

2015

# Humility, Otherness, and Immersion: Reflections on Traveling in South America

Tereza M. Szeghi  
*University of Dayton*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://ecommons.udayton.edu/cip\\_ges](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/cip_ges)



Part of the [Latin American Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Szeghi, Tereza M., "Humility, Otherness, and Immersion: Reflections on Traveling in South America" (2015). *Perspectives on South America: Reminiscence of the University of Dayton Global Education Seminar*. Book 10.  
[http://ecommons.udayton.edu/cip\\_ges/10](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/cip_ges/10)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Programs at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives on South America: Reminiscence of the University of Dayton Global Education Seminar by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu).

## Chapter 3

### **Humility, Otherness, and Immersion: Reflections on Traveling in South America**

By Tereza Szeghi Dempster

**Abstract:** This chapter addresses the nature of academic travel and some of the professional and personal dividends the 2013 University of Dayton Global Education Seminar trip to Argentina and Peru offered. It examines the power dynamics involved when entering unfamiliar nations and spaces in the interest of research, along with the shifting nature of identity in the context of such travel. It suggests that the lines between academic travel and tourism are fluid and contingent, and asserts that one of the merits of engaging in this form of travel (among others) is that it invites self-awareness about one's place in the world and one's relationship to others (as mediated by such factors as nationality, language, education, and socioeconomic status). A critical component of this self-awareness came through being in a position of otherness vis-à-vis the spaces and peoples encountered and experiencing unaccustomed vulnerabilities. Through a series of experiences the chapter shows that vulnerability, humility, and need can open doors to meaningful and transformative human connections not often available in the more comfortable and secured home environment.

During nearly three weeks in May 2013 I had the privilege of traveling to Argentina and Peru with a group of colleagues from the University of Dayton. Few of us knew one another well prior to this trip, and we made up a motley crew in many respects (in terms of discipline, age, origins, and lived experiences). But, as you might imagine, we fast became a distinctive unit. Little did I know that my sense of identity as part of this group would become so quickly ingrained that I would find myself responding to a call of "Dayton!" from across a crowded city street (the name of a city I have lived in for only four years and part of the name of the university where I have taught for the same duration). The malleability and sometimes surprising assertiveness of identity were vivid to me throughout the trip, as travel itself is a negotiation of identity as it is forged, tested, dismantled, and interrogated in the course of the journey—particularly when in regions markedly different from one's habitual context. As I reflect back on our trip and its meaning, I find myself lingering on a question I carried with me as we visited neighborhoods of various socioeconomic stations, cultural imprints and styles in Buenos Aires and Lima—that is, who were

we in these spaces? And what, if anything, entitled us to enter these spaces? Did we enter as scholars, tourists, travelers, or simply people? What could we offer to those we met that would not be self-serving or imposing? Similar sorts of questions concerning the nature of our experiences and the nature of identity and power in the context of international travel continue to be with me and organize my remarks below.

Let me begin with a question that has preoccupied travelers and scholars for generations, particularly since the era when transportation became more affordable for a broader range of people and thus travel became far more ubiquitous than ever before: what is the difference between travel and tourism? And, what is at stake in any distinction we might draw here? Of course, a critical context for any consideration of travel or particularly tourism is the socioeconomic differential that often exists between traveler/tourist and the local population. In my own scholarship I have interrogated the nature of travel, tourism, and diaspora, as well as the fluidity of these categories when measured against lived experiences and literary expressions of the same. Entering into an experience of extensive travel with varied motives and aims, I became the subject of my own critical assessment, particularly as I aimed to enter spaces to which I had no identity claims and with a strong desire to build relationships based on respect and reciprocity.

A passage from Dr. Julius Amin's contribution to this collection prompted me to give more consideration to these concerns and, in the case of our Global Education Seminar group specifically, the relationship between tourism and scholarly travel:

Discovering new sites, venturing into areas tagged unsuitable for tourists, getting lost, visiting with local people, enjoying a local sporting activity, shopping in the local market, visiting a local joint, and enjoying and dancing to the local music are things which make

immersion possible. They help us to realize our capacity for change. That, indeed, is the difference between immersion and tourism. (Amin)

I am less certain, however, that we were categorically distinct from tourists—though, as I explore below, our relationship to tourism was far closer in some contexts than other. What I am certain of is that whatever distinction there was between the members of the Global Education Seminar and tourists owes itself almost entirely to the access we gained through our contacts in Argentina and Peru and to how open nearly everyone we met was to talking with and spending time with us. Certainly many tourists aim to have an immersion experience in another culture; indeed, those who travel far from home often do so with this express purpose. They may even make an effort, as Dean MacCannell argues in his seminal study *The Tourist*, to escape touristy sites so as to access the “authentic” local culture. Such tourists often eschew the label “tourist” because it has come to connote a surface-level engagement with a site, with tourist zones often being segregated or even walled off from the spaces in which local people live. An exchange Louis G. Mendoza has with a Filipina restaurant owner in Milpitas, which he includes in a book I read during the trip, entitled *A Journey Around Our America: A Memoir on Cycling, Immigration, and the Latinoization of the U.S.*, suggests that the difference between travel and tourism pertains to connection with local people. After he notes that his travels include frequent overnights and time talking with people along the way she queries: “Yes, you’re a traveler, not a tourist, right?” to which Mendoza replies, “I like to think so” (206). His conversations are facilitated both by advance contacts in the places he visits and his own motivation to be more outgoing and talk with people as part of his aim of better understanding the experiences and perceptions of Latinas/os in the U.S. As I discuss below, my ability to connect with people in Argentina and Peru also derived a combination of established connections and shifts in my own disposition.

What frequently obstructs travelers/tourists who aim to escape a pre-packaged and structured version of the cultures they encounter is a lack of entry into the daily life of that place—points of entry best provided through relationships with the people there. In this regard, and many others, the participants in the Global Education Seminar were privileged. Not only was it a part of our express purpose to help build relationships between the University of Dayton and the two countries we visited, but some of this work of connection was done for us through ties between UD and the many Marianist schools in Argentina and Peru. These ties placed us in solidarity both with other educators motivated by a commitment to social justice and many of their students who clearly shared these commitments. This point of connection laid the foundation for meaningful and probing conversations in which all involved had a stake. Whether it was talking with relatively privileged students who commented on the importance of going to a university where they could encounter people unlike themselves (so as to develop a foundation for contributing to the common good of all Argentinians), or speaking with teachers trying to offer a meaningful education to students who confront extreme poverty, discrimination, and violence, during such conversations I was a teacher-scholar working in collaboration with colleagues and students.

In these school settings, particularly in poor neighborhoods, I worried that students might feel like they were objects of study or fascination to us. Consequently, it was striking to me that I came to feel *myself* becoming an object of curiosity and scrutiny as we entered certain spaces and introduced ourselves (particularly at the Fatima school, where we only briefly spent time in a series of classrooms, allowing only for quick introductions and goodbyes on the heels of those introductions). We were the others. We were the ones entering spaces we had not earned a place in through regular presence and developed relationships over time. Why were we there? What could we reasonably hope to accomplish through such brief exchanges? Among the many things I

learned through such moments and anxieties is the importance of humility and openness. It was important for me to feel discomfort and to inhabit my otherness, to simply introduce myself, and then be receptive to whatever sort of exchange might follow—whether this simply be a returned greeting or an extensive conversation.

Fortunately I received a powerful lesson in humility and openness right away—with maté—from the students in one of the poorest parts of Buenos Aires (Barracas/Villa 21) at Nuestra Señora de los Milagros de Caacupé School. Here, literally on day one of our trip, I was confronted with the importance of understanding myself to be a guest throughout my journey, and of being open to new experiences. Shortly after entering one of the classrooms, I noticed that the students were sharing a beverage that they passed around the room. At one point a student asked the faculty from UD if we would like to try the beverage (maté). Feeling the force of a communal tradition and of a generosity not to be turned down, I set aside my accustomed disinclination to share a single straw with a large group of people. As I sipped from the straw and experienced maté served in traditional fashion for the first time, I saw the students looking on in expectation and the pride in the face of the young girl who had supplied the maté supplies for the day. I felt a shift inside me. I had let go of something that would have kept me external to the space and norms of this classroom and entered more fully into it. Maybe this would have happened anyway (though I doubt it), but after the maté I felt freer in my conversations with the students and more confident speaking Spanish with them. The students' generosity went far beyond libations. They were eager to talk with all of us about a range of things, from our musical tastes (followed by their recommendations), to their careers aspirations, to one student's question about differences between life in the U.S. and media representations of the same. These students and their teacher Perico (José Luis Pérez, who was our guide and companion throughout our time in Argentina) taught me a great deal about

hospitality and community—and how each creates an environment for learning. Through informal conversation, made freer by shared maté, the students practiced their English, I practiced my Spanish, and we all learned more about each other's home countries, ambitions, and tastes.

This was the best sort of learning: learning without knowing that is what you are doing, because you are driven in your questions by genuine interest in your interlocutors that also translates into real listening. I left that school humbled, gratified, and in awe of what basic human connection can achieve. I was determined to put into practice one of the broad ideals that motivated our travels: to cultivate reciprocal relationships. I wondered what I might give to these students who have so little yet offer so much so freely. This is one reason why Perico's receptivity to the suggestion that he and his students contribute to this collection was so significant to me. He told me that his students would be surprised and delighted that anyone in the United States would be interested in what they have to say—and I was saddened by the assumptions embedded in their surprise. Thinking of entering into a collaborative relationship with Perico and his students seemed to me like the correct follow-up to that afternoon in their classroom.

Although this afternoon with Perico and his students in Barracas was just one opportunity afforded us through our connection to the university of Dayton and its fellow Marianist schools, its basic lessons carried over into so many of the encounters I had. I learned so much about the varied experiences and perceptions of Argentina and Peru through conversation. For instance, taking a taxi from Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina to a meeting with Márgara Averbach, a colleague I know through the Association for the Study of American Indian Literature who teaches at the University of Buenos Aires, yielded a forty-five minute conversation about Argentine literature, family pleasures and traumas, and politics. The taxi driver told me that he only has this job as a temporary stopgap between employments within his trained profession and

that he makes the job interesting for himself by learning about his passengers. In the backseat of that car I was the foreigner, object of curiosity, and source of entertainment. We struggled a bit to understand one another when his Spanish grew too rapid for me, or my Midwestern U.S. accent too thick for him. But, I was determined to speak as much Spanish as possible throughout the trip—with my successes bringing me closer to a sense of living within the culture and my failures reminding me of my externality to it. Simply being identified as having an accent was an important reminder of my otherness. Nonetheless, we worked together to achieve mutual understanding and passed the time rapidly. I was moved by his openness in talking about his life, the nature of his questions about me and the U.S., and the circumstances that made all of this possible.

In the United States I have had many illuminating conversations with taxi drivers while traveling (not at home only because I do not rely on taxis here), and have often thought that passengers can learn so much about a place by engaging with them; however, in a more familiar environment I would be more prone to distraction because of running late and the rising cost on the meter as traffic slowed to a halt. The lack of control that comes through international travel and unfamiliarity with one's environment can be unsettling and even scary, but also humbling and liberating in significant ways. The driver offered me his cell phone so I could call Márgara and tell her I was running late, and her graciousness and ease allowed me to let go of anxiety and enjoy the conversation I was having. When I stepped out of that taxi on the corner near the Bar of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the driver halted to wave me in the right direction. I was profoundly grateful for this extra bit of care as I negotiated a new city. It was my very foreignness that created my vulnerability and provided the opportunity to be cared for in this way. I wonder now about the cost of the individualism and autonomy so normative within the United States in that they devalue



and forestall the need of the kindness of strangers and the desire for reciprocity that comes from this.

Outside of the schools, however, much of our time was spent doing the things so many tourists do, complete with guided tours of multiple cities (from Buenos Aires, to Lima, to Cusco and Machu Picchu), which frequently involved a series of pre-arranged travels from site to site, carefully arranged by through tourism companies. Yes, in such moments, as scholars we carried a certain set of motives and disciplinary tools, but we were, in the broad sense, tourists. At Machu Picchu we discussed the fallaciousness of teleological narratives of history and marveled both at Incan architecture and their relationship to the natural world (still powerfully asserted and experienced in the ancient city today); but, to what degree were these reflections unique and to what degree are they shared by all fortunate enough to travel to Machu Picchu? I trust that the vocabulary we had for encapsulating our thoughts and the critical tools for probing them deeper are attributable to our educations and continued scholarship, but do they merit a categorical distinction from tourism? Moreover, what might motivate us to want to differentiate ourselves from the other tourists surrounding us, also led by guides?

As a scholar of indigenous American literatures, I had particular questions about Peruvian perceptions of and identifications with indigeneity today, questions shared by Julius Amin with his focus on race from a historical perspective, and with Ernesto Velasquez with his interest in indigenous philosophies. Perhaps at such moments we were scholar-tourists pursuing our research and driving interests through the vehicle of tourism. For me part of the learning experience of the trip was to have my markers of identity, belonging, and authority shaken and reconfigured. Part of this reconfiguration was seeing myself as a tourist in certain moments but also seeing other tourists in their complexity as individuals with their own interests and motivations. For instance, on the

train returning from Machu Picchu to Cusco I sat next to a German woman who works at the German Embassy in Buenos Aires who was traveling with her sister. She has lived in Argentina for over a year and was taking the opportunity of her sister's visit to see more of South America (before being transferred elsewhere in another year or so). With her Spanish language fluency, cross-cultural proficiencies, and broad global travels, her engagement with Machu Picchu was no more superficial than mine—though her questions about the place were different. Ultimately, the conversation I had with her on the train—a train full of tourists who had bought the same Machu Picchu travel package—was a vital part of my immersion experience. I learned not only her views of Argentine politics but about her cultural transition in Buenos Aires and how the city compares with others where she has lived. The fact that the person I randomly sat next to was so far from the stereotype of the typical tourist and was well-equipped for a deep—albeit different—engagement with Machu Picchu—presented the possibility that the train was full of other such individuals and thus that my colleagues and I were not so exceptional within this space.

Vulnerability and being the other are critical components of what travel can yield. At one point or another we all of us were pushed to or past a limit. For me this came with the altitude sickness I experienced in Cusco. The light-headedness and nausea I experienced were acute but intensified further by the fear of illness so far from home and so far from those I might expect to nurture me during a time of need. I was mortified as I felt tears springing uncontrollably to my eyes, despite my efforts to rationally explain to myself that this really was no crying matter—certainly not in front of colleagues! How grateful I was when our guide, Edgar, offered me coca leaves (the traditional indigenous remedy for altitude sickness) and directed me to sleep a bit in the van. It was with considerable relief that I awoke twenty minutes later feeling perfectly fine, and with greater gratitude still that I received the driver, Raúl's, question about how I was feeling.

We then spoke with one another in Spanish as the group finished its tour (for another 15 minutes or so) and he expressed mild frustration that the group was taking longer than usual, due to the fact that the police forced him to continuously circle the block. I explained that the number of questions my travel companions tend to ask are the likely culprits. Raúl was our regular driver throughout our time in Cusco and I was always especially happy to see him. Simple human kindness in times of vulnerability is a powerful gift.

Raúl's compassion and Edgar's determination to give us an indigenous perspective on Peruvian history and identity also had the effect of jarring another of my preconceptions about tourism. As Edgar grew breathless at times in trying to use every moment he had to educate us about the culture and endurance of indigenous Peruvians and their resistance to colonization (complete with references to a well-worn set of maps and respectful but resolute interruptions when our questions turned into discussions involving the full group), it became apparent that he was not the scripted or detached tour guide my own biases about tourism might have led me to expect. I had a similar experience at Machu Picchu, where our guide, Grimaldo, in his own reserved and soft-spoken style, replied to my question about anti-Indian prejudice in Peru by telling me about his childhood, about memories of his own family being discriminated against and the Quechua language being mocked, while expressing optimism about recent reassertions of Peruvian indigenous identity being embraced broadly. Each of these men, whom I met through decidedly touristic avenues, contributed meaningfully to my education about Peru and moved me through their willingness to engage with a group of foreigners in such a personal and earnest fashion.

In addition to weighing and negotiating a sense of my own identity and position within the various places we traveled, I had many occasions to think—and not to think—about the United States more generally. Students across the class spectrum in both nations expressed the perception

that everything is good in the U.S. When I pressed about the origins of this impression I learned that it has a great deal to do with the images we export through big budget Hollywood films—films in which the wealth and ease of daily life contrast starkly with the realities faced by the overwhelming majority of Argentinians and Peruvians (as well as people in the United States itself, of course). The students at Caacupé, for one, were surprised to learn that the racialized class divides that structure the city of Buenos Aires are common phenomena in the U.S. as well. One student who had studied briefly at UD told me that she and her peers were astounded and a bit confused by the fact that the parking lot at the mall takes up more space than the stores. I had never quite thought about it this way, but found it amusing now—particularly when seen from the perspective of a student in a city where people do far more walking than they do in Dayton. Seeing my country from others’ perspectives was as significant for me as letting my country slide off of my radar at times. The news channels there focused primarily on South America, of course, with the U.S. taking up a bit more time in the global news than other countries, but always interpreted through a South American perspective. I was invited to see the U.S. as a global power from the perspectives of people abroad, but also step outside of U.S. affairs and see first Argentina and then Peru as the immediate, pressing, national context.

Importantly, the breaking down of barriers and subsequent ability to connect more freely with people from other nations and cultures occurred in tandem with something of the same with my own colleagues. There are certain structures and subject positions in place that organize so many of our interactions on campus—and in the academy more generally. To travel with colleagues for nearly three weeks necessarily involves very different ways of relating to one another. Although we all commented on the value of approaching shared experiences from multiple disciplinary perspectives, and synthesizing those perspectives in conversation as we

worked collaboratively to make meaning of our experiences, in many ways it was the most mundane aspects of life and travel abroad that shifted our relationships to one another as colleagues to something this term does not encompass. The unaccustomed vulnerability generated by unfamiliar spaces and our own otherness played an important role here as well. We did not just rely on one another to intellectually process our experiences but to do the basic things of daily life, including getting from point A to point B. Navigating the subway together in Buenos Aires, for example, provided several occasions for stress, confusion, and hilarity. On one occasion Perico had directed us to get on the subway at one point and wave to him on the platform at a between stop so he could jump on and guide us to the Marianist school in Fatima. The members of the Global Education Seminar thought that Perico's suggestion that he would see us wave to him, and then hop on to our subway car with no delay, required an unrealistic degree of coordination and ease for us to pull off, so we came up with a back-up plan. When we did not see Perico at the stop, as per our back-up plan, Umesh and I got off of the subway to wait for him, while, inexplicably to us, the rest of the group continued on to the final destination. After confirming with one another that we understood and properly executed the back-up plan, Umesh and I spotted the only two seats in the empty subway platform and sat down. The contrast between being sandwiched into an overly full subway car with a group of six in a large and busy city to being the only two people on the platform was stark—leaving us feeling a bit abandoned and bewildered. However, not even a moment later Perico appeared and we were vindicated! So, why tell this story? It is just one story, and there are so many. I might have chosen the confusion we faced over my vegan pizza order at a Buenos Aires chain with the less than promising name of Kentucky Pizza. After one false attempt the full staff of five cooks waved me over for consult, and the whole episode escalated in such a way that the five of us together that day were laughing to tears. It could be that story too, or instead.

Both of these stories amused us, and our laughter was a needed relief from the stresses of travel. More importantly, though, this is the stuff of human connection. Returning to that moment on the empty subway platform, I was relieved not to be alone in having gotten off of the subway in an unfamiliar city.

It hopefully goes without saying at this point in my reflection that my experience traveling to Argentina and Peru with the Global Education Seminar was extremely powerful and rewarding. Ultimately these travels positioned me, variously, as scholar, teacher, friend, tourist, and student (or some combination thereof), and each of these identities had a role to play in developing connections with the places and people I met. I now face the challenge of carrying the lessons I learned forward. I must determine, among many other things, how to: sustain the relationships I began forging, integrate some of the style and substance of the learning environment at Caacupé school, allow for some measure of powerlessness and vulnerability in my daily life, and offer the sort of hospitality I received to guests to my home and country. During the course of our long flight back to the United States I spoke with one of my colleagues and fellow travelers about how long it would be before the time in South America seemed distant and momentary. We speculated that within a week our usual routines would assert their dominance and relegate the trip to an archive. As I write, however, our return date is a month and a half past and the experience is viscerally present to me, demanding that I carry its lessons forward and reciprocate.

### Works Cited

MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory Of The Leisure Class*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1999. Print.

Mendoza, Louis G. *A Journey Around Our America: A Memoir on Cycling, Immigration, and the*

*Latinoization of the U.S.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. Print.