

# REFLECTIONS ON THE WALKING TOUR

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It is not a lecture. It is not a performance. It is not entirely tourism, nor is it entirely a discussion. It is the ineffable neighborhood walking tour, a fascinating hybrid of teaching, touring, and discussion. After having led such tours for over a decade, for many different populations of students, this creativity issue of *The Academic Forum* gives me a unique opportunity to write about their place in higher education. Reflecting on my own experiences and the prevailing scholarship on the topic, I find that walking tours are excellent catalysts of critical thinking, provoking students to analyze the unfamiliar neighborhoods and landscapes they encounter. Tours of this nature, when well researched and conducted with an eye to social justice, also have great potential to connect our students positively to the surrounding community. Though walking tours are inherently unpredictable and the art of guiding can be difficult to teach, I believe that they are an indispensable, creative teaching tool that we can and should utilize to fulfill our University mission.

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## *Critical Thinking*

Standing in front of the SMART Boards or behind podiums, college instructors strive daily to connect students to new ideas and information. We do so with the goal of provoking our students to think critically about the subject at hand, occasionally struggling against classroom obstacles such as student apathy, exhaustion, or distraction. Even when we enliven our classroom sessions with discussions, exercises, and interactive exercises, students will be students, and incidences of tuning out, texting, or nodding off are hard to eradicate altogether.

On the sidewalks of a city walking tour, the challenges of teaching are markedly different. In my experience, apathy is easily vanquished when students are inundated with the sensory overload of an unfamiliar neighborhood. No matter how blasé they may try to be about the subject at hand, they cannot tune out completely when they need a guide to know where to go next. As a guide myself, and as a zealot for walking tours when I visit new cities, I find that the sheer mobility of these events creates a fascinating, heightened state of awareness. The ambulatory experience of a tour also takes sleepiness and issues of eyelid heaviness out of play entirely. Tourists may nod off during bus tours, no matter who is speaking over

the microphone, but walking tours are different. Even the most sleep-deprived person will keep those eyelids open if he is walking amidst speeding taxis, tree branches, and potholes.

Assuming then, that walking tour attendees are wide awake and listening intently, for fear of getting left behind, one could argue that such tours are the ideal Petri dish for critical thinking. In the words of the great Ira Gershwin, "It ain't necessarily so." One vexing aspect of these tours is that they can drive a tour guide and his or her students to distraction, quite literally. Especially in Manhattan, new sights, sounds, and passersby can be so interesting and relentless that the tour guide finds it difficult to present her or his argument.

Nevertheless, allowing for these distractions, I believe that the walking tour does indeed have a profound power to provoke critical thinking. Though at times the stimuli of a city street can distract from careful thought and sensitive discussion, these stimuli can also jar students into an entirely new way of thinking about a space or place. New ideas and information often come to you during tours, regardless of whether you had planned for them or not. Tours of places such as the New York City's Lower East Side or Machu Picchu's Inca ruins will inundate students with so many new vistas, unfamiliar buildings, and untrodden landscapes that they cannot help but

develop an appreciation for the place. When experiencing a tour with five senses alert, even the most well traveled of our students will see, smell, or hear something unfamiliar. More importantly, they will be forced to wrestle, up close and personal, with ways of living and being that are different from what they know. For history courses, this crucial process of seeing difference may occur between the present day and the past. In other words, students can more easily imagine the lives of people in the past while walking amidst preserved buildings or ruins. For sociology, education, gender, or intercultural relations courses, walking tours promote an equally fascinating tension between the familiarity of daily life and the unfamiliarity fostered by the tour.

Such tension lies at the heart of critical thinking. On countless occasions, I have watched students take special notice of a building, sign, advertisement, or local resident, in ways entirely appropriate to the course in which they are enrolled. On one tour, students who had been studying the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in class noticed a contemporary sign protesting the conditions of unsafe t-shirt factories in Chinatown. The parallels were stark and the discussion we had right there on the sidewalk was quite lively. Other students, enrolled in “Urban America” and walking Harlem’s Striver’s Row, commented on the district’s exquisite architecture, expensive cars, and well-heeled passersby. By paying attention to their surroundings, they had already absorbed one of the tour’s most important lessons—that Harlem is neither slum nor ghetto, but a vibrant and diverse *neighborhood*. I was hoping to prod students into challenging any assumptions they may have held regarding Harlem, and the visual stimuli of this particular block did much to begin the process. As effectively as a well-argued article or lively classroom discussion, walking tours have the potential to open students’ minds to possibilities they had not yet considered.

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Even if a student was born and raised in the site of a tour—in Chinatown, Harlem, or Jersey City—it is unlikely that she would get to the end of an academic walking tour without being exposed to new ideas or concepts. The visual landscapes may be familiar, but the manner in which they are being analyzed is not. None other than Marcel Proust described this particular journey of discovery when he wrote that “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”<sup>1</sup> Although Proust’s aphorism was not penned in reference to walking tours, it certainly applies. When touring a neighborhood without any guidance, either in written or spoken form, only the most incisive or earnest of visitors would be likely to revolutionize their thinking, or their frame of reference. Students who tour an urban district with an academic guide, however, or those who first read a thought-provoking article, have a strong chance of developing “new eyes” for seeing a place.

Above and beyond seeing new landscapes, or seeing familiar landscapes with new eyes, walking tours also have strong potential in reinforcing lessons already learned, or solidifying



learning already in progress. For some students, the preserved swaths of buildings in SoHo or in the Powerhouse Arts District of downtown Jersey City will be no great intellectual surprise. If they have done their reading and come to class, these landscapes will not introduce them to the concept of structural economic shift, from the industrial to the information age, because they will already have a keen sense of this from their reading. A tour, however, can reinforce their understanding of this crucial part of American urban history. It can provide a visual frame of reference for the lessons they have already learned. In this sense, a walking tour towards the end of the semester can be the just desserts of a subject well studied. In the same way that an art gallery or museum tour can be especially satisfying if one has already studied the paintings therein, walking tours can likewise show students the buildings or historic sites they already know well in the abstract.

In these cases, urban walking tours are something akin to tourism, but this is nothing to lament. Why shouldn’t our students graduate with lasting, memorable, and starkly visual impressions of the subjects they have studied? I believe that students who can think back to a tour of the Tenement Museum, a walk through the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu, or a journey through the cobblestones of Chinatown are more likely to also remember the critical lessons that we faculty labored to impart to them on those trips. Many a student has studied the notorious tenements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, but I believe that those who experience the artful claustrophobia and authentic darkness of the Tenement Museum are more likely to form an impression that lasts for many decades.

### *Surrounding Community*

Another redeeming quality of the walking tour is its potential to contribute to our University mission in the surrounding community. As a guiding principle for our work, we have



publicly pledged to improve the “educational, intellectual, cultural, socio-economic, and physical environment of the surrounding urban region and beyond.” Upon first glance, a group of students passing through this region on a sidewalk, led by a professor as their guide, leaves behind no obvious improvements. On closer inspection, however, I am convinced that tours can indeed improve the region in the long run, mostly by infusing within our students a sense of pride and ownership in local neighborhoods.

The cities and neighborhoods that many of our students call home—West New York, Bergen-Lafayette, Jersey City’s West Side, etc.—do not strike me as having well-developed public histories, at least compared to media darlings such as Greenwich Village or Hoboken. Unlike neighborhoods with long-established places in the public consciousness through film, television, and documentaries, the neighborhoods where many of our students live do not get much attention. Even worse, when these neighborhoods do get media attention, there is often a disproportionate focus on crime reporting. Neighborhoods such as Greenwich Village earn mention in the media because of crime too, but also because of architecture and history. Bergen-Lafayette gives Greenwich Village a run for its money in terms of architecture and layers of fascinating history, yet its crime problems dominate its media narrative.

The consequences of this go far beyond local senses of pride. Those neighborhoods and their residents miss out on all of the fringe benefits of a well-developed public history narrative. It is a well-established axiom of the real estate industry that homes named as historic, located within historic districts, or featured on architectural tours will fetch higher prices. This axiom has been confirmed in several academic articles published in the *Journal of Real Estate Finance and Economics*, *The Journal of the American Planning Association*, and many other places. Assuming that the original owners of a historically designated house can hold onto it, and that they



can afford tax levies that may increase as a result, it is reasonable to think that increased awareness of local history can also serve the public good.

Walking tours have the potential to illuminate the architectural or historic value of such homes, reaffirming and disseminating ideas that may or may not be codified by historic districting or preservation status. In cases where a student’s own neighborhood is featured on a tour, it is entirely possible for this student to cultivate a newfound sense of pride in the place she calls home. It is also possible that non-student attendees on walking tours, those watching them pass by, or those who develop their own tours will contribute to a burgeoning sense of community pride in local history and architecture. As one of the trail blazing scholars of Tourism Studies wrote in 1985, information from tour guides can “evoke collective experience of identification with symbolic heroes, groups and localities” (Katz, 1985).<sup>2</sup>

Above and beyond home values, and the sense of pride that people have in their neighborhood, walking tours can also play a small role in preventing the demolition of interesting, culturally valuable old buildings. Simply put, communities can only rally around the preservation of historic structures that they know about. I believe that in cases where repeated walking tours bring a charming, interesting old structure into the public spotlight, that structure has a greater chance of escaping the wrecking ball in the future. When I walk my students among the sturdy warehouses and majestic loft buildings of the Powerhouse Arts District, or the stately Victorian houses of Bergen-Lafayette, I like to think that they will leave these tours with a greater appreciation of the value of the old buildings they see. If they join the fight to prevent unnecessary demolitions of these types of buildings, it is my opinion that they will be working to improve, in the words of our mission statement, the “physical environment of the surrounding urban region.”

One cannot always assume, of course, that growth in public history awareness is always in the best interests of local residents. As scholars in several fields have acknowledged, there can be a negative relationship between walking tours and communities if the forces of gentrification run rampant. This has been of particular concern in Manhattan's Lower East Side, where history, hipsters, and rising home values transformed the neighborhood with startling rapidity after 1990. In Michael Sorkin's *Variations on a Theme Park* (1992), and in a more recent book, *The Tour Guide: Walking and Talking New York* (Wynn, 2011), academic authors have given voice to long-time residents in places such as the Lower East Side, where they are often frustrated about what walking tours do to their neighborhood. The most common complaint in Sorkin's chapter on this issue and throughout Wynn's book is that long-time residents get priced out through gentrification.

Another risk of growing historical awareness in a neighborhood is that many engage in public history for the sole purpose of making money, foisting a cornucopia of ill-informed guides and stereotypical narratives upon neighborhoods and tour guests alike. In my experience, these negative attributes of public history touring are especially true on bus tours, which strike me as the most likely type of tour to reconfirm or even exacerbate damaging narratives and stereotypes. When non-academic guides joke about the risks of getting off the bus, reduce complex historical trends to pithy sound bites, and otherwise butcher what we walking tour guides try to do as public historians, they give the entire public history enterprise a bad name. Even when tourist-oriented groups visit a neighborhood on foot, all it takes is a few jokes in poor taste about local crime to reinforce the worst of neighborhood stereotypes.

Such stereotypes do not need to apply to the present day to do their damage. If visitors to New York's present-day Chinatown were subjected to a costumed Five Points tour, presenting little more than gruesome details from the "Gangs of New York" era without any analysis, they could easily emerge from this experience with a tarnished view of the city's immigrants. Other thematic, tourist-oriented tours such as the "Sex and the City" tours of Greenwich Village may seem innocuous in comparison. Considering, however, how they reduce the historical, architectural, and political landscape of one of New York's great neighborhoods into a trite fantasy-world of film shoot locations, these too deserve criticism. At their worst, poorly conceived and non-academic walking and bus tours leave visitors with even more egregiously incorrect perceptions of a neighborhood than they held before.

Within the fields of Tourist Studies and Interpretation, walking tours in general are often lumped together with bus tours under the framework of "edutainment" because there are far more unemployed actors working the microphone of a double-decker bus than there are scholars working through a difficult argument on the sidewalks of Chinatown. Despite the rather small footprint of academic walking tours in the NYC/NJ urban region, as compared to the massive tourism

industry, I believe that it is important to preserve and promote this distinction.

These tours should be given a chance to stay separate from their less socially responsible relatives, because despite all of their potential for gentrification or stereotyping, they ultimately have strong potential to promote the public good and foster social justice. When walking tour guides present local histories that are constructive, accurate, and inclusive, they can shine light on buildings, people, or communities that may otherwise have remained in the shadows of a crowded urban landscape.

### *Walking Tours: Difficult to Teach and Unpredictable*

If academic walking tours have such a positive influence on our students and our surrounding community, it would follow that someone should get to work teaching the art or skill of guiding to as many people as possible. As I'm sure the other articles in this "Capturing the Ineffable" issue will address, good walking tours, like good teaching skills in general, are difficult to pass along to a younger generation. In my experience, strong skills as a tour guide are not so much taught as cultivated, mentored, or otherwise developed within learners. The usual starting point for a person interested in learning how to guide is to attend a tour, take some notes, and envision how to lead one's own tour. Despite one's best efforts to prepare for every eventuality, there is a "sink or swim" aspect to guide training that I suspect is similar to the training experiences by student teachers. In all fields relying heavily upon creativity, students must learn by doing, with guidance from instructors. There is of course a rich literature in teaching how to teach, but this is neither my field of expertise nor the subject at hand for this particular article.

This is about guiding a walking tour, from stop to stop and topic to topic on the sidewalks of a crowded neighborhood. It is something rarely studied from an academic perspective, although Jonathan Wynn's excellent *The Tour Guide: Walking and Talking New York* (2011) sheds light on the subject through ethnography. In Wynn's study of New York City's tour guides, he parses out the meanings of tours for different guides, and the means by which they gain authenticity. For some native New Yorker guides, especially those who charge little to nothing for their services, walking tours are sort of informal public service. Authenticity comes from birthright and lived experience. For others, especially those with academic training, walking tours are an extension of the classroom, and authenticity resides in training and research.

Given the wide variety of guides and ways of being a guide, it is not surprising that there are few "best practices" available to measure or assess walking tours. Instinctively, trainees and tour attendees know that the best guides are informed, lively, strongly engaged with the subject or site in

question, and able to adjust their tours to unexpected conditions. Formally, however, there is little guidance in the form of standardized certifications, leading pedagogical practices, or other unifying rubrics. While federal park rangers are required to pass rigorous content examinations, and commercial tour guides are often tested and licensed, legions of other walking tour guides nationwide create their content without any formal guidance. Not surprisingly, some of them develop a delightful wealth of knowledge, while others leave tour groups clamoring for their money back.

This unevenness stems from more than just the diversity of guides. By definition, walking tour groups amble into a staggering diversity of landscapes, from the Grand Canyon to the “Canyon of Heroes” in Lower Manhattan. Some utilize federal park rangers, confined to particular routes and vetted, researched topics, while others feature barely audible septuagenarians on a microphone, pontificating on the past, present, and future of their city from atop a double-decker bus. Others still go inside preserved plantation houses, slave cabins, or even beneath city streets into sewer systems. Although not endless, the possibilities for historical walking tours are nearly as diverse as the nation itself.

Despite this stunning variety, there is some coherent academic work on guiding in general, especially within the field known as Interpretation. Interpretation scholars “have tediously and carefully explored the sociological, educational, and cultural underpinnings of guiding” (Pond as cited in McGrath, 2003), since the 1970s, noting that “neighborhoods” are inherently ineffable and elusive places. The very same collection of buildings, streets, and sidewalks can mean something entirely different to each guide, visitor, and resident. Subjectivity is nothing new to academics, so in this sense the academic tour guide is particularly well suited to handle a site with several historic narratives, all competing for attention and dominance.

Even if a new guide were to train rigorously in all of the possible ways one could interpret a single site or street, walking tours can also come with contingencies so rare or unexpected that there is simply no way to prepare. In this sense, walking tours are far more volatile than classrooms. When a jackhammer interrupts your sentence, or a favorite street at the heart of your tour is unexpectedly closed, one must simply deal with it and move on. These are the sorts of distractions that are challenging in the purely negative sense.

Yet other neighborhood surprises prove challenging in the best sense of the word. Local residents often converse with my tour groups, challenging us to think about our perspective. During a Harlem tour not too long ago, I took my students to the historic NAACP brownstone at 224 W. 135th Street, hoping to talk about the great work of W.E.B. DuBois. A local resident beat me to the punch. Before I could get a word in edgewise, a fiercely determined passerby began to lecture our group about the achievements of DuBois and the dangers of gentrification. Given that this person was a well-

informed local historian and neighborhood activist, I happily yielded the stage for just a few minutes. As it turned out, the woman’s ancestors had worked directly with DuBois in the NAACP. She was also quite pleased to learn that we were not doing a real estate tour, and that the sole purpose of the tour was for the students to learn about history. After a couple of minutes, we politely excused ourselves from this unplanned guest lecture, and moved along.

As I see it, the question of local voices and perspectives on urban tours is one of balance. Had I handed over the remainder of our touring time to this particular champion of the NAACP, my students would never have seen Striver’s Row, the legendary Renaissance Ballroom, or the Apollo Theatre. However, had I refused to let her speak to my students at all, I would have risked unnecessary friction with someone who clearly cared deeply about local history. This experience reminded me of just how few walls, literal or psychological, the walking tour has to separate a group from the interruptions of the outside world. In our classrooms, we can close the door, plead with our students to not look at their phones, and provoke them to focus on the pressing questions of our syllabus. Even if a door remains open, we in the academy are not in the habit of popping in to each other’s classrooms to share an anecdote after overhearing something interesting in the hallway. Our pedagogical assumptions about the sanctity of each other’s classrooms, when combined with the closed-off, physical spaces we occupy as teachers, allow us to block out the chaos of daily life. Unlike the cacophonous urban sidewalk, classrooms are generally quiet, controlled spaces where students can concentrate, listen, think, speak, and learn.

On the streets of Jersey City or New York, interruptions of all kind await, with the potential to discombobulate even the most stalwart of guides. Experience has taught me how to expect and manage these situations, but every once in a while I have faced an interruption of such magnitude that my tour does hit a snag. One of the most memorable of these moments occurred on Hester Street on the Lower East Side, where I was accustomed to introducing students to the rich history of Gertel’s Bakery. This historic kosher bakery had been serving up ruggelach and other delicacies to both Jewish and non-Jewish patrons alike since 1905. On this particular tour day, I was well aware that Gertel’s was in danger of closing, but it had been a few months since my last visit to the site. I was flummoxed to turn onto Hester Street and realize that the threatened demolition of Gertel’s had most certainly come to pass, and that I had to improvise my analysis of local food culture in front of a plywood-shrouded pit. Though I was able to parlay the shock of this moment into a brief discussion of gentrification on Hester Street, my students could tell that that I was disoriented.

There have also been less “teachable” interruptions to my touring over the years. I once had a muttering homeless man wrapped in plastic and carrying a radio playing nothing more than static follow my students and me at a distance of about

fifteen feet for over thirty minutes on the streets of Lower Manhattan. The fellow was neither interested in what I had to say nor determined to share his own insights. Instead, he just followed us awkwardly and distracted us from the mission at hand. On another occasion, a female high school student, no more than fourteen or fifteen years old, made the rather serious decision to sneak away from the tour on her own, turn off her cell phone, and go shopping at Century 21 near the World Trade Center. There was little I could do to calm the group once they had concluded, without a doubt, that she had been kidnapped by ruffians on Broadway and in broad daylight. The tour came to an abrupt halt, devolving into an absurd jumble of cell phone calls to the student's parents in Israel and impromptu search parties. When she did turn her phone back on to confirm that she had not, in fact, been secreted into the back of a windowless van, we had no time left to finish the tour.

The most egregious tour interruption of my career thus far came not from a student, but from one of New York City's ubiquitous pigeons. During yet another Lower Manhattan tour, I was mid-sentence when I suffered the indignity of having a mischievous, airborne pigeon do what pigeons do, directly into my shoulder with laser precision. I consider myself an imaginative person, but to my knowledge there is no smooth way to turn such an incident into a teachable moment. I suppose I should have been grateful that this wicked pigeon did not besmirch the top of my head, but alas I needed a few minutes to clean my shoulder in a public restroom, regroup, and restart the tour.

To experience any of these setbacks on campus—the building gone missing, the student kidnapped mid-sentence, or the mischievous pigeon—would certainly bring a new level of meaning to the phrase “having a bad day.” Save for the once-in-a-lifetime fall of a ceiling tile onto a lecturing professor's head, I can think of no similar dangers awaiting us in our carefully maintained teaching spaces. Computers, projectors, or software may let us down on occasion, and the ring of a cell phone might cause us to lose our train of thought, but all things considered, the classroom is a controlled environment.

## Conclusion

For almost all of what we do as professors, the classroom is a wonderful thing. Without our thoughtfully curated and controlled classrooms, we would be hard-pressed to accomplish our teaching goals. However as supplements to classroom work and student readings, the unpredictable walking tour does have an exciting pedagogical role to play, especially at an urban institution such as our own.

On many stops of the Light Rail and the PATH, and at locations sometimes closer to our students' homes than our main campus, there are destinations of undeniable sociological richness, geological interest, historical importance, and significance in the struggle for social, racial, and gender equality. For many of the disciplines at New Jersey City University, these sites have vast potential to help us complement our teaching in the classroom, and to fulfill our mission. They have the power to constructively challenge our students' ideas and assumptions in a way that is memorable, visceral, and up close and personal. They can help students to appreciate all sorts of neighborhoods for what they are, rather than what someone else thinks they should be. Walking tours not only encourage students to place themselves in another's shoes, but also provide a unique opportunity for students to walk a mile in those shoes.

## NOTES

- 1 I was introduced to this Proust quote by Gemma McGrath, who used it as the opening coda to her 2003 study of tour guides in Cusco, Peru, entitled “Myth, Magic, Meaning & Memory”.
- 2 As my field is not Tourist Studies, I was introduced to Katz (1985) by Eldrid Brin and Chaim Noy's 2010 article in *Tourist Studies*.

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