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Dark Disneyfication: Staging Authenticity on Airbnb

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# Dark Disneyfication: Staging Authenticity on Airbnb

Petter Törnberg

## Abstract

*Urban areas around the world are currently seeing a surge in tourists on the hunt for “real urban experiences”: off-the-beaten-track, everyday and mundane urban life, seen as representing something “real” and “authentic” – with New York City, and in particular Brooklyn, providing the most emblematic example of these trends. This taste for urban authenticity has linked up with the simultaneous rise of urban digital platforms, as short-term rental platforms like Airbnb effectively cater to this form of tourism by providing access to residential homes in areas outside of urban centers, adding a sense of being integrated in the everyday urban fabric.*

*This paper takes a mixed-method and computational discourse analytic approach to look at data from all listings and reviews from Airbnb in New York City, combined with ACS census data, to identify a number of themes in how both reviewers and hosts partake in staging and performing “new urban tourism”, which simultaneously shapes an imaginary of what is meant by urban authenticity. This exploration is contextualized in a framework of research on consumerist society, postmodern tourism and Disneyfication, allowing the empirical material to provide the foundation for a broader theoretical argument, showing how these platforms provide a decentralized staging of a cosmopolitan experience by using the aesthetics of Otherness, in turn founded on colonial tropes of the “noble savage”, to provide a tourism commodity representing “authenticity”. The search for alternative, pro-poor, community-based, ethical and responsible forms of tourism, which started as a counter-reaction against the inauthenticity and commercialism of mainstream tourism, has now itself become transformed into a cultural system geared at the production of distinction. With this, it is argued, the old phenomenon of Disneyfication has now returned, in new, more “authentic” clothing.*

## Keywords

*New York, New Urban Tourism, Gentrification, Airbnb, Platforms, Authenticity, Disneyfication, Mixed-Methods, Computational Hermeneutics, Critical Discourse Analysis*

## Introduction

Cities around the world are currently seeing a surge in tourism, in particular a type that emphasizes “real urban experiences”: leaving the beaten-track tourist attractions for the everyday and mundane activities of urban life. These places and activities are seen as markers of the *real* and *authentic* (Maitland 2010), as what has been called “new urban tourism” (Frisch et al. 2019; Novy 2010) seeks the consumption of local amenities in diverse and ethnic neighborhoods – what Maitland (2007) refers to as “new tourism areas”. This transition is part of a broader shift towards longing for authenticity in current consumer culture (Gilmore and Pine 2007), constituting a reaction against passive consumerism and commodification, which is interlinking with contemporary cities increasingly turning toward tourism as a means of economic development (Gotham 2005).

Airbnb and similar short-term rental services play an important role in this shift. These platforms have helped expand the hospitality industry into the urban periphery: while traditional tourist hospitality tends to locate in urban centers, in part due to e.g. zoning regulations, Airbnb listings are primarily located outside of the immediate urban center. Airbnb furthermore offers integration in local neighborhoods and access to every-day life. This plays an important part of their marketing, which embodies the new tourism’s cosmopolitan aim to feel at home in a variety of contexts (Giddens 1991:190) – as illustrated by their slogan, “belong anywhere.”

The shift toward “new urban tourism” is an example of, and informative to, a larger shift in consumer culture, being consumption-led and driven by the dynamics of the symbolic economy (Zukin 1989, 2009), while involving complex dynamic processes of relations, interactions and conflicts (Gotham 2005). This implies both that urban tourism is increasingly recognized as playing a major cultural, economic, and social phenomenon as well as a driving force of contemporary urban change, but also that tourism studies can provide a powerful lens to on-going debates pertaining to broader questions of race, globalization and urban change.

The paper uses a mixed-method and computational discourse analytic approach to analyze textual data from Airbnb in New York City, to study how reviewers and hosts partake in staging and performing “new urban tourism”, while simultaneously shaping it (Bourdieu 2013). Looking at neighborhood descriptions and reviews, a number of themes are identified and illustrated using samples from the material. These are used as foundation for a broader theoretical argument, in which the current shift is contextualized by revisiting earlier debates on postmodernist consumption. This allows us to consider the way authenticity is produced and marketed as a consumption good, exploring the entanglement between cosmopolitan culture, gentrification, poverty tourism and online platforms. The paper begins with introducing the data, method and case, which is followed by the theoretical framework, which provides the foundation for the theoretically driven exploration of the material.

## Data and Method

This study uses data from InsideAirbnb (Cox 2015), from 2017-10-02, combined with the 2016 American Community Survey demographic, economic and housing estimates data on NTA level, which allowed the linking of discourse with detailed survey data. Listings were linked to NTAs using their location coordinates to allow for comparison between demographic and Airbnb data<sup>1</sup>. These data were then analyzed using Python and PostgreSQL.

This analysis was pursued as part of a mixed-method, theoretically driven exploration, developing custom text analytical methods to explore, answer questions, and find samples for close-reading representative of certain themes. This approach was further supported by a close reading of a large number of such samples. Tailor-made methods were developed for the analysis, to allow flexible analysis. These quantitative computational methods were employed qualitatively, that is, in a “computational hermeneutical” approach that leans on close-reading and interpretation rather than on statistical patterns of variable co-variance, supported by a recursive move between close-reading and computational methods, zooming in and out on the discursive landscape (Törnberg and Törnberg 2016).

The content analysis was carried out using a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis and computational methods, similar to the approach developed in Törnberg and Törnberg (2015, 2016). To allow the analysis of the large corpus, custom statistical methods were developed to compare word-frequencies in corpuses. The computational methods were used to provide an overview and to navigate the material, enabling a qualitative analysis which identified a number of discourses. In the following analysis, these will be discussed together with a number of illustrating quotes that exemplifies the specific themes.

The meta-theoretical foundation for this approach is Critical Discourse Analysis: a heterogeneous research program (Wodak and Meyer 2009) aimed to study "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (Van Dijk 2001:353), departing from the view that discourse does not simply mirror social processes but contribute to their perpetuation and production (Fairclough 1992). Cultural and discursive aspects cannot be completely separated from the economic or political dimensions; as JanMohamad (1985) puts it, there is a "profound symbiotic relationship between the discursive and the material practices of imperialism" (p.64).

CDA thus provides a powerful way of exploring how culture, discourse and tastes develop in ways that serve the interests of those in power, as exemplified by a large literature on colonial discourse analysis, documenting the ways that the stereotypes of colonial people fit into the interests of colonial rulers (Loomba 2007; Said 1978). Since discourses are reflections of real-world processes, discourse analysis allows

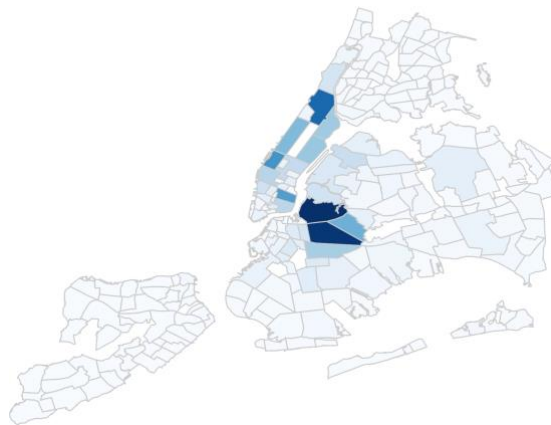
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<sup>1</sup> Attempts were made to delineate neighborhood race and income, by looking at the overlap between the poorest 1/3 of neighborhoods and the whitest 1/3, as well as between the richest 1/3 and the least white 1/3. However, it was found that in New York City, poor white, or rich non-white neighborhoods are virtually non-existent, preventing such delineation. This is left for future studies that expand this approach to other cities.

us to see how power works through language, literature, culture and the institutions which regulate our daily lives. In the context of this study, discourse analysis can thus provide a looking glass into the way that cultural commodification is used to market urban space, and can provide hints about the larger power hierarchy within which Airbnb operates.

**Table 1. Maps and table showing number of reviews and number of Airbnb listings with reviews per neighborhood. Table lists top neighborhoods. Neighborhoods outside of the downtown Manhattan and traditional tourist centers dominate.**

Reviews per neighborhood



<b>Neighborhood</b>	<b>Borough</b>	<b>#Listings</b>	<b>#Reviews</b>
Williamsburg	Brooklyn	3,073	69,782
Bedford-Stuyvesant	Brooklyn	2,592	67,606
Harlem	Manhattan	2,111	54,548
Bushwick	Brooklyn	1,704	34,122
East Village	Manhattan	1,608	39,864
Upper West Side	Manhattan	1,483	31,194
Hell's Kitchen	Manhattan	1,399	42,669
Upper East Side	Manhattan	1,333	26,973
Crown Heights	Brooklyn	1,188	24,120
East Harlem	Manhattan	909	25,781
Chelsea	Manhattan	847	20,451
Midtown	Manhattan	838	17,652
Greenpoint	Brooklyn	816	13,331
Lower East Side	Manhattan	770	19,701
Washington Heights	Manhattan	680	11,967
West Village	Manhattan	661	14,318
Astoria	Queens	650	15,917
Clinton Hill	Brooklyn	494	11,906
Flatbush	Brooklyn	443	7,833
Prospect-Lefferts Gardens	Brooklyn	441	8,879
Park Slope	Brooklyn	404	9,389

## **Airbnb and New York City**

New York City is Airbnb's third largest market, with more than \$650 million in host revenue per year. Airbnb in New York currently has 44,317 listings, owned by 37,108 hosts. These have been reviewed a total of 801,784 times by 703,685 reviewers. Entire-home listings make up half of all active New York City listings, but earn a disproportionate 72% of platform revenue.

Airbnb in New York has been subject to some controversy, in part for functioning as a way of by-passing the regulation facing commercial short-term rentals, but also in relation to racial bias. Studies have shown that African-American guests are more likely to be rejected by hosts and that black hosts earn 12% less than non-black hosts for equivalent listings (Edelman and Luca 2014; Edelman, Luca, and Svirsky 2017). Airbnb (2016) has attempted to respond to this criticism, for instance in their 2016 report "Airbnb and Economic Opportunity in New York City's Predominantly Black Neighborhoods," which used primarily anecdotal evidence to argue that Airbnb helps middle-class African-American families make ends meet. The report boasted that Airbnb usage had risen more than 50% faster in black neighborhoods than in the city as a whole.

Looking at the data (Table 1), we see that compared to hotels, which are predominately located in downtown Manhattan, Airbnb indeed does have a large number of listings outside of the most central parts of the city, in particular in Brooklyn. "Super-gentrified" (Lees 2003) Williamsburg dominates, followed by Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick, that are both in the process of rapid gentrification. While Airbnb is clearly focused on more peripheral and residential areas than traditional hotels, this however still begs the question of its actual impact on these areas, their communities, and urban fabric.

## **Mass-tourism and Disneyfication**

The intersection between tourism and urban life has only recently become an important subject of study. As urban tourism began to attract scholarly attention in the 80s and 90s, the research emphasized particular cities and places that were geared toward tourism: "tourist cities" (Judd and Fainstein 1999), which could be further differentiated into "tourist-historic cities", e.g. Venice; "resort cities", e.g. Las Vegas; or "converted cities", e.g. Baltimore. Within these cities, tourism was argued to be further concentrated to particular urban areas, "tourist bubbles" (Judd and Fainstein 1999) or "enclavic tourist spaces" (Edensor 2008): enclosed and regulated urban areas within which tourist activities were focused and its effects on the urban fabric most easily observed (Selby 2004).

Tourism was seen as producing commodified hyper-real non-places within these bubbles, focused around events and iconic architectures, but with limited connection to the rest of urban life (Novy 2010). These effects of tourism were positioned as part of globalization and its discontents, with homogenization and standardization seen as cornerstones. This was epitomized in Sorkin's (1992) notion that global consumerism would replace local particularities with theme park versions of themselves: a transformation

which would imply a simultaneous decontextualization and homogenization, as this was required for the successful packaging and marketing of places as universally consumable products. These spaces were developed for entertainment and consumption, requiring the removal of anything negative or dangerous, and extracting the *symbolic essence* of a place –while thereby removing their context and thus losing their original meaning. Just like Disney World provides an immense hodgepodge of symbols – medieval castles stacked upon colonial history, future technologies intermingling with dinosaurs, animals and exotic destinations – so did these tourist spaces, leading to the notion of “Disneyfication”: the decontextualization of reality and its repackaging in a family-friendly and simplified format ideal for mass-consumerism (Zukin 1993).

These touristic spaces epitomized the architecture and urban movement of postmodernity, with their dramatic fragmentation into smaller, more diverse and chaotically interwoven socio-spatial units. With this, the chickens of Jane Jacobs’ critique of the social sterility of Robert Moses naked grey concrete blocks had come home to roost, in an urban architecture whose objective was to provide a “warm” and “friendly” built environment. It achieved this by manipulating known design features of popular urban locations, mixing codes, and allowing diversity to dominate; replacing the austere homogeneity of the grey monoliths of modernity by a colorful potpourri of architectural styles, references and materials. But it was clear that this was less, as Jacobs would have hoped, an “architecture of the people” (Ley 1989) and more as just a new version of the “architecture of power”: now with its power not expressed in concrete blocks and steel towers, but cunningly disguised in the homeliness of cultural, historical and local remembrances (Kearns and Philo 1993).

The notion of a limited intersection and interaction between touristic and residential use of the city, implicit in the “tourist bubbles” research, started to break down as it became increasingly clear that this research focus concealed and left out the overlaps, intersections and interactions between urban tourism and other forms of urban life (Judd 2003). The type of consumption in which tourists engaged, and its effects on the urban fabric, could not be isolated to certain areas – but the touristic placelessness of the tourist bubble increasingly seemed to seep out into the city. As Baudrillard (1994) notes: “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyper-real and of simulation.”

To understand the Disneyland that lays outside the theme park, we need to look closer at the postmodern consumerist culture that the park epitomizes, situating it in the context of a larger consumerist society. While Fordist society was organized around efficient mass production, the consumerist post-Fordist society that followed was geared toward the production of demand. This implied a shift to a society in which goods provided the central principles of structuration, focused on material goods as communicators' rather than just functional utilities (Featherstone 1987). In such a society, consumption should not be understood through the lens of use-values, but as the consumption of signs whose meaning is contextual, as they play part in a cultural matrix. This transition liberated demand from the tether of a fixed referent, which was



instead replaced by an unstable field of floating signifiers, allowing capitalism, as Jameson (1991) argued, to reach its purest form: a nihilism found at the completion of the logic of capitalism, as Kroker (1985) puts it. This makes culture the very element of consumer society itself, and central to the reproduction of contemporary capitalism.

This transformation importantly implies a new role for the consumer, who could no longer be content with the homogeneous mass-consumerism of the previous era (Gartman 2004). Postmodernist consumerism implied the task of making lifestyle a life project: the role of the consumer is to display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle, relating and communicating to other consumer signs and symbols (Featherstone 1987). As Bourdieu suggests, taste in cultural goods function as markers of social status within a given field, thus implying the need to map out the social field. Consumer goods become words in a language, of which the modern consumer is made conscious that they must use to communicate – not only through their clothes, but through their home, furnishings, car and other activities, which are to be read and classified in terms of taste. This includes the consumption of urban place, which is thus increasingly becoming transformed into the shape of any other post-industrial consumer commodity (Zukin 1989, 2009).

The tastes of this consumer culture are not naturally occurring, but shaped and produced by economic interests (Zukin 1989, 1993) – but this does not imply a reductionism of the production of lifestyles to the economy. As Bourdieu (1985, 2013) emphasizes, the autonomy of particular practices needs to be understood in terms of the internal dynamic, structuring principles and processes which operate within a particular field. Each social field is to be regarded as a system in which each element receives its values, in the Saussurean sense, from its relationship to other elements. Bourdieu, however, is no structuralist, but recognizes the need to examine process and history that produces both the structure and the meaning of the elements within it.

A central part of this process is a hegemonic classificatory struggle on the basis of taste, setting the conditions for the logic and currency as well as the rate of conversion into economic capital of the cultural realm (Bourdieu 2011; Featherstone 1987). For instance, the interest of the possessors of a cultural capital – e.g. intellectuals and academics – is to shape the logic of the symbolic system to produce distinctions which contribute to the reproduction of the existing relations between classes and class fractions, thus valuing the forms of capital of which they are in possession. This suggests the task to map out the logic of a field, by look at the ways that taste in cultural goods function as markers of social status.

## **The Field of New Urban Tourism**

In order to map out the social field, that is, to look at the ways that taste in cultural goods functions as markers of social status among tourists, we look at the neighborhood descriptions of the hosts, and the

reviews that guests provide. These descriptions and reviews provide access to more than merely descriptions of listings, but give access to the urban imaginary and what the participants value. The hosts' neighborhood descriptions allow hosts to attempt to sell the neighborhoods of the listing that they are marketing, by framing it in ways that the hosts think will be likely to attract an "imagined audience" (Litt, 2012) of guests. The reviews are guests' opportunities to describe their experiences, and while doing so, market themselves by characterizing their travels in ways that are valued by their community. Following Edensor (2000), tourists can here be seen as performers: while these texts are intended to communicate to future potential guests of the host, they are simultaneously used to manage impressions, in part by using their touristic consumption to gain cultural capital (Goffman 1970). The reviews therefore provide a lens not only into how guests view their consumption experience, but also what they believe is seen as positive in the larger community: they provide a way of mapping the field of new tourism.

### **Theme 1: Cosmopolitanism – Belong Anywhere**

A guest of a listing in Prospect-Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn, writes in his review that:

"The neighborhood feels very authentically Brooklyn. I never felt unsafe, but it definitely had the 'trendy' grunge and multicultural-ness [sic] that one would expect when thinking about stereotypical Brooklyn. It will be a shock if you're coming from a quiet suburb (like me), but I adjusted quickly."

This illustrates the ways that tourists tend to frame their experiences to emphasize their own adventurous spirit, often hinting that the experience requires sophistication and experience in traveling. The narrative consists of meeting a difference, with the risk of feeling unsafe or of not fitting in, but being able to overcome this challenge. To be an *experienced traveler* implies the ability to navigate difference, and being able to "fit in" to various contexts, competently interacting with local people.

"Bed Stuy got quite a reputation. ...There are not many tourists in the area so will stand out as a newcomer as soon as you step out of the subway or the Über [sic]. That said we did not have any trouble during the week we stayed here. People were in general helpful and greeted us with a warm smiles on the streets. I will recommend this area for experienced travelers who are comfortable with getting around in big cities and curious on seeing other parts of New York."

Demonstrating this ability implies the need of interacting with "locals". Such local interaction is furthermore seen as a way of breaking out of the tourist bubble: it is framed as moving beyond touristic relationships and into something real and authentic. To emphasize these positive characteristics, reviewers commonly refer to interacting with locals and friendly neighbors:

"The neighborhood is transitional, but all the neighbors were very nice, we loved how on a warm evening everyone was sitting on their stoops, kids playing, a real neighborhood!"

However, these interactions can also be negative, as certain events are difficult to bring into a story of successful overcoming of a challenge. These are feelings of unease or fear with “a different kind of difference”, one that is not alluringly exotic but perceived as hostile (Snee 2013):

“the neighborhood is pretty ‘SCARY’, I did not feel safe walking at night. Lots of neighbors on the street but the only one that spoke to us was some guy pushing a cart full of ‘glow lights, sticks etc.’”

This cultural aim of “experienced travelers” to display and learn an ability to overcome encounters with difference can be related to wider sociological notions, in particular Giddens’s (1991:190) “cosmopolitan person”. For Giddens, a cosmopolitan person is one who draws strength from being at home in a variety of contexts. The cosmopolitan person is able to negotiate the fragmentation of collective identities in consumerist society, in which rigid and fixed identities have been replaced by a fluid multiplicity of signs. A cosmopolitan person is able to make use of diversity to create a distinctive self-identity which positively weaves elements from different settings into an integrated narrative, in a reflexive process, i.e. one founded on the ability of agents to reflect on and change the social conditions governing their existence (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994).

Cosmopolitanism implies, and enables, “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other” (Hannerz 1990:239): being faced by differences, without being overcome by it. This in particular concerns one’s orientation towards diversity, as a cosmopolitan person is able to make use of diversity in order to create a distinctive self-identity which positively incorporates elements from different settings into an integrated narrative. Cosmopolitanism is thus both a competence, needed to “make one’s way within other cultures and countries” (Szerszynski and Urry 2006:114), while at the same time being a form of “cultural capital”, used by the middle classes to distance themselves from those who lack this good taste, through the consumption of difference (Hage 2012).

**Table 2. (below). Left half of this table shows the “richest” words, and the right half shows the “poorest” words. This table lists the words sorted by the average population living in poverty in the neighborhood in which the word is used. Place and person names were removed, and only words occurring more than 100 times are included. These are split between content appearing in hosts’ neighborhood descriptions, and in guest reviews. “Nr” shows the number of occurrences. “Pov” shows the average rate of households living below the poverty line in the neighborhoods where the word is used.**

			“Richest” words						“Poorest” words		
Description	Pov	Nr.	Reviews	Pov	Nr.	Description	Pov	Nr.	Reviews	Pov	Nr.
<i>luxury</i>	9.6	535	<i>theatres</i>	6.7	373	<i>barrio</i>	26.			23.	
<i>theaters</i>	9.7	129	<i>theaters</i>	7.1	716	<i>murals</i>	1	103	<i>murals</i>	5	102
<i>designer</i>	10.	173	<i>doormen</i>	7.7	740	<i>generations</i>	24.		<i>gentrification</i>	23.	
<i>promenade</i>	10.	168	<i>promenade</i>	8.2	417	<i>changing</i>	3	178	<i>graffiti</i>	5	217
<i>comedy</i>	10.	396	<i>museums</i>	10.		<i>gentrifying</i>	22.		<i>latino</i>	3	268
<i>metropolitan</i>	10.	119	<i>centrally</i>	11.	2,301	<i>police</i>	22.		<i>jewish</i>	23.	
<i>finest</i>	11.	226	<i>district</i>	11.	4,026	<i>artist</i>	21.		<i>spanish</i>	1	909
<i>desirable</i>	11.	279	<i>gay</i>	11.	3,921	<i>soul</i>	21.		<i>hispanic</i>	9	178
<i>greek</i>	11.	206	<i>nespresso</i>	11.	2	<i>gentrification</i>	21.		<i>gentrified</i>	0	386
<i>cobble</i>	11.	165	<i>landmarks</i>	11.	108	<i>n</i>	21.		<i>intimidating</i>	22.	
<i>stone</i>	11.	182	<i>memorial</i>	11.	323	<i>bodegas</i>	21.		<i>dominican</i>	0	283
<i>sightseeing</i>	11.	106	<i>unbeatable</i>	12.	390	<i>colorful</i>	21.		<i>habitants</i>	9	217
<i>safest</i>	11.	281	<i>e</i>	12.	5671	<i>gentrified</i>	21.		<i>danger</i>	7	147
<i>tourist</i>	11.	415	<i>shopping</i>	12.	1,269	<i>caribbean</i>	21.		<i>dodgy</i>	5	189
<i>choice</i>	11.	119	<i>attractions</i>	12.	10,014	<i>social</i>	20.		<i>african</i>	4	151
<i>european</i>	11.	130	<i>s</i>	12.	5,939	<i>gallery</i>	20.		<i>unsafe</i>	21.	
<i>upscale</i>	11.	216	<i>finger tips</i>	12.	218	<i>black</i>	20.		<i>sketchy</i>	4	1,845
<i>destination</i>	11.	183	<i>whole foods</i>	12.	294	<i>coolest</i>	20.		<i>authentic</i>	1	182
<i>central</i>	11.	4,039	<i>s</i>	12.	1,045	<i>cultures</i>	20.		<i>insecure</i>	21.	
<i>natural</i>	11.	419	<i>assistant</i>	12.	621	<i>alive</i>	20.		<i>culturally</i>	1	135
<i>avenues</i>	11.	368	<i>sensation</i>	12.	416	<i>multicultural</i>	20.		<i>multicultural</i>	1	168
<i>centrally</i>	11.	376	<i>al</i>	12.	235	<i>l</i>	20.		<i>l</i>	0	251
<i>evening</i>	11.	126	<i>desirable</i>	12.	891	<i>hipsters</i>	20.		<i>dangerous</i>	9	551
<i>charming</i>	11.	489	<i>bakeries</i>	12.	5227	<i>used</i>	19.		<i>edgy</i>	8	116
<i>relax</i>	11.	206	<i>rarity</i>	12.	268	<i>indie</i>	19.		<i>hipsters</i>	6	136
<i>picturesque</i>	12.	109	<i>superbly</i>	12.	4,669	<i>thrift</i>	19.		<i>reputation</i>	20.	
<i>shows</i>	12.	359	<i>terrific</i>	12.	227	<i>artists</i>	19.		<i>police</i>	6	118
<i>quaint</i>	12.	283	<i>iconic</i>	12.	8227	<i>community</i>	19.		<i>gritty</i>	20.	
<i>attractions</i>	12.	935	<i>sites</i>	12.	1,794	<i>industrial</i>	19.		<i>rough</i>	20.	
<i>boutiques</i>	12.	945	<i>clubs</i>	12.	985	<i>dive</i>	19.		<i>tenement</i>	20.	
<i>renowned</i>	12.	156	<i>puntuale</i>	12.	108	<i>diversity</i>	19.		<i>rusty</i>	1	125
	12.		<i>fabulous</i>	12.	6,420	<i>locally</i>	19.		<i>bodega</i>	0	470
	12.		<i>shows</i>	12.	2,555	<i>melting</i>	19.		<i>hipster</i>	19.	
	12.		<i>museum</i>	12.	4,510		6	108		9	767

<i>fashion</i>	12. 7 172	<i>location</i>	12. 230,45 8 8	<i>culturally</i>	19. 6 220	<i>taco</i>	19. 8 198
<i>fabulous</i>	12. 8 172	<i>unreal</i>	12. 8 125	<i>culture</i>	19. 5 946	<i>threatened</i>	19. 8 158
<i>tea</i>	12. 8 122	<i>high</i>	12. 9 8,610	<i>creative</i>	19. 4 356	<i>gated</i>	19. 8 138
<i>specialty</i>	12. 8 122	<i>cushions</i>	12. 9 101	<i>vegan</i>	19. 4 187	<i>caribbean</i>	19. 8 447
<i>dining</i>	13. 0 724	<i>remarkabl y</i>	12. 9 295	<i>thriving</i>	19. 4 204	<i>cultures</i>	19. 8 263
<i>shopping</i>	13. 0 3,485	<i>personnel</i>	12. 9 102	<i>authentic</i>	19. 3 560	<i>diversity</i>	19. 7 316
<i>quality</i>	13. 0 157	<i>center</i>	12. 9 7,477	<i>eclectic</i>	19. 3 333	<i>colourful</i>	19. 6 258

## Theme 2: Gentrification tourism – and tourism gentrification

Places are like any other consumer good in these constructed self-narratives, as they are seen to “contain” experiences that can be incorporated into one’s identity (Desforges 2000). Places are not simply “out there”, waiting to be consumed, however: they need to be constructed through story-telling that bring into being a particular sort of place and people to inhabit it. In relation to urban areas in general, and New York City in particular, these imagined places can be related to what Neil Smith (2005) referred to as the “urban pioneer” mentality: part of lifestyle trends that encourages young suburbanites to migrate to the inner city in search of urban “grit” and “authenticity” (Lloyd 2010; Zukin 2011).

“I wanted to experience what real New York locals live like, so we got this place with Hollis. She was very nice and accommodating! Really cool lady for sure. The place is a historic brownstone built in the 1800s. Really cool! The neighborhood is gritty and still authentic Brooklyn. You have to adjust if you aren't used to the city life. Very vibrant and a melting pot. Home of B.I.G.!!!”

This has led to the formation of a symbolic system of place associated to a “cosmopolitan flair”: cosmopolitanism becomes an aesthetic, represented by a number of stand-in symbols, as it becomes integrated into a symbolic economy and part of a consumer lifestyle (Szerszynski and Urry 2006; Zukin 1996). The top-down place marketing of neighborhoods as having a “cosmopolitan flair” tends to involve buzzwords like *creativity*, *diversity*, *tolerance*, *vibrancy*, and *hipness* (Füller and Michel 2014). As the “post-tourists” (Feifer and others 1985) escape the perceived artificiality and “placelessness” urban centers’ tourist bubble, they wander “off-the-beaten-track” on the search for “alternative public spaces” (Richards 2011), “creative urban areas” (Pappalepore 2010) or “ethnic precincts” (Collins 2007) characterized by this symbolic system. This can be seen in the keywords identified by looking at the words associated to poorer urban areas, as shown in Table 2. Poorer areas tend to be associated to risk – *intimidating*, *danger*, *gritty*, *dodgy*, *unsafe*, *sketchy*, *edgy* – but also to life and vibrancy – *artists*, *culture*, *diversity*, *creative*, *authentic*. It is this overlap that constitutes the imaginary of the cosmopolitan flair.

The aesthetics of these “cosmopolitan spaces” are often associated to that of former working-class and post-industrial inner-city neighborhoods, often ethnically mixed and characterized by small retail (in New York in particular represented by the “bodega”), and whose residents tend to be poor, ethnic minorities, non-whites, and immigrants (Judd 2003). This urban imaginary is associated to a “gritty”, “rough” or “edgy” flair, helping to speak to a sense of risk that is central to the narrative of the new tourist as an adventurous explorer of the urban frontier (Zukin 2009). This aesthetic is similar to that of gentrification, and are thus associated to the “creative class” (Florida 2005) or a “neo-bohemia” (Lloyd 2002).

“In summary, great spot, brilliant people, and a very genuine 'Bohemian Brooklyn' experience...there's not many of these left anymore!”

This popping of the “tourist bubble”, as urban tourism now emphasizes the exploration of authentic urbanity, also suggests a stronger role of tourism in urban transformation. As both residents and tourists are consumers of the city (Glaeser, Kolko, and Saiz 2001; Zukin 1998), the boundary between tourism and residential life becomes increasingly permeable. In this new urban landscape, gentrification and tourism amalgamate with other consumption-oriented activities, e.g. restaurants, shopping, and cultural venues (Gotham 2005). This blurring of entertainment, commercial activity and residential space changes the relationship between culture and economics in the production and consumption of urban space. While tourism implies the symbolic consumption of place, so does living: changing forms of mobility has implied both growing difficulty to tell tourist and other forms of mobility apart (Sheller and Urry 2006), but residential choice also constitutes the consumption of place as a symbolic commodity, allowing the decoration of one’s identity with its particular brands and signs.

The search for authentic urban experiences among urban tourists has meant that the boundaries between tourists and residents are becoming less clear-cut: as tourists are no longer focused on sightseeing of designated tourist attractions, the effects of tourism on urban neighborhoods are difficult to distinguish from general processes of urban change and commodification (Hamnett and Whitelegg 2007; Zukin 2009). This entanglement is the focus of the concept of “tourism gentrification”, developed by Gotham (2005) in a study of New Orleans’ *Vieux Carre*, suggesting that tourism plays part in the urban gentrification processes, as areas are reshaped to become spaces of entertainment and consumption, focused on the production of local differences that appeal to visitors’ tastes for the exotic and unique (Coleman and Crang 2002; Urry 2002). While Gotham (2005) focuses on state-led gentrification, emphasizing the role of large-scale investment, these transformations can also develop from below, with almost no strategic state planning involved, as shown in Fuller and Michel’s (2014) study of *Kreuzberg*.

The analysis of the representation of neighborhoods on Airbnb, however, reveals the relationship between gentrification and tourism to be even more intricate: “gentrification” itself is an important keyword in the marketing and touristic consumption of neighborhoods. Gentrification is a central part of the urban imaginary, seen as something inherent and characteristic of New York in general, and Brooklyn in particular;

they are understood as places undergoing rapid change: this is part of its brand and urban imaginary, and so to experience “authentic” Brooklyn, one needs to experience – and indeed take part in – its gentrification process (see also Table 2.)

“the best part of her place is the location. It's a really cool loft space in what is the most gentrifying and artsy part of the Bronx, it's literally the best part of the borough and the quick walk over the bridge into the city was my favorite part.”

“The neighborhood is industrial but rapidly gentrifying. We kinda liked it: not pretty, but lots of new (hipster) bars, restaurants and vintage/thrift shops. Very well located from the L line subway. A really different side of NY compared to most touristic areas.”

This suggests that *tourism gentrification* is in part driven by *gentrification tourism*: that is, gentrification is part of the driving force of gentrification is to experience gentrification. In this territorial ideology, the dynamics of gentrification itself becomes yet another set of symbols in the symbolic economy used in the marketing of place. The dynamics of urban change are thus themselves made part of the dynamics, in a way that pushes forward and intensifies the very process that it describes: “gentrification” drives gentrification. This process illustrates Giddens’ (1984:20) notion of a “double hermeneutic”, as the social scientific notions surrounding gentrification enter constitutively into the world they describe:

“The neighborhood is rapidly gentrifying. This is a fraught subject for many, but the contrasts are too stark not be fascinating - abandoned lots and homes not maintained in 50 years adjacent to brand new architect-designed web startup buildings, with bicycle (fixed gear, of course) shops and cafes in the middle ground - rehabbing dingy spaces but keeping the rougher edges in place. No artisanal pickle or mayonnaise shops yet - I suppose that's just a matter of time. The street has rundown houses, metal working shops, and auto repair places mixed in obviously newly fixed up homes, tons of high-end new construction, and young people in skinny jeans. There are public housing projects right across Bushwick avenue and the lower income minority people whose families have lived in Bushwick since the 1960s are still here, in their neighborhood. For how long? Who knows. For an amateur student of class relations, urban studies, and a host of other fields, this neighborhood is fascinating.”

References to gentrification often contain within them an implicit understanding that gentrifying neighborhoods are perishable goods: early gentrification is preferable to late gentrification, as it means the neighborhood is “more authentic”. The urban frontier keeps changing, and so the fashionable visitor in search of authentic gentrification will need to follow.

“Not totally gentrified yet, Bed-stuy is the new place to be in Brooklyn. Enjoy before the hipster invasion which already began !”

### **Theme 3: Poverty Tourism – or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Other**

Since cosmopolitanism is related to the overcoming of difference, its display is dependent on having a difference to overcome: an Other is needed to define the self. Difference is thus something desirable, and

therefore, they need to be found, constructed, or a mix between the two; a task that is a central element of new tourism.

Such difference is also central to the value and meaning of place: according to Elsrud (2001), places acquire their symbolic value through images of Otherness – boundaries of difference that can be cast as providing a perceived risk and adventure to a travel narrative. Just as tourist uses pre-established notions of places in order to understand places by comparing them with what they know (Urry 2002), Rapport (1995) argued pre-established stereotypes help tourists to “make sense” of their contact with the Other: positioning both the tourist and the person that the tourist encounters. Differences must be socially recognized and legitimated: total otherness like total individuality is in danger of being unrecognizable.

“I would recommend this as a destination for anyone looking to experienced [sic] New York as a New Yorker”

“So if you are slightly adventurous and keen on crazy life stories, this is definitely the place to go to for you.”

This authenticity, tightly linked to difference, is the foundational value of modern tourism, similar to the "concern for the sacred in primitive society" (p. 590), which implies, as MacCannell (1973) argues, that tourism is the modern equivalent of the religious pilgrimage. As tourism is simultaneously a means of accumulating cultural capital, the use of these authenticity is also importantly implicated in cultural distinction: separating from those who lack good taste through consumption of difference (Bourdieu 2013). The perceived risk of meeting difference enables drawing a boundary between oneself and other tourists – separating the “traveler” from the mere “tourist”. Tourists are claimed to dilute the “authenticity” of the local experience – much in line with Brown-Saracino’s (2010) characterization of how gentrifiers construct distinctions and draw symbolic boundaries between one another.

This hunt for authenticity through Otherness has come to produce a type of tourism that finds authenticity in urban deprivation (Mowforth, Charlton, and Munt 2007). This can be seen in the growth of phenomena described by concepts such as “slum tourism”, “dark tourism”, “disaster tourism”, or “poverty tourism” (Dürr and Jaffe 2012; Frenzel et al. 2015; Frenzel, Koens, and Steinbrink 2012; Frisch 2012; Lennon and Foley 2002; Sharpley 2005), involving the casting of poverty, deprivation and violence as sources of commodifiable difference, by packaging them as tourism products. Deprivation thus becomes a renewable source of something “real”, to be used in the staging of authenticity.

In this packaging, deprivation and “the slum” are represented through familiar signs of urban poverty that circulate globally through popular culture. As Urry (2002) argues, tourists use signs acquired from travel discourses to navigate and read the landscape, comparing what they see with pre-established notions of places in order to draw pleasure from being somewhere out of the ordinary. Thus, certain symbols function as aesthetic markers of urban poverty, and thus indirectly of authenticity. As tourism mobilizes and alters places by linking them into global systems of dissemination and representation, these become global



imaginaries. Race is inextricably linked to this symbolic system, being entangled in a territorial ideology within which *blackness* has come to mean “authentic urbanity”, and “authentic urbanity” to mean *poverty*, *danger* and *excitement* (Short 1999).

**Figure 1.** This word cloud contains the words statistically most overrepresented in the neighborhood descriptions for areas in the tertile of NTAs with highest fraction of poverty, compared to the rest of the material. That is, these words are significantly more prevalent when describing a neighborhood with a high level of poverty. The size of the words is proportional to their Log-Likelihood overrepresentation. Place names were filtered out. As the cloud illustrates, poor neighborhoods tend to be represented as cultural experiences, emphasizing *raw*, *hip*, *cool*, *colorful*, *vibrant*, *authentic*, *historic* urban life, and the local *community*. There is also a clear prevalence of the symbols of gentrification: *art*, *galleries*, *music*, *bodegas*, including explicit mentioning of the term *gentrification*. The use of the word *unkempt* is in particular interesting, as it constitutes a discursive linking of the racialized idea of “untidy hair” with the notion of a “gritty” neighborhood.



The reason that deprivation in this way can function as a source of authenticity, to be staged and mined through poverty tourism, can be traced to the initial source of the strive for authenticity. According to authors like Baudrillard, this can be found in the alienation inherent in the simulational world of the consumer society. As Baudrillard (1983) argues, the end result of the triumph of a consumer society is an effacement of the distinction between the real and the imaginary through complete proliferation of signs and images: life is reduced to “an ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality” (1983:148); a postmodern and depthless

culture in which all values, to use a Nietzschean phrase, have become transvalued and art has conquered over reality. It is the sense of alienation that follows from this which results in a desire for authenticity: as Kroker (1985:80) puts it, the “death of the social, the loss of the real, leads to a nostalgia for the real: a fascination with and desperate search for real people, real values, real sex”.

This realness and authenticity has to be found elsewhere, outside the simulation of the consumer society: "in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles" (MacCannell 2013:3). Outside are those who are, to varying extent, not allowed in: those not seen as blank slates on which identities may be rapidly sketched and erased; those who are not free to take on or shed off identity signs to communicate through a symbolic language. They are instead left with fixed identities, branded on their skin, on their bodies, in where they live. It is those who *are* their place, rather than just temporary visitors; those who *are* their ethnicity, rather than just wearing its symbols; those whose shirts are tattered from use, rather than by fashion-boutique designers.

This notion, of the Other as humble, simple, basic and authentic, is linked to historic tropes of European expansion and colonization. It can be traced to ideas of the “natural” native; “traditional life”; and the simple “happy native” (O’Reilly 2006), and in particular the Romanticist notion of the “noble savage”, embodying the indigene, outsider, wild human; an Other who has not been "corrupted" by civilization, and can therefore represent humanity's innate goodness. This contains both a romanticized notion of that which was lost through the civilizing process, while at the same time being part of a civilized/uncivilized narrative central to the defense of colonial atrocities (Elias 1978). This points to an inherent paradox, identified by Wang (2000:138), in that there is both nostalgia for a simpler and more authentic way of life but also confidence that home nations are “superior” and more “civilized”.

As Featherstone (1987) argues, the cultural shift to valuing authenticity, collapsing traditional distinctions and hierarchies for a cosmopolitan celebration of difference, was not only driven by a sense of alienation, but was paradoxically also a move in the very cultural game against which it constituted a revolt. This was linked to a strategy for “outsider intellectuals”, high on cultural capital but low on economic capital, appearing to subvert the whole game by “proclaiming a beyond is really a within, a new move within the intellectual game which takes into account the new circumstances of production of cultural goods” (Featherstone 1987:69). By undermining the distinction of above-below, producing a meta-game, in which the appreciation of the postmodernist rules become the basis of distinction, thus increasing the value of their own cultural capital, while reducing the value of economic capital. In this postmodern value system, conspicuous consumption takes the form of alternative, aware, conscious consumption, aimed at a display of cosmopolitan values, while being relatively cheap in economic capital. This allowed the intellectuals to use the logic of symbolic systems to produce distinctions which contribute to the reproduction of the existing relations between classes and class fractions.

## Closing the Loop: Dark Disneyfication

As the search for authenticity, founded as reaction against the alienation of consumerist society, is itself commodified and brought into the symbolic exchange, in a reflexive move that is quintessential of the cultural commodification of consumerist society, we have in the end gone full circle (Baudrillard 2016; MacCannell 1973). As prospective destinations and hosts begin to place market on the basis of this symbolic system, presenting a packaged, universalized, decontextualized potpourri of symbols associated to an imaginary of *cosmopolitan authenticity*, we return to the notion of Disneyfication – but now of a form that is geared to the staging of authenticity, based on the symbolisms of an imagined, stereotyped, racialized, exoticized Other – linked to authenticity through colonial tropes of the “uncivilized.”

This phenomenon, to which I refer as *Dark Disneyfication*, is best captured through an example: a bar that recently opened in a gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood branded their venue by drilling their walls with fake bullet-holes and marketing their \$10 craft beers in brown-paper bags, in a plain reference to the neighborhoods’ history of violence, homelessness and substance abuse (Helmore 2017). This illustrates how, while Disneyfication was characterized by a sterilizing removal of any reference to the negative, the drive for staging of cosmopolitan authenticity instead creates a virtual Disney World of past horrors, in which poverty and suffering are commodified for the extraction of symbolic authenticity. It shows how poverty tourism is thus but one manifestation of a broader cultural move toward finding in the Other a source of cosmopolitan symbolic resources.

As their neighborhoods are marketed, residents are thus forced to watch their personal traumas become the vacant diversions for selfie-stick wielding tourists. For residents, the marketing of symbols of disenfranchisement and poverty functions as reminders of their destitution, while for visitors, they enable an ironic contrast serving to emphasize precisely privilege and affluence.

This also points to how the need for a marketable Other produces the particular racial stereotypes characteristic of consumer society. The traditional colonial stereotype of the Black man as “dangerous”, “physical”, “strong” and “hard-working”, what Derek Hyra (2017) calls a “blatant racism”, was the product of a regime of accumulation in constant need of cheap labor. The consumerist society, on the other hand, is geared toward the production of consumer demand, not efficient industrial mass-production. Its (post-)colonial racial stereotype therefore serves the purpose not of supplying labor power, but of producing demand by playing into a symbolic economy: it casts the black body as part of an “exciting” and “authentic” consumption experience, invoking what Hyra calls a “subtle racism”. While this racism in certain ways may be more subtle, it shares the feature with historic colonialism of exploiting, dehumanizing and objectifying the colonized subject: now reified not as labor power, but as consumption experience (Césaire 2001). In the narrative surrounding gentrification and the urban experience, Black bodies are not allowed to play the role of the pioneers in these dreams of colonial adventures at the urban frontier: they are its objects; they are what is being consumed.

This difference in the fixed identity, understood from a Bourdieusian high-low distinction, and the fluid cosmopolitan identity, fluidly weaving together borrowed signs to a coherent narrative, means that the fact of being a “traveler” or an “outsider” permits recasting a performance as higher in cultural capital. In other words, being seen as tourist provides access to a symbolic framing, through which rough and risky living are seen as showcasing a skillful performance of authenticity (O’Reilly 2006). Drawn to the extreme, the most dedicated traveler can seem virtually indistinguishable from a homeless, but with radically different implications in terms of social status<sup>2</sup>. For the same reason, the outsider fascination in ghettos and slums tends to be incomprehensible for the local – in part as their understanding of violence and poverty stems not from a global upper middle-class imaginary of Hollywood movie violence, but from real-life personal experiences and traumas – and in part as they are not granted the same access to the cosmopolitan framing.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored how Airbnb plays into new tourism’s hunt for authenticity, as both reviewers and hosts become “discursive investors” (Zukin, Lindeman, and Hurson 2017) in the staging of an authentic urban experience. New urban tourism is founded on a cosmopolitan ideal to “fit in” in various contexts, or “belong anywhere” (Giddens 1991). The display of such cosmopolitan capacity to overcome naturally brings the need for a challenging *difference* to overcome – meetings with an “Other”, in which the new tourist may display their competence. This implies that places acquire their symbolic value through images of Otherness – boundaries of difference that can be cast as providing a perceived risk and adventure to a new tourist travel narrative (Elsrud 2001). This has as its most extreme expression in “poverty tourism” – the casting of poverty and violence as sources of commodifiable difference, packaging them as tourism products – but is a cornerstone of the overall aesthetic of new urban tourism. The reflexivity of these cultural commodification processes implies a constant “folding in upon itself”, as exemplified by *gentrification tourism*, in which the very effects of tourism become part of the urban imaginary that attracts it.

In the end, what may have started as a reaction against the inauthenticity and commodification of consumer culture, and a search for alternative, pro-poor, community-based, ethical and responsible forms of tourism, itself has become transformed into a cultural hegemony geared at the production of class difference. The rejection of a symbolic system creating distinction through consumption thus merely led to the production of a new symbolic system – one in which cosmopolitanism is the foundation for distinction, and “authenticity” determines the value of its cultural commodities. The result, thus, is a postmodern, decontextualized potpourri of signs and symbols growing in the soil of *Otherness*, *destitution*, and *poverty*: a

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<sup>2</sup> This includes, naturally, one’s own reflection on one’s identity. An illustrating example of this comes from a recent conversation with a man sitting next to his sleeping-bag outside a supermarket in Barcelona: “I’m traveling, man, I’m not homeless. I sometimes need to remind myself of that... by moving to a new city... or at least to a new part of town.”

Disneyland of *shabby-chic* run-down factories with young creatives selling IPAs in mason jars – signaling *authentic, genuine, real* urban life, ostensibly in contrast to the artificiality of the urban center “tourist bubbles.” With this, Disneyfication has returned, but now in new, more authentic clothing.

This cultural hegemony of the *petit bourgeoisie* (Bourdieu 2013) is unlikely to stand unchallenged, founded, as it is, on the exploitation, dehumanization and objectification of the colonized subject as part of a consumption experience. Reactions against this are likely part of a host of contemporary societal counter-trends: the return to sectional ideologies and divisions, religious fundamentalism, nationalism and the questioning of cosmopolitan values (Vance 2016). Are we in these witnessing the early stages of a revolt against the extraction of authenticity from the Other; the beginnings of a new reflexive cultural turn, now against cosmopolitanism? Such resistance, however, quickly encounters the paradox that is inherent to this cultural hegemony: that the ethical, pro-poor, pro-Other behavior is part of a symbolic hierarchy that simultaneously distinguishes between high and low. Those who are ostensibly the beneficiaries of this symbolism of selfless solidarity, are at the same time on the lower steps of the hierarchy that is defined through capacity to perform precisely this “solidarity.” Resistance against inequalities thus faces a symbolic representation of itself. This once again lifts the question of how to escape the all-absorbing reflexivity of the consumer society; how to escape the simulation that Disneyland is made to make us believe is real.

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