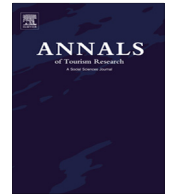




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Diaspora, authenticity and the imagined past



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ABSTRACT

Ancestral tourism in Scotland, a sector of the heritage tourism market sensitive to consumer personalisation, has particular propensities towards process-driven co-created experiences. These experiences occur within existing categories of object-based and existential notions of authenticity alongside an emergent category of the 'authentically imagined past'. The latter of these modes reveals a complex interplay between professionally endorsed validation of the empirical veracity of objects, documents and places and deeply held, authentically imagined, narratives of 'home'. These narratives, built up in the Diaspora over centuries, drive new processes towards authenticity in tourism. We conducted 31 interviews across 27 sites throughout Scotland with curators, archivists, and volunteers to explore these notions of authenticity within the ancestral tourism context.

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Introduction

Ancestral tourism has been identified as a key area of growth by Scotland's National Tourism Organisation, VisitScotland, with a market in the Scottish Diaspora estimated at 50 million people in countries such as Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand (VisitScotland., 2013). This paper reveals how ancestral tourists appear not to seek authentication of this form of heritage consumption in a conventional sense of indirect professional assurance, but seek confirmation of longstanding ancestral narratives (real and imagined), developed in the Diaspora itself. As a result, tourists seek to produce authentication through co-creation, with direct staff contact, participatory interpretation, and contribution of and to archival and object-based records. This presents heritage practitioners with direct, focused, and potentially rich, mutually productive encounters with tourists, yet also presents ethical challenges when intervening to disprove or modify often deeply held, but empirically dubious, notions of personal 'imagined pasts'.

Conceptual debates on 'authenticity' in the tourism literature have been present since its introduction to the tourism lexicon in the early 1970s (see MacCannell, 1973). In particular, a body of work focusses on authenticity as a process, negotiated (or renegotiated) between a tourist site and its visitors (Bruner, 1994; Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013; Frisvoll, 2013; Wall & Xie, 2005). This complex process often takes place around sites of staged authenticity (e.g. Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013; Frisvoll, 2013) and is increasingly viewed as a participatory, or co-created process (see Cohen & Cohen, 2012). In particular, we focus here on the specificity of historical relationships between zones of supply and demand that produce tourists' notions of 'authenticity', sometimes in tension with those held by heritage practitioners in the destination itself. While notions linking religious pilgrimage and authenticity among tourists are related to our context (Andriotis, 2011; Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008), these are largely determined by adherence to particular creeds and institutions. It is

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argued that experiences demanded by the ancestral sector of the heritage market often require intimate, place bound, origin-based levels of personal interaction with practitioners. The result of an increased desire for particular forms of ‘authentic’ verification can either reinforce and reproduce the curator/archivist as guarantor of authentication or, in one important sense, disrupt it. As such, the research question underpinning this study is: does the intimate engagement between the diasporic market and the heritage sector at the ancestral destination produce existing and emergent forms of authentication? The contested notion of ‘authenticity’ as desired, imagined, performed, experienced and consumed through cultural heritage tourism is well rehearsed in the literature (see Bryce, Curran, O’Gorman, & Taheri, 2015; Cohen, 2004; Lugosi, 2016; MacCannell, 1999; Salazar, 2012; Shackley, 1994). Analysis has been brought to bear on heritage professionals as activists, re-framers and ‘re-authenticators’ of history (see Barker, 1999; Bryce & Carnegie, 2013; Hein, 2000).

Discussion begins with an examination of changing professional discourse at heritage sites where much ancestral tourism is consumed. A review of the specific implications of tourism on professional heritage practice is undertaken, as well as of the notion of ‘authenticity’ as a function of market demand. The specific contextual background of ancestral tourism, nostalgia and the imagined-past is then offered alongside some necessary historical background on Scotland and the Scottish Diaspora’s experience of emigration and return. Our data is drawn from a qualitative study of ancestral tourism delivery at 27 sites across Scotland, pre-identified as *loci* for the ancestral tourism market through prior correspondence with staff. Analysis is framed on two existing themes identified in the literature, object-based and existential authenticities, and a third emergent theme, the authentically imagined past, leading us to implications of our research for ancestral tourism in particular and heritage tourism in general.

Changing institutional discourse, heritage tourism and the desire for authentication

Museums, archive centres and sites where heritage is consumed are traditionally framed as communities of cultural practice (Wenger, 2000). Professional staff see their primary role as custodians and enablers of conservation (Delafons, 1997). They, and the particular representational and interpretive practises they adopt, are historically mobile manifestations of societal change (Barker, 1999; Hein, 2000). Staff are under pressure to develop adaptive strategies to increasing demands for independent revenue generation. However, they are still embedded within national and local contexts which often underwrite their core appeal as repositories of favoured versions of past and current values (Barr, 2005; Hetherington, 2000; Radhakrishnan, 1994). Collections, therefore, become visual signs ‘colonized’ by both tourist and curatorial gazes (Claessen & Howes, 2006: 200), modified around the professionally legitimated discourse of curators and archivists or ‘triggering’ less empirically informed ideas and images for tourists (Jordanova, 1989: 23).

Museums are considered “premier attractions”, often forming a network or locus for how destinations are conceived, represented and consumed in heritage terms (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 132). Concerns exist that the meaning of texts and objects may be decontextualized due to the historical distance of tourists from particular events and the commodifying effects of tourism (Pollock & Sharp, 2007).

In tourism, authenticity often functions as a fixed concept (Hall, 2007) imposing “a one-dimensional interpretation, supported by assessment criteria” (King, 2007: 1143). If considering authenticity as enhancing measurements of ‘tourist satisfaction’ (Shackley, 1994: 397) to support ‘benignly self-serving’ tourist understandings of ‘the authentic’ (Horne, 1986: 223–224), then it is unlikely to yield much beyond managerial reductionism.

Therefore, Bell (1996: 132–133) wonders whether one can “know if an [aesthetic] experience is ‘authentic’ – i.e., whether it is true and therefore valid for all men?” and traces a late-modern shift in the defining quality, from ‘authority’ vested in ‘mastery of craft ... and knowledge of form’ to ‘immediacy’ of intent and reception. To Slater (1997: 94–95) the search for authenticity constitutes ‘scrutinising’ people, objects and aesthetic form for a ‘consistency’ which is often confused with ‘sincerity’. This is near impossible in a fragmented social world of pluralistic representation and reception for and by multiple ‘audiences’ (*ibid*). This invites recognition of the many modes in which subjects are ‘interpellated’ in relation to objects in a plenitude of ‘authenticities’, manifested in dispersed consumer culture (Althusser, 2008; Collins, 1989).

In a commercial/cultural nexus like tourism the valorization of ‘authenticity’ as a socially formed object of desire, has crossed the ‘threshold of formalization’ (Foucault, 1989a) and become a discursive ‘positivity’ with material consequences (Shepherd, 2011). In the move from the experiential ‘front’ (false/recreated) to ‘back’ (true/authentic) (MacCannell, 1999), ‘inauthentic’ experiences ‘staged’ in whole or in part for tourist consumption may, through habituation, become accepted as ‘authentic’ (Cohen, 2004; Ryan & Gu, 2010), acquiring patinas of ‘timelessness’ (Trevor-Roper, 1983).

Claims to authenticity can rarely be authenticated by tourists themselves but are instead often offered through quality assurance of *versions* of original objects, experience and places (Asplett & Cooper, 2000; McIntosh, 2004; Swanson & Timothy, 2012). Importantly, in the sense that Foucault (1988) understood ‘power’ both as deployer and producer of approved forms of ‘knowledge’, all such second-order experiences must be ‘authenticated’ by a source perceived by the market to be legitimate, i.e. having a relation to the original referent (Henderson, 2000; Hsieh & Chang, 2006; Thomson & Tian, 2008).

Meanwhile, ‘self-connection’ with brands (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010), can be projected onto entire destination cultures and experiences and be a determinant of tourist satisfaction (de Rojas & Camarero, 2008), hinting that some tourists may have done much of the work of authentication in advance, merely requiring the destination to confirm it in a ‘customized’ sense (Wang, 2007). Several authors note that, while sites, experiences or objects may be reproduced or ‘staged’, rooted in ‘provenance’ but ‘mobile’ in their place of consumption or even produced ‘creatively’ by tourists them-

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