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Instagram abroad: performance, consumption and colonial narrative in tourism

Sean P. Smith

School of English, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

As a form of travel writing and a highly favoured marketing tool, Instagram provides a blueprint of the ideologies underpinning contemporary tourism. This article argues that consistent visual motifs on Instagram echo a colonial iconography that sees tourist destinations as available for possession and consumption, effacing local place and identity. The reproduction of three motifs – the tropical exotic, the promontory gaze and fantasised assimilation – mediatises ideations that, rather than depicting these destinations as contemporaneous spaces in which a tourist is a guest, depict them as ‘other’ realms for the tourist’s taking. Local residents, when pictured, are configured as genericised icons of exoticism that serve to imbue the tourist’s experience with authenticity. These visual tropes, paired with textual captions and hashtags, present tourists as the rightful occupants and users of local spaces in a way that echoes the colonial seizure of foreign lands, an action that is imaginatively performed as tourists enact these three motifs in Instagram posts. Taken together, the visual regime witnessed and performed on Instagram contributes to the imagined and real perpetuation of unequal power relations in global tourism, which continue to privilege wealthy tourists over local residents.

KEYWORDS

Tourism; travel writing;
Instagram; colonialism

I. Introducing instagram

Instagram, a mobile-phone application in which users post photographs with captions, is one of the world’s most popular and fastest-growing social-media platforms. Launched in 2010, as of September 2017 the company hosted 800 million users worldwide, after adding 100 million in merely four months; 500 million of those users open the application on a daily basis.¹ Along with staying connected to friends, and viewing fashion, food and the ever-ubiquitous cat pictures, a large part of Instagram’s appeal is in its utility as a travel accoutrement. A 2016 report published by Forbes notes that 71 per cent of users aged 18–30 report using the application while on the road,² while two 2017 studies both found that around half of their survey respondents described Instagram as a source of inspiration for their trip.³

Tourism generally is being increasingly mediated through social media and networking sites. More than 20 per cent of all international travellers report using social media as a

source of information,⁴ while another recent study found that social media strongly impacts tourists' expectations of a destination.⁵ Instagram, in particular, says Lauren Bath, a marketer and user with 465,000 followers, is critical to the pre-travel 'dreaming phase'.⁶ Brooke Saward, a travel blogger and user with 635,000 followers, writes in turn of how 'I see a photo of a place and I instantly want to go there = trip booked, decision made'.⁷

While it has received limited academic attention, Instagram is an intriguing case for scholars of tourism and mobility. The platform functions as a form of multimodal travel writing, where, in the radically participatory framework of social media, authors-cum-users enact the mediated travel performances they no longer read about in books but scroll through with their thumbs. The surging popularity of the platform, and its deep imbrication with the mythos of travel, mirrors the precipitous expansion of the tourism industry itself – even as the industry's old narrators are left behind. In a well and widely described practice,⁸ from the nineteenth century forward travel writers often used their encounters with alterity as staging grounds for the reaffirmation of colonial-era tropes about the 'other'. In the late twentieth century, however, and spurred in part by postcolonial criticism, many of the genre's primary exponents attempted a shift in tenor to one less enfranchising of historically inequitable power relations.⁹ It was a belated arrival; the waning popularity of travel writing is poignantly illustrated in how *Granta*, the journal credited with greatly enhancing the genre's prestige,¹⁰ themed its spring 2017 issue with the question 'Is Travel Writing Dead?'.¹¹

It most certainly is not, but unlike much of the writing produced in the late twentieth century, Instagram's most popular travel-focused users are seemingly immune from the attempted postcolonial reform of travel writing's text-based guard. Consistent visual motifs on Instagram, this article argues, echo a colonial iconography that sees tourist destinations as available for possession and consumption. The enduring aesthetics of three motifs, (1) the tropical exotic, (2) the promontory gaze and (3) fantasised assimilation, sustain ideations that tourist destinations are 'other' realms for the tourist's taking, rather than contemporaneous spaces. Local residents, when pictured, are configured as genericised icons of exoticism that serve to imbue the tourist's experience with authenticity. These visual tropes, paired with textual captions and hashtags, prefigure the tourist as the rightful occupant and user of local spaces in a way that echoes the colonial seizure of foreign lands, an action that is imaginatively performed as tourists enact these three motifs in Instagram posts. Taken together, the visual regime witnessed and performed on Instagram contributes to the imagined and real perpetuation of unequal power relations in global tourism, which continue to privilege wealthy tourists over local residents.

II. Mediatized performances and the new travel writing

As social media and other online communication networks become an increasingly ubiquitous feature of contemporary tourism, mediating both the planning process and the trip itself, fresh theoretical paradigms are needed to contend with the shifting ground of the tourist imaginary. Mediatization offers a direction forward, describing how media and communication systems impact social institutions and culture. Livingstone and Lunt show how historical developments in media forms and distribution throughout

modernity generated transformative effects upon social institutions, a ‘co-evolutionary’ process by which the media gradually came to structure policy agendas and discourses even as their evolving forms were beholden to them.¹² The media’s patterns of organisation and dissemination, what Hjarvard calls media ‘logic’,¹³ have thereby impelled institutions as well as individuals to organise information such that it can be propitiously disseminated within media matrices. Social-media posts, for instance, are optimised for the maximum accrument of ‘likes’, and as will be discussed shortly, the pursuit of ‘likes’ and an expansive following often steers a tourist’s itinerary. As social media structures ever more instances of communication, Hepp et al. argue that the commercial functions of media institutions lead to a commodification of interpersonal interactions.¹⁴ Indeed, Agha characterises mediatisation as a process that links communication to commoditisation,¹⁵ a phenomenon broadly evident in an industry preoccupied with forms of consumption.

Never more so than in the social-media era, the changing nature of communication bears directly on tourism – an industry long marked by selling what Frow names as ‘a commodified relation to the Other’.¹⁶ MacCannell famously described the form of that relation as an encounter with authenticity,¹⁷ or in the backpacker vernacular, with ‘experience’ that leads to the reification of self-identity.¹⁸ Yet that experience cannot be utilised, Bruner argues,¹⁹ without the ability to narrate it, to recontextualise it in a form relatable to others. While oral narration remains a strong component of some, especially backpacker tourist practices,²⁰ Osborne shows how photography has been intensely imbricated in tourism both as narration and as a practice from the industry’s very inception.²¹ Urry and Larsen trace photography’s instrumental role in shaping the tourist gaze,²² establishing how epistemic visual aesthetics and the images seen prior to travelling create distinct visual modes that inform how tourists perceive and interact with destinations. Photographs are a critical part of the ‘pretour narrative’ that stakes out tourist expectations;²³ they are a crucial and almost inescapable firmament in the *habitus* that,²⁴ as Thurlow and Jaworski note, informs tourists of ‘what they are supposed to *do*’ in a destination.²⁵

In the mediatised field of tourism, Instagram acts both as an archive for discourse about a destination and as a vector through which experience can be performed. Edensor maintains that when a tourist interacts with a destination, they are guided by a set of pre-existing ‘embodied norms’ that provide a kind of script for what actions can or should be performed at the site.²⁶ While tourists certainly deviate from established scripts, or engage them playfully or even ironically,²⁷ the enactment of the already seen constitutes a *hermeneutic circle* by which tourists reflexively or un-reflexively recontextualise prevailing narratives about a destination.²⁸ While Edensor, along with Urry and Larsen, cautions against determinism in evaluating such performances,²⁹ arguing that tourists are creative, agentive actors, the recurrence on Instagram of the three visual motifs described in this article attests to the pervasiveness of embodied norms in tourism.

In a keen critique of performance theory, Lee argues that performance scholarship in tourism is disproportionately produced by ‘establishment men’ whose foregrounding of Western epistemology occludes non-Western and indigenous interpretations of tourist–host interactions, and maintains categories of ‘otherness’ with regard, in particular, to ‘Black female bodies’.³⁰ Lee draws on the work of Chambers and Buzinde, who urge an ‘epistemological project of decolonisation’ in which ‘native knowledges and practices’ become integral to ongoing tourism research.³¹ This article makes no claim to advance

this project (and is indeed written by a white man), although its findings are intended to identify ongoing 'colonising structures', as Lee writes, that are latent in global tourism and are discursively projected via performance on Instagram. Here, performance theory is only applied to the actions of tourists themselves; the Instagram users whose posts are evaluated in this article mostly hail from wealthy and formerly colonial countries. While this article is not equipped to analyse non-Western epistemologies in the tourist–host interactions through which Instagram posts are produced, it is hoped that such work will follow.

Even when viewed as a vehicle for a single epistemic expression, Instagram is a uniquely fecund space for performances to be circulated. Tourists leave home in pursuit of the experiences they have witnessed on social media, which they will secure for themselves by performing similar orientations and actions once at the destination. The images they take at the destination, of themselves, of their companions, or of inscribed sites, will be stylised to be received with maximum approbation once they post them to their own Instagram account. Thus, where Urry and Larsen find that much tourism is a search for the 'photogenic',³² the mediatisation of contemporary tourism instils in tourists a search for the perfect Instagram image, itself a representation of experience as well as a commodity that can be exchanged online for 'likes'.

While Instagram affords a kind of stage through which tourists visually narrate their travel experiences, it additionally exemplifies a form of travel writing. In one useful survey of the genre, Youngs describes travel writing as a fact-based, first-person prose account of an author's trip.³³ Thompson, in turn, insists that the form is more 'protean',³⁴ encompassing nonfiction books, novels, guidebooks, films and photographs, but that contemporary narratives almost always cohere around a journey or quest motif that resembles a rite of passage. Yet in an era when there is little left to be 'explored', many twentieth- and twenty-first-century travel narratives have relocated the principal journey to the self. Thus, while Instagram is not long-form prose, it otherwise steps handily into the travel writing form. Users post images that narrate an actual experience, and most are autobiographically rendered, as users take the images themselves. Captions provide additional, often first-person narration, while hashtags, such as #travelstoke and #wanderlust, align images with others like it, most of which serve to proffer travel as a means of self-actualisation. Most tellingly, however, travel-related images on Instagram are heavily imbricated with the discourse of travel writing, of tourism, and that of the 'other' more generally, which, as the three motifs discussed demonstrate, remains troublingly colonial in outlook.

The ensuing selection of nine Instagram images was made based on the popularity and thereby influence of the users who posted them, measured by the number of followers of their accounts. As with other social-media platforms, when individual users 'follow' an account they sign up to see that account's posts in their feed; as of 12 January 2018, the users whose images are selected here each have at least 100,000 followers (written henceforth as '100k'). As another measure of influence, three of the users discussed (@doyou-travel, @gypsea_lust, @muradosmann) are listed by *Harper's Bazaar* in a 2018 article as 'go-to's for recommendations' on travel destinations, offering such tips as 'how to live like a local'.³⁵ In the following analysis, each user's follower count is noted, to demonstrate the degree to which their posts are indicative of the broader travel discourse on Instagram. While it is not possible to delve into the posts of less-followed users, it should additionally

be noted that the influence of the popular users highlighted here is evident in how these three motifs are embraced and performed by users with smaller followings.

III. The tropical exotic: emptiness, eroticism and seizure

While the Portuguese circumnavigation of Africa resulted in the establishment of eastern trading settlements abroad in the fifteenth century, it was the Caribbean that witnessed the earliest real entrenchment of European colonial power. As Todorov shows,³⁶ the Americas served as the foil against which European identity was formed, and that the first point of contact fell in a tropical climate is highly relevant in contemporary tourism. In a poignant excavation of the Caribbean's symbolic currency in the West, Sheller describes how the emergence of the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on pure and untamed nature, endowed the Caribbean with its present – if entirely fanciful – touristic association.³⁷ As one of the first and most illustrated loci of European colonialism, the imaginative construction of the Caribbean bore lasting impacts on how tropical spaces worldwide were perceived by Europeans and, later, utilised by a global tourism that originated in the West.

An early, almost proto-Romantic vision of the tropics is evident in a painting by William Hodges, the on-board artist during Captain James Cook's second voyage. His 1776 painting *Tahiti Revisited* (Figure 1) reveals a newly discovered island of rugged peaks awash in golden light, lush vegetation and women in various states of undress. Positioning the women at the corner of the painting, a form that Mitchell describes as inviting the European viewer's eye 'in',³⁸ provides an alluring entrance for Hodges's British



Figure 1. William Hodges, *Tahiti Revisited*, 1776, oil on canvas, 98 × 138 cm, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, United Kingdom. Reproduced from Web Gallery of Art. Available at: http://www.wga.hu/html_m/h/hodges/tahiti.html (accessed 2 June 2016).

audience, dressed heavily against a cold climate and conservative culture. While the figures draw on archetypes of the noble savage and the Renaissance Venus, the eroticisation of tropical islands was already at work. The only thing missing from this Eden was the European subject himself (*sic*); however, with the promise of plenitude and the hint of sexual availability, Tahiti was an available enticement, an achievable state of bliss. Hodges's painting strongly informed the discursive vision of earthly paradise, which, as de Botton notes, continues 'to provide a model for subsequent depictions of tropical idylls'.³⁹

If sensuality carves an entrance into the tropical destination, the prevailing *vacancy* of the landscape is the method by which Europeans imaginatively established their presence. In *Tahiti Revisited*, excepting the few eroticised women, the land is written as free of any local inhabitants. Not only is the destination 'for' the observer's aesthetic enjoyment and, at times, titillation in the way Said called the Orient a 'spectacle'⁴⁰ but also the landscape – like the women pictured – appears to be for the taking. The only significant evidence of Tahitian settlement is a seemingly religious totem under which the women bathe, almost goading a Christian mission to strike down the pagan emblem and coerce the locals into moral propriety. Thus, while the painting appeals to Edenic fantasies, the sparsely forested meadows across the lagoon also appear to be a felicitous location for a future European settlement. Such a depopulation of what in reality is an inhabited landscape is a recurrent trope in colonial painting and photography, which, as Behdad argues, presents the 'European viewer as the potentially legitimate occupier through a visual erasure of the indigenous population'.⁴¹

Mitchell describes the South Pacific as historically providing 'a kind of tabula rasa for the fantasies of European imperialism',⁴² where the conventions and imaginaries of the colonial endeavour were freely exercised. In contemporary portrayals of the tropical-island destination, those fantasies remain widely in force. *Matador Network*, one of the largest online travel magazines catering to a predominantly backpacker tourist demographic, maintains an Instagram account with 212k followers (@matadornetwork) and features the photographs of travellers using the hashtag #travelstoke. A recent image from the Maldives shows a single white woman sitting on a boardwalk leading out to huts stilted over a turquoise sea, a place captioned as 'heaven on earth!' (Figure 2). The woman's exposed legs and the honeymoon-esque huts at which she is gazing allude to a missing companion and an undercurrent of sexuality, while the bright waters and clear skies denote tropical surrounds. Where Hodges could merely choose to elide Tahitians and their community infrastructure, in photographing tropical destinations the images must be carefully staged to sustain the illusion of emptiness. One can imagine the local staff of the Maldives resort waiting patiently for the photograph to be taken, before continuing down the boardwalk to change the bedding in the huts. One rather struggles to picture how residents of the Maldives actually live, when their primary occupation – in this as well as most images of the archipelago – seems only to be as invisible staffers of the numerous luxury resorts.

That the Maldives – like virtually all other tropical destinations – is home to anyone but itinerant tourists is rarely glimpsed in images of the islands; 'heaven on earth' could thus be anywhere with sun, beach and clear water. Tropical destinations are, as Kothari describes, regularly 'ahistoricized',⁴³ or stripped of their unique identity and 'devolved' to the genericised imagery of the tropical exotic writ large. This tendency is further evident in a post by Lauren Bullen, an Instagrammer with 1.9 million followers



Figure 2. Photo by Traveler's Little Treasures (@travelerslittletreasures) via Matador Network (@matadornetwork), <https://www.instagram.com/matadornetwork/>.

(@gypsea_lust). The caption accompanying Bullen's post of the Cook Islands in the South Pacific (Figure 3) – 'You are my paradise' – is presumably directed to her partner. '[P]aradise' is identifiable as a seam of azure water, densely verdant palm trees, and a white beach empty but for two unclothed bodies. Beyond these markers of the tropics,



Figure 3. Photo by Lauren Bullen (@gypsea_lust), https://www.instagram.com/gypsea_lust/.

however, no other signs of locality are present; the Cook Islands' identity is subsumed into the imaginative geography of the *tropical exotic*, valued for its iconographic attributes more than its location as home to Polynesian Cook Islanders. A corresponding post by Jack Morris, Bullen's partner and a high-profile Instagrammer as well (@doyoutravel; 2.8 million followers), follows a similar tack, gushing about how she surprised him with a trip to 'an island in the middle of the South Pacific' (Figure 4, emphasis added). The visual reprise of emptiness, eroticism, palm trees, white sands and blue waters once more strips the Cook Islands of their unique identity and projects them as merely another place to perform the tropical-paradise fantasy.

The cumulative effect of the tropical-exotic motif is an imaginative seizure of tropical destinations from local inhabitants. Sheller writes of the Caribbean that supposedly 'innocent' travel writing – in the case argued here, including Instagram – is 'deeply implicated in what might be called a politics of the picturesque, by which the framing of scenery becomes an exercise in colonial domination over Caribbean people'.⁴⁴ The constant eroticisation of tropical destinations alludes to the conquest of virgin land, while their emptiness insinuates that no one is around to mind. When tourists frame their Instagram shots to demonstrate emptiness and indicate eroticism, their performances re-inscribe colonial-era assumptions about the occupation of tropical land as a prerogative of the colonisers. The elision of local identity through ahistoricising portrayals of the destination contributes to the erasure of any other's right to inhabit the space, and privileges the tourist's desire to indulge in their tropical-island fantasy.

These performances translate, in turn, to the real seizure of land in the development of resort enclaves that are priced to exclude local inhabitants. As Kothari argues, 'colonialism initiated and developed the modern production of enclavic space ... [and] resort enclaves



Figure 4. Photo by Jack Morris (@doyoutravel), <https://www.instagram.com/doyoutravel/>.

echo previous colonial strategies to separate the colonisers from the colonised'.⁴⁵ The capital supplied by foreign tourists' wealth, coupled with their desire to perform the tropical-exotic fantasy, has enclosed the shorefronts and driven its historic inhabitants inland. The coveting of the ocean vista, which Ghosh describes as productive of a 'colonial vision of the world, in which proximity to the water represents power and security, mastery and conquest',⁴⁶ is perpetuated through Instagram performances of the tropical exotic, working to dissolve local claims to the land in favour of the wealthy tourist's manufactured experience of a beachside fantasy.

IV. The promontory witness: mastery and commodification

Beyond the tropics, the artistic and photographic depiction of landscapes in general is deeply associated with narratives of power. Mitchell observes how at the apex of strength in numerous imperial nations, including Rome, China, Holland, France, Britain and Japan, the landscape concomitantly arose as one of the most revered and reproduced art forms. Landscapes, Mitchell writes, are akin to the 'dreamwork' of imperialism, where narratives of power and expansion are extolled through both metaphor and realist portrayals of conquered territory.⁴⁷ As tourism now surges in the postcolonial era, the prominence of landscape images in marketing materials and social-media accounts illustrates an aesthetics of the 'world traveller', whose subjectivity is earned through unfettered access to the world's most beautiful destinations. Encoded within this contemporary aesthetic is the economic imperative to create tourist infrastructure for the 'world traveller', whose unexamined privilege guarantees their visa and right to occupy that infrastructure even as the infrastructure displaces local residents. This landscape aesthetic is, on social media among other forums, frequently transmitted through the motif of the *promontory witness*.

The promontory witness has a long historical precedent, beginning with late-eighteenth-century emphases on the picturesque and coalescing through an interaction with the Romantics and nineteenth-century scientific pursuit. In her study of Alexander von Humboldt's survey work in Latin America, Pratt identifies how Humboldt strove to instil in scientific inquiry a deep-rooted sense of the vastness and sublimity of nature. This sense is illustrated in artistic depictions of Humboldt that show him 'engulfed and miniaturized' within a landscape,⁴⁸ a small and indomitable figure standing fearless against the epic scale of nature, mirroring the heroic descriptive task to which he set himself. This iconicity was embraced in the paintings of the Romantics, where among many others one of the most famous of the movement, Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (Figure 5), shows a man gazing out upon a shrouded, haunting landscape, the wind tousling his hair. The 'promontory' gained by the elevation of the subject's gaze is indicative, at once, of the metaphysical solace delivered by the view as well as alluding to mastery of the scene beheld.

This scene is vividly reproduced in an image posted by Passion Passport (@passion-passport), a travel-photo aggregator with 898k followers. In answer to what a traveller undertakes in their first 24 hours after arrival in a destination, the woman pictured has headed 'straight for the highest vista' (Figure 6). Her outward-facing gaze from atop a rock outcrop, overlooking an outstretched plain of cloud, intensely recalls Friedrich's painting even as it overtly demonstrates the relationship of such a gaze to the mastery



Figure 5. Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, oil on canvas, 98.4 × 74.8 cm, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany. Reproduced from Artble. Available at: http://www.artble.com/artists/caspar_david_friedrich/paintings/wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog (accessed 2 June 2016).

of a scene. Urry and Larsen remark that in the Western epistemic sense of sight, ‘seeking distance’ and ‘gaining a proper ‘view’ enables the seer ‘to take possession of objects and environments often at a distance’, facilitating the imaginary control of what is seen by vantage.⁴⁹ Pratt, in her analysis of travel writing, additionally names the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ scene, in which a ‘seeing man’ gains an elevated view and aestheticises the scene using the language of discovery, which itself invokes a relationship of mastery.⁵⁰ Such performances on Instagram, innocent and certainly aesthetic as they appear, are indicative of an imagined possession of the land surveyed. While the touristic terms of possession differ from the colonial action of physically conquering space, deeming a place fit for tourism works in myriad economic, infrastructural and social ways to alter it, in almost all cases privileging the tourist’s enjoyment over respect for longstanding local patterns of life. By heading ‘straight for the highest vista’, the tourist’s visualisation of their recreational dominion acts as a predicate of its consumption.

Another iteration of the promontory-witness motif more clearly mimics the Humboldtian miniaturisation of the subject, as in a post by Samuel Taipale (@eljackson), a user with 383k followers. In an image of Wadi Rum, Jordan, a solitary woman, arms outstretched and dress gusting in the breeze, is wholly dwarfed by the rugged desert landscape and shifting seams of light (Figure 7). Remarking on centuries of European landscape painting, Bordo names such diminutive subjects as ‘witness figures’, marks of human presence

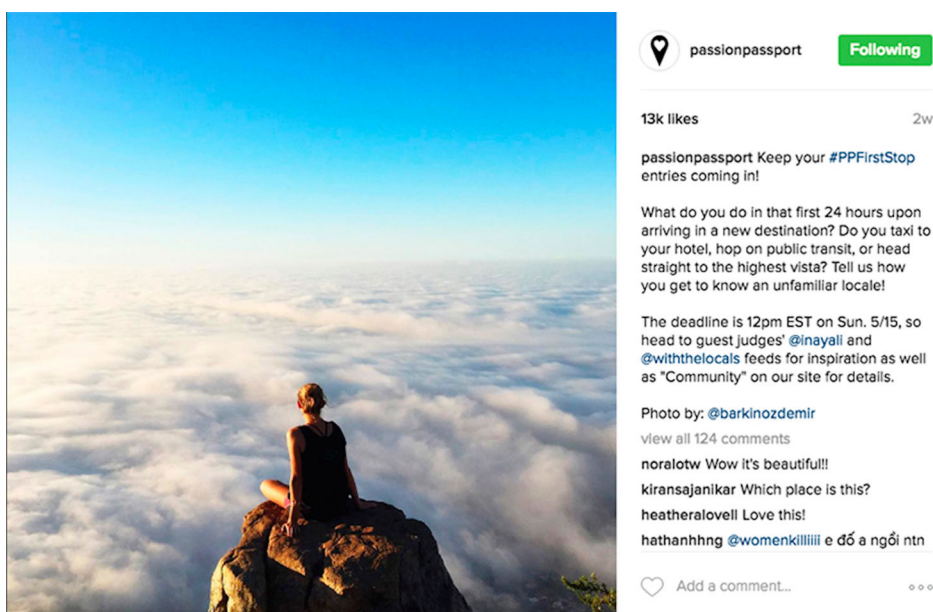


Figure 6. Photo by Barkin Lacin Ozdemir (@barkinozdemir) via Passion Passport (@passionpassport), <https://www.instagram.com/passionpassport/>.

that function to lay claim to the scene and induct the wilderness into European epistemic time; or, as Bordo writes, 'from this moment, history'.⁵¹ The performance of witness figures in an inhabited landscape, such as Wadi Rum, which has been (and continues to be) home to numerous societies across the millennia, effaces the history and presence that existed prior to the arrival of the coloniser-cum-tourist, in an act of what Spivak calls 'epistemic violence'.⁵² It is, of course, unlikely that the tourist engaged in a promontory-witness performance is aware of or intent on epistemic aggression. What is more feasible is that the Instagrammer is pursuing what Thurlow and Jaworski call an image of 'spectacular self-location', achieving a point of '[t]opographic extremity' that dramatises their travel

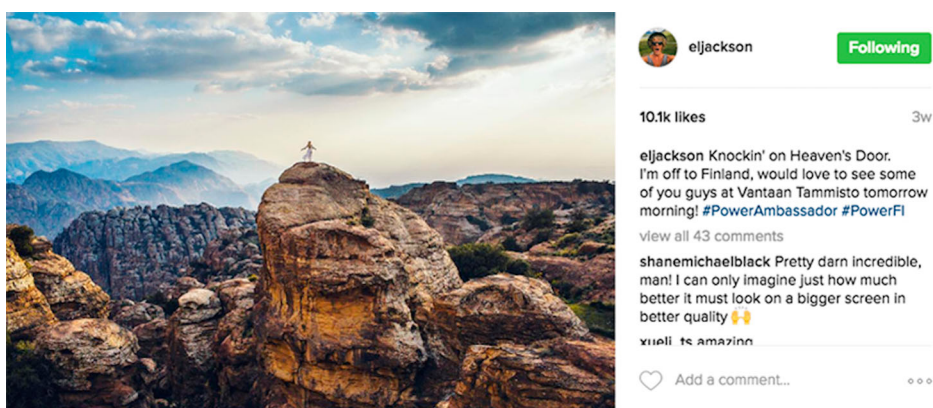


Figure 7. Photo by Samuel Taipale (@eljackson), <https://www.instagram.com/eljackson/>.

accomplishment. Yet even this photographic trope, Thurlow and Jaworski attest, ‘often resonates with histories of colonial conquest’,⁵³ as it relies on posing a tourist subject in a position of vantage over a foreign space in a way reminiscent of Pratt’s monarch-of-all-I-survey trope.

While the promontory-witness performance imagines, if perhaps unconsciously, a form of taking possession of a landscape, in both the process of photographing it and in posting that image to Instagram the landscape is transformed into a commodity. Long before the advent of social media, Mitchell discusses how landscapes are marketable commodities, objects to be ‘purchased, consumed, even brought home in the form of souvenirs such as postcards and photo albums’.⁵⁴ Urry, also writing before social media, observes the ‘visual economy’ of nature, by which a landscape ceases to exist as a unique locality but instead becomes ‘a particular combination of abstract characteristics that mark it out ... as more or less scenic than all sorts of other places’.⁵⁵ As a social-media platform, Instagram further accelerates the commodification of landscapes as users seek out locations that, once photographed and posted to their accounts, will accrue the most ‘likes’. Hence the expression of ‘only travelling for [one’s] Instagram’; the pursuit of an alluring landscape, and the appropriate posturing of the promontory witness within it, results out of a desire to capture a popular shot and secure one’s social-media popularity. Popularity, ordained by a large number of followers and ‘likes’, can then be sold for brand ambassadorships, product placements and free promotional trips. The mediatisation of travel thus works to wrangle tourists into the ‘logic’ of the media and dispossesses places (and hence peoples) of their inherent, unfetishised worth, assigning them instead a commodity value.

V. Fantasised assimilation: appropriative performances

While the staging of tourist photographs often depicts a destination as emptied of the signifiers of local life, thus making it available for the tourist’s consumption, a different means by which destinations are possessed is observable in the performance of local identity. When tourists don what is recognisable – or stereotyped – as local dress, they appropriate the identity of those who call the destination home, effectively claiming the destination (temporarily) as their home, too. When Edensor remarks on the ‘staging’ of local culture as an object upon which tourists ‘feast’,⁵⁶ he speaks primarily to the event in which tourists attend a performance as audience members. Yet tourists undertaking to enact their own conceptualisation of local culture, and staging its performance for their Instagram audience, instead consume that culture through a mode of *fantasised assimilation* wherein the tourist purports to engage the destination with the intimacy of a local inhabitant.

Especially when tourists visit a destination in the Global South, where their wealth and passport privilege far exceed that of most locals, mimicking the lifestyle and/or clothing of a local resident often reflects a pursuit of authenticity. When Noy describes the perception that ‘encountering “real” people bestow the tourists with ... a deep, transformative experience’,⁵⁷ that authentic experience is sought through some interaction that temporarily creates a common ground shared by the tourist and local inhabitants. Much of the literature on backpacker tourists highlights their efforts to take local transport and sleep in the most basic of accommodation,⁵⁸ yet tours and even dining experiences may confer on tourists what Žižek describes as ‘brief, intimate contact with the full-blooded life of the

poor'.⁵⁹ Much as Bruner highlights the centrality of a tourist narrating their experience,⁶⁰ Instagram users perform their encounter with authenticity through staging a sartorial depiction of themselves as the quintessential local. This act, however, reduces local inhabitants to a semiotised 'other', a process JanMohamed describes as a commodification of a 'stereotyped object' that is configured as a 'resource'.⁶¹ This resource is sought as a prized commodity in tourism, as the interaction with and acquisition, however temporarily, of local identity carries a notable exchange value. As Desforges has found, tourists returning home from an experience-laden trip benefit from an increase in their cultural capital and even their standing in community and workplace society,⁶² whereas a media-tised gauge for this cultural capital can, in turn, be seen in the amount of 'likes' an Instagram post receives.

In a promontory-witness image of the Taj Lake Palace, self-declared 'cultural chameleon' Alyssa Ramos (@mylifesatravelmovie; 136k followers) utilises the sari as a way to 'learn' about Indian culture (Figure 8). Ramos indexes herself as a cosmopolitan, stating that buying and wearing a sari 'was normal to me', as she further implies assimilation in attesting to the 'compliments' she has received 'from the people here in India'. Yet in taking care to inform her Instagram followers that the sari costs a mere '\$1.50' she at once commodifies Indian identity and casts it as comparatively cheap in the global marketplace. The 'experience' of being an Indian citizen – many of whom in truth would not find \$1.50 a careless purchase – promises at best a fleeting engagement with the extraordinary diversity of the subcontinent and presumably incurs only the best a generic Indian identity has to offer. If Ramos or any other sari-wearing tourists were to meet any of the genuine challenges such an identity might incur, such as India's vast and rapidly expanding wealth gap, to avoid these challenges they need only step back into their



Figure 8. Photo by Alyssa Ramos (@mylifesatravelmovie), <https://www.instagram.com/mylifesatravelmovie/>.

accustomed clothing and get on an aeroplane. The ‘resource’ of local identity can thus be donned and discarded at will, a privilege that fetishises an identity’s most marketable features while effacing its hardships.

One of the most popular travel accounts on Instagram belongs to Murad Osmann (@muradosmann; 4.5 m followers), whose images and #followmeto hashtag have created a widely recognised iconography that makes frequent appearances around the web and in print travel magazines. Working with his wife, Nataly, Murad photographs her pulling his hand into a scene, as he follows-her-to a destination in images that regularly accrue more than 200k ‘likes’. As they travel around the world, Nataly dons what is regarded as a typical regional dress and faces forward, gazing at the scene to which she pulls Murad. The images often show a city or historical monument, a sublime natural landscape, or occasionally the inhabitants of the couple’s chosen destination.

Dressed in regal silks in New Delhi, Nataly pulls Murad into an auto-rickshaw as the driver guides her in like a chauffeur (Figure 9). Beyond rendering the locals as disingenuously servile – no driver disembarks his rickshaw for a passenger – the image depicts unnaturally empty streets in one of the most populous cities in the world. Murad explains in the caption: ‘You wouldn’t believe how many people were actually surrounding us during this shot. The driver was then almost fined by police because we blocked the whole road. Had to persuade them to let him go :)’. Beyond the hope that Murad and Nataly fully exculpated the hapless driver with their bribe, what is most compelling about this image is the need to clear it of local inhabitants. The Osmanns, in keeping with the emptiness trope, seemingly went to such trouble in order to again make the landscape available for the tourist’s taking. That the driver remains, however, is a key figuration of Nataly and Murad’s imagined relationship to the people of New Delhi. While his apparently warm acceptance of the Osmanns into his rickshaw is intended to underscore the



Figure 9. Photo by Murad Osmann (@muradosmann), <https://www.instagram.com/muradosmann/>.

assimilation enjoyed by the tourist couple, the clash of Nataly's elegant dress with the driver's scratched and dented rickshaw belies a hierarchy that makes the driver's open arms appear more obsequious than genial. That Nataly and Murad would dress so opulently, and then choose a rickshaw as a mode of transportation around an uncharacteristically empty New Delhi, speaks to the fantastical nature of their imagined brush with authenticity; their travel in New Delhi appears as little else but a performance of authentic travel in India for the sustenance of their remarkable Instagram following.

When locals such as the driver in Murad's New Delhi post do appear in tourist images on Instagram, their presence is more often used to tokenise locality than to feature an individual. In their classic paper on tourist photography, Albers and James describe how images featuring local residents of a destination often follow two trends: *homogenisation* or *decontextualisation*.⁶³ Homogeneous images draw upon extant stereotypes of the local residents and reproduce them by fixating on 'picturesque' groups or generic elements, which leads to such errant conceptualisations as the pictured region hosting one group of people, instead of noting a region's diversity and unique groups. Decontextualisation occurs when images abstract particular elements, especially those perceived as 'indigenous' or 'aboriginal', from the setting and period in which they are pictured, thereby 'reducing' people to the exoticism of their crafts and traditional dances.

Both trends are manifestly evident in Murad's photo '#followmeto the Palawan Tribes' (Figure 10). Although the island of Palawan is home to at least six ethnolinguistic groups, the individuals pictured are captioned as undifferentiated 'Tribes'. Nataly, donning a sarong and – for her Western audience – provocatively topless, pulls Murad into what seems to be a forced welcoming ceremony as the locals stand expressionless in a semicircle. Nataly's placement at the centre of the semicircle alludes to a position of honour, or perhaps authority, as her prominently white skin casts an unquestionably colonial pall



Figure 10. Photo by Murad Osmann (@muradosmann), <https://www.instagram.com/muradosmann/>.

over the scene. The promise of authenticity is inflected by the vast remove at which the locals are placed from Western co-temporality: the bare feet, topless women, thatched roof and jungle scenery are ostentatiously displayed in a clear connotation of Western conceptualisations of the 'pre-modern'.⁶⁴ The assimilation fantasy – as simple as removing one's shirt – proffers an exhilarating experience. The fantasy is, however, excessively contrived. The locals' very fine clothing is hardly everyday wear, and centuries of evangelisation in the Philippines, as in many other former colonies, have made female toplessness largely taboo. The welcoming ceremony, forced or feigned, casts the residents of Palawan and other such areas of the Global South as a 'resource' for the meaning making of the tourist subject, a kind of travel accessory that can be deployed for the confirmation of 'experience' and the accrual of 'likes'. Images like the Osmanns' validate a tourist discourse about the 'other' that, deep into the postcolonial period, continues to perceive tourist destinations as easily and acceptably expropriated.

At the time of this writing, the 'Palawan Tribes' image has been removed from Murad Osmann's account, but not before it accrued 241k 'likes'.

VI. Banal privilege and the 'world traveller'

Such myriad imagery on Instagram masks the structural inequality upon which tourism relies. Especially when they travel in the Global South, wealthy tourists enjoy their mobility as a result of centuries of colonial conquest and subjugation – a long and often gruesome historical process that firmly entrenched former colonial powers as the world's richest economies. As Kaplan writes, tourism arose 'out of the [often manufactured] economic disasters of other countries that make them 'affordable''.⁶⁵ To this end, a great many of today's tourists are 'beneficiaries' in the sense described by Meister;⁶⁶ their wealth and ability to travel would not exist had it not been for the actual colonisation of sought-after tourist destinations. Formerly colonised destinations are available to wealthy tourists because visa regulations favour their governments; their dollars, euros or yen go much further abroad; and white skin, which characterises a broad demographic of tourists, still works as a kind of on-the-ground passport. The international legal regime substantially privileges individuals from wealthy countries, naturalising a system of historic inequality with such profundity that most tourists are blind to it.

In a recent post, Brooke Saward captions an archetypal shot outside the aeroplane window: 'Feel more at home here than any place on solid ground sometimes ... on to the next adventure! Had a blast in Peru' (Figure 11). The casual engagement with aeroplanes as a kind of home could only arise out of a particular class mobility and visa-easy nationality, much as the expectation of another 'adventure' only makes sense to those who have been born into a status in which tourism is easily pursued. The very word 'wanderlust', Saward's Instagram handle (@worldwanderlust) and a common expression in contemporary tourist discourse, is itself a mark of privilege: only those fortunate enough to possess the requisite passport and/or wealth are able to satiate their 'lust' for travel. The proliferation of this densely laden word, along with iconography such as the three motifs discussed here that make up so many travel-related posts on Instagram, occludes serious disparities in access and agency within global travel and tourism.

The easygoing attitude espoused by Saward and many other popular Instagrammers is reflective of a form of 'banal globalization' – texts that Thurlow and Jaworski characterise



Figure 11. Photo by Brooke Saward (@worldwanderlust), <https://www.instagram.com/worldwanderlust/>.

as appearing ‘innocent’ or ‘harmless’ yet doing the real ideological work of globalisation.⁶⁷ In the case of the ‘world traveller’, the asymmetrical power and capital relations that privilege their frequent travel and consumption of tourist destinations over those who inhabit them – and who are rarely able to travel themselves – is ideologically normalised, and indeed that privilege is rendered invisible. Without its visibility, it is likely that colonial-era power disparities in the relations between tourists and locals will persist.

VII. Conclusion: embodiment in the new travel writing

As a highly favoured marketing and inspiration tool, Instagram provides a blueprint of the ideologies underpinning contemporary tourism. What this article has sought to reveal are three identifiable visual motifs that, like much of the travel writing produced before the late twentieth century, work to re-affirm colonial-era perceptions of the ‘other’. Tourist destinations, particularly those in the Global South, are portrayed as resource-rich playgrounds for the tourist’s meaning making, privileging the wealthy tourist over local histories and land ownership. The *tropical exotic* fixates on empty, dehistoricised scenes of ‘paradise’ and often feature eroticised bodies for whom a tacit ownership of the scene is implied, eclipsing historical local belonging to the land. The *promontory-witness* motif scrubs the landscape of the tourist destination of any sign of human habitation but that of the tourist, singularly pictured in a position of mastery that confers possession over the destination. Lastly, *fantasised assimilation* is visible in the tourist’s act of donning

what is perceived to be local clothing and performing local identity; the intention is to demonstrate their belonging to the destination, yet this act often reflects the imbalances of power that allow the tourist to capriciously don and discard local-ness. In each case, these three motifs restage colonial tropes of conquest and privilege.

Such tropes that featured so prominently in nineteenth- and twentieth-century travel writing have been rigorously challenged, but as a new multimodal form of travel writing, Instagram offers a largely uncritical space for antiquated notions of travel. Via the social-media platform, these notions may be more widely broadcast and – crucially – imitated, for where text-based travel writing was largely the province of established authors, anyone with a powerful passport and disposable income can be a travel writer on Instagram. Where travel writing may have instilled perceptions in the tourist *habitus* that were acted out and photographed in destinations, the potentially limitless audience of social media provides a new stage on which colonial-era norms are reflexively performed by tourists for the attainment of ‘likes’. The mediated reproduction of the three motifs discussed in this article – from the most popular accounts to the most common – is indicative of the unique embodiment afforded by Instagram, where tourists’ right to consume a destination and their privileged position within it may be more deeply inscribed.

Instagram is still a relatively new media platform, and indeed the broader effect of social media on the tourist imaginary is largely unmeasured. Future efforts to do so might turn to the embodied nature of social media, which could describe why outmoded colonial perceptions remain so widely in force.

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Notes on contributor

Sean P. Smith is a PhD student at the University of Hong Kong. He holds an MA from the University of Cape Town and a BA from Tufts University.