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SENIOR TOURISM

INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON AGING AND TRAVELING

[transcript] Aging Studies Volume XIII
This volume aims to bridge the disciplinary gap between tourism studies and aging studies. It investigates the intersections of tourism and aging from a variety of perspectives that focus on the many ways in which senior tourism is socially constructed and/or individually experienced. The essays tackle key topics ranging from the socio-economic aspects of post-retirement travel to the representations of the traveling elderly in literature, film and media, and the influence of travel on late-life creativity.

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Editors’ Introduction

Over the past century, tourism has grown to be a defining trait of contemporary society, both from an economic and a cultural perspective. As a major industry worldwide, tourism has recently come to represent a strategic sector for the overcoming of the present economic crisis. As a social practice, tourism has long been recognized as central for the construction of cultural identity and heritage within a highly interconnected world where mobility is, for better or worse, constantly increasing.

Mobility is also increasing among the elderly. In the Western countries, in particular, longer life expectancy and the growth of aging populations, with their consequent involvement in both productive and non-productive (recreational) activities, demand new and serious consideration of post-retirement mobility not only in our era but beyond. No longer considered as an inactive period, post-retirement has now become, as Tongren suggests, “a stage in life when a person can do any number of things that have been put off for years and travel is a major element in most retirement plans” (qtd in Gibson 11). In the tourist market, “elderly” or “senior” tourists have started to be considered as a particularly valuable resource among the rest of the tourist population. In Europe, for instance, senior tourists have lately attracted the attention of the European Commission, and, more in general, of public and private tourist operators, not only for their economic contribution to local tourism development, but also for seniors’ preference to travel in low and medium seasons, which helps reducing tourism pressure in peak periods, especially in most popular destinations (EC 2014).
But elderly people also travel for reasons that well extend beyond the commonly accepted understanding of leisure travel. In an age of globally extended (work) mobility, for instance, many of them engage in what Lago and Poffley have called “multigenerational travel” (Gibson 13), in which they visit their children and grandchildren who temporarily or permanently reside away from them. While they do so, they also have the chance and time to getting to know unknown places and cultures, like ‘intentional’ tourists do. Travel and tourism, thus, come to play a key role in intergenerational dialogue and in the preservation of family ties. Promoting this dialogue however requires the removal of many existing physical and socio-cultural barriers (accessibility, transportation, information, health care, etc.) that hamper some seniors to travel (EC 2014).

Although “travel” and “aging” are concepts that have enjoyed significant semantic overlapping in intellectual history, their actual association has always encountered resistance. In one of the founding texts of aging studies, *The Journey of Life* (1992), Thomas J. Cole has identified travel as the most important metaphor ever used to describe the process of aging from the ancient times to the present. But whereas aging is commonly accepted as some kind of journey, the reverse equation is problematic. What is normally associated with mobility and travel (youth, health, enjoyment, open-mindedness)
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ness) is often perceived as antithetical to the distinguishing features of late life (illness, closure, rootedness, clinging to one’s old habits). As a result, late-life mobility, even in the socially acceptable form of senior tourism—stands out as a sort of oxymoron, something which ultimately exposes the ageist bias of our society, where the elderly is supposed to enjoy very low exposure to travel. Thus a paradox is apparent.

The recent thriving of senior tourism shown by statistics calls for a reassessment of these issues that reaches beyond the merely economic. What are the social and cultural effects of such a rising trend for the elderly? Should we take it as a convincing evidence of the empowerment of the elderly, at least in our Western world?

One thing seems to be sure: senior tourism is a complex phenomenon that deserves a much broader contextualization than the one provided only by quantitative studies in the field (Gibson 2002; Nimrod 2008; Sedgley et al. 2011). Senior tourism cannot be isolated and analyzed simply as a segment of the whole tourist market, as this simplified approach would suppress important aspects related to the particularity of the subjects involved and their individual experience of it. It is not by chance that leisure travel for the elderly population often represents a rite of passage, associated with retirement, and thus strongly related to an opening up of possibilities and a personal growth (Gibson 11).

This volume aims to bridge the disciplinary gap between tourism studies and aging studies by investigating the intersections of tourism and aging from a variety of perspectives which focus on the many ways in which senior tourism is socially constructed and/ or individually experienced. We agree on the fact that the extant research on tourism is still largely quantitative and would benefit from an interdisciplinary exchange with qualitative-oriented research. So far, quantitative research has not provided a comprehensive and exhaustive picture of the phenomenon, whose very ‘subjects’ are often very difficult to pinpoint. As Patterson observes, since the segment of the aging population is changing over time, the term “senior tourists” often applies un-problematically to cohort of people sometimes
separated by forty years, for whom it is impossible to get to a determinate clear-cut tourist typologies (Patterson 12-3).

There is a need to understand not only the possible economic advantages of encouraging tourism in old age, but also whether such trend is going to undermine in the long run stereotypes and biased perceptions regarding the elderly population—in line with the international agenda of the active aging movement—and perhaps also determine a redefinition of the overall idea of leisure travel. This is where the contribution of a humanist-oriented approach comes into play. Both critical gerontology and cultural analysis insist in fact on a radical shift of the object of investigation from “external truth” to a world of “constructed reality” (Sedgley 426), which would allow space for analyzing issues not commonly associated with senior tourism.

The following essays prove that the intersections of tourism and aging are many and still to be tackled. They range from the socio-economic aspects of post-retirement travel to the representations of the traveling elderly in literature, film and media, and the influence of travel on late-life creativity. These contributions engage in a multi- and interdisciplinary research, which significantly expands groundbreaking works like Patterson’s Growing Older: Tourism and Leisure Behaviour of Older Adults (2006), substantial chapters in Buhalis & Darcy’s Accessible Tourism (2010) and Buhalis, Darcy, Ambrose’s Best Practice in Accessible Tourism: Inclusion, Disability, Ageing Population and Tourism (2012)—which have drawn attention to senior tourism as a distinct subject of investigation. They also answer Diane Sedgley et al. (2011)’s reasonable plea for the necessity of a humanist approach to such subject.

The essays are ordered alphabetically and resort to (and fruitfully combine) a variety of theoretical and methodological resources. The volume opens with “New Options for Senior Tourists: Literary Tours in Albania” by Ilda Erkoçi, an essay that examines the relevance of literary tourism for the elderly population. This essay argues, in line with current data, that while reflecting attitudes commonly associated to late life like escapism and nostalgia, literary tourism has
also effects on the possibility of socialization and new experience for elderly tourists. Her essay also offers itself as a short introduction to literary tourism in Albania, a very recent and expanding industry.

The second essay, “‘Almost Fatally Disoriented’: Tourism and Aging in Moritz Thomsen’s The Saddest Pleasure” by Simone Francescato explores the relations between aging, travel, and memory in the autobiographical memoir The Saddest Pleasure: A Journey on Two Rivers (1990) by American expatriate, former Peace Corps member, and travel writer Moritz Thomsen (1915-1991). Thomsen lived for more than two decades as a poor man in a small town in Ecuador, where he helped a local black man to establish and run his own farm. Forced to retire by his work partner and suffering from poor health, the solitary 63-year-old writer living in Quito decided to embark on a long-dreamt tourist trip to Brazil as a means to overcome his existential despair. Drawing from classic studies on aging (Cole 1992; Woodward 1991) as well as recent studies on the relations between aging and narrative (De Falco, 2010), Francescato argues that Thomsen’s narrative significantly deconstructs our commonly accepted notion of ‘post-retirement leisure trip,’ while debunking the protagonist’s ‘tourist gaze’ and his exoticist fantasies about Brazil. The representation of other elderly tourists in this book is read in the light of Thomsen’s struggle with his own self-idealization and denial of aging.

Ulla Kriebernegg’s essay “A Man Should Be Able to Take a Trip if He Wants: Senior Tourism in Oscar Casares’s Amigoland” discusses senior tourism in the context of the increasingly popular genre of “nursing home escape narratives”—a genre in which nursing home residents escape the specter of long-term residential care in order to embark on journeys that prove life-altering. By means of Oscar Casares’ first novel Amigoland (2009), Kriebernegg looks at how the care home escape novel uses features of the road movie and discusses how mobility, space, and place inform an old man’s identity construction as he embarks on a journey from the USA to Mexico to find his peace of mind.
Representations of travel and mobility are important cultural narratives expressing issues and concerns of postmodern identity. By juxtaposing Vilém Flusser’s concept of the expelled and Zygmunt Bauman’s notions of pilgrim, stroller, vagabond, and tourist, in “(Un) Comfortably Moving Out of the Comfort Zone: Life as Travel” Roberta Maierhofer investigates movements through space and time within a life course as expressions of conscious acts of appropriation, where travel can express the matrix of time and experience, and how by the narration of these experiences of travel an escape can be enabled—to use Bauman’s words—from the limits that each society sets to “life strategies that can be imagined.” The narrative reflections of changed spaces and strange contexts allow for an expression of the fluidity of one’s identity, and thus open up possibilities of moving beyond defined positions of self. If identity is defined by both continuity and change over a life course, the importance is to narrate one’s life in an on-going process of dialogue between the strange and the familiar. Such reflections are used to reflect on the quest for individual identity as related to travel and aging in American literature and to analyze in particular Grace Paley’s short story “The Long Distance Runner” (1974) and, more extensively, the novel Praisesong for the Widow (1983) by African American writer Paule Marshall.

Valeria Minghetti’s essay, “Senior Tourism and Accessibility: Evolving Trends and Key Issues”, examines senior tourism by focusing on aging, disability and accessibility as three high-interrelated concepts. The current evolution of senior population and the extent to which an increase in life expectancy corresponds to a greater physical and psychological wellbeing have important consequences on seniors’ consumption behavior and on the possibility of accessing and enjoying specific products and services, also in tourism. Starting from a discussion on the various definitions of “seniors” and on the characteristics of main senior tourism market segments, her essay focuses attention on how the tourism industry and destinations can model their supply in order to ensure easy access to information and tourist services for elderly tourists, also through the use of In-
formation and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In particular, the role of technological innovation in reducing information barriers and supporting social inclusion is analyzed. The interoperability among tourism operators; the integration of tourism- and accessibility-related information; the customization of contents and, finally, the implementation of Accessible Design principles, all of which can represent crucial aspects to develop an inclusive tourism approach.

In “Undermining Retirement as Leisure Time in Deborah Moggach’s *These Foolish Things* and its film adaptation *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*” Maricel Oró-Piqueras focuses on cultural representation of senior tourism and on the process of adaptation from text to film. In particular she concentrates on how the idealized representation of happy old age of the baby-boomers generation is exploited by the tourism industry in order to acquire new customers. In Moggach’s novel (2004) and its film version (2012) a group of British citizens move to a retirement hotel in Bangalore, India, in order to escape a present and future situation which they perceive as limiting and suffocating. By leaving behind their British contexts, the older characters discover that the concept “old age” does not need to be limiting; rather, it is our culture which limits it. Thus, they also discover other facets of themselves which are more romanticised in the film version than in the novel. Still, both succeed in bringing to the surface the incongruities of stereotypical images of retirement and old age within Western society by pointing out at their complex nature.

The essay by Mirko Petrić, Ivan Puzek and Inga Tomić-Koludrović is a brief case study of how tourists perceived as “aging” can help sustain the essential qualities of what has recently been described as “living heritage sites”. Its aim is to serve as a relational contextual explanation grounded in one concrete example, which Jack Levine refers to as “sociological snapshots”. This particular snapshot was taken in a well-known heritage center on the Eastern Adriatic coast, inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List as “the historical complex of Split with the Palace of Diocletian” in 1979. Following a brief overview of the development of tourism on the Eastern Adri-
atic coast, as well as a discussion of specific heritage qualities of the historical core of Split, the results of two comprehensive surveys of tourists visiting the site (carried out in 2005 and 2013) are presented and compared. The discussion of the sociodemographic data and motivations to travel of the types of tourists obtained by means of cluster analysis suggests that experientially-oriented and culturally sensitive tourists aged 50 and over are presently best suited to the purpose of maintaining the heritage qualities of the “living site” in question. The text concludes with questions about how the process is going to develop in the future, when the currently younger visitors, with different educational background, cultural interests, and financial means will also “begin to age”.

In “Never Too Late for Remembering: Cruising the Past in Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow” Anna Scacchi examines, like Maierhofer, Marshall’s classic novel of late-life travel, but reads the text within the context of an increasingly marketized experience of African American history. Prompted by the famous TV series Roots, in the last three decades American heritage tourism to the West African shores has become big business, being advertised as a way for black Americans to “rediscover” their African roots and heal the wounds inflicted by the trauma of slavery. Such tours exploit the emotional impact of the memory of slavery on contemporary middle-class black Americans, while providing sentimentalized experiences with a happy ending. Marshall’s 1983 novel, on the contrary, depicts a very different kind of travel experience where the protagonist ultimately succeeds in recovering a connection, formerly dismissed as odd and atavistic, with her ancestors which leads her to engage in political and cultural change back home. By recovering her links with the ancestors and the black Diaspora in the Americas, the 64-year-old Avey Johnson discovers a new strategy of survival in racist United States.

In the essay “Cruising to Be Young Again: The Mystification of Senior Tourism in Love Boat,” which concludes this collection, Cinzia Schiavini investigates the cultural representations and misrepresentations of old age in one of the most popular leisure activities
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for old people: cruise ship tourism. She focuses in particular on *Love Boat*, a popular TV series of the Seventies and Eighties, which transformed cruise ship tourism in an affordable and tempting fantasy vacation for middle-class consumers. Drawing from contemporary tourism studies, Schiavini postulates that cruise ship tourism constitutes in the popular imagination the convergence between the “romantic” and the “collective” gazes contemporary tourism relies on. She also argues that cruise ship tourism, due to its intrinsic features, has been one of the most powerful agent in the domestication and commodification of the exotic, to make it usable especially to aged people. Her essay explores to what extent the socially affable captain, the all-American crew, the abundance of single people aboard looking for love, and a setting where passengers are indulged in opulence and luxury, rejuvenate and distort the reality of cruise ship tourism, and thus the impact of the third age in American contemporary society.

This volume is the result of the international conference held at the University of Venice Ca’ Foscari in January 2014, during which a group of scholars from different disciplines and from various European universities came together to engage in an exchange of ideas and methodologies. The conference was organized by the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies (Ca’ Foscari), in collaboration with the Department of Economics (Ca’ Foscari), C.I.S.E.T. (International Centre for Studies on Tourism Economics), and ENAS (European Network of Aging Studies), whose founder, Roberta Maierhofer (University of Graz, Austria) provided the keynote lecture. The conference also included contributions by Flavio Gregori, Danilo Cavapozzi and Francesca Zantomio (Ca’ Foscari) and also by Enrico Capiozzo and Lisa Danese, CEO and Content and Community Manager of VEASYT Srl, a research spin-off of Ca’ Foscari University aiming to develop skills in the field of language and sensorial accessibility. Over the years we have received support from all the contributors and positive feedback by those who kindly sponsored this event. In publishing some of the revised papers delivered during the conference, we do hope to contribute to redefine any re-
stricted notion of senior tourism, and to re-conceptualize it as a complex phenomenon associated with important economic, social, and cultural changes, which may inspire future research on the subject.

**Works Cited**


