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SIT Tunisia: Emerging Identities in North Africa

*Comparative Medinas: Complexity and Contradiction in Tourist
Spaces in Tunisia*

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There does not seem to be a lively debate in academia that tourism is worth studying. The wealth of material published on the subject is dizzying, and comes from a wide range of disciplines, from business and economics to anthropology and postcolonial theory. This is partially because of the wideness of the subject material; tourism is at the same time a cultural practice with specific characteristics and a decidedly transnational phenomenon, the form and implications of which change depending on which borders and cultures are involved or excluded. I would like to make my brief contribution to the study of tourism with a study of the cultural issues involved in the practice of tourism in the specific setting of tourist locations in Tunisia. I will offer a critical, semiotic reading of two spaces, the Medina Mediterranea in Yasmine Hammamet and the Tunis Medina, in terms of how they function to satisfy tourist demands, always with an eye toward complexity and contradiction, arguing that the two spaces cater to two different but not unrelated types of tourism. I will then briefly consider how the influence of tourism in these two spaces affects and complicates how they are appropriated into Tunisian discourses and projects of national identity.

Notes on Theory and Methods

To quickly introduce the spaces I will analyze, the Medina Mediterranea was part of the development of Yasmine Hammamet that occurred during the late 1980's

and through the 1990's. Yasmine Hammamet was built specifically to be a tourist destination, and the Medina Mediterranea is no exception; it is a development which features several hotels, restaurants, entertainment shows, and a theme park called Carthageland. The Tunis Medina, on the other hand, is at least 1100 years old, and is regarded as the traditional, ancient center of the city, built around the Zeitouna mosque, which was itself built on top of a pagan temple. As I will cover in more detail, the two spaces are incredibly different, almost worlds apart. While perhaps not as many people live in the medina as once did, it is still an area that around 15,000 people call home. The Medina Mediterranea, however, is purely a site of commerce. And while a comparative analysis could be done between any two spaces, these two share a particular intersection in that they both are conceived of as space called a medina.

Dean MacCannell, in his work on tourism, is right to identify the tourism as the consumption of experience (MacCannell 20-21). I will refer even more specifically to the consumption of space as part of the tourist experience. Baudrillard, though, is very adamant about the unique nature of the object of consumption. In his formulation, exchange of capital does not equal consumption (Baudrillard 60); at the point where a car is bought because the buyer-subject needs to get from one place to the other, it is not an object of consumption. An object only becomes an object of consumption when it also serves to function as somehow symbolic of the buyer-subject's idealized, imagined self (59). At the point where the consumer decides to

buy a BMW over a Honda, the car becomes an object of consumption, as it serves to signify something about the consumer; it is traded, then, not on use-value or exchange value, but on sign value (60). Thus, to say that experience or space is being consumed in the practice of tourism is to say that the object experience or object space is being traded based on its sign value, or how it allows the tourist to imagine the achievement of some kind of idealized self.

In beginning an analysis of certain tourist attractions, then, an important question to ask is why the given object or space is considered an attraction – what makes certain spaces or things so important, so worth seeing, taking pictures of, and ultimately consuming? MacCannell's classification of cultural productions is helpful here. MacCannell identifies consumption of the tourist attraction as the consumption of a very specific type of experience, one he calls the cultural experience, or cultural production (MacCannell 23-24). The cultural production, in MacCannell's view, consists of several parts: the first is the model, an idealized representation of a concept or "aspect of life," (23). MacCannell describes the second part, the influence, as "the changed, created, intensified belief or feeling that is based on the model," (24). He goes on to give the example of the spectacle of an auto race as a model, and the thrill it provides and the consumption of related products as its influence (24). And in between the model and the influence, bringing them together, is the medium; to use the previous example, this is the auto race itself, whether from the grandstand or from the television, although both experiences function with somewhat different

expectations. This raises an important point, however: one mediated experience does not necessarily subscribe to one model. While the person at home and the person in the grandstand are both watching the same race, one medium interacts with the model of live spectacle, while the other interacts with the idealized model of leisurely enjoying sports at home, perhaps as an afternoon with the family.

Going back to tourist experiences, though, and again the question of what makes an attraction an attraction, MacCannell allows some structure in which to frame the question. When analyzing the functions of tourist attractions, one must attempt to discern the model at play in the tourist's consumption of the attraction, and by the same token, the influences or desires involved. This is possible through analysis of the medium, the physical materiality of the attraction, in terms of how it functions to connect the models and influences. This is, in effect, to read the space of the attraction semiotically, as a text which functions to create and propagate very specific ideals and social relations. As MacCannell notes, the cultural production functions as a sign (26). Like a sign, though, the cultural production functions as a total package; the medium is no more separable from the model and influence in practice than the signifier is separable from the signified meaning. This is not to say, however, that a given medium has a fixed, essential model and influence, or that the medium can only function according to a model that exists before it; a given medium can and must serve to create, recreate and function through several models at once.

I would like to make a few quick notes on method: this analysis is based on hours of observation of and interaction with the two medina spaces on many different occasions, as well as informal interviews. My analysis is also undoubtedly influenced by my positioning as a white, male study-abroad student, a form of tourism in itself.

Spectacle in the Medina Mediterranea

There are two main models at play in the Medina Mediterranea in Yasmine Hammamet. The first is that of the all-inclusive resort experience, what Waleed Hazbun refers to as the “integrated tourism complex,” in which all or almost all of the tourist’s needs are taken care of within limited spatial boundaries (Hazbun 23). This is a common model throughout Yasmine Hammamet, and one that already exists as an ideal for the tourist. In the specific context of the Medina Mediterranea (from here on out the MM), this model is first mediated to the tourist or potential consumer through promotional materials. The MM website, for example, mediates this concept repeatedly just in the main page; the five navigational tabs on top of the page are labeled “Accommodation [sic],” “Gastronomy,” “Leisure,” “Culture,” and, of course, “Rates,” (MM website). It is also worth noting that the words “All Inclusive,” in English, function as a signifier in and of themselves in an advertisement otherwise entirely in French. The point of this model, and the point I wish to make, is that in its ideal form, as represented in the website’s promotional material, the all-inclusive resort is a place in which the tourist does not really have to move or travel. It is a

limited space where all the tourist's needs are met, and within which the tourist is free to, as the website advertises with another grouping of links, "Play," "Discover," "Dream," and "Meet," (website).

This grouping of links also serves to highlight the other important model at play in the MM: that of the Disney-esque spectacle. Whether this is to bring in tourists who are not staying in the hotels or whether it is to distinguish the MM from the many other all-inclusive, integrated resorts in Yasmine Hammamet, the promotional material, as seen on the website, again serves to mediate and project an image of the MM based on the Disney model. There are several demands of the Disney model. The first is the concept of raw spectacle. Included in this demand is a sense of wonder, smallness and magic, all tinged with hints of childhood; adults without children regularly visit places like Disneyland or Disneyworld because they represent a perceived lost childhood, regained through the magic of capital exchange. But on top of the demand for pure spectacle, which in its way is present in all tourist exchanges, is a demand for hypernarrated culture, that is, the world, or at least some kind of otherness, represented to the subject at his or her leisure. Combined with the spectacle, this model, properly mediated, should leave the subject with an influence which the MM website narrates as an "unforgettable experience," (website).

Before moving to the analysis of the MM space itself, that is, in MacCannell's terms, the sight recognized by the tourist (MacCannell 121), I would like to turn again to a piece of the MM's promotional material. On the map of the complex, which

does appear within the medium itself, the MM is represented as “The First Museum City in the World” (see Fig. 1). This phrase manages to appellate the tourist while combining the concepts of the Disney-spectacle model. First of all, the phrasing serves to position the MM as a sight worth seeing in and of itself, as it is the first in the world. This is the essence of spectacle: the thing that needs to be consciously sought out and experienced/consumed just because it exists. This is not entirely unlike roadside attractions such as the world’s largest can of chili in Iowa, or the Bean in Millennium Park in Chicago. These things are seen because they exist. This sense is intensified by the somewhat strange wording of “Museum City,” which serves to establish the uniqueness of the sight and even evoke some curiosity from its intended subject. The use of the word “Museum,” though, also serves to highlight the representative function of the MM: a museum is not a place of cultural immersion, but rather a place of cultural reification, in which cultural artifacts are removed from their context and organized in another space according to a logic which most easily allows the museum subject, or tourist, to use them as synecdoche, representative of a whole concept of culture.

Moving into a reading of the medium itself, I will be examining several aspects of the spatial dynamic in terms of how they mediate the models explicated above. First of all, the MM manages to mediate itself as spectacle, or that which must be seen because it exists, just through spatial dynamics of size and texture. The MM is a massive structure, and one that is organized to constantly remind its subject of its

massiveness. The entrances themselves are designed to inspire a sense of spectacular awe; one entrance is a giant gate in a giant turret with a ramp leading up to it, forcing the subject attempting to enter through that door look upward and be engulfed by the sheer size of the shape. Another entrance forces the subject to walk through a group of elephants and walk past a live camel before entering the open area in front of the gates to Carthageland, guarded by two more elephants (see Fig. 2). Open spaces tend to be wide but still keep the subject feeling small, with no buildings under two stories tall. And the MM's architectural mash-up of styles, which creates a sense of sensory overload for the tourist subject, is filled with vertical lines that serve to make large structures seem larger. Vertical lines appear in the façade of the conference center, inside the souk, in oversized pillars, and even the bizarre giant sea-monster emerging from the wall. The texture and building material of the architecture also contributes to the spectacle of the MM, oftentimes going above and beyond the Disney aesthetic, so as to make the subject say "They rebuilt this?" The Roman aqueduct ruins and the fortified gate are both examples of this kind of texture, which again establishes the MM as a spectacle worth seeing and consuming just for the novelty of its existence.

Beyond size and texture dynamics, though, the actual shapes of the MM landscape, by which I mean the pieces of the landscape identifiable to the tourist as signs of their own, also serve to create spectacle. As mentioned already, one entrance has the tourist walk through a group of elephant statues with warriors on top of them. There are also live camels at multiple points throughout the MM with which tourists

can pay to have their picture taken. With the camels are also live people, workers wearing bright head-wrappings and loose-fitting, flowing clothes. But while these are considered “traditional,” or based in some sort of referent, they are also acknowledged as a spectacular costume. The same goes for the outfits of the performers who can be seen and heard on any given day in the public spaces in the MM. There are several different performances the tourist can experience, from a snake charmer to a music and dance routine, and both involve costuming, but they are performed so as to set themselves apart as spectacle and entertainment. Spectacular forms of costumed people also appear as statues; while the statue forms are something of a spectacle in and of themselves, their dual function as garbage cans and ashtrays establish them as true novelties, part of a spectacular experience. There is even a pirate ship that functions as a themed restaurant.

Amongst and through these spectacles, a number of themes are created for the tourist. There are themes of travel, played out in the roller coasters of Carthageland, the camels, the elephants, the pirate ship, and the juxtaposition of restaurants themed on different geographical places existing right next to one another. There is also a theme of primitiveness, projected by the faux-ruins, the garbage-statues, the tents that some souvenirs are sold from, the costuming of the performers and the dances in the performances themselves. And there is even a theme of magic that emerges, exemplified in attractions like a fortune teller in a bright-purple turban, various

souvenirs advertised to bring luck, and the “medicine-man” costume of one performer.

These themes also emerge through and alongside another theme in the MM: that of exotic orientalism. Camels, desert people, elephants and outlandish garb are all common tropes of exotic orientalism, tropes that can all be seen mediated through popular films such as Disney’s *Aladdin*, which includes all said tropes, as well as monkeys. In an example of how the different media and the models they mediate complicate and create each other in a constant, rhizomatic give-and-take, the image of Disney’s *Aladdin* character actually appears as part of a sign for an area called “Aladin Bazar.” The promotional material on the website also plays to discourses of exotic orientalism already accepted by the tourist, advertising belly-dancing performances and fire-eaters. Belly-dancers, again an exotic trope arguably popularized in the Arab world only by the influence of Western colonial powers (Hammond 190), also appear on souvenir brass plates for sale in the souk-area (see Fig. 4), along with other souvenirs generally accepted as good ways of representing a trip to the “Orient,” such as drums, stuffed camels, spices, perfumes, and the ubiquitous hookah pipe. In the organization of spectacle around these specific tropes and themes, it becomes clear that the MM provides not only a spectacle, but what could be regarded as an oriental spectacle.

It is important to note, as well, that a sense of authenticity is not a demand of the Disney model which the MM mediates. Performances are seen as performances,

and consumed because they should be designed to offer an entertaining spectacle. The MM website does very little to imply that it is anything other than a spectacular experience; its only engagements with the question of authenticity, in descriptions of architecture and the “Berber Village,” are constantly referred to as authentic reflections and recreations of the culture they represent (website). There is no desire built into the Disney model, especially when coupled with that of the all-inclusive resort, for a sense of authentic experience of culture. Experiences only reference or reflect other cultures that are always perceived to be at a distance, or outside the walls of the compound. Within the medium, authentic experience is subordinated to spectacular experience, functional only insofar as it serves to enhance, theme, or color the spectacle. The discourses involved in idealizing the model which the MM mediates are those of escape, not immersion.

It is for this reason that the orientalism projected by the MM is generic and all-encompassing. Because spectacle is more important than authenticity or tying experience to conceptions of location such as nationality or region, an Indian food restaurant in the MM is entirely acceptable, and is in fact part of the demand. By the same token, this is also why tribal masks connoting a general sense of Africanness are a common item to find for sale in the souk-area. The website invites tourists to play and to dream; more than hyperbole, this is an invitation for the tourist to exercise his or her imaginings of oriental otherness within a specific and limited spatial arrangement. The tourist cannot truly play and exercise his or her imagination, cannot

dream, if constantly rudely awoken by contradictions and corrections in the name of authenticity.

Returning to the specific spatial dynamics of the MM, the organization of space between the tourist subject and souvenir commodities deserves consideration. As mentioned before, the souk area, like the rest of the MM, involves wide-open spaces, as well as a high ceiling. Even though enclosed, the souk area is a fairly open space, and the tourist can stroll through and view souvenir commodities at a safe distance, namely a distance familiar to him or her, the distance that is standard and normal for shopping in Western societies. And while the commodities themselves serve to represent a kind of fantastical exotic orientalism, they are still organized as they would be in a standard Western retail environment, in rows on shelves with clearly marked prices. The price markers and the common “Fixed Price” signs also serve to distance the commodities sold in the MM from commodities that tourists may consider consuming in places outside the MM, in effect calling out to the tourist and saying, “Hey, this is the type of consumption you’re used to!” A similar point is worth making when considering the mapping of the MM, the same one that included the museum city slogan. On the map, areas are grouped and color coded according to a key on the bottom left corner, and specific places of commerce such as restaurants are listed on a key to the right which indicates the symbol that accompanies the location of these places on the map. This is a map that is almost intuitively functional for the

tourist, as the layout of the MM and the way it is represented on the map is, essentially, that of a shopping mall.

The shopping mall reference is not made lightly or in passing; the similarities between the MM and Jon Goss's analysis of the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota are striking, and of particular relevance here. Goss refers to the Mall of America as a "dreamhouse of the collectivity" which promises to ameliorate the discontinuity and fragmentation of modern reality in "utopian community of consumption," (Goss 45). He goes on to identify themes in the mall's visual and verbal landscape which function to this effect, identifying themes of "Nature, Primitiveness, Childhood and Heritage," connected through themes of Travel and Magic (45). These same themes are at play in the mediation of the ideal models at play in the MM, just as easily manifested through themes of exotic orientalism as they are through themes of the Northwoods in the Mall of America. That these same themes, identified at play in a uniquely Western shopping mall, are also at play in the MM indicate that the experience mediated in the MM is one that is entirely replicable in a Western context. The medium of the MM functions, that is to say positions its subject amidst a spatial arrangement of signifiers, in the same way as a Western shopping mall.

For Tunisians, I have argued, this is the case. And the way it looks, Tunisians have many years of making sense of tourism ahead of them, routing discourses of identity around, parallel to, or sometimes through the processes of mediation involved

in the practice of tourism. This treatment has not been an attempt to comprehensively track all of the twists and turns involved in this interaction. It has, instead, been a peek at the many processes and dynamics of culture and power involved, in essence a way to point to complexity so as to say that what may appear simple simply isn't. This is a crucial fact to recognize when critically examining the issues created by tourism in an attempt to somehow deal with them. It is my hope, then, that this paper serves as a contribution to that conversation, or perhaps some kind of start.

So the spatial dynamics of the MM manage to mediate a model of an all-inclusive, Disney-esque playground-escape by maintaining a retail commodity aesthetic familiar to the tourist. In fact, it is by retaining the commodity aesthetic of places like the Mall of America that the MM completes its mediation of the all-inclusive resort; in this model, modern consumer capitalism is a requirement. Thus at the same time it is a demand of the idealized model that the experience be entirely reproducible; the desired influences come not from the location of the attraction, the world outside its thick and formidable walls, but the environment created within those walls. It is, in a way, a dual escape: escape from the tourist's culture, and escape from the culture of the location of the attraction. The word "ideal," at this point, ceases to mean just what is idealized, but also what is the ultimate manifestation of a particular model. And indeed, the MM functions incredibly well for what it is: a location for the tourist to escape, to imagine a fantastical dream world of unabashed stereotype

brought together under the spatial dynamics and hyperreal aesthetics of modern consumer capitalism.

Authenticity in the Tunis Medina

The Tunis Medina, on the other hand, mediates a much different model than the MM, one that is in fact pointedly different. The ideal model at play in the Tunis Medina is that of the “authentic authenticity,” as opposed to performed authenticity, in which the tourist is positioned to experience “real” culture, to move past that which is contrived and observe real natives going about their real lives, but within a semi-bounded space which the tourist can readily identify. The goal of this model, or its ideal influence, has very much to do with the tourist’s conception of his or her self; after such an authentic, immersion experience, the tourist should be able to conceive of himself or herself as more learned, worldly, or cultured. This type of tourism is also not generally limited in practice to just those who vacation, but is in fact the model interacted with and desired by academics, as MacCannell points out (MacCannell 102), as well as those who would consider themselves travelers, and even study abroad students.

The TM model, then, is created and idealized very in contrast to and in fact against the model at play in the MM and places like it. As mentioned explicated above, the MM operates on a dream of spectacle, fantastically conscious reifications and reflections of a distant authentic culture, and is more or less unconcerned with

mediating a sense of authentic authenticity or pure, unperformed culture. The spatial dynamics also serve, through a concert of performances and representation of specific ideas, to create a space in which the tourist can be comfortably positioned as one who belongs in that space. To the tourist gaze that functions in the TM, namely that which idealizes an authentic experience, the medium of the MM is entirely and deplorably inauthentic. It is important to note that even if the tourist has never been able to compare the MM and TM, the gaze and positioning of self involved in interaction with the authentic authenticity model forms itself in fear of any imagined places like the MM. MacCannell captures this attitude as he references Daniel Boorstin's work on tourism, with its polemical condemnation of those tourists who would consume and be satisfied just with the superficial attractions and experiences placed in front of them (103). This distaste for the social position narrated in the popular imagination as the "obnoxious tourist" is an incredibly common discourse, and one that is almost constantly at play in the mediation of authentic authenticity. Alex Gillespie identifies this discourse as the crux of the feelings of shame and awkwardness involved in the tourist's exposure to the reverse gaze, as it forces the tourist to acknowledge his or her position as a tourist (Gillespie 354), and Paul Theroux makes a point, in chronicling his travels in Tunisia, of referring to himself as a traveler, as opposed to a tourist (Theroux 476). The tourist interacting with a model of the authentic experience also seeks to conceive of his or her self in such a way so as to say, "I'm not just another tourist."

But just as the organization of space in the MM can cue a sense of deplorable superficiality to those seeking an authentic experience, so must the spatial dynamics of the TM somehow function to cue a sense of authentic authenticity. MacCannell places the tourist's interaction with authenticity into a framework of fronts and backs; in a modern era in which daily life is increasingly performed and mediated, he argues, the search for authenticity or authentic living manifests itself through a social-structural dynamic of imagined front spaces and back spaces (MacCannell 93). Front spaces are those intended for some kind of audience to attend and experience a performance; back spaces are the imagined sites of real life, where a subject (objectified by the tourist) goes about his or her life as he or she normally would. Authenticity in experience, then, is based on penetration of back spaces, the observation of life and culture that is not self-conscious or performed. For a space to be considered a site for the experience of authentic culture, it must be conceived of as a back-space, measured against an imagined front-space. To the tourist in the TM, the MM, or imagined sites similar to it, is the ultimate front standard against which "backness" is measured and judged.

Given that, the specific spatial dynamics of the TM must function to mediate the ideal of authenticity or "backness", just as the media form is important for a subject attempting to judge the legitimacy of a celebrity marriage scandal reported by a tabloid or major newspaper. The tourist's interaction or fascination with people in the TM serves as a good example: tourists tend to view people wearing a "jellaba" or

“sheshiya” in the TM as real, live natives in their native environment (my own grandfather referred to these clothes as “native garb”). It is not uncommon to see tourists attempting to take sneaky pictures of people in this traditional dress in an attempt to avoid the uncomfortable reverse gaze. The danger of the reverse gaze only exists, though, if the tourist perceives himself or herself to be in a space where it would be inappropriate to take a photo, namely a back space; tourists openly take photos of the costumes in the MM, despite a lack of the cultural knowledge to be able to distinguish between supposedly authentic traditional garb and costume. Thus, while people wearing traditional clothes in the TM can function to signify authenticity of culture, their bodies must be positioned within a perceived back space in order to do so.

The narrowness of the streets in the TM is one aspect of the area’s overall spatial dynamic that functions to cue a sense of authenticity through backness. The streets in the TM, even the widest streets of the main tourist thoroughfares, are narrow in a way that is generally unfamiliar to the tourist. They force the tourist into close proximity to everything: walls, people, and souvenirs for sale, essentially compressing the open spaces of a retail environment to the point that the tourist does not feel himself or herself positioned within a retail environment (see Fig. 5). In fact, the kind of sensory overload created by this compression of space and the seemingly chaotic organization of items for sale serves to mediate a visual landscape that the tourist has been exposed to, albeit in a different type of medium; the perceived chaos

of the visual streetscape in the TM can be made to fit the model of the bustling Arab market that is mediated through films like Casablanca. In the case of the TM, however, the tourist has the opportunity to feel positioned within that mediated concept; thus, because the experience of the spatial dynamics of the TM happen in color and in three dimensions, the space can be categorized as a kind of back to the two-dimensional, black-and-white of the movie screen. This sense of penetrating the front space of a movie screen is fairly common in the mediation of the authentic experience; it is certainly at play in tourist visits of the Star Wars sets in the south of Tunisia. And my grandfather, as we walked through the TM, expressed an interest in buying one of the items for sale so that he could wear it and be “Tom of Door County.” The item was a piece of headwear similar to those worn in the film Lawrence of Arabia. This is an example of an ideal model created in a Western film managing to create the urban landscape of the TM by demanding what kind of commodities are displayed for sale.

The organization of commodities within the tourist areas of the TM also serve to mediate a sense of authenticity. By and large, the same kinds of items are sold in the TM as in the souk-area of the MM. There are stuffed camels and brightly colored “traditional” garb, and the exact same pictures of eroticized belly-dancers appear on the copper plates for sale in both medinas. But whereas the items for sale in the MM tend to be organized in rows on shelves, in a way familiar and accessible to the tourist, the commodities for sale in the TM tend to be organized differently, in a way that

appears to be chaotic and lacking any kind of organizational logic to the tourist, with items hanging from the ceilings, some obstructing others, and all in close proximity to each other and their potential consumer. While this again serves to mediate the Casablanca streetscape ideal, it also creates a commodity aesthetic which is unfamiliar to the tourist. This stands in contrast to the MM, in which the commodity aesthetic is tailored to Western shopping-mall norms. It is this unfamiliarity in the TM, this organization of commodities that bucks the norms mediated in a typical Western retail environment and places like the MM, that mediates a sense of authentic authenticity to the tourist; if commodities are not organized in a way familiar to the tourist, the tourist can categorize the space as one that is not a front space, or one created specifically for the tourist to interact with. Essentially, while these are the same items for sale, their different organization allows the tourist to recontextualize them and conceive of them as somehow different from those for sale in places like the MM. At the same time, this also allows the tourist to purchase souvenirs while positioning himself or herself as something other than a tourist.

It is also important, in the mediation of a dream of authentic authenticity, that the TM appears and is perceived as a place that is rundown, dirty, and a little bit seedy. This is mediated through a number of signifiers working in concert to create this kind of texture: building facades at certain points appear to be crumbling, the continuity and visual solidity of the outer walls interrupted by peeling paint, chipped plaster and rusty although intricate European-style ironwork (See Fig. 5). The tourist

is also brought into close proximity with sites of restoration and remodeling, which are by nature unfinished, disorganized, and dirty. Overall, it is safe to say that the visual landscape, along with the other sensual landscapes of the TM, serves to cue a kind of dirtiness to the tourist. Take, for example, my grandmother, who felt compelled to use bottled hand sanitizer as soon as she had the opportunity after finishing her tour through the medina. This dirtiness, though, also cues and mediates a sense of authentic authenticity. Broken down into a basic semiotic model, the mediation would look something like this:

TM / is dirty / is authentic

But while the bridge between the first two parts is signified by a material experience of specific signifiers, the jump between the second and the third depends on a discourse of authenticity which the tourist brings to the experience. Roger Cohen's opinion piece in *The New York Times* is a perfect example of this discourse mediated from within a tourist's home culture; Cohen simultaneously celebrates and laments the urban space of the New York garment district, reveling in the site's lack of cleanliness as a sign of its purity, its ability to mediate the real and authentic soul of New York City (Cohen). He judges it against the refined, clean and gentrified spaces of other areas of New York, and makes a particular point of contrasting it to the superficiality of Times Square, which in his opinion is a space deplorably suited to satisfy the sheepish needs of uncultured tourists (Cohen). It is not difficult to see the parallel between Cohen's dichotomy of "inauthentic Times Square vs. authentic

garment district” and the dichotomy of “MM vs. TM.” Cohen even goes so far as to argue that his ideas are applicable to the world’s great cities (Cohen); one can imagine, then, that if Cohen considered Tunis a great world city, he would celebrate the authentic authenticity of the TM in contrast to a superficially mediated form of culture present in the MM. The tourist in the TM, though, does this work for him, exercising the same discourse of “authenticity exists in rundown-ness” that has led to the gentrification of warehouse districts in cities in the United States.

As an echo to this discourse, generally already accepted by the tourist, the appearance of dirtiness or perhaps a lack of sterility establishes the TM as a back-space. This happens in accordance with the kind of dichotomy discernible in the Cohen example; if in-authenticity is signified by bright lighting and cleanliness, as with a shopping mall or superficial tourist hotspots like Times Square, then dirtiness serves to mediate a sense of backness, or at least a degree of non-frontness. It is worth noting, here, that the MM is impeccably clean and well taken care of with an army of costumed janitors and garbage-statues. Because the TM lacks this kind of cleanliness, though, it appears as something that must be other than a performed front-space. To draw an analogy, the tourist, in his or her own culture, would not expect the janitor’s closet of a shopping mall to be as clean as the open public spaces, because the janitor’s closet is a back-space, one that is not created to be appreciated by an audience.

I also do not believe it just coincidence that dirtiness is traditionally involved, in Western societies, in the creation and positioning of racial others. In this way, the dirtiness or seediness of the TM establishes the space as authentic because the tourist, by nature of the tourist position, categorizes the people of the object culture as others, and in the case of Tunisia, racial others. This kind of discourse also positions the (white) self as the clean party in the experience. Again, see the way that hand sanitizer is used; even the narrated excuse along the lines of, “You can never be too careful, you just never know what you could pick up in a foreign country that your body isn’t used to,” functions to position the tourist as the standard against which deviations from the normative ideal of cleanliness are measured. My point here is not to categorize tourists like my grandmother as racists, but rather to indicate that there is something of a moral highness (“I could be infected because I am clean”) involved in the tourist position that is at play in the tourist’s experience in the TM.

Going back to the spatial dynamics of the TM, mappings of the area are important in mediating the area as a site for the exploration of authentic authenticity and backness. In stark contrast to the map of the MM, maps of the TM, such as the one that appears in the Lonely Planet guide to Tunisia, paint a picture of a spatial order which is seemingly chaotic and has no discernible rhyme or reason. The Lonely Planet map does not mark off neighborhoods or even main tourist thoroughfares, instead presenting just streets, their names, and the location of sites worth seeing, all on the same page as the orderly, grid-like mapping of the European Quarter (Lonely

Planet 70-71). In a way, this off-sight marker functions to designate the entire medina as a back-space, in a way indicating to the tourist that this space is chaotic and disorienting, and that even an attempt to map it cannot give it the kind of easily-interpreted organization that is characteristic of a front-space like the MM.

This kind of mapping, along with the unfamiliar visual landscape that characterizes the TM, manages to disorient the tourist, which in turn serves to cue a feeling authenticity. One could cheekily name this process “dis-orientalism,” the discourse which dictates that a tourist must be authentically experiencing another culture if he or she is disoriented or lost. This again forms itself in contrast to attractions like the MM, in which the tourist is positioned as one who belongs; in the TM, the tourist is disoriented, positioned as one who does not belong to the space mediated. This is the goal of the back-space dream: to arrive, observe, and feel a sense of being in a place where the subject is not supposed to be.

This desire can be exemplified in the idealized experience, mediated in promotional material like the Lonely Planet guide, of getting off the beaten path (67). The opportunity to wander off the beaten path mediates a sense of authentic authenticity for the tourist by allowing him or her to penetrate a perceived back-space while also not being just another tourist; the beaten path is, after all, beaten by all the normal tourists. The TM mediates this “off the beaten path” ideal rather effectively by offering a main tourist thoroughfare in the Rue Jemaa Zeitouna while making it fairly simple to veer away from it. This area, while not mediated as a front-space in

the way that the MM is, can function to cue a kind of semi-frontness against which the tourist can measure the backness of the spaces he or she encounters after leaving the street. To wander off the beaten path, to the tourist, is to enter into a space where real natives can be observed practicing their culture, uncorrupted by the performance that infects spaces that exist for tourists.

There is another moral dimension at work in the TM experience for the tourist. MacCannell explicates a kind of tourism that functions based on its ability to allow the tourist a site in which he or she can exercise his or her own moral code (MacCannell 40). These are tours of impoverished areas or attractions marking tragedies at which the tourist, upon recognizing the sight, is cued to express an emotion along the lines of “Oh, that’s a shame.” This kind of reaction tends to be cued, in the TM, by markers in the visual landscape which disrupt the mediation of the space as an idealized, authentic back-space. These markers come in the form of advertisements for commodities associated with modernity, like Coca-Cola, and the perception of a space as partially performed, as on the Rue Jemaa Zeitouna. This moralistic reaction, though, aided by nostalgic discourses like the one articulated by Cohen, allow the tourist to patch up these disruptions, framing signifiers of inauthenticity as intruders into a pure and authentic space, instead of as part of the reality of the life and economy of the space.

To the tourist, then, the TM is idealized as a giant back-space, involving varying degrees of backness, in which the tourist can exercise a model of himself or herself as

something other than a tourist, while also imagining himself or herself as interacting with or experiencing an authentic other culture. This is a tricky model to mediate, especially when it comes to positioning the tourist as one who pays to experience other cultures while also not being a tourist. But the spatial dynamics of the TM, by positioning the tourist within a space in which the commodity aesthetic is unfamiliar, disorienting the tourist, and mediating an interplay between imagined fronts and backs that the tourist is free to explore, manage to do this. With the ideal of the authentic experience properly mediated in the TM, tourists, as well as so-called “travelers,” study abroad students, and others who fear the stigma of the tourist identity are able to properly and thoroughly consume authentic authenticity.

The Medinas, Tourism, and Discourses of Tunisian Identity

I would like, now, to briefly explore how the influence of tourism in the TM and the MM, or the fact that the two medinas function to satisfy specific tourist needs, affects the appropriation of these two spaces in the mediation of discourses of Tunisian identity. These spaces are, after all, located in Tunisia, and must be made sense of to a Tunisian gaze; this is, in fact, part of the appeal of the TM to the tourist, and what the model mediated to the tourist in the MM tends to ignore. Instead of attempting to comment comprehensively on how the spatial dynamics function semiotically from a Tunisian point of view, I will be considering specifically how

tourism affects the discourses of Tunisian identity surrounding the medinas, starting with the TM.

The TM very much functions, in discourses of Tunisian identity, as a symbol of Tunisian history and tradition. It is, after all, over a millennium old, and served for much of Tunisia's history as a hub of trade and commerce. This discourse of the TM as a site of traditional Tunisian-ness can be partially seen in the clothes that people wear there; while Justin MacGuinness, writing in the 1990's, observed that traditional clothing had almost disappeared from the medina, this is certainly not the case today (MacGuinness 99). Much to the delight of the tourist, the TM is a space where one can safely wear a jelaba and sheshiya, exercising traditionalism without standing out from the crowd, as someone wearing the same clothes in La Marsa might. The TM is also generally considered the place to go if one happens to be in the market for quality traditional clothing. A key point in the narration of this discourse, though, is that the TM changed under French rule, and that it is not its former self today (interview).

This kind of narrative of loss is important in discourses of identity relating to the TM. The presence of tourism in the TM, and the subsequent changes perceived by Tunisians such as the dissolution of the order and separation of the different souks, helps to narrate this sense of loss and designate the TM as a site of nostalgia. MacGuinness' narration of the history of the medina can also be made to function this way. Tourism, then, is seen as something of a corrupting influence, one that threatens the organization and spatial realities of the TM that are imagined in this

specific memory of the space as a site of traditional culture. This is different, however, than the tourist's moralistic reaction to "signs of globalization" in the TM; whereas the tourist can remark, "Boy, it's a shame that their culture is being changed like that," and then get on a plane and leave the country, the sense of loss surrounding the TM to a Tunisian would be narrated more urgently, along the lines of, "Look what's happening to our medina!" This kind of urgent nostalgic narration of loss surrounding the TM has, so far, functioned to spur preservation efforts. To boil things down a little bit, the presence of tourism in the TM has been appropriated by a discourse of identity that nostalgically values the preservation of sites which symbolize a specific moment of idealized past.

This discourse is interesting for its potential contradictions and possible consequences. First of all, discourses of preservation are often dangerous, especially when dealing with a space like the TM, because they can often function to preserve dereliction and material inequality much more effectively than they preserve their desired, imagined and idealized moment in history. There is, basically, a structural classicism component involved. Also, in this particular instance, efforts at preservation may end up bringing more tourists to the TM, making the preservation of a special spatial-temporal ideal that is imagined without tourism that much more difficult. And finally, the concept of preservation can sometimes go too far; if they were to go too far in the TM, Tunisians may find themselves with, instead of a preserved segment of an idealized traditional past, another kind of museum city.

Returning to the MM, the tourists in search of authentic authenticity who would condemn the MM as a superficial and offensive perversion of culture fail to recognize a simple fact: the MM was developed by a Tunisian entrepreneur, and the MM functions as a perfectly acceptable place for a Tunisian to go in seeking entertainment. The restaurants and cafes are nice, and alcohol is cheap and readily available. My host-brother had an interesting comment about the MM: “Why do Tunisians go to Medina in Yasmine Hammamet? Because there aren’t many other places. We have the harbor, a little bit Sidi Bou Said, Lac, Nasr, and Hammamet,” (interview). What is significant here is not so much the sentiment that there is not much to do for a Tunisian, but the places that he chose to group the MM in with. Sidi Bou Said, Berges du Lac and Nasr are areas which mediate a model of stylish modernity. Lac and Nasr are especially preoccupied with Western-style modern aesthetics, both rife with glass facades and bright neon lighting. That my host-brother chose to associate the MM with these areas indicates that it functions, for Tunisians, as a place to safely exercise discourses of modern entertainment and interact with the ideal of the modern, Western model of a lifestyle.

Accompanying this pointed preference for modernity is a discourse of identity which chooses to focus on the Mediterranean aspect of Tunisian identity. Rather than idealizing a semi-remembered traditional past, the Mediterranean identity discourse focuses on Tunisia’s ancient history, and the many different cultures that have inhabited the space now bounded as the sovereignty of Tunisia. The MM, to the

Tunisian, mediates this discourse rather effectively. Aside from the obvious signifier of the name, the visual landscape also functions to this effect. Take, for example, a point where a wall reflecting the architecture of Sidi Bou Said suddenly becomes a faux-ruin of Roman aqueducts (see Fig. 6). Whereas for the tourist this is just a part of the form of the medium, this transition is somewhat jarring for a Tunisian who is familiar with both referents and knows that they do not, in their usual existence, go together. This disjuncture is patched up, though, by the discourse of the Mediterranean identity; under this discourse, the jarring transition serves to signify a sense of continuity between Tunisia's historical epochs.

The appropriations of the two medina spaces mentioned above, it seems, take two different approaches to the presence and influence of tourism. In the first, the tourist is seen as something of an intruder, an outsider whose influence is one of corruption, the ability to bury important relics of an idealized past. In a way, though, this discourse relies upon the presence of the tourist; without the tourist, collective loss is slightly harder to narrate, for there is no easy scapegoat. In the second, a space created mainly to serve tourist interests is accepted and appropriated to fit the needs of the pleasure-seeking Tunisian. In this case, the practice stops short of engagement with the tourists themselves, but accepts their presence, and conceives of the Tunisian subject as able to seek entertainment alongside of the tourist. It is something of an alliance; an acceptance of the tourist's presence, as long as the Tunisian can appreciate and interact with the space to his or her liking as well.

In both cases, though, the key function is the Tunisian's framing of his or her own culture. It is possible to paint these two discourses, which are not entirely exclusive of one another, as two different responses to the crisis of identity created by the pressures of globalization and post-industrial society. The tourist position is, after all, one that is decidedly post-Fordist, and as MacCannell paints it, a means of ameliorating the contradictions and discontinuities of consciousness under our post-industrial mode of production (MacCannell 17-37). These two discourses of identity, one focusing on tradition and the other on modernity, both with their own important versions of history, can be seen as processes culture folding in on itself in response to accelerated shifts in modes of production which are characteristic of globalization, ways of searching for a stable identity within a world that constantly changes.

While it may seem something of an obvious point, it is worth saying that the presence and influence of tourism in the two medina spaces makes the ideological construction of these narratives just a little bit more complicated. Both, in their way, ally themselves with the goals of the tourism that functions in the separate spaces; authentic history must be preserved in the TM, while the MM is ultimately a place for light entertainment. At the same time, though, these discourses are narrated and practiced in opposition to the presence of tourism, with tourism positioned as a cause of collective loss in the TM, and tourism ignored or coldly accepted in the MM. There is a strong need, in both cases, for an ideological smoothing-over of these contradictions. This need is generally met, both in the discourses touched upon and

in others. But the need itself, the fact that certain discourses of identity have to absorb and ideologically narrate disjunctures like Sidi Bou Said becoming a Roman aqueduct, indicates that tourism is, if anything, a force which aids and accelerates fragmentation in its object culture. I am not saying, here, that cultures are whole, or possess some kind of consensus before tourism corrupts them; I am only suggesting that tourism complicates and occasionally disrupts the institutions which function to project cultural consensus. I may be overstepping my expertise here, but it may be worth musing that, in an environment in which certain discourses of identity find it more difficult to propagate themselves and project cohesiveness, absolutist narratives of identity, forms of fundamentalism, may find themselves in a stronger cultural position. The fairly recent growth of the Tunisian police force described by Hazbun indicates that, at least in the minds of some, the hegemonic status quo requires more and more coercion propagate itself (Hazbun 29).

Conclusion

I have tried, however, to avoid polemics. If I have made anything appear overly simple, it has been by accident; my aim has been, first, to explicate the complication and contradiction involved in the construction, dreams, mediation and practice of tourism. Tourism is not a singular entity, and is as complex a societal practice as any other, particularly those of consumption. It involves a delicate balance of dreams and desires that, as discussed above, need to be mediated and are even

capable of forcing a given space to mediate them. This, in turn, complicates how space can be used by the object culture to symbolize a cohesive identity; in all likelihood, most attempts to absorb tourism and its influences into a national narrative of identity will find themselves fraught with contradiction and disjuncture.

All of these spatial-symbolic dynamics mediated in the MM, then, function to position the tourist within a space where he or she is supposed to belong. The collective dreams involved in the urban landscape, those of travel and primitiveness among others, are familiar to the tourist, and exercised in the same way that they would be in a setting such as the Mall of America or Disneyland. In addition, the spatial dynamics between the tourist and the souvenir are similar to those between the shopper and the commodity, thus producing another sense of familiarity. And the relations of space, in addition to making the tourist comfortable in a familiar environment, also serve to position the tourist as the center of the action of a limited space, creating spectacles within the boundaries of the MM all around the tourist for consumption at his or her leisure.