TOURISTIC QUEST FOR EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract: This study examines the experience of repeat tourists who participate actively in a Renaissance festival, from indepth interviews and participant observation over two consecutive years. Results contradict the general view of such commercial attractions as merely "spectacle" or "inauthentic". The notion of existential authenticity is central to understanding the experience of regular, repeat festival-goers who take their participation seriously. This committed action is a means of attaining heightened bodily feelings, expressing, regaining, or reconstructing a sense of desired self, and developing authentic intersubjective relationships. The study supports the existential notion in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal authenticity. Keywords: medieval festival, existential authenticity, self-making, communitas.

INTRODUCTION

Period theme parks involving such highly contrived settings as medieval festivals have become popular attractions. Yet these commercialized and simulated spaces are characterized in terms of pastiche and parody by cultural critics such as Boorstin (1961) and Eco (1987), and the tourist’s experience in this environment is viewed as consumptive,
superficial, and meaningless. At best, they may offer “real-life experiences of a certain verisimilitude but in the context of pleasure, amusement and effortless fun, without the burden and blandness of quotidian routine and responsibilities” (Yeo and Teo 1996:29). A number of empirical studies have attempted to identify the perceived authenticity of themed physical settings and events (Chhabra, Healy and Sills 2003; Pearce and Moscardo 1986). These are generally limited to a premise that the nature of tourism experience is determined by the displayed objects provided by the industry. But recent studies suggest that tourists subjectively construct their experience by actively negotiating meanings—toured objects being a related but secondary factor (Uriely 2005; Uriely, Yonay and Simchai 2002; Wickens 2002). Although this existential approach holds significant ramifications for understanding the experience, it has rarely been examined empirically in depth. Therefore this study engaged in a detailed investigation of tourist experience at a highly simulated period theme park, the Texas Renaissance Festival (TRF hereafter), held annually in Texas in the United States.

This research focused on a particular group of tourists highly committed to the TRF, as demonstrated by repeat visitation and several behavioral features. Results complemented the notion of existential authenticity proposed by Wang (1999, 2000). The study becomes especially interesting when tourists’ experiences are explored in a liminal space such as the festival. The medieval props, costumes, and related activities create a spatial and temporal matrix that provides its participants with the opportunity to feel less restrained. It allows participants to temporarily suspend conventional norms and play out carnivalesque illusions and fantasies.

AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE IN TOURISM

The concept of authenticity has played a prominent role in understanding tourist motivation and experience, and diverse debates and analyses have generated a plethora of literature in this field (Cohen 1988a; Crang 1996). The center of the debate lies in the meaning of authenticity. MacCannell proposed that “touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experience” (1976:101). Modern society is inauthentic and alienating, driving people to travel in search of the authentic since “reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere” (1976:3). But the touristic quest is doomed to failure, he argues, for all there is out there is a staged authenticity (Goffman 1963), an inevitable consequence of the commodification process. A commodity-driven industry underlaid with market capitalism produces a false touristic consciousness and is the epitome of modernity. Post-modernity arrives when true (authentic) meanings of cultural products and human relations are distorted by the constant reproduction process of signs and images. In this image-driven consumer society, the distinction between original and copy collapses, leaving only hyperrealities and simulacra (Baudrillard 1983).
The authenticity of objects and originals has been an important focus of debates as well. "Objective authenticity" (Wang 1999) presumes there is an undistorted standard to determine what is or is not genuine (authentic). A quest for it here is viewed as a quest for "originals" or for the "truths" that underlie the logic of modernity. The absence of commoditization (this quality of premodern life) helps to determine authenticity in this view. Tourism is an inevitably commodifying process, and the very search itself ruins the authenticity of the object: "the moment that culture is defined as an object of tourism, or segmented and detached from its indigenous sphere, its aura of authenticity is reduced" (Taylor 2001:15). Empirical research that conceives authenticity in terms of the original, primitive, traditional, and genuine is quite common in tourism studies (Waitt 2000).

Over the last decade, authenticity in the sense of "original" or "real" has been increasingly refuted by social constructivists, who see reality as being socially constructed through negotiated meaning-making and agreement (Bruner 1994; Hughes 1995). From this perspective, authenticity is subject to cultural selectivity (Halewood and Hannam 2001) and/or interpretation and the hegemonic voices of cultural marketers, scholars, local authorities, and more (Fawcett and Cormack 2001). The concept of "emergent authenticity" contributed significantly to this line of thought, by advocating that authenticity is historically and socially "emergent" rather than static: "a cultural product, or a trait thereof, which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognized as authentic, even by experts" (Cohen 1988b:379). For the constructivist, "authenticity is no longer seen as a quality of the object but as a cultural value constantly created and reinvented in social processes" (Olsen 2002:163).

The notion of historically and socially contingent authenticity thus opens up for analysis how social processes elevate some objects to the status of the authentic (Douglass and Raento 2004; Handler and Gable 1997; Reisinger and Steiner 2006). The object-oriented foundation, says Wang, has not been successful in explaining many of the motivations and experiences found in tourism. It only explains an "object-related authenticity." He proposes a type called "existential authenticity", a potential state of being that may be triggered by tourism activities, hence also referred to as activity-related authenticity:

...[it]comprises personal or intersubjective feelings that are activated by the liminal process of tourist behaviors. In such liminal experiences, people feel that they are themselves much more authentic and more freely self-expressed than they are in everyday life, not because the toured objects are authentic, but rather because they are engaging in non-everyday activities, free from the constraints of daily life (Wang 2000: 49–50).

A similar conception of authenticity has been proposed by others (Handler and Saxton 1988; Noy 2004; Selwyn 1996). More recently, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) suggest that the existential self, drawing from Heidegger, is transient and not enduring because this authenticity
is experience-oriented. One can only momentarily be authentic in different situations; hence there are no authentic or inauthentic tourists.

The research described below argues that the TRF is a constructed site of carnivalesque play and of “existential authenticity” as defined by Wang (1999, 2000). The attainment of existential authenticity, as shown in this study, is closely related to the liminal characteristics of the festival. Participants are free from the constraints of daily living and can behave in a way not governed by conventional social norms and regulations that structure everyday life. This liberation enables the participants to develop new social worlds and experiences that lead them towards an authentic sense of self rather than being lost in public roles. In other words, the relaxation of norms or de-control of usually controlled behavior leads the participants towards behaviors and self-understandings they perceive as being true to themselves. This state of being, characterized below as “existential authenticity”, is experience-based and oriented to the liminal festival space. In this sense, it corroborates Steiner and Reisinger’s (2006) discussion of the experience-oriented characteristics of the authentic self.

Liminality as a spatio-temporal characteristic of tourism (Graburn 1983; Lett 1983; Turner 1982) is also an important concept for understanding the attainment of authentic selfhood and unmediated intersubjective experience. Within a liminal touristic space, conventional social norms and regulations are often temporarily suspended as tourists take advantage of the relative anonymity and freedom from community scrutiny. Redmon (2003) suggests that the liminal spaces of the Mardi Gras provide tourists license to participate in temporary forms of transgressions that enable their secret selves to be displayed while pursuing unrestrained hedonic experience. Likewise, much literature collectively suggests that diverse transgressing behaviors (sexual behaviors in public, drug use) that cross the barriers of convention or social expectation are allowed and often actively sought for within a liminal zone, where participants are able to explore alternative self-identities as well as obtain unrestrained bodily pleasure (Diken and Laustsen 2004; Lupton and Tulloch 2002; Shields 1992; Wickens 1996). Previous literature on liminality has not linked these to the concept of existential authenticity. The TRF, as experienced by the study participants, reflects the characteristics (such as anonymity, public nudity, transformed appearance via the costume) of a liminal touristic space, which can be linked to the attainment of existential authenticity.

These newly emergent discussions of existential authenticity offer great potential to understand tourist motivation and experience, but few empirical studies have tackled this concept so far, since the tendency has been to continue exploring perceived authenticity (Beeho and Prentice 1997; Chhabra, Healy and Sills 2003; McIntosh and Prentice 1999; Zeppell 2002). A few rare studies explore a noncommodified or more participatory relationship between the tourist and the objective environment and make the association with existential authenticity. Daniel (1996) and Goulding (2000) suggest that this can be attained when participants alter their conventional tourist role.
and immerse themselves into the bought tourism products. In other words, an authentic state of being is achieved by "the construction of a context where the relationship between seller and buyer is different than what people in the Western world associate with tourism" (Olsen 2002:176). This study shows that Wang's (1999, 2000) notion of existential authenticity offers a useful approach for understanding this experience. By focusing on what appears to be merely a space for carnivalesque spectacle and hedonistic pleasure, the TRF offers an important example of the social meaning of tourism.

Texas Renaissance Festival

This study employed a participatory research approach to explore the experience of highly committed tourists at the TRF and their socially constructed meanings of this carnivalesque space. This period theme park, in Plantersville, 45 minutes northwest of Houston, Texas, was founded by a local entrepreneur in 1972, and has become a significant attraction, with over 300,000 paid persons on average annually. The site replicates selected features of a 16th century European village such as castles, knights, magicians, and jousts. The approximately 330 arts and crafts shops within the festival deal with numerous Medieval or Renaissance period-related items such as pottery, sculpted metal, period costumes, and woodcarvings. In 21 open theaters, 200 entertainment performances take place daily, most using Renaissance or Medieval motifs in their displays. In this performance-based attraction, all the employed crews and entertainers, shopkeepers, and even ticket takers are required to wear period costumes and speak in a way that matches the characters they portray. The festival takes place only on Saturdays and Sundays for a total of seven weekends in October and November. It is claimed to be the largest of the 158 Renaissance or Medieval themed festivals in the United States.

The festival also offers free camp space for overnight tourists; typically more than a thousand stay there. For many repeat tourists, this is a very important space for more intimate interaction with each other, particularly at night when the camp is alive with private parties. Although it is not required for tourists to dress in period costumes, a significant number (particularly repeaters) dress so voluntarily. Unlike the professionals hired to work at the festival, they are not required to follow a certain dress code (period specific costume). Thus, the type of costume ranges from historically oriented (Figure 1) to fantasy (Figure 2). So garbed, they attempt to assume the characters signified by the costumes and interact with other tourists accordingly.

Costumed tourists are one of the major components of the TRF that enhance its attractiveness and draw more. Of these, those who live at the campground, belong to social groups, and participate regularly in costume at the festival are especially important to creating a fun and lively performance. Many are seriously committed repeaters. They act as a stable source of revenue and a powerful promotion channel through word-of-mouth. Yet very little is known about this important
group of participants. Understanding their experiences was the main purpose of this study.

**Study Methods**

The study was conducted over two festival periods (2002, 2003). One of its authors participated in the TRF from October to November 2002 over seven weekends to conduct a pilot study. Identification of the serious tourist segment, primary questions and design for the present study emerged from this exploratory research. In 2003, the same author revisited the festival to conduct a comprehensive, grounded theory study over the seven-week festival period. Dressed in festival garb and staying at the campground during this time facilitated onsite participant observation and indepth interviews (the two primary data collection methods). Several behavioral criteria identified from the pilot study were used to differentiate the serious, highly committed, tourists from the casual ones: those visiting the TRF over three times in the last five years, those who always wear costumes during the
festival, those who stay overnight at the campground, and those who belong to a festival social group. These criteria were used to recruit respondents, so all 37 interviewees are identified as serious. There is no precise statistical data on who may fall into this category, but anecdotal information and researcher observations based on several years involvement with this unique social world (particularly at the campground) indicate an approximate 500 serious repeat tourists to this festival.

A total of 37 indepth interviews were conducted in the main study phase, with participants selected using a purposive sampling approach aimed at collecting “information rich cases for study indepth” (Patton 1990:169). Initial contacts for interviews were made through several serious participants encountered during the pilot study. As new themes emerged from examining the first set of interview data, subsequent individuals were sought via recommendations from other respondents. The interviews were conducted at both camp and festival sites with each recorded and transcribed. Fieldnotes were kept as well. Respondents consisted of 13 (35%) females and 24 (65%) males, aged 21 to 56 years (average age 35). Approximately 65% had completed at least high school level education. One noticeable characteristic was the dominant population group: all the informants were White Anglo Americans except two (one Hispanic, one Black). In terms of commitment, all had been with this festival from 4 to 26 years, and all had regularly attended more than one Renaissance or Medieval festival, spending some 4 to 20 weekends per year doing this.
The data from participant observation and interviews were analyzed following the analytic framework commonly known as “grounded theory” (Charmaz 2000; Glaser 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Throughout a qualitative data analysis software (NVIVO) was used to facilitate data sorting and storage. Data analysis consists of several iterative stages. The data were first fragmented through an open coding process, and then grouped into categories and subcategories that connected variously coded sentences, paragraphs, and incidents. New categories and refinements of existing sets occurred as interviews were gathered and coded.Selective coding for specifically observed concepts and themes helped to further inform various categories and properties. Over time, iterative examination resulted in the development of key conceptual categories and further refining of core categories, subcategories, and properties. The emerging grounded theory identified theoretical relationships among these iteratively, with data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously. During this process, relevant literature was consulted in response to the emerged themes and concepts for a more theoretically informed examination. The overarching concepts and categories that emerged from this process are shown in Table 1.

As Table 1 indicates, the respondents’ experiences related extremely well to Wang’s notion of “existential authenticity”, which he drew from existentialism (Berger 1973; Heidegger 1962). Described as “an intensified and concentrated experience of an alternative Being-in-the-world” (Wang 2000:65), this is an experience-based authenticity whereas object-related authenticity is associated with the quality of the toured objects (Cohen 1988b; MacCannell 1976). The historical accuracy of the costumes, accessories, and cultural landscapes within the festival ground was an insignificant issue to most of the study respondents, but they were strongly concerned about themselves and their relationship to others at the site. In the research findings

Table 1. Concepts and Categories of Existential Authenticity at the TRF

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
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<td>Intrapersonal authenticity</td>
<td>Bodily feelings</td>
<td>Sexual experience, Alcohol consumption</td>
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<td>Self-making</td>
<td>Self-transformation, Emerging self</td>
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<td>Constructing self-identity</td>
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<td>Interpersonal authenticity</td>
<td>Touristic</td>
<td>Equality, Acceptance</td>
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<td>communitas</td>
<td>Ludic nature of interaction, Enduring bonding</td>
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described here, pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality of respondent identities (required for the interview process), with male and female names denoting gender.

**Intrapersonal Authenticity: Bodily Feelings**

Turner (1991) suggests that the rational order of modernity often requires one to artificially restrain bodily impulses for the interest of social stability and moral virtue. Wang (1999) also maintains that a sense of inauthentic self arises when rational factors (norms and regulations) over-control non-rational factors (emotion, bodily feeling, and spontaneity). A release of bodily feelings (sensual desires), thus, can be conceived as an act of regaining authentic self not controlled by social norms and regulations. The TRF illustrates how bodily intensive feelings are actively created and fulfilled among tourists in a socially sanctioned “fun” play space outside of their home society.

**Sexual Experience.** Under the instrumental rationality that emerged in modernity, libidinal power was seen as an object of control, and expression of sexual desires was socially permitted only in the very private sphere (Turner 1991). If sexual desire is inherent in human nature (Freud 1986), then release of it through acts of deviance or other violation of social norms can be interpreted as an attempt to regain (authentic) feelings restrained by a rationalized social order. The TRF promotes a licentious atmosphere and converts such intimate desires into objects of public enjoyment. Public expression of sexual desire occurs in diverse forms such as public nudity at both festival site and campground. For some, costuming offers a chance to expose intimate body parts that would not be allowed in daily social contexts. For example, some who dress in barbarian or chain mail costumes can expose large portions of bare skin with a degree of social acceptance. Public nudity tends to become more intense at the campground; once in a while, a “nude party” is held, sometimes involving 30 to 40 individuals (male and female). The flogging practice occurs at night among intimate group members, and sexual desires are shared in a playful and consistent manner. Anthony explained:

> It is a tradition in the fair society. When somebody starts going to Renaissance Festival, unless they are opposed to it, they will be bent over and they will be flogged... There is a large amount of sexual stimulation involved in good flogging. It’s entertaining. It’s another way of having fun.

The sexually loosened atmosphere within the campground encourages its participants to solicit sexual relationships with others at the festival. Facilitated by the excessive drinking at the campground, sexual relations are likely to occur even between total strangers. A common expression one might hear is: “Anything that happens in the festival
stays in the festival." Hence, there is temporary license for explicit sexual indulgence there, and the fantasy of "sex with strangers" plays out in this liminal space in a way not permissible in everyday life.

**Alcohol Consumption.** The festivities involve substantial amounts of food and drink. As Burke (1978) noted, the traditional European Carnivals offered the commoners a chance to gorge themselves with a variety of foods and drinks not available in daily living. Such a practice of excessive consumption is revived at the TRF, adding to the festive atmosphere. Drinking is omnipresent during the day and at the campground at night, and appears to be a determining characteristic of festival experience for the study respondents. Those staying overnight usually started drinking during the day at the fair and carried on at the campground at night. It is a part of a number of ritualistic practices (like flogging) that enables a feeling of temporary liberation from various social and moral constraints. As such, binge drinking, flogging, and expressions of public nudity are indicative of the festival's liminality.

In sum, participation in sensual activities, like those noted at the TRF, offered respondents a chance to experience unrestrained bodily feelings. In this liminal state (relatively free from social expectations and obligations) is an expression of authentic self. Bethany’s comments illustrate such connection between bodily feelings and authentic experience (of a "free" self where she is able to be much more herself):

> We can come out here and flirt. And it means absolutely nothing. And the guys out here know that. You can come out here and be completely free and not have to worry about anything. I feel very free to say what I think and express what I feel. And it’s hard to do that in my working environment. And so, I come out here and I feel like I am much more myself.

**Intrapersonal Authenticity: Self-Making**

Various social and self regulations based on everyday life and work roles place boundaries on self-perception and constraints on actions in regular social contexts. The participation of serious tourists reflected a clear desire for transformation of everyday self to an "other" more desired one. This alternative (or desired) self was constructed through a combination of distinctive ritualistic practices: the use of a fictitious name, costuming, assuming a festival character and interacting with other festival tourists, repeated overnight stays at the campground over the festival period, plus belonging to a specific group.

**Self-Transformation.** Self-transformation was widely reported among most of those interviewed. The use of a fictitious name was an almost universal practice among these highly committed tourists who always referred to each other onsite by their festival instead of real name. As Arthur said, "Most of the people I know, with few exceptions, I only know their festival names. I am surprised when I find out what their mun-
dane and real life name is.” Given that naming is an essential aspect of personal identity, the use of a fictitious name may be a key step to escape from everyday self and become immersed into a different one. Lancelot also explains: “Having a Ren fair [Renaissance festival] name kind of helps you break away from the mundane world into this magical world.”

Along with the use of a festival name, a costuming practice allows a change of physical appearance and mindset. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, an appearance (often signified by dress) can imbue individuals with attitudes by arousing others’ anticipations of their conduct (Stone 1962:92). Likewise, costuming can act as a signifier for the construction of self. The transformed self, through costuming and assumed characters, provides a sense of freedom from social judgment and expectations associated with their everyday self. Elizabeth’s comments show for the function of the costume in transforming self: “It’s my normal clothes where the insecurities and work and all the stresses of normal life are. But when I put on my garb, they are gone. I can more fully immerse myself into the character”.

**Emerging Alternative Self.** The characters created through costuming and fictitious names also reflected a desire to express an idealized (or authentic) self, often expressing qualities that had been suppressed in everyday social roles. Mary, who played a fairy angel character, said:

> I can come out and be somebody else. My character is who I would be. You know, she is a beautiful character. She is like my altered ego. ...I mean it’s not really that she is completely different from me. She is just a part of me. She is like all the beautiful things about me that I would like to bring out but I can’t really bring that out in society ‘cause it just doesn’t work there. But it works here.

This expression of a desired self at the festival takes place through a process of self-empowerment and self-esteem. Costumed tourists tended to feel a temporarily elevated sense of power that was not easily attainable in daily social interactions. Henry illustrates this:

> Yeah, you feel powerful. Like my wife, she’s 4’11” and she’s not very big, so people out in the real world kind of just blow her off. She’s an ex-prison guard. She can take down a 300-pound man with no problem. But people don’t pay her the respect she deserves. But in here, when she’s in her armor or dressed in her pirate’s outfit like today, she gets respect. People will get the hell out of her way quickly.

Role-playing interaction with casual tourists also helped validate the emerged self. As most of the hardcore attendees are in elaborate costumes, they become objects of touristic gaze (ubiquitous cameras and video-cams) and public attention, particularly from casual tourists (often day-comers not in garb, lacking the serious commitment and ritual participation described). This provides a reflexive opportunity for self-evaluation and recognition that their everyday selves would not have generated such significant attention. Anthony described the feeling as follows:
I got stopped twice today. Excited! Flattered! It feels great. You feel absolutely amazing. All of sudden, you realize, wait a minute! There is something about the way I look. Did that person really want to remember me so bad? They wanna take a picture. That’s a hell of a compliment.

A sense of unique selfhood is constructed through the public attention perceived by respondents as endorsing the extended self (costumed character), which helped enhance self-esteem or self-confidence for committed participants like Mary, Henry’s wife, and Anthony. Direct, costumed participation created a transformative opportunity towards an alternative self.

Constructing Self-Identity. Most respondents indicated that festival participation resulted in radically changed self-perceptions, at least during the festival. These are mostly derived from costuming practices, role playing with the casual tourists, and interactions with group members. Whether the temporary transformation of self during the festival has any enduring effect on self in everyday life is a topic for future research, but preliminary insights were gained through the interviews. For some, the perceived change of self through costuming and role-playing has a real effect on the way they see themselves outside the festival. Edmund describes the effects of the festival experience on his personality:

I was real shy. I didn’t really consider myself that outgoing. I didn’t consider myself that attractive of a person. I didn’t see anything in me that I thought anybody would like. Once I developed this character and started coming out here and when you stand here and pose for 400 and 500 pictures a day and you’ve got women grabbing you on your butt...where’d all this stuff come from? You had no idea it was in you...I’ve gotten a lot more open, I’m not as shy as I used to be and I’ve got a whole lot more positive self-impression...I’d have to say this has changed my whole life and I guess it’s just allowed me to be the person that was inside me I just couldn’t see before.

However, for others, such transformation of self remained only at the festival and did not exert significant power on their everyday self outside it. Again, preliminary insights suggest that those who indicated a temporary change of self (only within the festival) take the event as a temporary escape from everyday life. Those who indicated a rather permanent change tended to perceive it as a something they participated in onsite that had continuity offsite. This was reflected in their enduring involvement with their social group (subculture) outside this space and time, through participation in other similar types of events and ongoing contacts with festival friends. However, these are very preliminary results and deserve further study. It is interesting to note that such serious participants gain “self-authenticity” by assuming a “virtual role” that translates into constitutive practices on and offsite, providing continuity and meaning to the everyday self and the somewhat virtual festival self.
Interpersonal Authenticity: Touristic Communitas

Regular human relationships generally occur within institutionalized social contexts, with interactions subject to normative constraints. Unmediated relationships not governed by social norms and regulations may be accessible when individuals are out of everyday social contexts (Arnold and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Graburn 1983,1989; Lett 1983). Similarly, Wang (1999) suggested that authentic human relationship constitutes an important axis of tourism experience. At the festival this occurred through social interactions, social groups, and interactions at the campsite. For many repeaters, the latter is considered of great importance to their festival experience as it offers them a chance for more intimate interaction with each other, particularly at night through diverse private parties. Most respondents reported strong camaraderie feelings that developed through these avenues. Data analysis resulted in identifying several properties that characterize Turner’s (1969) notion of communitas: equality, acceptance, ludic nature of interaction, and normative communitas.

Equality. A sense of communitas is achieved through sensed equality, particularly among the highly committed tourists. The festival tends to attract a considerable number of people with different social backgrounds. The characters assumed through use of festival names and costuming facilitated an equalizing (in social status) process among highly committed participants. As the study found, respondents rarely made reference to their social or occupational status at home, and political and religious orientations did not commonly surface during the festival. Being stripped of such social attributes, they confronted each other as social equals. Roger pointed out that:

This is a town of a lot of like-minded people. You got lawyers. You got doctors out here. You got stock market people. And you got people that work for freaking burgers and stuff. But when they are out here, they are all brothers...This is an unplugged time from everyday life. You put all that stuff aside.

Acceptance. Confronting each other as equals raises an ambience of acceptance. Distinctive differences in social, cultural, and physical features are usually ignored and accepted. The ambience is also demonstrated by the significant presence of Pagans among the hardcore tourists. For those involved in Paganism, the festival was perceived as a safe outlet to express themselves in public without worrying they might be judged for their religious belief. An attitude of acceptance is extended to strangers as well, to whom unguarded and open hospitality was often extended. Arthur described this in the following way:

One of things that our clan tries to do at the end of each fair...we try to have a feast. Just invite perfect strangers. Perfect strangers, people that you never met. People that you will never meet again. You know, like yesterday. I was going around people camping over there, saying, “Come eat with us”. And other people, they charge for that. We
don’t. A lot of people were saying, “How much does it cost?” No charge! It’s our way of saying we had a great year. Welcome to us.

Such an atmosphere of acceptance and equality made it relatively easy for serious tourists to make new friends during the festival. Costuming practices especially allowed them to identify with each other and promoted a feeling of we-ness.

*Ludic Nature of Interaction.* Dressed in a period (or fantasy) costume, dedicated participants often engaged in impulsive role-playing interactions with casual tourists on the fairground. This contributed to interpersonal enjoyment. However, hardcore tourists generally perceived themselves as performers and regarded casual tourists as spectators. Such a role division was represented through different designations, such as labeling themselves as “playtrons” while calling casual tourists “mundane,” “playtron,” a coinage combining “play” and “patron,” reflects their voluntary role as performers for enjoyment, whereas the term “mundane” is used to suggest that causal tourists are mere spectators not immersed in the social world created within the festival.

The role-playing interaction occurring at the TRF among the tourists tended to maximize the spontaneity and creativity of human interactive play (Huizinga 1950), which is claimed to be lacking in most modern forms of institutionalized and privatized leisure (Rojek 1985, 1995). Isabel commented on role-playing interaction at the festival and the lack of safe outlets for such play otherwise:

> You pretend like you are that person. Whatever person you wanna be. And it’s safe. It’s not like somebody is gonna go, “What’s got into you, you are crazy.” I guess it’s like improvisation. That’s what makes it a whole lot of fun. You can get into the conversation and try to act in style. See how far it goes. It’s like when you are child and you pretend to be a superhero or something like that. People like to play. It’s just built in human instinct to have fun, to play around. You really don’t have a whole lot of outlets for that kind of thing.

Trying to act in style and play at being an actor in simulated situations allows one to engage in play and suspend the reality, anxiety, and pressures of everyday and work roles. Thus, this type of interpersonal relationships at the TRF can be characterized as an authentic playfulness that is not governed by institutionalized norms, values, or preprogrammed rules. It is an opportunity for ludic play.

*Enduring Relationships: A Normative Communitas.* In addition to the instant friendships and camaraderie feelings, many respondents were connected to each other via a number of groups within the festival. More than 30 groups, varying in size and structure, all were voluntarily formed, with the main function of providing a forum for people of similar interest to gather. For instance, Chaos, the largest social group at the TRF, has over 200 members. Since most of them reside in several metropolitan areas in Texas, it has three branches (Houston, Dallas, and Austin) for social networking among members during the non-
festival season. Each branch organizes diverse ritualistic activities such as monthly meetings, funerals, and weddings.

According to Turner (1982), the state of spontaneous communitas (coincides with tourism communitas described above) soon evolves into normative communitas where another set of social roles and statuses is created. The former is not a permanent condition but a phase or a moment, and individuals attempt to maintain spontaneous relationships on a permanent basis. As a result, the human relationships freed from social structural elements (roles and status) in a mode of spontaneous communitas become converted into norm-governed relationships. Social groups at the TRF evolved structures and regulations over time. Well-structured groups like Chaos have also created somewhat hierarchical positions (head, council members, security guards, and more) but still maintain close and equal relationships among the members. Turner (1982) pointed out that the ambience of love, caring, and intimacy that exists in this state of normative communitas serves as a major impetus to maintain such groups. An example by William, a Chaos member, illustrates the social bonding:

My wife got sick last year and had to have emergency surgery. So I had to take off from work for a while, and we got a little behind in bills and stuff. They brought us food, a bunch of money they collected, which we didn’t ask for but they were like “we’re gonna help ya’ll out.” We do it for anybody that’s in our group ‘cause this group is closer than most families are. We know everything about everybody. Everybody knows if there’s a problem, we all work it out.

Such intimate relationships among group members enabled them to often identify with each other as a “family”. Robert mentioned this aspect too: “It’s a family by choice instead of by blood.” For participants such as those belonging to the normative communitas of Chaos, the social group extended from the festival space to everyday life. Not only did such groups act as a source of friendship, they also provided tangible support when needed.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experience of highly committed tourists to the TRF using indepth interviews and direct participation during two consecutive years (2002–2003), and seven weekends of overnight stay each year at the festival campground. Rigorous analysis and development of categories and concepts revealed that festival locations such as this are very important sites of self-making, meaning-making, and belonging in the (post)modern world. The research corroborates Wang’s (1999) notion of existential authenticity. This was surprising and somewhat unanticipated, since hedonic and pleasure-seeking performances appeared to dominate the liminal space (Diken and Laustsen 2004; Redmon 2003; Lupton and Tulloch 2002). However, active participation in bonding, friendship, identity-seeking and transcendence (self-transformation) became evident as the main study progressed. This segment of serious tourists was engaged in
meaning-making through a variety of practices and rites on the fair ground and in social groups. Clearly, the experience at such contrived, simulated carnivalesque settings is quite socially complex and cannot be generalized simply as postmodern, superficial, hedonistic, and ludic play. For the group of serious participants interviewed, this festival space was a center to which they conducted a ritualistic pilgrimage annually and experienced what has been described academically as existential authenticity in the tourism literature (Cohen 1979).

The results of this festival study contribute to an emerging understanding of existential authenticity with the following conclusions and insights. First, an authentic self is a state of being that transcends everyday social norms and regulations (Wang 1999). Heightened bodily feelings (an aspect of intrapersonal authenticity for Wang) relatively free from social regulations were actively sought via sexual interactions and heavy alcohol consumption (binge drinking) at the TRF. Participation was especially a means for serious participants to experience relatively unmediated feelings and to express, regain, or reconstruct a sense of self that was suppressed under the regular social roles and norms of everyday life. Second, the study thus helps establish an association between liminality and existential authenticity. As Burke (1978) stated, carnival in premodern Europe marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. It is a liminal (or liminoid) zone that temporarily liberates the denizen from the existing social orders via the inversion of roles and practices. Carnivalesque features (such as heavy alcohol/food consumption, lust, and temporary suspension of customary rules of moral conduct within the liminal touristic space) were revived at the Texas festival site in order to attain unrestrained bodily pleasure.

Social bonding and normalization of status and class distinctions were also enabled through costuming, role interactions, and other practices. The relaxation of norms and de-control of usually controlled behavior enabled the participants to engage in intra- and inter-personal experiences which led them towards an authentic sense of themselves. This existential authenticity is clearly experience-oriented, as Steiner and Reisinger (2006) also indicate. Third, the interpersonal relationships among the committed tourists can be described in terms of communitas (Turner 1982) or touristic communitas (Wang 2000). Moreover, results from the TRF research indicate that enduring social groups and relationships can be formed, not merely temporary ones such as might evolve on a tour boat. The touristic communitas created within the festival evolved into normative communitas (Turner 1982) through various membership-based groups. Friendships developed within the festival also extended into everyday life via group-related and other activities such as meeting for social reasons between festivals (as at neighborhood bars if living in the same town), mending costumes at home between festivals, and more. Fourth, through these various activities and ritualistic practices, the rational, modern home world and the carnivalesque, postmodern tourist world become much more interrelated than conventional definitions of tourism suggest (Jamal and Kim 2005). In this sense, the study supports Franklin’s (2003) argument
that tourism is an extension of modernity, not an escape from it (as MacCannell argued). Future study of existential authenticity and tourism experience might benefit greatly from examining this relationship between “home” and the world (Jamal and Hill 2002).

As a final point, previous studies of tourism experiences at period theme parks, cultural, and festival sites emphasized object-related authenticity (Chhabra, Healy and Sills 2003; Zeppel 2002). This was not an important issue for the festival respondents in the Texas study. They were primarily concerned with fun, play, self-making, developing friendships, and participating in social communities. However, it would be erroneous to disregard the role of cultural artifacts. Costumes were crucial in order to be part of the festival subculture. Several respondents were concerned with the elaboration of their costumes and accompanying artifacts (sword, shoes, and so on), and invested considerable time and money on them. But their involvement did not translate into concern or regard for the historical accuracy of the items as is the case for living history re-enactors (Allred 1996; Hunt 2004), or the Society for Creative Anachronism. George’s comments illustrate this well:

I’ve been doing the SCA and I had stopped for a while and I found a Ren Fair [Renaissance Festival]. They weren’t really connected in many ways other than I had experience. They were real strict about what time period you can make a character...what you have to be. But at Ren Fairs, just as easily as you can be of a French Knight, you can be a dragon or a gargoyle...You can’t do that with SCA. That’s why I stopped doing the SCA. That’s why I fell in love with Ren Fairs.

The cultural and built artifacts, and the costumes, were important only to the extent that these props enabled the enactment of carnivalesque and facilitated authentic experience for the serious tourist (it is for future research and discussion to characterize the casual tourist’s experience as to whether it is authentic). Carnival is “a spectacle lived by people who are all participants, actors, not spectators” (Bakhtin 1984:5). As the study described in this paper shows, the TRF is a ritual-oriented performative space for serious tourists. It is an embodied relationship situated in a liminal space, place, and time.

The results call for a closer linking of intrapersonal and interpersonal authenticity; such a relationship was not clearly specified by Wang (1999) in his discussion of existential authenticity. After all, identity is constructed through acceptance and validation by significant others (Burke 1991; Hog, Terry and White 1995). The notion of communitas is helpful in this respect, for although it tends to emphasize collectivity, individuality is important—it is not about the disappearance of one into many, but the recognition of each individual as distinct and equal. As Turner said, “the more spontaneously equal people become, the more distinctive they become” (1982:47). The intimate and leveled social relationships provided through costuming and other activities at the Texas site provided a safe atmosphere for experimenting with self-identity, for “if one can find people with similar ways of looking, feeling, thinking, and being, then it is assumed that one has found a place where one can safely be oneself ” (McMillan 1996:321). A theory of
touristic communitas should thus provide insight into how experience within an idealized community (interpersonal authenticity) facilitates displaying or constructing a desired self (intrapersonal authenticity).

Invented, explicitly commercial tourism events such as the TRF have often been denigrated as generating superficial (Boorstin 1961), inauthentic (MacCannell 1976), or simulated (Eco 1987) experiences. Contrary to this conventional view, the present study shows that this commercial tourism event is one in which highly committed tourists gain “self” authenticity despite the fact that they adopt “virtual” or “phantasmagoric” roles. While the TRF is defined by a fantastic time and a fantastic space, it offers a performative means for transcending everyday realities and re-grounding existence in the present. Repeat, ritualistic participation in this medieval themed festival may be understood as a quest for authentic self and human relationships via a socially constructed alternative reality.

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