

**Selling Symbols: Tourism, Heritage, and Symbolic Economy in Battambang, Cambodia**

By

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PREVIEW

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Dedicated to my parents, Rowland and Susan,  
who saved a boy and taught him to never grow up.

“The greatest moments in life are not concerned with selfish achievements but rather with the things we do for the people we love and esteem.” - Walt Disney

PREVIEW

## Acknowledgements

The list of people I need to thank far exceeds what I can possibly hope to write in a mere few pages, and I wish to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who supported me on this journey. This research was generously supported by the Fulbright-Hays program, and to all who helped me through that process I am forever in your debt. One name that must be singled out for thanks is that of my advisor Katherine Bowie. As a renowned scholar of Thailand, Katherine stepped outside of her comfort zone when she accepted me as her student, and I hope with all my heart that she feels that her gamble has (finally) paid off. The best thanks I can give for all the patience and guidance she has shown me over the years is the promise that, if I am ever in a similar position, I will do everything I can to continue her legacy of supporting the study of Southeast Asia's many underrepresented regions.

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not an archaeologist, but his thoughtful blending of present-day cultural perspectives with the deeply analytical study of the past helped me think about how to tell the story of the past made present in Battambang. To boot, he is one of the nicest people you will ever meet, especially in an academic setting, and I am grateful for his compassionate friendship. Last, but certainly not least, I wish to thank Ian Baird for his willingness to push back at my ideas in the hopes of improving them. Although I needed to swallow my pride at times, Ian often caught errors that I overlooked and helped me be more self-critical in a manner that improved not only this research, but my approach to cultural study as a whole. My thanks to the many other professors and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin - Madison who influenced me, and to the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (and Dr. Mike Cullinane most of all!) for all the support.

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and so I hope she knows that this dissertation represents his legacy through her efforts as much as it represents my father's through mine. Thank you, bamboo train girl.

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### **A Note on Khmer Language Transliteration**

The Cambodian language, Khmer, is a notoriously difficult language to transcribe using English letters. Most standard systems for transliteration are phonetically inaccurate, choosing regularity of character representation over sound accuracy, in part because there are sounds in Khmer that we do not regularly use in English. Although I would prefer to use phonetically accurate spellings and would defend experimenting with spelling (even if it meant spelling inconsistently) as an accurate expression of the fluidity of language and sound, I am not linguist enough to attempt such a feat here. Therefore, for most Khmer words, I adhere to the standard spellings used by Cambodians when they write their language in English and provide footnotes where appropriate to describe pronunciation. Occasionally these spellings diverge in popular usage from the academic systems typically employed in Khmer transliteration, which I justify as my attempt to reflect how Khmer language is represented in the many English-language tourist materials that are of concern in this dissertation (and which are not always consistent). In all cases of conflict, I attempt to stick with the spellings used by my Cambodian acquaintances, as I find local usage more appropriate for this type of ethnography than a scholarly romanization system. For nonstandard usages of regionally-important words like “Banon” instead of “Banan,” “Nieng Rumsai Sok” instead of “Nieng Rumsay Sok,” or “Sangkae” instead of “Sangker,” I consulted with my Cambodian research assistant and other residents of Battambang to determine spellings they feel can accurately represent their wishes for how their terms should be spelled.

There are two exceptions in which I purposefully ignore their wishes: the spelling of “Battambang” and the usage of the term “Khmer Rouge.” In many conversations, my English-speaking Khmer acquaintances in Battambang have been consistently adamant that foreigners

should spell “Battambang” phonetically as “Batdumbong” in order to better reflect the Khmer pronunciation and spelling. My Khmer friends have also argued that scholars should use the term Khmer Krahom/Krahorm to refer to what we usually describe in English as the Khmer Rouge (thus replacing the French word for “red” with the original Khmer term). Both of these requests are made to decolonize the transliteration of the Khmer language and to better represent Khmer opinions. While I agree with these requests and hope to make these changes in future writings, I am sticking with the common international terminology for this work because this dissertation will be disseminated largely through academic settings for readers who may only know the popular terms for Cambodian-specific issues. I hope my Khmer friends will forgive me this intentional oversight.

For a few terms, I purposefully utilize a different spelling in order to elucidate an issue or avoid a problem. For example, I spell Wat Kdul with a “u” because the typical spelling with an “o” brings the word phonetically close to an anatomical term that would not be appropriate to use in relation to a holy space. In instances where my spelling differs from standard usage, I have provided footnotes to explain my reasoning for the alternative spelling. All errors in spelling or transliteration are, of course, my own.

Regardless of English spelling, I provide footnotes with the original Khmer script in all cases where Khmer is used so that readers need not guess which terms I am attempting to spell. Despite my best efforts to use consistent formatting, readers may notice some unevenness between lines whenever I use Khmer script due to the manner by which Khmer language stacks characters. I beg the patience of the reader on this issue and with all issues related to my usage and understanding of the Khmer language.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>A Note on Khmer Language Transliteration</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Figures and Visual Content</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Tourism Growth in Contemporary Cambodia .....	6
Tourism as an Analytical Framework .....	8
Tourism as Leisure Debated .....	11
The Quest for Authenticity .....	12
The Hero’s Journey .....	15
Disneyization .....	20
Theming .....	22
Dedifferentiation of Consumption and Merchandizing .....	24
Performative Labor and Nationalism .....	25
Tourism and Heritage .....	27
Theming and the Urban Sphere .....	30
The Symbolic Economy .....	38
Research Background .....	43
Chapter Previews & Goals .....	49
<b>Chapter 1 - The Story of Battambang</b> .....	<b>57</b>
Angkor and its Aftermath .....	64
The ‘Colonial’ Eras .....	71
The French .....	82
Democratic Kampuchea and its Aftermath .....	87
Battambang Today .....	90
The Tourism Cycle .....	94
Tourism Problems and Initiatives .....	101
The Tourism That Isn’t .....	105
Battambang’s Immediate Goals .....	112
<b>Chapter 2 - Dark Tourism in Battambang</b> .....	<b>114</b>
The Third Life of the Khmer Rouge .....	117
Sailing Ship Mountain .....	119
The Well of Shadows .....	127
Local Reactions to Dark Tourism .....	131
Breaking Cambodia’s Curse .....	134

The Killing Dam .....	138
The Decline of Dark Tourism .....	142
Dark Anthropology .....	145
<b>Chapter 3 - The Evolution of Thematic Tourism in Battambang .....</b>	<b>143</b>
Twenty Years Apart .....	147
Sex Tourism .....	150
Restaurant Names & Religious Aims .....	158
Ecotourism and the Environment as Analogy.....	163
UNESCO and the Samsung Problem .....	171
The Battambang Winery .....	176
<b>Chapter 4 - Art Tourism, Past and Present .....</b>	<b>183</b>
The Origins of Cambodian Art? .....	185
Buddhist Tourism and Khmer Literature .....	187
The Power of Rock and Roll: Music Tourism in Battambang .....	191
The Flowing Voice: Interview with a Dead Man .....	195
Monuments and Tourism .....	199
The Gallery and Café Crowd .....	204
Interviews with Artists .....	210
Phala, the Self-Taught YouTuber .....	211
Rangsei, the Fashionista .....	214
Lorn, the Pragmatic Philosopher .....	218
The Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School and Circus .....	223
Cambodian Hollywood .....	227
Summarizing Battambang’s Artistic Legacy .....	231
<b>Chapter 5 - Past Alliances, Tourist Futures: Battambang and its Relationship with     Thailand .....</b>	<b>233</b>
The Director’s Grand Plans .....	236
Deny the Thai .....	243
Death of a King .....	252
Shadows of Siam .....	255
<b>Chapter 6 - Behind the Curtain: Stories of Power and Identity .....</b>	<b>254</b>
Women, Resistance, and the Battle of Banon .....	262
The Death of a Bike Shop .....	275
An Interview About LGBTQ Tourism .....	285
Tourism’s Consequences .....	291
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>293</b>
<b>Works Cited .....</b>	<b>300</b>

## List of Figures and Visual Content

Figure 1 - Domestic tourists taking selfies and making offerings to Ta Dambong Krañyoung....	61
Figure 2 - Battambang’s central location between major cities, past and present .....	70
Figure 3 - Khmer-Thai royal family tree (as of early 2016) as connected by the House of Aphaiwong .....	76
Figure 4 - Map of Battambang City in 1907 .....	86
Figure 5 - Figure 4 - Simplified map of downtown Battambang City .....	91
Figure 6 - Important sites around Battambang that will be discussed in later chapters .....	114
Figure 7 - Phnom Sampeau at sunset .....	120
Figure 8 - Macaques playing on guns leftover from the Cambodian Civil War (Phnom Sampeau) .....	124
Figure 9 - Memorial Stupa at the Well of Shadows .....	129
Figure 10 - Khmer New Year Fun at Kamping Puoy (the Killing Dam) .....	141
Figure 11 - The Samsung Problem .....	174
Figure 12 - Chantol and myself displaying some of Battambang’s wine .....	180
Figure 13 - Voy Ho, very much alive, posing with memorabilia from his musical heyday .....	195
Figure 14 - Statue of <i>Lōk Okhna</i> Suttantaprija Ind along the Sangkae River, downtown Battambang City .....	201
Figure 15 - Shoes left outside during an exhibition at one of Battambang’s art galleries .....	207
Figure 16 - Chhum Aphaiwong’s Sala Khet, built ~1906 CE.....	241
Figure 17 - Carving of Chhum Aphaiwong at Wat Kdul .....	257
Figure 18 - The Banon tourist police shack that Vibol and the vendors helped build .....	273

## Abstract

Over the past two decades, international tourist visitation to Cambodia has grown an astounding 2,178%, and the country now serves more than 5 million foreign visitors per year. Cambodians are also traveling within their own country much more frequently, creating new forms of domestic tourism that influence regional development. While the nation continues to struggle with the consequences of such rapid expansion, the growing number of tourists also provides opportunities for smaller urban spaces to compete with Cambodia's larger cities through the creation of region-specific tourism industries. Such is the case in the northwestern provincial capital of Battambang City, where local residents and their provincial government are attempting to establish a 'symbolic economy' based on tourism that can tempt tourists away from well-trod tourist attractions found elsewhere in favor of regional offerings. In so doing, Battambang City can compete with larger cities like the national capital of Phnom Penh for tourist income while also promoting narratives about regional history and identity that challenge the nationalist discourse asserted by the central Cambodian government.

To establish a symbolic economy, residents of Battambang are utilizing two key aspects of the Disneyization process: theming and performative labor. In Battambang, themes are reinforced through the postmodern presentation of the urban landscape. In this work, I detail several themes at work in Battambang and demonstrate how themes are changing to reflect the local government's goal of becoming Cambodia's "Charming City." Tourists of all origins engage with themes such as dark tourism, the 'wild' frontier, or the opulent timeliness of Indochina, but often do so following different narratives. So too can a single location represent multiple thematic possibilities and different narrative interpretations based on touristic desires.

Through the analysis of specific themes and the touristic narratives that are negotiated by locals and guests interacting within them, as well as the performative labor provided by local residents, Battambang City's symbolic economy emerges as a complex form of place-based storytelling that allows locals to promote the region as resistant to outside influence, even if that influence comes from within Cambodian borders.

PREVIEW

## Introduction

I first encountered the wonders of Cambodia as a small child in the late 1980s. My family traveled many hundreds of kilometers from our Canadian home and boarded a small steamship, the *Mekong Maiden*, for a journey up the Mekong River in search of adventure amongst the overgrown jungle ruins. The *Maiden* was a small ship, capable of seating perhaps twenty souls in a carefully arranged half-moon surrounding the constantly grunting steam-engine in the center of the boat. The engine was hot to the touch and each passenger had to remain vigilant so as not to accidentally brush up against it while the boat navigated uncertain waters. Overhead, a bolt of tan canvas that stretched perilously across makeshift poles provided some protection from the raging sun, although only the occasional breeze helped relieve the suffocating humidity. Our captain was a thirty-something American man in the employ of the Jungle Navigation Co. Ltd. who insisted on the moniker 'Skipper Dan', which seemed befitting of his jungle-green safari attire and flop hat. Skipper Dan assured us we had nothing to worry about and that our journey would last three months or "as far as we could get," a statement that inspired little confidence.

The *Maiden* soon found her way into some overgrowth where large, wet jungle leaves reached across the water towards the boat. I will never forget the smell of the water - not unpleasant, but with a distinct sharpness from the soil along the riverbanks. Animals occasionally peeked through the leaves and revealed themselves to our sight, notably a large crocodile that Skipper Dan named Ginger because, as he quipped, "Ginger snaps." Much of the journey continued in this manner, with Skipper Dan dispensing satirical commentary on the many wonders that passed by.



After what felt like no time at all, the *Maiden* followed a series of sharp bends that revealed a weathered stone structure downriver. Skipper Dan informed us that we were approaching the ruins of Angkor in northern Cambodia and warned us to be careful as this particular temple seemed to have partially collapsed across the river, blocking any alternative but to risk sailing directly through the precarious ruins. The Skipper's face tightened as he gripped the helm while leaning on a cargo box to steady himself for this unexpected challenge. A sudden silence fell across our group and, as we passed through the stone entrance, I made eye contact with a large stone face carved into the temple's exterior that was in the process of being reclaimed by the jungle vines. The face, taller than I was, seemed to be looking back at me with an impish grin, beckoning me towards an uncertain fate. Darkness immediately followed, swallowing the boat and cutting us off from the brightness of the outside world.

Skipper Dan activated a small handheld lantern that was tied to the front of the *Maiden*. In that moment, a whole new world revealed itself to our group. The light from the lantern, though weak and unsteady, revealed something glittering in the distance. As we approached with the lantern, sparkles danced across every visible surface, including the incredulous faces of my shipmates. Golden artifacts covered in jewels lay scattered about the ruins, displaced by whatever monumental shift caused the temple to collapse long ago. Alas, this treasure was not destined to become ours. Just as soon as we realized the potential of our discovery, we heard a hissing that alerted us to new dangers. Panning across the trove of precious artifacts, our eyes caught sight of a large snake sitting atop the jewels - a king cobra. The serpent raised itself as we neared and opened its hood, hissing violently at our intrusion. Soon, more cobras revealed themselves until the entire cache was shielded by a wall of poisonous fangs. Disheartened,

Skipper Dan turned us away from the treasure, preferring to locate an exit from the bowels of the temple, perhaps with the intent to return for the loot at a later time.

Just as thoughts of desperation began to creep into our minds, a glimmer of light appeared in the distance, widening as we approached. An exit was near, causing elation among our group. As we sailed back into the sunlight, we turned to gaze upon the fallen stones that nearly trapped us within. This story, for certain, would be impossible to believe for any who had not lived through it with us. As if to reward us for our survival, the exit emptied into a hidden pool with a small waterfall, a paradise hidden from the outside world. In this pool, numerous Asian elephants were spraying each other with water while they bathed. Skipper Dan turned and, in an expressionless deadpan that belied his anticipation of the punchline, remarked, “Go ahead and take pictures, folks, they’re all wearing their trunks.”

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A few minutes later, after disembarking back at the dock, my parents asked where I wanted to go next. “Frontierland,” I replied, “I want to ride Big Thunder Mountain!” Just as I was once a jungle explorer, I now envisioned myself a cowboy who needed to conquer the nearby runaway mine train - a role that necessitated a quick exit from the now thematically inappropriate jungle decor of Adventureland. Still, the memories of my first encounter with Cambodia on the Jungle Cruise attraction at Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom in Orlando, Florida, never left me. The boat ride may have taken only ten minutes and perhaps did not occur with the exact detail of my childhood imagination as described above, but was nevertheless the beginning of a lifelong fascination with the people and culture of Cambodia.

Although this purposefully-sensationalized account of my childhood introduction to ‘Cambodia’ as a themed tourist space teems with generalization and inaccuracy, it also formed the foundation for how I encountered the real Cambodia when I finally journeyed there as an adult in 2009. Truthfully, I cannot deny that my initial internalization of Cambodia as exotic and mysterious continues to affect how I interpret my experiences there. Even through years of living in Cambodia and experiencing all of the boredom, pettiness, and normalcy that presents itself through long-term engagement with any human society, I will never be able to fully remove the sense of wonder I feel when engaging with the Cambodian people and environment. Foreigners who study Cambodian culture are subject to similar biases - indeed, many scholars from around the globe have expressed to me the same youthful fascination with the vine-covered face of the Bayon Temple that so captivated me a child!<sup>1</sup>

Although we carry the responsibility of being aware of and openly critiquing our biases for all of the stereotyping and Orientalism therein, we must also acknowledge that these feelings are not entirely baseless (Said 1979). Cambodia and places like it have long captured the imagination of outsiders and will always continue to do so because the environment, history, architecture, language, and countless other factors, even if understood as perfectly routine in local society, are so radically different and aesthetically appealing to those unfamiliar with Cambodian daily life. Consider the words of American explorer Harry Hervey, who in 1925 visited the ruins of Angkor and, parallel to my own childhood feelings, wrote, “I beheld the

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<sup>1</sup> Nor should I discount the powerful desire to right the wrongs of the Khmer Rouge, as I have never met a scholar of Cambodia who does not embody a genuine love of the Cambodian people and a vocal desire to use their work in search of justice (in whatever form it takes) to a populace that has unfairly endured far more suffering than should be possible for a single lifetime.

towers of Angkor Wat thrusting up in the rain like guttered candles; and after so long a time of dreaming I felt I was merely gazing at an enlargement of the picture that had begun its thrilling tyranny in my boyhood” (Hervey 2014: 49). My argument is not that foreigners such as myself should be forgiven their biases and generalizations, but instead that these biases can, through thematic tourism, prove great agency and ingenuity amongst the local people who manipulate such tourist emotions for their own benefit.

All anthropologists and ethnographers are, to some degree, tourists, even if not engaged with the practice of mass tourism (Ochota 2017). They are thus subject to what sociologist John Urry and geographer Jonas Larsen term “the tourist gaze,” a manner of viewing and engaging with the world that assumes and categorizes difference between the self and the Other (Urry and Larsen 2011). As Urry and Larsen summarize, “People gaze upon the world through a particular filter of ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education. Gazing is a performance that orders, shapes, and classifies, rather than reflects the world” (Urry and Larsen 2011: 2). By acknowledging the bias of my own tourist gaze and using it as the basis for examining the gazes of mass tourists to Cambodia, I will show that tourism in Cambodia is not a simple picture-taking experience but a form of storytelling told from the first-person perspective of each individual tourist. I will also demonstrate that when compared demographically, particularly regarding national origin, these individual tourist narratives shape certain predominant genres or ‘themes’ that differentiate appeal across global groups, helping to grow Cambodia’s tourism economy. By focusing on thematic tourism and narrative as opposed to a purely statistical examination of tourist development, this study argues foremost that Cambodians are not simply subject to the tourist gaze, but are engaged in an ongoing

conversation with tourists to shape the manner by which Cambodia is presented and consumed through tourism. Whether responding to foreign tourist imaginaries or creating the narrative for to suit their own motivations, Cambodians involved in tourism are actively involved in the narrativization of Cambodian history and culture as it is experienced by countless travelers from home and abroad. This process in turn gives them great power in directing the future interpretation and experience of Cambodia.

### **Tourism Growth in Contemporary Cambodia**

According to the World Bank, global tourism rates grew a respectable 129% between 1995 and 2015, 34% from 2009 to 2015 alone despite fears that the Great Recession might negatively impact tourists' willingness to travel (2017 "International tourism: Global"). Southeast Asia is rated as the fastest growing region of the world for new tourist arrivals, with Cambodia in particular experiencing a dramatic and rapid rise of tourism arrivals over the past twenty years (2014 "Table 6.14"). After an initial offering of 220,000 tourists in 1995, some 5,012,000 international travelers visited Cambodia in 2016, - a 2,178% growth attributable to the opening of the country following years of war (2017 "International tourism: Cambodia"). The most significant period for tourist expansion in Cambodia began in 2009, the same year I first set foot on Cambodian soil, when 2,162,000 tourists visited the nation - a number that had previously held mostly steady for several years. Since then, tourism rates have more than doubled, and growth rates of over 500,000 additional arrivals per year are estimated for the foreseeable future, bolstered in part by the European Council on Tourism and Trade awarding Cambodia the title of World's Best Tourism Destination for 2016 (Hou 2016).

Most tourists to Cambodia seek to explore the legendary temples of Angkor, especially the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious structure (2016 "Angkor"). But as more and more tourists visit the region, they increasingly seek new experiences in regions where most previous tourists did not go. As the tourist crowds expand, the potential for smaller sites to grow and establish tourism economies increases exponentially. This work is a study of one such site: the provincial capital of Battambang City in northwestern Cambodia.<sup>2</sup> With a population of approximately 197,000 people, Battambang City is often called Cambodia's "Second City," even though it occasionally ranks third in population behind Siem Reap depending on the statistical sourcing (see Chen 2011; Sawe 2017). Since 1998, Battambang has focused on tourism as a method of urban development and is now one of the fastest growing regions in the country (Manet 2017). An important city that serves as a gateway of sorts between Cambodia and Thailand, Battambang's history differs greatly from that of Phnom Penh and thereby provides the city a unique method of appealing to tourists. Although much smaller than the capital, the growth of the tourism industry is helping Battambang compete with Phnom Penh through tourist visitation and the resulting growth of its international reputation.

Battambang is a compelling case study because of its unique history and domestic appeal. Indeed, an important aspect of Battambang's tourism industry is the role that Cambodians themselves play in tourist development, both as vendors and tourists. The region also counters many of the trends present in the greater Cambodian tourism industry, yet remains successful and growing. For example, 32.6% of all tourists to Cambodia now come from China, but only 4-5%

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<sup>2</sup> Both the province and its capital city are named Battambang. I attempt to specifically write "City" when addressing the urban space, but even when I do not it should be understood as related to this region's main sphere of action.

of visitors to Battambang hail from China. Instead, France is the predominant group with nearly 20%, thanks largely to the abundant French Indochinese architecture prominent in area. I argue that locals are crafting a symbolic economy through the relationships they negotiate with tourists, who want to experience certain narratives but are also open to suggestion. Locals thus carefully manipulate the region's unique appeal to both grow their tourism economy as separate from trends in greater Cambodia while also extolling a sense of regional independence and political resistance, in essence infusing tourism narratives with their own regional identity. To date, Battambang is a critically understudied area of the Kingdom of Cambodia, and it is through tourism that I hope to expand upon discussions of history, creativity, nationalism, and other concepts that are understood differently in Battambang than other areas of the country.

### **Tourism as an Analytical Framework**

Tourism is a highly active area of social engagement and can dramatically influence the development of many areas of culture, including politics, economics, and communal emotions like nationalism, amongst others. As early as 1963, anthropologist Theron A. Nuñez, Jr. made the argument that “tourism may bring about rapid and dramatic changes in the loci of authority... [thus] it is a legitimate and necessary area of culture research” (Nuñez 1963: 352). Tourism is now seen as a primary conduit of globalization, and we cannot categorize tourism as solely a matter of individual leisure, as early scholars once did (see Smith 1989; Graburn 1989). As sociologist Adrian Franklin and geographer Mike Crang state, “Tourism can no longer be bounded off as a discrete activity, contained tidily at specific locations and occurring during set aside periods” (Franklin and Crang 2001: 7). Through media influence and other constant

reminders, tourism has become a part of daily life.

Furthermore, because tourism is such a strong avenue for globalization and intercultural communication, understanding tourism can be a gateway through which humans learn about other cultures and eventually reshape their own identities. As anthropologist Valene L. Smith writes, “Tourism can be a bridge to an appreciation of cultural relativity and international understanding,” if proper time and attention is paid to how tourism operates in society (Smith 1989: 9). Indeed, postcolonial theorist Joanne Sharp states, “Tourism is probably the most important mediation of otherness in terms of our sense of experience of difference” (Sharp 2009: 94). These tourist-led experiences of otherness continue to grow, particularly through themed tourism, and it is through these exploratory processes of touristic curiosity that humans not only imagine their community, but those of others (see Salazar & Graburn 2014). Sociologist Mark Gottdiener argues that these tourist experiences not only introduce many of the pros and cons of otherness, but also shape our national consciousness. He writes, “Both national cultures and local environments [are] increasingly altered by the growing influence of franchising and theming“ (Gottdiener 2001: 2). Thus, tourism acts as what anthropologist Nelson H.H. Graburn refers to as a “barometer of the dynamics of culture change” and should not be dismissed as merely the realm of entertainment (Graburn 1983: 2).

The growth in tourism is also allowing certain societies to replace their previously industrial-based economies with a different mode of production and consumption, and thus tourism can become the method through which communities survive economic adversity (see Lukas 2007: 6). The shift from factory-based industry to tourism can dramatically restructure social organization. Graburn offers three primary modes for observing interactions within a