Among the Piranhas: The Troubling Lifespan of Ethnic Tropes in 'Tribal' Tourism to Vietnam.

Abstract

This article presents findings from mixed-method research into ethnic tourism in Vietnam. Drawing on critical discourse analysis of tourism marketing material and subsequent ethnographic research carried out in Sapa, northern Vietnam, the article examines how minority indigenous groups are represented in ways that reproduce certain racial and gendered tropes that are drawn upon by tourists before, during and after actual tours. It explores the impact of the imagery and words used to describe and position indigenous people, or more specifically women, highlighting the powers of discourse in this context. Findings from the study suggest that ethnic tourism is having a marginalising effect on minority ethnic women, who are becoming excluded from social, symbolic and economic space for behaviour that is deemed inauthentic. Data suggest that tourists are drawing on a narrow range of Orientalist tropes throughout different stages of their participation in ethnic tourism and are carrying forward their pre-conceptions into tourism environments. Therefore the ways in which indigeneity is packaged for tourists and the ways that tourists 'authenticate' ethnicity informs their desires, which then shapes their behaviour and interactions with locals. Drawing on a conceptual framework that brings together ideas about authentication and gendered Orientalism and Othering, the analysis shows that the power play and its impacts on indigenous groups are considerable and troubling, with the whims and desires of tourists steering tourism organisation, including the surveillance and controlling of indigenous women traders in and around the town.

Introduction

Vietnam is rapidly emerging as an important and well-invested tourism destination, receiving 7.5 million international visitors annually. Certain areas including remote mountain hill-station towns like Sapa have an established market for tourism development dating back to colonial era resort tourism and Socialist state-sponsored holidays for proletarian workers (Michaud and Turner 2006). A burgeoning and under-regulated private sector grows on the back of this historic infrastructure and in very

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recent years Vietnam, particularly its Northern Territory, has been marketed towards the 'worldly' and 'adventurous' global traveller, commoditised as a place of ethnic diversity, untamed landscapes and unique cultural heritage. Like many other Southeast Asian destinations, Vietnam is packaged to promise a 'taste' of all the country has to offer, including tropical beaches, mountain treks, historical visits and so on. More recently, advertisements for cross-cultural interactions have risen in prominence and the country's complex war history and 'exotic' culture now feature heavily in marketing material. Like many other Southeast Asian and South American countries, Vietnam has become particularly popular with Western tourists seeking to consume in more 'niche' ways. Certain prefixes to new forms of tourism – 'eco', 'adventure' and 'independent' for example – carry positive associations for tourists looking to differentiate themselves from the meanings and problems attributed to mass tourism. Mowforth and Munt argue that this often occurs as a class-based acknowledgment of tourism as 'an environmentally, socially and culturally problematic activity among certain fractions of the new middle-classes' (Mowforth and Munt, 2009: 131). As a result, they argue, 'the intellectual demands of these class fractions are of increasing importance to the legitimisation of travel' (Ibid). Vietnam is firmly established on the budget/backpacker itinerary as it provides hugely depreciated currency and suffers extreme levels of poverty, representing what *Lonely Planet: Vietnam* (2014) call 'simply outstanding value for money' (rear cover). It is also appealing to a new generation of volunteer tourists, predominantly young, white middle-class wanting to 'give back' whilst enriching their *curricula vitae.*

Amidst these emergent desires, Vietnam has become an important location for a niche tourism market called 'tribal tourism' (or 'ethnic tourism'), where remote minority villages are visited by parties of tourists who are encouraged to photograph 'tribal' people, purchase 'traditional' artefacts and 'collect memories'. International and Vietnamese tour agents are beginning to capitalise on tourists' desire to visit ever more remote areas in search of 'authentic' experiences and adventures. This often involves gazing upon indigenous locals, and ethnic tourism is often marketed though heavily Orientalist reproductions of indigenous peoples. Such 'tourism of difference' is growing in many parts of the Global South, but Vietnam is somewhat unique in that it is developing a tourism industry in the aftermath of a deeply embedded post-colonial war, whose violence and suffering are themselves commodified for tourism. Vietnam's tourism, therefore, grows in a context of Orientalist commodification of cultures, history

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and the performative presence of 'Others'. Its largely devastated post-war(s) infrastructure, poisoned natural environment and extreme poverty make Vietnam especially vulnerable to laissez-faire, neo-liberal development policies and practices that readily bow to the demands of niche tourism markets. This research is concerned with the implications of these factors for indigenous minority groups, whose indigeneity is being understood and reproduced as being outside of 'time' and who are therefore potentially denied access to benefits of tourism development.

The article presents research on ethnic tourism in Sapa, a mountain resort town in northern Vietnam with a population of 6000 people, which has become Vietnam's top ethnic tourism destination. Sapa has a complex and buoyant domestic and international tourism economy and has sparked some anthropological interest as a site of reinvention and competing tourist purposes and narratives (Michaud and Turner 2006). Whilst Michaud and Turner's study discusses the market presence of ethnic/tribal life as a site for tourist visits by predominantly backpacker tourists, it was carried out before a significant growth-spurt in the past ten years, which has resulted in a more distinct and formal market for ethnic tourism being publicised towards tourists from the West. [1] This suggests a need for research on shifts that may have taken place in the performative presence of 'ethnic' locals and necessitates an empirical and theoretical return to concerns about the vagaries of an Othering tourist gaze as outlined above.

There is considerable need to examine the implications for local people of the changes, incentives and pressures brought about by the neoliberal commoditisation of their cultures and this research asks important questions about a tourism niche that draws on a discourse that sells 'authenticity' and makes marginalised minority communities a desirable tourist commodity. It explores discursive representations, or 'tropes' of indigeneity in ethnic tourism in Vietnam, identifying their beginnings in marketing material and tracing them through the discourses, photography and other forms of 'capture' by tourists to Vietnam. The aim is to shed light on the power contained in racialising discourse and its impact on those it depicts for consumption by tourists. The research adopts a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to

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[1] The author acknowledges that Vietnam attracts approximately half of its 10 million visitors from other Asian countries, with China being the largest single sending country. However, the research is concerned with the especial commodification of difference in tourism aimed at Western consumers and is limited in practical capacity to explore the potentially very interesting and revealing market for 'non-Western' ethnic tourism.

interrogating the inequalities and potential power abuses inherent in ethnic tourism. It uses Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework for studying discourse, whose aim is to map three forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of texts (spoken or written but also visual), analysis of discourse practice (predominantly in this case its consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice (the behaviour of tourists in relation to discourse on ethnic tourism). These are considered in relation to the global context of the research: Western tourism to Far-eastern indigenous communities, and therefore debates on Othering/Orientalism and authenticity/authentication are crucial; this analysis brings these debates together in a new and necessary way. It highlights omissions in recent 'authentication' theory, which has not adequately discussed the complexities of racialisation or the significance of Orientalism in tourism. Discussions here consider authentication in tandem with Orientalism in multi-modal discourse in order to illustrate the symbolic, commercial and 'live' power abuses inherent it this, and other, 'developing world' tourism markets.

Authenticity and Niche Tourism in the Global South

There is a particularly condensed tourism expansion in some of the world's most peripheral and remote areas, a process that is accelerated by niche tourism practices and desires. This has ignited concern among scholars about the potentially negative implications of the power discrepancy between locals and tourists in marketised settings that usually favours tourists in their powerful role as consumers (Bruner 1991; MacCannell 1992). It is argued that 'host' communities are often required to adjust to tourist worldviews and lifestyles (Hall and Tucker 2004; Hollinshead 2004; Sin and Minca 2014). The commoditisation of difference implies that what were once personal cultural displays become cultural products, which may lead to the invention of heritage to meet visitor conceptions of the Other (Hall and Tucker 2004). There are also concerns about potentially homogenising impacts of tourism development on areas that are considered fragile – ecologically, environmentally, culturally and so on (Fagence 1999), which echo a focus in earlier decades on the negative impacts of tourism development for 'host' communities (e.g. Turner and Ash 1975; MacCannell 1976). These older consternations have been critiqued in post-modern tourism analysis because of their failure to acknowledge the agency of tourees and therefore render locals static and fixed, something that arguably reproduces the very hegemonic discourses that commoditise 'tradition' for tourists (Hall and Tucker 2004).

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Extant research specifically on ethnic tourism is primarily concerned with the polarity of whether tourism has been detrimental or beneficial to indigenous communities (Wood 1998; Ryan and Aicken 2005) and much of this is underwritten by concerns with what constitutes ethnic authenticity and how the arrival of tourists changes or harms that. However, debates on authenticity have been conflicting and incomplete. MacCannell's introduction of the concept of the 'staged authenticity' of tourist attractions in 1973 instigated four decades of discussions that have led to little paradigmatic or conceptual consensus among tourism scholars (Rickly-Boyd 2012). More recently, concerns with authenticity have undergone a shift in emphasis, turning to consider the more dynamic social processes of *authentication* in tourism markets and interactions of different tourism stakeholders. (Ateljevic & Doorne 2005; Cohen & Cohen 2014; Xie 2011).

Xie (2011), writing specifically on ethnic tourism, suggests that authenticity evolves from a static into a dynamic concept, which can be formulated according to the different stages of development relating to all the stakeholders involved. Authentication, he argues, is an interactive process in which a balance of forces leads to a state of equilibrium between parties. Whilst this important work on authentication processes in ethnic tourism usefully acknowledges the potential agency of indigenous stakeholders, its focus is solely on domestic tourism to specially constructed 'folk villages' on China's Hainan Island and not on actual communities as they conduct their everyday lives. Therefore, Xie emphasises the reconstruction of ethnicity in a formal workplace, rather than in everyday life itself or in a context of unregulated, informal labour. It has been argued that such constructed authenticity is an embodiment brought into being by the dynamic interaction between individual agency and the external world (Knudsen and Waade 2010) and that authenticity is 'neither objective nor subjective, but rather performative' (Zhu 2012: 1496).

However, these comparatively non-problematising analyses of performative authentication do not adequately probe the power dimensions, Othering and forms of exploitation at play when tourists gaze upon the (non-performative) everyday lives (or their tropes in promotional literature) of indigenous people. If we explore authentication more critically as the 'various ways in which certain languages, bodies, practices, places and objects become authenticated in a particular time and space' as suggested by Pietikäinen (2010: 80), yet also through the lens of unequal social, cultural and

economic positioning often experienced by minority indigenous communities, we can reflect more critically on its exploitative potential.

Othering, Power and Depictions of Difference in Promotional Material
Authentication theory is gaining purchase in broader consumption spheres, as a tool with which producers and marketers exploit their power to construct the authenticity of products for consumers who, in turn, judge products and themselves in terms of authenticity. Producers are well aware of consumer desire for authenticity and utilise processes of 'otherising' and 'traditionalising' to exploit and perpetuate those desires (Koontz, 2010). These tools are especially useful in markets that have become saturated, within which it is increasingly difficult for consumers to self-actualise and self-distinguish. As a highly saturated market, mass tourism is a case in point, and, as discussed above, niche markets signify a more 'authentic' alternative. By travelling further afield to more 'global' and less visited places tourists can occupy global spaces that are, in Bauman's terms, ever geared towards tourists' 'dreams and desires' (Bauman,1988: 93) in increasingly self-conscious and, as argued here, troubling ways. These dreams often begin in consultation with promotional literature prior to travel. Indeed, tourism marketing media is recognised as a significant shaper not only of tourists' expectations but of destinations themselves (Jenkins 2003). Marketing material constitutes an important point of conceptualisation for the tourist, which becomes connected with the subsequent creation of first-hand knowledge brought about by actual visits. These representations are carried through into embodied trips to 'faraway' lands and, in many contexts in the Global South, tourists' discourses, behaviour, consumption, photography and so on, reinforce a narrative mastery in which tourists 'fix meaning, encapsulate and control the other, to stop motion and time, to exert power' (Bruner 2005:195). Morgan and Prichard argue that the construction of ethnicity by marketers is always oppositional and polar, creating a we/they binary, where 'they' are 'culturally inscribed with otherness' (Morgan and Prichard 1998: 214). Thus the 'ethnic' is made and identities represented in photographs become living representations of culture. Indigenous people therefore become the tropes of an 'interpreted, pseudo-authentic way of life' that is commodified for tourists which, in turn, 'contributes to the shaping of the way of life of those it images' (Ibid.). In the photography of marketers and tourists alike, photographers hold the powerful position

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of 'master subjects' who impose their own fantasies upon the living 'object' of their desire. This enables them, as the agents of authentication, to 'bring back a disembodied, decontextualized, sanitized, hypothetical Other, one they can possess and control through the stories they tell about how the souvenirs were purchased and the photographs taken' (Bruner 2005:194). This power relation is crucial, especially in the context of tourism to marginalised indigenous communities inhabiting what is sometimes termed the 'Fourth World'.

Orientalism, Selves and Gendered Others
The figure of the indigenous Other in travel brochures is often used to illustrate how interesting or unusual a destination is, and this is important to demarcating and differentialising the 'niche' tourist self from the 'mass' tourist self. Whilst 'Othering' is a notoriously difficult and complex area of psychoanalysis, a brief outline of the concept and how it is useful to this analysis will now follow.

The fluidity and complexities of Otherness and Othering have long been the focus of ongoing debates in the humanities and social sciences. Heidegger's vast and influential contribution to the philosophy of identity and difference focussed on identity as a subject-centred concept, in contrast to, and separate from, difference, which he treated as external to identity (1957 – cited in Baumann and Gingrich, 2004). Later work carried out in the field of postcolonial studies, perhaps most notably that of Spivak, connects identity and difference more closely through the notion of 'Othering', where colonised Others, though absent, remain close. Although colonisers and the colonised are intrinsically different, Spivak suggests that they are linked by reciprocal processes of identity production, wherein colonised subjects exist only as 'dependents' through the powerful gaze of postcolonial discourse, and colonisers retain subjects within their gaze under the conditions of Othering (Spivak 1985) .

Said's 'Orientalism' thesis recognised that whilst Westerners malign what they understand as 'Oriental', they also desire it (1978). In setting up binaries between the self and the 'Oriental' (rational/irrational; advanced/backward; calculated/spontaneous etc.), the emphasis is not a straightforward 'good' versus 'bad' dichotomy. The Other can embody qualities of innocence, exoticism and purity that the (Western) self

desires. Thus Baumann identifies the difference between xenophobia and 'xenophilia' in cultural self-seeking:

> The xenophobic version is to seek superiority for whatever merits one calls one's own; the xenophiliac one is to search for redemption from an equally self-counter-mirrored Other… The baby grammar of 'us is good and them is bad' is thus transformed, in orientalism, into a double-edged, potentially subtle, and at times even dialectical way of selfing one's own and othering the alien (2004: 20).

Said had also recognised the self/other dialectic:

> For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them").This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Orientals lived in their world, "we" lived in ours. The vision and material reality propped each other up, kept each other going (1979:43-44).

This relationship of interdependence is central to contemporary international tourism and arguably no more so than in ethnic tourism where the principal 'attraction' hinges on this Orientalist gaze. Said's concern with the power of discourse to create 'imagined geographies' (Said 1978) that are themselves used to legitimise objectification, control and subordination hold striking relevance to understanding ethnic tourism.

However, Said neglected to adequately consider gender in his Orientalism thesis, which presents limitations to its application to understanding this context. As the following sections will illustrate, the data generated in this study revealed that indigeneity is almost exclusively connected to femininity; indigenous men remain almost entirely invisible in promotional literature and in ethnic tourism settings. Said refers to gender only in terms of the symbolic feminisation of the Orient, arguing that Orientalism confirms the Orient's 'eccentricity, backwardness, silent indifference, feminine penetrability and supine malleability' (1978: 207). Implicit in Said's feminisation of the East is the masculinisation of Orientalism, which whilst fixing and freezing the East also inferioritises and freezes the feminine. As a result, Reina Lewis argues, 'Orientalism is a homogenous discourse enunciated by a colonial subject that is unified, intentional and irredeemably male' (1996: 17). This obfuscates women's

agency in two ways: that of Western women's ability to Orientalise, and that of Eastern women's capacity to resist. Whilst this provides a useful lens for analysing tourism landscapes that are 'infused with masculine ideas about adventure, pleasure and the exotic' (Enloe 1989:20), it falls short of considering the embodied presence and commoditisation of 'Oriental' women.

The power to create and perpetuate discourse lies with those who have the capacity to objectify those whom they are imagining, and this can be a highly gendered process. Prichard and Morgan have argued that the language and imagery of tourism promotional material foregrounds the male, heterosexual gaze, and that the 'feminized landscapes of the Third World are constructed to appeal to this gaze in terms which are gendered' (2000: 885). The gendered and racialised dimensions of this discursive power and its various stages of mediation were the central concern of the research on ethnic tourism in Sapa, which will be discussed in the remainder of this article.

Methodology

The research took a mixed-methods, critical discourse analysis approach, including content analysis of a collection of purposively-selected online marketing publications, followed by a six-week period of ethnographic fieldwork in Sapa. The sample of websites was selected by an exhaustive search via major search engines *Google* and *Yahoo*, using 'Ethnic Tours Sapa'; 'Vietnam'; 'Tribal Tourism'; 'Tourism Sapa' as search words in various combinations. Searches produced material from 14 tour operators/travel agencies, four newspaper/magazine travel articles and six travel blogs. I also draw retrospective data from *Lonely Planet* guidebooks since they emerged as an important point of conception for tourists. All material used was written in the English language and originated from USA, UK, Canada, New Zealand or Australia. Whilst this represents a skewed and limited sample, it does also allow for the exploration of the project's central concern with Western conceptions and commodification of Eastern indigeneity. The purpose of this stage of research was to document the extent and operations of the market for ethnic tourism, explore the 'selling points' that are used, and to gain a sense of the 'tropes' being drawn upon and reproduced. Therefore both visual and narrative content was analysed qualitatively, using the 'expert judgement' (Singh and Hu 2005) approach to seek out most frequently used images and descriptors. In this way, descriptions of indigeneity were

identified and are discussed in detail below. For clarity, themes were organised into the following categories:

Photographic Depiction	Frequency (out of total of 24 sources)	Written Description	Frequency (out of total of 24 sources)
Tribal Dress	24	Unique	18
Woman/Women	22	Authentic	18
Field Labour	20	Tribal	14
Handicrafts	20	Traditional	13
Smiling Faces	18	Simple	12
Children	15	Colourful	12
Elderly (women)	12	Friendly	11
Musical Instruments	7	Untouched	8

Fig.1: Table showing frequency and type of descriptors of indigenous people in sample of literature promoting ethic tours in Sapa

Subsequent ethnographic fieldwork in Sapa included participant observation of tourism in the area; undertaking four organised 'tribal tours' (treks) to outlying minority villages, keeping a detailed field diary, and recording/gathering postcards, souvenirs and other mementos collected by tourists. I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with tourists from Europe, New Zealand and Australia, all of whom were white and spanned an age range from 19 to 60 years. There was an even gender split among interviewees. The interviews explored how participants were experiencing ethnic tourism in Sapa, their motives for partaking in it, their views on it, and what they were hoping to see/experience. I asked how their experiences compared to their expectations, and where/how their expectations had been conceived and developed. I asked interviewees to bring along any photographs, postcards and souvenirs that they had gathered in Sapa, and these were used as prompts for exploration of their conceptions of indigeneity and ethnic tourism. Since I do not have permission to reproduce these images, they are described verbally for the purposes of analysis. Interviews were organised in advance during the treks and carried out in a quiet corner

of a café. Each lasted approximately one hour and was audio recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the anonymity of participants.

Interviews were repeatedly read, thematically coded (manually, given the relatively small quantity) and analysed with the textual data in mind. As I draw on CDA to explore how discourse reproduces social and political inequality, domination and power and to examine the ways that the West imagines and positions the East, I used these ideas to draw out interpretive themes in the data (Mason, 2002). Further, the critical stance of the research brought forth themes that signalled Orientalist means of authenticating ethnicity, and I do not try to claim that 'themes "emerge" as if data and the interpreter are not always already theory-laden" (Adams St.Pierre & Roulston 2006: 677).

I also draw on informal, conversational data generated during the treks, which is recalled from memory as note-taking was not a practical option. I do not quote directly from these exchanges, and I informed all participants, including the tour guides, that I was carrying out the research at the start of each trek. I was unable to inform the many women traders who joined the tours because of language barriers and impractically high numbers (often upwards of 40 women).

Notwithstanding the limitations of a relatively small study such as this, a 'thick description' of the setting was generated. Using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional approach to analysing discursive texts, practice, and events in relation to one another allowed for some nuanced exploration of different narratives as they evolved over time –before, during, and after embodied travel. This constitutes a useful data set with which to continue exploring and begin shedding much-needed light on ethnic tourism to Vietnam and its potentially problematic implications for locals living and working under its associated gazes.

Ethics and Power

The project represents a complex range of power relationships, arguably involving at different or indeed overlapping times researching 'up', 'across' and 'down'. Often I was interviewing tourists of a similar socio-economic positioning to myself, which was relatively unproblematic in terms of power relations. My experiences of researching a range of niche or 'social interest' tourism settings has revealed a generally high level of interest in my work among tourists, which has resulted in comparatively straightforward recruitment of interviewees. I have had numerous encounters that

have revealed what I would conceptualise as racism on the part of interviewees – the labelling of Vietnamese as 'backward' as an example of the widespread Orientalising and Othering recurrent in my research. As a white, Western woman my tourist interviewees and I often shared a racial/national background which seemingly enabled a discourse of Othering. My identity as white British therefore had an impact on the research by way of its invisibility; had I not been white and aligned to them in terms of my position as a tourist, their thoughts might have been differently expressed. Our shared positioning elicited 'honesty' around race and racism under the auspices of it being the central 'non-race' against which it is 'normal' to measure Others, and this is at once revealing and troubling.

I was significantly more powerful, socially and economically speaking, as a tourist observing local people who were positioned as tourism 'hosts'. Tourism's key underlying principle is to meet the desires of its consumers, and when one of those desires is data, the power differentials implicit in the researcher/research process become enmeshed in the dynamics of commercial exchange that drive the service industry. There is always the danger in tourism research that information is given alongside other 'goods' in a 'wish-granting' culture of hospitality, a possibility that undermines the nature of consent and complicates the power relations already present in face-to-face qualitative research. These complications call for an especially reflexive approach, with a watchful eye on how data are inevitably affected and produced in these differentiated circumstances. Researchers are always, especially in the field, 'material bodies', through whom 'a narrative structure unfolds' (Richardson 1994: 523) and we should, therefore, always be concerned with 'the workings of the world *and* insights on how that knowledge came about' (Berg 2007). In an ethnographic research context such as this, whose aim is to explore the relationships between differently positioned groups at close quarters, such concerns are arguably magnified and particularly pertinent. Owing to these concerns, as well as time and language limitations, I did not conduct interviews with indigenous people, since the groups had no written English skills and I had neither knowledge of local languages nor the means to pay a translator. A longer period of fieldwork and greater financial resources (to pay interpreters and so on) would allow for a deeper exploration of the implications of ethnic tourism experienced by members of indigenous communities.

Ethnic Tourism in Sapa: The Market and its Racialising Tropes.

The hill town of Sapa is surrounded by 17 small communities of minority ethnic groups, whose womenfolk walk into town on a daily basis to trade their handicrafts. The town is a busy mix of Vietnamese, other Asian (predominantly Chinese), and Western tourists, and traditionally-dressed women from the surrounding villages. The women are the most prominent figures in promotional material and also emerged as a focal point during all of the interviews. They were, in the texts consulted, overwhelming presented as the embodiment of rural tradition, always depicted in 'tribal' dress and almost always smiling. They were closely connected to traditional forms of labour, either producing handicrafts or tending rice paddies or other crops. All three of these commonly occurring tropes are exemplified in the image below:

Fig. 2: The familiar trope of 'traditional' female labourer (Henritours, 2017)

Indigenous women are portrayed in very serene and simple terms. Images are always colourful and present happy, smiling women's faces, often in convivial settings such as groups of women laughing together. Women are often pictured caring for their children, or with children playing nearby. Handicrafts are also frequently depicted, being produced or traded in the marketplace. Images are often colour-filtered to enhance the vibrancy of the landscape and the women's clothing and textiles.

Written descriptions in advertisements tend to be gender-neutral, favouring the terms 'hill tribes' and 'minority villages'. Amongst the most commonly-occurring adjectives used to describe indigenous people, as Figure 1 shows, are 'unique'; 'authentic'; 'tribal'; 'traditional'; 'simple'; 'colourful'; friendly'; and 'untouched'.

These versions of ethnicity reduce the many different and varied minority groups inhabiting the Sapa area into a singular vision of Orientalist fantasy, essentialising them as static and undeveloped—thereby fabricating a manageable view of Oriental culture that enables its repeat depiction by the West (Said 1978). Yet the reality of daily life for the women, who are among the poorest communities in Vietnam, involves trying to make a living by selling the products of their labour to tourists and there is fierce competition among the many hundreds of women traders in the area. Their make-shift stalls line the streets of Sapa and many carry their wares (hand-woven hemp blankets, embroidery, scarves, bags, jewellery, trinkets etc.) in baskets on their backs. The sales techniques they have developed in an intensely competitive environment include following tourists and striking up a conversation, asking 'where are you from', 'how long are you staying here' and 'would you like to buy something'. Sometimes the women traders follow tourists through the streets and back to their hotels to wait outside for their re-emergence.

The women also use the organised 'tribal tours' or 'tribal treks' to make connections with tourists. Treks are organised by small travel agencies in town, and cost approximately £25 for a half day tour including lunch. Tour guides, again always women from minority indigenous groups, are paid approximately £10 per day, regardless of the size of the group (this is a comparatively high wage in Vietnam). Depending on the location of the community visited, the tourers either walk or are collected from their hotels by minibus and transported to trailheads or drop-off points. These locations are well-known to the women traders and trekking groups are typically greeted by upwards of forty women, who then join the trek, talking to tourists and lending a hand to negotiate muddy or steep sections of trail. At the end of the trek, the women pull out their goods from their bamboo baskets and try to sell them to trekkers. Often the helping hands and perceived 'friendships' generated during the trek are cited as a point of obligation for tourists to purchase goods, as a gesture of reciprocity. These actions contradict the portrait of passive, pre-capitalist indigeneity depicted in tour advertisements and this often generates ill-feeling among trekkers:

> It's so sad. It's just so weird and annoying that you think 'oh how friendly, how nice' that they want to come with us, and help us, but then you get to the end and you realise they're just trying to sell you something, and they're like, they've helped you so you feel like you owe them. Now I just don't look

at them. I don't make eye contact and they leave me alone. It is sad (Kate, 24 years, UK)

In a telling instance of researcher-as-tourist overlap, my field diary recorded feelings of discomfort during my first experience of a 'tribal tour'. As we left Sapa with our tour guide, we were immediately joined by four women from the minority Hmong community. My notes explained what happened during the tour:

It was raining heavily for the duration of our five-hour trek. The group consisted of me and three white Australian students, two men and one woman in their early twenties who were on a two week holiday to Vietnam. They were inappropriately dressed in canvas shoes and cotton clothes, straight from the beach in Ho Chi Minh City, with no outerwear or waterproofs. One of the men was not sure-footed and was struggling on the muddy, uneven terrain. The Hmong women helped us all through tricky sections of trail, taking our arms to steady us and holding their umbrellas over our heads to keep us dry. They escorted us carefully through tiny hamlets, pointing out spectacles such as starving dogs and children tending fields. We were ushered inside a house and offered a place by the fire to stare at tribal elders, drunk on rice whiskey. The women repeatedly offered us their brioche, asked us a lot of questions, ingratiating themselves to us, their new friends. Then at lunch, which was pre-organised in a small village eatery, the friendship transpired into a contractual obligation: 'but you're my friend, we talked a lot, you promise me to buy something'. We tourists felt uncomfortable and awkward. The Australians became slightly hostile. The mood cooled and the others refused any further help, or to purchase anything, their fantasy of the innocently welcoming Other shattered (Field diary, February 2016).

I discussed the events of that trek in a subsequent interview with one of the Australian tourists and his disappointment was clear:

I'm just not feeling the *authenticity*. They con you into thinking they're being friendly, you know, trying to help us because we're a bit useless or

whatever, and then they do that and it all gets ruined. And it makes you feel bad because you can't, you just don't want to get to know them, you get angry and feel like telling them to piss off (Nathan, 22 years, Australia).

'Pinkie Promises'

My first encounter of such a 'hard-sell' in Sapa occurred immediately when I disembarked the bus from Hanoi. A middle-aged woman of Red Dao origin approached me, enquiring about my name, nationality, duration of visit, asking was I married, did I have children and so on. She asked if I would like to do some shopping, showing me her embroidery and scarves, and I thanked her but said that I needed to find my hotel. 'Maybe later?' she asked. 'Maybe later' I replied. 'Pinkie promise?' she asked, and held out her little finger for me to take with mine and 'shake', which I did. She then followed me to my hotel and insisted, when we arrived, that I had 'pinkie-promised' that I would buy something from her. A long discussion ensued, at the end of which I bought a trinket and she walked away, shouting at me. This kind of encounter began to characterise trips on foot into town and it became apparent to me that any kind of engagement with the women would be read as a signal to initiate a purchase, a misunderstanding that could prove very difficult to get out of. The 'pinkie promise' is an Americanism that is delivered with the irony of cultural appropriation, which is happily indulged by bemused tourists. But the warmth of interactions drains when tourists back out of the 'deal' and often resent being so heavily pressured. The unfortunate consequence of this is for tourists to start avoiding interactions, or even become hostile, in order to avoid an uncomfortable situation.

This type of exchange was referred to many times during interviews and conversations with Western tourists. Without exception there was negativity, resentment and sadness around the actions of the women. It was termed as 'a great shame' and 'a real disappointment', and was typically cited as a reason for leaving Sapa earlier than anticipated or vowing never to return. Clara, a German tourist in her mid-twenties explained:

'We were planning to stay here for around a week but we're so, we're really disillusioned with the whole thing here. It's just so hard to deal with, the women, it's like you don't dare to be friendly, and that's why you travel, to

see other cultures but also to make friends. You can't afford to do that here because of the harassment. We're leaving tonight, we're going to Laos. It should be less developed there'.

I pursued Clara's use of the term 'disillusioned', since it suggested disappointment that her expectations were not being met. She explained that the reality of her experience did not match the way she had imagined it to be. I asked where her imaginings had originated and she replied:

'I've got friends who had visited and I saw their pictures online and it was just, it looked so different with the women and the rice terraces and, I don't know, it just didn't really set you up for this. When you do research for your trip on websites and, it looks so idyllic and interesting. You just don't expect the harassment'.

The non-passive trading techniques of the women were shocking to Clara because they contradict the Orientalist versions of indigeneity that she had previously consulted in promotional literature and a friend's holiday photographs. Her longing to be somewhere 'less developed' suggests that she equates commercial activity with a loss of authenticity, and that the women's behavior presents layers of complexity that jar with her essentialist conceptions of indigeneity.

These sentiments are also reflected in the many travel blogs, tour operator testimonials and advertisements dedicated to Sapa. The image and text below are taken from a travel blog written by a representative of New York-based outfit *Remote Lands*, a small independent travel company that offers bespoke luxury holidays to Asia. The travel representative, pictured in the top image, was writing up his observations of an 'inspection trip' to Sapa:

'As has become normal for me, I was on a quick inspection trip. I spent two nights on the train back and forth from Hanoi, and only one night in the hotel during two full days of touring. It was a very tiring but personally and professionally fulfilling trip. I would advise others to stay at least two nights in Sapa. Sapa is well worth the effort involved in getting there, being one of the few places left on the planet where it is possible to see tribal culture in an almost undisturbed state, if you go to the right areas (certain areas of

Northern Laos and   Kengtung and/or   Chin   in Myanmar come   close)'
(*Remote Lands,* 2016).

These smiling Red Dao would have robbed me blind had I given them the chance.

Figure 3: Remote Lands, 2016

The lower of the two images, which form part of the same article, reproduces the trope of happy, traditionally-dressed women but the accompanying text warns that the women who provide tourists with the opportunity to encounter authentic 'tribal culture' are also quite likely to steal from them. This contradictory discourse positions the local women of Sapa as a 'desirable nuisance', reminiscent of the xenophobic/xenophiliac dialectic discussed above, where 'irrational' Others are simultaneously maligned and desired in cultural self-seeking. Further, implicit in the fabrication of Others as static and singular, according to Said (1978), is the idea that Western society is, in contrast, developed, rational, flexible, and superior. The author certainly positions himself as both perspicacious and powerful, using his exoticising photographs of the local women to illustrate his own cultural capital by keeping both physical proximity *and* symbolic

opposition to them, his Othered subjects. His masculinity is foregrounded, both in a physical sense by his position in the photograph, and in its superior rationality and wisdom. This vision of the 'canny' Westerner is also reproduced by tourists, as can be interpreted from this interview quote from John, a 36-year-old British tourist whom I interviewed after meeting on a trekking tour:

> 'The women in town will rip you off if you're not vigilant. They give you that sob story so you feel like if you don't buy that blanket or whatever they can't feed their children tonight. But it's kind of, it's not real, so you go to these villages like the one we went to today and they're working in the fields or they're weaving and just getting on with normal life. If you're stupid enough to fall for it you'd buy everything at rip-off prices; they're just out to make money off you in Sapa'.

John showed me his photographs from the day and explained how he had carefully edited them to represent what he sensed as authentic. This included capturing the wrinkled faces of 'tribal elders', children playing, women in tribal dress and the performance of (field) labour. He explained that he had deleted photographs of local women smoking cigarettes and wearing jeans because this did not portray the kind of image that he wanted to share on *Instagram*. Like Clara, John's version of indigeneity therefore replicated the tropes found in promotional discourse. In this way, ethnicity is being authenticated at different points of production and consumption in a profoundly gendered-Orientalist manner, again with the layers of difference and complexity of local people being erased to produce a singular fantasy of the Other, which enhances the status of the tourist because it exhibits his ability to 'locate' the Other.

The specific pointing to the 'women in town' as a problem was a frequent discussion topic in interviews. Among the implications of the ways that indigeneity is Orientalised and authenticated is the reaction of the Sapa authorities. In response to tourists' complaints they have recently (in 2016) deployed a squad of tourist police who patrol the streets wearing red arm bands, frequently questioning and moving the women on and sometimes issuing fines. There are notices in the town that advise against purchasing goods from the women as it discourages minority ethnic groups from formally educating their children in school. Yet the sub-narrative to the actions of tourist police is that they are guardians of the tourist gaze whose remit tends to

criminalise and expel elements disruptive of the gaze, thereby preserving the commercially important desires and expectations of visitors. This involves indigenous communities' geographical and symbolic restriction to the specifically 'raced spaces' (Mills 1997) to which they are deemed to belong. It also requires them to conform to the Orientalist conceptions of consumers in the Western developed world.

Piranhas and Sheep

Interviews revealed a persistent tourist-as-victim theme, which often moved beyond the accusations of theft and harassment illustrated above, into more symbolic terrain where the women were constructed as guilty of robbing the tourist of an experience to which they felt entitled; an 'authentic' and emotionally rewarding encounter with an innocent, primitive Other. For example, during a long, ongoing series of conversations, Lana, a 60-year-old White Canadian woman explained to me, in relation to minority tourism in Sapa, how nothing feels 'real':

> 'There's just no… I think the thing that's missing is that there's just no love.
> It's a feeling like you're, like being among the *piranhas*. I actually realised
> that I can't stand it here, can't stand to be here and that just feels so wrong.
> I had to go to the Mekong Delta to feel like I was doing something real'.

Here the assumption is that the feminine Other should be 'authentic', i.e. passive and 'loving'. Lana's disclosure that she actually 'hates' Sapa made her remorseful because it represents a betrayal of what it means to be an intrepid, global traveller, part of which is to be able to withstand, even court, adversity:

> 'I have to keep questioning myself, like what is that I hate so much, when
> I've been traveling all over Asia and I'm not normally intimidated. But I feel
> bullied here, like *I'm* the victim'.

Lana's emphasis on '*I'm*' in her declaration 'I'm the victim' suggests that the more normalised power dynamic between tourist (powerful, invincible) and the Other (powerless, vulnerable) is being disturbed in an uncomfortable way. Tourists to poor regions often cite pro-poor sensibilities as a self-affirming motive to travel – to 'help'

or 'give back', yet in reality this often happens in ways that benefit the neoliberal subject (tourist) more measurably than local 'poor' (Vrasti 2015).

Lana had spent her final morning in Sapa at a religious festival in an outlying village and was heartened by the 'authenticity' that she sensed there. She explained how there were very few tourists present, and therefore 'no selling or performing' occurring, allowing her to gaze freely at the ceremonies and costumes, getting a sense of 'reality' before she left. She explained how she photographed the event extensively (without permission and potentially thereby causing some degree of offence) because it represented something 'real' that she wanted to remember and share with her friends. For Lana the hard selling feels 'even more weird' because the aggression and intimidation is coming from women; gender arguably deepening the powerful/vulnerable disjuncture. Like Clara, Lana decided to travel further 'off the beaten track', overland across the Chinese border to tackle notoriously difficult logistics, poor transportation, with no European languages spoken. Lana anticipated enjoying a feeling of adversity and meeting 'real' people. To this end, she had previously left the town for several days to live with a minority ethnic family at their 'homestay'. But her hopes of experiencing 'authenticity' were again quelled:

'I've stayed in homestays, but here they're not really homes anymore, more like guesthouses. It's really hard to get that experience here'.

Homestay tourism (something of an oxymoron to many partakers) is growing in popularity in Southeast Asia. It is a niche area that promises authentic experiences in the homes of families, often in a traditional 'longhouse' with communal living and sleeping. Sometimes guests can stay for free or very little money in exchange for labour ranging from light farm work to teaching English to village children. This kind of experience is romanticised in guidebooks and their readers are often sorely disappointed when their expectations are not met and the experience feels (is) 'commercialised', as Clara explains:

'We've done homestays all over Asia and they've been really great, super interesting… you know you feel like you're really seeing life as it is lived rather than what they want you to see. We had one booked here, just

outside Sapa but we cancelled our booking when we realised what this place was like. We knew we would hate it there'.

The disavowal of their own participation in tourism by tourists has been well researched (see Cohen 2003; O'Reilly 2005; Week 2012) but interestingly here the symbolic distance that tourists put between themselves and the commercial aspects of tourism is important to identity-making in specific relation to Orientalist authentication. Implicit in the imaginary distinction is the idea that 'tourist' means 'mass' or 'package' as oppose to independent or niche visitors who possess the cultural, economic and social wherewithal to encounter and capture indigeneity. This encounter with the Other is structured, as the data have been illustrating, in certain ways that elevate the Western self both in one's own mind but also as embedded in discourse. The fantasy has even reached tour operators in Sapa, who advertise excursions to tourists with 'no tourists':

Figure 4: Tour advert featuring promise of 'no tourists' (author's own photograph).

In a similar vein, it is considered important to 'get off the tourist trail', a notion that recurred in interviews and which can also be found in the pages of travel guides. I interviewed two tourists who were touring the country by motorcycle, a fashionable

method of 'doing' Vietnam. The independence and freedom of motorcycle touring permits another level of differentialisation, where motorcycling tourists can distinguish themselves from other, less 'imaginative' and mobile tourists. For some, the 'inauthenticity' of the local women's entrepreneurialism is enmeshed with their desire to find freedom on two wheels:

> 'We're talking about these problems [women traders], and they are problems for sure. You know this isn't *real*; we're not seeing these tribes [in Sapa] for what they really are, because everyone goes to the same places and it's just become a joke. Which is why we're doing it on a bike, to get off the trail, get away from all the sheep. We can turn up at a village and they had no idea we were coming, and *they* are staring at *us*!' (Jake, 30, New Zealand)

Here, Jake marvels at his own ability to reverse the tourist gaze with his unanticipated arrival, by motorcycle, in 'virgin territory'. His self-telling recounts an experience so rarefied it could transcend the normal ordering of tourist relations, meaning that the masculine Western hero becomes the spectacle who impresses Othered local onlookers. Such pushing of frontiers in tourism by heroic Westerners is reminiscent of the symbolism of colonial exploration, where muscular individuality and independence overcame adversity and begot authentic adventure, the presence of Others bringing the self into relief.

Not unlike previously quoted participants, Jake's judgement of the women's behaviour has gendered dimensions, and the intersection of gender and ethnicity has emerged as an important analytical theme. Arguably, the tourism industry reinforces the gendered roles of the broader service industry, which is 'founded on an army of poorly paid women who cook, clean, wash, and service the needs of incoming tourists' (Prichard and Morgan 2000: 888). What is more, Southeast Asia has particular infusions in terms of the sex industry and sex tourism. Nagel attributes this to what she terms the 'military sexual complex' (2003: 191) where Southeast Asian countries were sites of the US military's 'rest & recreation' bases during the Korean and Vietnam wars, which precipitated the longstanding institutionalisation of sex tourism in the region. This infrastructure intersects with extreme poverty and Orientalist fantasies meaning, as O'Connell Davidson states, that by the 1980s, a 'visible segment of the tourism

markets in Thailand and the Philippines consisted of men from the affluent, developed world who were attracted by the cheap commercial sexual opportunities available in these much poorer countries' (2006: 224). This burgeoning market relies upon and reproduces 'racist and sexist fantasies, as well as economic and political inequalities' (Ibid).

Gendered Orientalism, therefore, reproduces expectations of Asian women to be emotionally and sexually accommodating. It is conceivable that with such a backdrop, there are expectations on *indigenous* Asian women to provide an alternative Othered femininity to the 'corrupted' kind found in discourse on majority Southeast Asian women. The issues taken by tourists are around hardened, 'commercial' behaviour and emotional insincerity, things more normally associated with the sex industry. The dissatisfaction of tourists suggests that indigenous femininity is expected to be more emotionally 'pure' and innocent. These expectations clearly intersect with those set up in the tropes of passivity and primitiveness attached to indigenous women, thereby formulating the grounds for the strong resentment of their agency and resistance evidenced in the interview quotes discussed above.

Conclusions

The underlying principle of 'ethnic tourism', to seek out and gaze upon 'Othered' peoples is not new; there are strong echoes of the colonial project, as organised 'ethnic tourism' in former colonies is often marketed though heavily Orientalist reproductions of the Global South. The racism running through the ways that indigenous people are presented in advertising material sets them up in deeply Orientalist ways, as innocent, picturesque, colourful, simplistic and traditional. At the same time, instances where these perceived qualities are viewed as being eroded by the 'corruption' or entrepreneurialism of indigenous women are written up in promotional material in the form of a warning. Alternative, 'still-authentic' options such as Laos or remote Cambodia are then offered – a theme that also circulated interviews. This suggests, quite dangerously, that authentic indigeneity is static, should be immutable and essential, and is still 'out there', to be discovered by the most adventurous and imaginative Western (non-) tourist.

The expectations of tourists clearly reflect the tropes circulating their pre-trip reading. This is evidenced in the disappointment expressed by interviewees at the loss

of 'authentic' lifestyles and behaviour of indigenous women who were not faithfully replicating their portrayals in advertisements and guidebooks, as passive, innocent objects. Entrepreneurialism and hustling represent a loss of authenticity to tourists who are purposefully travelling to 'exotic' and under-developed parts of the world for distinctive, rarefied, pre-capitalist experiences and encounters. Yet beyond that lament, I would argue that it also upsets the power balance that Western tourists have come to expect, partly through the discourse permeating marketing material, but largely through the burgeoning centralisation and essentialisation of white, Western power in global tourism and beyond. It appears to be particularly troublesome that the transgressors are women, further upsetting racialised and gendered constructions of power, submission, control and passivity that underlie tourism relations more generally. In neither the documentary data nor the interview data was there a recognition of the complexities of social, cultural and economic life in Vietnam - the decades of subjugation and enforced Vietnamisation visited upon many minority communities, the repeated invasions and claiming of their land by China, or recent measures to surveil, control and rationalize their lives by the Vietnamese authorities. There is no acknowledgement of the above, or indeed of rapidly growing numbers of visitors, having an impact on the very lives being objectified by the tourist gaze on indigeneity.

There is a long-established symbolic polarity between the leisurely bodies of tourists and the working bodies of their 'hosts'. Tourists expect to gaze upon, and be at liberty to photograph, the working bodies of Others. Data here suggest that the desired labour of Others is very specifically constructed and is expected to fall into a narrow definitional range. Work should be 'traditional' and picturesque, pertaining to age-old forms and techniques. Tourists seeking out the primitive and authentic do not wish to witness the bringing of labour into the contemporary. Hence, in the case of Sapa, the 'strong arm' selling methods are viewed as 'sad' and 'annoying' and these issues seem to be exacerbated by the fact that the instrumental, market-oriented 'hustling' is carried out by indigenous women.

By critically interrogating multi-modal discourse in relation to its geographic and historical context, this article has shown that authentication is more antagonistic than current debate suggests. Orientalist authentication has alienating consequences for indigenous communities because ethnic and gendered power imbalances, and the

disenfranchised position of indigenous groups in majority Vietnamese society, mean that they cannot meaningfully be classified as full 'stakeholders'. It is a tourism context whose poorest and most racialised actors operate in what Christine Sharpe has termed 'the wake' (2016), in this case the one left behind by colonialism, imperialism and war. This research recognises that whilst the women have agency to mobilise and resist – through entrepreneurialism, creativity, and perhaps even subversion techniques, this does not lead to 'equilibrium' (Xie 2011) but rather to resentment and further marginalisation.

This study has opened important scope for further research and debate. A deeper and wider critical discourse analysis of the production and consumption of literature and its effects on practice is needed. This should involve broader sampling of texts and participants, and a longer, truer period of ethnographic research to enable a richer understanding of the market. Crucially, research into ethnic tourism needs to include the voices of indigenous communities, which are missing from this study. There are important policy recommendations to be made on the back of further research, as this article has highlighted the power of gendered Orientalist discourse and the urgent need for its monitoring and guidance in this growing tourism context.

Acknowledgements

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