

• *Articles* •

**“I Want to be a Witness”:
Blogging for Urban Authenticity and
 Cultural Authority in the East Village**

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Abstract: *New vernacular anti-gentrification media communities were formed in the twenty-first century that both documented changes in urban environments and aimed to inspire future action. This essay looks at how a specific blogging community, Jeremiah Moss and the East Village Blog Mafia, started campaigns online and off, facilitated meaningful dialogue, created a distinct folk group that was focused on saving New York City, and became cultural agents of change themselves. Grassroots movements, such as this one, raise important questions about collective identity, community values, and neighborhood diversity, issues that are at the center of our field. This case study is a call for folklorists to study anti-gentrification media communities, folk responses to displacement, and the material culture of vanishing urban cultures and communities. Urban folklorists should be a part of the gentrification conversation going forward.*

More than 58 million tourists visited New York City in 2015, which is an increase of over 20 million visitors since Mayor Michael Bloomberg first entered office in 2002.¹ Likewise, New York City has dramatically changed physically in the twenty-first century. Mayor Bloomberg facilitated the addition of 40,000 new buildings during his tenure, rezoned 37% of the city, and radically transformed New York's waterfront.² That trend has continued under Mayor Bill de Blasio with the development of the Hudson Yards project, plans to rezone East New York, and projections of over 60 million visitors in 2016. Unprecedented redevelopment and growth, when combined with record visitation numbers, has resulted in significant social and cultural consequences.

In an increasingly networked society, these consequences can now be easily seen, recorded and mapped. From *The Nation* to *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York*, from *The New York Times* to *E.V. Grieve*, from the *Gothamist* to *Ephemeral New York*, mainstream media institutions and vernacular media communities alike, have ensured that no change, no matter how minor, went unnoticed. The gentrification of New York City was broadcast in real time for anyone that was interested in watching to see. In *The New Yorker*, Elizabeth Greenspan even showed how in the twenty-first century "Manhattanize" had entered the vernacular as a verb that meant how to turn a particular urban space into a playground for its wealthiest inhabitants while forgetting about its poorest.³ As anti-gentrification efforts move to the center of urban activist efforts, I argue that it is critical for folklorists to study these anti-gentrification media communities and vernacular movements, to analyze the folk responses to displacement, and to recognize the material culture of vanishing cultures and communities. It is time to question who has been watching and who has heeded the call and moved gentrification beyond academic circles and in to digital spaces and in to our neighborhoods.

While the effects of gentrification in urban spaces have been documented by sociologists, urban planners, and cultural geographers in the past, it is critical for urban folklorists to be a part of the gentrification conversation going forward. New vernacular anti-gentrification media communities were formed in the twenty-first century that both documented changes in urban environments and aimed to inspire future action. In particular, bloggers became cultural agents of change as they started campaigns online and off, facilitated meaningful dialogue, and created a distinct folk group that was focused on saving New York City. Bloggers used their posts, photographs, and social media accounts to establish the boundaries of their folk group, perform for their intended audience, and malign mainstream institutions. These grassroots movements and vernacular media communities raise important questions about collective identity, community values, and neighborhood diversity—issues that are at the center of our field.

I have spent the last five years following, studying, and documenting these vernacular media communities across multiple platforms. While much has changed since 2012, I still continue to come back to the blogger and blog that captured my attention from the very start, and who is at the center of this paper—Jeremiah Moss and his *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* blog. To see New York City through Jeremiah's lens is to see a folk group that is committed to preserving the past and one who is longing for an intangible New York spirit that is riddled with contradiction—a masculine outsider spirit filled with rugged individualism, fringe culture, sexual freedom and artistic expression. A spirit that perhaps existed in popular culture, but may have never been a reality. Finally, I have corresponded with Jeremiah since 2012, and therefore, want to begin with a quote by him on why he writes,

I write the blog because I'm angry and despairing about what has happened to the city in the past dozen or so years, largely under Bloomberg. I want to preserve what I can, in words and pictures. I want to show what happened—the blog is, in a way, proof that the changes in the past decade were not "normal" or organic change, but massive and deliberate. I guess I want to be a witness.⁴

Understanding Jeremiah's Jeremiad

Jeremiah Moss has written just under 3,000 entries for his *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* blog since he started his blog in 2007 at age 36. Jeremiah Moss, which is the author's penname, created the blog to detail the effects of redevelopment, commercialization, and gentrification on local neighborhoods in New York City. Moss chose the biblical pseudonym Jeremiah because he "was the prophet of doom who nobody listened to until it was too late."⁵ A former freelance writer, Moss felt that by blogging anonymously he could express himself more freely and find an audience of readers for his "Book of Lamentations." His blog has become

wildly popular and is widely respected by New Yorkers. The *Village Voice* recognized Moss in 2012 as the blogger that New Yorkers most love.⁶ He has since been frequently interviewed by *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *New York Daily News*, and *Observer*. He is also planning on releasing a book entitled, *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul* next year. While Moss acknowledges his entries are nostalgic in tone, he thinks they are the most effective means of charting the process of extinction that he believes New York City is currently experiencing.

Jeremiah Moss is part of a growing contingent that believes both 9/11 and Mayor Michael Bloomberg changed New York City forever and not in a positive way. Moss characterizes pre-9/11 New York as “liberal, multicultural, and bereft of the right-wing’s version of Christian Family Values.” For Moss, New York was once the ultimate embodiment of the subaltern spirit—a place where the “artsy, leftie, Commie, and Queer could be embraced and understood.” Instead, Moss claims post-9/11 New York is now nothing more than a “vertical suburbia”—a place that Americans championed and fetishized beyond the point of recognition in the name of patriotism. Moss and his supporters perceive the resulting rise in tourism and the corporatization of the city by Bloomberg as a threat to their authentic urban existence.⁷

Moss and his inner blogging circle, dubbed the “East Village Mafia” by readers, have been among the most active bloggers in the city on the topic. Members openly tout their blogs as the authentic voice of the city and warn residents of the potential dangers in allowing themselves to be overpowered by the institutional forces around them. Inarguably, these anti-gentrification blogging communities have inspired groups across the city to take action and small, but important, victories have occurred. The bloggers and their followers have succeeded in creating imagined communities, ones that bond over fleeting moments of resistance.⁸ For example, in 2010, when a dispute occurred between local bar owners and residents over the loud noise emanating from certain East Village bars, residents took to the local blogs to spread the word about the noise issue and to coordinate a

neighborhood response. Moss, and local bloggers E.V. Grieve and Jill at *Blah Blog Blah*, inspired residents to band together and they were successful in their efforts. Jill writes, "I hope my blog is one of the places where neighbors can find each other and feel that sense of community that maybe they didn't think about too deeply, but realize they yearn for it, like I do."⁹

In 2015, Jeremiah Moss embarked upon his largest offline effort to date, #SaveNYC. The mission of the campaign is to be, "a grass-roots, crowd-sourced DIY movement to raise awareness and take action for protecting and preserving the diversity and uniqueness of the urban fabric in New York City."¹⁰ #SaveNYC builds upon the success of the blog by annotating New York's vanishing landscapes through photographs, videos, and testimonials submitted to the website by supporters. Visible storefront signs with the #SaveNYC logo and public rallies have continued to reinforce the urgency of his efforts. Jeremiah also regularly communicates with supporters via a #SaveNYC Facebook group. Unlike his blog, which is nostalgic in tone, the Facebook forum and website are meant to raise awareness, coordinate efforts, and inspire offline action and policy changes.

Yet, despite Jeremiah and the East Village Mafia's best efforts in fostering a sense of community both locally in the East Village and across the city, both online through his blog and offline through campaigns like the #SaveNYC one, the current larger war for the soul of the city that they believe they are engaged in is not so much a war as it is a battle. Groups have been battling for the soul of New York City for centuries and blogging is just a new method in which to help do so. It could be argued that the quest for cultural authenticity and legitimacy in an urban space is both cyclical and generational. Each generation is forced to write its own book of lamentations and mourn the loss of something they felt was "theirs" to lose.

Each generation experiences the city differently.¹¹ Each generation's response is personal for what they see is largely influenced by their personal memory of the city's past. Cities are sites where renewal and redevelopment continually occur for the individual, the plural and the built environment. Economic,

environmental, and ideological changes and forces affect a city's character, image, and identity. The city itself is a powerful cultural force, a producer that enables its inhabitants to both consume what it produces and construct new spaces within its boundaries. Moss and the East Village Mafia use their blogs as a way to construct such a space. Deborah Jensen summarized the sentiment well when she posted the following to Jeremiah Moss:

My childhood entertainment was just to walk around the city. My father taught me that there is something magical on every block. Heartbreaking as it can be to see changes and losses, there is a heartbeat and a soul that is pure New York. Whether the corner shop is a cookie store or a yoghurt [sic] store or a Starbucks, whether it's Koch or Bloomberg, our city is always the center of the Universe.¹²

Ask someone to describe and write about the soul of New York City and you will receive diverse portrayals in response. For some, New York City represents classical beauty and romanticism, existing as it does in the opening to Woody Allen's 1979 classic *Manhattan*, in black and white and set to Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." For others, New York represents the outsider spirit, rugged individualism, fringe culture, sexual freedom, and artistic expression, as it does in vivid color in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* or Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side." And yet for others, it represents unabashed consumerism, the very best in fashion, food, and theater, as it does in Candace Bushnell's *Sex in the City* through Carrie's Manolo Blahniks or Magnolia Bakery cupcakes. Jeremiah's folk group believes grit is a necessary part of New York's soul and is most concerned with the transition to a Disneyfied and commercial city.

Jeremiah is not alone. Over the course of the last decade, scholars, major media outlets and cultural critics, have discussed and debated the social and cultural consequences of an institutional culture of security, shopping, and tourism that has

defined New York City since 9/11.¹³ As a result, the story of post-9/11 New York is now more complex than ever. The narrative is multi-layered and consists of constant contestation over the economic necessity of selling New York City to outsiders versus preserving urban spaces deemed authentic by an unquantifiable portion of its current inhabitants. At a recent “Cities for Tomorrow” conference, Cynthia Nixon asked participants to consider who the sanitization efforts were even for, asserting that there has been a shift from a native culture to consumer culture in New York City in the twenty-first century. Bloggers effectively use their posts to visually chart and document that transition—a physical and cultural transformation unrivaled since Robert Moses.¹⁴

Blogging then becomes a fundamental tool—one that promotes a collective narrative of social and cultural resistance. The reshaping and recapitulation of historical memory online becomes an act of subversion in and of itself as groups work together to ensure that the city’s geography of memory does not get radically remapped in the face of dramatic change and institutional sanitization. Blogging communities, like other vernacular media communities in the past, believe they are in some small way counteracting the pervasiveness of institutional change and slowing down a quantifiable extinction process.

Earlier literary communities expressed similar sentiments—they simply employed a different medium to convey their message. In the twenty-first century, Moss found himself unable to find a similar literary outlet to successfully publish his generation’s lamentations prior to the creation of his blog. This is often the case when individuals or groups feel they are excluded from participating in traditional avenues for public discourse. Peripheral groups create blogs so that they have a tactical outlet to engage in social and cultural commentary. Moss believes that the virtual community he has created is no different than other non-virtual urban communities. Moss said in an interview, “When I first came to New York, I sought a literary community. I couldn’t find it. The blogosphere may be the closest I’ve come to it.”¹⁵

For Moss, the Internet was a democratizing and empowering tool that allowed him to create a new folk group and codify new traditions. Through blogging, Moss has become a “public intellectual” that is able to both produce and circulate new cultural practices.¹⁶ One example of this process can be seen in the way Moss used his blog to introduce the term “Yunnie” into the vernacular.¹⁷ A Yunnie describes the young Generation Y urban narcissists that he feels have overtaken his home. Moss believes that a Yunnie does not have the ability to fully experience the city. Instead, they are digital zombies that fail to engage the world around them and be productive members of their local community. The cultural practice of calling someone a Yunnie became tradition when Moss’s followers engaged the material as “prosumers.” This means that the followers of *Jeremiah’s Vanishing New York* not only consumed what Moss wrote, but they produced new content by commenting on the blog, by sharing the original post with others, by writing posts on their own blogs or social media platforms that reflected his original ideas, or by creating new print materials that validated his claims.

An example of the prosumer influence is the publication of an article in *The Williamsburg Observer* entitled, “Williamsburg: Spiritual Home of the ‘Yunnie’.”¹⁸ The article both promotes the cultural practice Moss initiated and legitimizes his buzzword to a new audience. Urban bloggers rely heavily on prosumers to validate or challenge their claims and fellow bloggers are often the most vocal prosumers themselves. They reinforce each other’s claims and collectively determine the boundaries of their folk group. Often, members of the East Village Mafia comment on each other’s blogs and repost material.¹⁹

If one accepts the East Village Mafia as both a legitimate vernacular media community and a folk group, then it is important to understand how the members of the group establish boundaries and determine membership. Often, members of a particular vernacular media community will attempt to control who is allowed to speak for their imagined community and whose rhetoric they will accept as authentic. The group also establishes what qualities one must possess in order to be

accepted as a bona fide blogger and a member of their community. The East Village Mafia uses their blogs as tools to both justify their status within the neighborhood and the city's hierarchy. The group wants their audience to feel they are competent performers that are able to tell the story of their neighborhood through the lens of authenticity.

Moss and the members of the East Village Mafia employ this rhetoric of authenticity to frame public discourse and foster change.²⁰ This rhetoric is carefully chosen and performed. Therefore, blogs are more than just online diaries or web logs. Blog posts are performances in that they are staged for a certain audience. The blogger begins to know what the audience most wants to see performed and reacts accordingly. The result is bloggers that are deliberately crafting their blogs in a way that encourages readership and commentary, elicits a desired emotional response, and inspires confidence in its veracity.²¹ The fact that Moss's supporters have nicknamed his cohort the East Village Mafia is significant. The ascription of the mafia moniker to this particular vernacular media community by those outside the group implies that the bloggers indeed have real power in an urban space. Moss himself is not so sure, saying that his fellow bloggers may in the end be nothing more than "a bunch of middle-aged people sitting around critiquing the uncontrollable."²² However, their performances are very powerful. Their posts prove that the Internet has become the prime incubator of subversive thought and action in an urban space in the twenty-first century.

It should be noted that the group never mandated that one must be a native New Yorker to necessarily speak for the community, but they do require that one use the correct tools, say the appropriate things, and create the illusion of being an authentic New Yorker. A recurring theme in posts on *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* is the relationship between nativism and urban authority.

Moss himself moved to New York City in 1992 from Massachusetts and currently lives in the East Village. Blogs like *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* serve as evidence that non-natives use blogs as one such tool to justify their existence in an

urban space that is rapidly changing around them. Moss longs to be accepted as one of E.B. White's settlers and not deemed an outsider by other New Yorkers.²³ He wants his audience to feel he is a competent performer, able to tell the story of his neighborhood through the lens of authenticity. Some of Moss's fellow bloggers in the East Village Mafia are not native New Yorkers either. Both Moss and E.V. Grieve moved to the city in the '90s at a time when gentrification had already started to take root in the East Village and admit that they likely benefitted in some way as a result. More than likely, someone in their neighborhood resented them moving in just as much as Moss and his current followers resent the Yunnies.

The battle between nativism and cultural authority is perhaps nothing new then and is also cyclical and generational in nature. Sharon Zukin feels that the pre-Internet "authentic" voices of New York that have historically engaged in this battle included: historic preservationists, political activists, socially conscious residents, and alternative media or lifestyle journalists. Now Zukin argues it is the urban blogger's turn to shape one's contemporary urban experience, dictate styles and cover local developments, and provide a forum for public discourse in what Zukin and other scholars believe are "troubling times."²⁴ Ultimately then, blogs do have the power to promote an imagined sense of "authenticity" and transcend geographical limitations, but how does one prove that they are any more powerful than older methods?

Blogs can be used as excellent case studies in the complex contest for authenticity and authority occurring in urban spaces. While it is impossible to quantify the influence of their existence, blogging communities can be studied as non-static folk groups. By inspiring pro-sumption, bloggers ensure fluidity in the digital realm that allows for the meaning of the vernacular web content they produce to change over time. All members of the folk group should be studied to better understand why prosumers visit certain blogs and to what extent they reuse the information they find on particular blogging sites. Do readers consume the content on blogs to supplement or replace information they have received

elsewhere or do they engage the material to produce their own future content? Are blogs and other social media platforms evidence that we have officially transitioned from being a society preoccupied with consuming the news to one now producing it in a vernacular tone?

Jeremiah's Vanishing New York tests Robert Howard's concept of "Electronic Hybridity" (2008). The East Village Mafia blogs are a hybrid of vernacular and institutional forms, "folk" and mass media, and private and commercial interests. Moss would like his readers to believe that he has very little in common with the mainstream New York media. His posts indicate to readers that mass media outlets are institutions in and of themselves and that they only assist in advancing Bloomberg's institutional message. In many ways, Moss uses his blog to further set himself apart from institutional media platforms. However, it could be argued that the news content produced by bloggers like Moss does complement the content produced for media institutions in a multitude of ways. The two often rely on each other more than they are in competition with one another.

Moss performs his role as an independent news gatherer and yet one must acknowledge that his blog would not exist without conventional methods of journalism. "Pure vernacularity" can never exist in the digital realm, for digital media forms need an institutional point of reference to distinguish them and borrow from to both support and contest the institutional.²⁵ *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* would not survive if Moss did not have an identifiable institutional force in which to rally against. His blog can be distinct from the institution, but never entirely separate. In the case of the East Village Mafia, they are rallying against Mayor Bloomberg, corporate America, and real estate developers.²⁶ By examining a dispute between the East Village Mafia and the *New York Times*, one can better understand how bloggers establish the boundaries of their folk group, perform for their audience, and use media institutions as an institutional point of reference to distinguish themselves.

The East Village Mafia versus the *New York Times*

In 2010, the *New York Times* announced they would be partnering with New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute to create a new blog entitled *The Local East Village*. The collaboration officially began in September of 2010 and the blog would be dedicated to covering developments in the East Village. The initiative limited their coverage area to 14th Street south to Houston Street and Broadway east to the East River. The *New York Times* viewed the blog as part of a new larger experiment in hyperlocal journalism.

The project's planners hoped the endeavor would not only foster a relationship between the newspaper and NYU, but with the local neighborhood as well. Writers for *The Local East Village* expected they would be able to successfully gather news in the same manner that the East Village Mafia bloggers did. By using student journalists, the *New York Times* would be able to take advantage of the now blurred line between production and consumption of news content. They could create prosumers by inspiring local residents to produce content for their site while hopefully avoiding the "snarkiness" and "glibness" that often characterized other blogs about the neighborhood.²⁷

The Local East Village wanted to have locals produce only fifty percent of the user content for the blog. The initiative implied that blogs such as *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* could never be entirely successful because they could not control user content. The East Village bloggers had no way of controlling how the prosumer would ultimately react to their posts and what they would or would not do with the text. *The Local East Village* wanted to hopefully control both the production and consumption aspect of future news content instead. They allowed local residents to both pitch news stories and/or cover news stories, but only if the editors felt the news was worth covering. It appeared that the *New York Times* wanted to have total editorial control over all content produced for the blog. By ensuring quality over quantity, *The Local East Village* assumed they would be able to quickly outshine other popular local blogs.²⁸ Skeptics believed this was *New York*

Times' way of ensuring that the institutional voice would always dominate the vernacular one. To critics, the whole project was a sham from the start. The institution was operating under the guise of a vernacular form.

Immediately following the announcement of the new partnership, local bloggers started to challenge the legitimacy of the project. This had to be expected. A hostile relationship between Village residents and New York University was nothing new. Greenwich Village is known for its social and political activist roots and residents have resented the university's construction projects and cultural dominance in the neighborhood for decades. The East Village Mafia frequently wrote posts that held NYU accountable for the continual gentrification of their home. Did the initiative truly believe they could coexist with the local blogging community or did they think they could replace them?²⁹

Jay Rosen, a professor at the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at NYU, was quick to defend the reasons NYU entered into the partnership with the *New York Times*. Rosen stressed that NYU students and local residents would be the producers and that the *New York Times* would merely be the publisher. Rosen felt that any editorial supervision and control the *New York Times* had would be justified. Supporters of the project, like Rosen, pointed to how successful the *New York Times* was with other similar collaborative endeavors in the past. One project was a partnership with the City University of New York to cover Fort Greene and Clinton Hill for the *Brooklyn Local* and the other was a blog dedicated to covering neighborhoods in New Jersey. In addition, NYU also had a track record of journalistic excellence through their "Reporting New York" program that featured a class on how to conduct hyperlocal journalism.

Rosen was well aware of the mounting criticism. His response to the East Village bloggers attempted to justify NYU's ability to be an authentic voice for the neighborhood.

NYU is a citizen of the East Village, a powerful institution (and huge land owner) within the frame. Our students are part of the community; they live there, or at least a lot of them do. Because we're located there, we can't really separate ourselves from our subject. Look, not everyone is going to be thrilled that NYU is doing this with the *New York Times*. We'll have to take those problems on, not as classroom abstractions but as civil transactions with the people who live and work here. You know what? It's going to be messy and hard, which is to say *real*.³⁰

Local bloggers strongly disagreed with Rosen. They viewed NYU students as transients that were ruining the social fabric of their neighborhood. E.V. Grieve felt that to have two massive institutions, NYU and the *New York Times*, use student Yunnies to cover the same neighborhood that they were destroying was a real slap in the face.

Other venerable New York media institutions were quick to defend the blogging community. *New York Magazine* chastised the work of the students when they cited one of the recent *Local East Village* posts about a new yoga class. Chris Rovzar rhetorically asked residents, "Is this now your life?" The implication was that now that the *New York Times* and NYU were covering the neighborhood that anything that was left of the East Village's edgy character was now truly gone. One reader, with the username Esquared, played along and commented that the new blog would "cater to the nyu kids, the transplants, and the rich. Their stories will be covering on things aren't be of interest to the real local ev'ers."³¹ Who was allowed to be a part of the bloggers' folk community, and who was qualified to speak on their behalf?

Local bloggers, such as Jeremiah Moss, E.V. Grieve, and Choire Sicha quickly took to their blogs to criticize the students for covering a neighborhood they never actually took the time to get to know. The posts generalized NYU students as

Yunnies that avoided interacting with the ordinary people that make up the East Village neighborhood they so badly wanted to cover. Local journalists were quick to support the blogging community and let others know about their “chilly” response to the project. From the beginning, other journalists gave the blogging community a lot of power by claiming their response would be a strong indication of what the collaboration’s future might be.³²

E.V. Grieve and Jeremiah Moss continued to frame the discourse by frequently posting about the project. E.V. Grieve, in his post “After helping ruin the East Village, NYU turns its attention to covering it,” summarizes the official *New York Times*’ announcement about the collaboration, Rosen’s defense of the initiative, and local bloggers’ reactions for his readers. However, what was most interesting about E.V. Grieve’s post was the responses. Sixty-six readers responded to the post and both E.V. Grieve and Jeremiah Moss speak candidly throughout the comments section about their feelings. The common theme is that most responders categorize NYU and the *New York Times* as “arrogant, narcissistic, and desperate institutions.” The bloggers use the comments section to commend each other for being the “authentic” commentators on life in the East Village and to further legitimize their claims.

Supporting Robert Glenn Howard’s claim that vernacular communities need an institutional point of reference to set themselves apart from (194), E.V. Grieve went so far as to justify the authenticity and vernacularity of his blog by claiming that he and his fellow bloggers are not writing for monetary reasons or treating the blog like a business the way the *New York Times* and NYU are. E. V. Grieve compares himself and Moss to the mom and pop grocers of the community and warns residents that by accepting this partnership in the neighborhood they are allowing a Whole Foods to move in next door. The resulting tension in the comments section is palpable as readers’ debate who is the authentic voice of the East Village and who is qualified to cover their neighborhood. While many support the bloggers’ viewpoint, one anonymous reader criticizes both the collaboration and the local blogosphere

and claims neither are purely authentic. The commenter feels that blogs like *E.V. Grieve* and *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* are "endless streams of bitching about other white people that dress differently from you and dared to move here from Ohio 10 years after you did. These blogs, let's face it, are the Fox News of anti-gentrification."³³

The debate between the alleged institutional voice on one side and the vernacular voice on the other raises some very important questions. Did the East Village Mafia wage war with the *New York Times* for moral reasons or simply because they did not want competition? Are those writing many of these blogs newly arrived white people themselves? Are these bloggers primarily writing urban blogs for other anti-corporate white people? Moss and E.V. Grieve claim they are speaking for the neighborhood in ways that the students never could because the students are transients that did not take the time to get to know the real people living in the neighborhood. However, one must acknowledge that the bloggers were perhaps writing from a position of power as well. To what extent are bloggers taking into account residents in the East Village of all socio-economic levels? What percentage of residents living in Campos Plaza on Avenue C even have access to digital technology or are aware of these blogs? The East Village Mafia may be more easily forgiven by locals than the *New York Times* simply because they are much more successful at employing the correct tools that enable them to be the most competent performers within the neighborhood.

This debate also reinforces Howard's argument that "pure vernacularity" cannot exist in the blogosphere (203). Could an institution as powerful as the *New York Times* ever successfully inspire vernacular participation? The *New York Times* may concede that the East Village blogging community is successful at prompting community participation, but they would argue that it is not meaningful participation. The *New York Times* believed they had the journalistic skills to prompt meaningful vernacular participation. Yet community members were hesitant to submit content to *The Local East Village*. Some believe it was the *New York Times'*

involvement that hindered community participation because local community members felt they had to write on the level of *New York Times* to participate. The partnership could not understand why community members were more inclined to participate in discourse on popular blogging sites and add content to social media sites rather than write for a hyperlocal journalism site.³⁴

In June 2012, the *New York Times* made the decision to officially end its partnerships in hyperlocal journalism with both NYU and the City University of New York (CUNY) by the end of 2012. In less than two years, the *New York Times* was ready to turn publishing responsibility back over to the individual schools and withdrew from their partnership. The CUNY/*New York Times* collaboration on Brooklyn had already been turned over to CUNY and the site covering New Jersey did not even last a full year. Representatives from the *New York Times* said that their decision to abandon the project had nothing to do with the popularity of the sites. Rather it was a decision by the newspaper to invest their time and resources into other projects. The *New York Times* also backpedaled and reported that they always intended the initiative to be an experiment and that there was never a promise to anyone that it would continue long-term.³⁵

Even though the *New York Times* officially announced their departure from the East Village scene, local bloggers continued to discuss the demise of the partnership and deliberate the possible reasons for its failure. Jeremiah Moss and E.V. Grieve did not feel that the *New York Times* was being wholly honest when claiming that hyperlocal journalism was no longer an avenue they wished to pursue. Dave Gustav, co-founder of the *Bowery Boogie*, believes that it failed because it lacked authenticity and legitimacy. The fact that most East Village bloggers did not approve of the partnership meant that it could never survive. The power of their community's backlash hastened its demise. Some local bloggers refused from the beginning to even read *The Local East Village* or even take it seriously.

While years of distrusting NYU in the Village did not help matters, it was in the end the *New York Times* that the blogging community was most suspicious of.

Local bloggers said that they would still be willing to take on journalism students as interns if they expressed a genuine interest in getting to know the "authentic bloggers" in the community. NYU and its students insulted the local blogging community by entering into a partnership with the *New York Times* instead of coming to them first. During the course of the partnership, bloggers found that students only contacted them when they needed something or wanted a link for their story to appear on their more popular blogging sites. Local bloggers just wanted the students to take the time to learn their craft and get to know the neighborhood better.³⁶

In the end, NYU did not shutter the blog completely. In 2011, *The Local East Village* hired a new editor, Daniel Maurer. Maurer previously created a popular restaurant blog for *New York Magazine* entitled *Grub Street New York*. Maurer was chosen as the replacement editor for the project because of his relationship to the neighborhood, he is a local that lives on East 12th Street, and his ability to inspire meaningful neighborhood participation in digital spaces. Maurer, a believer in hyperlocal and collaborative journalism, says that blogs are no longer "curiosities" but rather meaningful sources of information.³⁷ Today, the blog lives on as Bedford + Bowery and is part of a collaboration between NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute and *New York Magazine*.

"Disney on the Hudson"

While Jeremiah sparred with the *New York Times* over the *Local East Village*, he has also used the *New York Times* to gain additional exposure for his blog since he began writing. He authored "New Yorkers Need to Take Back Their City" in April 2014 and "A Cranky Blogger Crusades to Preserve the Ordinary" in April 2015. However, it was an op-ed published in August of 2012 entitled, "Disney on the Hudson" that first thrust Moss in to the spotlight and put him at the center of the debate about the High Line. "Disney on the Hudson" was a highly controversial opinion piece about the effects of the High Line on the West Chelsea neighborhood.

According to Moss, he wrote “Disney on the Hudson” for the *New York Times* because he wanted to write about what everyone else was currently talking about, but no one else was brave enough to write about themselves. The High Line, a nearly 1.5-mile-long elevated railbed, was saved when the Friends of the High Line formed in 1999. Opening in sections, the famous urban park now runs from Gansevoort Street to West 34th Street.³⁸

Moss expresses in the article his disappointment that the High Line became a hotbed for tourist activity and a catalyst for further gentrification in Manhattan. He feels that the park is a sanitized version of its former self and now has more in common with city museums than an urban park. Moss asserts that the High Line is the ultimate symbol of Bloomberg’s transformation and notes that 3.7 million people visited the High Line in 2011 and that less than half of them were New Yorkers. He warns New Yorkers that this brings New York City one step closer to becoming “Disney World on the Hudson” and that the High Line is nothing more than an excuse to corporatize the West Side.

Assuming office in 2002, one of Mayor Bloomberg’s major initiatives during his tenure was the creation of NYC & Company, the city’s promotional arm tasked with rebranding the city and stimulating the economy after 9/11. Created in 2006, NYC & Company is a 501(c)(6) that staffs over 150 employees and sells New York City domestically and internationally. Mayor Bloomberg set a goal of attracting 50 million visitors to New York City by 2016. That goal was broken five years early in 2011 when a British couple was officially proclaimed the 50 millionth visitors that year. Moss and his supporters criticized the mayor for his constant obsession with marketing New York City as a luxury product to be consumed by the entire world. Residents felt that Bloomberg had spent more time engaging potential visitors than addressing the needs of his constituents. Tourists now spend an estimated \$47 billion a year to experience the luxury product that NYC & Company effectively sold.³⁹ Moss claims the High Line is one of the ultimate symbols of the CEO Mayor’s marketing efforts.⁴⁰

"Disney on the Hudson" struck a nerve indeed, and New Yorkers were not shy about their opinions on the piece. The op-ed gave Moss a significant amount of fame and attention. The *New York Times* subsequently published four letters to the editor that responded to the original piece. All were critical of Moss. The letters included one from the founders of the Friends of the High Line, Joshua David and Robert Hammond. David and Hammond wrote, "To claim, as Mr. Moss does, that the High Line was never about the neighborhood is not true and an unfortunate simplification of our past and current reality." Karen Bassler agrees, "Cities evolve. They change and grow and shrink, and the economics and demographics of neighborhoods shift. This is healthy and normal. Freezing a city's parts into amber is not." Ande Lund adds, "Sharing the treasures of the city with visitors is an undeniable fact of life for those of us who call Manhattan home. Like so many other 'must sees' in the city, New Yorkers should view the High Line with pride, eager to show it off, not require a local driver's license to enter."⁴¹ The *New York Times* was even criticized for not using Jeremiah Moss's real name on the piece and felt the article did not live up to their typical standards of journalism.

Moss immediately reposted the article on his *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* blog.⁴² The article drove supporters to his blog and prompted over 100 comments to the post. Unlike the letters to the editor, about 80 percent of the comments on his blog were positive. It was expected that most of his followers would support his point of view. However, it is some of the negative comments from his followers and the ensuing debate that are worth analyzing. Big One wrote the following to Moss,

The term 'Jaded New Yorker' arises, I think, when those who once came with bright eyes simply become Old New Yorkers. Tired and unable to appreciate the moments of change that they are not only living BUT actually helped push to create themselves.

An anonymous commenter complained, "Mr. Moss brings nothing to the

table. Only complaints. He does not give insight of how the current situation can be improved, or what could and should be done for future redevelopment within the City." Another anonymous writer claimed,

The usual outpouring of concentrated bitterness at "Yunnies", tourists, "hipsters" or whatever - basically anyone who seems to be having a better time than you, as though NYC was devoid of assholes in 1977, or wherever we'd set our CBGB Time Machine to, if we could. These are your flock Jeremiah: people who self-identify as "nativists" with pride. People who "don't want to give the nytimes any traffic" (Yes, bold protectors of all that is good - the world would surely be much better without the NYTimes!) People who tell you that you're "brilliant" for pointing out that Sephora is a larger company than Stella McCartney. It's nice to be appreciated, I get it. What's shocking to me is how parochial and sclerotic one's view of the city must be, to find this upsetting enough to rant about it on the internet for years on end. Is the passage of time really making all of your lives that miserable?

Moss reacted to the debate by posting a subsequent entry on his blog entitled, "High Line Op-Ed Response."⁴³ Moss reassured his readers that despite the occasional backlash, the support for his piece had been overwhelmingly positive and that it proved that New Yorkers are indeed afraid to speak out against Bloomberg and his "sacred" High Line. He believed the founders' response in the *New York Times* was simply proof of their insecurities about the High Line being an "authentic" component of the city. Moss summarized the criticism to his piece and responded to each one of his detractors. He wrote that he was proud of the fact that he is a "complainer" and believed that his complaining does help to actually solve problems. He admitted he himself had benefitted from gentrification in New York

and that he was fully aware of the natural gentrification process. However, he argued that Bloomberg had ushered in hyper-gentrification and that we must recognize that this wave of gentrification is a completely different beast. No, Moss wrote, he does not like the '70s, is not particularly fond of crime, and actually has nothing against the tourists. Rather, he was trying to send a message to Bloomberg that it is time to take care of the residents first, tourists second. Once again, most agreed with Moss and claimed that those who disagreed in other forums were either not smart enough to understand or Yunnies themselves. His critics, on the other hand, continued to allege that his jeremiad was both hypocritical and elitist.

"Disney on the Hudson" was the end result of several earlier posts about the High Line that Moss also garnered a significant amount of attention for. Three months earlier, in May of 2012, a West Chelsea resident started plastering signs on telephone poles near the High Line that warned tourists that the High Line was not Times Square, asked visitors to be respectful of local residents, and pleaded with outsiders that if they loved New York they would leave it alone. Moss supported the sentiments of the West Chelsea poster and posted an entry with pictures of the neighborhood signs on his blog. The incident elicited ninety-eight comments, but again not all of the respondents agreed with the original poster and Moss. Many felt the posters did not accurately reflect the attitudes of the neighborhood as a whole.⁴⁴

Moss followed his original post with another controversial one entitled, "A Zillion Tourists." This entry focused on how the mainstream media picked up the story. CBS Channel 2, NY1, the *New York Post*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Wall Street Journal* all ran his story. The article in the *New York Post* saw the fact that half of the users of the High Line are New Yorkers as a positive and not negative thing. One poster said "Dear Chelsea, Nice problem to have. Wanna trade? Sincerely, Bedford-Stuyvesant."⁴⁵ Another believed the poster of the signs couldn't possibly be a New Yorker themselves. They said that real New Yorkers would just shrug it off. If one only read the mainstream media coverage of this incident, one would be led to believe that New Yorkers felt that the attitudes of the anti-gentrification bloggers

might be more of the problem than the tourists.

Both vernacular and mainstream media institutions continued to pick up on the tension between tourists and natives in the Bloomberg era. Numerous other vernacular media communities also catered to the “no tourist” discourse. Even the *New Yorker* was not above playing along. In 2011, Bruce McCall produced a titillating cover for the magazine after meeting a colleague for lunch in Times Square. On McCall’s cover, there are two paths on the sidewalk. One section of the sidewalk is for New Yorkers and the other is for tourists. The tourists are armed with cameras, overweight, and lacking a sense of fashion. They are neatly corralled into designated zones, and both the adjoining sidewalk and busses have signs that say “no tourists.” The advertisements in Times Square read: “You’ll regret it,” “Eat Fat,” “Spend, Spend, Spend,” and “Rip-Off City.” The cover, produced by a venerable media institution, echoed sentiments that had been previously limited to vernacular media discourse.⁴⁶

Despite garnering sustained criticism, Moss was able to successfully use the debate over the High Line as an opportunity to finally express, in a very public way, his fear that the rise in tourism, with the High Line as its ultimate symbol, was just one more sign that Bloomberg’s vision for New York had been successful. To Moss, the influx of newcomers meant that more and more people who did not like New York City previously are now attracted to his home because it reminds them increasingly more of where they came from. The potential displacement of the working and middle classes and an increase in the arrival of Yunnies frightened Moss, the other members of the East Village Mafia, and their supporters. They claimed that the long-term consequences of this governing style, if allowed to go unchecked, would be large-scale neglect of infrastructure, a return to a Robert Moses style vision of urban growth, and a conversion of all citizens to consumers. If Manhattan is truly in the midst of a cultural crisis, and New Yorkers are currently at war, then independent retailers, the middle class, the elderly, and minorities would be the ones to ultimately suffer the most major casualties. Moss used his blog to

effectively warn readers that we too may easily be seduced by Bloomberg's vision if we have even the slightest obsession with upward mobility.

Jeremiah's early battles with the *New York Times*, Mayor Bloomberg, and the High Line are two case studies of many that raise important questions about collective identity, community values, and neighborhood diversity. *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* is both an anti-gentrification vernacular media community and a DIY movement, a folk group that documents responses to displacement and visually records the material culture of vanishing cultures and sub-communities in New York City. These folk communities successfully inspire the pro-sumption of digital content, the oral transmission of urban narratives, and the creation of new vernacular terms and expressions. Jeremiah Moss could be considered a public folklorist—his blogging community reinforcing that not only are folklore and urbanism not mutually exclusive, but also folklore and the blogosphere.

Folklorists have used New York City as their case study for decades. Benjamin Botkin's *Sidewalks of America* (1954) and *New York City Folklore* (1956), along with his contributions to *New York Folklore Quarterly*, were concerned with what urban cultural forms were emerging, and likewise what was unique, about the urban experience. Influential academic folklorist, Richard Dorson, would himself ask in 1970, "Is There a Folk in the City?" Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's 1983 piece, "The Future of Folklore Studies in America: The Urban Frontier," uses New York City as her example when arguing that "The city is thus not a museum of folk traditions brought to it from elsewhere, but a crucible in which expressive behavior is forged."⁴⁷ Like Botkin, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett did not view the modern urban experience as a threat to folklore studies. In 2001, the 35th Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival focused on New York City, its organizers contending that, "daily life in New York would be impossible without a body of shared urban traditions, of collective community knowledge, customs, historical memories, and cultural understanding."⁴⁸ The program looked at how one's ethnicity and religion, occupation and neighborhood affiliation, affected one's understanding of the city

and how one could belong to an infinite number of communities and continuously reinvent one's self if desired. Today, Steve Zeitlin and City Lore continue to demonstrate the importance of working at the intersection of folklore and urban spaces.

In the twenty-first century, *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* and the East Village blogging circle also use New York City as a case study to reinforce that the city both has unique cultural practices and is a crucible in which expressive behavior is forged. Bloggers are a new generation of folklorists, but in this case, their community is not bounded by ethnicity, religion, or occupation, but by those who collectively long for a different era in New York's history or a different vision for its soul. Bloggers use a variety of methods and tools to reframe historical memory as a means to both glorify and promote New York's past and respond to changes occurring in the city that members feel are now currently beyond their control. It could be argued that members of these sub-communities are actually better able to successfully forge a collective subversive identity and feel more connected to each other and the current space they inhabit now than in the past. Gentrification has hastened the loss of specific cultural practices, and in New York City, it is happening at an unprecedented rate. An effect of hyper-gentrification is that it facilitates the production of subversive space and sub-communities of resistance, such as *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York*. As folklorists, we must record these cultural shifts and document the social and cultural effects of redevelopment and change at both an individual and collective level.

To walk in a post-9/11 New York is to inarguably experience a safer trajectory. Murder rates are the lowest they have been in the city since the NYPD started to keep track in 1963. However, does this safety come with a social and cultural price tag that cannot be justified? Bloggers employ the rhetoric of cynicism and fear to both answer this question and attempt to convert readers to their side. But the larger questions remain: Why do the members of the East Village Mafia and their supporters then stay? If the city is dead and creativity truly stifled, then what

can they even hope to accomplish with their rhetoric? Why do they truly write?

One commenter on *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York*, Alexander, says to Jeremiah, that he writes the blog not because he misses old New York, but perhaps because he misses his youth instead. He posts,

Newflash: YOU fools also "changed" New York. And the generation before YOU "changed" New York. New York has always been about constant change! Compare the New York City of the early 1900s to the dumpy New York City of the 70s. Trust me, the earlier generation of civilized New Yorkers probably looked at the filthy city you cretins ruined and took over during the crack era with disgust too. You don't miss the old New York, you miss your youth.⁴⁹

Mayor Bloomberg said that New York is "a destination for anyone with a dream." He said that anyone can be a New Yorker if they allow themselves to be captivated by the spirit of the city. Moss, on the other hand, believes "A New Yorker is someone who longs for New York." An anonymous poster on *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* attempts to explain to Moss what they believe a true New Yorker to be.

To me, a New Yorker is someone who appreciates the city in large part because of its diversity. Who has a sense that "we are all in this together". Who acts accordingly in his/her daily life, i.e. being considerate when out and about, being sure to avoid actions which will impact someone else's day negatively. Who gives back to his/her community. Who knows and interacts with other New Yorkers from diverse socioeconomic groups, ages, sexual orientations, backgrounds, interests.⁵⁰

Do Moss and his fellow bloggers embody the true New York spirit best? After Moss won the *Village Voice's* annual competition for "Blogger we Love," he announced it by posting a clip of Sally Field's 1984 "you like me" Oscar acceptance speech. Moss was overcome with emotion and pleased that other New Yorker's liked him enough to bestow this honor upon him. To read Moss's posts is to believe that he writes his blog because he genuinely longs for something that is no longer there. And yet, Moss above all is also looking for acceptance. He, like others, uses blogging as a tool to establish an identity in an urban space they believe they can no longer control. Each generation of New Yorkers will have their own Jeremiah, and in many ways Moss is a fascinating character to have as ours.

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