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# Tourism as a membrane

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ASA07: Panel D1: Lifestyle migration and residential tourism: new forms of mobility between tourism and migration

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**Abstract:**

Out-migration from Britain by British nationals is attracting increasing academic and popular interest. One idea to emerge suggests that British identity tends to be deconstructed into its constituent parts (English, Scottish and Welsh) through the process of migration and that the break-up of Britishness results in essential underlying identities (re)emerging rather than forms of hybridity developing. This paper recognises that we are always already hybrid and thus these constituent parts are hybrid forms themselves.

The contemporary mobility patterns of migrant British populations are, particularly in the case of Europe, prefigured by tourist mobilities. Drawing on experience working in the European travel industry the author outlines a substantive example of the osmotic exchange between tourism, travel and migration through a focus on elite cultural tourism, in particular walking tours. Tourism is understood as a membrane with the constituent(s) discovering appropriate solutions and the elements of identity that 'work'. These tensions are maintained in migration yet an individual's account of themselves may obscure the soluble nature of identity, the progression of hybridity. It is proposed that a focus on the internal and external decoration and representation of domestic space can act metaphorically as a filter through which such hybridity may be drawn.

**Background**

In being invited to develop my abstract as an e-paper I was informed that I could present 'work-in-progress'. For this I am grateful, as the following discussion is un-tethered, that is a work in flux. I am at an early stage of a research project where I will be exploring some of the issues that emerge from British life-style migration in the context of fourteen months ethnographic fieldwork 'somewhere in rural France'. I have lived outside Britain for fifteen years during which I spent several years employed in various aspects of tourism, in particular, six years as a guide on cultural walking tours. My initial interest in this field was motivated by landscape issues reflecting my training in landscape archaeology. My concern was that the tourist's ability to consume the landscape negated their engagement with the social complexities that made that particular set of material conditions possible.

The questions I was asking about the tourist's engagement with landscape were in fact partly born of my having lived in rural France for several years and my decision to carry out research in the context of a resident British population developed out of this. I feel part of a generation that left Britain. Holidays taken with my family in Europe in the 1960s and the early 1970s had been plagued by currency restrictions but by the early 1980s these had disappeared and Europe seemed open and available and ready for movement. I like thousands went abroad where I encountered others who had come abroad in earlier movements. I discovered a long lineage which stretched from Athens or Rome and from there to Beirut and beyond to a recollected colonial epoch. The crusades were far from being round the corner but they too were present. It was a complex acclimatization, giving a strange legitimacy.

That movement of Britons into Europe has continued and grown. By 1987 I had moved to rural France, in the Perigord, perhaps the most clichéd of the British rural retreats. When *A Year in Provence* was published by Peter Mayle (1989) I refused to read it. I

could not bear to read what I assumed to be a tawdry reflection on my own discoveries. I couldn't allow that story to be told back to me. This awkwardness with an identity as a British migrant was shared by many of my contemporaries. I recall clearly walking through the local town where I lived and being horrified at the gaggle of British residents clustered around pots of tea. This attitude towards myself or at least my relationship with my co-nationals confused me. Gradually I began to forgive the tendency of the British to gather together seeing this paralleled in the behaviour of other migrant groups.

From my personal history I identify a sense that already by the late 1980s moving to rural France was clichéd. However settlement by the British in the rural areas has continued with presumably each generation, like my own, anxious not to be seen as conforming and confronting the relationship between representations/expectations of our lives as migrants and the 'reality' of that life.

### **The problem**

Out-migration from Britain by British nationals is attracting increasing interest. An example are the large number of online forums where questions can be asked and advice given or sought. The larger of these are international with country specific forums that offer fascinating research material as well as eminently practical information from travelling with pets to how to MOT English registered vehicles. I have recently posted messages on two of these forums (BritishExpats, 2007a; BritishExpatsForum, 2007a). Both are requests for information about 'hotspots' of British settlement in the south of France. Neither has brought forward much comment although a large number of people have looked at the posts. In another section of the forums are pages dedicated to questions by TV and other media journalists and researchers (BritishExpatsForum, 2007; BritishExpats, 2007). Reading the posts in this section was very enlightening as I found that British migrants are a sought after commodity. There are researchers crawling about all over the place looking into the phenomenon. The majority are media based and are requesting families or individuals to interview but the emphasis on research of one type or another and the popularity of the phenomenon in popular culture will play a part in my fieldwork experience. I am tempted to make a comparison with Burngreave, the area where I live in Sheffield. Here the nature of migration is substantially different, Burngreave is a deprived city ward, a centre for international migration, asylum seekers and refugees. The interest generated by this for researchers both from the various media and the academic community is similar as is the diffidence with which the residents of Burngreave relate to research. The relation of these two phenomena to current pre-occupations with Britishness is evident. Burngreave situated as a test case for how to become British while France is a test for how Britishness might survive.

The recent report on the extent of British emigration published by the IPPR (Sriskandarajah & Drew, 2006) encouraged a spate of popular articles including the Saturday Guardian supplement (Guardian, 2007) and a BBC2 Money programme feature (MoneyProgramme, 2007). In reference to France, the Guardian supplement of forty pages led on the French example in spite of the fact that France figured 8th in the list countries with the highest count of British migrants. This is indicative of the relationship of the British middle class with France. The food, the wine, the affordable country house, the vista all speak to the ability of a middle class sensibility to act out its understanding of

France. Caricatures of a certain 'French' attitude to Britain play a role in this too with the French appellation of 'Rosbif' for the British being well known. A recent popular publication in France is titled *Help! The English are invading us* (Fralon, 2006). Here the soft tone of the author's introduction is indicative of a well known and clearly recognisable set of British caricatures shared by the French reader and which build a different but clearly recognisable Briton. This paper suggests that this ground, this shared if un-translated sense of each other, offers a site of resolution, a place where invasion makes no difference, is not taken seriously, a site of the mundane, a site of recognition, of shared rules and disinterest.

In the IPPR report the authors turn their attention to hybridity, to diasporic ties and identity. This question develops from the potential for perhaps an explicit Euro nationality or identity to develop and British migration as a test case in a way. But the study reveals people saying that they are not hybrid, no, they are English in fact or Welsh, or Scots or Northern Irish. To what idea of those identities they adhere is not clear from the report. The survey stops with the knowledge that Britishness is decomposing rather than hybridising or remaining static. From my perspective as British, by which I mean I have both English and Welsh parentage, the underlying principle is that we are always already in a state of hybridity, we are always already in a state of flux and change. The contingent nature of fluid social groupings has been explored by Maffesoli (1996). His description of contemporary social groups as neo-tribes, temporary and necessarily contractual agglomerations, is born of constant change of which migration is one aspect. The problem remains of how to address this unspoken hybridity?

### **Osmosis**

Contemporary mobility patterns of migrant British populations are, particularly in the case of Europe, prefigured by tourist mobilities (Macdonald, 1993; Boissevain, 1996; Macleod, 1997; Abram, 1997). As a tour guide I felt I was in the position of being a translator of many things. Clients asked questions which I translated. People encountered on walks answered and I translated. Essentially the work felt, at its most exiting, like the translation of desires. Fulfilment of desire seemed to be at the heart of tourism; the desires of clients materialised through a journey, bringing the movement of their ideas and bodies into some performative harmony. Being a resident myself in France at the time, I felt empathy both for the tourist and the residents. My work involved a movement of people from A to B through a maze of potential points of contact with local life. This involved looking for the common ground, that is history shared, common denominators between local and British experiences: medieval Christianity, the renaissance, rural decline, picnics in hidden valleys, an aesthetic of botany, ecology and food. These were points of contact offering the potential to remap ideas and even memories onto a new landscape.

It is in this context that I formulate the metaphor of these tourism events as osmotic. The performance of cultural tourism, for a middle class culture rich Anglophone audience permitted bits of living in France to be drawn through the membrane. The experience of being a migrant could be created for the tourist by my pulling the potential through. Osmosis requires solutions of differential density, a necessary attraction of one density to the other. That is the job of the guide, to weight the solution of migrant identity so as to

attract the settler. To map the migrant land so that the new settler can find their way, imagine their own presence. By extension, this osmotic process is found in the brochure image and more broadly in representations of tourism. These I describe elsewhere as a HaHa! (Neal, 2006), representations leaving the tourist, potential or actual, perching above a ditch that protects them from the inroads of social complexity that might involve discomfort, non-fulfilment of desires. Tourism makes the landscape static, pre-prepared. This too is a property of the membrane. It normalises potentially exotic experience.

Metaphorically, I am describing tourism as a membrane with the constituent parts, the tourist on one hand and the potential-migrant on the other, discovering appropriate solutions and the elements of identity that 'work'. The paradox is that this extraordinary situation will be described in mundane terms for the nature of such migration is the mapping of the mundane onto the extraordinary. Nostalgic visions of rural Britain were understood to be central to the search for an ideal French home (Buller & Hoggart, 1994b, p.201). Nostalgia, a longing for a home that perhaps never existed (Boym, 2001, p.xiii) might be reconfigured as a reminder – it is a memory of difference, but not the difference of a lost home but the original difference of density, the memory of ourselves before we changed.

The basic contention of this discussion is that there is something in the negotiation of current British migration that makes of something exceptional something mundane. Moreover this normalising tendency is 'settling in' itself. People's accounts of their lives and understandings of themselves and others are the appropriate solutions that people find to their identity and they tend to come across as static or reverting to something. The question remains how to delineate hybridity that seemingly cannot be directly vocalised? In the context of this work-in-progress, I fear I am hoping to catch something out of the corner of my eye.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I present work-in-progress exploring my personal trajectory through tourism and migration using the metaphor of osmosis. I explain that my interest in this field developed through a discomfort with my experience of both tourism and migration in Europe. I suggest that there is a reservoir of characterisations of France by the British and vice-versa that make the ground fertile for migration. Partly as a result of this very fertility, I suggest migration as mediated by tourism is implicitly mundane and that this results in a forgetting of their difference by the migrant. This is proposed in the guise of an explanation for why British people are understood not to be developing hybrid identities. I further suggest that nostalgia is a longing for when the migrant was truly different, that is before they migrated, before they normalised and found solutions. I acknowledge that these metaphorical reflections leave substantive questions un-answered about how to sketch what is not on the surface. Extending the metaphor I suggest that material culture, objects and their histories are caught in the membrane and offer snapshots of, glances on, or, more mundanely, data for further discussion.

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