

Disrupting the Tourist Gaze/Gays: The globalizing discourse of queer mobilities

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Cape Town is one of the few places in Africa where it's truly okay to be gay ... [it] has repeatedly been voted as one of the friendliest gay capitals in the world, and absolutely the gayest city on the African continent.

In this paper, I examine the rhetorics of LGBTQ tourism discourse about Cape Town, as exemplified by US-based organizations like *GayTravel.com* (as seen in the quote above) and *GayCities*, which has likewise declared the city to be “equality on the sea”. This paper considers the cultural, cosmopolitan and ideological implications of being “the gayest city on the African continent”, with specific reference to the way both locals and visitors are imagined, welcomed and positioned through these rhetorical/commercial acts. Building on research in tourism discourse and the sociolinguistics of tourism (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2010; Heller, Jaworski and Thurlow, 2014), the paper seeks to understand how the seemingly well-intentioned and playful linguistic and visual tropes of tourism can obscure deep-seated historical and contemporary inequalities under the guise of intercultural contact and so-called “global citizenship”. Within the specific context of LGBTQ tourism, we see how various queer mobilities – social and physical – compete in complex, often contradictory ways. As Beverly Skeggs (2004: 49) observes, “mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship.”

At the heart of my paper is a multimodal critical discourse analysis (cf. Machin & Mayr, 2012; Milani and Wolff, 2015) of five international and South African tourism genres: websites, promotional videos, social media sites, brochures, and travel guides. This discourse data is supplemented by my own (auto-)ethnographic field research. In my analysis, I identify the linguistic, visual and spatial tactics by which Cape Town is stylized as Africa’s “gay capital” – a place of progress, pride and ‘equality’ – and as belonging to an elite club of global “gay cities”. I demonstrate how the marketing (and performance) of gay Cape Town (by insiders and outsiders) establishes itself chiefly through rhetorics of post-apartheid progress, rainbow-nation ‘equality’ and international gay liberation/solidarity, while indexing and inscribing particular (and particularly, Western and homonormative) ideologies of individual freedom, hedonism and a singular LGBTQ lifestyle. Indeed, I argue that as part of a broader, transnational ‘pink economy’, we witness how the globalizing gay/tourist gaze “deploys its own violence” (Oswin, 2006:788), promoting what Leap (2010: 556) characterizes as a culture of “assimilation, mobility, achievement, and conspicuous consumption”.

References

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