Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world. Jessica Murray is a PhD student in psychology at the graduate center where she focuses on human development with respect to mobilities, transportation, technology, accessibility and disability rights. She researches access to transportation as a critical environmental factor for human development. She also advocates for improving accessibility in the New York City subway. Welcome to the Thought Project, Jessica.

Jessica Murray: Hi, it's nice to be here.

Tanya Domi: That's great. Jessica, you have been a student at the Graduate Center since you enrolled in your masters in psychology of work and family. So tell our listeners how you became interested in the issues of mobility and access by those who are disabled.

Jessica Murray: Sure. So I have a personal connection to disability. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2005. I have relapsing remitting MS, which means that it kind of goes into remission most of the time. I don't have serious symptoms, and then it will kind of have these exacerbations that happen randomly, and for periods of time that can last anywhere from a couple of weeks to a couple of months. And the exacerbations that I've had have affected my sensory and motor skills basically. And so that has kind of been on my mind. Before I decided to go back to school, I was a huge fan of the subway. I moved here from Texas where I had to drive everywhere, and the freedom that the subway kind of gave me, not having to worry about a car all the time, being able to kind of just go wherever I wanted to go, I really appreciated that.

And the impact that it had on my psychological wellbeing, not being stuck in a car in traffic, those things kind of really resonated with me about being in New York City. And when I decided to go back to school, I kinda wasn't really sure what I wanted to study, but the thought of looking at transportation and its impact on our emotional wellbeing was kind of high on my list of research interests just because I had noticed a change in myself when I moved from a kind of stressful commuting environment to one that was less stressful for me.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, it's interesting, and people, you know, I used to live in the Midwest. I grew up in the Midwest, and the lifestyle there is a car. The city of Indianapolis really has minimal mass transit, and I think people don't realize, you're right, there is this, you can relax because you don't have to drive anywhere. At the same time, as you will explain to everybody, and even for those who us who are able bodied, I'm getting in the subway can be extremely stressful, and it presents lots of challenges to people who have even temporary disabilities. Like if you break
your leg or your ankle in New York City, you're going to be in a tough situation on a daily commute for several weeks.

Jessica Murray: Exactly. And I actually had one of those scenarios where I had a severe ankle sprain, and I lived about a half a mile away from the closest subway station at the time. So it was pretty difficult for me to get back and forth to work and that kind of planted a seed about this accessibility issue with the subway. One of the first classes I took here at the Graduate Center was in the environmental psychology program called Supportive Settings and Restorative Environments. And I wanted to do my project about the subway because it is this supportive setting. It kind of gives people easy access to mobility for a very low price. It has its fallbacks for sure. But when I was kind of watching people on the subway during this class, you kind of see them reading books or talking with friends or family. And there's this weird in between space where people have a little downtime in between their work and home environments.

So I've found that to be restorative, but the issue of access really stuck out, and one of our guest lecturers during that class was Simi Linton who wrote a book called Claiming Disability, and it's basically kind of dissecting the word disability, and how it's used and how it's been kind of a negative term and reclaiming that word and saying that it's not necessarily a negative thing. If society can adapt to include people with disabilities, ability and disability don't really mean anything if you have the right accommodations essentially.

Tanya Domi: So I'm a good good friend of mine of many years is one of the top disability attorneys in the United States, and she has shared with me once that anybody can become disabled in a minute, in a second. And all of us in New York I think are maybe a little bit more cognizant of that because of the way we have to get to work. You have to walk to get to the subway, you have to go down the stairs, or if you can't go down the stairs, then how do you access the elevator. So as a matter of fact, you have become more or less an activist here, using your research, your personal experience in your research to leverage and advance more access. And I happen to read the New Yorker, a profile on Andy Byford, who's the new president of the MTA Transit Authority, and you were mentioned. You're an activist with the Elevator Action Group, which is a subset of Rise and Resist, a New York City advocacy group for the disabled among other issues.

And you took a ride with him in April, and it seems you impressed him quite a bit given the fact that the New Yorker mentioned you, and you were also in AM New York, and you rode around with him for several hours. And it was reported to you provided them with a map indicating which subway stops didn't have elevators. That must've been quite a list. What do you think you accomplished in that ridealong, and tell our listeners what happened. What happened during that period of time?
Jessica Murray: Sure. Yeah, so we presented Andy Byford with a corkboard with the subway map on it, and we put red pins on all the inaccessible subway stations, and blue pins where all the accessible stations were, because people have kind of made different maps that represent the inaccessibility of the subway, and they removed all of the stations that didn't have elevators, but we couldn't really find a map that we could print large enough. The motivation for that was that we heard that he had a framed copy of the subway map in his office that he was studying to get to learn the system. And so we wanted to give him another frame to map that would show him what the system looks like for people who need elevators, and I think that made an impression. We also wrote him a letter, and read the letter to him at his first committee meeting in January, inviting him to accompany us on a subway ride. So when we finally got around to making the ride happen in April, we met very early.

We basically just pointed out the things that wheelchair users experience when they try to access the roughly 23 percent of subway stations that are wheelchair accessible. And so the first thing was that there's what's called an AutoGate entrance that only works with reduced fare MetroCards. To get a reduced fare MetroCard, you have to prove your disability.

Tanya Domi: So that comes after somebody approves you getting a reduced card.

Jessica Murray: Yeah. So you have to-

Tanya Domi: You have to go through the MTA to demonstrate that?

Jessica Murray: Right. And it has your photo on it so that you don't, it's a fraud prevention for fraud prevention mechanism to put your photo on it. So it's not something you can just buy from a machine to get a replacement if someone loses it or if a machine eats it, which I've heard happens pretty frequently. It can take up to a month to get a replacement, and people can't access the subway during that time. At the same time, there's also this issue of people not being able to just use a regular MetroCard and that same entry. So if they put in, if they wanted to buy a ticket from the machine, pay full price, my friend April who accompanied us on the ride is a college professor. She says, "I'm working, I can afford to pay for my subway rides. I want to buy a card like everyone else, but I can't actually use the entrance because it's designed only to open for this reduced fare MetroCard." So that was the first thing that we pointed out.

Tanya Domi: So then the access itself is denied to you because of a bureaucratic way that you can purchase and use that pass.

Jessica Murray: Right, and they just never really thought through, what about people that don't want to go through the hassle of getting a reduced fare card? Yeah, maybe they are working and they'd rather just buy a card like everyone else.

Tanya Domi: Or it's convenient.
Jessica Murray: Yeah, it's convenient.

Tanya Domi: It's just literally convenient.

Jessica Murray: Yeah, so that was the first hurdle before we even got into the station.

Tanya Domi: What was his reaction to that?

Jessica Murray: He wasn't aware that that was how it functioned. There's so many intricate little details of all these programs that are embedded in this really complex system that this was something that was news to him. And so one of the things, he had someone taking notes the whole time we were together.

Tanya Domi: That's good to know.

Jessica Murray: And they've actually started working on ways to expedite the process of getting replacement cards to reduce it to two weeks. But until they can do anything serious with, they're changing the fair payment systems in the next couple of years, so they can kind of integrate systems that can take different kinds of cards, or it's going to be contactless so we may not even have MetroCards and a couple of years, but whatever account that you have on your phone or on another card, hopefully all the machines will be able to read all of the cards. It's just something that is kind of a relic of..

Tanya Domi: Of the past.

Jessica Murray: Of the past. Basically, MTA historically has not been so kind to people with disabilities, and they've even publicly shared opinions that people in wheelchairs won't use the subway. So we should just develop paratransit, and provide that service to them because they'll never use the subway in enough numbers to justify the cost of elevators. This is back in the 80s when we were saying that.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, before the ADA Act was passed.

Jessica Murray: Right.

Tanya Domi: So this went on several hours, and I read in your blog that you actually had coffee and maybe something to eat here at the Graduate Center during that day. What else transpired as the day proceeded with him?

Jessica Murray: I should have spelled that out because GC is also, I was using it for Grand Central, so that's where we stopped for coffee.

Tanya Domi: Sorry. Okay. So Grand Central Station.
Jessica Murray: Grand Central Station. So we had coffees, then he bought us all pastries and coffee and just talked about other issues in the rest of the transit system. For example, buses have accessibility issues too. MTA likes to say 100 percent of our buses are wheelchair accessible, which technically they are, but occasionally some old buses have lifts that break. Sometimes, the bus drivers don't know how to operate them. There's typically two spots for wheelchairs on the bus, and if those two spots are taken, you have to wait for the next one. Or if there are people with other disabilities occupying those seats or if the bus is just really full, you may just get left until the next bus picks you up. So there's still issues with the buses as well as the subway. And then paratransit is this very complicated problem that MTA is still trying to figure out how to deal with. It's a very expensive program, costs almost half a billion dollars a year.

Tanya Domi: Are you talking about Access-A-Ride now?


Tanya Domi: Let's talk about that a little bit. So let me just ask, how did he leave it? Did he say, "I want to stay in touch with you, I want to talk to you, I want to hear from you." How did he leave that day after as he departed?

Jessica Murray: Well, he's always been a strong supporter of accessibility. His past record, he came from Toronto, and led their transit system there, was very proud of his record working with the accessibility advocacy organizations in Toronto, basically helped to get more elevators into some of their stations and doing retrofits. They had the backup of a law passed in Ontario to make these accessibility improvements mandatory by 2025. So there was another outside mandate that kind of helped him push that along, but..

Tanya Domi: Yeah, that comes out for two at his time because the MTA was sued last year by the Center for Independence of Disabled New York for failure to maintain the few elevators that exist, and the disability rights advocates have sued the MTA for failure to install elevators in all the stations. So New York substantially lags behind a number of cities with regard to access to mass transit. Also, hasn't the MTA failed to spend the required amount according to the ADAs, and 20 percent of the budget, or there's some number of the budget that's got to be dedicated to upgrading and including accessibility, paying for that within the budget itself.

Jessica Murray: So the lawsuits are ongoing. I know several of the plaintiffs, and they're ongoing. They're trying to get a legally binding enforcement out of a settlement agreement that has firm timelines for when new elevators are going to get installed. The budget issue, yes, there is a rule that accessibility, if it's in the budget and if it costs under 20 percent of the whole budget, than they have to include it. If it costs over 20 percent, that's where they kind of have figured out this loophole in my eyes that they say, "This whole station renovation is going to..."
cost $50 million, but the, if we put elevators and that would cost $20,000,000, so therefore we don't have to do it."

Tanya Domi: Interesting. So as a disability activist and advocate, you've clearly demonstrated thus far that you not only have to have a lot of knowledge of the system itself, you have to know about the legal aspects and you have to be an advocate, become an effective advocate. Is your research going to help leverage or inform any of these lawsuits? Are you providing any research or background information for the lawsuits?

Jessica Murray: Not specifically for the lawsuits, but I'm kind of looking at other accessibility issues in addition to wheelchair access. And so I'm trying to get a better understanding of all the problems that people with disabilities face when they're trying to get around independently. So there are a number of issues that have not been in compliance with and concerned to communications. So making sure that information is able to be accessed and understood by people with different disabilities is something that they have not really been consistent with.

Tanya Domi: Usually at the MTA or..

Jessica Murray: The New York City transit and the MTA, they don't always provide a announcements about service changes visibly and audibly or about the stops. So I've conducted a small pilot study, and had one woman who had very low vision who was part of the pilot, and she told me that she couldn't take the bus, but the drivers don't consistently announce all the stops. So if she's not really aware of the surroundings or can't keep up with where they have stopped and where they haven't stopped, she could end up really far from where she intended to go, and it's difficult for her to find her way back, so she ends up walking miles and miles when she could just be on a bus.

Tanya Domi: That can even happen to those of us who are able bodied, which is really crazy and maddening, so I have a lot of compassion for people that, that may not have vision, adequate vision or even adequate hearing.

Jessica Murray: Right.

Tanya Domi: So that's interesting. Are there any other areas that you've identified that are deficient or not recognized?

Jessica Murray: Yeah, I think, also not having visible announcements is also a really big problem for people with deafness and hearing loss. And like you said, able bodied people have the same challenges, and this is something that kind of came through in the pilot that people couldn't understand the announcements even if they could hear them. So I think hopefully going forward as they try to incorporate accessibility, I hope they look at it more broadly, and look at it as it's not just about disabled people, it's about everyone and the user friendliness of the environment for everybody, and that includes parents, children, people with
different abilities, people who speak different languages. It's kind of a hostile and confusing environment to be in, and so people with cognitive disabilities are kind of left out of that equation, and they end up relying on Access-A-Ride more than they should.

Tanya Domi: So not only do you have this extensive knowledge of the system itself and its deficiencies, but you're also harnessing technology to advance your research in your understanding in how you can actually as an advocate, with the city attorney, improve some of the the issues you've talked about, including Access-A-Ride, which I want to talk to you about, but you're a graduate fellow at the Futures Initiative here at the Graduate Center, which the focus is to leverage technology, to advance and deepen research and create even new knowledge. Tell our listeners how you're using technology to research these issues in your Our Mobility, a research project I found to be very interesting.

Jessica Murray: Sure. So I'm using some methods that I'm geographers and other urban studies people have used using GPS technology to basically map where people are going. I'm also trying to tap into just the proliferation of mobile devices and free applications, so I'm using the built in function of Google Maps which is called Timeline. People can opt in and choose to record their location history that shows basically the places they visit and the modes of transportation they use.

Tanya Domi: Is this open to anybody, or is this for people who have disabilities?

Jessica Murray: No, it's open to anyone. You have to log into Google Maps and enable it in a couple of places on your cell phone and within maps itself. And then as soon as you know, it can sometimes take a couple of days for it to start recognizing your location.

Tanya Domi: I'm going to sign up.

Jessica Murray: It's kind of cool. Some people get a little weirded out about the location tracking, but other people find it extremely helpful for remembering places that you went, and it's kind of like a travel diary, your own personal travel diary. If you take photographs, those show up in the timeline. It's a pretty cool tool, but you can also download your data for each day. And so that's what I ask people to do for this pilot study. I had about 20 people that downloaded their location history for a week and shared it with me, and another component to the study is a travel survey app that I developed through a free tool called PACO, which is Personal Analytics Companion, and it's totally free, and anyone can make their own experiments.

Tanya Domi: It's like open access. So you and I were talking before we sat down for this podcast, and you were telling me about Access-A-Ride, and you've brought it up a couple of times so far. New York has these short buses that you see them in all five boroughs. I see them a lot in my neighborhood because there's a lot of seniors that live in my neighborhood. I live in Riverdale, in the Bronx where a lot
of people have retired and they've been there for 40 years. There's people in my building, women mostly. They've lived there like 40 years. And you indicated to me that this is a really inefficient system, and that the city is looking at, it's run by the city of New York, you can actually go to the city website and find it because I did the research for this podcast on it, and it's quite inefficient and they're looking at maybe trying to develop some new apps to make it a much more efficient and maybe less costly system.

This is really critical for people who need to get to the doctor, or they don't have anybody, they want to continue to live independently. I do think that New York City does a lot for seniors and people as they age here, and there's a lot to do, but you have to be able to access it. And I'd love to hear what's going on, what you, what you're doing, and what you hear or the city is doing with regard to Access-A-Ride.

Jessica Murray: So Access-A-Ride, it's a part of New York City Transit. And so you have to be eligible and you have to prove your eligibility to be enrolled in the program. They have about 150,000 registered users. Maybe it's slightly less than that.

Tanya Domi: That's pretty low, I think.

Jessica Murray: Considering the cost.

Tanya Domi: There's 8.6 million people that live here.

Jessica Murray: Right, and there's an estimated 100,000 wheelchair users in this city, but MTA says that only about 20 percent of their passengers are wheelchair users. So you have people with other mobility disabilities maybe that don't. But yeah, so it's clear that there are a lot of people that could qualify for the service but don't use it. And I think part of that is the negative reputation that it has. It is pretty inefficient, especially when I've heard a lot of horror stories about the time it takes, the lateness of drivers. Most people call it Stress-A-Ride because

Tanya Domi: Stressed ride. Wow.

Jessica Murray: Just because of it really does cause a lot of frustration and anxiety for people, like you said, who are trying to get to a doctor's appointment or anything. They have to schedule their rides a day in advance, and to do that, and then your driver's shows up late, you end up being late, people pad the time, so they'll ask to be picked up an hour early so that they can try to get there on time. They still end up being late. They are trying to make it more efficient and user friendly with an e-hill pilot program that's ongoing, but the future of that is not really clear at this point. The pilot is supposed to end in October, I believe.

Tanya Domi: How long has it been studied, do you know?
Jessica Murray: I think they started it with a few passengers in late 2016, and then for most of 2017 they had, people could request a taxi when they were requesting a ride. And then they opened up a smaller pilot for people who could request same-day on demand service. And so it's not really clear. There was a Wall Street Journal article that came out about the costs and the number of people in the pilot last week, but it's not clear how many people are using, how many rides were provided for the same-day service versus the prescheduled service or how many people were using the prescheduled service. So it's not really clear if they're saving money with the prescheduled rides, or if the people who are using the on demand service are using it way more than they anticipated. So I think they're looking at all those things internally. Unfortunately, that information is not fully transparent, but the people that have been using the on demand pilot has changed their lives.

They went from never being able to take a spontaneous trip to being able to decide to go somewhere, and 15 minutes later, they have a taxi picking them up.

Tanya Domi: That's good news. I imagine that city council's probably gonna look at a report that will probably be forthcoming from this pilot project, I would assume. Is that correct?

Jessica Murray: I hope so. I know the comptroller's office has been very active in issues related to accessible transit for people with disabilities in New York City. Um, I don't know when they plan to release a report. All they've really divulged so far as how much they anticipate it to cost for the first year, which is I think around $60,000,000 for the year. But like I said, it's not really clear how many passengers were taking advantage of that. The Wall Street Journal had to correct the numbers that they reported because it wasn't very clear on the MTA's dashboard for paratransit. They were kind of lumping two different pilots together into ones that they had.

Tanya Domi: It was misrepresented.

Jessica Murray: Right.

Tanya Domi: Well, we can have you back to talk about that with us. Wish you good luck on your study.

Jessica Murray: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: I'm going to sign up on Our Mobility. I encourage our listeners to do that. And I want to thank you for being with us here today.

Jessica Murray: Thank you. Thank you for having me.
Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest PhD student, Jessica Murray. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Sira Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.