

Manhattan

In 12 Streets

Words and Photography by Kennie Ting

“But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n' arette it nat my vileynye,
Thogh that I pleyedly speke in this mateere,
To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.
For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thing, or fynde wordes newe.”

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

“I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan Island, and bathed in the waters around it;
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day, among crowds of people, sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night, or as I lay in my bed, they came upon me.”

Walt Whitman, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*

Introduction



I'm not a New Yorker. Never been one and never will be. But I'm fascinated by New York, particularly by Manhattan, for no specific reason, except, perhaps that it is an island; and a very small one at that; and having spent my life living in islands, of the small variety, Manhattan strikes me as being a small island that is inexplicably bigger than the sum of its component parts – aided, no less by the hundreds and hundreds of square blocks on its (in)famous grid.

Incidentally, I have lived in New York, though not in Manhattan, but just across the water in Brooklyn, where Manhattan beckons seductively, day and night, with its gleaming unreal towers and its Manhattan-ness. Inevitably, my residency in New York has been spent contemplating and objectifying Manhattan; wondering what it is that draws so many people all over the continent, and also from the rest of the globe, to its 34 square miles. 1.6 million people live in these mere 34 square miles,

and another 1.6 million count as in-city commuters – that’s a density of about 140,000 people per square mile; a scandalously large amount. In Africa or parts of equatorial Asia, a dense urban environment such as this would be regarded as a slum. Here, it is high-end, high-rise living; because living anywhere in Manhattan, regardless of the size of your hovel, is considered high-end. You have *arrived*, if you’re living in Manhattan; though what exactly that means; *where* exactly you’ve arrived *at*, existentially, remains a question that Manhattanites constantly ponder, aided by their therapists.

The intent of *Manhattan In 12 Streets* is not to provide an accurate picture of the state of the urban and human landscape on this small island. Nor is this strictly a guidebook presenting alternate walking tours of the city, though it may seem suspiciously that way. My aim is to use Manhattan – specifically 12 streets on the island – as a means to playfully deconstruct the genre of walking tours and urban sociological studies; to use this city as a blank slate on which to impose my own wayward interpretations of The City as a concept. Inadvertently, the history, architecture, politics and spirit of Manhattan may creep into these narratives, they being intimately associated and rooted in *place*. Those who seek a guidebook in these pages will also a perverse simulation of one, with landmarks, both familiar and unorthodox, scrupulously documented in easy-to-follow, richly visual accounts of walks.

For after all, this book is nothing but a collection of accounts of walks. The tone of these accounts, however, will be itinerant, irreverent, and idiosyncratic. I am guided by *The Canterbury Tales* in this – that alternately bawdy and baleful collection of stories within stories (within stories), told by nine and twenty pilgrims, banded together and headed for Canterbury to seek benediction at the Shrine of Thomas A. Beckett. There is no specific destination for my own *Mannahatta Tales* – Mannahatta being what the small island was called by its indigenous Native American tribes at the time of *The Canterbury Tales* – and there are but a dozen wildly different characters – my 12 streets – each with their own unique tale to tell. Nonetheless, like Chaucer’s Tales, all of mine contain stories within stories, just as, in every big city, such as New York, there are smaller “cities” within the space of the bigger one, self-replicating in

scale from blocks, to streets, to neighborhoods, to precincts, to districts, to boroughs, and finally to the city as a whole.

My own approach is to engage the city at street-level, exposing each of these streets for what really are – whole universes in their own right, with diverse populations, landscapes, ecologies and stories, real or imaginary, concentrated on both sides of a single straight line. In my choice of streets, I am admittedly guided by diversity, wherein I choose streets that pass through as many neighborhoods in Manhattan as possible, in order that their tales would be richer, and my own critiques – or flights of fancy – more diverting and serendipitous. Collectively, the streets also traverse the entire length of Manhattan, from the grid-less, chaotic South with vestiges of New York’s brief turn as New Amsterdam, through the totalitarian landscape of its rigidly gridded lower, middle and upper reaches, to the once-again grid-less far northern wilderness of the island.

The 12 streets, and the names of their Tales (**TO BE CONFIRMED AS I GO ALONG**), are as follows:

- I. *30th Street – Totem and Time-Travel*
- II. *14th Street – State of the Union, or Swinging Both Ways*
- III. *11th Street – A Divine Comedy, or 1 ³/₃ Gods*
- IV. *43rd Street – Unreal City*
- V. *79th Street – Geneva to Zurich Express*
- VI. *Liberty Street – Death and the Maiden*
- VII. *187th Street*
- VIII. *125th Street*
- IX. *92nd Street*
- X. *58th Street*
- XI. *146th Street*
- XII. *Grand Street*

The tales are told in the order by which I walked the streets, and there are no linkages between one tale to the next. That seems to me, to also mirror the nature of the city itself, where events or neighborhoods often happen or exist independently of other events or neighborhoods elsewhere, and only when taken in totality, can a beautiful and complex full picture be grasped.

Manhattan In 12 Streets is ultimately an account of Manhattan from the point of view of an outsider, who, being alien, observes and experiences the city from a wholly alien, wide-eyed point of view; like how colonial settlers in 1624, chancing upon Mannahatta in a secluded cove, must have observed and appraised its pristine forests as they stumbled ashore weary from travel and celebrating their good luck. Being an alien account, it will contain very little that is familiar to the average New Yorker, or to the avid New York observer, and may at times be annoyingly, willfully off-center and tangential, if only to incite the reader to abstract from the obvious to see what's implied. The ride is engineered, not to be smooth, but to be completely unpredictable.

Many others have written extensively about Manhattan, particularly online; and it is from these online accounts that I have drawn my inspiration and, in many cases, my background information. The best and most inspiring of these – which include some *extremely* informative and detailed walking tours of Manhattan's streets, avenues and neighborhoods, accompanied with stunning photography – I have listed in the “Essential Surfing” section that follows this Introduction.

My own accounts of these streets comes closest in form to those presented in the excellent website *New York Songlines* (www.nysonglines.com), which meticulously documents streets in their entirety, using the metaphor of Aboriginal Australian songlines: a traditional approach of remembering and navigating the vast Australian desert through song cycles that describe key features of the landscape. I am indebted to *New York Songlines* for the wealth of architectural and building-related information that it has accumulated and presents, and which I have referenced not insignificantly in my tales of streets south of Central Park.

My tales are not songs by any means, nor will they aid in remembering or navigating the city. But they do achieve a similar purpose to the *Songlines*, which is to open one's eyes and mind to forgotten histories of the City, or to interesting everyday details, too often taken entirely for granted, even when they are staring one directly in the face.

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Essential Surfing:

- *The Bridge and Tunnel Club's Visual Tours of Manhattan* – www.bridgeandtunnelclub.com/bigmap/manhattan
- *Ephemeral New York* – www.ephemeralnewyork.wordpress.com
- *Lost New York City* – www.lostnewyorkcity.blogspot.com
- *Manhattan Street Project*, by Mary Sargent – www.newyorkphotoblog.blogspot.com
- *New York City Walk*, by Caleb Smith – www.newyorkcitywalk.com
- *New York Songlines*, by Jim Naureckas – www.nysonglines.com
- *Walking Off the Big Apple: a strolling guide to New York City*, by Terri Tynes – www.walkingoffthebigapple.com