

Transcript  
Onomatopoeia  
EP - The Return to the City

[TAPE] Sound of attendant checking proof of vaccination

**ELIZABETH ERB:** The straps of my N95 mask tug on my ears. I file into a line of others who must have missed the “please wear a face mask sign.” It’s a bright blue-sky November day, warm enough for just a light jacket. I’m at Pier 83 on Manhattan’s West Side. Berth 2. Boarding the Circle Line Brooklyn.

[TAPE] Sound of archival footage of breaking CNN news

I’ve spent the greater part of the last year and a half obeying the “stay home, stay safe” message.

When COVID shut the world down in March of 2020, I packed a single suitcase. I thought I’d be gone for two weeks. I flew from New York City to my home in Michigan.

I was going to ride out the pandemic with my parents. That two weeks turned into over a year. And, well. You know the rest.

[TAPE] Sound of car horns honking

I’m a bit of a germaphobe. I hate crowded spaces. And New York is all of that. Compact. Cramped. Dirty.

But my life was here. My apartment. Work. And future.

So I came back. The pandemic looms. It seems like every other day I hear of another vaccinated friend contracting Delta. I’m even more anxious being around people.

[TAPE] Sound of boat attendant telling patrons to watch their step as they board

But here I am.

On a boat with strangers.

A 90-minutes tour to see “the highlights of Manhattan.”

There’s no escaping now.

[TAPE] Theme music plays

I'm Elizabeth Erb and this is Onomatopoeia - a podcast about the people and places of New York City. In this episode, The Return to the City.

Chris is our tour guide.

[TAPE] Sound of Chris telling patrons that he'll be pointing out some of the highlights

He's from Bay Ridge. He's wearing a Kelly green shirt and khaki pants. He explains what's in store for us. The Empire State Building. Brooklyn Bridge. Lady Liberty herself.

The Circle Line Brooklyn sounds her horn, we leave port. I make my way up the metal stairs to the top deck.

[TAPE] Sound of boat horn

There are rows of brown plastic chairs. There must be over a hundred. I position myself strategically. Away from the family of six crunching on nachos and the group of women downing their white wine. They must be on a girl's trip.

[TAPE] Sound of waves

We make our way south down the Hudson River. Lower Manhattan's skyline becomes irresistible to photograph. I stand up. Along with the rest of my fellow voyagers. The social distancing that was observed before has suddenly disappeared. Everyone is now on the left side of the ship. Selfie sticks in hand. Ready to get that shot of One World Trade.

I quickly snap my picture and move to an empty row of chairs. I push on the bridge of my nose to ensure my mask is still securely fastened to my face.

[TAPE] Sound of passengers chattering

As I navigate through the throng of happy tourists, I hear sounds I haven't heard in months. French. Hindi. Russian. And German. Our tour happens to be two days after the United States eased pandemic restrictions and welcomed back international travelers. The melodic hum of languages feels to me. For the first time. Like the world might be returning to some sense of "normal."

Chris chimes in again. “The bow of the boat is now open!”

[TAPE] Sound of Chris

He tells us that is the best place to see the Statue of Liberty.

I rush back down the stairs, following a couple who sound like they might be from Texas. Or somewhere in the South. The man is wearing a cowboy hat.

We enter the bow and there she is. Proudly poised with her head and torch held high. Chris did not lead us astray.

[TAPE] Sound of waves

As we wave goodbye to Lady Liberty, we make our way past Governors Island and forge north into the East River. I head back upstairs. This time passing the concession stand. Those nachos did look good.

I exercise restraint. I don’t want to have to take my mask off after all...

I reach the top deck at the perfect time. We are about to sail directly below the Brooklyn Bridge. The massiveness of the structure seems almost unbelievable. I look up at the lanes of traffic rushing by. So often have I been in one of those cars.

Our last stop on the tour is the iconic Empire State Building.

[TAPE] Sound of Chris

It sticks out as the pinnacle piece in some sort of Legoland city. Chris tells us it was completed in 1931 and that we ought to get tickets to go up to the top. If we haven’t already.

He puts his microphone down. Allowing us to enjoy the short cruise back to Pier 83. I take in the sweeping views of the city one last time.

We dock and file out in a mass of humanity.

We’re back where it all began. We go our own ways.

[TAPE] Sound of boat horn

I remove my mask. At last. And take a deep breath in. And out.

[TAPE] Sound of “Oh so so much to explore” jingle

[TAPE] Theme music

This episode of Onomatopoeia was created by me, Elizabeth Erb. Onomatopoeia is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Original theme music by Lee Feldman. Special Thanks to Columbia Digital Librarian Michelle Wilson.