

Guiding Practices: Storytelling Tricks for Reproducing the Urban Landscape

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Through walking and talking, tour guides weave together an array of stories and facts in order to re-produce varied urban cultures and local histories. The practices of these 'cultural intermediaries' must at once be entertaining as well as educational, and are set within a rich urban context that is itself increasing in commercialization and homogenization. As a segment of a larger ethnographic study, this essay focuses on the storytelling tools these social actors use to reproduce New York City's history, culture, and meaning—eight tricks of the trade. As illustration of this social world and the practices within it, description of a Grand Central Terminal tour is woven throughout the analysis in a series of vignettes.

KEY WORDS: urban culture; storytelling; tourism; everyday life.

Through stories about places, they become inhabitable. Living is narrativizing. Stirring up or restoring this narrativizing is thus also among the tasks of renovation. One must awaken the stories that sleep in the streets... Festivals, contests, the development of 'speaking places' in neighborhoods or buildings would return to narratives the soil from which they grow (de Certeau and Giard 1998, pp. 142–3).

INTRODUCTION

The walking tour guides of New York City are a diverse group of individuals who teach about the public histories, spaces, and cultures of Gotham. Like Aristotle, they are peripatetic—using walking and experience as a part of their teaching. Ancient Greek guides, called *exegetai* ('explainers'), were professional storytellers often posing the offer to sea-weary travelers, "Give me a copper coin,

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and I'll tell you a golden story." Such characters were approached with apprehension: they were colorful necessities, yet pesky and potentially deceptive. For dwellers and visitors of any age, a metropolis can be confusing and overwhelming; as a practice of re-producing a city's landscape of culture, history, and meaning, this study focuses upon how individuals use storytelling as a way in which tour guides explain the urban fabric to others (Suttles 1990).¹

In today's New York City there are, for example, walking tours about the edible flora of Prospect Park, the Radical Left history of the East Village, the Native American History of Manhattan, and the filming locations of television shows like 'Sex in the City.' The walking tour, as a social form, has become ubiquitous: organizations like the Central Park Conservancy and the New School University use tours as a part of their educational programming, the city government has them for jurors on lunch break, as does the hip health club 'Crunch' as a way to "work out the mind and body." High School teachers use them, as do international artists like Janet Cardiff. It is because of this omnipresence and diversity that guiding is hard to weigh on the cultural scale. Guides themselves are torn between the more schlocky aspects and their own intellectual endeavors, keeping nearly forgotten histories alive and parlaying popular sentiments, all the while re-enchanting the urban world. Rather than locating them within a 'low culture'—'high culture' dichotomy (Gans 1999; DiMaggio 1992), this study demonstrates their position in the middle: blending education and entertainment, knowledge with a little panache.

It is, then, the *how* of tour guiding that is at issue here—the tricks of this particular trade. Rather than a device that makes a task easier, Howard Becker writes that tricks "suggest ways of interfering with the comfortable thought routines . . . ways to turn things around, to see things differently, in order to create new problems" (1998, pp. 6–7). His *Tricks* examined how ethnographers could think reflexively about their work and how they represent that world to readers. Neither tricks nor thinking reflexively, however, are the sole purview of social scientists: they are a part of the practices of everyday folk as well. This essay examines these *practices* of these cultural reproducers in the street, rather than content (what MacCannell called a 'set' in *The Tourist*).

Highlighting eight tactics of these 'unconventional intellectuals' (Shils 1972), this essay will identify particular practices as well as the tensions that these practices entail vis-à-vis major social forces that affect urbanism, tourism and culture. It should be noted that guides explicitly cited a few of these 'tricks,' but most were gleaned from interviews and extensive participant observation. To evince this social world, ethnographic vignettes of a specific context (a walking tour of Grand Central Terminal) and a particular social actor (in this case, Jeffrey

¹This essay is taken from a larger study and, therefore, cannot illuminate many key aspects of this social world. Analysis of tour content, the biographies, histories, and cultural capital of the guides, are not included. All names are pseudonyms.

Harrison) are interspersed within the essay to keep discussion in close dialogue with the empirical setting.²

Walking Tour of Grand Central, June 20th 2003

In the public plaza of what was not too long ago the Philip Morris Building on 42nd and Park Avenue there are about forty people waiting for the tour guide. As I find my place on a bench I hear languages and accents from the American Midwest and South mix with German. The Grand Central Partnership, one of the largest of the 43 Business Improvement Districts in New York, sponsors this tour every Friday at 12:30 as a part of their tourism and promotions endeavors. It is free, public, and is one of the best-attended tours I have taken.

At 12:31 Mr. Jeffrey Harrison arrives through the doors and smiles at the security guard. He is stately, looking younger and more vital than his 53 years. He has a trim mustache and thin herringbone bow tie running parallel, an accessory that I have never seen him without, and a small black shoulder bag with books sticking out of it. An independent guide, unaffiliated with any tour company, Mr. Harrison is a distinguished member of the New York guiding community. Many of his colleagues have told me about how he assisted them with a tour, or taught them a class, or helped begin their careers. Some call him the Dean of Guides.

He quickly gathers the group together, cajoling them to get nearer together in a circle. Quietly, beckoning them further still, he asks, "Where y'all from?" Going through the group he asks everyone and, at every third or fourth person, he stops to ask a follow up question. "New Jersey? You're from the whole state? What *part* of New Jersey are you from?" He says that we shouldn't worry if we are from elsewhere: "I tell all my groups that it takes about three hours to become a New Yorker."

THE WORLD OF THE WALKING TOUR GUIDE

Academic and popular presentations on tourism describe a homogenized and commodified landscape, punctuated by low-risk, tacky experiences derided by architectural critic Herbert Muschamp as a kind of "sanitized razzamatazz" (1995, see also Lash and Urry 1994; MacCannell 1976; Cohen 1988). This over-generalization ignores walking tour guides who serve as creative, improvisational

²Jeffrey Harrison and his tour were selected from over 50 interviews and over 160 hours of participant observation conducted from June 2001 to June 2005, because many of the 'tricks' that guides used are evidenced within his tour. It should be noted that this narrative thread is a linear description of his tour and, therefore, does not explicitly or directly correlate with its surrounding text in complete harmony. The intended result is an essay not dissimilar to a walking tour: weaving together multiple themes, ideas, stories, analysis, and imagery (for similar usage, see Wacquant 1995).

thinkers, intelligent historians, and passionate storytellers of the urban landscape, but also conflates a larger context, that is comprised of three interconnected forces: the rise of urban tourism, growing interest in heritage, and a new ‘festivalized’ culture.

Urban tourism has been on a steep incline for the past twenty years at both the national and global scales (Fainstein and Gladstone 1999). As cities become desperate to stem economic decline from deindustrialization or disinvestments, tourism has played a pivotal role in the transition from manufacturing to service-oriented economies (Law 2002; Newman 2002). In attempts to convert to ‘Tourist Cities’ (Fainstein and Judd 1999) or ‘Cities of Leisure’ (Castells 1989) the social institutions of many urban centers are betting upon consumption rather than production. In this effort, a second component appears: the excavation of historical and cultural events (*inter alia* Lash and Urry 1994; Hayden 1996; Boniface and Fowler 1993; Boyer 1992). Cities, their entertainment industries, and other groups willing to capitalize off culture, are buoyed by public curiosity in places like Harlem and South Street Seaport, as well as *New York Times* bestsellers on the founding fathers, television shows on antiques, and blockbuster films like *Gangs of New York*. Suttles wrote that this revitalization of collective representations creates a ‘muse-umization’ of local culture (1984, p. 299), and worse, de Certeau and Giard see this process as adding the element of commodification wherein urban places are made to be part theatrical, part pedagogical, and part scientific (1998, p. 138). This synergy results in a third force, wherein experiences are increasingly constructed for the benefit of locals and visitors alike through the cultivation of a theme (Zukin 1995; Sorkin 1992; Hannigan 1998), and the staging of events (Della Britta et al. 1977; Hall 1992). Häussermann and Colomb (2003) call this the ‘festivalization’ of cities.³

These interconnected forces, according to walking guides, result in “a fight over attentions spans,” “a car-culture-destination fixation,” and an “entertain-me-now mentality.” Consequently, many have resigned themselves to move away from educational content towards more entertaining aspects of their craft. Even the most ‘academic’ of guiding outfits, New Apple Walking Tours (NAWT), which only hires Ph.D. students, struck a deal with Miramax for their official ‘Gangs of New York Tour.’

For scholars attuned to the production of culture, some attention has turned to types of people who arrange, organize and frame cultural symbols and meanings as a major workforce in a post-industrial economy like this one (Florida 2002;

³Most of these academic studies on thematizing spaces and the production of events focus on large-scale social forms—for example, how cities compete to host international events like the Olympics for their prestige and perceived economic growth potential (Judd 1999)—an overemphasis on structure ignores the smaller, phenomenological ways in which individuals create and come to understand this urban world. Despite their location in this field, evidence of guides arises only if they are somehow fraudulent or absent-minded (see Perrotett 2002; Sante 1992).

Negus 2002; Portes et al. 1989; Sassen 2000).⁴ Collectively, these workers serve as *cultural intermediaries*—a group “involving presentation and representation . . . providing symbolic goods and services” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 359).⁵ For ethnographic research within the confluence of urbanism, tourism and culture, walking guides are ideal subjects.

Certainly, within this social group, there is much diversity of style, content, and relative power, but an analytical distinction between guides, when brought into the light of these concerns, can be made between the *autodidactic* and *academic*.⁶ The majority of New York’s 1,300-plus licensed tour guides have educated themselves on the topics and themes they use. Varied in their origin and aspirations—some want to be full-time guides, some see it as a weekend hobby, others see guiding as career training for acting—these individuals learn cultural and informational capital without the institutional legitimacy of a university degree. (Fittingly, Jeffery Harrison is a prime example: a self made man, with high esteem in the community.) Guides who have completed, or are working on, their Ph D., in history or a similar field comprise the second group. While not holding exclusive rights to higher education, nor to scholarly research, New Apple, loudly promotes itself on the academic credentials of its guides and, as a company, holds a great deal of prestige. Paradoxically, at the individual level, its guides are only in the business temporarily before moving on to academic appointments.

Mr. Harrison situates the tour within a historical background. He tells us that barely over a hundred years ago this land was a cow pasture, he tells us about the lives lost here during the Revolutionary War, he tells us that “Up north there was a mansion bought by a man that you might have heard of before, what was his name? George . . . that’s right: George Washington.” He asks us why Alexander Hamilton died in New Jersey as he nods to the couple from the Garden State, and answers that because of New York’s law forbidding dueling, Hamilton and Vice President Aaron Burr had to cross the river in 1804 to try to kill each other. He tells us what neighborhood you’re in depends upon whom you talk to, and cites the blurred line between the Upper East Side and Spanish Harlem as an example.

He tells us that Cornelius Vanderbilt, whose statue sits prominently before us, across 42nd Street, started out as any young enterprising capitalist would: he hit his mother up for money. At this, he shuffles up to a middle-aged woman in the group, and pretends to beg for money.

⁴The larger ethnographic study engages in the literature on informal and service sector work in greater detail and, in particular, the ways that *affect* is a central component of this variety of labor (Hardt and Negri 2001; Lazzarato 1996).

⁵*Cultural Studies* 16 (4) is devoted to these characters, and many of the essays call for research that supplements theoretical discussions with research on the *ways* through which these social actors present and manipulate knowledge and information.

⁶Their biographical trajectories (i.e., laid off office workers, out-of-work actors, aspiring academics, and hobbyists) and their organization in the social field (i.e., affiliated with a touring company like New Apple, or independent) also affect their ‘toolkits.’

CULTURE AND STORYTELLING

Every society has a need for contact with its own past . . . Where this cannot be provided by the powers of individual memory within the kinship group, historical chroniclers and antiquarians are required (Shils 1972, p. 4).

As one autodidactic guide said, “No place, and no people are without history.” The wonder of urban culture is that, according to Suttles, it is a “vast, heritable genome of physical artifacts, slogans, typifications, and catch phrases . . . most appropriately called collective representations” (1984, p. 284). Through their storytelling, guides weave local knowledge and culture into a larger ‘set’ of cultural meanings.⁷ To practice their craft, guides depend less upon a savant’s storehouse of facts and figures than on their ability to manipulate these unruly elements into a varyingly coherent narrative. This is not necessarily an easy task, but guides are not without their resources.

In a dizzying blur of information, Mr. Harrison weaves together a fifteen-minute patchwork of facts in his dandyish elocution prior to setting out: Before the establishment of the railway system here at Grand Central, if one were to travel between New York City and Pittsburgh he would have to change his pocket watch six times.

He pulls pictures out of his tote to show the dirty, smoke-stained rail yards north of the Terminal, and then how they looked after they were covered by the soon-to-be-elite Park Avenue.

“Fifth Avenue is not an American street, it is where we prove that some are more equal than others.”

He tells us that Manhattan is made of a particular rock known as Mica Schist, and that the mainland up north is composed of Gneiss, proving “That’s why Westchester is really very Gneiss and Manhattan is full of Schist.”

“I always say, Brownstone was the Aluminum siding of the mid-19th Century.”

Cole Porter said that Park Ave. is “Where bad women walk *great dogs*.”

EIGHT TRICKS OF THIS TRADE

While Grey Line Bus Tours had such a poor appreciation of the narrative skills of its guides that the company attempted (but failed) to replace them with taped recordings, walking tours demand a storyteller with wit, knowledge, and charisma. Most of these tricks are well intentioned enough to mollify or good-naturedly razz a group, to educate and entertain, to establish authority without alienating, to attach local knowledge with popular culture, and to struggle with the

⁷Narrative is defined by Somers as “networks of patterned relationships connected and configured over time and space” (1999, p. 128). Just as everyday storytelling is a non-linear phenomenon, so too are stories of cities: full of metaphors, ironies, and juxtapositions.

tensions of consumerism and perceived ‘inauthenticity.’⁸ Swidler, in her pivotal essay on culture in action, sees culture as containing “diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action,” and the practices of manipulating that culture as a ‘tool-kit’ (1986, p. 277). Guides might call it *shtick*. Similar to Grazian’s attempt to explicate the “specific performance employed by producers attempting to pull off an event with as little apparent effort as possible,” (2004, p. 140), the following are tools at a guide’s disposal to be used, combined, and violated. Again, guides described a few of these tricks, but predominantly these devices have served as objects for ethnographic analysis.

Moving out on the sidewalk, Mr. Harrison yells over the 42nd Street traffic and holds against the midday current of pedestrians to tell us that Grand Central is a *Terminal*, not a *Station*, and traces this common misconception back to the introduction of an old radio show, that decided ‘Station’ sounded much better on air. He begins to move people’s bodies around to get them physically involved. He sculpts a woman’s arms around to mirror Athena’s pose (“The Kitty Kelly of the Ancient World”) in Jules-Alexis Coutan’s sculpture, ‘Transport,’ that alights the adjacent façade. He lines us up into two rows and has two volunteers walk between them, waving, to show how architects wanted buildings with huge columns to make people feel special. Some people giggle, some move to the back of the group, afraid of being next.

Trick #1: The Conceit

Mr. Harrison was an obvious choice to provide the narrative thread that runs through this essay. Not only is he fascinating, but he is also reflexive about his craft. When asked, he was quick to come up with one of his major devices:

I try to sort of twist people. I sort of believe in John Donne’s idea of ‘the conceit:’ taking an idea and turning it at a right angle into something totally different. And I do this based on what people know. So, I start with the familiar and then I get into the weirdness—leading to unfamiliarity. I try to make them look at something that they’ve seen, but maybe not seen the same way.

Another autodidactic guide proudly talks on his tours about how this research lead him to believe that the story about Dylan Thomas having 17 straight whiskies at the White Horse Tavern is possibly fiction, and that Hell’s Kitchen derived its name from Davy Crockett—two examples of ‘debunking.’ While Jeffrey Harrison will talk about African- and Chinese-American cowboys, and another guide uses the tag line of “There are 10,000 people buried in Washington Square Park” on her brochure, both are used more than just to debunk a myth, but are used for the

⁸The search for authenticity is central to current research on tourism and urban culture. Grazian’s *Blue Chicago* describes that it is “based on a mix of prevailing myths and prejudices invested in the absence of actual experiences” (2003, p. 12).

express purpose of tweaking the familiar. Guides like Mr. Harrison use the conceit to draw participants into the tour, as well as to make them feel ownership of its interactive process, and the city itself.

The conceit works to de-mythologize commonly held beliefs. As Shils writes, part of intellectual work includes the rejection of an “inherited set of values,” serving “the important function of molding and guiding the alternative tendencies which exist in any society” (1972, p. 7), and here, Mr. Harrison sees it less an outright refusal, than a teasing out of alternatives.⁹ Put into practice it works: he feeds off of startled looks and puzzled expressions in order to draw the participant in.

Trick #2: The ‘Perfect Tour Guiding Moment’

It seems that certain stories help to define a tour, a culture, a city. These moments are ideal in simplicity and wonder, yet speak beyond the story itself. Guides relish to tell such tales: allowing them to illustrate different layers of architecture, social forces, cultural changes, politics, and/or economics. One of those moments is the once unfinished back face of City Hall, because its architects failed to forecast the city’s growth further north. This also stands in for the larger processes of sprawl and population shifts. As an academic guide told me:

That story about, you know, the construction of City Hall, given the fact that it coincided with the establishment of the grid street system in New York, I think that it helps non-New Yorkers be more anchored in what they are going to see, what they are going to experience. (. . .) The Sara Delano Roosevelt Park story [about Eleanor Roosevelt’s struggles against Robert Moses’ unbridled urban planning, and how he snubbed her by naming a park after her mother-in-law] is another one that I tell all the time, because it is about Bob Moses, who I hate, and I want everybody else to hate him and imagine that the city might have been different without him. And it’s funny.

The best of these are dramatic, include famous personae, have a twist, and are instructive. The most important thing for guides, however, is its multiple usage; that they are, in some fashion, ‘universal’ New York stories. The fight between Roosevelt and Moses is a guide favorite because it has everything: the public, parks, drama, fame, plight, power, and even disliked mothers-in-law. These moments resonate meaning, and are selected to provide a persuasive vision.

Mr. Harrison talks about how Grand Central was built from 1903 to 1913, and was the second transit hub built on the site. Because its architect was trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition (he spells it for us: “B-E-A-U-X-A-R-T-S”), the building is raised up on an elevated platform, like a sculpture on a pedestal.

⁹Shils’ point is not too small to restate: his intellectuals are, unlike guides, within established social institutions and have rejected inherited values. It is because they position themselves in the interstitial spaces of urban culture rather than within organizations that, in the larger project, I refer to guides as ‘street intellectuals.’

On another tour of the same spot, a different guide told the story of how Coutan never saw his sculpture, which took seven years to build (three fewer than whole building), grace the top of the Terminal. Coutan proclaimed: “I’d rather die than go to New York!” To this, the crowd chuckles, and someone says loudly: “Boy, the French haven’t changed.”

Below ‘Transport’ he mentions again the bronze statue of ‘Commodore’ Vanderbilt, an infamous figure in the history of the Terminal, the railway industry, and New York. We’re told his nickname originates from his first business of ferrying people between Brooklyn and New York—people said that he was so proud of his little boat that he fancied himself a commodore.

Trick #3: Happenstance

Great urban spaces, for Richard Sennett, are those wherein “to know too much might weaken the desire to know what will happen next . . . endowed with the possibilities of the unexpected” (1990, p. 195). One of the most wonderful things about a walking tour is that, unlike a bus tour, there is the potential of tapping into unexpected urban interactions. Guides love to report stories of being invited into old homes with antique interiors, how groups were offered afternoon tea, or how a resident or homeless person will begin to contribute to, or argue over, a story. In an interview, Jeffrey told me:

It’s also one of those blessings of New York. It is that serendipitous event of something you never expected, incalculable. And you never know when it is going to happen and it’s a godsend. It’s the woman—this will often happen on a tour—someone will come out with a wary ear [and want to debate me]. Crazy people are part of the magic of the city.

More academic guides show disbelief of such quixotic stories, but not without a tinge of envy. While autodidactic guides seem to scout out chance, New Apple guides are either too timid or uninterested, preferring changes to be in routes or emphases already within their stock of knowledge. Self-taught guides are more likely to understand that the tour is as much an *experience* as it is a *lesson*, and therefore prize an entertaining ad-libbing within the emergent urban world. They are comfortable in the unknown and changeable, and say that these moments are often the participant’s favorite parts of the tour. It is frustrating too, because it is the *least* planned aspect.

Trick #4: Simulation

Unlike Colonial Williamsburg or Western Ghost Towns, walking tours are not ‘reenactments’ (see Fine and Speer 1985). There are, however, a few performance-oriented tours that attempt to simulate historical experiences or moments. Like any of these eight tricks, simulations can range from the ham-fisted to the sleight

of hand.¹⁰ Jeffrey Harrison physically involves people in his tours: molding them into the positions of statues or columns, and weaving them through crowds in a conga-line.

There are more involved simulations. One guide dresses like Abraham Lincoln. A group of guides recite poetry on their Greenwich Village Literary Pub Crawls. Another guide aspires to collect a whole gallery of guides dressed as ‘vintage’ characters to transport participants 120 years in the past. Wanting to develop this part-tour company, part-repertory troupe, Mike Auster rode the new-found interest in the Five Points area, leading tours costumed as ‘Butcher Bill’ O’Toole, and had a young woman portray ‘Becky, the hot corn girl.’ On one tour, she came up behind us singing her advertisement for corn right on cue (signaled with a tip of his hat). Having met Mike at a Renaissance fair, her part entails sweetly answering questions with a fake English accent with the accompaniment of a real pet rat on her bare shoulder.

Goffman makes a great deal of how the ‘make-believe’ is a significant part of our understandings of everyday life (1974, pp. 48–56), but the more scholastic guides wouldn’t dare such theatrics. Jeffrey and Mike, both self-taught guides with divergent styles, would agree that this is shtick not without a pedagogical purpose. By trying to get participants involved, by balancing make-believe and real life, the trick of simulation is a delicate one that illuminates the tension in touring between education and entertainment. While it is no surprise that Jeffrey sees this trick as something to be sparingly deployed, Mike was singularly honest when he told me that, in the end, “if there are two different dates, or two different facts, go with the one that is the most interesting. Never let the information get in the way of a story.”

Before heading into the Terminal, Mr. Harrison takes us next door to the Lincoln Building. He asks us if we would have ever remembered Chrysler’s or Woolworth’s first name if they had not built a building for themselves (Answers: Walter, Frank), but this is uninteresting to the group. He tells us that in naming this building, they made a safe bet, to do so after a president that both parties claim as their own. He tells us that when this was built we were a country without any history: so we borrowed it, looking up to the Italian ceiling and ornamentation.

Mr. Harrison brings us over to one of the five sculptures Daniel Chester French used as studies for the Lincoln Memorial, and points out the copy-right mark with an outstretched pinky finger. Carefully, he explicates its composition: we often think Abe’s eyes look promisingly into the future but that he is, in fact sullen, that he is not sitting on a throne but a plain seat, that

¹⁰Shields believes that representations blanket the city, and that, “in everyday life, we fashion and receive countless representations. Of course we all realize that a totally accurate representation—a perfect copy—is impossible. We are happy to settle for a good likeness . . . [yet they are] treacherous metaphors, summarizing the complexity of the city in an elegant model” (1996, pp. 228–229).

he is dressed ragged and not regal, and that the ordinary coat (“The kind of coat you might leave in the trunk of your car”) draped behind him on his right is placed in the same fashion as the flag on his left to indicate that the state and the everyman are equal.

Trick #5: The Duel

Some self-taught guides collaborate on debate-based tours. These events are often scripted and, despite antagonistic appearances, are a united effort to educate and attract participants. According to a guide who gave a ‘capitalist vs. radical’ tour of Wall Street:

It was hysterical. A lot of fun. We did nine of them for about two years, he did the conservative side, I did the radical side. And we fought over Wall Street, which was perfect. (...) We didn’t do too much preparation, but by the time we were finished I would think of jokes that he would say and we’d tell each other before hand, it was really well choreographed. (...) I’d talk about how a third of the founders were slave owners, and all the protests at the Stock Exchange, I’d talk about how this is ‘great’, and how anyone can make money, and blah blah blah, what a great institution, free market. I talk about all the corruption scandals at that time, and all the brokers getting arrested. (...) We’d end at Battery Park, but overlooking Ellis Island, I would talk about all the immigration restrictions and Bob would talk about all the immigrants coming over here in such large numbers and, “If it’s so bad why’d they come?”

Jeffrey has done dueling tours on the Jewish Rialto, and another with an architecturally based format:

I’m more 19th Century, he is a kid of the sixties, he’s Mr. Modernism, I’m Mr. non-modernism, and we speak to two different worlds, with similar levels of appreciation. So what would happen [was], when we would start doing the “I don’t agree with you” routine, then we’d go back and forth, but the nice thing was that it made people realize that there’s more than one way of looking at the world.

These tours, however, are not particularly cost-effective. The orchestration of debates, and dividing both the prep work and profits make this trick hard. For these reasons, guides might take advantage of more informal interactions with a feisty participant or stranger. The resulting banter allows the group to hear different opinions and offers guides an opportunity to establish their authority through demonstration of knowledge and their rhetorical ability to pacify critical missives. In a performance there are often “bonds of reciprocal dependence” that link a group together but that a team, such as the one between a guide and participant, helps to define the situation (Goffman 1959, p. 82). While Goffman saw open conflict as corrosive, here, the duel is affirming.

Back outside, in front of the unceremonious main entrance of the Terminal, Jeffrey starts talking about how “There is no evidence that Disney was ever caught reading a book.” He asks what color Alice’s hair was in Lewis Carroll’s text (reminding us that it is called *Alice’s Adventures Underground*, not *Alice in Wonderland*). When someone guesses blond, he pulls out a reproduction

of an original illustration to show that her hair was, in fact, short and brown. Clucking his tongue, “See? He didn’t even look at the pictures!” Because the architect was very careful to draw the visitor in viscerally, Jeffery sets up the experience. Why are sculptures placed high? Because when the chin is up the lungs get more oxygen, and the body feels good. But here, at the entrance, Mr. Harrison points out that the downward incline is intended to get our hearts racing, to lure us in. Right before we go through dull wood doors, he tells us that real life rabbit holes are actually quite boring, and in we go.

“Beaux-Arts was always about more than the practical.” He corrals us into the entrance, and down the incline, and stops us there. He tells us there used to be two sets of doors here, for two sets of reasons: temperature control and pacing. Visitors get distracted and are surprised at the majesty of the room on the other side. To simulate the missing effect, Jeffrey shuffles in before us, sticks out his arms, and makes us bump through them one by one. The group giggles past, as he says, “The doors are the wrapping for the Christmas present of the interior!”

Trick #6: The Joke

A key to being entertaining is, of course, being able to tell a good joke. A few guides claim to be adamantly uninterested in being funny (and are successful at it, I might add), but most have a few standards (e.g., “Yes. Historic neighborhood, historic jokes”). The trick is in keeping it fresh, but even repetition itself can make a good gag. An autodidactic guide, an aspiring actor who studied Vaudevillian banter and conducts theater tours, will talk about how a critic once wrote that Neil Simon didn’t have a good idea for a play this season, but he wrote one anyway. He’ll then lean into the person next to him and repeat, “*He wrote one anyway.*” A good joke doubles as a way to educate:

You are sugarcoating people’s education (...) but, you try to make them informative jokes. You know? I mean, it’s like this line that I do about Ladies’ Mile: it was the only place in New York, in the old days, where a woman could walk unescorted. Now, I could go into an explanation of what that meant, in that usually, when woman went around unescorted, that you thought she was a prostitute. But I just throw in a line “Well, there were places where a woman could walk unescorted, down by the docks, but that doesn’t matter.” So, that’s a joke, it gets a laugh, but also it explains to them what it meant to walk unescorted (...). You’re working with less time, so you kinda come up with a way to hit it quicker (...) It puts the idea in their head, kinda snuck under the RADAR.

It is rather easy to find data to create a tour using public history, and it is therefore material of this nature that tends to be jealously guarded. The theater guide spoke of his anger not that someone stole a joke, but that she kept telling it *wrong*.

In fairness, some guides bristle at the notion that they tell jokes. According to one autodidactic guide: “Have you ever heard of Dorothy Parker? Oscar Wilde? Did they tell *jokes*? No, darling, they had *wit*. A joke can be anything. Wit has context. It is based on intellect. Don’t call it a joke, it demeans my humor. You can put that as a footnote.” This guide’s point, obviously said for effect, still resonates with the notion that a guide’s greatest attribute is that they are always working within a social context. It is fair to say that the ability to use most tricks involves wit.

While another guide used the Waiting Room to point out the Botticino and Tennessee Marble (and how the walls are not French Limestone, not Limestone, and not even stone, but actually gypsum plaster molded to simulate French Limestone), Mr. Harrison talks about the social aspects. In particular, how a woman’s traveling experience included elaborate powder rooms and resting areas. He tells us how travelers would arrive, grab their luggage, walk through these wonderful spaces, walk to one of the hotels within a few blocks, and be reclining in bed within ten minutes. He asks demurely, “Now, where were you ten minutes after arriving at JFK? In a cab on the BQE? Still waiting for your luggage?”

He also takes time to demote two famous men: describing Frank Lloyd Wright as the most overrated 20th Century architect (but a passable 19th Century one), and Fredrick Law Olmsted as an amateur gardener with only two years experience before Central Park.

Trick #7: Fabrication

A myth told with good humor, or even inadvertently is one thing. But some guides, in order to maintain the face of authority, might manufacture a tale or a fact. Such lies are common enough in everyday life (Goffman 1974, pp. 10,15). As an autodidactic guide told me, the correct information isn’t always there, but “a little schmaltz never hurt anyone—In fact, it could be good because it gets them thinking.” For another guide: “There was a guy, who’d say, if he didn’t know the address: 70 Pine Street. He didn’t know the year it was built? 1892. Architects? Smith and Lewenski. He’d say it with complete confidence. It sounded good. [laughs] That’s a trade secret by the way.” There are also lies that, to no surprise of Goffman’s, venture more than skin deep. Rebeccah Laurent admitted that she has constructed a whole identity as a non-practicing Jew from Brooklyn four years older, just to give herself credibility to clients on her Lower East Side tours:

It seems that people *want* me to be Jewish. And they react very badly when they find out that I’m not. They act as if I’ve tricked them somehow. I have light eyes and dark curly hair. That’s not a trick. It’s very offensive to me the way that they react—as if I just sold them the Brooklyn Bridge. I mean, it’s really unbelievable to me. Um, so I’ve started lying. It’s easier to lie and create this persona that makes everybody happy, and it stops some of the questions and the more offensive stuff.

Perhaps this might be expected from an out-of-work actor guide, but this was an academic. Smaller embellishments are frequent for autodidactic guides too (e.g., faking a Brooklyn accent or wearing a Mets hat while having a distaste for baseball). It is, despite the rigor and intelligence of many self-taught guides, a measure of the stigma of the tourism industry—they feel that without the authority of the lectern and the legitimation of a university announced at the beginning of a tour, as so many academic guides disclose, that they find alternate ways to establish authority.¹¹

Making our way into the grand space of the Terminal, Jeffrey Harrison stops to tell us “Come on in.” Sticking his chin out, he shows us how the ramp arches our backs so that we face the ceiling mural (painted by Brooklynite Charles Basic, who died of gangrene while on vacation after a camel stepped on his toe). He reminds us of the visceral influence of architecture. He then bolts off into the crowd thirty paces, hopping between couples and commuters, to demonstrate the careful mass-ballet that occurs here every day. He grabs another volunteer, and shows that the floor blocks of Tennessee marble are the width of a single walking pace, and the length of a fast one. As we head further downstairs he stops halfway and talks about how the original brass railings were modeled on the size of a lady’s wrist, and shows how the wall tiles are based upon the width of the human hand. Stairs, Jeffrey insists, ought to fit the stride of the average person, not a clumsy arithmetic of rise and span. Jeffrey stops to point out how easy it is for a passing woman wearing high heels—who is still well within earshot—to walk up the stairs without looking down. Then, with a flourish, he says that “Good French stairs are like great sex: it’s a lot of fun, and you have no idea where it’s going.”

Trick #8: The Bridge

Often a guide will use one element or architectural detail to talk about the larger forces of the neighborhood or the city. This technique, when one aspect of a form is used to represent the whole (i.e., when the image of a crown represents the British monarchy), is called *metonymy*. Such a connection is popular, but difficult. A more modest use of this technique might look at iron columns to talk about the transition from light-industry to loft buildings to boutiques of Soho. There are ambitious uses too:

We’ll start near City Hall (. . .) I have my own little story that I can tell them with an overarching meta-narrative about that tour, which is just my own thing. Other people could do something totally different. But, on that tour the story for me is when the bridge was being built, there were two cities: there was New York then there was Brooklyn. And

¹¹Concerns over fabrication are not just that of the tourism industry but are, in fact, a concern in everyday life, and concealment, deception, and manipulation are of importance to cultural intermediaries in general (Negus 2002, p. 508).

Brooklyn had a certain urban vision. Brooklyn was founded on an urban vision, called the American City. So: trees, parks, wide streets, and churches. American, Protestant, prosperous middle class, right? And they looked across the river and they saw New York: Tammany, immigrants, corruption. And the bridge as going to connect these two very, very different cities and ultimately form this cosmopolitan—both American and somehow not American—city. (...) Now I have a little meta-narrative for each tour.

While an expert in 18th Century France, this academic guide was particularly careful with his pedagogic technique for guiding. His reflexive and explicit development of a ‘meta-narrative’ for all his tours, was singular throughout this study.

Downstairs on the newly renovated concourse level, there are shops and food kiosks, waiting chairs, schedules, and ramps to train platforms. Mr. Harrison walks down to one of the ramps, and asks us why it was designed with an unnecessary incline. When no one guessed, he made his way up the ramp in a kind of slightly slow-motion run, to tell us that they wanted to prevent late commuters from bolting onto the concourse level. Ramps were a central part of the design of the building, not because of an Americans With Disabilities Act, but the architects wanted to moderate the flows of foot traffic and bodily experiences.

Checking the time, he shows us his favorite part of Grand Central: the Junior’s Restaurant dessert case. Huddled up against the Plexiglas he teaches us two important lessons. The first is how to pick out good cheesecake: real cheesecake does not have a graham cracker crust, nor does it have that shmutz on the top, pointing to a lesser cousin with strawberries on top of it. Which brings up the second important lesson. He gets serious. “If you are going to be a New Yorker, you have to learn the second official language of New York City. Anyone? Yiddish.”

CONCLUSIONS

The reader [of cities] produces gardens that miniaturize and collate a world. . . Sometimes, in fact, like a hunter in the forest, he spots the written quarry, follows a trail, laughs, plays tricks, or else like securities of reality when he reads: his escapades exile him from the assurances that give the self its location on the social checkerboard (de Certeau 1984, p. 173).

It is, to use a trick from their own bag, a serendipitous heuristic convenience that guides identify as ‘historians’—a discipline that has put a good deal of thought into how narratives shape representations.¹² Research on cultural produc-

¹²See historians like Mitchell (1980), White (1980), and Halttunen (1999). Clough (1992) warns that art and craft of ‘storytelling’ itself has gone under-problematized and more examination of practices needs to be done. As a storytelling tradition of its own, ethnography has begun to examine such issues (Sennett 1990; Simpson 2000; Gubrium and Holstein 1999; Venkatesh 2002) in part due to engagement with its own cultural reproduction (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Storytelling has become an important tool in recent ethnographic work as an ever-changing fabric through which people make meaning, respond to larger social changes, re-present knowledge, transmit information,

tion has focused upon elites (Suttles 1984, p. 294), but tour guides are ‘populist intellectuals,’ oriented towards “the creativity and moral worth of the ordinary people. . . In the simplicity and wisdom of their ways” (Shils 1972, p. 20). Wise, but hardly simplistic, guides navigate through conflicting forces of homogenization and commodification. Their stories shape the everyday heteroglossia of the urban world.

A resulting tension between entertainment and education fuels the analytic categories of autodidact and academic guides who enact their cultural and informational capital differentially: autodidactic guides are more apt to use the Conceit, Happenstance, Simulation, Joke, and Fabrication, and academic guides will use tricks that reflect more traditional historical devices, like the Perfect Moment and the Bridge.¹³ There is a great deal of overlap, however, and the real differences are in the tricks that academics shun, or at least feel sheepish to use.¹⁴ An academic guide who fabricates a Jewish identity is only able to rationalize the trick as a defense mechanism, and others are confounded by the ease that autodidactic guides incorporate everyday conversations and happenstance into their talks. The inclusion of such devices into the narrative of history—the personal and the serendipitous—is difficult to explain for academics, including polyvocality. While Haltunen, a historian, writes that few of her academic peers experiment with multiple voices and perspectives and are willing to “abandon unified closure for open endings, highlight gaps and contradiction” (1999, p. 167), guides do this every day and autodidacts do it best: as they use all the tricks at their disposal, the more ‘folksy’ aspects make them local’s favorites.

Tour guides, as a group, enact the two divorced kinds of knowledge Bourdieu outlines in *Pascalian Meditations* (2000)—the scholarly and experiential. Bourdieu was, at once, against the ‘scholastic culture’ that tacitly and implicitly ignores the levels of meaning-making done by unconsecrated groups, but is also against the ‘cult of popular culture,’ which often reproduces class differences (2000, pp. 69, 76). Cultural intermediaries in general, and specifically the guides presented here, can be seen as offering a bridge between those two cultures and sets of knowledge.

Any fact or figure can be found in a dozen dusty tomes or semi-factual websites, but guides make them *present* and *tangible*, the intellectual merged with experience. As Mr. Harrison told me, “Walking is about your senses; it is about experiencing.” Reinforcing ‘place character’ (Molotch et al., 2000, p. 793),

find economic viability and search for recognition (Clough 2001; Wacquant 1995). For example, ethnography, in its selection of research sites and emphases does have a tradition in embracing happenstance more than most of the social sciences. Auyero, for example, valorizes ‘spontaneistic ethnography’ (2003, p. 204).

¹³Categories not discussed here but fleshed out in the larger study include those between high and low culture, personal taste and professional judgment, public good and private interests, education and entertainment, legitimation and autonomy, ‘knowledgeable local’ and ‘nascent traveler.’

¹⁴For academic or autodidactic, the resultant tour content is certainly varied. The emphasis on practices here isn’t entirely deductive: guides themselves bristle at notion of another secretly taking their tours and using the material. While information is ‘public’ and academic guides see their tricks as commonly used historical devices, autodidactics loathe the theft of a good trick.

these guides take the cacophony of collective representations and create new constellations of meaning, and identify the threads and histories of the city. Guides will say that such tactics resonate with an audience better than any classroom lecture. As such, in this corner of the urban culture and public history, the tour guide's practices—by bringing together Aristotle's walking and teaching, and Bourdieu's scholastic and experiential knowledge in New York City streets—develop a modern peripatetics of urban cultural reproduction.

From the concourse we make our way over to one of the most famous parts: the 'whispering gallery.' Located directly below a railing that we waved to people from, the ceramic ceiling is based upon ancient vaulting (and the structural principles of an egg), and uses no steel reinforcement. Jeffrey gets four volunteers and sends them into the corners, telling them that, due to its geometry, if you put your nose up to the tiles, you can whisper to the person thirty feet behind you. An old girlfriend showed me this place and told me how Charles Mingus brought his own girlfriend here and whispered quietly to her, "Will you marry me?" I stand aside to let everyone have a chance, but Jeffrey tells me, "I know you've done it a million times, Jonathan, but you have to play with everybody else," and escorts me by the elbow to my corner.

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