Cornelia Cody

“Only in New York”: The New York City Personal Experience Narrative

Have I Got a Story!

**Cornelia**: Do you have a New York story?

**Steve**: No. New York’s tough because there’s not a lot of stuff that happens in New York that is inherently funny. I think you ultimately make fun of and find humor in the things that happen in New York, but most things at their core are tragic.

**Cornelia**: I agree, but I think that’s why New York has such a good sense of humor. I mean, nothing happens in Baltimore where people say, “Oh, only in Baltimore.”

**Dana**: “Only in Duluth.” [laughter]

**Steve**: But, you know, there’s much more walking-around, contact kind of stuff. I mean, I don’t know if this is funny but I can remember the one time I knew I had really become a New Yorker.

And it was after fifteen years.

Shannon and I were crossing the street in front of the Flatiron Building. And Shannon’s on my left side. We’re just crossing in front of the Flatiron and this taxi driver . . . I mean, the light was green. It was our light and . . . shit! In New York there are very few privileges and rights.

And the light is green. It’s our light.

And this taxi comes screaming up and stops inches from Shannon.

And I turn and I say [does stereotypical, working-class New York accent], “You stupid Motherfucker! What the hell is wrong with you? You goddamn asshole!” Boom! I smack the hood. [uproarious laughter]

And I turn back to Shannon and say, “What were we talking about?” [laughter]

That’s when I knew I had become a New Yorker. [uproarious laughter]

(Steve Wall and Dana Hickox, interview with the author, 15 March 1994)
“What makes a city a city?” asked B. A. Botkin in Sidewalks of America. “What makes it different from other cities? Humanly, not statistically speaking.” Botkin goes on to answer his own question: “From the folklore point of view, a city is ‘we’—you and I and everybody else, what people say, especially what they have to say about themselves in their own way and their own words, folk-say, and what they choose to remember” (1954:1). We find the city in the voices of its people: in their stories.

If you have lived in New York for years, if you arrived last month, if you only have visited briefly—even if you have never been there at all—you have something to say about the city. New York City does that; it solicits stories from people. Or perhaps New York compels one to tell a story. As Vivian Gornick recounted in The New Yorker, to be in New York City is to take part in a performance:

On Thirty-eighth Street, two men were leaning against a building one afternoon in July. They were both bald, both had cigars in their mouths, and each one had a small dog attached to a leash. In the glare of noise, heat, dust, and confusion, the dogs barked nonstop. Both men looked balefully at their animals. “Yap, yap, stop yapping already,” one man said angrily. “Yap, yap, keep on yapping,” the other said softly. I burst out laughing. The men looked up at me and grinned. Satisfaction spread itself across their faces. They had performed and I had received. My laughter had given shape to an exchange that would otherwise have evaporated in the chaos. The glare felt less threatening. I realized how often the street achieves composition for me: the flash of experience I extract again and again from the endless stream of events. The street does for me what I cannot do for myself. On the street nobody watches; everyone performs. (1996:72)

I am drawn to New York City stories, those that narrate this “concentrate of art and commerce and sport and religion and entertainment and finance,” as E. B. White has described it, “bringing to a single compact arena the gladiator, the evangelist, the promoter, the actor, the trader, and the merchant” (1977:148). How do these varied inhabitants talk to each other about New York City? And what do their stories tell us?

New York City has been dramatized in everything from television’s wildly popular Seinfeld to the New York Times feature “Metropolitan Diary.” But as Eleanor Wachs tells us, the city is performed beyond the mass media: “One of the most popular traditions among New Yorkers
is telling stories about significant events in their daily lives” (1988: xi). Though the stories share features of all personal experience narratives (see Stahl 1989), Wachs identifies themes and characteristics common to these particular tales. “Many New Yorkers,” she writes, “recount their experiences with power blackouts, transit or garbage strikes, battles at traffic court, or eccentric characters”; consistently, these narratives “deal with some aspect of crime victimization or some feature of urban life” (1988:xi).

Both “socially situated” (Bauman 1974:9) and geographically sited, these personal narratives direct attention to the struggles of everyday urban life within the larger performance of New York City, a place that has developed a “body of custom and fantasy peculiar to itself” (Botkin 1954:vii). Foregrounding negative characteristics associated with the city, these stories offer “exemplars of lives, heroes, villains, and fools,” as well as guidance about how to behave and even survive (Richardson 1995:211). But their performance also helps to create New York and New Yorkers themselves. In Laurel Richardson’s words, “Participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other. The process of telling the story creates and supports a social world” (211).

And in New York, that social world is ever changing, open to recreation. “There are roughly three New Yorks,” writes E. B. White in his paean to the city:

There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter—the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something. Of these three trembling cities the greatest is the last—the city of final destination, the city that is a goal. It is this third city that accounts for New York’s high-strung disposition, its poetical deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements. Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness, natives give it solidity and continuity, but the settlers give it passion. And whether it is a farmer arriving from Italy . . . , or a young girl arriving from a small town . . . , or a boy arriving from the Corn Belt with a manuscript in his suitcase and a pain in his heart, it makes no difference. (1977:152)

In my ten years of collecting narratives about the city,¹ I find that the
most interesting, passionate, and funny stories belong to the third kind of New Yorker, to people who have come to New York to find—or to lose—themselves, as the case may be. The stories from immigrants to New York City are compelling because, like Steve in the opening story, these settlers are undergoing transformation; they are becoming New Yorkers. At home, in traffic, while shopping, they participate in the risk, excitement, conflict, and uncertainty of the city. New York stages continual performances on the street, which native New Yorkers may take for granted unless they have lived elsewhere and returned (see Gornick 1996). But transplanted New Yorkers, those here “from some excess of spirit” (White 1977:151), are particularly attuned to the spectacle of the city, and they become part of it by crafting their experiences into personal narratives that capture its pace and its paradoxes. Their stories initiate newer transplants, imparting “street smarts” and making sense of the city’s chaos and over-stimulation.

The tales themselves also become part of the city and its performances—and it is not just what they say, but how they say it. If tellers of New York personal narratives foreground the negative, they do so humorously. They have to, in order to reconcile the dangers, threats, and inconveniences of the city with the fact that they have chosen to live here. Finding the humor in everyday travails also transforms narrators from victims to survivors. “Yes,” they imply, “I was scared, hassled, annoyed, or threatened . . . but I lived to tell the tale!”

You Won’t Believe What Just Happened to Me:
The Personal Narrative

Stephanie: So do you have a New York story?
Cornelia: Actually, yes, and it may have been one of the springboards into this whole study.
Stephanie: So . . . ?
Cornelia: I was coming home on the F Train. It was rush hour. And the train, of course, is packed. I was standing . . . and not too far from me I notice this guy who’s also standing—you know the seats that are three across, in front of the pole . . . ?
Stephanie: Uh huh.
Cornelia: So this guy is standing there, hanging on to that center pole. He’s fiftyish. Slightly unkempt. Looks like he’s been sleeping in his clothes . . . laughter Longish hair.

And he’s staring intently at this young woman sitting in one of those
seats in front of the pole. She’s reading a book. And she’s very Bay Ridge. 
[laughter] You know, the big hair, the long nails, the tight jeans, smacking her gum.

And this guy is staring at her. And the rest of us are aware of it. 
**Stephanie:** Right. A weirdo. 
**Cornelia:** Exactly. 

So, you know, he’s making the rest of us a little anxious because he keeps staring at this girl and she’s clearly becoming uncomfortable. She glares at him once or twice but he keeps staring.

Then, she moves the book so that it blocks him but he moves just so, so that he can stare at her some more. She glares again, making it very clear that she does not like his behavior at all—you know, the fact that he’s just standing there staring at her. 

**Stephanie:** Uh huh. 
**Cornelia:** So finally, when all of us were really starting to get weirded out by him, he leans forward and says to the girl, “Excuse me, Miss.”

She looks up at him with her eyes all squinty and mean. 

“Excuse me,” he says again, “I was just wondering. Are you . . . Are you enjoying that book?” The rest of us are thinking like “Come on! Just leave her alone already!”

She looks up again and says, “Yeah, I am.”

And as she starts to go back to her book, he says, “I’m so glad. ’Cause I wrote that book!”

**Stephanie:** No! 
**Cornelia:** Yeah! And she flips to the back flap—the book is a hardback—and she says, in this great Brooklynese, “Oh my Gawd! Yoo ah de awthuh! I love dis book!”[uproarious laughter]

**Stephanie:** Oh, my God! That’s great!

**Cornelia:** And everyone around them . . . we all burst into uproarious laughter. (author Cornelia Cody [CC], in an interview with Stephanie Glick, 20 April 1994)

The narratives that interest me take as their subject the social and communal world of New York. But they do so from a particular perspective: using a dramatic narrative structure, the tellers relate what they assert to be their own true experiences. That is, these stories are personal experience narratives (Stahl 1989:14–15). For example, the story I told to Stephanie—what I’ll call “Author on the F Train”—includes an initial exposition (author spots woman reading his book on the subway), a developing conflict (man tries to gauge woman’s reaction; he is perceived by others as a potential threat), and a resolution (author reveals his true identity). As in the narratives I have collected,
my story builds toward a final climax (laughter erupts and anxiety is relieved) and frequently implies a moral lesson (here, a play on the maxim “Don’t judge a book by its cover”—especially in New York). In addition, all of my informants claim that their tales are true. Mine certainly is. Undoubtedly, some of the tales have been embellished, but not by much: the city provides sufficient drama to prompt any number of stories.

Then, too, the tellers and the main characters in the stories presented here are one and the same. Steve talked about his own experience with an aggressive cabby, an encounter that taught him something about himself as a New Yorker. In “Author on the F Train,” I was not the story’s protagonist, but all of the train passengers were central to the thrust of the story. Together we felt and responded to the young woman’s initial distress.

In fact, only a handful of stories I’ve collected adopt a third-person perspective, and they negate Stahl’s second feature of the personal narrative: that is, there is some question as to their truthfulness. Ron Alexander, former editor of an anecdotal column in The New York Times, told me this second-hand story:

One guy had this story to tell. A guy comes into his office and goes to the men’s room and he said, “Boy, what a morning I just had! I went to this little grocery store where I buy my egg-salad sandwich every morning and my coffee. And two guys came in and held it up and the police came and they threw a bomb in the window and they came after them with hatchets and bombs going off and shooting was going on!” And he said, “What a morning I had!” And the guy in his office said, “Really? You have an egg-salad every morning?” (interview with the author, 24 March 1994)

My own husband, Dana Hickox, related another:

OK, let me just preface this by saying that this is something that Donna told me. She lives down on Bleeker Street in the Towers. She lives on the same floor as Oliva, actually. And one day she gets on the elevator. She’s on the 24th floor. And the elevator door opens and there’s a dog in the elevator. By itself. There’s a dog. The dog steps out, makes a right, goes down the hall. Donna gets in the elevator. The door closes. The elevator descends . . . two more floors. The door opens. And there is a guy holding a leash. And the guy says, “Have you seen a dog?” And Donna says, “Yeah, he got off at 24.” And the elevator keeps going down. (interview with the author, 2003)
In both stories, the informant immediately establishes that the story belongs to someone else; this is not his own experience. This fact identifies the narrative as hearsay and, along with imprecise or improbable details, calls the story’s veracity into question. Like many of the personal narratives I will focus on here, these third-person stories highlight a general bizarre quality of the city, but they function much like jokes, avoiding narrative digressions and instead building to a quick punch line that recasts but does not resolve the bizarre event.

In the personal narrative, however, teller and listener both return to a “positive equilibrium” (Ellis 1989:33): the violent, disturbing, or bizarre situation achieves closure. The humor in the personal experience narratives I present here develops organically; it is intrinsic to each story even as it builds to the final punch line. And while the narratives I have collected are told as true first-person experiences, they are not “isolated, static” texts; rather, each story is a socially constructed unit of meaning (Bruner 1986:7), a way of “putting experience into circulation” by drawing on (and reinforcing) shared forms and understandings (Victor Turner, quoted in Bruner 1986:12). These personal narratives are commentaries on New York City, enabling their tellers to understand the city’s culture and define their place in it.

It’s a Jungle Out There!

Karen: The first time I came to New York, it was like for a day. I took the Grand Central Shuttle—you know, Times Square to Grand Central Station—and I watched a man steal a woman’s purse and run. And I am totally paranoid anyway, so this is like my introduction to the city.

The second time we came to New York, we drove down in this car. I was with Scott and another couple and we drove to Playwrights Horizons to visit a friend who worked there and he had an office with a window. It’s Forty-second Street, like five O’clock. We parked the car under the window and thought, “We’re just going to run in and talk to Josh. The window’s right there. We can see the car.”

Nada.

We came out, the car had been broken into and all our stuff was gone. My second introduction to New York.

The next time we came down for two or three weeks. I brought my beat-up Renault, which is like an ’80 something; it looks like shit. And we thought, “Great, no one will steal the car.” We parked the car on the street in Chelsea, which, you know, is about as good as you’re going to get.

All right.
Fine.

That was the first night. We were planning to move into Brooklyn later on.

We came out the next morning and they had broken into the car. And there was nothing in the car. They stole a ballpoint pen.

So I, of course, was totally freaked and didn’t want to be here looking for an apartment anyway. I was threatening to break up with Scott, and he was saying, “If you love me, you’ll move.”

We got in the car and drove it to Brooklyn. We parked it in Park Slope. A nice neighborhood. Fine. The car would be safe.

We came back to Manhattan. Like a day or two after that, at four O’clock in the morning, this huge explosion. Ka-boom! It shook the apartment. Things were shaking. I had no idea what happened and all I could think was “natural gas explosion!” Thank you, Edison, New Jersey.

So I thought we were all going to burn up and I ran to the window in time to see this man running down the street, completely on fire. Like someone out of Vietnam. This man in flames, running down the street, screaming whatever you scream in Spanish. It’s unreal. It’s like TV. You want to put the man out but you think, this can’t be happening. These people across the street have a restaurant, and he’s pounding on the door. So they took him inside and put him out. You could see them all running around and the ambulance came and the police came.

So that was horrible and I was like, “We can’t live here. My car’s been broken into. The building next door just blew up—we’re going to die.”

[CC laughs]

We looked for apartments and ultimately I decided that we would move here and I was going to die.

And I told this to Scott and I told this to my family and I told this to my friends. I said, “I’m moving to New York and I know that I’m going to be killed. But this is the choice that I’m making. I don’t know what I’m going to do with the rest of my life but there’s no point in deciding because I’m going to be killed off in New York.”

So we looked for an apartment and found one.

We went back to Brooklyn to get the car that we had parked in this oh-so-safe neighborhood and get off the subway to walk down the block where the car was and couldn’t because it was blocked off with crowds and police and ambulances. There was a guy laying in the middle of the street with his head blown apart. It turned out this guy had been walking down the street with a gun in his mouth. Ready to pull the trigger. Just like walking. Blocks and blocks and blocks. People called the police and the police came and followed him for blocks and blocks and blocks. And tried to get him to take the gun out of his mouth. Well, ultimately they succeeded and what this guy did was point the gun at them.
Well, so they shot him. You know, what could they do?
So this is the block that my car is parked on.
We get to my car. And it’s been broken into again. And this time they’ve smashed the windows.
So we get in the car and we drove it to our new apartment. Where our happy home was going to be! [uproarious laughter] (Karen Lee, interview with the author, 23 March 1994)

As Wachs has observed, New York City stories invariably mark some negative characteristic associated with the city: “population density, heterogeneity, alienation, anonymity, bystander apathy, and invasion of privacy, among others” (1988:x). Most of the narratives I’ve collected contain negative elements ranging from discomfort and rude behavior to danger and violence, either as the focus of the story or as a latent aspect of it.

Karen’s story is a remarkable account of surviving the ultimate New York City ordeal. Her initial experience of New York involves witnessing a mugging, a man on fire, an attempted suicide, a fatal shooting, and an arrest. At the same time, Karen’s car is broken into repeatedly. What magnifies the story is that Karen is an out-of-towner new to the dangers and indifference of the city. Her non-New Yorkerness intensifies the New Yorkerness of the events, depicting the extreme possibilities of a city in which car burglary becomes mundane, even funny.

Steve’s story emphasizes the same negative themes; in fact, he observes that the city is “tragic at its core.” “There’s not a lot of stuff that happens in New York that is inherently funny,” he says, and we learn that simply crossing the street in busy, fast-paced New York, a city that offers “very few privileges and rights,” is an act fraught with danger. Steve, however, quickly becomes the aggressor. He yells at the driver and attacks the cab. He not only avoids personal injury, but he turns the tables on his urban attacker. And, finally, he is able to transition from aggressor to ordinary man-on-the-street without missing a beat. “That’s when I knew I had become a New Yorker,” he concludes, and his audience joins him in enthusiastic laughter. Karen, by contrast, remains a passive outsider. “I’m moving to New York,” she reports to have said, “and I know that I’m going to be killed.” Karen has not yet become a New Yorker, but telling her story is the first stage in the process.

The humor in my own story turns on the fact that audience members all recognize the subway as an inherently dangerous place. No one, as Stephanie indicates, is surprised that there is a “weirdo” on
the train, and we all anticipated that the man would do something
to frighten or intimidate the young woman reading. I believe a large
measure of our anxiety also stemmed from trying to reconcile our
communal sense of responsibility to prevent harm with our sense of
appropriate personal space. “At what point,” I and my fellow passengers
wonder, “do we interfere?” It is not until we realize that the “weirdo”
is actually a published author, and that the girl is reading his book,
that we obtain relief from our anxiety.5

Two “New York” stories told by Larry Mintz suggest why hesitation
about interfering might be particularly problematic for those who
identify as New Yorkers, and they demonstrate the tendency to high-
light moments of disquiet or concern, even in situations that initially
appear innocuous.

Larry: We were going to the deli . . . I’m not sure if it was the Carnegie
or the Stage but it was definitely one of those two. I always went to one
or the other of them when I went to New York.

And I remember the first time I went in with my Southern, WASP
wife and we ordered . . . she ordered a sandwich and a coffee or a coke
or whatever.

And then she also asked for a glass of water.

And the waiter’s response was, “Water? You don’t need water! What
do you need water for? You ordered a soda!”

And uh . . . [laughter] I didn’t even think anything of it. In fact, I hardly
even noticed it but she was shocked out of her mind.

The other one that I thought of . . . when I was thinking of funny
things that happened in New York—that time when I was very young
and I was walking in Greenwich Village with my first wife and we were
walking hand in hand and this crotchety old lady came up to us and she
said, [old lady voice] “Oh, it’s so nice to see a young couple walking in
Greenwich Village where one is a male and the other is a female [laughter]
and they’re both white.”

And I turned to her and I said, “Yeah, but she’s my sister.” [laughter]

And I left her walking off muttering. [laughter] (Lawrence Mintz,
interview with the author, April 2003)

Invasion of privacy is operative in both stories. In the first story,
this invasion shocks the non-New Yorker. Larry hyperbolically insists
that his wife “was shocked out of her mind.” The anecdote makes
clear that the Southern visitor does not expect to be scolded by a
waiter—despite New York waiters’ reputation for being rude and
abrasive. In the second story Larry, a native New Yorker, outmatches
the racist and homophobic busybody. Like Steve, he becomes the aggressor. However, as a born-and-bred New Yorker, Larry does not remark on his quick rejoinder to the meddlesome woman: he takes his own in-your-face attitude for granted, whereas Steve, the settler, notes in self-congratulation that his seamless comeback to the cabby’s aggression marked him at last as belonging to the city.

Informants often told me stories where they themselves took the offensive, even becoming the (generally unintentional) instigators of an apparent crime or misdemeanor. Eve related this story about her quest for an apartment:

**Eve:** I was just about to get married. I’d finished college and I was looking for my first apartment in New York. This was in 1985 when, as all you old New Yorkers will know, the real-estate market was even more horrible than it is now. There were no apartments anywhere. I had just got back from spending an academic year in China and I thought I could use this to my advantage.

I asked a friend to look in the Chinese newspapers. And sure enough, there were some great bargains for apartments in there. However, I also knew that . . . [pause] [laughter] It was rumored that it was very hard for non-Chinese people to get these apartments in Chinatown. These really good bargains. That they were only for Chinese people.

So I made an appointment to meet a landlord. Over the phone. My friend who spoke fluent Chinese made the appointment for me. My future landlord’s name was Charlie. He was about sixty years old. And he would meet me on the corner of Henry and Franklin Streets carrying a copy of the *Shi jie ri bao*, the Taiwanese daily newspaper of New York City. And that I should also bring a copy of that paper [CC laughs], meet each other and that we’d go look at the apartment. Now we didn’t tell him that I wasn’t Chinese.

So I show up on the corner at the appointed time, with the appointed newspaper. I wait for a while and Charlie shows up. Sixty-year-old guy holding a copy of the *Shi jie ri bao*. [CC laughs] I go up to him and say, in Mandarin, that I’m interested in the apartment. He says he has no apartment.

Now I’m really mad. He’s seen that I’m not Chinese. He’s not going to rent me the apartment even though I got up early in the morning on a Sunday. Came all the way to Henry Street. Stood there on the corner holding my Taiwanese newspaper.

So I figure I’m not going to give up that easily. Maybe he has prejudices against Westerners. That we’ll play loud music. That we’re disrespectful. That we’re not the kind of people he wants to meet. But once he has a chance to talk to me, he’ll see that he likes me. He’ll rent me an apartment.
So, I don’t give up. I stay there. I talk to him. I say I’ve come all this way. This is in my Mandarin, which is terrible. His Mandarin is as bad as mine. He’s Cantonese. We’re barely meeting across the language gap. [pause]

I continue to harangue him. For another three or four minutes. At which point the real Charlie finally showed up. [uproarious laughter from CC]

I had been harassing a totally innocent bystander. [laughing] Nice, sixty-year-old Chinese guy. [uproarious laughter] Who had no business . . . [uproarious laughter] . . . with me, whatsoever. [uproarious laughter]

(Eve Jochnowitz, interview with the author, March 1994)

Eve, of course, assumes that the first “Charlie” she encounters is the real landlord and that he refuses to acknowledge the apartment rental because she is not Chinese. It is clear that Eve arrives with the preconceived idea that she will have to contend with some form of inconvenience or prejudice, and listeners (or at least, the “old New Yorkers” in the audience) accept this premise because the story takes place in New York City, where nothing—especially the acquisition of a reasonably priced apartment—is easy.

We also accept that the first “Charlie” is, in fact, the landlord and that he has decided not to rent Eve the apartment because she does not belong in that neighborhood. New York comprises numerous distinct, delineated, and in many cases, exclusive areas. Some are financially exclusive, such as the Upper East Side; but there are also ethnically exclusive areas. My own neighborhood, Carroll Gardens in Brooklyn, is now quite “gentrified,” but when it was known as Red Hook it was inhabited only by Italians. An Irish friend who grew up in a different part of Brooklyn told me that as a child he never set foot in Carroll Gardens. “The Italians would have beaten me to a pulp,” he tells me. “‘You walk around a corner,’ writes one New Yorker of his neighborhood, ‘and it’s a different world’” (Botkin 1954:x).

In Eve’s story, her preconception about how she will be received in a different neighborhood sets up the misunderstanding that reaches a climax when she is transformed from potential victim (she will not get the apartment because of prejudice) to victimizer (she harasses a bystander). As listeners, we laugh both at the incongruity of the switch and because we recognize the difficulties that the city constantly throws in our way. Straightforward activities, such as looking over an apartment, take on an intensity that we do not associate with towns or suburbs.

It is, in part, this intensity that marks something—an activity, an event, a situation, a character—as “Only in New York.” Steve, for instance, felt that the city provided unique experiences, not only in its
heightened “walking-around, contact kind of stuff,” but also in terms of its stock characters, such as the reckless New York cabby. Mintz’s waiter and busybody; my subway “weirdo-turned-celebrity”; Karen’s mugger, shooter, and car burglars; and Eve’s presumably prejudiced landlord all people New York City in the common imagination. We expect to encounter these negative types on the street, and we do. Such circumstances demand the development of a more calloused or detached street persona in order to face the dangers or unpleasantness of the city, and so we oblige.

Frances, who has become a New Yorker, highlights her own initial inability to adopt this attitude during a particularly memorable encounter involving one New York city street presence: the ubiquitous cabby. Like many New York City clichés, real cabbies and symbolic characters exist and reinforce each other. In Frances’s New York story, the cabby represents the urgency and motion of the city, which has no pity on the unsure or the ill-prepared:

Frances: This actually took place in 1988. So I wasn’t living here then. I was living in Texas but I was always jonesing to get back to New York.

And, something came up: . . . there was going to be a foundation . . . RFP [request for proposals] about something having to do with musical traditions and we were really desperate for money and so I said I’ll go to this foundation and I will make the proposal to them that they should fund us for this thing.

So, I come up to New York.

But I hadn’t really thought about what I was doing or where I was going.

And, so, the morning that I was getting ready to go for this thing, I thought, “Oh, my God, I need to look the part. I can’t be wearing like blue jeans and a T-shirt,” so I put together what I considered to be a foundation outfit. It was May. It was a hot . . . it was a really hot day, as I recall. And, what happened was that I . . . put on this long skirt with an elastic waist that was grey and I put on this kind of colorful blousy kind of thing and some little flats that were fuchsia that matched the color in the little silk over-blouse kind of thing.

And I can remember looking at myself in the mirror going, “Wow, you look really weird. I hope they buy this! This is not you! But, it’s OK. This is a disguise. You’re trying to get money.”

So.

But I was . . . you know . . . I had sort of boastfully told my colleagues, “Oh, you know, piece of cake, I’ll come back with a big bag of cash and we can do this project.” And then I started to get really kind of nervous. Because I had never really gone to a foundation and certainly not, you
know—I had gone to some local foundations in Texas but I had never gone like to one like this one. It’s in the tony east side of midtown. An area I didn’t know very well. Whenever I came and stayed here, I stayed with friends on Ninety-sixth Street and hung on the Lower East Side. And so this was an area that was not really my area to go into.

So, I was revising my outfit and revising my look, [CC chuckles] you know, all morning long until I looked at my watch and I was, “Oh my God, I can’t take the train, I’ll have to cab it.”

So, I get out at Ninety-sixth Street and Central Park West and I hail a cab and I give him the address and off we go.

Now, it’s really getting hot and I’m sweating bullets and I feel like perspiration is pouring off my brow and I’m kind of . . . And I feel like . . . everything’s like melting and I’m not looking or feeling all that good [laughter] for this appointment. Now I’m looking at my watch and I’m thinking, “I’m kind of late” and I’m telling the cabby, “Gotta get there, gotta get there!” This place is between Second and First, I think.

We arrive. We pull up to the corner and I say, “It’s OK, I’ll walk. Just get me out at Second Avenue.”

I get out and I’m gathering up all my stuff. I’m going around behind the cab. And I’m just starting to get up on the curb when I . . . I . . . I look down and my skirt has caught on the taxi cab bumper [laughter] and he’s pulling away and my skirt is down around my knees. [laughter]

And so . . . This is all happening like in a split second of madness. And it’s the lunch hour. It’s one O’clock. And these beautiful men from, you know, midtown. The bankers, the lawyers . . . I see a bank of them coming at me in their beautiful suits. They’re immaculate. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with them. And this one . . . I see this one young executive type—very handsome. And I can still remember, he was wearing a beautiful brown, you know, sort of light silk suit. And he had his matching briefcase and everything matched and he looked absolutely beautiful.

I see this look of panic cross his face and he takes his briefcase and slaps the cab and he grabs me and undoes my skirt. He was like my knight in shining princely suitness. He gets me up on the curb and he goes, “Are you all right?”

And I’m like shifting my skirt up over my [laughter] hips and I . . . I just looked at him and I said, “You know what, I think I’m going to be all right. I . . . I have this appointment and I . . . I obviously am not . . . not going to be very successful.”

And he looked at me straight in the eye and he said, “Yes, you will!”

Then he was gone.

And then that was that and I went to the appointment, totally blew it. The woman looked at me like I was from outer space, “You think this project qualifies for this RFP, I don’t think so!” You know, “blah, blah, blah . . .”
She pretty much reads me the riot act in five minutes and I’m out of there [laughter] onto the street, in my bad outfit, still sweating . . . with the memory of my skirt coming down . . .

The whole issue of stepping into . . . There are so many different worlds here, that you can find yourself stepping into the elite world . . . even if you’re not an elite, you . . . you might have an opportunity to step into that world and then fail . . . quite miserably. (Frances Helen, interview with the author, 19 November 2003)

Frances says she opts to “cab it” in order to arrive on time for her meeting, but her decision to take a cab allows her to traverse social as well as physical boundaries. Frances may have chosen to take a cab rather than ride the subway because she was traveling to a more elite part of town; the cab was more in sync with the environment she intended to visit. The fact that the cab itself was partly responsible for Frances failing “quite miserably” in her “opportunity to step into that world” accounts for a large part of the story’s humor.

While cab passengers are generally tourists or New Yorkers with more money and less time than those who take the subway, the cabby himself is not such an elite figure. Generally, he is either a recent immigrant or, in pre-1990 narratives, the wise guy from the outer boroughs who dispenses insight along with cynical and edgy views of city life. He is often, like New York City itself, depicted as confrontational, loud, accident-prone, and inconvenient.

Undoubtedly, New York City and its citizens suffer from a bad reputation—one that persists even in attempts to prove otherwise. For example, consider Natalie J. McCracken’s recent submission to “Metropolitan Diary,” a long-running column in The New York Times:

Dear Diary:

Even 40-odd years ago, New Yorkers had an unearned bad reputation. As my friend Dorothy and I prepared to set off for New York, our fellow Iowans warned us about how unfriendly the city was.

We found that to be a base canard—up to a point.

One afternoon as we walked through Times Square, I fell. Although unhurt, I wanted to sit and collect myself a bit, but one stranger after another stopped to help me up. Some didn’t pause to offer: they just started to lift.

Dorothy already understood New Yorkers.

“I’ll sit down next to you,” she said, “and they’ll just think we’re crazy.”

She did and they did, and they left me alone. (28 April 2003:B2)
Though this “Diary” submission celebrates the absence of the negative, it simultaneously marks its pervasiveness. In emphasizing how helpful New Yorkers can be, despite an acknowledged reputation to the contrary, McCracken subtly underscores an antisocial trait of the city: she was finally left alone only after pretending to be another New York crazy.

“Diary” anecdotes rarely deal with outright violence, but many point to unpleasant situations in order to depict the cleverness or resilience of the main characters who have to deal with them. When the “Diary” applauds a New Yorker’s ability to outsmart another (less courteous) New Yorker, the need for resiliency and street smarts is again reinforced. This column, like the oral stories I have collected, plays with a dual sense of New York: on the one hand, New York is dangerous and violent; on the other, New York teaches one how to survive danger and violence. Stories that highlight both features render the city innocuous—or at least livable.

A personal narrative told to me by former “Diary” editor Ron Alexander illustrates a related duality: the simultaneous civility and expectations to the contrary that characterize a New York outlook on life:

**Cornelia:** What’s the most “Metropolitan Diary”-like story that ever happened to you personally?

**Ron:** Oh, that’s easy. I take the number 10 bus home. You know, it’s slow but I like it. It was a Wednesday. And a woman . . . you know, they have those little single seats by the window? And I sat in back of a woman . . . and she was reading the “Diary.” And it was really a great thrill, that. Watching. I mean, you find yourself watching. Is she going to laugh? Is she going to cry?

This was the most “Metropolitan Diary” thing that ever happened to me. This woman was reading the paper and I was trying to get her reaction. It used to be—they don’t have it anymore—but part of the page used to be a recipe. The rest was “Diary.”

So she was reading the paper and I went up to her and I said, “Excuse me. I never usually do this but I have to ask you a question. Was there anything on that page you particularly liked?”

She turned and said, “The potatoes and cheese sounded good.” [uproarious laughter]

And I said, “No, no. The ‘Diary.’”

She said, “Yeah, it was pretty good.”

And I said, “Uh . . . the reason I asked is that I write . . . you know . . . I edit the column. And I like to know what people like. What they don’t like.”
She said, “Yeah, yeah.” She was OK. She was friendly enough.

And a week later I get a letter that said, “Dear Mr. Alexander, you . . . you really should know that there’s somebody going around New York City pretending they’re you.” [uproarious laughter]

And that is like *Diary* “Diary.” (interview with the author, 23 March 1994)

The story takes place, as most New York stories do, in a public space—in this case, a public bus. What is important to note in this anecdote is the constant contrast between New York and non-New York behavior. Ron makes a point of emphasizing his non-New York preference for comfort (the bus) over the more traditional New York preference for speed (getting from A to B as quickly as possible). Then, in a city known for its anonymity, Ron experiences a moment of self-recognition: he discovers a woman reading “Metropolitan Diary.” Participating in a very New York activity (people-watching), he does something very non-New York: he breaks through the city’s anonymity by looking for emotion in the woman’s face as she reads his “Diary.” Ron then explains how he cautiously trespasses into the woman’s private space (“Excuse me, I never usually do this . . .”) to ask directly for the woman’s opinion. Her first answer (“The potatoes and cheese sounded good”) underlines the assumed disinterest and disconnectedness of New Yorkers.

In the story’s punch line, the distant woman on the bus becomes someone who cares enough about Ron Alexander to warn him about an imposter—despite the fact that she knows Ron only in a removed sense, as the editor of the familiar “Metropolitan Diary.” A true New Yorker, the woman did not feel comfortable relating to Ron when they shared physical space. Rather, she preferred reaching out in a non-physical way; the issue of trust becomes moot if she is “talking” to him through the mail. Ironically, the content of her concern represents a classic New Yorker attitude: mistrust everyone; nothing is ever what it appears to be. What makes the story funny is precisely this constant juxtaposition of New York and non-New York behavior. Binaries such as public arena/private space, trust/mistrust, and anonymity/recognition (or detachment/reaching out) play off each other throughout the anecdote, as they do in all of the narratives presented here (cf. Wachs 1988:86).

New Yorkers, be they native or transplanted, in fact take great satisfaction in the double-sided nature of New Yorker aggressiveness and the
challenges that necessitate such a paradoxical stance. A “primer” written for people visiting New York for the first time celebrated this “New York Attitude”; points three and four of one bulleted list claimed:

3. A New Yorker is a very forward person who is always ready to interact in some fashion or another with anyone.
   • That is why everyone in New York is so friendly.
   • That is why everyone is so cranky.
4. A New Yorker makes the most of adversity.
   • Teeming crowds inspire New Yorkers to awe and pride in their ability to survive the impossible number of people.
   • Power blackouts, confinement in stalled subway cars, and Statue of Liberty anniversaries not only promote a feeling of brother and sisterhood but also make good stories for dinner parties and telephone conversations. (Gordon 1986:102)

New Yorkers, primer author Alice Gordon tells us, are proud not only of their ability to survive adversity, but also of the adversity itself. Through adversity one develops resilience, superiority—and good personal narratives.

One way a non-native New Yorker acquires the necessary resilience to live in New York is by developing “street smarts.” Native or long-time residents of the city often teach these skills to non-New Yorkers, and narrative is one means to this end (see Wachs 1988:7). In the following anecdotes, told one after another, a new New Yorker and a native both encounter a hostile driver:

**Cornelia:** She has a great New York story.
**Val:** When I got hit by a cab?
**Anita:** You did?
**Val:** I didn’t tell you when I got hit by a cab?
**Anita:** No!
**Val:** Yeah. I was on my way to work and I’m crossing University Place and Fifth. I’m crossing this way and the “walk” sign lights up. And a bus comes around. So I stopped really suddenly. But I was still in the street . . . A cab decides he’s going to beat out the bus for the turn. And he comes swerving right into me. He stops suddenly at me. And these two really sophisticated . . . The lady with the black hair parted in the middle that only comes to here. You know the look? And the guy in the suit, sitting in the back, talking to each other. They look at me like, “Umph! Why are you holding us up? Get the fuck out of here with your dirty red coat and your stringy hair. You’re obviously not one of us.”
But I just turned and was like, “Wow.” And I looked at him and he looked at me. And he put the car in reverse . . . He backs it up slowly. And he drives up and hits me! So he sort of pushed me and I wobbled. But I didn’t fall.

**Anita:** Oh, my God . . .

**Val:** It was like me and the car. [*laughter*] And I looked at him and I said, “Hey, you hit me!” Like he didn’t know. [*laughter*]

The thing was he never changed the look on his face. Nor the two people in the back. I look at him again. He puts it in reverse again. Backs up and hits me again. Again, he hit me.

**Anita:** Are you serious?

**Val:** I’m like [*school-marmish voice*] “Well, that’s about enough of that!” [*uproarious laughter*]

**Cornelia:** Why didn’t you throw something at him?

**Val:** I didn’t have anything to throw at him but this [*indicating briefcase*] and I thought if I threw this it’s going to land on the hood and he’s going to take off with my wallet. My inclination was to spit. Fat . . . big . . . like I see on the street that makes me want to gag? But I don’t know how. So I pointed at his license number like, “Got your license number, mister!” [*laughter*] And he backs up and hits me again! And I’m like “8-5-9-C-6-4.” [*laughter*]

And I start walking across the street, memorizing this number, and he again cuts me off! Like he wasn’t done with me yet. And I’m like, “All right, fine, you hit me twice, now I go call the police.” I call 911 because I don’t know any other numbers other than . . .

Right off the bat, I’m so nice. I’m like, “Listen, this isn’t really an emergency so if you have to put me on hold, go ahead. I can wait.” [*laughter*]

The emergency call goes through. [*laughter*] She was like, “Yeah, what?”

And I go, “I’ve been hit by a cab.”

And she’s like, “Why didn’t you call from the accident scene?”

And I’m like, “Well, there was no telephone mounted to the top of the cab. How did you want me to call?”

She’s like, “Well, you didn’t call from the site. What do you want me to do?”

And I’m like, “I don’t know. What do you usually do in these situations? I thought you’d want this guy off the road.”

She’s like, “Well, why didn’t you call an ambulance?”

I’m like, “I’m not really hurt . . .”

“So why . . .”

**Anita:** [*laughing*] “So why are you calling me?”
Val: [laughing] I’m like, “I don’t know, where I’m from they like to get homicidal taxi drivers off the road. I guess here it doesn’t matter to you.”

[uproarious laughter]

Anita: That happened to me a couple of weeks ago. I was driving to midtown and this . . . uh . . . van cut me off. I mean, he was driving erratic . . . in and out of traffic. And when I pulled up next to him to say, “Uh, excuse me, sir,” he tried [laughing] to ram his van into my car! [laughter] And he took off!

So I took down his . . . It was . . . uh . . . a . . . I think it was . . . uh . . . uh . . . some type of plumbing company . . . And I took down the license plate, the number and everything.

And I called the company.

So I talked to the secretary and I said, “I want to speak to the manager of the company.” So he got on the phone.

He said, “Who’s calling?”

I said, “This is Officer MacDaniels of the 34th Precinct. [laughing] I was driving up First Avenue at approximately one fifteen . . . [uproarious laughter] One of your drivers tried to run me over!” [uproarious laughter]

Val: What did he say?

Anita: He said . . . [uproarious laughter] He said, “Officer . . . What’s your name? What precinct?”

And I said, “Yes.”

And I said, “If I wasn’t on my way to work, I would’ve pulled him over and arrested him.” [uproarious laughter]

I said, “You need to . . . ” [uproarious laughter]

He was like, “Oh, shit, I’m tired of this man! [uproarious laughter] I’m gonna get him! What . . . what was the number . . . number of the car?”

And I gave it to him [laughing] and everything.

And he said, “I’m gonna get him.”

They wrote me an apology letter. (Valerie Chimera and Anita Daniels, interview with the author, 7 March 1994)

Val’s response to the “murderous” cabby is to scold the driver timidly and call the official emergency number. She is surprised at the 911 operator’s lack of concern (“Where I’m from, they like to get homicidal taxi drivers off the road”)—but as any seasoned New Yorker knows, calling 911 in this sort of situation is both ineffectual and foolish. If New York City residents called 911 every time they encountered reckless cab drivers, the city’s emergency system would come to a standstill.

Anita, a native New Yorker, takes a completely different stance. She impersonates a police officer, scares the truck company, and—instead of bureaucratic indifference—she receives a letter of apology. Anita
relates her own personal narrative for the same reason everyone else does: to share, shape, and make sense of an event experienced in New York. Consciously or not, Anita also tells her story to instruct Val in dealing with the city’s dangers to better effect. In the process, she affirms her role as insider.

The insider/outsider binary is indicative of the way the city functions in dichotomies. Much of the danger, distress, or discomfort experienced in these stories occurs at the point where the binaries intersect. In each one of the stories I have collected, someone’s private space is violated while navigating a public arena (cabs attack pedestrians, a subway rider is intimidated, waiters and busybodies get pushy, an innocent bystander experiences harassment). The level of trust or mistrust (in both the stories and in everyday life) has much to do with one’s ability to “read” as well as navigate the city, and the contrasting pair anonymity/recognition (or detachment/reaching out) corresponds to the sense of alienation or confrontation one experiences there.

There is the sense that the cab provides a private space from which to watch the public performance of the city. Undoubtedly, this is generally true, but in cab experiences that become personal narratives, the privacy of the passenger’s seat is often shattered; the private and the public merge. The taxi passengers in Val’s story, for example, position themselves as detached observers of and not participants in the struggle between Val and the cabby, but it is precisely because they do not interfere that the situation gets out of control. Despite their detachment, they—along with the cabby—become central characters in the story.

In just one example of the ambiguous nature of the city and its stock characters, the cab represents both a temporary shelter from the many and oft-articulated dangers of the city and a representation of danger itself. In Frances’s story, a cab is almost literally her undoing; in the narratives told by both Steve and Val, the driver actually attacks the pedestrian. The listeners of these stories laugh uproariously. Why? By laughing, do we attempt to find order in a situation that offers us the opportunity to experience disorder? (Babcock 1978:20)

And It’s Funny!

Dana: The DEA used to be located up on Fifty-seventh Street and like Tenth Avenue. Cornelia and I were working the same hours. This was shortly after we were married and moved to New York.
Cornelia: Yeah, I started working for the DEA shortly after we moved to New York.
Dana: But they moved from Fifty-seventh Street down to the meatpacking district, down along Tenth Avenue. This is, again, eleven years ago. So, at night it was desolate. And it was this nondescript brick building. Under this trestle, down there. Near The Homestead Restaurant?
All: Yeah, yeah.
Dana: So, I would walk down to meet Cornelia but I couldn’t even go inside the garage. There was absolutely no way, I had to wait outside.
Cornelia: It became very high tech and very high security, which it hadn’t been before.
Dana: Right. So, and again, it was so nondescript. It was like this brick warehouse. And, of course, in the evening this area is populated by transvestite hookers.
Drew: Right, right.
Dana: So, I’m standing outside. And invariably Cornelia was always late getting out. So I would sit there and I would get hit on by like a two-hundred pound guy in spandex. [laughter]
I would sit there on the corner and I kept thinking, someone I know is going to be driving up Tenth Avenue . . . [uproarious laughter] And it’s just be me and my stable . . . [uproarious laughter] Here I am, pimping on Tenth Avenue. [uproarious laughter]
It was humiliating! And I would get so angry. She’d finally come out and I’d be [angry voice], “Where the hell have you been? Why are you so late?”
Cornelia: [laughing] And I’d have no control over when I could leave. . .
Dana: Just being approached by . . . And, of course, they couldn’t figure out . . .
“What do you mean . . . you’re waiting for . . . someone? You’re waiting for me, honey.” [uproarious laughter]
“You’re waiting for sugar bear!” [uproarious laughter]
Cornelia: Poor Dana! [uproarious laughter] (Dana Hickox and Drew Wheeler, interview with the author, April 2003)

If New York personal experience narratives highlight negative aspects of the city and city life, they rely significantly on humor to do so. According to Ron Alexander, “New Yorkers have the best sense of humor in the world” (interview with the author, 24 March 1994). Indeed, laughter is a significant part of all the narrative performances transcribed here. What makes these stories funny, and how is this humor expressed? Do we laugh because of content, delivery, or both? And what might the humor in the New York City personal experience narratives achieve?
One theory of humor dating from antiquity is the idea that humans enjoy feeling superior to others. Steve’s audience, for instance, laughed heartily when they recognized his sudden turning of the tables on the taxi driver. In the story exchange between Val and Anita, listeners may feel superior to Val, the pitiful out-of-towner who does not know how to respond to New York aggression, and appreciate Anita’s superior knowledge and courageous wit. Similarly, our laughter at Dana’s story implies that we would not be so foolish as to find ourselves in the meat-packing district surrounded by transvestite prostitutes. In this story, Dana’s own laughter acknowledges his ridiculous predicament.

Another possible source of humor is the juxtaposition of elements that seem incompatible or unexpected, but that are arranged in a relevant way. Incongruity—and especially appropriate incongruity, to use Elliott Oring’s term—has been recognized as the essence of comedy since the early eighteenth century (1992; see also Rubin [1976] 1998). Incongruity theory argues that the perception of apparent incongruity, followed by its resolution, results in pleasure.

Much of New York humor entails the piecing together of disparate (often threatening) entities. Conforming to the city’s own pace and rhythm, this piecing together is done quickly (see Oring 1981:39–40), relying on the rapid recognition of relevant cultural categories and the application of personal knowledge. In my subway story, we do not expect the “weirdo” to be a published author. In Eve’s narrative we laugh at the sudden incongruity of Eve-as-harasser, much as we chuckle at the prospect of Dana—loitering outside a disguised government facility—as sexual pickup. When Steve confronts the aggressive cabdriver, his effortless shift between a stereotypical working-class New Yorker persona and his role as an attentive and composed companion evokes laughter from those who recognize these personas as incompatible. The story is even funnier to those who know that Steve is CEO of his own consulting firm, someone who presumably would not employ that kind of language or behavior in ordinary circumstances.

But these narratives are also funny because of the way they are told; after all, they are personal experiences crafted into narrative form, rather than cursory reports of random events. As Stahl observes, tellers of personal narratives recognize an incident as “story-worthy” and adapt “the perceived experience to the demands of the genre” and their audiences. A skillful narrator presents a “rhetorically enhanced” but still believable narrative (1989:18). In the New York stories I have heard and collected,
audiences expect a good narrator to downplay trauma in favor of humor—and narrators oblige by employing several artistic strategies.

For instance, I have transcribed more than one version of Val’s narrative about her run-in with the cab and the 911 operator; as the events themselves recede in time, the narrative about them has become more polished and its humor more pronounced. The conversation between Val and the 911 operator, for example, has become more theatrical as she deliberately builds to a final punch line. On the other hand, Steve makes the moment of his own “cab incident” memorable by articulating a contrast between his learned “New Yorker” identity and his “natural” persona. The mechanisms of humor are many; one I will mention here is Steve’s use of a stereotypical New Yorkese (some version of a working-class Brooklyn and/or Bronx accent) when assuming the voice of a stock native-New York character (the “regular guy on the street”). Steve does his version of Robert De Niro’s New Yorkese, and I over-exaggerate Brooklynese when I perform the girl on the F train (“Oh my Gawd! Yoo aw de awhah!”). Immigrants, on the other hand, are frequently performed using some imagined non-European accent.

But overblown voices may not always be appropriate to the New York personal experience narrative. Wachs described the performance style of one narrator by saying, “[She] told her stories in a straightforward, dramatic style, sprinkling them with traces of wit and sarcasm.” Wachs notes that this style is “used by many New Yorkers to tell gruesome tales of city life,” tales that are “often embedded into conversations” as “part of the city’s oral tradition” (1988:x). In my own experience, the more terrifying the event, the less emotional the narrative delivery; for example, if an incident involved hysteria, panic, or great commotion, a narrator often employs a detached quick staccato to tell about it. Karen’s “these-are-the-facts” tone of voice emphasized the horror of her initial experiences in New York; in fact, had she over-dramatized the numerous violent episodes of her introduction to the city, the story would have lost much of its humor. Because the city’s inherent “over-the-top” elements already stretch the line between truth and fiction, there is no need to embellish; in these stories, humor seems to lie in the careful calibration of the outrageous and the believable.

Lawrence Mintz has posited two humorous stances: a narrator may represent (or portray) a negative exemplar, or she may act as a comic spokesman. The tale tellers I have presented here are not
socially marginal—not negative exemplars. What is outside the norm is the event or experience. The teller, as comic spokesman, transfers the frame of the narrative from serious to not serious. The dangers and violence of the city demand attention and anxiety, but these tensions also need to be controlled and relieved. Otherwise, New Yorkers could not live here in this city of contrasts, motion, desires realized and dreams deferred.

B. A. Botkin saw transformation—both of self and of city—at the heart of New York, and this was one reason he chose to study its folklore (1956:xvii). Nothing in New York is static (see Ozick 1999), including the identities of its citizens. Those who venture to stay in the city find themselves—and their expectations—changed. When Steve states that “in New York there are very few privileges and rights,” he suggests that the city fails to meet his standards for a civil society. Val, in response to the 911 operator’s indifference, exclaims, “Where I’m from . . . they like to get homicidal taxi drivers off the road. I guess here it doesn’t matter to you.” The point of the story is, of course, that public and personal safety should matter to New Yorkers.

But the clash between ideals and everyday realities need not stifle creativity or communication; in fact, these incongruities seem to encourage them (see Rubin [1976] 1998). New Yorkers find humor in the fact that everyday life in the city “is not what it should be, or what they expected it would be” (Bradley [1936–37] 1997:46–47). By highlighting these incongruities, New Yorkers re-establish control, narratively adapting to the demands of the city in order to overcome them. Ultimately, perhaps New Yorkers feel superior because they can laugh at experiences—even dangerous ones—beyond the norm, and that’s why they choose to do so, in conversations and gatherings throughout the metropolis. Everyone, it seems, has a New York story. In the words of Nancy Franklin,

[C]ertainly there will never be a dearth of things to complain about and to crow about. One thing is inarguable: there’s no place like it anywhere else. You can’t blame people for deciding not to live here, but you do have to wonder about people who have never at least wanted to live here. Here you will have the worst and the best days of your life, and your response to both will be the same: Only in New York. (1999:42)
Notes

1. To collect these narratives, I asked friends and acquaintances for their “New York City story,” allowing each to decide what constituted such a story. In addition, I interviewed these individuals about their ideas and perceptions regarding New York humor. Most of my informants were living in the city when they told me their stories or returned to the city on a frequent basis. Often, I asked someone for his or her story on “the spur of the moment” when I had a tape recorder handy, or I warned a friend that I would be asking for a story at some convenient moment. But on a number of occasions I have also invited friends to assemble for the express purpose of sharing New York anecdotes. Invariably (and as I expected), one story prompted another as individuals (myself included) suddenly remembered bizarre or interesting anecdotes about the city. This “sudden recall” occurred at all group gatherings.

2. When my husband first told me this story, he kept confusing the floor numbers. The story presented here is his second attempt.

3. These narratives also share features of urban legends, “realistic stories concerning recent events (or alleged events) with an ironic or supernatural twist” (Brunvand 1998:145), and in form they resemble anecdotes that depend upon shared knowledge of people and places and culminate in a pithy instance of reported speech (Bauman 1986:77).

4. Karen’s experience approximates another (this time, fictional) “New York experience” portrayed on film. Martin Scorsese’s After Hours (1985) depicts what happens when an uptown computer programmer sets out to meet a woman in Soho. His wild taxi ride is the first in a long series of events that includes a suicide, pursuit by rabid vigilantes, and unwelcome sexual advances—nightmares that are exacerbated by the fact that he does not have enough money to get home and is unable to get to a telephone.

5. Lawrence Mintz has suggested that “[h]umor is a cognitive process in which incongruities and conflicts are perceived, reconciled, and understood, generating a pleasurable response by controlling or eliminating tension.” Or, in other words, “Humor is a transference of frame from serious to not serious resulting in relief of tension and therefore pleasure” (2003:7).

6. Fran Lebowitz, a writer who specializes in sustaining (and perpetuating) the negative stereotypes of New York, foregrounded this stock character when she speculated on what would happen if New York participated in the Olympics as a separate entity:

   The [Olympic] athletes will be followed by seventeen Checker cabs carrying the New York team. The first cabby in line will have his arm out the window and in his hand will be a torch. The passengers in this cab will be screaming at the cabby as sparks fly into the back seat. He will pretend not to hear them. When the parade concludes, the first cabby will fail to notice this immediately and he will be compelled to stop short. This will cause all the following cabs to run into each other. The cabbies will then spend the rest of the Olympics yelling at each other and writing things down in a threatening manner. The athletic teams will be forced to start the games even though this collision has occurred where it will cause the greatest inconvenience. (1981:23)
7. One “Metropolitan Diary” entry begins: “This happened many years ago when New York cabbies were considered the source of wisdom on all metropolitan matters.” *The New York Times*, 14 April 2003, B2.

8. Plato and Aristotle advanced the idea that humor resided in situations that humbled a superior, while Thomas Hobbes remarked in *Leviathan* (1651) that laughter is “provoked by the ‘sudden glory’ attending a perception of one’s own mighty powers, or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another” (in Friend 2002:80).

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Gornick, Vivian

Lebowitz, Fran

Mintz, Lawrence

Oring, Elliott

Ozick, Cynthia

Richardson, Laurel

Rubin, Louis D., Jr.

Scorsese, Martin, dir.

Stahl, Sandra Dolby

Wachs, Eleanor

White, E. B.