manhattan and they have a couple beers in hand, even though that’s against the rule, they’re in cups or bags and they are surreptitiously having a party on the train. And they can be disruptive. The noise level on the trains, from the conversations, is very loud. There is an incredible amount of socialization going on within the groups, but then you see it among groups that are strangers. A bunch of guys, and a bunch of girls, and it’s interesting because they overlay on the daily regular riders.

On regular workdays, when there is no game, the 7 train is filled predominantly with people going to and returning from work, so there are fewer violations of the subway’s normative order, although, as the deputy line general manager pointed out, they can happen at any time:

We have a good deal of what we call unruly customers. Inebriated people. It is around payday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday. It could be disruptive to the line. It’s not just at night. I am always amazed at the time of day. Someone who has worked all night, their night time is morning.

It would be extremely unusual to spot a rider of immigrant background drinking from an open can of beer at any time on the 7 train. In fact, the contrast between the boisterous, well-off white men and women continuing their party on the subway and the 7 train’s generally cautious, polite riders of Latino or Asian origin is itself a commentary on the distance between subway citizenship and identification as an American. The more minimal sense of being a New Yorker may start with acquiring skills at effectively getting around the city. This achievement remains in stark contrast to the behavior of bold but boozy young Americans on their way to a night baseball game after work in the office towers of Manhattan.

The Mets Express is an extra service for riders that is implemented by the new line general manager, a position first created in 2007 on the L and 7 lines in an attempt to improve communication among the different departments of the MTA’s subway division. The popularity of the Mets Express has been measured yearly through a subway report card filled in by the riders:

The idea is that the vice presidents are really out of contact with the employees. The idea is to flatten out the organization. As a line general manager, I am only one step away from the frontline people. There are supervision and management there, but all those people, I can interact with them. They know me.

The main challenge for the 7 train’s new line general manager was to accommodate a growing ridership while setting up a new real-time signalization system that would allow the MTA to know where all the trains were at any moment and to post waiting times to passengers on the platform:

This is a train where the scale of operations is deceiving, because we are probably on track to carry 450,000 people a day, which is huge. And it’s very short, only a 19-mile route. So it is like a metronome. If you miss a beep, you are in trouble. One of the old timers said to me: “If you spit on the rails, you have delay.” To a certain extent, there is some truth to that. So it tends to be very demanding in that regard. But it’s quite an opportunity. It’s the fourth largest transit system in the United States all by itself.

One of the remarkable achievements of the program was to recruit voluntary bilingual information staff during the many disruptions incurred by breakdowns and upgrade work. This was one of the first attempts to consider the actual diversity of the ridership. In 2009, the line general manager program was judged successful by the subway administration and was extended to all the lines in the system. But in 2010, following the nomination of a new president, the program was cut, and attention to the diversity of the ridership receded.

Corona and Elmhurst: Hispanic New York Meets Asian New York

The next four stations after Willets Point—111th Street, 103rd Street, Junction Boulevard, and 90th Street—are elevated over Roosevelt Avenue and trace the border between Corona on the north side and Elmhurst on the south side. Here the 7 rumbles over tracks that are above the roofs of three-story row houses where a majority of immigrant families and workers live.²⁰

At 111th Street, according to the ACS (2006–2010), the population boarding the local train and a local bus line largely reflects the population of the neighborhood. Here, almost 70 percent of the population relies on public transportation to get to work. It is overwhelmingly male (61%) at peak time and of Hispanic origin (78%), mainly Ecuadorian, Mexican, and Dominican with a minority of Chinese (7.5%). These numbers remain basically the same at the following stop, 103rd Street, except for a small proportion of African American riders (about 10%) mostly living in the Lefrak City area of Elmhurst.

After the morning rush hour, all trains leaving Main Street are local. This is when the mostly Chinese and Korean populations of Flushing meet the Hispanic population of Corona on the train. Another episode on the local off-peak train narrated by Ting illustrates this point. This time a “Chinese woman” offered her seat to a young “Mexican mother”:

A Mexican mother in her mid-thirties, short, dark skin came in with her two daughters. She carried one of them, a two- or three-year-old. The other, five or six years old, following her into the train, crying “Mommy! Mommy!” . . . It is mild but loud enough to catch attention in the train. I looked to my left and see the big sister crying. I just spaced only for a moment. I did not respond immediately by giving them my seat. Then, at the corner of my eye, I saw the Chinese lady expressing to give up her seat. She said, “Excuse me” and made an inviting hand gesture. . . . Something struck me. I woke up. I gestured to the mother, “Do you wanna sit?” “Thank you,” she said. The Chinese woman and me got up almost at the same time.”

Wednesday, June 14, 2006, 11:30 P.M.

The “Mexican mother” whom Ting observes may just as well be Ecuadorian, the other dominant ethnic group in Corona. Somehow, just as “Chinese”

is a proxy for "East Asian," "Mexican" is often a synonym for "Hispanic" or "Latina." What is at play here is at the same time a norm about helping women with young children, a general idea that this norm is widely shared in the city, no matter what the ethnic identity of the other is, even if it is by no means observed consistently.

Another of Ting's example shows the formalization of yet another norm shared by "Asians" and "Hispanics":

I doze off. Sitting to my right was a Spanish macho-looking mid-aged man. I guess my head fell to the right a few times. He poked me and said, "Excuse me." I don't remember other English words he said. I noticed what happened and tried hard to stay alert. I remember my head fell to the right once. But I am not sure. After all, I was dozing off. I was kind of pissed off because he continued talking about it to some other Spanish men across from us in a loud voice. He talked in Spanish but I understood. He was saying something like: "I'm not his father or mother. Why he fell on my shoulder?" I guess he was very acute to his personal space. The problem is he talked about it the next 5 minutes. I knew it was my fault, so I didn't say anything.

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

Junction Boulevard is the only express stop in Elmhurst and Corona. Apart from a small proportion of people from Colombia (4%), the composition of riders entering the station is basically the same. By now, the local train is entirely filled with riders speaking Spanish, while the express train is a mix of East Asians and Hispanics, plus a small white minority. Again, we see that that the actual experience of "diversity" depends on opportunities structured in part by the unintentional effects of train service.

At 90th Street, in Jackson Heights, the crowd coming in is two-thirds Hispanic and one-third East Asian. Ecuadorans still make up the main group, with Colombians, Mexicans, and Chinese close behind. The stream of riders from India (about 6%), the Philippines, and, to a lesser degree, Pakistan grows as the train moves west. White non-Hispanic riders also gradually become more numerous. This trend is confirmed at 82nd Street with a new addition of white (non-Hispanic) riders, mostly of Italian, Irish, and Jewish ancestry. While the proportion of Hispanics gradually diminishes, the main group is now Colombian, with Ecuadorans a close second.

74th Street/Roosevelt Avenue: Queens Masala

The second busiest station in Queens, after Flushing–Main Street, is 74th Street/Roosevelt Avenue. This station offers passengers the greatest number of possible transfers, since it also serves the F, E, R, and G (in 2007) trains. Six bus lines also converge on the congested streets outside the station. Yet 74th Street is only a local stop on the 7 line, as the express bypasses it, angering many riders. This problem dates back to the separate construction of the Roosevelt Avenue IRT (7 train) and IND (now the F, R, and A trains) stations in 1916 and 1933, and the subsequent municipalization of the IRT in 1940. The 7 train’s Roosevelt Avenue stop was not built as a transfer point, and the platforms are located on the outside of the tracks, giving no access to the express tracks.

For riders on the local 7 train, 74th Street/Roosevelt Avenue is a major transfer point to the faster E and F express trains that also serve midtown and downtown Manhattan, whereas the 7 serves only midtown. At rush hour, about half the train empties out here, only to fill up immediately with riders going to Long Island City or to Grand Central or Times Square in Manhattan.

At 74th Street, Latin America meets South Asia. The streets around the station form one of the main commercial centers serving the city’s rapidly growing Pakistani and Indian populations. Descending from the elevated 7 to the station’s street level, the largely Hispanic flow of people is representative of Corona and Jackson Heights, as well as a significant minority of Asian and Korean riders from Flushing. This human current then meets African Americans and South Asians, especially Indians and Pakistanis. Here the interactions among passengers of different races and ethnicities may invite multiple layers of misunderstanding and ignorance, as we see in the following excerpt from a discussion among three high school students we worked with: Indira and Aisha, two South Asian women, and Tao, a female immigrant from China. Aisha wears a head scarf that completely covers her hair, as well as a traditional Pakistani tunic that comes to her knees, covering only half her blue jeans. She explains to the others that her head scarf always draws stares on the subway, but when she is with her mother, who “covers herself completely,” there are often more testy encounters. Recently she had an encounter with a

"Chinese lady" who said something like, "Go back to your own country. . . . You terrorists!"

Indira: For real?

Aisha: She did not even speak English well and she was saying that. I almost said to her, "You go back to your country."

Tao: How do you know that she was Chinese? Sometimes there's Korean.

Aisha: Maybe she's Korean. I don't know. I don't know. The difference between a Filipino and a Chinese is that their skin is darker. Like your skin is of the Chinese. I don't know the difference between Chinese and Korean. Maybe Korean. And I'm like . . . and I said to my mother, "What did she say?" and she's like, "You heard her." [Then] My mother is telling her, "You go back to your country."

The unstated assumption and the very New York aspect of this interaction is that after paying the fare, we all have an equal right to be on the subway, to be in the city dressed however we please, and to be ready to defend ourselves against stereotyping and bigotry. Far from becoming intimidated by the attention she attracts when she is on the subway in her burka, Aisha says that her mother enjoys riding on the subway. The stares they receive sometimes make them feel more foreign and different, but they still are proud to be in public in the city wearing clothing appropriate to their religious beliefs.

The transfer at 74th Street/Roosevelt Avenue often brings Connie, a Colombian high school student who usually gets on at 82nd Street, close to people of color. She comments in her subway diary on the discomfort caused by this proximity:

When I take the E train, there was a black man that was looking at me in the all trip and I was scared because I don't like the way that he look at me. When the train stop at 23 Ely Avenue, I get out from the train and walk faster to the exit.

Subway diary, 2006

Connie's anxieties about navigating her way in the subway are compounded by her fear of people who seem to be looking at her, especially when they are dark-skinned men. She takes the measures that she feels will make her

safer, and each time she does so successfully, her confidence and ability at reading subway situations will gradually replace her fearful reliance on racial stereotypes. Or it won't. When young women like Connie experience actual, rather than imagined, negative encounters with men on the subway, they may withdraw and cease to ride underground, a subject to which we return in detail in chapter 6.

Riders remaining on the 7 local are met at 74th Street by a diverse throng of people who have entered the station from the street or who are transferring from the underground lines. According to our turnstile counts, people entering the station between 8:00 and 9:00 A.M. are demographically representative of the surrounding neighborhoods. Hispanics are still the main group, along with a substantial number of East Asians, whites, and South Asians. This population then separates into the many subway lines as it passes the turnstiles. It is then met by a different flow of people walking up from the lower train lines. Accounting for the people walking up the stairs and taking the main escalator to the 7 train, including riders transferring and excluding those taking other trains, we found that ethnic diversity increases at 74th Street. This is especially true because more black riders from southern Queens board the train (Jamaica, at the end of the E and F trains, is a mostly African American neighborhood), creating on that line the same interracial and interethnic groups found on the E and F trains.

Hélène, a young, dark-skinned woman and a studious high school student from Haiti, rides the E train from Jamaica and transfers at 74th Street to the 7 train. In the following diary entry, she is annoyed by what she finds to be the blatant gaze of boys of different races and ethnicities. Even though she roughly identifies the boy's ethnicity (“Hispanic”), she does not claim their behavior to be a consequence of their culture or racial difference. Instead, Hélène insists on her right as a rider to reject unwanted attention and prefers to generalize more abstractly about “people”:

Can you believe I got a seat in the morning? That doesn't happen very often. . . . There was two Hispanic males sitting right across from me, looking at me like they know who in hell I was. I didn't say anything to them and turned my head to my right. Then I heard them giggling. I don't know what it was at all to tell you the truth. They are lucky I was in a good mood that morning because I got a seat. If not, I would have cursed their asses out real

bad. By the time they were looking at me again, I was already at my stop, which is the 33rd St. station. Yo, people can be really stupid at times.

June 6, 2006

After 74th Street, the 7 train stops at all the neighborhoods between Jackson Heights and Long Island City. By then, its ridership has become more representative of the true diversity of Queens and is no longer predominantly the Asian–Hispanic train. In fact, the mix gets increasingly more diverse as the train continues its course toward Manhattan. At 69th Street, a significant Filipino and Korean minority gets onboard. At 61st Street, a stream of white passengers transferring from the Long Island Rail Road joins them. Their proportion increases gradually to about 60 percent of the population boarding the train at Long Island City's Vernon–Jackson station, the last stop before the train enters the tunnel under the East River.

Woodside–61st Street and Queensboro Plaza are the other two main transfer points. At 61st Street, riders on the express train who are not going all the way to Manhattan transfer to the local train, and vice versa. This station thus contributes to mixing the riders who boarded in Flushing (mostly Asian) with those from the rest of the borough. This continues at Queensboro Plaza, where riders, much as they did at 74th Street/Roosevelt Avenue, get another chance to transfer according to their final destination in Manhattan. A small minority of inhabitants originally from the Dominican Republic also lives near the station, resulting in additional black and Hispanic riders on the train.

The Queens Mix: Immigrants Meet Immigrants

The mix of riders on the 7 train reflects their different socioeconomic backgrounds as much as their ethnicity and race. This is changing quickly, though, as Long Island City rapidly converts from an industrial area to a neighborhood of expensive residential towers.²¹ Nevertheless, the train's ridership right now is disproportionately composed of less affluent riders, reflecting the temporal organization of work in the city. Census figures consistently show that workers in the service and construction sectors leave their homes earlier than do office workers. Although they may not be in the same train cars, they all use the 7 train. The average income of people

who live in the Queens neighborhoods served by the 7 train (as well as the E and F trains) is much lower than the income of people who live in the wealthier neighborhoods of Manhattan and farther out in the suburbs. The competition for room on the subway is therefore reminiscent—at a more microlevel of interaction—of the interethnic competition among immigrant groups with a similar socioeconomic status for the same jobs and apartments. On the subway, however, expressions of tensions or overt prejudice are relatively infrequent as a proportion of the total number of interactions during a given time period. Only certain groups, such as young people or inebriated sports fans, seem to act routinely in ways revealing intolerance and prejudice. When overt conflicts or incidents of bigotry do occur, they tend to reflect ways in which the subway community in transit resists the imports of parochial rivalry.

When riding in groups, some high school students may have fun by acting out the racial prejudice that they most often suppress. Here again is Connie, the recent Columbian immigrant:

I enter the 7 train at 1:40 P.M. [coming back from school] with 7 friends. A man was standing, looking to the map of the train, and one of my friends was sitting. And he raises his hand and he starts to smell very bad and my friend stand up and said “Ese man huele a cebolla” [That man smells like onions], and all my friends start to look at him. I think the man was Hindu. He was old. He had a blue shirt and blue jeans. His skin was like brown and he smelled like onion.

Journal, June 9, 2006

As time passed, however, we began to see Connie’s increasing tendency—especially when alone on the train—to observe subway encounters that lead her to revise some of her stereotypes:

In the train that I take today was many black, Chinese, white people, and I was the only Spanish in that train. These people were reading newspapers in English and listen[ing] to music. I was standing in the door and I saw that a man give his seat to a woman that she was with a kid and I saw that he was the only person that stand and give the seat. This man was skinny, short, black and the clothing look dirty. He had a gray shirt and blue jeans. This man start to look at me strange, and I was scared because he walk and

stand next to me. But finally he get out in Queensboro station and I calm down.

June 10, 2006

When high school students are not in groups, they may even extend a helping hand and look for ways to revise their prejudice:

Today, on my way to work, one of my friends was waiting for me at 46th St. Once I entered the station, he was there. The train came but at the same time I observed that he ask a girl around 17 to 20 years old if she was OK. So, I thought he was flirting with the girl. Then he told me that the girl had had an accident on the R train. He said, "The train was too fast and when the train stopped the girl was moving and she got hit hard on her nail on the foot. The accident was that her nail come off." He said, "No one pay any attention to her. So I helped her. I put a bandage on her toe."

Then after a while, he was joking about it. He said, when she gets home, she is going to tell her parents and friends what has happened to her. And she is going to say: "You know how much I hate Mexicans, and one of them helped me today." He also said she might say, "An immigrant helped me." He didn't know how to speak English.

Vasco, journal, June 24, 2006

Manhattan: Queens Meets the Other Boroughs

By the time it enters the tunnel under the East River, the 7 train has collected an impressive medley of Queens inhabitants, most bound for the offices, restaurants, and stores of Manhattan. Finally after about a 30-minute ride (the express and the local take almost the same amount of time), the 7 train lets its riders off first at Grand Central–42nd Street, where they can transfer to the uptown and downtown 4, 5, and 6 trains. At the Fifth Avenue–Bryant Park stop, they can transfer to the lettered trains F, B, D, Q, and M. At Times Square–42nd Street, passengers may transfer to the West Side 1, 2, 3, E, and A trains. Times Square and Grand Central are the busiest stations in the entire system. Both stations are a world of passenger flows, each worth a separate study.²² At these stations, the immigrant

riders brought by the 7 train now mix with riders from the other boroughs and the suburbs, including more affluent regional rail commuters from Westchester County and Long Island. There are no more neighborhood demographic groups entering the trains. Riders are now strangers in travel, immigrant or not. In September 2015, the line was finally extended by one additional stop into Manhattan’s Far West Side, where it serves the offices and luxury condominiums going up in the Hudson Yards district at the northern end of the celebrated High Line.



From Flushing–Main Street to 34th Street–Hudson Yards, the 7 train journey is an experience in blending human diversity of all kinds. It starts off with adjacent neighborhoods meeting on the train and gradually morphs into an experience of the entire borough of Queens before finally blending into the full New York City mix. Depending on the time of the day, it is also an experience in crowding, forcing all these different bodies, cultures, and personalities together in a small space for an involuntary daily get-together. The tensions and cooperation between all these riders of different origins revolve around practical issues of bodily copresence, comfort, and the efficiency of the trip. The daily miracle is in how riders find ways to tolerate and manage their way in the crowd, whether they like it or not. The tricks and implicit social agreements that allow them to get to their destination day in and day out are not very difficult to acquire, but they do demand some adaptation, and for many newcomers to the city, they require the acquisition of some new values and orientations.

Contrasting Differences and Highlighting Similarity: The Riders’ Competences

The 7 train riders experience a succession of contexts of copresence representative of distinct neighborhoods coming together from the borough of Queens and the entire city. Accordingly, riders have to adapt to different situations requiring the enactment of actions specific to the subway. First they must master the subway’s technical hardware, including buying and

swiping a MetroCard (more about this in chapter 4) and finding their way. In addition, the main competence required, regardless of each rider’s origin, is the ability to read the many different social cues and situations that subway life presents. Such a challenge is characteristic of large cities, where immigrant populations are numerous, and flows crisscross territories. Isaac Joseph, who pioneered the study of urban sociability in the United States and France, with a special focus on the spaces of transportation, including the Paris metro, referred to the competence shared by all urbanites as requiring “contextualization skills.”²³ In this chapter, we have seen how young immigrant riders develop some of these competences, especially in their growing ability to read subway situations, thereby transcending their initial stereotypes and gaining a deeper understanding of what they see and encounter. Their diaries show how they learn a technique used by veteran riders as they search for empirical confirmation of their initial impressions. For example, they often begin to discern the language of the papers and books that people are reading. But rather than data reflecting the differences among riders, such perceptual details confirm the reassuring fact that despite their differences, riders have similar expectations regarding the trip and generally accepted subway rules.

Mike, an Indian American around fifty years old, has been living in Queens for twenty-five years and in Jackson Heights, near the 74th Street/Roosevelt Avenue station, for eight years. He describes this technique with great enthusiasm:

Mike: This is a world community as you can see. Ha? (*door beep*). You can see all kinds of populations here. The Orientals, the Chinese, the Koreans, Indians, Hispanics, everybody.

Stéphane: You can see that?

Mike: Yeah! Right now! How do you identify which community they belong to? From the newspaper they read, you know. It is a lot of Chinese and Koreans . . . carry their own language papers. Ha?

Stéphane: Do you sometimes meet people on the train?

Mike: Hmm . . . Sometimes. But most of the times when I get inside the train, to be honest, I am buried in my newspapers. Except when I see somebody familiar, I am buried in my newspapers. And except when I am traveling with somebody.

Stéphane: Do you feel comfortable in this train?

Mike: Not just comfortable, very comfortable. Because I like this train ride (*station-stop noises*). Like I said, I see so many different people and I continue to marvel.

Ethno-racial categories do not need to be precise. It does not matter whether the person standing by the door is really “Chinese,” “Mexican,” “black,” or “white.” She may, in fact, disagree with that label in the first place. What matters is that the observable difference contrasts with the more subtle behavioral similarity that riders gradually expect. This big difference/small similarity is an effect often noted in literature on the subway to illustrate the elusive togetherness of its population:

They rock in unison, at least they agree on that one small thing. Check their wallets—the denominations won’t jibe. Review their prayers—the names of their gods won’t match. What they cherish and hold dear, their ideas and shopping lists, are as different and numerous as their destinations. But all is not lost. Look around, they’re doing a little dance now in the subway car and without rehearsal they all rock together. Shudder and lurch together to the car’s orchestrations. Some of them even humming. Everybody’s in this together until the next stop, when some will get off and some others get on.²⁴

Riders are fascinated by the diversity they experience and take pride in learning to read cues regarding the identities of strangers on the trains. A most remarkable characteristic of the process whereby one becomes an urbanite on mass transit is that the ethnic and racial categories that might seem to distance one from fellow passengers are usually and quickly dismissed as secondary. As Roger Sanjek observed, people need to be “color-full” before they can be “color-blind.”²⁵ This process of knowing-yet-ignoring whereby riders become “blasé” New Yorkers on the subways is essential to the establishment of a community in transit. In such a process, the heterogeneous crowd of subway riders is united in its desire to keep moving forward with skillful deliberation. In the next chapter, we will discuss this community in transit through riders’ accounts of their walk from home to station and onto the trains. In these accounts, we will again see evidence of subway skills and competences in action.