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Underdisciplinarity: Where are the humanities in tourism education?



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ABSTRACT

It is increasingly commonplace to hear critiques of the contemporary tourism curriculum as overly vocational and managerialist. Such critiques typically characterize tourism studies as a bisected field – one part business-oriented and one part social science-oriented – and argue that the latter element is underrepresented in educational practice. Rarely considered, however, is the role the humanities could play in preparing tomorrow's tourism leaders. This conceptual paper explores the current shape of the tourism higher education curriculum, contextualized amid the rising reality of the “neoliberal university,” and then makes a case for the inclusion of philosophy and the arts in tourism education.

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1. Introduction

When I was just beginning my university education, in line with the tendency to haste that is the typical folly of youth, I had it in my head that I needed to finish my degree as quickly as possible, so I set out to leverage some of my accomplishments in my high school literature courses by signing up for a series of standardized tests that would earn me higher placement in university coursework. In my hurry to fill in any gaps in my education before the testing began, I broke out my American literature anthology, one of that series of three-inch-thick tomes with tissue-thin leaves published by Norton, which exist to provide students with exposure to samples of all that is considered valuable in the history of a given body of national literature. I was mindlessly consuming the short stories, novel excerpts, and poems that filled the book's pages, with little but test preparation in mind, when I encountered a work that stopped me in my tracks. It was a short story by Anzia Yezierska about the lives of immigrants in early twentieth-century New York City.

The story was called “The Lost Beautifulness,” and it was the tale of a European Jewish immigrant who had recently settled in America. The story's protagonist, Hannah Hayyeh, lives in a poorly maintained tenement building with her husband, while her son, the apple of Hannah's eye, is away serving in Europe in World War I. Hannah has begged her landlord to paint her kitchen, which is dark and dingy, so that she can feel proud of her home when her son returns from his service, but her landlord refuses to invest in the apartment, given that doing so is not necessary to keep it rented. With great personal effort, and over the protestations of her husband, Hannah works as a laundry maid to save up the money to purchase white paint, and she is finally able to spruce up her kitchen. Beaming with pride, she brings all her neighbors to look at her home improvement project, and they marvel at the beautiful space she has created for her family. When she

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shows her landlord the transformation, however, she receives a notice a few days later stating that the rent is being raised. When she approaches her landlord to discuss the matter, he tells her quite simply that the apartment is worth more since she has improved it. If she is unwilling to pay, then he can find a new renter to pay the new price. Incensed but undeterred, Hannah cuts meat and milk from her diet in order to afford the rent hike and carries on until yet another notice of rent increase is delivered. Unable to make any further cuts in the family budget, Hannah and her husband are forced to leave their apartment. On her last night in her home, overwhelmed with frustration, Hannah destroys her kitchen with an axe, rendering the beauty she has created useless to her callous landlord. Upon awakening to the scene of her destruction, however, she feels only a deep sense of tragedy at the “lost beautifulness” that lies before her.

I was enraged when I read this piece. How could a landlord fail to maintain his own property and then claim ownership over someone else’s investments of money and labor to improve it, using these efforts to leverage extra rent payments out of tenants who were already teetering on the edge of desperate poverty? How could a person like Hannah Hayyeh be expected to experience any sense of dignity in life with so little control over her very own living space and so little power to defend her family’s welfare against the greed of a better-off stranger? What other indignities, lying well beyond the boundaries of my middle-class American teenage imagination, did those living in impoverished and disempowering conditions have to face in the ordinary course of their days? Although many of the details escaped me with the passage of time, and I had to do some searching even to locate the piece when I was working on this manuscript, in seventeen years, I never forgot the essence of Yeziarska’s story. It made injustice concrete for me in a way that no abstract analytical treatise on rights and responsibilities and entitlements ever could.

Just this past year, I happened to attend the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, held in New York City. There, I was lucky to catch a presentation by [Sampson \(2012\)](#) on the Lower East Side’s Tenement Museum and its complex political history. According to Sampson’s exposition, the museum, located in an old apartment building in an historically Jewish immigrant neighborhood (perhaps even the same neighborhood once inhabited by Yeziarska’s family in her own immigrant days!) and professing a mission to educate contemporary New Yorkers and tourists about the challenges of immigrant life in America in the early 1900s, found itself desiring additional space in 2002. The preference of the museum operators was to expand into the complex’s identical “sister building” next door. The problem, however, was that the sister building was an active apartment complex, housing mostly recent immigrant families from China’s Fujian Province. The museum operators requested that the city use its power of eminent domain to take ownership of the sister building and force its tenants to relocate; the museum could then purchase the sister building from the city and expand to accommodate additional visitors. The museum operators’ justificatory argument went something like this: The museum is an asset to the Lower East Side, and to Manhattan and New York City in general, because it attracts tourists who spend their dollars in the city and who walk away from the visit with enhanced tolerance and respect for the challenges of immigrant life, past and present. Although it is unfortunate that the sister building’s tenants will have to relocate, this cost is marginal compared to the good the museum can do for the city economically and for humanity by spreading progressive values through education about immigration and xenophobia.

Predictably, the building’s tenants felt somewhat different. Protests by New York’s Fujian community quickly spiraled wider to gather allies from other ethnic groups, tenants’ rights activists, and even landlords, who stood in solidarity with the landlord of the sister building who would be forced to sell his property to the city if eminent domain were enacted. (Sampson notes that it was indeed joked that the Tenement Museum controversy was the only event in the history of New York City to bring tenants and landlords together on the same side of an issue!) City officials, who had originally sided with the museum operators based on their logic about the museum’s touristic value for the city, reversed their position in light of the protests, and the museum was ultimately forced to revise its expansion plans and acquire a different historic property, which was actually larger, and more importantly, which was vacant, and therefore free of the moral irony associated with relocating current immigrants in order to commemorate past ones.

When I heard this story, I was immediately struck by the pedagogical opportunity it represented. Many of us working in today’s tourism academy spend a significant portion of our efforts trying to get students to think about the complexities they will encounter when they leave the university to work in the tourism field. We talk at length about stakeholder conflicts and the importance of local community buy-in for successful tourism development and ethical issues regarding the representation of people and their cultural histories. What better way to bring these concepts to life than through an example of a museum, with a noble educational premise, which nonetheless, in the course of trying to meet its development goals, almost ended up reproducing the very kinds of injustice it was trying to educate visitors about.

I wondered, however, if this story would have had as much of an impact on me, if I hadn’t encountered “The Lost Beautifulness” all those years back. Hearing the rich details of Yeziarska’s tale led me to picture the realities of life for the Fujian newcomers in the Tenement Museum’s sister building in a specific and concrete way that might not have otherwise been available to me. The story was like a bridge of empathy, allowing me to cross the divide from my comfortable twenty-first-century, middle-class life, in which I own property, have had abundant educational opportunities, and am generally treated with respect by my fellow citizens, into the fictionalized but very real world of early twentieth-century Jewish immigrants in New York City, and then back through time in the opposite direction to the world of contemporary Fujian immigrants trying to make their way in a new country that didn’t necessarily welcome them with open arms. How might my students be able to grow in analytical strength, in compassion, and in ethical maturity, if they were offered the chance to consider the issue of the Tenement Museum’s expansion through the lenses of not only economics, history, and critical theory, but also literature, in their coursework?

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