

Digital Orientalism: TripAdvisor and online travelers' tales

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Online tourist reviews have emerged as an important source of information for participants in the global tourism industry. For tourists, they serve as research resources during pre-trip planning as well as outlets for expressing opinions about their travels post-trip (Leung et al, 2013). In turn, tourist operators find them valuable because they can reveal the opinions, thoughts, desires, and motivations of potential customers as well as user-generated content that act like an advertisement, or "free" publicity (Leung et al, 2013). Review-based websites such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Foursquare serve as digital hubs for the tourism industry within the social logic of Web 2.0 by connecting potential tourists, former tourists, and tourist operators in a virtual space.

Using data collected from millions of user-generated product reviews, these sites employ algorithms to calculate rankings and to determine categories that sort the activities and experiences of a tourist trip – hotels, restaurants, attractions, etc – according to how popular and highly rated they are among tourists. The aggregated reviews also function as online travel "communities," and it is from this perspective that much of the scholarship on online tourist reviews is focused (Jeacle and Carter, 2011; Leung et al, 2013). Most review content features short narratives in which the reviewer tells a story about their experience (Tussyadiah et al, 2011). In this sense, it is important to remember that these reviews constitute a contemporary version of a much older narrative form, the traveler's tale, which is heavily implicated in the ways Western constructions of social, cultural, gendered, racial, and ethnic types of "Otherness" are formed (MacCannell, 2011; Said, 1978; Smith, 2012).

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This chapter proposes a theoretical foundation – drawing primarily from Orientalist critique and also from digital race studies – for evaluating online tourist reviews as simultaneous examples of social media and travelers' tales. This is a crucial duality to recognize, as each of these discursive platforms are invested with different kinds of authority within the global tourism industry, which itself contributes to what critical Orientalist, tourism, and neoliberal scholars refer to as “the commodification of the Other” (Behdad, 1994; Harvey, 2005; MacCannell, 2011; Said, 1978; Smith 2012). This is the process by which social constructs imagined as outside of the boundaries of Western cultural norms – commonly, but not exclusively, manifested as social, gendered, racial, cultural, or ethnic difference – become packaged as attractions and consumer goods within the global market economy. It is argued here that online tourist reviews, due to their dual authorities, occupy an influential place – or places – within this process and the discourse that sustains it.

TripAdvisor is the world's largest travel-related social media site. It exemplifies what Henry Jenkins calls a “convergence culture” where different types of media – in this case, the traveler's tale and digital social media – converge to create a new type of media culture (2006). Nick Couldry, however, in critiquing Jenkins' argument, suggests that, while useful to discuss new media in terms of convergences, to categorize them as a new kind of “culture” masks convergent media's capacity to differentiate across political, ethnic, and social spectrums: “It may be more plausible to see ‘convergence’ as a resource for *differentiation* between media users [and thus] ... a medium of longer term *stratification*” (2011: 494; original emphasis). This chapter adopts the position that the convergence seen in TripAdvisor maintains – through its content, organization, popularity, and digital prominence – an Orientalist discourse that is at its core both differentiating and stratifying.

Today TripAdvisor contains over 225 million individual tourist reviews, with 139 new contributions being made every minute,¹ which involves around 340 million unique monthly visitors.² The website depends on a dynamic of prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), where site users – both the readers and writers of reviews – are responsible for the consumption and production of site content. This dynamic combines the narrative power of the individual tourist with social media's ability to effectively categorize and classify the multitude of individual accounts. Each review represents the voice of an individual tourist, while the site's rankings system – based on individual review ratings – become representative of the collective voice of the tourist. TripAdvisor is thus able to engender discursive authority at both the individual and collective levels.

With this duality in mind, two types of authority are developed using methodological devices introduced by Edward Said to analyze the authority of the Orientalist text: strategic location and strategic formation:

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[Said's] principal methodological devices for studying authority here are what can be called *strategic location*, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about, and *strategic formation*, which is a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass density, and referential power amongst themselves, and thereafter in the culture at large. (1978: 20)

The ultimate authority of online travel reviews lies in their ability to influence economic decisions made by both tourism producers and consumers, but this authority comes from different sources. Travelers' tales are invested with positional authority by virtue of their strategic locations, meaning their authority is derived from the positionality of the author, usually from the vantage point of an "expert witness." They are the original connection between the reader, or potential tourist, and the attraction being described in the review, and thus play a role in the initial framing of the attraction for the tourist. The strategic formation of social media-based discourse is invested with informational authority, which is derived from the value social media is afforded – by virtue of its aggregative abilities and classificatory capacities – as an influential source of information in the global market. These sources of discursive authority converge within the organizational structure of a website like TripAdvisor, which is simultaneously characterized by Jeacle and Carter as a site providing potential tourists with the trusted opinions of fellow travelers, and also, as "an expert system ... governed by calculative practices" (2011: 96). The result is that online reviews, and TripAdvisor in particular, are often perceived as trustworthy, truthful, authentic, and reliable sources of information when making decisions about travel plans (Jeacle and Carter, 2011; Leung et al, 2013), and thus help structure ways the Other is experienced and consumed.

The chapter unfolds in four parts. The first provides a brief contextual background based on a prior study (Jamerson, 2014) involving discourse analysis of a small group of TripAdvisor reviews concerning a popular cultural tourism company in Harlem, New York. These reviews represent some of Harlem's most prominent digital representations. The second discusses the historical development of travelers' tales and the importance of understanding online tourist reviews as a repetition, or convergence, of different genres of traveler's tale. This section draws primarily from Orientalist critiques supplied by Said (1978) and Behdad (1994) to show how different genres of travelers' tales engender different types of authority. The third part maps the growth of TripAdvisor as both an online community numbering in the millions, and as a vast repository of touristic information and knowledge, its rise to prominence within the tourist industry, and its methods of success. It links the long history of travelers' tales to the digital world of Web 2.0,

and implicates both in the cultural and intellectual practices of Orientalism through understanding the discursive authorities held by each. In short, the relative “newness” of social media and its influences needs to be considered alongside the relative “oldness” of the equally influential traveler’s tale. The fourth section places an Orientalist critique of TripAdvisor in conversation with recent scholarship in digital race studies concerning dilemmas of access to – and representation within – the digital realm. This section emphasizes the ways in which TripAdvisor might represent, as McPherson puts it, “the infusion of racial organizing principles into the technological organization of knowledge” in post-Second World War America (2012: 24).

Contextual background

Perform a Google search of some combination of the words “Harlem” and “tourism,” and links to TripAdvisor and Harlem Heritage Tours quickly appear near the top of the results. Within TripAdvisor, Harlem Heritage Tours is the highest ranked tour company operating primarily in Harlem. This digital prominence is a reflection of their popularity with tourists, and was the primary reason I chose a small group ($n=111$) of reviews about this company as the subject of a discourse analysis concerning the ways that Harlem is presented as an attraction within the online tourist domain. Findings indicate that tourists find value in the temporary cultural immersion offered through tour participation, and is oriented around themes of Black Harlem – Harlem Renaissance, gospel churches, Savoy Ballroom, Apollo Theater, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Geoffrey Canada, jazz music, soul food – yet the idea of race within review content is notably absent, or not discursively singled out by reviewers. These reviews are then prominent – and therefore influential – examples of color-blind rhetoric in the service of cultural commodification, which is a well-documented phenomenon (Gotham, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Werry, 2011). But why are they popular? And how are they influential? The answers can be unraveled through understanding different ways the website engenders their discursive authority. In the case of TripAdvisor, as the next section shows, this authority is partly rooted in the long tradition of travelers’ tales being afforded the ability to define the parameters of cultural Otherness.

Positive Orientalism, or the Orientalism of tourism

An Orientalist discourse can be briefly defined as a communicative field that privileges Euro-American centric ways of thinking about places or people not considered part of Europe or the US. The origins of contemporary Orientalist critique can be traced back to Edward Said, whose foundational Orientalism defines it as a Western imposition across discursive and epistemological fields

which results in a discourse that, "... is produced and exists in an uneven exchange" (1978: 8–9) with other types of power, such as political, economic, or cultural power. In the case of online tourist reviews we might think of their authors and readers as exercising digital powers over tourist attractions.

For Said, the authority of an Orientalist discourse is based on its ability to generate perceptions of truthfulness and objectivity in the face of biased subjectivities, narrative forms, and historical interpretations. These biases forever position the West as the center and birthplace – and therefore its citizens as the true inheritors – of modern civilization (1978). It is important to recognize that Orientalism is a discourse trafficking not in truth or "'natural' depictions of the Orient" (1978: 21), but instead in biased and misleading representations. Said tends to focus on those representations which perpetuate the negative image of the Other: the Other as sneaky or dirty, or savage, dangerous and threatening, but at times he hints at – as Dean MacCannell points out – a different, or "positive" side of Orientalist discourse and imagery:

Said was aware of ... what can be called the tourist version [of Orientalism] ... the ultra-touristic version of the Near East proffers an endless open air bazaar by day and the romance of men on stallions, dancing girls, hashish, and moonlit oases at night. (2011: 9)

MacCannell (1976, 2011) identifies the "Other" in very broad terms as the primary site of tourist desire, and points to tourism activity as a practice of "positive" Orientalism, where, instead of being defined as negative, dangerous, or threatening, the Other is positioned as exotic, desirable, and consumable. The tourism industry has the ability to place a price tag on experience in order to meet the desires and demands of tourists, and successfully markets the notions of "Otherness" in order to cater to those desires (MacCannell, 2011). Tourism and travel have a long history more broadly of helping to shape ideas of Western cultural and intellectual superiority over peoples and places outside the boundaries of the West (Behdad, 1994; Said, 1978; Smith, 2012). Maori scholar and activist Linda Smith devotes a chapter of *Decolonizing methodologies* to the importance of travelers' tales not just in Western science and research, but also in trade and culture, or trade in culture (2012: 81–97). She links travelers' tales to knowledge exchange value, cultural economy, and Western identity formation in a process called "Trading the Other":

In this sense, the people and their culture, the material and the spiritual, the exotic and the fantastic became not just the stuff of dreams and imagination, or stereotypes and eroticism, but of the first truly global commercial enterprise: *Trading the Other*.... Trading the Other is a vast industry based on the positional superiority and advantages gained under imperialism. It is concerned more

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with ideas, language, knowledge, images, beliefs and fantasies than any other industry. Trading the Other deeply, intimately, defines Western thinking and identity. (2012: 92–93)

According to Behdad, the commodification of Otherness as well as the establishing of cultural and intellectual superiority is rooted in the discourse of tourism, which “packages the [Other] into a commodity for Western consumption that ‘homogenizes’ the West ideologically as colonialist” (1994: 16). He identifies two important genres of travelers’ tales – prominent at different times during the colonial era – which were especially influential in forming popular conceptions of Otherness both negative and positive while still maintaining themes of Western intellectual superiority. The travelogue, popular in earlier colonial periods, was the product of an individual writer, and usually told as a longer, first-person narrative. The travel guide, on the other hand, came to prominence during late colonialism, and was the product not of an individual writer but a series of editors and publishers, a “dispersion of a plurality of voices” (1994: 41). These influential touristic exchanges – each with similar “discursive functions” (1994: 39) to exotify the Other – are distinct in terms of where they “[situate] the speaking subject” (1994: 39). In other words, travelogues are characterized by a textual focus on the writer, while travel guides are characterized by a textual focus on the reader.

In the travelogue the textual focus on the writer and their interpretation was often legitimated through the “expert” credibility of the writer that then imbued it with discursive authority (Behdad, 1994). These narratives – exemplars include works by Volney (1959) and Chateaubriand (1968) – feature the author situated as the focal point within the text. The author becomes the source of truth, thus affording the author and his story positional authority in regards to the Oriental material he is writing about (Behdad, 1994). The professionalism and elite nature of early travelers only added to their perceived mastery over Oriental subjects, both human and academic (Smith, 2012). The mid-19th century saw the advent of more inexpensive forms of mass travel, such as trains and steamships, and it is no coincidence that this period also saw the birth of mass tourism and of amateur, as opposed to professional, travelers (Behdad, 1994).

Instead of being attributed to one single writer, travel guides – produced with the amateur traveler in mind – were often credited to the publisher and not its contributors or editors (Behdad, 1994). Textual focus in this case shifts from the writer – because they are nonexistent – to the reader, thus placing the reader in the center of the material and allowing them to temporarily “become” the traveler themselves (Behdad, 1994). Travel guides were composed of lists, categories, and descriptions presented in objective fashion, most exemplified by John Murray’s *Handbooks for travellers* (1840, 1859). According to Behdad, “The new mode of information was defined by the accumulation of ‘informative’ statements uttered in a dispersive fashion”

(1994: 43). The dispersive, dissociative voice of the travel guide enables the reader to visualize being at the places described in the guide. Rather than presenting a singularly framed narrative, à la travelogue, it presents an all-encompassing description of the far-away destination (Behdad, 1994).

The information concerning Otherness in travel guides, and the way it is presented and organized for readers to consume, can be considered to be imbued with a kind of informational authority that is able to structure the reader's interpretation of the material and foster reader visualization. Turning our attention in this regard to TripAdvisor, Leung et al find that: "In general, the content shared in online communities and blogs are travel stories and experiences that are represented in narrative format. [Tussyadiah et al, 2011] posited that stories have the ability to encourage audiences to visualize the consumption of a product or service" (2013: 9).

Behdad adds that, although they are distinctive forms of travelers' tales, the travelogue and travel guide played similar roles in the Orientalist project, and should be recognized as coeval discourses working together to disseminate and repeat Western-centric Orientalist discourse (1994). They each are in part responsible for constructing the image of the exotic and desirable Other. But where the travelogue defines the exotic through its positional authority, the travel guide reaffirms the prior definition of the exotic through its informational authority. Behdad argues that this repetitious relationship perpetuates cycles of Orientalist discourse, maintaining Western perceptions of superiority over the Other, and ultimately – through its commodification – threatening to dissolve the Other within the consumptive logic of Western capitalism. Within TripAdvisor, however, discursive authority is derivative as much from the strategic formation of social media as it is from the strategic locations of the travelers' tales themselves.

Travelogue → travel guide → travel agent → TripAdvisor

In TripAdvisor's case, there seems to be a repetition of the logics that, according to Behdad, link different types of travelers' tales together in the consumption and dissolution of the Other (1994). Ironically – because they somewhat dismiss this possibility – netnographic research by Jeacle and Carter concerning the perceived validity of reviews on TripAdvisor suggests that the discursive dynamics that generate trust and legitimation among users are based on elements of both travelogue and the travel guide (2011). Musing as to the reasons for TripAdvisor's rapid growth and popularity, they remark:

As a relatively recent development, [TripAdvisor] possesses neither a wellspring of longstanding goodwill to tap into, nor is it part of an established tradition. (2011: 294)

Despite the suggestion that TripAdvisor does not represent “part of an established tradition,” their analysis reveals that TripAdvisor’s trustworthiness results from combination of “personal trust” and “systems trust” that implicates it in the discursive traditions of the traveler’s tale as well as in established methods of digital computation. Reviews themselves are considered to be, like the travelogue, “authentic”, written by a singular voice, an actual tourist, or even a trusted friend, while the website itself, taken as an aggregate of reviews, rankings and categories, is – like the travel guide – a valuable “unbiased” intermediary in the online relationships between potential and former tourists, hotels, tour operators, and attractions (Jeacle and Carter, 2011).

TripAdvisor was launched in 2000 with the intention of providing internet users with “unbiased” reviews of tourist attractions by city, country, and region. According to Law, “Rather than serving as an online travel agency or an agent representing any hotels or attractions, the website aims at providing unbiased recommendations for hotels and other travel related information to users” (2008: 75). By “unbiased,” Law is referring to reviews written by actual consumers, or tourists, where a “biased” review would be written or otherwise influenced by tourism operators in the hopes of boosting an online ranking. The notion of bias here is being used in a very different way – based within the logic of the tourism industry – than that critiqued by Said and Behdad, which is based on the broader plane of Euro-American cultural logic and perceived ideological centrality.

Jeacle and Carter explain that TripAdvisor has become popular within the nexus of internet-based commerce, the rise of ranking systems for sifting through the piles of data found on the internet, and the proliferation of cheap jet travel that has allowed for tourism to become one of the world’s largest industries (2011). For the authors, the website is able to generate both personal trust (citing Mayer et al’s 1995 model) and systems trust (citing Giddens, 1990), and is ideal for the new breed of “independent traveler,” “... a traveler who spurns the services of their local travel agent in favor of a do-it-yourself approach to holiday arrangements” (Jeacle and Carter, 2011: 294). This shift away from travel agents necessitated “new ways in which to replicate the trust which was previously invested in the face-to-face interaction with the expert system of the travel agent (Giddens, 1991)” (Jeacle and Carter, 2011: 294).

TripAdvisor is able to replicate that trust through its combination of “unbiased” reviews and the categories and rankings systems that collect, sort, and re-arrange review content. The notion of review content being “unbiased” is linked to the personal trust that the website engenders among its users. According to Mayer et al, personal trust is based around three qualities: ability, benevolence, and integrity (1995). In the case of TripAdvisor, ability is inscribed within the review content, or whether the reviewer is an adept storyteller; for example, “The most obvious way a TripAdvisor reviewer can impart their ability and competence to users of the site is through the narrative content of their review” (Jeacle and Carter, 2011: 299). Ability is also marked,

categorized, and ranked within TripAdvisor's "badge" system, where reviewers who contribute more reviews are labeled as "Top" or "Senior" contributors. Benevolence is maintained by the "community" atmosphere emboldened by the website, where reviewers are perceived to only want to provide friendly advice to other would-be travelers. As Jeacle and Carter put it, "The impression provided by the website is that it is contributed to by self-styled cosmopolitans, who share a habitus as to what is constitutive of a good hotel" (2011: 300). Integrity is determined by the perceived "truthfulness" and unbiased nature of the reviews. One of TripAdvisor's main concerns is the threat that biased or non-consumer-based reviews will make their way on to the site, and they claim to have developed sophisticated algorithms to detect fraudulent reviews (2011). Jeacle and Carter, citing supporting research by O'Connor (2008), endorse these claims by finding that there is "little evidence of characteristics that typify false reviews" (2011: 301).

TripAdvisor engenders systems trust through its use of symbolic tokens, expert systems, and calculative practices (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). Each individual review consists of both narrative content and a reviewer rating (1–5 stars). The individual rating is a way for each reviewer to summarize in one general measure their impression of a hotel or attraction, and also provides the raw data for TripAdvisor's influential popularity index, which ranks hotels and attractions against each other. Symbolic tokens are defined by Giddens as "media of exchange which have standard value, and thus are interchangeable across a plurality of contexts" (1991: 18). The best example of the use of a symbolic token within TripAdvisor is its popularity index, which is able to project the perceived value of an attraction across distances of time and space, "a 5 star hotel booked now for next summer will probably remain a 5 star hotel in a year's time" (Jeacle and Carter, 2011: 296). The calculative practices that lend TripAdvisor perceptions of trust are "located within the algorithm which creates the site's famed rankings.... As an expert system, the rankings convert the numerous individual ramblings on the site into hard and objective fact" (Jeacle and Carter, 2011: 301). These algorithms – the basis of TripAdvisor's calculative practices – provide the formulas through which each individual tourist voice is aggregated into a collective voice in the form of a ranking.

In their study of the trustworthiness of TripAdvisor, Jeacle and Carter show how TripAdvisor's success is based on the authority created by the interdependent relationship between the writers and readers of reviews, and the website itself (2011). The personal trust TripAdvisor engenders is a manifestation of the *positional authority* of the individual review writer – which TripAdvisor guards fiercely, in part because it depends on individual reviewer ratings for its attraction rankings. The systems trust engendered by TripAdvisor is a result of *informational authority* generated by its algorithmically deduced rankings systems – which then adds more credence and legitimacy to the individual review.

As the previous section notes, communicative logics generating positional and informational authority are long established in positive Orientalist discourse, and especially prominent in travelers' tales, which, over time, feature discursive repetition that in turn cements the status of the Other as a product. For TripAdvisor, the repetitions found in the relationship between travelogues and travel guides – and thus its Orientalist roots – are encased within the trust produced from its organizational structure, specifically, how it carefully cultivates the relationship between perceptions of trustworthiness associated with each individual review and those associated with the aggregative “calculative practices” that govern its operation.

As much as TripAdvisor reviews represent a repetition of prior types of travelers' tales, they also represent the *convergence* of these distinct but related forms. It is notable that Jeacle and Carter mention that TripAdvisor's popularity is a response to shifts in the tourist industry, particularly the move away from the “expert system” represented by the individual travel agent (2011). This shift parallels in some ways the shift Behdad (1994) describes taking place between the travelogue and travel guide, with some important differences. Much like the travelogue, the travel agent represents a singular voice illuminating the texts of Otherness for its consumer. Similarly, like the travel guide, TripAdvisor features a plurality of voices to accomplish the same task. The primary difference is that, where the shift from travelogue to travel guide represents a shift from the writer to the reader (still remaining in the realm of the “human”), the shift from travel agent to TripAdvisor represents in many ways a shift from the human to the digital, or at least the digitally mediated. So where does the Other stand in this most recent discursive shift, and how does TripAdvisor help structure its reproduction?

Digital Orientalism

The travelogue and travel guide as popular discursive genres or sources of information were products of the cultural atmospheres of their respective colonial eras. The travelogue was more prevalent during early colonialism, when the Other was still being “discovered” and defined, whereas the travel guide, prevalent during late colonialism, understands and presents the Other as an already “known” quantity (Behdad, 1994). TripAdvisor, in the spirit of convergence, is able to do both by taking the “discoveries” of each individual reviewer and *re-presenting* them – through the aggregative, algorithmic conversions of their ranking systems – as “known” commodities (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). Tara McPherson argues that there are specific ways the expert systems of a website like TripAdvisor become complicit in – at the same time they are partially the result of – the perpetuation or mirroring of the ways the Other is formed today (2012). She first points out that current versions of racial discourse and ways of understanding race and the current methods

of techno-digital organization that undergird the internet and social media have their roots in the same post-Second World War cultural era that saw the simultaneous rise of the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, the New Left – its economic and ideological rival neoliberalism – and digital computation:

Certain modes of racial visibility and knowing coincide or dovetail with specific ways of organizing data: if digital computing underwrites today's information economy and is the central technology of post-World War II America, these technologized ways of seeing/knowing took shape in a world also struggling with shifting knowledges about and representations of race. (2012: 24)

McPherson investigates the intersection between the development of contemporary “covert” racism, characterized by color-blind rhetoric (see Bonilla-Silva, 2001), and the development of digital computation systems, such as TripAdvisor's rankings algorithms, which have their foundations in coding programs such as UNIX. She concludes – with important implications for understanding TripAdvisor's role in today's digitally mediated tourism industry – that, similar to the organizational protocols of UNIX-based programming, current notions of both “capital” and “race” are increasingly understood as “modularized” entities increasingly tracked, measured, and ultimately defined through the functions of digital computation: “[They] operate via the algorithm and the database, via simulation and processing” (2012: 34).

McPherson (2003) introduces the concept of a lenticular image to discuss the ways in which racial difference becomes covertly constructed in the US South in the post-Civil Rights era. More recently, she maps the similarities of lenticular logic within both UNIX and post-Second World War racial formation. This type of image, or logic, “... is composed when two separate images are intertwined or combined in a special way. This combined image is then viewed via a unique type of lens, called a lenticular lens, which allows the viewer to see only one of the two views at a time” (2003: 25–26). She points to the ridged plastic (lenticular) lens which covers “3-D” post-cards to illustrate her point: “The viewer can rotate the card to see any single image, but the lens itself makes seeing the images together very difficult, even as it conjoins them at a structural level” (2012: 24). For McPherson, lenticular logic is able to both hide the underlying activities that compose the “inner workings” (2012: 25) of programming – both racial and computational (we might also add touristic) – and fragment, simplify, and diversify the information that is eventually presented as the product of the programming process. McPherson characterizes it as the shell that hides the kernel:

UNIX's intense modularity and information-hiding capacity were reinforced by its design: that is, in the ways in which it segregated the kernel from the shell.... [Similarly,] the second half [of the 21st

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century] increasingly hides its racial 'kernel,' burying it below a shell of neoliberal pluralism. (2012: 29)

Once again, in TripAdvisor we see a convergence, this time between the lenticular logics of contemporary racial understanding and digital computation within the tourism industry. Lenticular logic is apparent within TripAdvisor's content and organizational structure in multiple instances. Perhaps the best example of lenticular logic within its organizational structure – the popularity index – is found in a quote used earlier by Jeacle and Carter:

As an expert system, the rankings convert the numerous individual ramblings on the site into hard and objective fact ... such a quantification process releases the traveler from the need to place personal trust in a travel agent, glossy brochure, or even the personal reviews within the site. Instead, trust is placed directly in the numbers. (2011: 301)

This has the effect of hiding the varied opinions and thoughts of tourists behind the "hard and objective fact" of the popularity index. Trust moves from being a property of the individual reviews to a property of the programming that re-arranges them. The popularity index also represents a modularization of the review process, where, within each review, content is being separated from the individual rating. The operational structure of TripAdvisor exhibits lenticular logic on another level concerning the specific make-up of the algorithms that calculate the website's rankings. Their exact formulas are not publicly disclosed, so the precise ways in which the popularity index takes shape are kept hidden from those who place trust within it.

In terms of content, information on the website is presented in a modular fashion. Reviews can be viewed according to rating (highest to lowest) and date (starting with the most recent). The front page for each attraction or hotel displays the total number of reviews available, as well as the ratings breakdown indicating in a quick glance how many reviews correlate with each level of the 5 star ratings system. Reviews are displayed in a scrollable column made quicker and more efficient to read because initially only the first few lines of the review are visible, while the rest of the review is hidden from the screen. The rest of the content is only accessible if the reader makes a conscious decision to click on the "more" tab in the bottom of the review. The "more" tab is just a small example of the diverse array of interactions the website facilitates between itself and its users. Some of the key aspects of the lenticular logic of digital computation – diversity, efficiency, modularity, and hidden information – are found throughout TripAdvisor's content; they also happen to be common features of the way contemporary patterns of racial understanding are structured. These also seem to be, according to Behdad, key facets of Orientalist discourse as well:

Orientalism depends for its economy on a 'principle of discontinuity' that makes possible the production of a whole series of discursive practices in various epistemological domains.... What gives Orientalism its efficient discursive power, what makes it a productive force in European colonialism ... is the all-inclusiveness of its epistemological field and its ability to adapt to and incorporate heterogeneous elements. (1994: 13)

Lenticular logic, like Orientalist discourse, tends to separate cause and effect sequences, effectively hiding the former from the latter. In addition to TripAdvisor's connection to earlier iterations of Orientalist travelers' tales, there is also evidence that TripAdvisor's content adheres to the colorblind rhetoric and neoliberal pluralism described by McPherson and many others (see Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Harvey, 2005, Goldberg, 2009) as dictating the contours of contemporary racial understanding. Within review content concerning Harlem Heritage Tours, for example, the notion of civil rights and race-based inequalities as important topics in understanding the community of Harlem is relegated to a specific historical frame coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement (Jamerson, 2014). It is not identified by reviewers as a contemporary issue, even though gentrification is – and despite evidence that tour guides link gentrification to civil rights as part of tour presentations.³ Out of the 111 reviews I analyzed, only one contained either of the words "racist" or "segregation." They were in the same review and were both mentioned in reference to the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. The lenticular logic of color-blind rhetoric in these reviews is the shell that hides the kernel – or the inner workings of institutional – racism in the US today, and it is also a discursive strategy complicit in the commodification of Otherness within the tourism industry (Werry, 2011).

The shift from the travel agent to TripAdvisor – or from the human to the digital – represents a shift in position of the "expert" as well. In this shift the expertise that potential travelers rely on to make decisions moves from being situated within the logic of the individual travel agent – or travelogue, or travel guide, or a trusted friend – to within the lenticular logic of digital computation. This might be the best way to successfully manage or negotiate a group of over 225 million individual travelers' tales, but it also acts to reinforce the authority that is produced from their rearrangement – or modularization. Lenticular logic within TripAdvisor seems to be an important factor in the variety of ways trust is produced from the website, and in general can be seen to parallel in many ways – or perhaps make possible – the convergence of elements of both the travelogue and travel guide within the organizational structure of the website.

Conclusion

In sum, TripAdvisor's Orientalist origins are located in the ways trust is manufactured within the website's organizational structure. This organization incorporates discursive elements of longstanding narrative forms – travelers' tales – with a digital platform governed by algorithms. The result for users is a potent mix of "expert trust" and "systems trust" that has made TripAdvisor the internet's most popular travel themed social media website (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). Reviews about Harlem Heritage Tours, for example, are by no means the only digital representations of Harlem, but they are some of the most prominent (Jamerson 2014). They therefore have more potential to reach a wider audience, and shape outsider perceptions of the community. In the case of TripAdvisor, the content of each review is just as important as the way that content is managed by the website through its ranking systems. Moreover, TripAdvisor's content as well as organization can be seen to buttress contemporary discourses about racial difference and reaffirm their legitimacy. It brackets and categorizes notions of Otherness in the service of the tourism industry as well as offers a crowdsourced standard of objectivity – mediated by algorithms – that tourists have come to rely on when making decisions about travel related purchases (Jeacle and Carter, 2011; Lueng et al, 2013). TripAdvisor represents a type of digital Orientalism because of the way it packages biased tourist representations of otherness as "unbiased" online consumer reviews.

The rhetorical divide in scholarship between representation within and access to the digital realm is also characteristic of early developments and differences in techno-Orientalist critique (see Morley and Robins, 1994; Nakamura, 2002; Chun, 2003) and the notion of digital Orientalism (see Morozov, 2011). McPherson's essay addresses a problem she identifies in the development of digital race studies that early on saw the emergence of two distinct camps dealing with intersections of race and the digital: "Early analyses of race and the digital often took two forms, a critique of representations in new media, ie, on the surface of our screens, or debates about access to media, ie, the digital divide" (2012: 23). In techno-Orientalism, the technological Other is rendered less, or not properly human, because of the high degree to which it is integrated within technological systems (Chun, 2012). Digital Orientalism is grounded in a more classic notion of primitivity where dehumanization of the Other is incurred because of a lack of access to modern technology (Morozov, 2011).

TripAdvisor represents an example of a "positive" type of digital Orientalism, but the proposed framework does not seem to fit neatly within either techno or digital Orientalism critique. McPherson (2012) and Chun (2012) suggest that the relationship between racial understanding and digital media is much more intimate and intertwined than either strand of early digital race studies initially allowed for. Chun suggests that, instead of considering race

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and technology as distinct, there should also be the possibility for considering race as technology (2012). This call for understanding race and technology as at least partially convergent is also in line with Couldry's (2012) call for a more socially conscious theory in which to engage in convergent media studies. I want to suggest that TripAdvisor, in this case, represents an Orientalist technology or a technology of Orientalism, where the Orientalist traditions of the – strategically located – traveler's tale converges with the lenticular logic of digital computation and the strategic formations of social media it enables. In an era when both tourism and digital communication are two popular and broad discursive formations that act to structure contemporary definitions of Otherness, TripAdvisor stands as both a virtual portal and trusted intermediary within and between both.

Notes

- ¹ See www.tripadvisor.com/PressCenter-c4-Fact_Sheet.html
- ² Google Analytics, average monthly users, Q1 2015.
- ³ As part of background research for this project, I participated in two differently themed tours six months apart from each other. On each of these tours our group (of mostly white people) was taken by two neighboring buildings – one was occupied by families receiving subsidized housing and rent control (monthly rent was about \$600). The next building had recently been sold to a developer that converted the building to condominiums, with the average asking price around \$600,000. Our group was posed a rhetorical question: How long did we think the families in the first building would be allowed to live there? This was presented as a literal example of gentrification, and was linked to continuing civil rights struggles for its residents.

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