

## Reflection Paper # 1

“Michaela, who are you gonna sit by on the bus on the way back? ‘Cause I’m sitting next to Andrew, who is so cute and likes me I think. And I heard that Frederick doesn’t like Andrea anymore and I saw him share his chips with you at lunch today so I think you should totally sit next to him. Well?”

I shifted my gaze from the passing countryside to meet the expectant eyes of my friend, Miranda.

“Um, sure, I’ll talk to Fred.”

I was eleven and on my first weekend-long field trip with my fellow sixth grade classmates. After having studied the history of France during the Middle Ages for several months, my entire class at the American School of Paris was going on a tour of castles in the Loire Valley. I learned in school about the friendship between Leonardi Da Vinci and Francois Premier, but that weekend I knew I was actually going to be standing in the very castle where the two might have discussed art, culture, and politics. I was going to see the castle Henri IV built for his mistress, and I was going to leave my footprints on the famous double-helix spiral staircase in the chateau at Chambord. I felt like I was about to step into my history textbook. As the bus rhythmically toted my classmates and me closer to our destination deep in the French countryside, I, for once, wasn’t thinking about boys.

I have since been back to the castles in the Loire Valley on several occasions, but I’ll always remember my first impressions from my sixth grade travel experience. I

remember feeling very small on several levels. One of the first castles we visited was Chambord, a veritably enormous chateau. I somehow managed to separate myself from the group and ended up alone in what seemed to me a giant stone auditorium. I obviously felt extremely small relative to the physical enormity that surrounded me. At the time, however, I felt another kind of smallness that lingered even when I left the room.

One of the main appeals of historical tourism is the hope to make the past come to life, to “seem real,” rather than remain mere words on the page of a history book. Traveling to a historical destination has the power to make one appreciate what it would have been like to live in a different place in a different time. Even at 19 years old I was no exception to this rule. Stepping into the castle walls, I couldn’t help but imagine what life would have been like during the Middle Ages. Once I began thinking about the lives of people who lived in the distant past as being just as “real” as my own, I was struck by how much occurred before me, and how much would continue to happen after me. In the grand scheme of things, my life just wasn’t that important. I remember feeling very small, then, in terms of my individual significance. This understanding, however, was more reassuring than anything else. In a world of seemingly constant judgment, sometimes the most comforting thing a person, place, or historic site can tell you is “you don’t really matter that much.”

Even though humans are generally thought to be selfish, a notion that has surely influenced the term historical “consumption,” perhaps the realm of historical travel is, in reality, more characterized by humbling experiences like my own. This may be my personal opinion, but I can’t help but hear the negative connotations when discussing how travelers “appropriate” history. Different from other types of tourism where certain

items can be consumed, history cannot literally be consumed. What can be appropriated is historical knowledge. I can see no real difference, then, between the appropriation of knowledge from a book and knowledge from a historical site. Moreover, the idea of “consumption” calls to my mind a relationship in which one party exploits the other. When I consume a sandwich, I am draining energy from that sandwich with no intention of giving anything back to it. The attainment of knowledge, however, does not represent a similar relationship. Indeed, one who “consumes” historical knowledge from travels does not literally give anything back to history, but the attainment of knowledge does seem to bestow certain obligations upon the “consumer.” After having appropriated the history of a certain place, the traveler then possesses a much greater respect for that place (and its history), and will hopefully pass on the knowledge he has learned. This seems to me a much more symbiotic relationship <sup>than of</sup> that mere consumption. <sub>1 1</sub>

Additionally, historical tourism is more “authentic” than other forms of travel, but only because the term actually applies, not because this form of travel is inherently better than others. The notion of authenticity implies that something is conforming to its original form. Thus, in order to be authentic, a location must be approximating some sort of standard. In the realm of historical tourism it actually makes sense that a building aims to look as it did during a certain time period. Similarly, a historical museum is authentic if the exhibits are representative of original objects from a given place and time. The term “authentic” seems to be thrown around carelessly as a measure of value. A city might be deemed “inauthentic” if it is too commercial with fast food restaurants on every corner. This seems to me a misnomer. If the tourist sought to visit what that city was in

1850, then yes, I suppose the city does not approximate the standard, but the present state is not intrinsically inauthentic.

My opinions have certainly been colored by my own experiences, but I believe historical tourism to be one of the most enlightening forms of travel. I will admit that I am not opposed to a cruise or two, but travels that highlight history (and one's place in history) are by far more meaningful. I did sit next to Fred on the bus ride back to Paris, but I suddenly felt much older than his eleven years.

An interesting discussion from the point of view of your earlier self. While I can see how castles might make you feel small and insignificant and that that could be comforting, some sites might have the effect of thinking of long-dead life emperors or prophets as humans who had to walk through the same spaces you were occupying, thus bringing about a consciousness of being responsible for constructing contemporary history. I also think that historical sites can be consumed by tourists as mass products — simplified, made unproblematic, even civilized than the messy struggles of history in order to fit into mythology. In that sense, appropriating them is probably missing their import.

On your next paper, try to be more explicit about the connections between the ideas in the readings and your own views.

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