

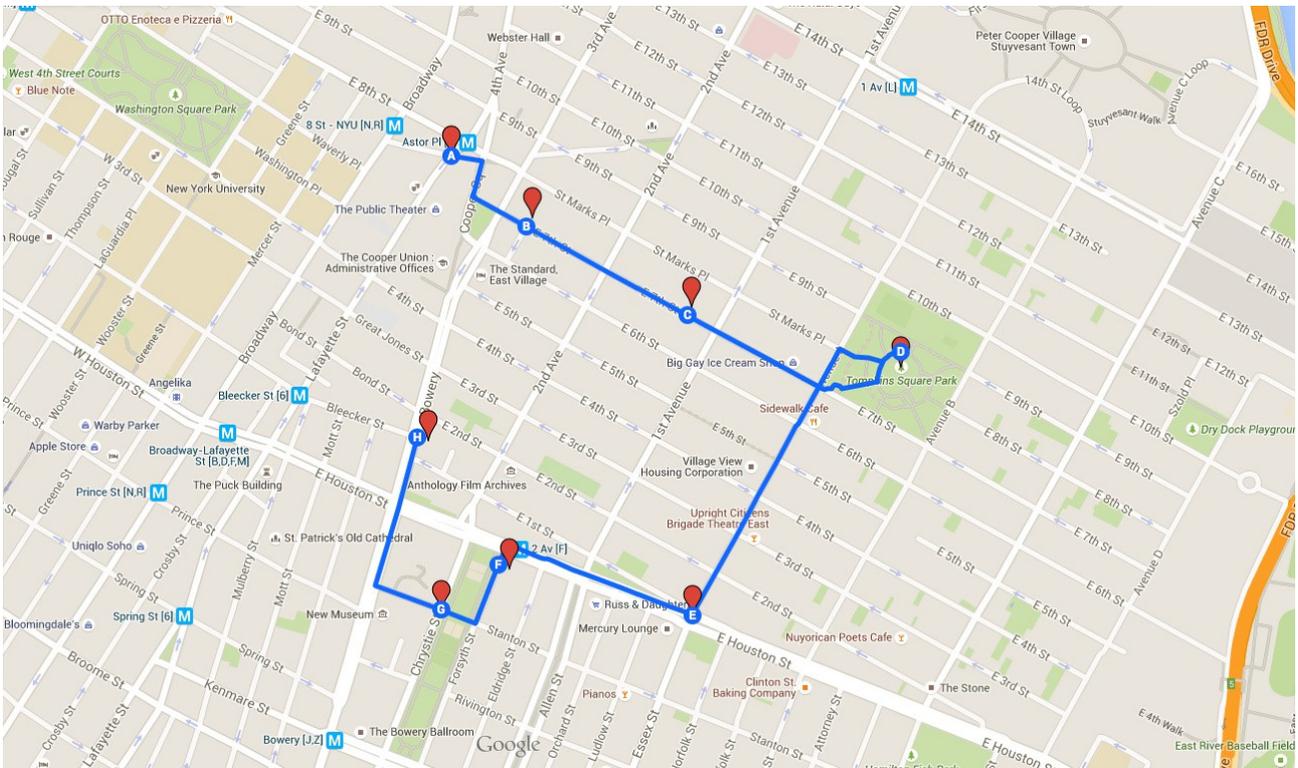
## Taking Research to the Streets

Jonathan R. Wynn and Richard E. Ocejo

*Residents of iconic neighborhoods in New York City have grown accustomed to walking tourism in their midst—clumps of curious observers and amateur historians following a knowledgeable guide who points to signs of the past in the contemporary landscape. This multimedia article follows sociologists Jonathan Wynn and Richard Ocejo on a tour whose subject is both the East Village neighborhood and the phenomenon of the walking tour itself. We follow the guides from Astor Place to the Bowery, via Tompkins Square Park and Houston Street, stopping in at culturally significant bars along the way.*

On February 28, 2015, Jonathan Wynn and Richard Ocejo led a group around the East Village to experience the sights and sounds of this historically and culturally meaningful district of Manhattan. Wynn drew from his study of walking tourism, published as *The Tour Guide: Walking and Talking New York* (2011, University of Chicago Press), and Ocejo drew from his work on bars, nightlife scenes, and gentrification in downtown neighborhoods, published as *Upscaling Downtown: From Bowery Saloons to Cocktail Bars in New York City* (2014, Princeton University Press).

Figure 1. Route of the walking tour



Source: Google Maps

A walking tour affords participants the chance to occupy the physical spaces they discuss. Walking tours and pub crawls match intellectual ideas with visceral, lived moments. This “tour about tours” and “pub crawl about pubs” drew out historical and cultural data and paired them with new experiences for participants, making East Village history more present. By walking and talking in public spaces, the tour-crawl also highlighted the importance of public spaces in the East Village: from the free library in Astor Place to the Tompkins and Roosevelt parks to the semi-public spaces of bars like McSorley’s and the Blue and Gold Tavern. The same can be said in reverse. The East Village provides a rich set of historical moments and cultural places within a dense few blocks, an easily navigable path allowing us to illustrate the development of the neighborhood over the last century, the importance of culture to the area, and the tensions between grit and glamour, ethnic history and real-estate development, and the pros and cons of gentrification. Perhaps most of all, the East Village holds sites and sights we knew would be educational, entertaining, and intellectually accessible. As a form of “public sociology,” walking tours offer social scientists an outlet for embedding a broad audience in the contexts they examine.

At the end of the tour, the author-guides talked about the neighborhood, their research, and the success of the walking-tour phenomenon as part of the New York City tourist experience.

### Stop 1. The Alamo and Astor Place

[Video 1. Introduction to guides, walking tours, and the East Village; talking about Astor Place]

**Jonathan Wynn:** We begin at the former site of the recently displaced *Alamo* cube<sup>1</sup> in the center of **Astor Place**<sup>2</sup> It was a good to start because it’s a site of history (e.g. the Disaster Place Riots<sup>3</sup>), culture (e.g. the sculpture and mosaic work on civic hardware such as lampposts by Jim “The Mosaic Man” Power<sup>4</sup>), nightlife (e.g. nearby German beer gardens and Irish pubs, 1960s hangouts, Skid Row bars, and punk rock clubs), and public education (e.g. the Astor Library,<sup>5</sup> which sowed the first seeds of the New York Public Library, and the **Cooper Union**). We also needed to start at a subway line: If you are going to have people meet you for a tour in New York, it’s easiest to start at a subway station.

**Richard Ocejo:** Furthermore, this spot contains many themes of the tour. All the ethnic, religious, political, and working-class groups who lived and worked in the neighborhood left behind physical reminders of their presence.

### Stop 2. McSorley’s Old Ale House and gentrification

[Video 2. Not getting into McSorley’s]

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<sup>1</sup> See: [www.nytimes.com/2005/11/19/nyregion/19cube.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/19/nyregion/19cube.html?_r=3).

<sup>2</sup> Additional information about this location—and all other places mentioned in **bold** in this article—can be found on the following map online: <http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?vs=2&hl=en&ie=UTF8&oe=UTF8&msa=0&msid=207945701754173499619.0004bbb174ddd9231a949>.

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5402902](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5402902).

<sup>4</sup> See: [www.themosaicman.com/Themosaicman/Mosaic\\_man.html](http://www.themosaicman.com/Themosaicman/Mosaic_man.html).

<sup>5</sup> See: [www.nytimes.com/2002/02/10/realestate/streetscapes-old-astor-library-now-joseph-papp-public-theater-once-it-held-many.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm](http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/10/realestate/streetscapes-old-astor-library-now-joseph-papp-public-theater-once-it-held-many.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm).

**RO:** Some of the longtime downtown residents I interviewed spoke frequently and admiringly about the vibrancy of nightlife in the area. They would refer as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was characterized by working-class and immigrant groups. So our second stop, at McSorley's Old Ale House,<sup>6</sup> fit perfectly. I conducted an interview in McSorley's with a local resident, historian, and activist who told me:

This was pretty much the original nightlife capital of New York City and all that, as you know, and therefore, of this country. Yiddish theatres, Italian operas, oyster bars, brothels, everything else, nightclubs, all of those types of things that were going on down here in the 1800s while it was very working-class and all that. To blow off steam, and all that, like pour whiskey right out of the jug... this is the genesis of modern-day, working-class, multiethnic America. This is the melting pot.

With today's gentrification and fancier nightspots, McSorley's is hailed for its stubborn commitment to the neighborhood's cultural past.

**Figure 2. McSorley's Old Ale House**



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### Stop 3. Blue and Gold Tavern

[Video 3. The Blue and Gold]

**RO:** Walking east on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, we traveled to the East Village's post-World War II period. At this time, the area was known as "Little Ukraine" for the many immigrants who fled the Soviet Union and settled there. There are several remaining establishments that reflect their history, including restaurants, the Ukrainian Museum<sup>7</sup> and the Blue and Gold Tavern.<sup>8</sup> Named after the colors of the Ukrainian flag, **Blue and Gold** opened in the 1960s. It became a favorite for incoming artists in the 1980s, who shared the space with aging Ukrainian men. Blue and Gold maintains its status as a cheap dive, with only a few old-timers still coming in.

<sup>6</sup> Website: [www.mcsorleysnewyork.com](http://www.mcsorleysnewyork.com).

<sup>7</sup> Website: [www.ukrainianmuseum.org](http://www.ukrainianmuseum.org).

<sup>8</sup> See: [www.newyorkontap.com/reviews2show.asp?show=54](http://www.newyorkontap.com/reviews2show.asp?show=54).

#### Stop 4. Tompkins Square Park

[Video 4. Parks and punks!]

**JW:** From the southwest corner of **Tompkins Square Park**, we could see the **Pyramid Club**, a hotspot for the drag and gay scenes of the 1980s and the place where Nirvana and the Red Hot Chili Peppers played their first New York gigs. We also saw **151 Avenue B**, the former home to jazz legend Charlie Parker. This Gothic Revival-style rowhouse was built in 1849 and deemed a New York City Landmark in 1999. Was there a highlight moment for you, Rich, that connected your research?

**Figure 3. Jonathan Wynn and Richard Ocejo in Tompkins Square Park**



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**RO:** Probably Tompkins Square Park<sup>9</sup>—about halfway through the tour. Many residents spoke almost fondly for the 1970s and 1980s, when the area was crime-ridden and drug-infested and the park was a dangerous place. But to them, the negative conditions provided the backdrop for creativity in art and music. The park is symbolic of so much of the East Village’s gentrification. Today, nightlife revelers traverse the park to get to their next destination, while the neighborhood’s remaining drug addicts continue to hang out on the sidewalk. During the day, it serves as a temporary soup kitchen for the homeless as well as a playground for young wealthy families. The park allowed me to point out how these different social actors interpret and attempt to coexist and share the same space, with mixed results.

<sup>9</sup> Website: [www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/historical-signs/listings?id=12589](http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/historical-signs/listings?id=12589).



## Stop 6. Yonah Schimmel's and Sara Delano Roosevelt

[Video 6. Yonah Schimmel's as potential victim of gentrification?]

[Sound file: Schimmel's bakery]

**JW:** In addition to Yonah Schimmel's Knish Bakery<sup>11</sup> on **Houston Street**, another great “tour-guiding moment” was the Sara D. Roosevelt Park<sup>12</sup> story, which is one of the tales a fantastic guide (and currently my colleague in the history department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst), Jennifer Fronc,<sup>13</sup> relishes to tell. Through their battles over New York public spaces and development, Moses and Roosevelt never liked each other. Roosevelt advocated for parks and low-income families and often roused public opposition to Moses' urban planning. Moses justified the destruction of affordable housing for low-income residents by saying it wasn't “slum clearance” but for a public park Roosevelt couldn't argue against. To complete the rhetorical coup, Moses used his power to name the park after Roosevelt's mother-in-law, whom Eleanor didn't get along with. It's a story of gamesmanship playing out on the spot, and she told me it was a favorite tale.

**Figure 6. Yonah Schimmel's Knish Bakery**



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<sup>11</sup> Website: <http://knishery.com>.

<sup>12</sup> Website: [www.nycgovparks.org/parks/saradroosevelt](http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/saradroosevelt).

<sup>13</sup> Her web page: [www.umass.edu/history/faculty/fronc.html](http://www.umass.edu/history/faculty/fronc.html).

## Stop 7. CBGB and the Bowery

[Video 7a. From Skid Row to CBGB (part 1)]

[Video 7b. From Skid Row to CBGB (part 2)]

**JW:** In some ways, I feel the Bowery is the height of incongruity in the neighborhood.

**RO:** The most interesting of these cases for me is the Bowery Hotel,<sup>14</sup> an exclusive boutique hotel with rooms starting at \$400 a night, that is located directly across from the curiously named **Whitehouse Hotel**, a former flophouse for homeless men. The marked differences between these two buildings and what they signified about the neighborhood are evident.<sup>15</sup> However, even the Whitehouse<sup>16</sup> has been transformed from a flophouse to a youth hostel catering specifically to foreign travelers and students.

I began my research downtown by studying the last of the Bowery's Skid Row bars, Milano's,<sup>17</sup> which is located just off Bowery on Houston. Like the Bowery itself, Milano's is a sort of microcosm for downtown's transformation. It began as a place for Italian immigrants, then became a bar for homeless men, and then became a local hangout for the neighborhood's early gentrifiers in the 1980s and 1990s. Today these latter two groups are joined by young visitors who are attracted to the bar for its "authenticity."

New cocktail bars, the Bowery Hotel, and stores like John Varvatos create a physical sense of "downtown luxury" that has defined the area in the last decade. In his work on the neighborhood's gentrification, Christopher Mele points out how symbols of downtown bohemia, like subversive art, political and cultural resistance, and a working-class lifestyle of gritty tenement living, became marketing tools by real-estate developers and city leaders in the 1980s and 1990s—a reversal of how such symbols have normally been treated by people in power (2000). Nightlife downtown today, as evidenced by the Bowery, has eschewed the neighborhood's historical bohemianism and working-class spirit to provide upscale products and services for clientele who may or may not know anything about the area's history.

## Stop 8. Wrapping up

[Video 8. Hidden in plain sight]

**JW:** What do you think is the allure of the pub crawl?

**RO:** I wondered if interest stemmed from a desire to experience the city in a unique way—through a walking tour—or if it was the East Village, in particular. An important goal for me was to show that consumption spaces, such as bars, are not by-products of neighborhood reinvestment, as gentrification scholars such as Neil Smith (1996) would suggest. Rather, they are important catalysts for gentrification and unique lenses for understanding the process.

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<sup>14</sup> Website: <http://theboweryhotel.com>.

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://nymag.com/news/features/41818>.

<sup>16</sup> Website: [www.whitehousehotelofny.com](http://www.whitehousehotelofny.com).

<sup>17</sup> See: [www.yelp.com/biz/milanos-bar-new-york](http://www.yelp.com/biz/milanos-bar-new-york).

**JW:** Guides who lead walking tours enact much of what interested us in doing this exercise: to get the stories off the page and into the streets. On the sidewalk, we were able to talk about the importance of public culture while demonstrating how it can be used. The streets and parks were important places for the free exchange of history and storytelling, and that shouldn't be lost in today's overly commodified urban spaces. The tour brought our research to life, hopefully in a fun fashion.

### **Bibliography**

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**Richard E. Oejo** is assistant professor of sociology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York (CUNY). His book, *Upscaling Downtown: From Bowery Saloons to Cocktail Bars in New York City*, about nightlife and conflict in gentrified neighborhoods, was published by Princeton University Press in 2014. Oejo's work has appeared in *City & Community*, *Poetics*, *Ethnography*, and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. He is also the editor of *Ethnography and the City: Readings on Doing Urban Fieldwork* (Routledge, 2012), a collection of readings on classic and contemporary works in urban ethnography, and a contributing editor to *Metropolitiques*.

Oejo is currently working on a monograph called *In Cathedrals of Craft: The New Elite Retail, Manual Labor, and Service Jobs* (working title, under contract; Princeton) about the upscaling of trades from low-status to "cool," as well as a research methods textbook and website (under contract; Routledge). His overall research and teaching interests include urban and cultural sociology, community studies, work, and research methods (especially qualitative methods).

**Jonathan R. Wynn** is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He works at the intersection of urban and cultural sociology, and his first book was published as *The Tour Guide: Walking and Talking New York* with the University of Chicago Press (2011, "Fieldwork Encounters and Discoveries" series). His work has been published in *City & Community*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *Sociological Forum*, *Contexts*, and *Ethnography*. He is also the co-editor of the ASA Culture Section Newsletter (2011–present).

Wynn is currently completing a comparative, multi-method analysis of three music festivals (the Country Music Association Festival in Nashville, the Dunkin' Donuts Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island, and the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas), to examine how city stakeholders have adopted "festivalization" as an urban cultural policy, and the effects of city branding on locals, visitors, event organizers and participants alike. This book is under contract at the University of Chicago Press.

A third book on urban cultures, co-authored with Andrew Deener, is under contract at Oxford University Press.

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