A virtual tour for change: Exploring transformational potential

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Abstract

As we emerge into our third year of the global pandemic, as academics and researchers we continue to strive to meet the evolving needs of our students, our institutions, and our communities. As much as this has been a challenging period for all, there have been numerous responses to the 'new normal' that have been celebrated and which we may wish to see continue going forward (c.f. Ateljevic, 2020; Brouder et al., 2020; Hoyt et al., 2021; The Economist, 2021). Universities, students, instructors, and administrators have also had to rapidly adapt to shifting guidelines, online platforms, and growing concerns regarding isolation and mental health (c.f. Mareilli et al., 2021; Mueller et al., 2021; Nuere & de Miguel, 2021). In this short communication, I will discuss the innovative use of virtual tourism in a graduate tourism classroom that at once seeks to transgress the classroom walls, open spaces for dynamic dialogues regarding issues such as tourism and poverty, exploitation, and (post)colonialism, as well as begin the shift towards a broader objective of decolonizing Western notions regarding the nature of 'knowledge' at the university. As such, the virtual tool can be understood, at once, as an experience of tourism, of 'travelling' to a foreign space, while also used to interrogate tourism pedagogies as well as the broader Western academic project.

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Literature Review

Tourism and poverty

The forces of colonialization and globalization, in combination with technological advancements, have made it increasingly possible for wealthy, mobile citizens of the Global North to consume spaces of comparative disadvantage in the South for their touristic pleasure (Enloe, 2014; Smith, 1979), however the practice of intentionally touring to view poverty for poverty's sake is not new. Beginning in the 1880s, fashionable Londoners would visit East London to encounter the living conditions of the poor — a practice that came to be known as 'slumming' (Freire-Madeiros, 2012; Frenzel, Koens, & Steinbrink, 2012). This practice enjoyed a renaissance during the early 1990s when social activists in South Africa and Brazil sought to bring foreign journalists and politicians into the townships and the favelas, respectively, to have them witness the deplorable living conditions within and help to create pressure for change (Freire-Madeiros, 2012; Frenzel, 2016; Muldoon & Mair, 2021ü). From there the roots of modern poverty tourism were born. The tours range from the highly informal to those organized by some of the leading tourism operators in the host country. It is estimated that approximately 300,000 people per year visited the townships surrounding Cape Town in pre-COVID times, and the original slum tour operator in India, Reality Tours, claims to have had over 180,000 visitors (Reality Tours, 2020; Rolfes, Steinbrink, & Uhl, 2009). This form of tourism encompasses Caton's (2012) "morally loaded territory," a practice which "at once speaks of light-hearted pleasure and heavy social consequences" (p. 1907). It can also be considered a form of dark tourism, which takes us to our next topic for consideration.

Dark tourism

Dark tourism spaces are defined as spaces associated with death, those that cause us to confront our own humanity, and to reflect on what we have learned as a society because of past atrocities and tragedies (Carrigan, 2014; Lennon & Foley, 2000). Sharpley and Stone (2009) refine this definition by categorizing dark tourism sites according to varying shades, with the lightest being comical fright sites, such as a haunted house, and the darkest being locations of actual human suffering and death. This is a vastly broad categorization of a

particular form of tourism, ranging from destinations that explicitly promote their relation to the dark side of humanity and others which might dispute it (Carrigan, 2014). Poverty tourism can be considered as a form of dark tourism because its focus is on the suffering that other humans experience, and often the conflicts that result. What makes poverty or slum tourism different than, say, tourism to more well-established dark tourism spaces such as Chernobyl or Auschwitz, is that these are on-going spaces of human habitation, where people go about their everyday lives and do not exist in some imagined faraway past. While this creates its own realm of moral complexities that we do not have the space to consider here, what this does foster are opportunities to engage with people and learn about their lived experiences. In the case of slum tourism, often it is also an opportunity to learn about the ongoing legacies of colonialism in the Global South.

Decolonizing education

Calls for decolonizing education have been reverberating from voices in the Global South for many years now, as well as from BAME/BIPOC (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic/Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) scholars from within Western contexts (c.f. Abdi, Shultz, Pillay, 2015; Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2019; Manthalu & Waghid, 2019; Wane, Todorova, & Todd, 2019). In postcolonized territories, calls for decolonizing education take the form of the decentering of Eurocentric epistemologies from the curricula and a recentering of Indigenous knowledges (Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2019). In the western tradition, universities were built by and for the benefit of wealthy white men, and while much progress has been made in including the voices of women, people of colour, and Indigenous people in the academy, this is often done through an "assimilationist mode that does not include indigenous [sic] and other non-Eurocentric epistemes" (Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2019, p. 11). I posit that decolonizing education is to be the major challenge of academia in the 21st century, and one we have barely begun to scratch the surfaces of, in its first 20 + years.

We turn our attention now to the context of the proposed study, and what role it might play in contributing to the discussions briefly framed above.

Context

In the Fall of 2021, students in many parts of the world were finally returning to campus, after a year or more of online learning. In their first class together in a one-year Master's program, 9 students and one instructor at a northern European university came together to discuss tourism, culture, and sustainability. Several factors came together which resulted in my (as the instructor) deciding to take the students on a virtual tour of a South African township during our 'dark tourism' module. First, we had all become increasingly comfortable with communicating online, and all our classrooms were still equipped to allow for hybrid learning. Second, I wanted the students to have a 'real world' experience that disrupted their comfort zones. And third, creating some tourism incomes for people who have lost theirs, and potentially lead to further collaborations down the road.

The tour was pre-recorded in a township near Cape Town, South Africa, where a local resident toured the township for 45 minutes and pointed out sites of local interest, historical sites, and development initiatives. Following the tour, our guide and two other community development workers met live with the Master's students to provide more details about their

programmes and answer the students' questions.

Research Method

To learn about the students' experiences of the tour as well as the potential that they see for this pedagogical tool in the university classroom, individual semi-structured interviews will be conducted between the researcher/instructor and the tourists/students. The research questions are:
1. How did you experience the township space through the virtual tour?
2. How has this experience informed your understanding of tourism in spaces of poverty?
3. Do you see a role for digital technologies to play in facilitating some of these challenging conversations in the university classroom?
4. How can we further mobilize these technologies to begin to disrupt some of the legacies that privilege academic knowledges?

This study has received research ethics approval and interviews are set to begin in January 2022. While this is a very small pool of participants, the hope is that the student participants will be actively engaged in co-creating where this study takes us next, particularly in terms of questioning what constitutes 'knowledge' in the university classroom.

What is missing from this study, as has been critique elsewhere concerning 'dark tourism' (c.f. Carrigan 2014), that is, the voices of residents in the tourism encounter. Where this study differs is that the township residents/tour providers are in ongoing conversations with the instructor in terms of developing and delivering the tours. Thus, there is an ongoing feedback loop between the tourist/students and the tour guide/ residents, facilitated by the instructor/researcher. It is the intention of this research, beyond this initial exploratory phase, to collaborate with the tour guides/residents to develop sustainable online tour products while at once contributing to our understandings of resident engagements with (virtual) tourism in spaces of poverty.

In conclusion, while it is too early to anticipate the findings of this study, the hoped-for outcomes are threefold:
1. An increased understanding among the students of the complexities of tourism, poverty, and (post)colonialism in our globalized world;
2. An ongoing opportunity for residents of the townships to promote and celebrate their communities through expanding virtual tours, particularly considering shifting lockdown measures and travel restrictions, and;
3. A questioning of the nature of 'knowledge' in the university context and how we might optimize our access to virtual technologies to challenge the role of the 'expert' in the classroom.

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