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Abstract

At the heart of tourism is encounter - perhaps its defining, distinguishing feature (Crouch et al., 2001). We travel to encounter other places, landscapes, people, sights, weather. While the tourism industry relies on all manner of material commodities to turn a profit (hotel beds, postcards, luggage, etc.), and has been incorporated into a symbolic economy of marketing representations, its most cherished, commodified, essential elements is encounter.

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Geographies of tourism: space, ethics and encounter

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Abstract:

In this chapter I focus on encounter, the spaces of encounter in tourism, and the manner in which tourism catalyses entanglements of people, places and identities. Antecedents were earlier theories of the tourist gaze, and critiques of tourism as neo-colonialism. One response was the emergence of an ethical tourism industry – based on commitments to pay decent wages, respect local cultures and tread lightly on nature. While the ethical tourism industry has made strides on these issues, I critique its reliance on binary thinking, and failure to accommodate contradictions and variable ethical conduct in the moments of encounter. By contrast, recent work in geography has sought to explore the multi-sensory and affective dimensions of tourism encounters without recourse to ethical essentialism. In research on embodiment, emotions and sensory encounters, risks of diluting critique are weighed against opportunities to sharpen ethical concepts. A focus on encounter enables closer dissection of the moments and spaces in which power is exercised, and relations of care extended.

Introduction

At the heart of tourism is *encounter* – perhaps its defining, distinguishing feature (Crouch et al 2001). We travel to encounter other places, landscapes, people, sights, weather. While the tourism industry relies on all manner of material commodities to turn a profit (hotel beds, postcards, luggage, etc), and has been incorporated into a symbolic economy of marketing representations, its most cherished, commodified, essential element is encounter.

Tourism encounters are immediate, embodied, and geographical; everyone with sufficient means to travel experiences them. Although tourism feeds off the ‘desire for distraction from the demands and drudgery of everyday routines’ (Britton, 1991:452-3), the flip-side is that tourism also relies on bodily displacement and immersion in unfamiliar environments. Despite a propensity to *avoid* encounter on holiday (in favour of the poolside or the view from the bus), most tourism arises from the simple human need for social interaction, the ‘need to be with others’ and to ‘regress into childhood in order to play’ (Ryan 2002:28&33). Tourism is more than escapism, evidenced by continued growth in niche travel, educational tours, working holidays and sex tourism – all of which involve leaving the ‘safety bubble’ of the tour bus or hotel, to be ‘*doing something* in the places they visit rather than being endlessly spectatorially passive’ (Franklin and Crang 2001:13). Tourists are consumers, translators, collectors, detectives – everyday cultural and political geographers (Crouch 2000) – seeking to make sense of the world and their place in it. It makes sense, then, to focus on encounter, a notion explored in tourism research some time

ago (e.g. Karch and Dann 1981) but now increasingly relevant across geography (see for example, Valentine 2008).

What kinds of encounter?

Tourism has a visual preoccupation – indeed, an ocular epistemology came to shape the early practice of tourism research, a ‘looking glass’ approach to the phenomenon of encounter (Picken 2006). Thus John Urry’s (1990) *The Tourist Gaze* has been particularly influential; a book “focused upon tourists’ ways of seeing, the power inherent in their gaze upon attractions as well as the power inherent in the manipulation of tourism representations and experiences” (Hannam 2002:229).

Tourism brings consumers within visible proximity to workers in destinations – unlike other forms of commodity production which frequently distance or shield consumers from seeing how goods are made. Women’s labour is frequently exploited for cleaning and serving; but unlike the textiles trade or electronics assembly, in tourism worker conditions are at best only partially hidden from tourists, and usually are quite visible (in hotels, bars, planes) (McNeill 2008). The preponderance of guilt and shame amongst tourists, as common emotional responses to travel, attests to this (Waitt et al 2007). At one level, the tourist gaze involves encounters between producers and consumers that make more transparent the politics of capitalism.

Having said this, much remains concealed, and tourism encounters are packaged, with worker decorum frequently stage-managed for tourist consumption. This is particularly so in cultural tourism, which commodifies ethnic difference and vernacular culture to bring order and predictability (Cuthill 2007). As Robinson

(2001: 54) reminds us, few tourists seek total immersion in a different culture. Instead, 'the tourist seeks safe glimpses of cultural difference, and can often be satisfied with simulacra'. For Doorne et al (2003:1), 'cultural identities are appropriated, constructed and traded through and around material objects of touristic exchange'. Tourism commodifies place, guiding tourists' movements and controlling that they are drawn to gaze upon. Indeed, Britton (1991:452) argued that travelling was 'not free time in any absolute sense, but is subject to rules of permissible forms and sanctioned behaviour'. Tourism's apparently 'free' or spontaneous encounters are regulated and a source of profit, even when, in the case of the backpacker scene in Southeast Asia, a sense of being 'off the beaten track' prevails (Lloyd 2006). Given this, it is entirely understandable that in academia and activist circles the tourist gaze has been conceived as another means of colonialism or imperialism (Robinson 2001), especially when historical injustices against indigenous and minority groups are glossed-over in attempts to maximise experiential appeal for tourists (Muzaini et al 2007).

Towards ethical encounters

One response has been the emergence of an ethical tourism industry, 'against a background of environmental ethics and global political economy' (Macbeth, 2005:962). In parallel to the fair trade movement, enterprises can now badge themselves as 'ethical' in terms of environmental standards, work practices and cultural sensitivity. There are now even whole guide books, in the style of *Lonely Planet* or *Time Out*, dedicated to ethical tourism globally (e.g. Pattullo and Minelli 2006). Where ethical tourism succeeds most is in foregrounding concerns of justice

(Higgins-Desbiolles 2008), in improvements to living and working conditions, clarifying the means of tourism production and raising awareness of terrible practices elsewhere – or in the case of travel to participate in active conservation programs, to catalyse positive improvements in biodiversity (Broad and Jenkins 2008). Frequently community-owned and supported through non-profit organisations, ethical tourism enterprises promise honesty and integrity, and provide hope of an alternative economy through which ethical/unethical practices are brought into sharper relief (Gibson-Graham and Cameron 2007). Ethical tourism enterprises pursue a philosophical commitment to ‘move beyond the almost exclusive pursuit of industry profits and place social, cultural and ecological value on local environments and economies’ (Wearing et al 2005:424).

Yet a distinction is worthy between attempts to insert more ethical enterprises into the super-structure of the tourism industry, and what an ethics of tourism might encompass in the moments and spaces of encounter. Tricia Barnett from non-profit organisation Tourism Concern writes in the introduction to *The Ethical Travel Guide* (Pattullo and Minelli 2006: viii) that ‘If you decide to visit one of these hotels, guest houses, lodges or villages you will know that your money will go to people directly and not be lost to outsiders. You can then have a great holiday and not take a guilt trip!’. At one level this is perhaps true, but being on holiday is much more than just paying for a hotel room or taking a cultural tour. That more ethical enterprises might now exist cannot guarantee ethical *conduct* (whatever that might be), nor counteract the variability of how tourism encounters actually transpire. Cultural exchanges take place in unfolding circumstances, relationships develop (or deteriorate) and reactions are negotiated (Johnston 2007). Both the critique of tourism as corruption and the

newly-branded ethical tourism industry share ‘a sentimental nostalgia... that resembles nothing so much as the vituperative nostalgia of conservatives, who fondly imagine a time where the elite alone travelled and everything in the world showed itself truly to them’ (Culler 1988:10).

Again, the parallels are with fair trade: branding masks the possibility of more or less ethical practices under the ‘ethical tourism’ banner (Duffy 2000); it codifies ethical tourism (against all other tourism, which is unethical by implication); and introduces a moralising element that endorses some types or spaces of tourism against amoral ‘others’ (Butcher 2003). The ‘new moral tourist’ seeks non-intrusive encounters that reconnect sensitively with nature and culture – all good intentions. But ethical tourism risks becoming another opportunity for cosmopolitan travellers, who distance themselves from mass tourists, to accumulate cultural capital (Germann Molz 2007) and consider themselves superior – adding to the ‘right’ luggage and adventure wear as markers of distinction (Britton 1991:454).

Ethical tourism hopes to overturn a binary between oppressor (tourist) and oppressed (host community, tourism labour, nature) that may not bear out so simply in reality. Amidst exploitation tourism workers negotiate marginality and improve their life chances (Malam 2008), an observation that does not preclude opposition to capitalistic relations of work, but rather acknowledges possibilities of resistance and presence of intermittent victories. In the context of sexual politics, Waitt et al (2008:785) argued that

representations of the gay tourist as a passive consumer, whizzing around the commercial gay circuit, are rather simplistic... Indeed, the presence of

international tourism amenities and associated travellers in non-Western nations might even *help* constitute alternative expressions of same-sex desire and identity... and do so on the political terms of local sexual dissidents rather than those of 'Western imperialists'.

Backpackers are another case: becoming part of the tourism workforce is for many part of the travel experience – a particular preference that complicates binary readings of tourism as third world workers in servitude to rich westerners (Duncan 2008).

Boon's (2007) analysis of the negotiation of front- and back-of-house boundaries by hotel room attendants demonstrates just how fluid the micro-geography of tourism work can be, with resultant ambiguity for what might constitute 'ethical' tourism encounters in any given place and time. Even mass tourism – so frequently depicted as tourism's dark heart, with its low wage labour, environmental damage and cheap cultural stereotypes – involves local populations establishing and defending front and back zones of encounter: places to entertain and to escape; places to perform formulaically for tourists, allowing everyday life to take place away from the tourist eye (Butcher 2003). By contrast, slum-dwellers meeting western tourists in a pro-poor ethical tourism experience must re-visit Western expectations of 'slum life' every time they greet, serve or accompany tourists through their neighbourhoods.

Limitations and contradictions are apparent even for the most well-meaning or best-designed ethical tourism enterprises.

Sensory encounters: beyond ethical essentialism

Accordingly, recent work in tourism studies has progressed from cultural imperialist critiques (and moralistic endorsement of ethical tourism) to focus on the complexity

and materiality of tourism encounters. Beyond sight, researchers are now analysing the other senses and how encounters are experienced in an affective, embodied fashion, through touch, sound and taste. It becomes possible for tourists to ‘internalise a place through its food’ (Everett 2008:337), because ‘eating and drinking out are important performances in the consumption of place’ (Cuthill 2007:64). Sensory encounters inform geographical analysis of material space, its surveillance, governance and affective possibilities (Paterson 2009). Some sensory cues are obvious: street signs guide sightseeing tourists; police encourage orderly behaviour; paid ticketing at museums and galleries ensures commercial return and regulates the movement of bodies. At once mundane and profound, such technologies of space enormously shape what encounters are possible – and how tourists attach meaning to them (Griffin and Hayllar (2007). Augmenting physical infrastructures are less obvious, but often no less important, sensory, psychological and cultural cues for the regulation and expression of bodies in tourist space (Saldanha 2005). Music, for instance, marks out tourist space, defines its borders and makes tourists feel invited (or unwelcome) – as in New Orleans, where both before and after Katrina jazz marked sections of the French Quarter as tourist-friendly (Gibson and Connell 2005). At street parades and festivals, sound has been shown to be pivotal in tourists participating with a sense of joyous abandon rather than reserved observation (Duffy et al 2007).

The simple pleasure from feeling sun and sand on the skin is central to the beach’s ubiquity in tourism, while cultural norms governing bodily exposure and decorum prevail and shape the sensory environment (Obrador-Pons 2007). Similarly, in Third World informal sector sites – markets, bazaars, streetscapes – bodily proximity, smell, heat and noise have long invoked the exotic. For Robinson (2001:40), ‘what tourists

seem to feed from is the apprehension of conflict and the emotional responses brought out by the tangible recognition of difference’.

The senses trigger specific bodily and emotional responses and encourage human interactions, from the festival parade to the nightclub. Tourism is visceral, and frequently relies on hedonism: sun-baking, dancing, drinking, taking drugs, pursuing sexual encounters, the ‘noise and din of the disco and the sweat of the massage parlour’ (Ryan 2002:27). Accordingly, tourism research has been refreshed by experts on space and sexuality, offering analysis of the complexities of sexual encounters, as correctives to a cerebral view of the world as ‘asexual terrain, a world seemingly devoid of lust, passion and sex’ (Waitt et al 2008:782). Within regulated spaces unpredictable encounters are still possible; while in the heat of the moment, ‘sensory and social overload’ renders self-conscious tourist behaviour impossible, ‘rehearsed tourist roles have little coherence in these settings’ (Edensor 2001:77).

Geographers have also sought to situate tourism encounters as moments of interaction between humans and non-human landscapes (Bentrupperbäumer and Reser 2009). Waitt and Lane’s (2007) traced how ‘wilderness’ comes to be understood through bodily encounters with nature among four-wheel drive tourists in the remote Kimberley region of outback Australia. In another study from the same part of the world, White and White (2008:42) explored how isolation and transience combined to catalyse new social relationships, as encounters with strangers ‘offered comfort and companionship in what they perceived to be a hostile and alien environment’. In neighbouring New Zealand, a new wedding tourism industry relied on ‘pure’ landscapes of snowcapped mountains, glaciers and forests, in turn naturalizing and

romanticizing heterosexuality – landscape and bodies entwined (Johnston 2006). In Borneo, humans simply ‘got in the way’ of enjoyment of nature, as boundaries were made between tourists and wild nature (Markwell 2001).

Conclusion: spaces of encounter, spaces of politics

Analysis of tourism’s encounters is now more attentive to how bodies and materials interact in fluid, complicated ways – and the spaces in which these encounters take place. For me, a litmus test is how such work contributes to on-going critical research agendas. The danger is that with a highly nuanced description of how bodies, materials and ‘nature’ are brought together in tourism encounters, the exercise of power is relegated to background status (Valentine 2008). But as Dikeç (2005: 172) argued, “space becomes political in that it becomes the polemical place where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated. It becomes an integral element of the interruption of the ‘natural’ (or better yet, naturalized) order of domination through the constitution of a place of encounter by those that have no part in that order”. The political, Dikeç (2005: 172) argues, ‘is signalled by this encounter as a moment of interruption, and not by the mere presence of power relations and competing interests’.

So there is much value in an ability to locate precisely the agents, moments and techniques of the exercise of power in tourism encounters. How then might future geographical research on tourism encounters further contribute to critical political agendas through such a lens?

Signposts in recent research include using concepts of embodiment and affect to trace an anatomy of power in the spaces of tourism encounter – whether planned or ‘serendipitous’ (Shaw, forthcoming) – to highlight collisions of class, gender, race and identity (Saldanha 2005). Researchers are increasingly turning to such considerations, to examine how trust operates in the micro-spaces of encounter (Lynch et al 2007), and conversely to identify the intimate mechanics of discrimination, as in Tomsen and Markwell’s (2007) analysis of hostility and violence at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Similarly, much work remains to be done in thinking through conceptually, as well as documenting empirically, the detrimental elements (or otherwise) of human-nature interactions in tourism – from feeding bottle-nosed dolphins (Smith et al 2008) to whale-watching (Hughes et al 2006).

Encounters elicit emotional responses of guilt, shame, concern – all potentially productive (if complex) responses (Waitt et al 2007). How are ethical dilemmas confronted in encounters, and resolutions to them rehearsed? Alongside the pervasive danger of exploitation and environmental damage are possibilities in the moments of encounter to learn, to address wrongs and demonstrate commitment to equality – to extend ‘relations of care’ (Miller 1998; Dikeç 2005). What moral gateways are opened (or closed) by the ‘embodied knowledge derived from travelling, witnessing, climbing, walking, touching and being touched’ (Waitt et al 2007:248) – given the possibility to interrupt dominance is ever-present? Tourism’s encounters alert us to the very desires that underpin travel – and in amongst these are motivations beyond mere conquest or accumulation of cultural capital. We encounter other places, landscapes and peoples possessing varying geographical resources and spatial literacies; a range of skills and knowledges are brought to (and gained from) tourism

encounters (Hannam 2006). Tourism is thus ‘full of contradictory possibilities and potentials’ (Watson and Kopachevsky 1994:660).

Also, what new connections can be made between critical tourism geographers and the worlds of tourism industry management and social activism? Analysis of the moral gateways opened (or closed) by tourism encounters underpinned Waitt et al’s (2007:261) recommendations to national park managers: about whether cross-cultural signage worked, and whether restrictions on tourist movements intended to respect local indigenous communities in fact had the opposite effect, making tourists feel guilty to be there, and thus more estranged. In their case, pride, shame, guilt and surprise were emotional responses to visiting Uluru, a famous site of Aboriginal heritage in Australia. Through these emotions moral reflection was either suppressed or pursued. Those tourists able to acknowledge shame tended to explore indigenous culture with interest and respect, and thus productive moral gateways were opened that assisted attempts to promote reconciliation.

What other possible practical lessons arise from micro-analysis of encounters? Can confrontation and tactile intensity be harnessed to enable ‘symbolic excavation’ of difficult or suppressed memories – or to deliberately invoke emotional responses, what Ballantyne (2003) calls ‘hot interpretations’ of social, environmental and moral issues? In America’s Deep South museums invite tourists to touch the material objects and landscapes of slavery –shackles and chains – heightening the drama of encounter, and forcing museum visitors to ‘participate in the memory work of not forgetting or trivializing the enslaved and their experiences’ (Alderman and Campbell 2008:338).

There are indubitably other similar opportunities for museums and galleries to enlist tactility towards educational and curative goals.

Finally – and mindful of the perennial depiction of tourism geography as ‘shallow’ and ‘frivolous’ – something needs to be said about the possibility of reclaiming tourism as fun. Holiday escapism may well tempt ignorance of unethical practices, but does that mean dismissing fun as a possible site of analysis? Surely there is something in the unexpected surprises and comforts of strangers (White and White 2008), in the transient and transgressive spaces of festivals, backpacker hostels and bars (Wilson and Richards 2008), that enables community and communality to be remade in unlikely ways. Even that most stereotypically mundane form of mass tourism, family holidays, provides meaningful encounters, because having fun together cements human relationships (Obrador-Pons 2004). Without tourism, the world would be dull – and more pointedly, tourism’s only alternative, immobility, is an invitation to xenophobia. For this reason tourism encounters warrant further analysis and reflection.

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