

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Clara Kim's essay "Finding Veritas in Harvard's Tourism" was written in the fall of 2015 for a WR 100 seminar focusing on tourism in New England. In the class, we examined what various forms of tourism in the region can tell us about American culture. This essay was submitted for the third assignment in the course, in which students were asked to independently visit and research a tourist site in New England and construct a persuasive analysis about that site.

This essay offers a critical examination of Harvard University as a tourist site. Through an analysis of Harvard's website, tourism brochures, and the tour itself, Clara claims that Harvard offers tourists a solely celebratory narrative of its history and legacy, disavowing its complex and often unsettling involvement in the history of slavery and race relations. Clara presents her claim clearly and supports her ideas through a thorough analysis of these sources.

Clara's essay is not only well structured and clearly articulated, but it also contributes to a larger scholarly conversation about the role of tourist sites that engage with public history—whose history is told at these sites, and whose is left out? How should the tourist industry make these decisions? Clara's piece suggests that Harvard and other public history sites must strive to provide tourists with a comprehensive history that acknowledges the "dark" elements of a site's past and present.

Emma Newcombe

WR 100: Touring New England and the World

FROM THE WRITER

When dealing with a topic as broad as New England tourism, it becomes difficult to hone in on a specific site and deal with all the nuances of public perception and institutional presentation. I remembered wanting to focus on something relevant to my own personal experience yet removed enough for exploration. I chose to focus on Harvard because of its accessible tourism and race relations because of my standing as a Korean American. Existing in the gap between privileged and unprivileged allowed me to examine, thoroughly, the larger framework of race through the lens of an industry as broad and narrow as campus tours.

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FINDING VERITAS IN HARVARD'S TOURISM

Harvard's motto is *veritas*, or truth. A university that prides itself on the noble pursuit of ethical academics, it seeks to reflect integrity in all its facets. However, despite its advertised commitment to honor, Harvard University does not make its controversial interactions with slavery and race issues as accessible or as visible as it does its merits. This creates a seemingly perfect image that does not convey the reality of the truly complex history behind Harvard University. Debunking Harvard University's glorified history concerning its involvement in abolitionism and race is crucial to understanding the perseveringly complex nature of race relations today. Harvard University does not address these issues on its tours, but they must be acknowledged due to the institution's ubiquitous nature propagated by its tourism's extensive merchandising and frequency in popular culture.

Harvard is portrayed as a very American institution with impressive global reach. Founded in 1636, it is the country's oldest institute of higher education. Its website lists eleven American heads of state as graduates, and even more presidents with honorary degrees.¹ It has been host to the Crown Princess of Japan Masako Owada and Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-Moon, two key figures in the modern political macrocosm.² Politically and academically established faculty members are scattered about the website and displayed with distinction as not only accomplished scholars but global citizens. They are instigators of widespread change and academic advancement. Advertisements for seminars about topics from iconoclasm to climate change are all led by professors and high-profile guest speakers and further cement the nationalism displayed by the university.³ The American element is unmistakable: a country in the political center of the world holding prominent discussions at the prime academic hub of the world only promotes the idea of exclusivity. The Harvard President herself, Drew Gilpin Faust, is a lauded historian of both the Civil War and the American South, effectively connecting a high administrative position, academic prowess, and America's deepest, darkest history in a self-satisfied loop that advances Harvard's popular standing as not only a highly patriotic university but also an enlightened one.⁴

However, with all of its good American qualities come the bad ones, particularly in relation to race. In a project entitled *Harvard and Slavery*, Sven Beckert, a Harvard professor, reveals the unexpected racially fuelled tension that permeated the academic environment during the 1800s.⁵ Harvard was rife with discouragement of discussion of abolition. Discussion of such topics was considered uncouth and improper, especially because Harvard University was beholden to a

¹ "Heads of State," *Harvard University* (website), The President and Fellows of Harvard College, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance/honors/heads-state>.

² "Heads of State," *Harvard University* (website).

³ *Harvard Gazette* (website), The President and Fellows of Harvard College, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette>.

⁴ "Office of the President: Biography," *Harvard University* (website), The President and Fellows of Harvard College, accessed December 2, 2015, <http://www.harvard.edu/president/biography>.

⁵ Sven Beckert and Katherine Stevens, "Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History," November 16, 2011.

financial house called the Baring Brothers, an institution whose major trade was, incidentally, cotton. In addition, many plantation-holding families dreamed of sending their sons to learn at this prestigious school where they coexisted with the non-slaveholding population with ease. Active abolitionism was taboo, and faculty members who called for the abolishment of slavery were told to reconsider with prudence, a thinly veiled way of proposing job loss over causing too much social disruption. An entire university indebted to a business run on the backs of slaves muffled talks of activism in its best economic interests and perhaps, as an unintended consequence, perpetrated the slowness to turn the public away from blatant racism, a slowness that persists to this day. Harvard professors, even in the 1800s, were considered academic authorities; their opinions held great sway in the minds of many. This power was effectively utilized by Louis Agassiz, a prominent professor, who further aggravated the issue of slavery by giving slaveholders an excuse through his very extensive work in polygenism—the belief that the basis for inequality, genetics, is evidence that the story of Adam and Eve only applies to Caucasian people, thereby justifying holding slaves to the highly religious South.⁶ Harvard is a school whose history is littered with failings such as these, but it is difficult to find them in Harvard's public history.

In particular, Harvard's tours fail to address the school's very controversial role in black history and the complexities of it in very much the same manner as the Freedom Trail. The university delegates pleasant history to its public tours and its historical blemishes to papers such as the one written by Sven Beckert. The Freedom Trail, according to historian Alfred F. Young, "has fragmented social history by groups," a dangerous practice that places different phenomena, such as race relations, on "separate tracks with their own timetables." In both cases, "the challenge... is to integrate such histories into the larger narrative."⁷ They both present modified images of glorified institutions, ones that are particularly harmful to the perception of race today. Tour guides discuss a very whitewashed history poorly hidden by mentions of academic progression and diversity, failing to mention how Harvard University in particular has failed people of color for decades, how the very campus has come to develop since the growth of equality. They mention the university's commitment to the advancement of knowledge in all its facets, but the guides address the university's history in half-truths in a manner inconsistent with the very principle of *veritas*. Nowhere in the readily available pamphlets distributed outside the campus does it mention the controversial history of the school. Tourists hear about John Harvard's financial contributions, the many ways in which Harvard has changed the world in the past, and the ways that Harvard continues to impact the geopolitical sphere in the present, but there is no acknowledgment of a history that is not as pleasant as the unsuspecting tourist may think. For instance, Harvard's Memorial Hall, meant to simultaneously honor students who fought on the Union side and, more dishonorably, deter federal interference into Harvard's affairs (racism chief among them), is only addressed in a positive light, a falsely innocent symbol of a righteous fight for emancipation and abolition. Tourists, as a result, remain blissfully blind to the school's less-than-ideal reality in favor of celebrating the very prominent accolades of an institution that does not properly address its past shortcomings.

Many will say that, because Harvard University was definitely not a sole instigator in the slow progression of equality, it is not necessary to discuss this institution specifically. More importantly, the institution is not likely to change its campus tours to include its ties to slavery. However, it is important for the school to address it, to discuss it, to be honest about it in some other capacity—if

⁶ "One Race or Several Species," *Understanding Race* (website), American Anthropological Society, accessed December 1, 2015, http://www.understandingrace.org/history/science/one_race.html.

⁷ Alfred F. Young, "Revolution in Boston? Eight Propositions for Public History on the Freedom Trail," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 36.

not on its tours—because it is almost impossible to escape Harvard’s influence and image both in and out of Massachusetts. Boston is scattered with Harvard merchandise. Faneuil Hall’s university apparel shops prominently feature the familiar crimson lettering in favor of, say, the brown and blue of Tufts University. Harvard Square itself capitalizes on prospective students touring the campus by offering exclusive sweaters, scarves, and bags at exorbitant prices. Consumers are therefore a mode of advertisement as they walk the streets of both Cambridge and their hometowns wearing the colors of an elite university. Popular culture simultaneously exploits Harvard’s prominent image by plastering the familiar red brick across television screens and marketing its name across the country. The Old Yard is recognizable from beloved works such as *Good Will Hunting* to the degree that it is not uncommon to hear “Park the car in Harvard Yard” years after the making of the movie. The television series *Gilmore Girls* paints the university as a place of academic prowess and achievement, a place that the noble protagonist strives to attend in the early episodes of the show. No matter where one may be, Harvard is highly visible and will continue to be visible in the future. Discussion of the failings, perhaps in the *Harvard Gazette* or in some of its famous lectures, of such a prestigious institution will encourage, not discourage, the discussion of systematic racism in today’s society.

Why would a university think to bring to light its dark history? Why would it deliberately expose its shortcomings, especially in the manifold area of race? Race is still a hotly contested topic politically, socially, and universally. The systemic oppression and stigmatization of people of color persists, despite the end of slavery more than a century ago. The modern focus on black history has proven to be insufficient in the advancement of people of color.⁸ Harvard itself was involved in a racially fueled event that highlighted the fact that even a university of seemingly enlightened individuals is not safe from racism: black tape over the faces of African-American Harvard Law professors revealed that discrimination survives in America’s oldest, most treasured institution, despite the limited efforts in addressing it in the past. The university was forced to confront the ugly existence of hate on its campus, and the world was forced to watch as students rallied in solidarity with its African-American professors, as they attempted to discuss that there were some in their own student body who contemptuously defaced pictures of revered faculty members because of their race.⁹ In an article in *The New York Times*, they expressed dissatisfaction with the way their own school did not “[do] enough to make the school fully inclusive of minority students and faculty members.”¹⁰ Bringing to light the truth, the *veritas*, in Harvard’s past and present moves the conversation of race into the future.

Widespread acknowledgement of Harvard University’s dark history, especially through the way it markets itself to tourists, will stimulate necessary discussion of race relations in the United States. Though it is unlikely that Harvard will change its repertoire of tourism techniques, glorification of its history dismisses it from culpability that extends to this very day in the way that people of color experience systemic oppression. The tours are blinding, and therefore market schools as improbable places for racial tension, and the elevation of such a visible school as a place of total equality hides the unpleasant reality from the general public. Despite renewed efforts in light of recent events at the university to address systemic racism, the racial climate has not changed; it is not enough. When a visible entity addresses its shortcomings publicly, thoroughly, to its visitors and prospective

⁸ Jeff Nesbit, “Institutional Racism Is Our Way of Life,” *US News*, May 6, 2015, accessed November 26, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/at-the-edge/2015/05/06/institutional-racism-is-our-way-of-life>.

⁹ Jess Bidgood, “Tape Found Over Portraits of Black Harvard Professors,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2015, accessed November 23, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/20/us/tape-found-over-portraits-of-black-harvard-professors.html?_r=0.

¹⁰ Bidgood.

applicants, the world listens with bated breath, with intent to examine itself. Tourism, despite the fact that it is an area that will most likely remain unchanged, highlights a need for honesty elsewhere. Harvard is an institution recognized almost universally as an academic authority, and its words hold power. Knowledge of Harvard University's involvement in the slow progression, and even inhibition, of racial equality should be made more accessible to the modern person, a move that will widen the discussion of race in America today. *Veritas* is out there, and it is Harvard's turn to find it.

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