Re-Imaging the Imagined Community: Homeland Tourism and the Role of Place

Jillian L. Powers
Duke University
Word Count 5,797

1 This article is an extract from the author’s dissertation “Traveling to Belong: Homeland Tourism and the American Imagined Community,” Duke University 2011.
Re-Imaging the Imagined Community: Homeland Tourism and the Role of Place

ABSTRACT

This article offers an exploration of the diasporic public sphere in order to understand the processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted or embraced. I explore how American diasporans use place to narrate and construct the imagined community, documenting through interviews and observations made on three homeland tours the meanings that shape participants and participation in social collectivities for racial and ethnic minorities. Homeland tours are group travel packages that take individuals to destinations that they believe is their land of origin. I examine the experiences of two specific cases of homeland tourism: Jewish Americans traveling to Israel and African Americans traveling to Ghana. I present two examples for each case, that are both specific to the homeland tour as well as general sites of tourism, demonstrating how experiences with place can create community. Homeland tourists act as a community, engaging in experiences that come to define the values, beliefs, and practices of the larger imagined diasporic community.

Keywords: African Americans, Diaspora, Imagined Communities, Jewish Americans, Tourism, Place, Racial and Ethnic Identity
Re-Imaging the Imagined Community: Homeland Tourism and the Role of Place

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots" Marcus Garvey²

This article offers an exploration of the diasporic public sphere in order to understand the discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted or embraced. Individuals believing to be “expatriate minority communities” dispersed from their land of origin yet maintaining a memory, vision or myth about their original homeland are said to be living in the diaspora (Clifford 1994; Safran 1991). I examine how American diasporans use place to narrate and construct the imagined community (Anderson 1983). Through interviews and observation, I document the meaning of place that shapes new American participants and participation in racial and ethnic national imagined communities. This article builds on Appadurai’s cultural model of globalization to study imagined communities that live nationally but exist/imagine globally. The experiences of two specific cases of homeland tourism: Jewish American college-aged participants of Birthright Israel and African Americans traveling to Ghana through Sankofa Travel are used to demonstrate how place creates imagined communities.³

² www.thejosephproject.com/index1.php Accessed 8/28/07
³ The names of the tour agencies and any individuals in this dissertation are fictitious in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants and the businesses. Sites, locations and memorials have not been changed due to their specific importance in the history presented in this article. However, Birthright Israel is a well institutionalized consortium of multiple donors and organizations combining private
Homeland tours are group travel packages that take individuals to destinations that they believe is their land of origin. They travel as a group relying on a tour guide to present the land being toured in relation to the traveler’s heritage. Homeland tourists travel to perceived homelands to participate in structured touristic experiences that highlight natal relationships to the state or region being toured. Other examples of this type of travel can be found in many contexts, including Europe (Danforth 1989; Delaney 1990), Israel (Habib 2004; Kellner, Saxe and Kadushin 2000; Mittleberg 1999; Storper-Perez and Goldberg 19944; Shapiro 2000; and Zerubavel 1995) and Africa (Davis 1997; Ebron 1999; 2000; Hartman 2008) among others.

Homeland tourism provides opportunities to narrate collective identities that allow participants to remain American yet accept and incorporate their ethnic heritage through consuming these brief homeland encounters. The construction of the imagined community through homeland tours creates new American citizens, because, as Anderson states, “what cannot be ‘remembered’ must be narrated” (Anderson 1993:204). As one traveler to Ghana, Allison, an African American woman, comments:

Most of us don't know anything but America…you always get that feeling you don't have ownership to this country like a lot of white Americans do, so it gave you something to feel a part of, because you don't always feel a part of this. You sometimes feel on the fringes, it gave me this sense of connection. Allison

In this article, I present two examples for each case, that are both specific to the homeland tour as well as general sites of tourism. Place creates community during the tour, the participants experience touristic sites together. Place also connects the homeland traveler to the philanthropists through the Birthright Israel Foundation; the people of Israel through the Government of Israel; and Jewish communities around the world through United Jewish Communities (UJC), Karen Hayesod and the Jewish Agency for Israel. Birthright Israel is mentioned by name since it organizes/funds all the Jewish programs that offer free ten-day Israel homeland tours.
larger imagined by providing tangible examples and consumable experiences that define boundaries of belonging.

**Those Who Traverse: the Diasporic Public Sphere**

Appadurai calls for understanding “diasporic public spheres” (1996) because theories that continue to focus on the salience of the nation-state are failing to take into consideration global consumption of knowledge, and increased migration. These diasporic public spheres are the “new arbiter of social change” (Appadurai 1996:4). The global imagined allows individuals to extend their definitions and allegiances further than the nation, yet exist *within* national boundaries both imaginary and real, widening the national imaginary to include within itself diasporic public spheres. Individuals therefore imagine themselves in larger more complex systems of organization that have global implications within national contexts.

A global/national scope is necessary when studying populations that exist within both. Diaspora theories explore populations that traverse these boundaries (Clifford 1994, Karla & Hutnyk 2005). People claiming to have common origins (roots) and similar patterns of movement (routes) will seek out new flows of knowledge and information to continually inform and shape their collectivity. The communal boundaries and definitions of a people identified by an original movement with a shared consciousness must be worked at and continually created.

The imagined is a technique used to shape and define group boundaries, and is a “space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices” (Appadurai 1996:4). Ordinary people now have access to global flows of information

---

4 For Appadurai this signals the end of the nation, (1996); however I do not believe that the nation is behind us and my participants discuss the global community, but imagine the importance of community in a national context. Anderson’s discussion of nationalism and the nation suggest that the nation is imagined as a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983:7). The nation is imagined similarly to ethnicity, as a natural constellation of persons existing within a limit sovereign group with a shared history and trajectory (Smith 1986, 1993).
and can imagine new forms of social organization and belonging incorporating distant places in their social collectivities.⁵ These new imagined connections might be globally thinking, but they are locally and nationally oriented. The imagined diasporic community traverses both time and space; traveling to international locations to experience history and heritage.

**Tourists and Pilgrims**

Tourists are temporary strangers, extracting themselves from their daily life in order to experience another location for a short period of time. Tourists come to expect specific experiences through presentations of idealized symbols that define place (MacCannell 1973; 1976). They desire the quintessential, confirming and affirming their preconceived notions. The tourist gaze is therefore a construct requiring participation by both the tourist and the host country or place of travel (Urry 2002). Tourists combine the specifics of the locations being toured – the present day conditions, the intersecting and sometimes contrary narratives of significance, with their commercial knowledge gleaned from popular culture and mass-media. Urry emphasizes that the socially constructed character of the tourist gaze “must be directed to certain objects or features which are extraordinary, which distinguish the site/sight of the gaze from others” (Urry 2002:92). The gaze must be directed upon something. Objects, vistas, and indigenous people are all deemed extraordinary, they have been highlighted to represent the specificity of place. As Culler states; “The tourist is interested in everything as a sign of itself…All over the world the unsung armies of semioticians, the tourists, are fanning out in search of the signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behavior, exemplary Oriental scenes, typical American thruways, traditional English pubs” (1981:127). Tourists rely on consumption; consuming signs that create/confirm the meaning of their travel experience. However, homeland

---

⁵ “More people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born” (Appadurai 1996:6)
tourists are searching for sights/sites of personal heritage. Homeland tours present quintessential representations of the other as consumable moments of similarity and solidarity.

I combine ideas from both tourism and pilgrimage, mapping the homeland tourist experience as both a pilgrimage and a leisure activity. While tourism is a break from the monotony of the everyday, the pilgrim travels for educational or religious purposes hoping to come back transformed or healed. While the tourist returns well rested from a seaside vacation, a pilgrim returns enlightened from a religious shrine. Where tourism is an activity for leisure, pilgrimage is travel for community building. Pilgrims travel for experiences and transformation not attainable in the home environment (Morinis 1984; Porter 2004). The experience of both pilgrim and tourist is dialogic; it is created through interaction between visitors and the space visited. I argue, and will demonstrate how the possibility of place shapes and defines the meanings placed in the cultural symbols used to create imagined communities.

Homeland tourists are betwixt and between before they even decide to travel. My participants live within the United States; yet do not feel like they belong.

I went to a high school where there were only 6 other Jewish people and it was a 2,000 person high school...A lot of people didn't understand. One girl asked me why I wasn't living with the other Jews. I didn't know what to make of that. Seth

My participants see themselves as excluded from traditional American narratives due to racial or ethnic difference. Traveling to the homeland has elements of pilgrimage, the traveler can return

---

6 I am not claiming that all forms of tourism are superficial; some forms of tourism like cultural tourism or eco-tourism blend pleasure, education, enlightenment and self-improvement. But there is a difference between cultural, leisure and eco tourism. Educational tourism to museums, a spa weekend that claims to restore and rejuvenate, and eco-tourism trips that claim to build awareness and empower local people and environments differ from the goals and structures of homeland tourism. Homeland tourism has more in common with religious pilgrimage, since both are seen as a sojourn and Birthright explicitly takes Jewish Americans to their religious land of origin.

7 For more information about the community building prospects of pilgrimage see “They Told What Happened on the Road: Narrative and the Construction of Experiential Knowledge on the Pilgrimage to Chimayo, New Mexico”, Holmes-Rodman (2004) demonstrates that the activity on the pilgrimage leads to communitas as the people in the group care for to each other, sing and comfort one another.

---
validated and empowered. The American traveler confirms their relationship to the land being toured and through acceptance and knowledge of heritage and difference can affirm their position within the American landscape. Following Geertz’s understanding of religion as a quest for meaning (1973), homeland tourists search for authenticity and self-renewal in the sacred third space between pilgrimage and tourism, collapsing the distinction between secular leisure voyages and religious pilgrimage.

**Discovering Heritage; Tourism in Action**

I present two cases in order to demonstrate the transformative possibility of the imagined community. I traveled on two homeland tours, and conducted interviews with my fellow travelers as well as participants of other homeland tours. The data for this article are produced from interviews with travelers and observations made when traveling on homeland tours to Israel in 2005, and Ghana in 2007. My participants are actually *in* motion; they are literally traveling. Extended stay ethnography would not capture the physical act of movement occurring, the ethnography(er) must be able to move alongside the participants. Like the pilgrim, existing in a liminal space between the past and the not-yet-spiritually transformed present, so too does the research(er) need to be keen to this shift.

I present examples demonstrating how the experience is twofold: you tour the perceived homeland experiencing ethnic heritage, while at the same time participating with your tangible American diasporic community. Homeland tours connect visitors to place, framing the trip as an exploration of one’s history or the first steps to the journey of belonging. Homeland tourists are also encouraged to behave *as* a community, living their communal attributes while on the homeland tour.
**Birthright Israel**

Birthright Israel was created by Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman to “plug the dam of assimilation” seen in the diaspora (Wohlgelernter 2000). Birthright is a carefully crafted travel experience with clearly articulated ideas about what it means to be Jewish and the importance of Israel for world Jewry. Birthright as an organization and a program delineates criteria to tour operators who then arrange tour groups.

Birthright provides a free ten-day experience for Jews ages fifteen to twenty-six in order to jump-start the journey of lifelong engagement with Judaism and the Jewish community. Since most Jews in the diaspora live in the United States, the program focuses on a mostly American demographic who might not have been “drawn into the existing Jewish frameworks” (Post 1999). While there is a North American focus, Birthright is a global program providing the same gift of inheritance to a global Jewish audience.

Israel trips are organized into bus groups that include forty participants and five to ten Israelis serving as tour guides, trip overseers, and peers (in the form of soldiers on leave). Birthright presents Israel as a diverse nation, an exemplar of the pluralism and possibilities of Judaism. Yet, global Jewry is presented as distinct with specific values and rituals. Those who might not see themselves as models of Jewish life can therefore feel a connection to a foreign land and a similarity with those speaking a different language due to the presentation of Israel and the Jewish people as a diverse yet bounded group. Birthright Israel exposes participants to specific sites representing key narratives of Jewish diasporic identity. Participants see old and new, the devout and the secular simultaneously existing in the land of Israel.

---

9 While Birthright is global, I focus on the American diaspora. While I believe the experience of dispersal creates similarities in identity and community (Gilroy 1993), my focus on the American experience allows closer examination of the intersections between commodification of identity and American values.
The Western Wall, sometimes referred to as the Wailing Wall or the Kotel, is an important Jewish religious site visited by every Birthright tour. It is located in the Old City of Jerusalem, which is itself a landmark for secular and religious tourists alike. In Judaism the Kotel represents an important symbolic marker of the history and religiosity of the Jewish people. It is the sole remnant of the Holy Temple and is a place of pilgrimage for Jews around the world. Jewish law dictates prayers should be directed towards the Temple Mount and the last remaining artifact of the Temple accessible to Jews is the Western Wall. Birthright participants already have knowledge of the significance of the Kotel, albeit sometimes very minimal. By visiting the site as a group, homeland tours link religious rituals to tangible objects. These tourist attractions/symbols of identity create “communities of sentiment” (Appadurai 1990), widening who can be included in a global Jewish imagined.

The Western Wall remains a site of devotion for the Jewish people and is already an important mark of Jewish identity. The Wall is engrained in every Jewish person’s understanding of what it means to be Jewish. It is well known and represents an important living testament to Jewish resiliency. Birthright participants witnessed and then commented on how Jews across the world of every sect and level of involvement use this symbol/object. Participants are encouraged to re-establish links to this biblical and historical landmark.

The location and the importance of the location and the number of people crammed into this space to pray was just, especially since its one of those few things that if you haven’t gone to Israel it’s such a important place to go see, everyone tells you. Adam

One doesn’t visit Israel and not see the Kotel. The Wall provides the necessary symbolism for the breadth and endurance of the Jewish faith. It is the last remaining tangible object of biblical Judaism linking participants to the imagined community that spans both time and space.
When I touched the Wall, it was empowering. I felt myself grow strong and weak at the same time. Weak with how much history there was and how in the scope of everything how insignificant I felt in the history of Judaism and empowered at the same time because here was this holy symbol still standing and how everyone was gathered around it, it was one of the most incredible things I have ever seen. Seth mentions being humbled at the Wall. By viewing this physical representation of an entire global people, Birthright participants, experience a moment where the imagined community does not feel so vague. They are connected, through place, to the entire history of Judaism. Yet the interaction between participant and place is personal and localized. Birthright participants imagine personal connections and to a larger Jewish global collectivity. As Rachel states below, by witnessing Jewish prayer at the Wall she accepts the religiosity of other Jews and finds her place within Judaism.

Being at the Wall was pretty huge, seeing everyone praying. Normally when I'm at synagogue and see somebody davening [a religious ritual where one recites Jewish prayers while rocking back and forth] I normally look at them in complete confusion, what are you doing? I think it was different being at the wall, I understand a little bit more the deeper religious feel that people have. Why they do some of the things that they do. Rachel

She might not feel inclined to be more religious, but she can see where she fits within the constellation of Jewish belief and activity. Literal interactions with symbolic markers of Jewish identity demonstrate the multiple possible forms of Jewish engagement. This type of identificationwidens the boundaries of the diaspora to include Rachel’s personal experiences.

By visiting the most important religious symbol, American Jewish participants can claim this space. Birthright participants view touristic sights with significance; so secular Jews like Rachel connect to the history of the Jewish people and the larger present day global Jewish community.

I think I felt most connected to god when I was in Jerusalem at the Western Wall on Shabbat because when I was there I wanted to say a prayer and I didn't know what to say so I went up to a woman who was with her family and asked is there a prayer that I can say. She told me that anything I say God will hear. Emily
The movement across time and space within the tour itself provides multiple opportunities for engagement. As Emily’s quote demonstrates; she literally connected to other American Jews while at the Western Wall. Birthright provides various opportunities for the participant to see themselves within the constellation of possible Jewish identities. Each site speaks to the tourist in a multitude of ways, allowing connection through many different narratives and schemas. Individuals are encouraged to ask; “how does this relate to me?” Birthright Israel’s structure challenges each participant to relate tour activities and locations to lived experiences. Birthright shapes encounters with place into personal journeys of self-discovery hoping to influence future diasporic engagement.

Birthright participants also visit Masada, the ancient palaces and fortifications in the South of Israel in the Judean desert that overlooks the Dead Sea. Seth mentioned how experiencing Masada as a group added to his overall sense of wonderment towards the nation of Israel and connected him to other Birthright tourists, the larger Jewish community, and to God.

Masada that's another highlight…when we all climbed it together. When someone was getting tired we would help them out, we would ask to stop the group to rest and continue up. It really created a community. Seth

The framing, presentation and ultimate consumption of place uses historical trauma to instill present day diasporic duty. By experiencing place together, participants actively create the values they see existing within their community. Birthright participants assisted each other as they climb Masada, demonstrating what Seth sees as a core Jewish value, solidarity and support. As a Jew living in the diaspora, this brief moment of Jewish interaction exemplifies perceived global values of Jewish identity.

---

10 According to legend, in 73 AD, 960 Jewish rebels under siege in the ancient fortress of Masada committed suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. For more information about Masada’s strategic use as an ideological symbol for the state of Israel and the Jewish people see, *Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* by Machman Ben-Yehuda, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.
Masada also strategically represents strength and confidence when displaying a Jewish identity in a multicultural American environment. While Zach does not remember the historical particulars that make Masada meaningful, he uses his experience at Masada to shape his understanding of Israel and the Jewish people.

Hearing the whole history of what happened there. It was the perfect metaphor for Israel. You never give up it’s always worth fighting, it’s important to not let history repeat itself. Zach

As Zach’s recollection of Masada demonstrates, touristic sites are not important for the historical detail. Tour sites come to represent group values that bind the traveler to the imagined community. MacCannell comments on how tourists make sense of what they see based upon “tourist truth” not necessarily actual historical truth (MacCannell 1989:139). Zach gained something unattainable in the United States; he confirmed the values he sees important to the Jewish people. He takes his experience at Masada and relates it to the history of Israel nationalism. He then uses the lesson of perseverance as a definition of the Jewish people as well as an indicator of his newfound relationship to Israel. This reaffirms and confirms the values he places in his Jewish-American identity. “The trips, both covertly and overtly, create links between the major threats to Jewish existence in recent decades – the Holocaust, the Arab-Israel conflict, assimilation and intermarriage – and Israel as a response to these threats” (Saxe and Chazan 2008:49). This trip is an exercise in becoming Jewish and appropriating Israel in one’s hyphenated American identity. Birthright Israel seemed to “work” because it resonated with deep-seated American Jewish conceptions about what being Jewish means and Israel’s place in this constellation of values.
Birthright Israel, as a program is well organized, well funded, and frequently assessed and studied.\textsuperscript{11} While context and location provide specificity for community, homeland tourism is about the journey and homeland tours to other locales also use place as a consumable cultural product for diasporic imagining. The economic, political and historical basis for the African diaspora may differ, but the cultural forms sustaining and connecting these scattered people are comparable (Clifford 1994:305). Homeland tourism to West Africa and Ghana in particular utilize similar ideas of individual journey for group membership blending narratives of the past, present and future when tourists encounter landmarks.

**Ghana and Sankofa Travel**

The Ghanaian government actively tries to attract more African Americans interested in exploring their African heritage and has undertaken touristic projects specifically geared to the diasporic traveler. Yearly festivals, events and commemorative monuments mark just a few of the programs created by the Ministry of Tourism (Hasty 2002). Ghana presents Pan-Africanism as a personal project, not a political agenda where the African American tourist can experience the global African community through commercial group tours.

Sankofa travel provides tour services to West Africa focusing on a North American clientele. I travelled on a Sankofa tour to Ghana for the inauguration of the Joseph Project with a group of mostly middle aged and retired African Americans from the United States. The Ghanaian Ministry of Tourism created the Joseph Project to “reconcile and unite the African Peoples so that their positive spirit and strengths are released in a focused manner to elevate Africa and Africans worldwide”.\textsuperscript{12} This program consisted of group activities, visits to specific

\textsuperscript{11} Most research on Birthright is supported through the Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

landmarks, vigils and performances for the diasporan traveler and the African citizen. There were many other tour agencies with group trips travelling to Ghana during the same period, and Sankofa travel had a few tours themselves.

As a full service tour agency they offer a wide array of options for travel to West Africa, many of their tours are organized around Ghana’s sanctioned celebrations that focus on diasporan relations. Framed as a counter to the forced journey of slavery, the voluntary return to Africa is part of a larger economic strategy targeting diasporan tourists. The Ministry of Tourism specifically states that their primary function is to create a “sustainable relationship with the diaspora for resource mobilization and investments.”

Homeland tourism to Ghana attracts a middle class well-educated segment of the African American population, “consisting mainly of those with the money and leisure time to make the long and expensive journey” (Bruner 1996:290). Heritage tours focus on core sites representing a Pan-African imaginary relying on presentations of the mythic pre-modern Africa, and the history of slavery. Like Birthright, homeland tourism in Africa is multi-vocal, combining pasts, presents and futures personalizing one’s relationship to the homeland. “[T]he tours provoke varied and complicated responses among participants; the experience can prompt cultural crises and contradictions even as it carries the participants through the rites of passage that allow them to experience Africa as home” (Ebron 2000:912).

Structured homeland tours are gaining popularity and are inspired by Alex Haley’s fictional account of his search for his heritage in Roots (1976). Homeland tours present travel to Ghana as a way to pass through different liminal states, ending when travelers literally emerge

---

through the Door of No Return\textsuperscript{14} as a more knowledgeable and healed member of the African collective.

Memorials and monuments of the slave trade are one of focal points for homeland tours in Ghana. Elmina Castle, where slaves were held before transportation to the Americas, is and has been preserved as an iconic symbol of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Sites of trauma are visited and participants are encouraged to see themselves within the walls feeling the materiality and weight of history. The imagined community then becomes tangible when participants confront these historic traumatic sites.

The castles and dungeons at Elmina are registered World Heritage sites visited by a wide variety of tourists. Yet when I traveled with Sankofa tours with a group of African Americans, Elmina was presented as a place of specific interest for the African American tourist in search of routes to heritage. The importance of place, and the presentation of place links tour participants to the entirety of the Black Atlantic. As Allison states, her African tour guide shaped her interaction to the slave dungeons by presenting place through the shared history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Sites were framed with personal significance welcoming homeland participants and asking them to engage in the process of imagining themselves intimately connected to the land visited.

Going on the tours of the slave castles, the tour guides spoke in terms of "we" did this; they talked about the African role that was played in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. And they spoke, to us, and I'm not sure they spoke to white tourists the same way. They spoke like "we did this to you guys" it was "we" and "you" and it made this true connection. And of course, he didn't do anything, this was many years ago and we are American born and raised, but he made the connection that

\textsuperscript{14} "The Door of No Return" represents the exit of the castle where the captive slaves were held before being transported by ship to American colonies. The House of Slaves and its Door of No Return is a museum and memorial to the Atlantic Slave Trade on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal. The use of the phrase “Door of No Return” is used to memorialize the final exit point of slaves in many colonial castles/dungeons on the Western Coast of Africa.
you come from somewhere over here and your family is probably related to someone in my family. The pronouns that were used made this huge connection. Allison

Allison’s tour guide framed his tour to her particular lived experience as an African American and utilized shared knowledge of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The presentation of place in this manner provides immediate and tangible links to distant and historical pasts. The experience of travel or the routes one takes to find roots make sites of tourism important for the symbolic construction of community. Allison and her Ghanaian tour guide are implicated in the trans-Atlantic slave trade through his presentation of this tourist site. The individual traveler is connected through the narratives of a historical kinship that can only occur at these specific sites in these specific countries of origin with fellow homeland tourists. Tara discusses how the physicality of place allowed her to feel a visceral connection to those who came before her.

When we went to the different castles and into the dungeons, you can read about that stuff in books and see it in movies, but it’s nothing until you actually experience it, when we were at Elmina castle, when we were standing out in the courtyard where the governor could chose which one he wanted to rape. I had a breakdown. If I were in that situation, would I have been able to survive it, not only physically, but mentally. One person in my group said, all you need to know is that someone survived it. Somebody survived this so you could be here today. Tara

Tara came face-to-face with her ancestors. By bearing witness at a touristic location, she experiences the entire history of the people she claims as kin. Tara uses her interaction with place and her fellow travelers to shape her definition of the African American community. She is a part of a strong and resilient people. Traveling to specific places of historical significance is an emotional journey where one is encouraged to confront traumatic histories. Place mediates these traumatic histories and works as a symbol influencing the imagined community upon return.
The Door of No Return, where they actually pushed the slaves overboard...That was very emotional...I said I want to bring it back and show it to the young people here, because the way I look at it, the blacks that made it safely, not safely but made it from that continent to America or the other places we went to. The ones of us who made it, to America, our ancestors who made it here, were very, very strong. They had to be. Margaret

The process of experiencing history and engaging in symbolic kinship while on the homeland tour blurs past and present distinctions of African American ethnicity, nationality and regionalism (Ebron 2000). Margaret and Tara live in two different communities. Tara is a recent college graduate living and working in the Northeast and Margaret is an older retired woman in the South, yet both came away from Elmina with definitions of who makes up their imagined community. By presenting and simultaneously healing wounds of slavery, the Pan-African imaginary is re-constructed for a new era of American national identity that relies on global consumption.

In Kakum National Park, a tropical rainforest in Ghana, Sankofa Tour participants toured the rainforest by canopy-bridge. We walked the planks, feeling the sways from the participants in front and behind us. As each Sankofa Tour participant stepped back on solid ground those waiting clapped and two different tour groups came together as we placed our feet back on Ghana’s soil.

Maureen’s completion of the canopy walk demonstrated how ordinary tourism activities influence definitions of belonging. Maureen traveled to Ghana before and plans to return again in another ten years when she turns 100. As she slowly reached out a hand for support and stepped back on land, both groups cheered. She responded; “I did it at 80, I did it at 90 and I’ll be back to do it again at 100.” Maureen’s dedication to Ghana and her physical ability to complete the canopy walk provided tour participants with an unrehearsed example of the values important to the group. Ryan, a fellow participant, thought it was the most moving experience of
his journey, demonstrating the resiliency and strength of the African American people.

Maureen’s continued return to Ghana is a ritual in itself that has the possibility to inspire her fellow travelers. One woman cheered, “Now that’s sankofa”. Using a word in the Akan language spoken in Ghana that translates to “go back and take” transforms this individual incident into a tangible moment that defines group values. Maureen, an African American, continues to return to Ghana, engaging in a new ritual blending pilgrimage with leisure travel. Maureen continually “goes back and takes” her lost heritage combining African heritage with her American consumer practices. African symbols learned and embodied while on the tour influence American practices and behavior, widening the African American imagined community.

**Discussion**

Tourist attractions are commodities consumed and witnessed by all travelers. Yet, the homeland tourist has a special claim to these places; they represent the ingenuity of the entire community giving the homeland tourist a sense of pride and a symbol for the boundaries of belonging. The idea of experiencing the homeland; “of being there”, witnessing, is “offered not only as truth, but as the most authentic kind of truth…the ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis (Williams 1985:128). By providing witness, this form of experience has the possibility to reveal new understandings of place that might have been suppressed or repressed.\(^{15}\)

The experiences with place are interpreted and then used to define the individual’s place within the social world. Experience can assist in giving names and details to that which is still in

\(^{15}\) For further understanding of the power of experience see Samuel R. Delaney, The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965 (New York, 1988). He discusses the presence of a gay subculture before there were terms to describe its existence. By witnessing and experiencing it for himself, he was able to construct his own subjectivity within a subculture that had not yet been discussed, revealed or defined.
formation, or provide support for that which is already known, because who can contest someone’s lived experience?

Experience as a mechanism leading to group social consciousness needs to be learned, it is not innate. Hall (1988) demonstrated how the term ‘black’ could only be established at a certain moment historically when it was appropriate for such configurations of being.16 Homeland tourism’s importance can only occur in a historical moment of extended global flows. The act of experiencing within specific historical moments, at specific locations with similar individuals, “serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is ‘unassailable’” (Scott 1991:791). Therefore, experience is an active process providing evidence of group belonging.

By visiting specific sites on homeland tours, participants engage with each other over tangible symbols that shape their imagined community. Touching a wall or touring a slave dungeon connects the tourist to social collectivities that traverse both time and space. This provides participants with opportunities to define and shape collectivities. While each member discusses individual feelings of elation or spirituality, what makes these important to the imagined community is the act of going through it together. Tourist sites, if experienced in a group can turn commodified tour activities into validations of group belonging.

Tourism, particularly international travel allows individuals to actively engage with larger systems of organization that implicate both the nation they reside within and the place they chose to visit. This represents a distinctly Western and American path to the globally implicated imagined community. These tours reinforce “American-ness” as well as create new American

16 “The fact is ‘black’ has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found…Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment.” Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves” in Identity: The Real Me, p. 45
travel narratives using different locations. Instead of grand tours of Western Europe after college, secular American Jews participate in Birthright. Museums of Paris are sidestepped in order to widen one’s knowledge of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Tourists project the meanings of travel from a Western consciousness (Brunner 1991), shaping their view of the international homeland through their American touristic gaze. This new ritual for group membership shapes American identity and the definitions of community. The imagined community becomes tangible when groups encounter place as seen in Maureen’s returns to Ghana and Birthright’s position as a new rite of Jewish passage (Saxe et. al., 2009). The work of the imagined when encountering place than is greater than the particularities or the specificity of history.

Conclusion

It is not the cultural context enclosed by the boundary but the boundary itself and the symbolic representations of that border (language, food, etc) that perpetuate the community. The symbolic is crucial for legitimacy of any bound group and sites on homeland tours become delineators of group boundaries. The homeland tour provides an interface between the gravity of history and the leisure of tourism connecting heritage to consumable international products.

Homeland tourism in Israel and Ghana shifts who is defining community, creating new rituals and civic engagement. While these cases are comparable on some levels, their distinct features should not be overlooked (historical trajectories, homeland trip structures, socioeconomic status of participants, etc.). Homeland tourism as a genre is a mechanism for remembering heritage when immediate connections either do not exist or have broken down. However, there are limits to the agency of individuals and collectives; therefore there are limits to the possibilities of the imaginary. The homeland tour is bound and based upon the tour
company’s desires. Tour operators and organizers (including national tourism boards) provide accessible presentations of home for the diasporan lacking direct access.

Place is used, for those interested in changing or countering hegemonic narratives, to re-shape the definitions of belonging. What counts as knowledge and who gets to define knowledge and historical narratives are important in the creation and maintenance of the boundaries of the community, imagined or direct. Homeland tourism is a cultural product, similar to the printing press (Anderson 1983). By consuming the homeland (through homeland tourism), individuals become implicated in global and national imagined communities. This ritual travel is agentic (albeit constructed), providing options to narrate heritage for American minority groups.

The imagined community in all its forms is a constructed community. While diaspora highlights the natural and organic connection claimed between people and land, homeland tourism demonstrates that this natural connection requires work. “We not only do these things because we are these things, but we are these things because we do these things” (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993:96). Homeland tourism evokes strong feelings of kinship due to the power of the group experience fostering belonging within the diasporic community. By claiming a place you already see as important for your group identity, simple acts of touring become important cultural markers for group boundaries. Diasporic global flows should be added to our understanding of the American experience since journeys to places not yet sacred can be rendered such by the ritualistic activities of the pilgrim/traveler (Fife 2004).

The use of primordial sentiments similar to ethnicity demonstrates how new and changing collectivities can base their ontological existence upon natal or natural discourses of belonging. Groups work towards ideal types of subjectivity; therefore the imaginary is a future
oriented process of belonging using historical pasts and international places. Individuals engage with larger systems of organization that incorporate and implicate both the nation they reside within and the place they have chosen to visit, representing a distinctly Western and American path to imagined communities.

References


York: Oxford University Press

Jerusalem. 54.


Williams, Raymond. 1985. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. New York: Oxford University Press.
