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Futures, fakes and discourses of the gigantic and miniature in 'The World' islands, Dubai

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ABSTRACT: This article takes the "island" as a key trope in tourism studies, exploring how ideas of culture and nature, as well as those of paradise (lost) are central to its interpretation for tourists and tourist industries alike. Increasingly, however, island tourism is blurring the line between geographies of land and water, continent and archipelago, and private and public property. The case of 'The World' islands mega project off the coast of Dubai (UAE) is used to chart the changing face and future of island tourism, exploring how spectacle, branding and discourses of the gigantic, miniature, and fake, alongside technological mediations on a large-scale, reflect the postmodern neoliberal world of tourism and the liquid times in which we live. Artificial island complexes such as this one function as cosmopolitan 'non-places' at the same time that they reflect a resurgence in (British) nascent nationalism and colonial nostalgia, all the whilst operating in a sea of 'junkspace'. The shifting cartography of 'the island' is thus mapped out to suggest new forms of place-making and tourism's evolving relationship to these floating islandscapes.

Keywords: archipelago; culture; Dubai; island tourism; nature; 'World Islands'

Introduction

> A journey. A saga. A legend. The World is today's great development epic. An engineering odyssey to create an island paradise of sea, sand and sky, a destination has arrived that allows investors to chart their own course and make the world their own. An array of island parcels means an array of possibilities. Engineered to be flexible and designed to be unforgettable: a blank canvas in the azure waters of the Arabian Gulf. An incomparable destination, The World is a collection of private and commercial islands that form a singular expression of exclusivity … The World is now poised to become Dubai's exclusive island destination (from 'the World Islands' official website: http://www.theworld.ae)

Travellers worldwide often imagine the "island" as an exotic, utopic, and extraordinary destination. It is not only the palm fringed white beaches that outline its coast or its azure skies that have ensured its allure through time (Dening, 2004; Gillis, 2007; Grove, 1995). Tourists have also historically sought out island spaces as natural *sites* and *sights* for isolation, contemplation, and quietude, in contradistinction to the hectic and noisy cultured mainland spaces that they inhabit on a daily basis, that is, in the ordinary (Edmond and Smith, 2006; Gupta, 2010). This article takes the "island" (Baldacchino, 2005; 2007) as a key trope in

tourism studies, exploring how discourses of culture and nature, as well as those of paradise (lost), are central to its interpretation for tourists and tourist industries alike. Increasingly, however, new forms of island tourism are blurring the line(s) between geographies of land and water, continent and archipelago, and private and public property and confusing the distinction between nature and culture: massive infusions of global capital are now being used to create nature out of culture and vice versa. As we will see, the *island* thus has much potential as a site for "innovative conceptualizations, whether of nature or human enterprise, whether virtual or real (Baldacchino, 2006, p. 3). Moreover, "the disembedding and mobilization of island spaces into global networks and cyberspaces occurs especially in the and through the realm of tourism" (Sheller, 2009, p. 1392).

Here I use the remarkable 'World Islands' development off the coast of Dubai (UAE) to chart the changing face and future of island tourism where it seems that tourists are increasingly giving up the search for authentic islandness and shifting towards visiting megaprojects such as this one instead (Minca and Oakes, 2006; Jackson and della Dora, 2011b). This tourist attraction as well as artificial island complexes more generally, might make us rethink the idea (and object) of the tourist gaze that Urry (1990) wrote so forcefully about 25 years ago. These are sites where spectacle, branding and discourses of the gigantic, miniature and fake take on epic proportions (Abbas, 2008; Koch, 2012; Stewart, 1993). That is, we live in a post-modern neoliberal world of tourism (Sheller, 2009) and liquidity (Bauman, 2000) where travel, lightness, and fluidity are the major metaphors of our time, and where certain islands are no longer materially "real" geological formations that have simply been found in nature and developed for public consumption. Rather, tourists are increasingly drawn to 'imagined' islands that are artificially designed and that involve technological mediations on a massive scale for their form and shape as continental archipelagos (Jackson and della Dora, 2011a). These are sites where "tourism geographies are being rematerialized in relation to code" (Sheller, 2009, p. 1392). On one hand, these somewhat surreal islands operate as non-places (Augé, 1995) of enclave tourism. On the other, there is a pull towards individualization wherein ownership is increasingly branded and privatized, and access restricted to a privileged few. Both processes of global place-making in relation to tourism take shape on these floating island-scapes (Appadurai, 1996) that make up what is warmly called 'The World,' a tourist destination off the coast of Dubai, perhaps unlike any other in its conceptualization, first envisioned in 2003.

Dubai: "imagineered urbanism" and gigantism

In his fittingly titled article, "Fear and Money in Dubai," social critic Mike Davis describes his (very real) and unforgettable experience of landing at Dubai's Jebel Ali airport, one of the world's fastest growing "global air hubs." He writes:

> As your jet starts its descent, you are glued to your window. The scene below is astonishing: a 24-square-mile archipelago of coral-coloured islands in the shape of an-almost finished puzzle of the world. In the shallow green waters between continents, the sunken shapes of the Pyramids of Giza and the Roman Colosseum are clearly visible (Davis, 2006, p. 47).

Just like Davis, many tourists are coming to Dubai for its "conspicuous consumption" and "supreme lifestyles" (Davis, 2006, p. 49), and to indulge in a new form of island enclave tourism that is taking place at this city-state's latest attraction, the 'World Islands' development. I first provide a brief background on Dubai, a city of excess made possible by expensive oil and cheap labour. It is also a tourist attraction built on the spectacle and spectre of capitalism, where "apocalyptic luxuries" (Davis, 2006, p. 55) are at the heart of its appeal and take on epic proportions. Next, I use the case study of 'The World' to revisit some basic geographies of land and water, suggesting that the ways in which we conceptualize "artificial islands", "archipelagos", and beach front property are changing dramatically as a result of this over-the-top tourist destination. Moreover, its widespread appeal is very much tied to its ability to act as powerful site of both gigantism and miniaturization (Stewart, 1993) and to tap into globalized discourses of the "fake" (Abbas, 2008). Lastly, I look at the 'World Islands' as a form of expert catering in island branding, which functions effectively as a cosmopolitan "non-place" (Augé, 1995). At the same time, however, this interesting case study proposes a surprising resurgence of specifically British nascent nationalism and colonial nostalgia in relation to island ownership; this suggests that sites of non-placeness can simultaneously become meaningful ones. I show how ideas of place and non-place (and old and new ideas of islandness) translate onto this particular set of fake islands set in the Arabian Sea. Dubai is, after all, a destination of choice for many British elite tourists who have bought into this smartly conceived mega high-end design project, just one direct (Emirates) flight away.

This former pearl fishing village and pirates' cove located in the Middle East is fast becoming one of the world's most globalized cities. Architect George Katodtrytis describes Dubai as an example of the 'new post-global city':

> [It] creates appetites rather than solves problems. It is represented as consumable, replaceable, disposable and short-lived... If Rome was the Eternal City, and New York's Manhattan the apotheosis of twentieth century congested urbanism; then Dubai may be considered the emerging prototype for the 21st century, prosthetic and nomadic oases presented as isolated cities that extend out over the land and sea (Katodrytis, 2005, n.p.).

In setting up Dubai as the emerging model for the 21st Century, Katodrytis reinforces its importance for rethinking the future of the world's cities, a future where new forms of tourism appeal are satiated beyond belief, and which thrive (and rely on) their "newness and bigness" (Katodtrytis, 2005) for their success. Susan Stewart, writing on discourses of the gigantic, productively reminds us: Our most fundamental relation to the gigantic is articulated in our relation to landscape, our immediate and lived relation to nature as it 'surrounds' us. ... We are enveloped by the gigantic, surrounded by it, enclosed within its shadow. ... The gigantic becomes an explanation for the environment, a figure on the interface between the natural and the human (Stewart, 1993, p. 71).

Just as "largest, tallest, first" are the superlatives often used to characterize Dubai (Jackson and della Dora, 2009, p. 2087), a spectre of gigantism is what looms large and suggests Dubai itself as a megaproject in the making. It is indeed a "strange paradise" (Davis, 2006, p. 49); yet it in many ways still reflects its historical roots in the Middle East. With a population of about 1.8 million, Dubai is currently one of seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Located south of the Persian Gulf on the Arabian Peninsula, Dubai was established in the early-19th Century by the Al Abu Falasa clan of Bani Yas and remained under its control until the United Kingdom assumed its protection against the Ottoman Empire in 1892. Its geographical location made it an ideal haven for smugglers, gold dealers and pirates throughout the first half of the 20th century. Pearl fishing and trade were its economic mainstays until the collapse of the pearl industry in the 1930's. Until the mid-1950's, when the first concrete buildings were constructed, the local population lived in traditional *barastri* houses built from palm fronds that helped them to stay cool in a consistently hot and arid climate: temperatures range between 40° C during the day and 30° C at night. Dubai's citizens lived a mostly quiet existence, an "Arab culture of tethered goats and communal wells" (Davis, 2006, p. 56). However, everything changed with the discovery of oil reserves in 1966, putting Dubai on the commercial world map and resulting in an influx of foreign workers, mainly from India and Pakistan.

On 2 December 1971, Dubai, together with Abu Dhabi and five other emirates, formed the UAE. This followed the withdrawal of its former protector, the United Kingdom, from the Suez Canal (1968) and the Persian Gulf (1971). When Dubai's original deep water creek proved too small to handle all the resultant incoming trade, the first oil profits were used to finance Port Jebel Ali, the world's largest man-made harbour and the largest port in the Middle East, which was completed in 1976. Dubai has been ruled by the Al Maktoum family since 1833. The current ruler, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who has been likened to a "philosopher-king" and the Gulf's "prophet of modernization", also styles himself as the CEO of company Dubai, who is invested in making this city-state the "new global icon of imagineered urbanism" (Davis, 2006). He has invested close to US$10 million in outfitting Emirate Airlines with the latest planes and making the Jebel Ali airport a hub of activity that is situated conveniently at the intersection of Europe, Africa and Asia. As recently as 2014, Dubai's airport overtook London's Heathrow as the busiest airport in the world (Green, 2015).

Maktoum has grand schemes for Dubai: as a shopping consumer paradise; a tourist haven of gated communities (located nonetheless in a land of nomads and tents); an architectural wonder of skyscrapers, malls, and museums; and as a world capital that hopes to see 40 million tourists annually by the year 2015. One of the Sheik's favourite aphorisms is that "anyone who does not attempt to change the future will stay a captive of the past" (Davis, 2006, p. 68). By fully embracing this idea, Sheik Mohammed has transformed Dubai even as its conceptualization as an urban megaproject located in the non-West is very much rooted in ideas of extravagance precisely in order to counter enduring Orientalist tropes of the "backwardness and underdevelopment" (Koch, 2012, pp. 2445-2446) of the Middle East. However, its tourism landscape continues to be oddly scripted in Orientalist ways. Describing contemporary tourism in Dubai, researcher Joan Henderson writes:

> [It is a] developed and sophisticated destination which incorporates intangible aspects of a fascinating and vibrant atmosphere where East meets West. ... Tourists are invited to share in the long tradition of Arabian hospitality, yet also reassured about modern and familiar comforts as well as their personal safety (Henderson, 2006, p. 94).

As Koch productively shows for Astana, Kazakhstan's new capital, these forms of "false modernity" (as attempting to cover up a lack of modernity underneath) that creep into Western writings on tourism spaces in the non-West are hard to overcome and need to be continuously

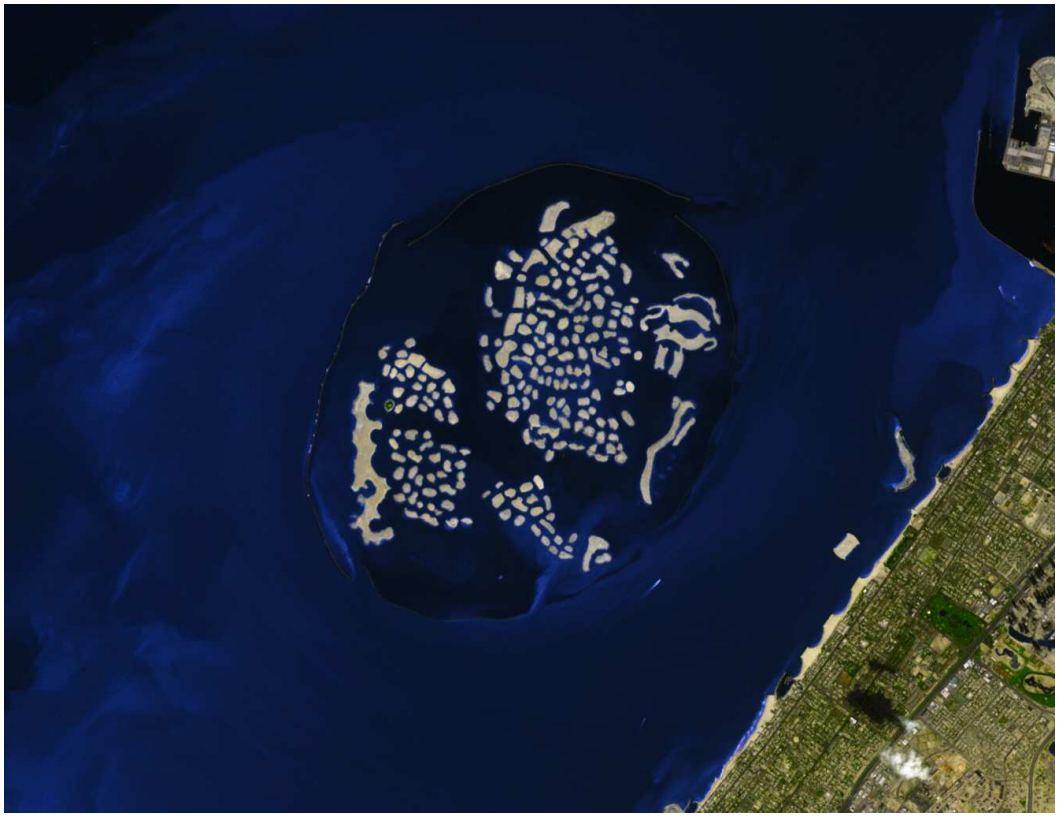
and critically examined in academic writings such as the one cited above (Koch, 2012, pp. 2446, 2459), or even in Davis's earlier description of Dubai's Arab culture consisting of "goats" and "wells" (2006, p. 56). Today, Dubai's economic revenues are mainly derived from tourism, real estate, and financial services under Maktoum's careful direction and vision. This city-state also serves as a regional entrepôt, a key commercial and financial hub for the Gulf region. "Sheik Mo", as Dubai's expatriate community popularly and affectionately calls him, thrives on his wealth (estimated in the billions of dollars), his super-yachts, his collection of thoroughbreds, and over-the-top iconic buildings that are examples of architectural steroids: in other words, on pure (but perhaps not so simple?) excess. Returning to Mike Davis, he describes the sheikdom as "… more like a hallucinatory pastiche of the big, the bad and the ugly. Everything must be world class, meaning everything the first or the biggest of its kind" (Davis, 2006, p. 50). In other words, discourses of the gigantic are at the heart of Sheik Mohammed's game plan and Dubai's tourism expansion, for "the gigantic, occurring in a transcendent space, a space above, analogously mirrors the abstraction of institutions: either those of religion, the state, or as is increasingly the case, the abstractions of technology and corporate power" (Stewart, 1993, p. 102).

Geographies of land and water, discourses of the miniature or faking it

The 'World Islands' as it was conceptualized under the direction of Sheik Mohammed and unveiled as a tourist development in 2003, takes its cue from this same notion of (visual and environmental) excess and gigantism that characterizes Dubai itself. Here, I briefly outline the construction of this tourism site whilst looking at some of the interesting conceptual ideas it raises for the future of island studies. Specifically, it reorients our thinking on the nature and culture of artificial islands and archipelagos, produces new beach-front prime property out of dirt and sand, and introduces processes of miniaturization and faking it in relation to island tourism. However, this island map *of* the world cannot exist *in* the world without environmental, ecological and economic costs. While Dubai is home to several artificial island projects, including the Palm Islands project and the Dubai waterfront, which are also human-made (much like the earlier Jebel Ali harbour, completed in 1976), the distinctive 'World Islands' development, under the direction of a group of Indian developers called Nakheel Properties, is Maktoum's most ambitious project to date. "The World", as it is called by developers and tourists alike, consists of an artificial archipelago of various small islands constructed in the rough shape of a map of the five continents of the world, located 4 km off the coast of Dubai. The islands are materially composed mainly of sand dredged from Dubai's shallow coastal waters and range from 14,000 to 42,000 m² in area, with an average distance of 100 m between separate islands. The entire "World" covers approximately 6 by 9 km and is surrounded by oval-shaped breakwater islands. While roughly 232 km of shoreline was created in the process of building this tourist haven, construction costs were estimated at US$14 billion back in 2005. With dredging close to completion, there are currently an astounding 321 million m³ of sand and 31 million tonnes of rock on these islands. On 10 January 2008, the final stone of the breakwater was laid, thus completing the creation of this completely man-made fantasy island continental archipelago. Incredibly, this same year saw 60% of its islands sold to investors, a fact that was greatly helped by Sheik Mohammed's earlier "freehold revolution" decree of 2002 which allowed foreigners to buy luxury properties outright and not just on a 99-year lease. This massive real estate boom lasted until late 2008,

when the effects of the global financial crisis were finally felt in Dubai. 'The World' project was then suspended briefly until the Dubai government provided US$8 billion in additional support to Nakheel Properties, enabling the corporation to complete its tourist and futuristic vision of 300 small private islands divided into four categories: private homes, estate homes, dream resorts, and community islands–all exclusively built for Dubai's "more well-heeled expatriates" according to sociologist Said Ali who writes about Dubai as a once and forever "gilded cage" (Ali, 2010, p. 8). That each independently owned island (and thus each owner) is part of envisioning a miniaturized archipelago of the world no doubt contributes to the World's tourist appeal as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006). In other words, it incites discourses of the "miniature" –to return to Susan Stewart (1993), only this time I employ a different conceptual category developed by her. As she productively suggests, the "miniature" operates at the conjunction of the material and the abstract; it "celebrates new technologies at the same time that it reduces the world to microcosm but continually refers to the physical world itself, and infinite time" (Stewart, 1993, pp. 39-44).

Figure 1: View of 'The World' in early 2009.



Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_World_(archipelago)

The building of artificial islands has a long, rich, and varied history and imaginary (Jackson and della Dora, 2009, p. 2091). Significantly, their creation can be authorized by any coastal state, for each has legal jurisdiction over an area of up to 200 nautical miles from its coastline,

according to the United Nations Law of the Sea (McDorman, 1988, p. 208). However, the idea of artificial islands that has been fantastically developed for these mega Gulf projects, of which the World is one, is doubly 'new': both with regard to the "scale of their self-proclaimed spectacular appeal" and the "new assemblages of exclusion and inclusion" that result (Jackson and della Dora, 2011a, p. 297). Moreover, these human-made island masses require our attention as newly emergent "metageographical categories" (Jackson and della Dora, 2009; Sidaway, 2007). We also need to explore more fully how the "artificiality of the artificial island works to hide the technical preconditions of the island experience to promote the dream space as space" (Jackson and della Dora, 2009, p. 2100).

It is the wildly speculative and speculating "the World" that is also setting the trend for future fake fantasy island tourism in the Middle East and beyond. Not only does the earlier and more modestly planned Palm Jumeirah development (Palm Jumeirah, 2015) off the coast of Dubai come to mind, but also the more recent and ambitious project of Saadiyat Island (or "Island of Happiness"), currently underway off the coast of Abu Dhabi as a premier cultural centre, and includes future offshore museum sites of the Louvre and Guggenheim (Saadiyat, 2015). This latter case offers an especially interesting counter-example to the World Islands wherein ideas of nature and culture have taken on differing epic proportions, and where "offshore economies" and "new state fictions" are being put into practice (Palan, 1998) alongside the implementation of advanced software supported spatial programming and complex architectural mapping (Sheller, 2009, p. 1386).

If every island is a "small continent" (Dening, 2004), then what does this imply for thinking about the stakes involved in conceiving and constructing 'the World' or other such future fake island tourist archipelagos? Can we conceive of these artificial islands as "anxious spaces?" (Jackson and della Dora, 2009) and/or as "promissory" ones whereby they "enclose their retreat from a supposedly joyless and strained world by delimiting emergent possibilities and thereby control[ling] the impacts of indeterminancy and uncertainty on a 'world' insulated from the 'rest of the world'" (Jackson and della Dora, 2011a, p. 295). At one level, these fantasy islands reorient and redefine how we think about archipelagos. In its original meaning, "archipelago" referred exclusively to the Aegean Sea. It later came to define any chain or cluster of islands. 'The World' thus re-conceptualizes in some sense the very meaning of an archipelago by the fact that it is performed on such a large scale that a map of the landmasses of the Earth is fantastically conceived as one big archipelago. This tourism destination also needs to be understood as actively reconstituting beach-front property in relation to ownership; dredged sand and reclaimed dirt have become pristine white beaches and valued prime property to be bought and sold to the highest bidder. According to Jackson and della Dora (2011a, p. 297), once all of Dubai's mega island projects are complete (including the Palms Trilogy, the World and the future Universe archipelago), a startling and disturbing figure of 950 kilometres of beachfront property will have been added to its landscape, its future ecological and human consequences not realized as of yet.

Finally, the 'World Islands' is an example of fakeness par excellence operating to insert itself (and Dubai) in a world economy. This set of artificial islands tap into what cultural studies critic Akbar Abbas (2008) calls the discourse of the "fake" that is fast becoming part of the globalization process,

> The fake is a way of relating to a global environment; it is an example of the seduction of global space and the objects found there (Abbas, 2008, p. 263).

Following Abbas then, rather than dismiss the fake, we should see it as powerful symptom, one that "enables [us to] address rather than dismiss some of the discrepancies of a rapidly developing and seemingly ineluctable global order" (Abbas, 2008, p. 252). Moreover, this generative idea of the "fake" also allows us to "read" Dubai less as a tourist site promoting a certain vision of false "utopia" or "modernity"(Koch, 2012), but rather to understand its distinct islandness as integral to newly emergent forms of late capitalism. Thus, if we view 'The World' as a material (and miniature) form of "faking it", then perhaps we can better understand its importance for Dubai in becoming a world capital and centre of international tourism. As Abbas points out for China:

> The contemporary fake, in particular, forces us to re-examine all the objects and processes around it like legal systems, politics, technology, design culture, and globalization itself. ... The production of fakes appears only when cities are just about to enter the world economy and become exposed to media representations of global communities (Abbas, 2008, p. 253).

In other words, it is no mere coincidence that the production of 'the World' coincides with Dubai putting itself on the world map, literally. Its planners hold onto and advertise these forms of island excess (and privileged access) while writing out the very real materialities that undergird these fake built environments. However, Dubai's manufactured state of affairs, a form of "enclave globalization" particular to the Gulf (Sidaway, 2007, p. 335) is not without financial and economic costs. With 99% of the city-state's private sector workforce considered "deportable non-citizens", Dubai has achieved "the state of the art in disenfranchisement of labour" (Davis, 2006, p. 64). The majority of its cheap labour is performed by exploited Asian workers who live there in a state of "permanent impermanence" (Ali, 2010, p. ix). And sometimes their labour is in vain. As recently as the beginning of the year 2011, newspaper reports have suggested that some of the artificial islands that make up 'the World' are "falling into the sea" (Spencer, 2011). Just like Dubai's labour force, they too lie in a perpetual state of "permanent impermanence" (Ali, 2010, p. ix). There are also perpetual problems of water supply, as Ali points out in his study of Dubai. He writes,

> While any appraisal of the beauty of Dubai's construction is subjective, the negative ecological impact on the sea and desert is beginning to emerge and is difficult to deny. For instance, raw sewage was being dumped directly into the Arabian Gulf, leading to beaches that were pristine being temporarily closed. An even more basic ecological threat looms: water. The demand for water has skyrocketed as the number of residents and tourists increases, but also to a large degree because of the insatiable thirst of golf courses (ten at the time of writing) (Ali, 2010, p. 39).

Perhaps 'The World' can be better understood as an interesting and insightful study in over-the-top fakeness that taps into the inequities that globalisation, by its very nature and culture, engenders. Abbas writes:

> The fake confirms rather than subverts the global division of labour, made worse now by the fact that it is developing countries that condemn themselves to the (fake) production of First World Designs. The fake is not as it is sometimes represented to be, capable of being politically subversive of the global order. There is a passive quality to the fake that makes it work as symptom, but not as subversion. Its value as symptom is that it reveals in its own shabby and damaged way, a negative side of globalization that is usually well hidden under a rhetoric of cooperation and collaboration. But faking globalization is neither undermining it nor changing it (Abbas, 2008, p. 261).

And if Dubai and its 'World Islands' tourism destination continues to get it right, this "taste of the fake creates a taste for the fake" (Abbas, 2008, p. 258).

Brand Dubai or "junk space"

Without clever or shrewd branding behind it, "Brand Dubai" would neither be on the world map nor the world market (The World, 2015). That this particular brand allows 'The World', the Palm Islands project, or for that matter Maktoum himself, to stand in for Brand Dubai is a signifier of its success. A brand based on "hype and hard sell" (Henderson, 2006, p. 94), Dubai is marketing a certain type or unique brand of global city, one of "transients and transience" (Ali, 2010, p. 3). In this last section, I examine the branding of the 'World Islands' more closely, suggesting that one of its design tools involves creating a form of "enclave tourism" following Michael Pearson (2003). Each island destination within 'The World' is set up as a cosmopolitan "non-place" (Augé, 1995) where the idea of "living well" is taken to an infinite (air-conditioned and classed) degree. Next, I look briefly at the types of expatriate tourists who are investing in the 'World Islands' development on a large scale, suggesting that this form of transnational tourism simultaneously evokes placeness, a nascent return to nationalism and British colonial nostalgia, with both playing a surprising role in determining who buys what and where; that is, each island's form and content. Lastly, I look at the 'World Islands' as simultaneously an example of postcolonial "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) and an intriguing form of "junkspace" (Koolhaas, 2002) operating in the 21st Century.

Again, one of the many appeals underlying this popular beach destination is its ability to satiate every tourism whim, both gigantic and miniature. It has a strangely ethereal beauty, one of a "forest of construction cranes reclaiming desert and sea" (Ali, 2010, p. 3). Perhaps in another sense, these island resorts are increasingly successful tourist destinations because they function as sites of a fast growing trend of "enclave tourism" (Pearson, 2003, p. 274) the world over. Not only are the requisite requirements of sun, sand, and surf fulfilled on a daily basis inside tourist gated complexes, but every service amenity is made possible (and in the case of 'the World,' with an unparalleled level of sophistication), and finally with very little contact with the locals beyond consumer exchanges. These (artificial) island getaways also "extend and exacerbate" enclave development trends (Jackson and della Dora, 2009, p. 2088; Sidaway, 2007). Moreover, in a manner similar to the way Marc Augé's persuasive ethnology of the experience of travel theorizes the airport, motorway and shopping mall as sites of supermodernity, I argue that 'the island' too is fast taking on a geography of "non-placeness" (Augé, 1995), where high-end island resorts are somewhat similar across the globe, and where circulation, communication and consumption occur at a "heightened speed", though accompanied by a certain detachment between the individual traveller and the spaces traversed

(Merriman, 2004, p. 148). The conditions are set so that the global tourist can be somewhere and nowhere at the same time. The idea of living "quite well" (Ali, 2010, p. 53) is taken to an extreme, and as we will see with some of its high-end British tourists, it is tied to a different set of (imagined) histories and materialities.

Dubai's transformation, however, has not been easy. It was Sheik Mohammed who managed to turn Dubai's disadvantaged natural state into a tourist phenomenon largely through technological innovation,

> [The case of Dubai] yields insights into how a small and comparatively remote state with an imperfect supply of conventional natural and cultural attractions can become an internationally known tourist destination. Possible weaknesses have been turned into selling points of consistently hot weather and awesome desert landscape and elaborate attractions have been constructed to satisfy modern tastes, with technology allowing them to function irrespective of climatic and other geographical impediments (Henderson, 2006, p. 97).

Moreover, as architect Rem Koolhaas has pointed out, the use of air-conditioning – "an invisible medium, therefore unnoticed" – has revolutionized building construction in places of extreme climates such as Dubai, where it can reach a remarkable 50° Celsius with high humidity. Koolhaas cleverly suggests that "because it costs money, [and] is no longer free, [air] conditioned space inevitably becomes conditional space" (Koolhaas, 2002, p. 176). And precisely because 'The World' tourism complex is located in Dubai, in the Middle East, it has been developed as a paradise of personal security, one big (or gigantic) gated community. In Dubai, extreme measures (not only air-conditioning but including an army of concierges, watchmen, and bodyguards as well as a tolerance of Western vices) have been adopted to ensure that tourists do not feel that they are located in an oasis of (Islamic) fear but are instead dwelling in "sanctums of luxury" (Davis, 2006, p. 60). As the CEO of Dubai's promotion board put it, "We're a little island of bargains in a sea of countries where nothing is available" (CEO, quoted in Ali, 2010, p. 22). In other words, the 'World Islands' is a cleverly disguised "consumption gulag" (Koolhaas, 2002, p. 187) located in the midst of a conservative Muslim society and barren desert landscape.

'The World' has been a popular travel destination since its inception, attracting a wide range of tourists from Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East. Brand Dubai is not only tied to "using its sovereign wealth to build up its international image", but targets bringing in Western expatriates as well as retaining wealthier expatriates; in other words, "those with serious money and those who know how to spend it" (Ali, 2010, p. 33). During the 1990's, the majority of Dubai's tourists were British and Russian. By the mid-2000s, the bulk of tourists were from the region, *i.e.* Gulf Arabs and South Asians. However, with travel and tourism today accounting for 30% of Dubai's GDP, its industry is now even more "geared towards aggressively courting high end, especially British tourists" (Ali, 2010, p. 43). It also draws many of the biggest Western and Arab pop stars as well as Bollywood stars due to its thriving cosmopolitan club scene. Western tourists in 2007 accounted for 40% of the almost 7 million guests who stayed mainly in the four- and five-star hotels available in Dubai. While many of these Western tourists are British (750,000), other groups include Russians and Eastern Europeans (475,000) and Americans (400,000). A high number of regional tourists (400,000 Iranian, 400,000 Indian, and 450,000 Saudi Arabian) also contribute significantly to Dubai's

successful branding and commercial viability (Ali, 2010, pp. 43-45). However, it is the disproportionately high number of British tourists that I am interested in exploring here.

Some very famous and extremely wealthy British travellers have invested heavily in Dubai. These investors are taking their cue from fellow countryman and billionaire businessman-turned-entrepreneur Richard Branson, who was one of the first to buy and brand an island back in 1978 (Necker Island in the British Virgin Islands). Perhaps Dubai's fake islands hold much the same appeal. While soccer legend David Beckham owns an entire beachfront property in Dubai, it is rock star legend Rod Stewart who purportedly spent an astounding US$33 million to buy the island of Great Britain in 'The World' tourism complex. Beckham and Stewart (significantly, household globalized brand names in their own right) are,

> … the biggest cheerleaders for al-Maktoum's paradise, and many of them luxuriate in a social world that recalls the lost splendour of gin and tonics at Raffles and white mischief in Simla's bungalows. Dubai is an expert at catering to [British] colonial nostalgia (Davis, 2006, p. 65).

The city-state of Dubai is significantly a "miniature Raj" in another respect, namely because of its South Asian and South-East Asian workforce (Indian and Pakistani construction workers and Sri Lankan, Filipino, and Indian maids), who are exploited in a manner akin to colonial indentured labour. This idea of a nostalgic and material return to a past colonial way of life is intriguing and suggests that Brand Dubai has in some way reached the apex of its tourist success by escaping the here (Dubai) and now (post-9/11, post-2008 recession). Sheller's argument for the Caribbean easily applies to 'the World' and its global positionality today,

> New information and communication technologies connected to global media outlets and celebrity star power thus assist the neoliberal spatialization of the Caribbean [read Dubai] for the benefit of the superrich, yacht-owning, aeromobile, global elite (Sheller, 2009, p. 1396).

This return to the past also suggests an expanding nascent nationalism, particularly if we consider Rod Stewart's interest in owning Great Britain in the 'World Islands' development. Thus, even as the island has often been a "convenient receptacle for the idea of the polity, whether precolonial, colonial or national" (Sivasundaram, 2010, p. 428), it also suggests that, despite our attempts to traverse transnationalism through cosmopolitan travel and tourism, the nation-state is not going away anytime soon. Instead, it is transnationalism's tendency to "draw attention to what it negates, that is the continued significance of the national" (Hannerz 1996, p. 6) that is relevant here, suggesting that tourism's particular appeals to the likes of Rod Stewart run deeper. His is not an isolated case: Irish businessman John O'Dolan purchased the island of 'Ireland' in 2008 to develop an Irish themed resort, only to commit suicide in February 2009 after facing serious financial difficulties. Other wealthy British denizens are investing in imaginaries of their country of origin, perhaps even as a perverse form of patriotism, so as to inhabit (and perform) an embodied and experienced Britishness outside of Britain itself (Walsh, 2012). Perhaps "[h]istory returns in new and interesting ways" (Jackson and della Dora, 2011a, p. 306) for this Gulf megaproject. Other examples include 'the World' island of Thailand that has been built into a five star residential resort named Jasmine Gardens, and is inspired by traditional Thai architecture. However, we must be cautious in making

generalizations: for example, Finland's and Brunei's island developments as high-end fashion TV resorts share no relation to their individual histories as nation-states.

Thus, the case of Britain and its island developers returns us briefly to Dubai's history and its past rapport with British imperialism in the Middle East. As Frassinelli, Frenkel, and Watson write in their introduction to *Traversing Transnationalism*:

> The irony here is that the colonial state becomes the ground of national liberation, yet once the postcolonial state is constituted, its autonomy is eroded by transnational forces that originate from the same historical trajectory that enabled its constitution (2011, p. 7).

So, while history, culture, and power may not completely explain individual tourist desires and choices, such as Rod Stewart's expensive bid to possess Dubai's island of Britain, it does suggest a wider historical backdrop for better understanding new forms of meaning-making (and a resurgence of placeness) in relation to distinct tourist destinations such as 'The World'. It is a space increasingly defined by its inhabitants' desires to return to colonial nostalgia and nascent nationalism. As Jackson and della Dora argue,

> … these new iconic artificial island projects [are] symptomatic of an attempt to fortress hope by articulating place, for the few, through nostalgic desire and enclosure (2011a, p. 295).

However, we can also look closely at the 'World's Islands' to see that it functions simultaneously as a "non-place" in Augé's sense of the term that I outlined earlier, wherein high end island tourism, enabled by technological mediations, looks like it could (almost) be located anywhere: the Caribbean, Europe, or South East Asia. It is a place where old and new ideas of islandness are perfectly combined,

> adventure *and* security, escape *and* familiarity, isolation *and* cosmopolitan diversity, tranquillity *and* excitement are [all] promised (Jackson and della Dora, 2011a, p. 300, emphasis in original).

In a sense, 'The World' requires these double aspects in order to succeed. On one level it is pure fantasy, a complete exaggeration located at the high end of the tourism bubble, which is always seen as *almost* about to burst, hence its appeal as a form of indulgence. On another level, it is here that we find ourselves resisting homogenization and almost inevitably returning to culture, society and history, albeit in new creative ways, such as relying on discourses of the gigantic, miniature and fake. Such discourses, ironically or not, are what obliged these projects in the first place.

Tourism researchers need to think critically about the polarities of place and non-place and need to regard tourist destinations as a tenuous interplay of both, requiring a balance in order to succeed in the increasingly competitive world of island tourism. We must also acknowledge the heterogeneity and materiality of the social networks bound up in the production of such environments as 'the World'. These islands are a deeply visceral example of postcolonial "liquid modernity" (Baumann, 2000), being defined by "fluidity" and "travelling light" and characterized by constant shifts in territorial form and content. That is,

we have moved from an era of hardware and heavy modernity into a seductive one of software and lightness (Baumann, 2000, pp. 118-120) and which only technology has made possible. "It is not the durability or lasting reliability of the product" that we are interested in. Rather, it is the product [here the fake island] as product that is for sale to the highest bidder (Bauman, 2000, p. 14). And, lest we forget, it is digital mapping that makes these island futures possible and [that is] "recoding and rescaling island space in new configurations of territoriality and governance" (Sheller, 2009, p. 1386). On a more playful note, this archipelago of islands in the midst of the Arabian Sea is a fascinating example of what Rem Koolhaas's (2002, pp. 185-187) has labelled "junkspace":

> The built product of modernization is not modern architecture but Junkspace. Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course, or more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout (Koolhaas, 2002, p. 175).

'The World' increasingly serves as a space where "space is vacation", "foliage is spoilage", and "ecology and economy have bonded in Junkspace as ecolomy" (Koolhaas, 2002, p. 187).

Conclusion

I end my rumination on artificial islands with the wildly speculative words of Rem Koolhaas, who, as one of the designers of the island-based Waterfront City in Dubai, writes: "The Gulf … is not just reconfiguring itself; it's reconfiguring the world" (Koolhaas, 2007, p. 7). This leading global architect's provocation works as a perfect concluding foil to suggest that 'The World' works simultaneously as both material and metaphor, made possible by technological mediations on a fantastical scale. It also allows me to play with ideas of "world" and "worldings" with regard to the future of artificial islands and in relation to new tourism research. The case of 'the World' has thrown into geographical relief experimental ways of thinking about concepts of land and water, nature and culture, archipelago and continent, and private and public property. I have focused on discourses of the gigantic and miniature, and proliferations of the fake in order to show how the 'World Islands' functions as both an "anxious" and "promissory" space (Jackson and della Dora, 2009; 2011a) that is the postmodern neoliberal world of tourism that we find ourselves living in. Dubai's particular form of artificial island branding functions as a cosmopolitan non-place, a secure site of sun and sand, and as an epitome of enclave tourism for a jet-setting global elite. Simultaneously, it operates as a unique tourist destination, one where nascent nationalism and a resurgence of colonial nostalgia lure high-end long-term British visitors who make meaning out of owning a piece of Britain in the larger archipelago that is the 'World Islands.' This tourist complex also reflects emergent globalization and technological processes, including a turn to liquidity, lightness, travel and software (Baumann, 2000; Sheller, 2009) in the face of modernity's fallout, or "junkspace" (Koolhaas, 2002). Lastly, 'the World' suggests a new arena of critical studies with regard to the face and future of artificial island tourism as more and more offshore built environments get designed and enacted in multiple global locations both within and beyond the Gulf, thus remapping the geographical world as we know it, including the refiguring of distinct social worldings within it.

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