Performing national identities in spaces of tourism

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Abstract | A contemporary way of understanding tourism is to approach travel as a means of creating new societies. Instead of looking at cultures commodified as destinations for tourist consumption, it is worth exploring tourism itself as emergent culture. This paper goes beyond 'destinations' to explore national tourism discourses and practices by situating interactive and embodied spaces invested with emergent meanings. It focuses on the relationship between the constructions of national identity and tourism and situates the study in Singapore to investigate discursive spaces in terms of visualities, materialities and reflexivities. The research critically evaluates the relationships, experiences and performances that inform a bricolage research methodology. Through questioning the relationship between Singapore's nation building project and tourism policy, tourist practice is understood in the context of the everyday through 'local' consumption, its translation into tourist identities and vice versa.

Keywords | Tourism, Performance, National identity, Nation building, Singapore.

Resumo | Uma forma contemporânea de entender o turismo passa por analisar as viagens como um meio para criar novas sociedades. Em vez de olhar para culturas mercantilizadas como destinos para o consumo turístico, vale a pena explorar o próprio turismo como uma cultura emergente. Este trabalho vai além dos 'destinos' para explorar discursos e práticas do turismo nacional, situando espaços interativos e imbuídos de significados emergentes. Centra-se na relação entre as construções da identidade nacional e do turismo e situa o estudo em Singapura para investigar espaços discursivos em termos de visualidade, materialidade e reflexão. A pesquisa avalia criticamente as relações, experiências e *performances*, com base numa metodologia 'bricolage'. Através do questionamento da relação entre o projeto de construção da nação de Singapura e da política de turismo, a prática turística é entendida no contexto do quotidiano através do consumo 'local', da sua tradução em identidades turísticas e vice-versa.

Palavras-chave | Turismo, Atuação, Identidade nacional, Construção da nação, Singapura.

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1. Introduction: Destination, representation and beyond

A contemporary way of understanding tourism is to approach travel as a means of creating new societies. Instead of looking at cultures commodified for tourist consumption, we could also be exploring tourism itself as emergent culture. However, the majority of studies in tourism have generally been restricted to:

> [a] vision of tourism as a series of discrete, localized events, where destinations, seen as bounded localities, are subject to external forces producing impacts, where tourism is a series of discrete, enumerated occurrences of travel, arrival, activity, purchase, departure… (Franklin & Crang, 2001, p. 6).

Especially when we review notions of destination marketing and imaging by the industry or destination branding by national tourism boards, the destination becomes a 'privileged tourism space' (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen & Urry, 2004). It is limiting to assume modern tourists only leave home on the understanding that they know where they are going, and that they will return to their point of origin. The latter is also usually neglected at the expense of the destination, which is largely considered in terms of how it is produced and represented by the tourism industry, corresponding to a patterned consumption of flows and outputs in the touristic system. Through notions of the tourist gaze, we reproduce and sustain the imaginations that adhere to common tourist devices such as brochures, guidebooks, postcards and the myriad of images in circulation about place-culture (Urry, 1995; Selwyn, 1996). Tourist destinations are thus presented as "places for viewing the other rather than as spaces with which and within which to interact" (Wearing, Stevenson & Young, 2010, p. 110).

Bærenholdt et al. (2004, p. 28) emphasize that "destinations, apart from marketing, organize little of the networks that are so important in tourism". Framke (2002) in his article *The destination as a concept: A discussion of the business perspective versus the sociological approach in tourism theory*, contrasts an understanding of destination as a physical, spatial container filled by services and products and their connected images and identities which are consumed by tourists with another kind of destination not implicated by tourism activity, but through embedded, socially constructed meanings. Rather than a 'destination' which he insists belongs to a communication infrastructure supported by tourism marketers and consumers, Framke (2002) proposes 'differentiated spaces of tourism' in which "the tourists own tourist spaces as well as industry created economic spaces" (Framke, 2002, p. 106). Ringer (1998), an advocate of Framke's (2002) second position reveals that "people construct geographies… shaped by social values, attitudes and ideologies as they contract and expand, deteriorate and improve over time and space" (Ringer, 1998, pp. 6-7). If places are constantly being made and remade by people practicing various forms of mobility, then a question to be asked is if the destination exists at all, especially if "[t]here is no evidence that any destination ever attracted, in a literal sense, any tourists…" (Leiper, 2000, cited by Framke, 2002, p. 105).

Destinations have to commodify their specificity in ways which are not about existing or happening naturally but about vested historical, political and economic interests in their constructions (Harvey, 1989; Saarinen, 1998). Crouch (1999, p. 4) contends that:

> [a] spatial practice is to engage in a transformation, not to return or imagine a past, but creatively to enliven, to repeat only the possibility of a new, unique moment. Agencies that represent tourism and leisure can only provide structures into which our imaginative practice enters and through which it explores its desires, and their promotional messages that inflect these structures may not be ours.

It is then important to see how promotional images are being negotiated as tourism markers and how they are being performed and incorporated into

practice. Meaningful settings are achieved through a process where the tourist consumes the preset imagery based on particular assumptions the producers have of both self and other, and in turn projects these desires to reinforce the tourist product. In this sense, the tourism product is "interpreted for a consumer" (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990, p. 25) and packaged as an allure towards the 'tourists' way of seeing (Relph, 1976, p. 85). It becomes apparent that local agencies are no longer simply producers of the product, but are an inherent part of the product in producing and projecting their bodies as "performed selves" (Featherstone, 1983, p. 29) in the construction of identity.

This paper goes beyond 'destinations' to explore national tourism discourses and practices by situating interactive and embodied spaces invested with emergent meanings. It focuses on the relationship between the constructions of national identity and tourism and situates the study in Singapore to investigate discursive spaces in terms of visualities, materialities and reflexivities. The research critically evaluates the relationships, experiences and performances that inform a bricolage research methodology. Through questioning the relationship between Singapore's nation building project and tourism policy, tourist practice is understood in the context of the everyday through 'local' consumption, its translation into tourist identities and vice versa.

2. Contextualising national identities as tourist space

The nation is often preconceived with a set of characteristics and national identity is usually conceived as the immutable, state established iconography of what nationhood might mean. According to Smith (1991, p. 16), nations "define a definite social space within which members must live and work, and demarcate an historic territory that locates a community in time and space". Guibernau (1996, p. 79) considers the nation to represent "the socio-historical context within which culture is embedded and the means by which culture is produced, transmitted and received." In this regard, national identity seems to be identified in a national, top-down view of culture and differentiated from mundane forms of cultural practices.

Contemporary notions of national identity and nation building situate senses of identification and belonging that fuse individual and collective perspectives. Edensor (2002, p. vi) challenges this view to explain that:

> [the] under-explored, the habitual, unreflexive routines of everyday life also provide fertile ground for the development of national identity. Thus the cultural expression and experience of national identity is usually neither spectacular nor remarkable, but is generated in mundane, quotidian forms and practices.

According to Cubitt (1998, p. 1), "the concept of the nation is central to the dominant understandings both of political community and of personal identity". In this sense, social and individual identities rather than being distinct are entangled in complex ways. Edensor (2002) discusses nations as 'staged' as a showpiece of culture for the world to see. For example, places such as the Great Exhibition are created in ways in which its sole purpose is to portray a particular aspect of national identity. However, the 'staging' explores not representations for what they are, but performances of which meanings emerge. By the same token, national identity follows a course in which it is not being represented, but it *becomes*.

It is crucial to consider various spaces of performances in which symbolic sites can be explored as stages where identity is reproduced. By situating national imperative as part of everyday life, this paper follows on from a 'local' platform of national identity to expand on the fuzzy notions of how the self and other, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the individual and the collective, the inclusive and the exclusive, the internal and the external, the everyday and the state, that are constantly renegotiated especially

within designated spaces of performances where national subjects engage in tourist practice. The processes involved in these negotiations are complex and emergent, and reveal various local spaces in which identity is being made and remade, followed by the introduction of tourist spaces that are at the same time, spaces for nation building.

The case of Singapore is pertinent given its complex state formation process within the last forty-eight years, moving from a developing nation to a newly industrialized country and finally an advanced economy surpassing the ranks of many first-league developed countries. The success of the nation-building project has been seminal in the sowing of a multicultural identity as an inherent part of nationhood (Wee, 2010). A 'multiracialism' (Benjamin, 1976) developed as a crucial means for the maintenance of racial harmony and the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) quadratomy (Siddique, 1990, p. 36) was established as a classification of multiracialism. In a 'corresponding' relationship, four languages (Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English) were linked as matching 'ethnic' languages to each tenet of this multiracialism and cultivated as a Singaporean identity "to utilize its historical legacy, spatial location, economic heritage, political structure, and the demographic and ethnic constituency" (Salaff, 2004, p. 240).

It becomes evident that the cultivation of identity as a need and means of survival has evolved into a "substantial injection of self-definition and national pride" (Chua & Kuo, 1990, p. 6). However, what is seminal is how the notion of tourism, its practices and imbued identities have extrapolated into the expression of Singaporean identity. The deep connections between tourism and identity, often manifested in the re-invention of tradition and heritage to support the interests of national tourism industries, are pertinent (Wee, 2012). Hence, it is important to consider the conflation of tourism and identity, how tourism and identity discourses co-produce a range of performances that blur traditional conceptions.

3. Spaces of performances as epistemology

In a methodological enquiry, Hollinshead (2004, p. 85) highlights the importance of the "symbolic meaning of places (objects and events): what do objects, places, events 'authentically' or 'precisely' mean for their owning populations?" The exactitude of what is authentic in terms of the 'original' or 'real' is less a defining aspect than how the objects, places and events *connect* with the population or individual in question (Holliday, 2002). This is one of the foremost criteria in which identities are made and remade, but who owns what? How are concepts, values, representations, artefacts owned and how is ownership manifested and for what gains? These questions are tackled through an interpretive, qualitative methodology in which the researcher is fused within the research in a reflexive, self-critical and creative dialogue with the aim of problematizing hidden realities. It builds up embodied encounters through spatial networks through an immersion of self with tourist practice.

As part of the larger research frame of which this paper was a part of, particular spaces of performances were demarcated with the aim of exploring tourism and the everyday in Singapore. The processes of encounter, of being immersed as a mobile unit within these spaces of performances were based on arbitrary measures that incorporated rhizomatic connections and inherent as part of the bricolage approach in data collection. Participant observation was 'performed' and fieldwork allies were made up of photographs (photography), dialogues and secondary resources based on epistemological concerns that incorporate visualities and reflexivities. This study was conducted within the four heritage precincts (Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India and the Civic Quarter) of Singapore, as demarcated in accordance with the CMIO quadratomy above.

The methodologies that informed this paper were based on secondary research and the resources of the National Library in Singapore. It was also based on an ethnography in which the roles

of researcher, local and tourist were fused and documented through experiential narratives and visual approaches including photography. These reflexivities and visualities informed the research epistemology and contributed at the same time to a discourse analysis that strove to understand how national identity was portrayed, represented and reproduced. On the one hand were tourist attractions disseminated in guidebooks and brochures, and on the other, were discourses of the identities and ethnicities that constituted the nation-state.

4. The Merlion: National symbol and tourist icon

According to 'Your Singapore', Singapore's latest tourism campaign in 2010 to replace 'Uniquely Singapore, the Merlion is:

> An imaginary creature with the head of a lion and the body of a fish, the Merlion is the most important trademark, and symbol of the country […]. The Merlion is representative of Singapore's humble beginnings as a fishing village, and is a national icon that you must visit on your trip here (Your Singapore, 2014).

The 'trademark', 'symbol of the country' and 'national icon' is also in a more reflexive way, a 'tourism symbol' and a 'souvenir spinner' as illustrated by Lee (2004, p. 99), one of the pioneers of the early projects of the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (now known as Singapore Tourism Board):

> To tourists around the world over, the Merlion is the tourism symbol of Singapore. To the architects of independent Singapore, it is the story of a concept that worked. To the travel industry, it is a souvenir spinner and an icon that helps to sell Singapore overseas.

In both descriptions above, the Merlion was about its representation to the other, but how is it represented for the people of Singapore? Does it have similar meanings for the sake of tourism or are there certain identities attached to what it might mean to a Singaporean?

According to the Report of the Tourism Task Force 1984 (Schoppert, 2005, p. 25), "what Singapore suffers from is an identity problem as there is no landmark or monument which a tourist can easily associate Singapore with". The Merlion had already been erected and was ostensibly without significant impact:

> In conjunction with Singapore's rapid commercial development and a worldwide postwar tourist boom, an attempt was made to draw tourists into the district. First, in a bid to sell the Garden City image of Singapore abroad, ornamental and fruit trees were planted in the Esplanade and a Merlion Park (1972) (based on Singapore's renowned tourist insignia, the Merlion) was developed (Huang, Teo & Heng, 1995, p.33).

As a mascot for tourism invented by Fraser Bruner of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board in the 1970s, the Merlion seemed to be in a precarious position. On one hand,

> It has, with the passage of time and successful promotion on the part of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB), come to hold symbolic meaning for the people, as exemplified by a respondent's remark: Destroying the Merlion Fountain is impossible. You can never hope to replace it. It speaks of our ancestry and the myth of Singapore as a Lion City (Huang et al., 1995, p. 37).

On the other, academics such as Phua and Kong (1995, p. 138) suggest that such public symbols "have been poorly received by some as too conscious and artificial." Thumboo (1979, p. 18) recalls a majestic Merlion in a poem entitled *Ulysses by the Merlion*:

> Perhaps having dealt in things,
> Surfeited on them,
> Their spirits yearn again for images,
> Adding to the dragon, phoenix,
> Garuda, naga those horses of the sun,
> This lion of the sea,
> This image of themselves.

Sa'at (1998, p. 21) retaliates in contrast with scepticism:

> What a riddle, this lesser brother of the Sphinx.
> What sibling polarity, how its sister's lips are sealed
> with self-knowledge and how its own jaws
> clamp open in self-doubt, still
> surprised after all these years.

Perhaps the Merlion has over time evolved with different characteristics, holding different meanings for different people. Sa'at's (1998) modern Merlion, albeit filled with conflicts and uncertainties and somewhat depressing, is also more real and aware of the incessant search for identity embedded as everyday discourse within itself. It would seem that the determined national imperative to acquire a particular identity has seen ramifications that question its very construction, but on the other, the same national ideology that expends its energies in producing contrived identities is also capable of producing other forms of ironic and even affectionate identifications (Wee, 2009).

Figures 1 and 2 reveal scripted tourist practices unwritten in guidebooks, but found in virtually every tourist place that elicits performances to do with the essence of the attraction and its relationship to the everyday. For Osborne (2000, p. 70), "The tourists are incorporated into the system of tourism. They physically mimic its forms." But it is also the form as object that supports mimicry in a certain way. It gives way to a set of performances that adheres to a particular cultural script and at the same time, produces a unique experience. Whether it is a reference to that 'classic shot' usually taken from the place marked 'scenic view point' beside the icon of a camera, or the shot of you behind the signboard that reads, 'don't go beyond this point', or the broad grin in front of the camera after having said 'cheese' or 'kimchee', or the time you posed with your head in some hole simulating your execution by hanging in a cowboy western, or Eiffel Tower on your palm, or the *order of mimesis* where we observe other tourists taking a shot and endeavouring to do the same, or the *sole ownership of sight* in which we wait for all the 'tourists' to first disappear, it is worth admitting that they mark an all-too familiar way of 'tourist practice' around the camera. These tourist practices encompass the spontaneous performances and embodied practices amongst tourists, whether framing the shot or being framed, deal with the intersections of various backdrops. It is in looking at these performances that we strive to understand how the tourist object is not only consumed, but reproduced for further consumption.

Rather than being an object as to "how tourists identify Singaporeans", the Merlion seemed to be as much the Singaporean 'struggle for an identity'. As described by Lanfant, Allcock and Bruner (1995, p. ix), it is tourism that "compels local societies to become aware and to question the identities they offer to foreigners as well as the prior images that are imposed upon them." Representations in this sense are not only constituted by embodied practices, but

Figure 1 | Tourists posing at the Merlion Park.

Figure 2 | Tourist posing at the Merlion Park.

they also constitute the ways in which identities are performed. The Merlion becomes significant as a national icon, both in terms of its representation for tourism purposes and the ways in which it is conflated with the nation-building project. The fact that the Merlion was invented in the name of tourism was never disguised. However, how the Merlion continues to be appropriated for Singaporeans questions the difference between local and tourist consumption of the object.

5. Inventing places for tourism

Hobsbawm (1983) elaborates on the notion of nation building involving deliberate and innovative social engineering exercises. To add, the invention of tradition is also the invention of nostalgia wherein the question of identity is often laced in terms of memory, of needing to return to a romantic reminiscence of the past. What this suggests is that "[t]he phenomenal changes in Singapore, well documented in the dramatic changes in its landscape, thus set the stage for the transformation of history and collective memory into nostalgia" (Kong & Yeoh, 1995, p. 18). In a more critical stance, Chang and Huang (2005, p. 268) consider this nostalgia a 'reification of collective memory' in which "heritage is fraught with selective remembering and institutional forgetfulness." For Yeoh and Kong (1999), nostalgia is a construction of the past but a condition of the present, the 'present historic moment' when Singapore 'arrived' in an economic and material sense but lost the meaning of leisure and time to stand and stare. They also critique the *place* Singaporeans find themselves, a city "bristling with efficiency and productivity but without a certain intangible spirit and soul" (Yeoh & Kong, 1997, p. 141). This seems to echo what Koolhaas (1995, p. 1026) quip of Singapore being "a melting pot that produces blandness and sterility from the most promising ingredients".

Johnson (2009, p. 175) writes that it is "[b]y selectively choosing which area and history is included in the precinct and which remains either hidden or is transformed state conservation and redevelopment practices are involved in simultaneously erasing but also inventing heritage." The case for conserving Chinatown as a repository of cultural heritage could be understood "as a means of upgrading the built environment and rendering heritage in material form, but the conserved Chinatown landscape also serves the socio-political purpose of binding Singaporeans to place, to the city and ultimately to the nation" (Kong & Yeoh, 1994, p. 29). With the reinvention of tradition in place is also the evolution of a 'contrived' culture, what Chang (2000, p. 40) would be critical of, a Chinatown that "celebrates a reified image of Chinese culture, one which is distant and distinct from the lived culture of early immigrant life."

Chang (2000, p. 43) also depicts Little India as being "reduced to a set of marketable images; something that sells, something that is seen rather than lived or felt […], removed from the practicalities of people's daily lives" (Chang, 2000, pp. 43-45). In a similar but more severe way, the designation of the Kampong Glam Historical District stimulated controversial discussions on what constitutes Malay heritage and culture. What is particularly interesting was the eviction of the descendants of Sultan Hussein Shah from their ancestral home at their *Istana* at the heart of Kampong Glam in order "to make way for a S$16million state-driven restoration project to convert it into a Malay Heritage Centre" (Johnson, 2009, p. 177). Conservation efforts in Singapore, most notable in the historical districts, seem to contradict its very purpose through excessive reconstruction and re-representation.

In a screen shot of a page from the 'Uniquely Singapore' website[1] which is no longer in use as the 'Uniquely Singapore' campaign is now 'Your Singapore' (Figure 3), a tall, 'Chinese' woman wearing the *Cheongsam* (traditional Chinese at-

[1] http://www.uniquelysingapore.com.

Figure 3 | Cover image from Uniquely Singapore website.

tire) is depicted, swaying along with the spring blossoms. The accompanying caption 'Singapore in spring' is especially striking since Singapore is situated in tropical climate. Koolhaas (1995, p. 1083) provides a critical and daring commentary of the constant manipulation of the Singapore landscape, in what he describes as "indoors turned into a shopping Eden, outdoors becomes a Potemkin nature – a plantation of tropical emblems, palms, shrubs, which the very tropicality of the weather makes ornamental". Perhaps Spring in Singapore evolves even beyond Koolhaas's (1995) imagination of 'pure intention' as Singapore traverses from 'Instant Asia', the tourism campaign of the 70s that marketed Singapore as the cornerstone of the exotic tropics to a 'Uniquely Singapore' where the weather is tuned in to the visitor's personal experiences, where even 'spring' can be experienced in equatorial climate. In what is an apt recapitulation, Koolhaas (1995, p. 1001) recalls that "[a]lmost all of Singapore is less than 30 years old; the city represents the ideological production of the past three decades in its pure form, uncontaminated by surviving contextual remnants. It is managed by a regime that has excluded accident and randomness: even its nature is entirely remade." Important questions surfaces from this image with regard to its consumption, how it is consumed, by whom and how one makes sense of this in the spatial context of Singapore.

6. Conclusion

The fact that cultural identities are commodified for tourist consumption is nothing new; however this paper suggests that the blend between the commodification of culture, tourism and nation building is an intricate mechanism in Singapore. Wearing et al. (2010, p. 80) depict tourist places as sites in which "constellations of values and meanings are negotiated, constructed and mediated and where the travel experience is interpreted, developed, rejected and/or refined". This is reminiscent of Bruner (2001) in which he positions the case of Bali in which tourism not only shapes Balinese culture, but *is* Balinese culture. The case of Singapore presents a similarly complex situation in which a strong sense of identity is incorporated into tourism culture. A unique feature about Singapore is the use of tourism as a nation-building apparatus in which Singaporeans engage in tourist practice in order to perform self and appreciate the cultural and historical mechanisms of the country. It is evident that Singapore is more than a *place*; Singapore is performed in terms of what it means to be Singaporean, thus evoking a sense of national identity.

It becomes apparent that a 'national identity' supports a highly flexible resource that can accommodate multiple national identifications, so that proliferating identities can be contained within, as well as, outside the nation. With the continual revamping of identities especially in the light of global cultural flows, national identity "has become detached from the nation-state, proliferates in diasporic settings far from its original home, appears in syncretic cultural forms and practices and exists in 'hyphenated' identities" (Edensor, 2002, p. 29). Through travel and tourism, 'Singapore' collapses the notions of object, artefact, concept and national entity in order to gain recognition and reinforce its identity as Singaporean. In this sense, the notion of national identity is sustained through "the circulation of representations of spectacular and mundane cultural elements…" (Edensor, 2002, p. 139) and constantly being decen-

tred and re-centred through creative performances. By this token, rather than looking at Singapore as a location of tourism, it is possible to re-examine Singapore as a condition for tourism.

In exploring Singapore as a condition of tourism research, this study demonstrates that there are ultimately different kinds of performance of place that reproduce various notions of space and coerces a reconsideration of its implications: if the content of this study can be extrapolated to include other spaces in which tourism and identity are performed. The ways in which these performances seep into the constitution of identity and national belonging through various modalities of tourist practices call for even more rigorous research, not only within the context of Singapore, but elsewhere. How tourism and identity are linked, merged and performed is a vital question that should explored as practices to reveal a co-existence between national discourses alongside tourism.

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