

## Connective filaments, coyote walks on the map

*Dillon de Give*

*yahoo@implausibot.com*

Since 2009 the Coyote Walk project has linked the center of New York City to the wild with an annual walk. The project began as a human oriented reciprocal gesture for an animal that mysteriously appeared in Central Park and later died under somewhat ironic circumstances. “Hal” the coyote keeled over *as he was being released* into a forest north of the city, following a massive, municipally organized chase in midtown. The whole incident created, what seemed to me, a martyr-like image and character.



Figure 1. Collage incorporating a camera trap image by Justin Edge.

Few species find advantage in the wake of unceasing human expansion and domination. In North America coyotes are one. As late as the mid-1800s their population was localized in the plains of the central and southwest US<sup>[1]</sup>. Opportunistic colonizers, they traced the path of westward European expansion in reverse, filling in destabilized niches. The coyote is identified as a creative, trouble-making trickster spirit in numerous indigenous American traditions, and this identity seems to play out uncannily. Efforts to control their numbers continually fail, traps are found shat upon. The largest landmass on the continent not yet home to the species is Long Island, inaccessible save through the bottleneck of New York City.

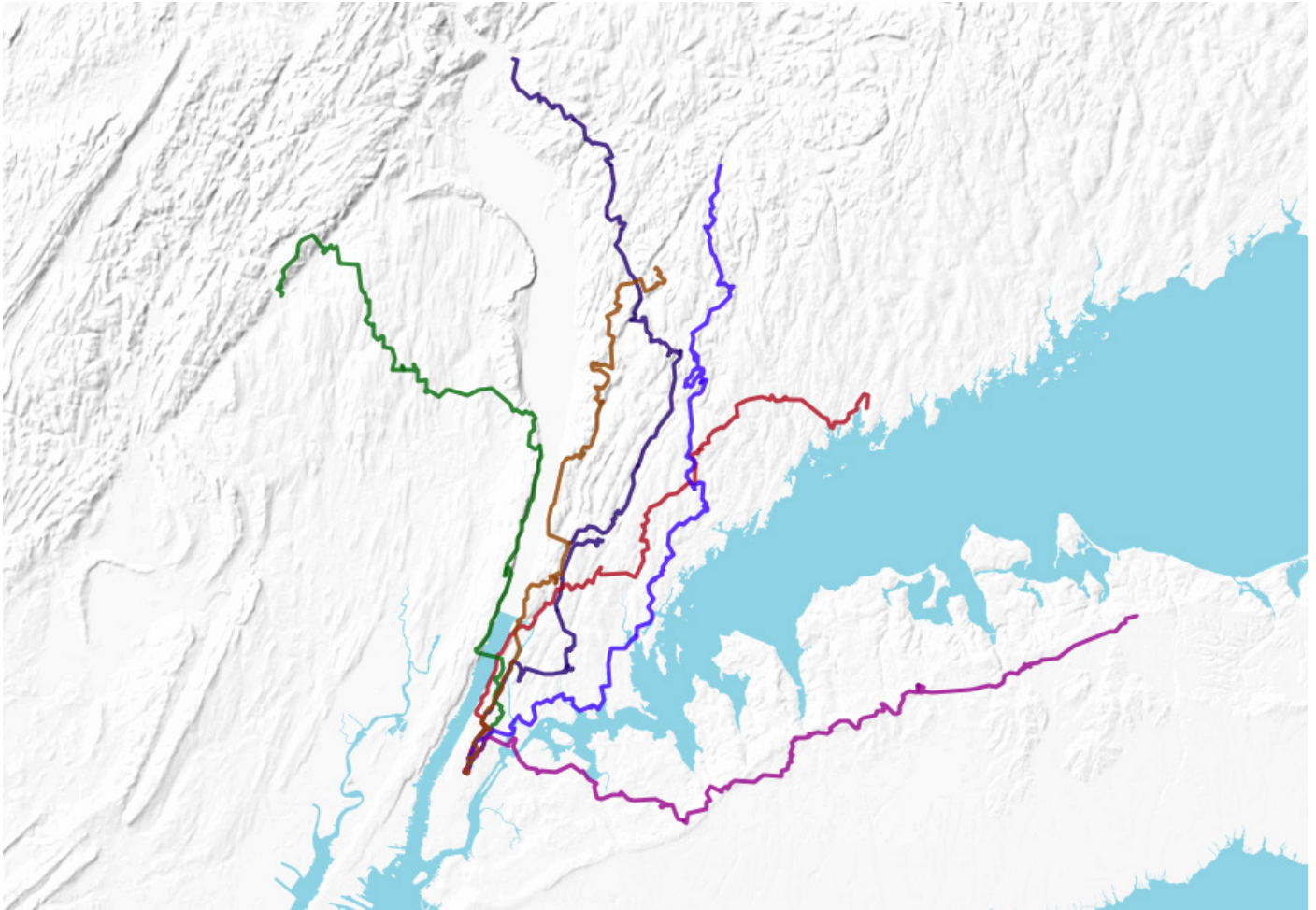


Figure 2. Complete Coyote Walk Routes 2009-2016.

The Coyote Walk project produces a series of lines on the map that originate from the middle of Manhattan: Hallett Nature Sanctuary in Central Park (where the unfortunate animal denned). The lines represent three days of walking out, somewhere between 45-65 miles, a distance typical of juvenile coyote dispersal (a behavior in which the young strike out for new territory). The duration also happens to coincide (though not by design) with a Joseph Beuys performance entitled *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) in which the European artist entered the United States at New York City to spend three days in an enclosed gallery space with a coyote.



Figure 3. 2016 itinerancy group in uptown Manhattan. Photo: Ramsay de Give.



Figure 4. 2015 itinerancy group roadside in Westchester County. Photo: Dan Phiffer.

Since 2014 the Coyote Walk has been opened to others and framed as an “itinerancy”, a short walking residency. A fractured dialogue in and of the landscape emerges as the group weaves through grey areas between built and natural environments. The conversation inflects the paths with shifting meanings and memories. Talking partners switch, we stop to navigate and eat, but a sense of continuity pervades the experience of following the natural within the urban. Ultimately there is no clear boundary between the city and the wild. The path is a series of tiny crossings that can seem strangely out of order.



Figure 5. The Hallett Nature Sanctuary in Midtown Manhattan. Photo: Ramsay de Give.

The thinning and thickening corridors include public parks, private golf courses, abandoned railroad tracks and traditional walking trails. These green space channels are like interconnecting veins running through the city and suburbs. They reflect a latent, alternative transit network. The lines of the Coyote Walk illustrate hypotheses about the fateful journey Hal might have taken, but more broadly they are collaborative considerations of a messy entanglement between what we might perceive as the chaos of nature and the rational orderliness of civilization. As such, they occur away from (but alongside) the lived reality of the everyday.

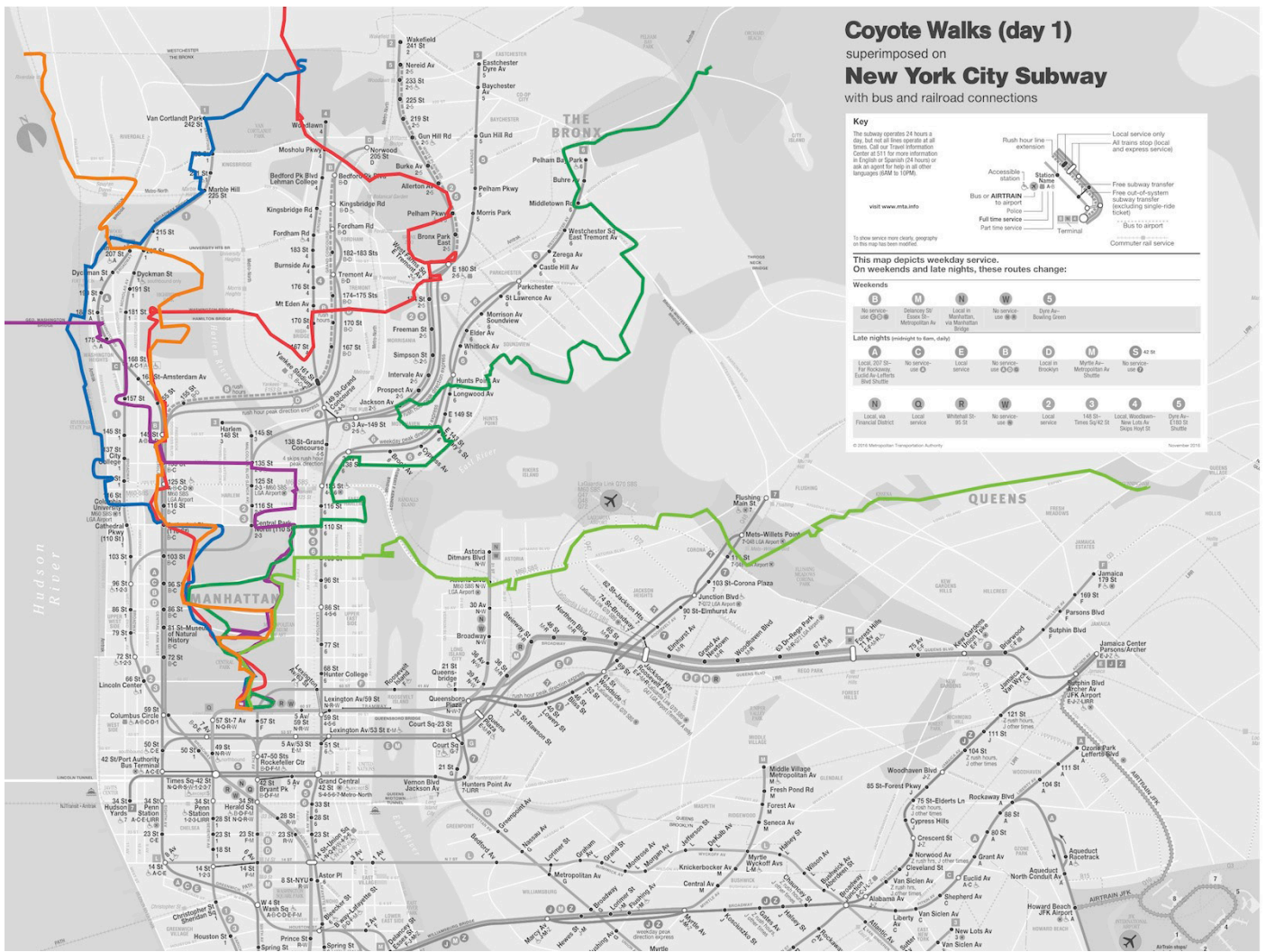


Figure 6. First day walking routes superimposed on NYC subway map

Each year as the early spring approaches I remember the sense of power and pleasure that comes in knowing that I can, if I want, step out the front door and just continue walking. At the same time there is a soberness- even sadness- associated with the Coyote Walk. It is inspired by a friction that ended in the death of an actual animal. Even as it has grown past its initial intention as a memorial gesture for one life, the walk continues to contemplate a complex disharmony we have with the natural world.

In the ten years since Hal's story unfolded other coyotes have entered the boroughs of New York. The city has gotten better at responding. Yet the animals have a knack for exposing inflexibilities that define urban space. A group of eight coyotes near LaGuardia Airport in Queens were euthanized this past November by the Port Authority without discussion. Their occupation of this interstice (airport as crossroads) was deemed an untenable security risk<sup>[2]</sup>.

Today I wonder if I might speak of this walk as an annual holiday: a period to distance notions of control, private property, and speciesism in daily life, to extend and confuse the home range in a social experiment. Perhaps everyone could take one.



Figure 7. Ramsay de Give

- 
1. See research biologist Gerry Parker's narrative of colonization in *Eastern Coyote: The Story of Its Success*. 1995.
  2. Related discussion of the trickster's mythological role as an articulator of weak points in the Lewis Hyde *Trickster Makes this World*, especially the chapter "Trickster Arts and Works of Artus". 1998.