

By DEXTER JEFFRIES

One of the ways I have kept track of the many sociological changes that have occurred in New York City is by recording and remembering everything that I see on the subway. Of course not everything, but people and events do stick in your mind. I now know that if I hear a squeaky whistling sound as the door at the end of a car opens, it's going to be the old Asian lady saying, "Dor-cell, one dollah, Dor-cell, one dollah." She's slick, though. Before she opens the door completely, she makes a furtive glance for the undercover police officer who might be waiting for her. Seeing that the coast is clear, she walks innocently through and starts her litany. Then there's the teenager, too engrossed in his Vibe to notice that another plainclothes officer has entered, and the ticket for having his Size 10 sneakers on a pole has already been drafted.

Summonses, CDs for sale, Black Soap, Duracell batteries, and cat-and-mouse games all form the underground opera that is the subway. If one of New York's Finest catches one of these self-made entrepreneurs every now and then, that's the final act of the drama, and those are the chances one takes. But these are not the only barometers that measure the commercial and human activity of our underground rail system. Lately, another useful gauge has been the sinage. Along the subway line I take, people are using big platform advertisements to discuss the social and political issues of the day. Those ubiquitous ads for iPods and radio stations are forming one gigantic canvas for people to express their observations and conclusions. Remember that Normal Rockwell painting of the town meeting at which everyone gets to speak his piece? This is occurring, not in a New England grocery store around a potbelly stove, but right down on a gritty subway platform. People are participating in duels of discourse and wit that rival Albert Camus duking it with Jean-Paul Sartre back in the early 1950s.

I see it on a daily basis ever since I noticed someone's magic marker that said something on a Monday and the Bic pen of his chief antagonist that answered him on Tuesday. The replies and responses form a beautiful tapestry revealing estranged groups of people trying to communicate. Small little notes, fragments of ideas and half sentences all exhibit a new level of patience as old adversaries take up pens instead of swords. It's educational. Certain New Yorkers are answering each other in less acerbic tones and are leaving feelers and peace offerings for further communication.

For me, it all started a year ago on the "G" line, and the stop is Clinton-Washington. Fort Greene, a neighborhood that has changed quickly and was always anchored by Pratt Institute, is the laboratory under my scrutiny. It's a neighborhood that has endured the darkest days of New York's 30-year decline, from 1965 to 1995, when the subway was not a source of entertainment. Once I walked from the station at about 11 p.m., and heard footsteps keeping pace with mine. When I increased my gait, so did my potential assailant. Stepping it up to a mild jog, I heard the person behind me start to run. When I turned around to confront the enemy, I saw a young woman. "Sorry," she blurted out. "I'm just trying to keep up with you. I'm scared of getting mugged. I saw you on the train... people get robbed along this stretch of Clinton Avenue." I breathed easier and told her: "Sure, no problem." I was scared too, and two scared people are better than one.

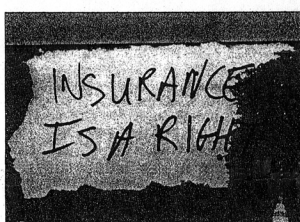
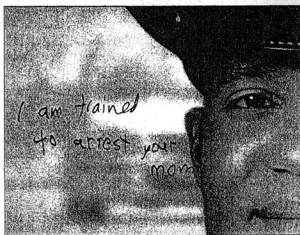
The new intelligent graffiti started here because it had to. Fort Greene, directly adjacent to Clinton Hill, is the only truly integrated neighborhood in New York City. From my perspective, it's the only truly American neighborhood in the United States. It embraces the creed that everyone is created equal. Not the most original idea, but rather stunning when practiced. When America melts, there are good results.

The old graffiti of another generation made statements that left little room for dialogue. They were messages revolving around identity and survival in a

city that was in trouble. Gloriously painting a subway-car exterior with the braggadocio of a Michelangelo garnered attention, but the viewer had to guess at the message – if there was any. And tags meant nothing, except perhaps to the iconoclastic authors of those swirls and curls, who did not seem to be in the market for a response.

The new graffiti, which are different, started innocuously enough. Someone had made fun of an advertisement offering medical checkups for men over 50 who dread colon cancer. Added to it was nothing substantive, just a stupid remark about those who live in fear of a disease that kills more men than any other ailment. A day later there was a response: It won't be so funny if this disease is around when you're 50 and need help.

I was impressed. That was Tuesday. By Thursday there was another comment. With a red marker, somebody had written, as neatly as possible: He's right; colon cancer kicks ass (get it?). I marveled at this. Here was a dialogue in the making. I had not witnessed anything like it since somebody had written the word tough next to Tuff Crip – a spelling correction.



## Duels of Discourse, Underground

The next day the original scribbler wrote: Go your-self. To which the seemingly unfazed spelling editor replied: You should be able to spell TOUGH.

In the same station about a month later there was an advertisement for mock penitentiary clothes made by a company called State Prison Authority. Six surly black men were dressed in faux prison garb, looking as tough as possible. In my distant memory and imagination, these were the guys who followed my female ally and me the night we thought we were being mugged. Boasting that prevalent gangster image, these African-American models stated that they were proud to be anti-middle class, physically violent, outside of mainstream society, and white America's worst nightmare. Again, a few days after the ad went up, somebody scrawled across it with a flashy red pen: Black people have to stop playing the role of the slave.

Wow! I wished I'd had the gumption to write that. Nevertheless, the anonymous commentator inspired me to write, and I wasn't ashamed that my words dated me: Right on!

Now I was involved, and couldn't wait for tomorrow. I was rewarded. The next day someone else had

written, right underneath, in pencil: They are proud young black men. Then, accompanied by a swirling arrow that demonstrated some artistry in itself, yet another response was posted on the other side of the advertisement: Some legacy. Slavery to prison clothes. Great!

Political graffiti are swift and effusive. The following day, in frustrated handwriting that reflected annoyance came the riposte: White racist – one of the new people in the neighborhood. I'm not sure which is a more contemptible accusation, to be a racist or one of the new people who is gentrifying the neighborhood. But that charge was answered too: I'm white – just making a statement – it IS a sad legacy. The tension mounted. I took notes. More arrows and ultimately a confession: I'm Black and I wrote this, i.e., the original observation that black people are psychologically and physically enslaving themselves to negative stereotypes.

Powerful stuff. I mulled over the clothing issue. Recalling the first few times that I saw young black guys with pants hung low, underwear showing, a colorful bandana tied around their heads was painful. I grew up at a time when Hollywood was discarding its Stepin Fetchit and Willie Best images of a black man. Slow moving, lazy, and irresponsible, with ill-fitting clothes and bulging, incredulous eyes, they shuffled through American cinema, leaving an indelible image on white Americans. They Yes-suhed and subordinated themselves, and cut a native, happy-go-lucky Uncle Tom figure.

In the 1960s black America made a conscious effort to resist and defy this destructive image. Fortunately for me, there was a new breed of black man to emulate. From Duke Ellington's orchestra to Jackie Wilson, the Temptations, and other Motown stars, stylish black men who sported tightly fitted suits, shined shoes, and classy ties imbued a whole new generation of black people with pride and dignity.

I once asked a friend who had been a prisoner at Fishkill Correctional Facility how this "big clothing thing" got started in the first place. Direct and caustic he said: "Oh, this is how they dress ya in jail. When you're doing a bid, they give ya these big clothes on purpose. Ya know, big jump suits. Everything is too big. One size fits all. A prison shrink figured out that if ya wear these big sloppy clothes, you don't feel like doing nothin'." Ya know, you just want to chill. No ambition. And the CO's, man, they happy if ya chillin' and watching TV. Makes things easy on everybody."

I was stupefied. Had Tommy Hilfinger and the other clothing designers been on this? Did they know this prison psychologist who was obviously a genius? Sloppy, ill-fitting clothes remove one's motivation and ambition and result in abject humiliation. This sounded remotely familiar. Then I remembered where I had first read it: in William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. The Nazis had devised just such a technique when it came to outfitting prisoners in concentration camps. They gave them ill-fitting striped pajamas, which made their victims feel as if they

were in a dream or a nightmare. The Nazis used this psychological method to control their own as well. When it was time to prosecute the conspirators who had played a role in the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler – some were high-ranking generals and field marshals – not one was permitted to wear his uniform. Instead, they were given oversized, worn-out civilian clothing that forced them to keep pulling up their trousers (no belts).

These haunting thoughts and ideas spun around my head as I once more walked to my favorite spot on the platform. To my disappointment, I found that things had reached a boiling point of resentment and rage. Reductive four-letter words had truncated our efforts to communicate, and our discourse had fallen into the gutter.

I also wondered how long the basic ad would stay up, and if there would be some gesture of reconciliation? These last remarks were racial and racist, with whites and blacks going to it full tilt. I was tempted to intervene. Just a few words of common sense might bring this back to where it commenced – civil discourse with some bantering New York humor. But I decided to stand back. Why? Fatigue, and awareness that a person who still uses the expression, Right On should linger on the sidelines and let the younger generation hammer it out in their own way.

In the 1960s we communicated through pamphlets and leaflets. Discourse and dialogue was created methodically through a series of articles printed on mimeograph machines with smudged black ink. You responded quietly and thoughtfully, in silence. Waiting a week or a month for an answer to a suggestion about what should be done to improve the civil rights campaign, or how to manage the next Vietnam moratorium at colleges nationwide, was the standard practice. People would read, think, and then write. It's different now.

And perhaps a bit more complex than I previously envisioned. With blogs and chat rooms swelling the Internet and creating a kind of a home-spun blackboard, maybe social change is a thing that today's young people have their hands around in a new and productive way. They have grown accustomed to conveying their feelings and opinions on the computer, and have therefore become familiar with the essence of democracy, whether they realize it or not.

Maybe what I witnessed on the subway platform was just an extension of that spontaneous public discourse, the voice of the people – not the newspaper columnists, social scientists, and pundits – just folks standing on a subway platform in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, New York.

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