

## TRAVELS TO AN ANCESTRAL PAST: ON DIASPORIC TOURISM, EMBODIED MEMORY, AND IDENTITY

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### Resumo

Este artigo explora o 'turismo de raízes' como uma prática identitária diaspórica. A partir de relatos de viagens feitas por membros de várias populações diaspóricas, mostro como o prestar atenção à experiência individual do turista revela uma ênfase subjectiva no corpo sensível como um componente-chave do 'regresso' turístico às terras ancestrais. Através de uma participação total dos sentidos com o contexto físico que os rodeia, os viajantes levam a cabo práticas comemorativas que os unem, somática e imaginativamente, com os seus antepassados, e, deste modo, ultrapassam a ruptura diaspórica de passado e presente, antepassados e Eu, terra de origem e exílio.

### Abstract

This paper explores "roots tourism" as a diasporic identity practice. Drawing on accounts of voyages made by members of several different diasporic populations, I demonstrate that attention to individual tourist experience reveals a subjective focus on the sensing body as a key component of touristic "return" to ancestral homelands. Through sensory engagement with their physical surroundings, travelers undertake commemorative practices that somatically and imaginatively unite them with their forebears, thus bridging the diasporic rupture of past and present, ancestors and selves, homeland and exile.

An obligation to remember truly ... is as binding as the fact that other generations live on in our very blood and descend from our own. To forget the past willfully is to threaten the fragile links that, however tenuously, guard us from oblivion.

(Davis and Starn 1989:5-6)

The New York subway train taking me out of Ungvar [Hungary] is not the cattle car that brought my grandfather to Auschwitz. That train and the one I'm on travel in opposite directions. And yet, the two trains are, in some way, coupled. Often, quite often, the way back is the only way forward.

(Feldman 2001:171)

## Prologue: Remembering Portugal

Texas, August 2003. Kevin and I are relaxing in the nearly empty hotel restaurant, taking a mid-afternoon break from the back-to-back sessions of an international genealogy conference we've both traveled thousands of kilometers to attend. This is the second time we've met. Our first encounter, a year earlier and half a world away, was in Portugal, on a ten-day group tour designed for descendants of Portugal's medieval Jewish population, expelled in 1496 and now dispersed throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> We and the twenty-two other tour participants spent many hours talking on the air-conditioned bus, sharing stories and impressions as we crisscrossed the Portuguese countryside, stopping here for a walking tour of an ancient *judiaria* (Jewish quarter), there for prayers at the site

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<sup>1</sup> My participation on this and other similar tours was undertaken as part of the field research for my doctoral dissertation on Portuguese-Jewish heritage tourism and ethnic revival. This research, conducted in Portugal, the United States, and several international online communities (April-June 1998, June 2002-August 2003, April 2004-present) has been made possible with the generous support of the National Science Foundation; the Maurice Amado Research Fund in Sephardic Studies; and the Portuguese Studies Program, Department of Anthropology, and Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley. I am deeply grateful to the tour organizers, guides, local hosts, and participants who have welcomed me aboard and openly shared their experiences and perceptions with me, both on the tours and after. I am also indebted to Nelson Graburn and Misha Klein for their ongoing critical engagement with this project and to Paula Mota Santos and an anonymous reviewer for constructive comments on drafts of this article. Special thanks to Elizabeth F. S. Roberts for her close reading and invaluable critical feedback.

of an Inquisition trial, again to enter a building used long ago as a synagogue. Now this Texas conference on Iberian Jewish genealogy and history has proved to be a reunion of sorts, with fully a quarter of the original tour participants in attendance. At the moment, however, Kevin and I are alone, having a soda and reminiscing.

An elfin, gregarious Englishman in his early sixties, Kevin is puzzling over his feeling of having found kindred spirits during the tour. His immediate ancestry, going back perhaps three hundred years, is Dutch. “Why do I feel comfortable in Portugal?” he asks rhetorically. “Why are there certain countries that I feel more comfortable in, and not in others?” He pauses, sips his Coke. “Portugal is definitely a special country for me. Because of my genealogical research, I am aware of the fact that there are these half a dozen [Portuguese] names in my family. ... No, the only way to answer that question is this thing that people have been talking about, gene memory.” I nod; the term is familiar. Kevin is referring to a common thread of discussion on an international Portuguese-Jewish internet group to which we both belong. Recently a surprising number of participants, many of them descendants of Portuguese *cristãos-novos* (Inquisition-era forced converts to Catholicism), have described feelings and memories they cannot explain, linked in one way or another to their ancestors’ lives as Jews in medieval Portugal. Often the experience occurs upon traveling there. They call it “genetic memory.”

When I first set out to explore tourists’ experiences of Jewish heritage sites in Portugal, most of my encounters were with international visitors who felt no direct connection to Iberia. In our conversations, these travelers spoke of the historical significance of the Inquisition for all Jews, comparing it to the Holocaust and mourning the decimation of Portugal’s vibrant medieval Jewish culture. Although occasionally impassioned, these were, in the main, distanced, somber tales of sightseeing among the remnants of a lost world. But as I continued my research and began to meet a broader range of tourists, a different picture emerged. Rather than stories solely of absence and loss, what I soon heard—and later observed, as a participant in group tours—were moments of heartfelt connection: not a sense of connection to a depersonalized collective history, but instead a profoundly personal encounter with the past, in spaces redolent with ancestral memory and, in some cases, even felt ancestral presence. For these latter tourists,

many of whom trace their genealogy directly to medieval Iberia's exiled Jews and *cristãos-novos*, Portugal has particular emotional resonance as a lost homeland. Indeed, some who make the journey speak explicitly of having "returned."

Such language, and subjective experiences it evokes, are not unique to participants in Portuguese Jewish "roots" tourism. Similar informant accounts surface in recent scholarship on journeys made by other diasporic populations, both in organized groups and as individual travelers. These include African American trips to sites linked to slavery in Africa (Bruner 1996, Ebron 1999), American and Israeli Jewish tours of Holocaust sites in Poland (Feldman 1995, 2001; Kugelmass 1992, 1994, 1996), and trips made to the Scottish Highlands by people of Scottish descent worldwide (Basu 2001). While the studies cited here provide sensitive and often brilliant analyses of the individual cases they describe, it is the commonalities among them that I wish to examine here. Each addresses, with varying degrees of emphasis, the interplay of prior knowledge of the destination (what some call "diasporic imaginings"), memory, and physical experience of place in the construction and performance of identities that are rooted in the past. But none places their findings in comparative perspective, nor do they attempt a more general exploration of this type of tourism as an increasingly widespread practice among diasporic populations.

Such a general, comparative analysis is the goal of this paper. The studies cited above provide rich material for a collective discussion: each includes multiple first-person quotations describing travelers' experiences during "roots" journeys.<sup>2</sup> In the pages that follow, I provide a synthetic re-reading of these quotations, together with materials from my own ongoing field research, to reveal key common features in the experience of diasporic tourism as an identity practice. Chief among these features, I argue, are (1) a subjective focus on the bodily sensations of "being there"; (2) an engagement in "remembering" ancestral experience, often somatically as well as intellectually; and (3) in some cases, if only momentarily, an experiential merging of past and present, in which

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to participant-observation, these studies draw their first-person accounts from travel journals (Feldman 2001), an internet discussion list and personal correspondence (Basu 2001), and published memoirs (Basu 2001, Bruner 1996, Ebron 1999, Kugelmass 1992, 1994, 1996). My own fieldwork utilizes each of these types of sources as well.

the journey becomes a “return,” generational distinctions collapse, and participants experience the emotions of their forebears as their own. Before turning to these tourists and their experiences, however, it may be helpful to clarify the contours of the phenomenon under consideration.

## 1. Diaspora, Homeland, and Longing

Recent attempts to clarify the term “diaspora” have emphasized the centrality of a commitment to *homeland* (remembered, actual, or imagined) as a defining feature in the identity construction of diasporic populations (Cohen 1997, Safran 1991). To live in diaspora is, at the most basic level, to be traumatically separated from this homeland, whether through displacement, dispossession, or—in the archetypal form—permanent exile (Brah 1996, Clifford 1994, Stratton 2000). While it may be the object of fervent longing, however, in this literature the homeland is characterized above all as a place of the imagination, of myth, of desire: “‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’” (Brah 1996:192). Return is impossible, in part, because the desired homeland exists *in the past*. As Jon Stratton puts it, “Modern diasporas may have... a ‘homing desire,’ but it is for a return to a place of origin as it *was*, not as it is now. Moreover, it is for a return that returns the diasporic subjects to the way they were, to an imagined past time created in memory, before the impact of their diasporic experience” (Stratton 2000:152).

These refinements of the concept of diaspora have been presented, for the most part, as theoretical abstractions. As Edmund T. Gordon and Mark Anderson (1999) have argued in relation to scholarship on the African diaspora, we need to flesh out our abstract definitions of diasporic identity with ethnographies of diasporic *identification*—ethnographies, that is, that reveal the processes and practices through which people in specific places, at specific times, build and express a sense of identification both with the “homeland” and with a community that transcends national borders. This essay follows their call, examining accounts of tourist experiences that indicate how diasporic identification may be deepened through roots

tourism. As we will see, it is precisely through such tourism that participants find a means of “returning” to the lost homeland. This is effected, above all, through commemorative practices, activities dedicated to generating “memory” at sites visited. What participants remember and even relive, however, is not just the homeland “as it was,” but also—and this is key—the subjective, bodily experiences of their ancestors there. It is the latter aspect of these journeys that grants them such emotional power for participants. For if it is true that diasporic identity is necessarily constituted in relation to a moment of traumatic rupture—a “recurring break where time stops and restarts” (Clifford 1994:318; cf. Hall 1990:226)—then a defining feature of the diasporic condition must also be a fundamental break in the continuity of lived experience, a sense of having lost not only the homeland but also all connection to the life-world of the ancestors. For some, tourism provides a means of bridging that gap.

## 2. Understanding Diasporic Tourism

It is important to recognize that the tourism referred to here is not primarily ludic, nor is it necessarily motivated by a desire to escape from daily life. For the most part, it is characterized by a underlying seriousness of purpose and emotional engagement that sharply differentiates it from more common modes of leisure travel (cf. Poria et al. 2003, Wearing 2002:239-41). In his widely cited “Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences” (1979), Erik Cohen provides a useful framework for understanding what is at stake. Arguing that we cannot understand tourist motivation and behavior without viewing each tourist’s travel within the context of his/her overall “world view”—“the different meanings which interest in the culture, social life, and the natural environment of others has for the individual traveler” (Cohen 1979:183)—Cohen proposes that we view tourists along a five-part continuum, from “recreational” to “existential,” depending on the location of their “spiritual center,” i.e., the “religious or cultural... center which for the individual symbolizes ultimate meanings” (1979:181). For individuals whose spiritual center lies within their own society, international tourism will serve merely as a mode of recreation, a means of relieving the pressures of daily life. At the other end of the

continuum, individuals who are deeply alienated from their own society will engage in tourism as an existential quest for an alternative, or “elective,” center in a society distant from their own. But what of the “roots” tourist, who travels to the land of origin of his or her ancestors? “In this case,” writes Cohen, “the desire for a visit to such a center derives from a desire to find one’s spiritual roots. This visit takes on the quality of home-coming to a historical home. Such travelers, so to speak, re-elect their traditional center” (1979:191). Here tourism becomes akin to pilgrimage, if the latter is understood, following Cohen, as a journey toward the spiritual center of one’s world (Cohen 1992).

The homology between diasporic tourism and pilgrimage is often made explicit in participants’ framing of the experience, both as a journey to a spiritual center and as an individual quest (cf. Badone and Roseman 2004:7). One morning over breakfast, towards the end of the tour where Kevin and I met, the tour organizer, a South African Jewish descendant of *cristãos-novos*, was sharing stories about a previous trip she had made to Portugal. On that journey, Silvia and her sisters had focused on their “roots,” traveling to ancestral villages, visiting Jewish heritage sites, and meeting extended family. “We called it our pilgrimage, our *hajj*,” she said, her eyes sparkling. Why *hajj*, the term usually used in reference to Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca? “The Jews from North Africa used that term for visiting Jerusalem,” she explained. “We were making hajj to *our* Jerusalem.”

Package tours designed for such travelers may reinforce this framing. On the African American “roots” tour analyzed by Paulla Ebron (1999), guides repeatedly reminded participants that their journey to Africa was “a pilgrimage, not a Safari.” The tour as a whole was structured, in Ebron’s words, as “a carefully crafted... Turnerian ‘ritual process’ [with] stages of separation, liminality, and reintegration” (1999:911). Others have offered similar analyses of package tours to Holocaust sites (Feldman 2001, Stier 1995). Perhaps in deference to the emotionally powerful character of these “roots” journeys, some anthropologists do not use the word “tourism” in reference to them at all, choosing instead to call them pilgrimages (Basu 2001, Feldman 2001).

But if these are pilgrimages, what, precisely, is their sacred destination? Although some diasporic travelers are fortunate enough to know the exact location of their ancestors’ origins, a survey of the

literature suggests that this is a relatively small percentage of the traveling population; most independent tourists and the majority of package tours focus instead on visiting public monuments, cultural centers, and representative landscapes. Viewed solely in terms of itinerary, then, these journeys may be indistinguishable from more ordinary heritage tourism. Here a second typology may be useful. Like Cohen's phenomenological typology of tourist experiences (1979), the distinctions I propose here are made on the basis of individual tourist subjectivity, rather than external features of the journey. Broadly defined, "heritage tourism" may be taken to refer to any leisure travel concerned with the past.<sup>3</sup> Under this general umbrella, several types of international tourism can be distinguished, depending on the tourist's felt relationship to the destination and its history. On the one hand, the destination may include historical sites that the tourist perceives as belonging to humanity as a whole, as in the case of monuments or even entire localities that have been classified as "world heritage," but to which the tourist does not feel a direct personal connection; this most generic form may be referred to simply as *heritage tourism*. Alternatively, the destination may be experienced as a site of "personal heritage," i.e., as having particular emotional resonance given the tourist's own national, ethnic, religious, or cultural origins (cf. Timothy 1997, Poria et al. 2003).<sup>4</sup> When, as in the cases discussed in this paper, international travel is directed to what is perceived as the "homeland" of one's ancestors (however loosely defined) or as a site of particular importance in the history of one's ethnic group, such travel may be referred to as *diasporic tourism* or *roots tourism*. At the most specific level, the destination may be selected on the basis of an interest in one's immediate ancestry or known place of family origin, particularly as a result of genealogical research. Following

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<sup>3</sup> There is not yet an agreed-upon terminology in the field of tourism studies. The typology I outline here employs terms that have been used in the literature in contradictory ways, and "heritage tourism" is not always used solely in reference to travel related to the past. Particularly in industry-oriented texts, "cultural tourism" and "heritage tourism" are used interchangeably to refer to all travel focusing on monuments, art museums, cultural and historical theme parks, festivals, and so forth. In light of concerns over sustainability, the term "heritage tourism" is also frequently used in reference to any protected historical, cultural, or natural "resource," so that even ecotourism and ethnic tourism are included (cf. McCain and Ray 2003:715).

<sup>4</sup> For a useful exploration of perceptions of heritage as "own" or "other" in relation to cultural metaphors of kinship and inheritance, see Graburn 2001



Gary McCain and Nina Ray (2003), this narrow subset of diasporic/roots tourism may be referred to as *legacy tourism*.<sup>5</sup>

While each of these types of tourism could conceivably be directed to the same physical destination—take, for example, Ghana’s Elmina Castle, built by the Portuguese in 1482, used for centuries as a staging area for slave ships, now a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Monument (Bruner 1996)—the extent to which this constitutes a “pilgrimage site” will vary widely depending on the orientation of the individual traveler. So too will the emotional tenor and subjective meaning of the visit, a point made by several observers in recent years (Bruner 2005, Cheung 1999, Poria et al. 2003, Rojek and Urry 1997). Edward Bruner’s essay on tourism to Elmina Castle (1996) explores precisely this issue, examining conflicting attitudes toward and interpretations of the history of the site. Dutch, British, African American, and Ghanaian tourists, museum professionals, and local residents each have an interest in the castle, but for different reasons and with different effects. For African American diasporic tourists, the castle and its slave dungeons are “sacred ground” representing the mid-Atlantic slave trade, “the transition point between the civility of their family in Africa and the barbarism of slavery in the New World” (1996:291). For Ghanaians, on the other hand, Elmina Castle represents 500 years of local history, reflected in its many uses over the centuries by the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and finally Ghanaians under self-rule—“from trading post to slave dungeon to military fortification to colonial administrative center to prison, school, and office” (1996:292).

The complexity of the history reflected in Elmina Castle may help clarify the nature of the destination of diasporic “pilgrimages” in general. For if Elmina is indeed a pilgrimage destination for some African American tourists (and Bruner’s description of the emotional and spiritual experiences of these visitors strongly suggest that is it), we must ask not simply *where* the destination lies, but *when*. For these visitors, Elmina Castle is not of interest for its long colonial history, nor is it merely a physical place to be toured. It represents enslavement. It is thus, to employ Pierre

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<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, purely a heuristic typology; an individual tourist could easily move from one of these types of tourism to another, or even to an entirely different form of travel, during a single trip.

Nora's useful term, a highly charged *lieu de mémoire*. In a sweeping characterization that may be particularly apropos for diasporic populations, Nora describes our current cultural moment as one marked by a fundamental rupture between past and present, between "memory"—lived, felt, directly transmitted—and "history," understood as mediated, distanced reflection upon the past (Nora 1989; see also Lowenthal 1985, 1998). In the absence of continuous, unself-conscious modes of remembering, according to Nora, the past must be "preserved," reconstructed, and revisited via *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory: museums, archives, historical festivals, monuments. For the tourists Bruner describes, Elmina Castle provides just such a materialization of "memory," experienced as the crystallization of several hundred years of ancestral trauma. Thus to visit the physical site is to make a "pilgrimage of memory" (Stier 1995), a journey whose goal is the traveler's ancestral past. Similarly, Silvia's "hajj" took her not to Portugal at large, nor to a single physical location. Instead, the "Jerusalem" to which she traveled was a particular concatenation of sites representing Portugal's (and her own) Jewish past: a discontinuous historical space, that is, which is often referred to by tourists as "Jewish Portugal."<sup>6</sup>

An important feature of these sites of memory, as destinations, is that they need not ever have been inhabited by the tourist's direct ancestors. The thousands of Jewish tourists who make "pilgrimages of memory" to Poland's concentration camps, for example, did not necessarily lose relatives at those particular sites; descendants of Portugal's medieval Jews who describe being deeply moved upon visiting the remnants of pre-Inquisition synagogues cannot know with certainty where their ancestors might have prayed; and, for many African Americans, it is nearly impossible to know precisely when and from what port their individual ancestors left Africa. Nonetheless, the sites these tourists visit function as metonyms, mnemonic fragments not merely of the specific historical experiences that occurred there, but also of the entire lost life-world of the pre-diasporic population (cf. Kugelmass 1992:401). Indeed, it is because the past so recalled is collective,

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<sup>6</sup> The construction and experience of "Jewish Portugal," as a conceptual space, is discussed at greater length in my forthcoming doctoral dissertation, *In the Footsteps of the Ancestors: Tourism, Transnational Networks, and Portuguese Jewish Ethnic Revival* (University of California, Berkeley).

general rather than specific, “owned” by the diaspora as a whole, that such pilgrimages work effectively as an identity practice. To “remember” what has happened to members of a group with which one identifies, past or present, is a fundamental aspect of the experience of belonging (Olick and Robbins 1998:122-126). As Eviatar Zerubavel cogently puts it, “being social presupposes the ability to experience events that happened to groups and communities to which we belong long before we joined them, as if they were part of our own past” (Zerubavel 1996:290).

### 3. The Embodied Traveler

This “remembering” does not happen passively. On the contrary, as Chris Rojek and John Urry have argued in relation to museums and heritage centers, reminiscence is a performative act that the visitor undertakes in engagement with others, “similar to the variety of other spatial practices which take place at tourist sites; these include walking, talking, eating, photographing, and so on” (Rojek and Urry 1997:14). But such bodily practices, and the sensory engagement they entail, have received relatively little attention in the tourism literature. Instead, studies have tended to assume a detached tourist “gaze” (Urry 1990), with vision—i.e., sightseeing—privileged as the primary mode through which tourists apprehend place (an emphasis thoroughly critiqued by Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen [1994] and David Crouch [2002]). And yet, as David Crouch and Luke Desforges point out, even the sightseer has a body: “Practices such as sightseeing involve taking the body on particular routes around sites so that the senses, in all their full kinesthetic complexity, engage with and construct the tourist experience” (Crouch and Desforges 2003:8). Thus it is through the fully sensing body-in-place, not merely through vision, that tourists engage and experience their surroundings.

How might we understand the role of the body in “remembering” at tourist sites? In a study of Finnish sun lust tourism in Spain, Tom Selanniemi notes that the embodied experiences of lounging in the sun, swimming in the ocean, and walking on the beach evoke, for his informants, memories of earlier times in their own lives, providing “a

surrogate return to childhood, to pleasures derived from simple but very profound visual and tactile sensations” (Selanniemi 2001:91). Similarly, in her ethnography of *pied-noir* voyages to Malta Andrea Smith shows how, through sensory engagement, an entire destination can serve as a mnemonic for another: for these Algerian-born travelers, Malta is a “place replaced,” where the particular combination of sights, sounds, and flavors (landscape, flora, language, foods, all perceived as being much like those of North Africa) offers a surrogate journey to colonial Algeria, the remembered homeland to which these travelers cannot return (Smith 2003).

In both of these cases, the memories prompted through travel are not specific to the place visited. These are surrogate destinations, providing an indirect route to remembering other places and other times; presumably some other destination offering the same combination of sensory triggers (sea, sun, sand; desert, Semitic language, Latin alphabet, Barbary figs) would do. But for diasporic travelers, the specificity of the sites themselves is critical. André Levy writes:

Representations of the past are often enfolded and sustained within spatial contexts. No wonder, then, that the return to one’s past is often enacted through the practice of visits to past spaces. These sites are expected to embody uncontaminated, authentic memories.

(Levy 2002:3; cf. Basu 2001:339-341)

However, because what is “remembered” is in this case not one’s own past, but that of one’s ancestors, these *lieux de mémoire* are not merely bearers of memory. They are also experienced as richly evocative points of contact with prior generations: the fact that one’s forebears (direct ancestors or not) may have stood in the same spot where one is now standing is of crucial importance. Thus it is through the tourist’s bodily presence—in Edward Bruner’s apt phrase, “the sheer materiality of being there” (2005:24)—that he or she gains the sensation of “remembering” ancestral experience. Returning to Elmina Castle, Bruner makes this point eloquently:

In the castle of Elmina in Ghana, tourists enter the dungeon where slaves were herded together to wait to be transported in the mid-Atlantic slave trade. It is a dark, dank cavity beneath the ground, and for the African

American tourists, it is a tremendously emotional experience, not only because of the story of the slave trade but because they are physically positioned in the very dungeon where their ancestors had been located. The tourists assume the position of the slaves, moving beyond text to embodied experience, and within the dungeon they are better able to feel the predicament of the slaves, torn from family and community, robbed of human dignity. ... In the tactile encounter in the dungeon, the tourists relive the slave experience.

(Bruner 2005:25)

As Bruner's example demonstrates, the tourist's full sensory participation is an essential component in grasping the past. This resonates with Yi-Fu Tuan's observation that "an object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind" (1977:18). Extending Tuan's insight, we can say that the *past* may achieve concrete reality in this way, as well. Indeed, to cite an extreme example, it is through precisely such an attempt at "total" experience, "through all the senses," that participants in "living history" reenactments—mock American Civil War battles, historical villages, heritage parks—feel that they are able to reinhabit the past (Handler and Saxton 1988). This is achieved through great effort; living history practitioners don period costume, adopt historically accurate language, and carry out appropriate daily activities. All this is undertaken in the belief that through a particular set of bodily practices, participants will be able "to experience what their counterparts in the past experienced, to know 'what it felt like'" (1988:248). Perhaps analogous, too, are the James Dean fans who celebrate the anniversary of Dean's death by retracing the exact route of his final drive—dressed in period clothing and driving renovated 1950s cars (Rojek 1997:62).

In their introduction to a collection of essays on tourism and the body, Crouch and Desforges argue that treating embodiment as a solely physical phenomenon is insufficient: "our sensory engagements with place need to be connected to issues such as subjectivity and intersubjectivity, expressivity and emotion, memory and imagination" (Crouch and Desforges 2003:11). The existing literature on roots tourism provides a rich resource for such an exploration. The remaining sections of this paper draw primarily

upon first-person tourist accounts from this literature, combined with my own field materials, to shed more light on the interpenetration of embodiment, space, imagination, and emotion in diasporic tourists' experiences of "remembering" during their travels. As we will see, it is through such embodied memory that they are able to bridge the gap between past and present, ancestors and selves, homeland and exile.

## 4. Modes of Memory

Diasporic tourists engage in a variety of commemorative activities during their travels. Some of these activities are highly structured components of package tours, apparently purposefully designed by organizers to "contemporize" participants' time with that of their forebears and thus experientially merge past and present (cf. Feldman 2001:164). Others are spontaneous, sometimes unanticipated, individual moments of "remembering." While it is true, as Bruner has argued, that "the trip as lived, as experienced, and as told are never exact replicas of one another" (Bruner 2005:19), travelers' narratives of these activities provide a window into their subsequent assessment of the experience and its place within their evolving relationship to their collective past.<sup>7</sup> How, then, do these travelers make their journey through time?

### 4.1. Sensing the Past

At the most basic level, as discussed above, participants may gain a sense of (re)visiting the past through the "sheer materiality of being there," occupying spaces where their forebears are known (or believed) to have been. In this case, the past is in effect already present, awaiting discovery, in the landscape or the sites visited; one merely needs to be aware of it and engage it with the senses. It is important to note, however, that this sensory engagement is so effective because it is

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<sup>7</sup> The travelers' narratives quoted in the following section are drawn, as noted above, from several published ethnographic accounts of "roots" travel. While the interpretations given in those articles have certainly influenced the discussion offered here, in most cases my use of these quotations, and the conclusions I draw from them, are different.

imaginatively experienced as being *the same* as that of one's own ancestors. Thus, for example, an American traveler of Scottish descent describes "sensing the past" as a result of seeing the same landscape his ancestors would have seen:

Standing on the bluff at Lower Killeyan. There were still ruins of the homes my ancestors left in 1856. The view was spectacular. I could sense the past, and knew I was seeing the same sites as they did back into the 1700s, maybe earlier.

(Quotation from Basu 2001:340)

Simply moving through a space to which one has an ancestral connection can provide a similar sensation (cf. Ebron 1999:920-23). A walking tour of the former site of Porto's *judiaria*, or medieval Jewish quarter, is a mainstay of the several Portuguese Jewish "roots" tours in which I have participated. Although there are few external signs that it was once a Jewish neighborhood, the quarter has mostly retained an ancient feel, with steep staircases through narrow, dark cobblestone alleys and high stone walls. By appearance, it is indistinguishable from other parts of Porto's old center. Tour guides accordingly stress the importance of imagining what time has erased: "There was once a synagogue here; down there was the cemetery..." On one such tour, as the guide led us down a long staircase still known as the Escadas da Esnoga (the synagogue steps), three participants paused on the landing (Figure 1). In a hushed voice, one said to the others, "You know, we are really, really walking in the footsteps of our ancestors now." She repeated: "We're really walking in the footsteps of our ancestors. And if you close your eyes, you can hear them and see them. They're still here." After a moment, one of her companions remarked wonderingly, "It's a time capsule." Said the third: "We're walking through the ages."



**Figure 1.** Touring the Escadas da Esnoga (Synagogue Steps), Porto, Portugal

Smell, too, can provide a sensory link to the past. This is mentioned both in descriptions of visits to concentration camps, where the intense



smell of rotting piles of victims' shoes evokes, for participants, the decaying corpses of those who died there (Feldman 2001:165), and in accounts of voyages to African slave dungeons, where the dank, musty odor recalls the bodies of enslaved ancestors (Bruner 1996:291, 294):

As I stood transfixed in the Women's Dungeon [at Elmina Castle], I could feel and smell the presence of our ancestors. From the dark, damp corners of that hell-hole I heard the whimpering and crying of tormented Mothers and Sisters being held in inhumane bondage...

(Quotation from Bruner 1996:294)

Such sensory engagement with the past may be consciously sought. An American Jewish traveler describes the experience of seeing piles of victims' shoes at the Majdanek concentration camp, a site evocatively captured by anthropologist Jackie Feldman:

Within the memorial site at the Majdanek death camp are three adjacent wooden barracks containing huge, cagelike bins, filled to the brim with old shoes of the victims of the Shoah. As one enters, the floorboards creak. The buildings are badly lit and poorly ventilated. The stench of old, decaying shoes fills the dark.

(Feldman 2001:165)

The traveler realizes that her own shoes are nearly identical to those in the bin in front of her. She is overcome by an urge to touch the shoes, to add her own to the pile, to merge herself, even if only momentarily, into the experience encapsulated in "this ocean of death":

I glance at my own shoe, expecting it to be far different than those in this ocean of death, and my breath catches in my throat as I see my shoe, though lighter in color, is almost the same style as one, no, two, three of the shoes I see: it seems as though every shoe here is my shoe. I wish I could throw my shoes into this pile, to grasp and feel each shoe, to jump into this sea, to become part of it, to take it with me.

(Horn 1992:16, quoted in Kugelmass 1994:176)

Similarly, Bruner recounts that one visitor to Elmina Castle "is reported to have fasted in the dungeon for three weeks, and afterward stated that she had achieved a spiritual reunion with her ancestors" (1996:291). In this latter case, the tactile sensations of physical presence

at the site seem to combine with extreme (self-induced) bodily suffering to conjure a sense of cross-generational, experiential connection.

## 4.2. Entering Past Time/Place

Some visitors engage in what I term *imaginative reconstruction*, not merely sensing the past or reliving ancestral experience in the present, but actually imagining themselves “there, then.” This “as if” mode of experiential commemoration can produce powerful emotional effects. Writes an American traveler to Scotland:

It was as though, if I'd stepped off the train, I'd be alighting in a different era... It made the stories I'd heard throughout my life about my ancestors concrete. I was obstinately of this place!

(Quotation from Basu 2001:340)

In his analysis of North American package tours of Holocaust sites, Jack Kugelmass (1992, 1994, 1996) notes that such imaginative reconstruction is built into the structure of the trips, through emphasis on emotional reflection, sharing, and catharsis. “Almost immediately,” he writes, “involvement in these activities encourages participants away from disengagement and pulls them toward experiencing themselves as Holocaust victims” (1994:175):

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, a member of a Montreal synagogue group watched her fellow participants march towards the destroyed crematoria. As they walked she could see the men at some distance. Crossing her vision was a barbed wire fence and she commented to others near her that for a moment she imagined the men were actually imprisoned in the camp.

(Kugelmass 1996:202)

Some destinations include preserved tableaux that tourists can enter, immersing them entirely in a sensory environment that assists their sense of transcending time. A young participant in an Israeli school trip to Poland describes entering a prisoners' barrack at Madjanek, complete with bunks, beds, and, on top of them, empty camp uniforms. Feeling that she has almost “returned back in time,” she finds herself expecting the camp prisoners to reappear:

At Elmina Castle, visitors can participate in a much more elaborate reconstruction of their ancestors' experience, for a fee. In a participatory performance called "Through the Door of No Return—The Return," produced by an African American couple who now live in Elmina, tourists are led through the castle and its dungeon in an emotionally charged journey that transports them from the present to the past and then back again:

After a tour of the castle, the group assembles in the dungeon, where they hold hands, light candles, pray together, usually weep together, pour libation as a homage to the ancestors, and then pass through the door that the slaves went through to the slave ships taking them to the Americas. For the slaves, after going through that infamous door, there was no return, and it was the beginning of diaspora history. But ... once the tour group gets to the other side, they sing "We Shall Overcome" and the Negro National Anthem, which are diaspora songs. Then they reenter the castle, singing and dancing African songs to the beat of the drums, festive songs, to celebrate their joyous return to Mother Africa.

(Bruner 1996:296)

The reenactment thus collapses centuries of history into a single performance, taking participants out of the dungeon as slaves, through the diaspora experience (represented through song), and back to Elmina, *not* as Americans, but as Africans, "singing and dancing African songs." Within the reenactment's narrative structure, then, the participants' visit to Elmina becomes a "revisit," a triumphant "return" to Africa as a free people (cf. Ebron 1999:912).

Each of the preceding examples of experiential memory, whether orchestrated or spontaneous, reflects ways in which diasporic tourists may temporarily "enter" the ancestral past and imagine what it might have been like. But the case of the performance at Elmina Castle—like visits to its counterpart, the House of Slaves at Senegal's Goree Island, discussed at length by Ebron (1999)—brings us to a more complex level of experiential memory and, more importantly, of diasporic identification, in which the tourist's journey is framed *and experienced* as a "return" to the homeland that has been lost.

### 4.3. Collapsing Generational Distinctions

The trope of roots travel as a form of “return” is common in tourism marketing. “Come Back to Erin!” proclaims one Irish heritage marketing campaign (McCain and Ray 2003:715). “Come Home to Africa,” “Back to Sefarad,” “Hebridean Homecomings,” and dozens of similar titles entice would-be tourists searching online for an organized tour to their ancestral homeland. But this framing of the experience also appears in travelers’ own talk, discursively collapsing the distinction between their ancestors’ lives and their own. For example, in a discussion of debates over the entrance fee at Elmina Castle, Bruner notes that “some African Americans ... refuse to pay the fee, saying *they didn’t pay to leave here, so they shouldn’t have to pay to come back*” (Bruner 1996:298, emphasis mine). Similarly, in a description of Goree Island quoted in a different context by Ebron, the author refers to the experience of enslavement and passage to the New World in the first person:

It is all but impossible to be a Black American and not know Senegal. *So many of us made our way to the New World through Gori Island. Through a fort and a hole in the ground where even yet one hears the moaning of the captives.*

(Giovanni 1991:v, quoted in Ebron 1999:920; emphasis mine)

This may, of course, be simply an evocative turn of phrase. But the first-person language of “return” is ubiquitous in travelers’ accounts. Indeed, this framing of diasporic/legacy tourism is so pervasive that it surfaces, apparently unselfconsciously, in the writing of anthropologists themselves. The particular fusion of past and present in the quotations just cited goes unremarked by the authors of the articles in which they appear, and Bruner, describing this type of tourism, even uses the phrase “when African Americans *return* to Ghana” (1996:296, emphasis mine). Similarly, Paul Basu describes tourists of Scottish descent as making “a pilgrimage of sorts to the ruins of the houses and villages *they left behind*” (2001:335, emphasis mine). There is, it would seem, a widespread mode of speaking about diasporic tourism—among tourists *and* their observers—as if ancestors and selves were collapsed into a single acting subject.

Eviatar Zerubavel, writing on social memory more generally, suggests that there is something more basic than word choice at work here: such language reflects what he calls “sociobiographical memory.” Citing a passage from the *Haggadah*, the Jewish text that is recited each year at Passover—“we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God brought *us* out of there with a mighty hand”—he writes: “Such existential fusion of our own personal biography with the history of the groups or communities to which we belong is an indispensable part of our social identity as anthropologists, Mormons, Native Americans, Miami Dolphins fans, or Marines” (Zerubavel 1996:290).

And yet while undoubtedly a crucial element here, the general concept of sociobiographical memory does not explain the emotional immediacy of the experiences that some diasporic tourists describe. Take the Scottish-American traveler who characterizes his trip in near-mystical terms, as a cross-generational homecoming:

Walking through Cawdor village and castle knowing my ancestors also walked there... I felt like I came home after several generations’ journey.

(Quotation from Basu 2001:336)

Ebron, writing both as an anthropologist and as a “native” participant on her African American roots tour, suggests that this subjective sensation of “return” emerges from the combination of the tourist’s often emotionally-charged cultural knowledge about the destination and the much-anticipated sensory impact of visiting the place itself. In an eloquent passage, she describes her visit to Goree Island in this light:

The tour and the rendering of the slave experience into a narrative conspired along with the heat of the day, the small windowless rooms, and the chains on the walls to convey a sense of experience, a filling-in of memory. Because of the strength of already cogent images of the Middle Passage, the trip to Goree Island seemed to prick the unconscious, (re)calling the trauma of slavery and the reuniting with “Mother Africa,” the mother lost centuries ago and longed for since. ... A sense of the past was created by the interplay of already familiar images of slavery and those material objects, views, and stories that bring these to life as “memory.

(Ebron 1999:923)

The generation-blurring “return” to the ancestral homeland, then, is not (merely) discursive or intellectual. For at least some diasporic tourists, it is also experiential.

As Ebron’s description suggests, for some travelers this feeling of having “returned” is heightened by a sensation of recovering their ancestors’ subjective, emotional experiences, enabling a still-deeper level of identification with the collective history of dispersal and loss. The trip to Goree Island, she writes, “seemed to prick the unconscious, (re)calling the trauma of slavery.” Other travelers report a similar welling-up of feelings that seem to come from beyond their own life experience, almost as if they were channeling ancestral emotion. Paul Basu tells us that the Scottish tourists he worked with “report being moved to tears when visiting [significant] places, or having experiences they have difficulty in expressing. They talk in terms of ‘resonances’ and senses of ‘déjà vu’” (Basu 2001:340). Sometimes these emotions are more specific, as in the case of a Jewish legacy traveler who went in search of his Polish ancestors’ graves, only to find that the cemetery had been replaced by a football field, the sole remaining tombstone desecrated. He describes his powerful response at being mocked by local children as he stands at the site:

As we stood there, plunged in tearful thought, a book of Psalms in our palms, a group of youngsters jeered while passing *Zhid*, *Zhidka* (Jew-boy, Jew-girl). Though I had never ever heard that cry before, the blood froze in my veins as if I had perceived some horrific echo resounding from the depths of time through the collective memories of generations of cowering ancestors.

(Fenton 1990:29, quoted in Kugelmass 1992:399-400)

This traveler’s fleeting perception of an “echo” of collective ancestral memory is not unique. Some travelers to “Jewish Portugal,” particularly those who have only recently discovered that they are of Portuguese-Jewish descent, find that the journey seems to reactivate long-dormant emotions from their ancestors’ lives, “stored” in what Kevin and many others I have encountered in my fieldwork refer to as “genetic memory.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Although the term is widespread, it should be noted that different individuals use “genetic memory” to reference a wide variety of ideas about memory, descent, and the body, on a continuum ranging from a literal belief that ancestral memories could be “encoded” in one’s DNA to an entirely metaphorical invocation of genetics as a way to talk about a mystical experience.

I first met Raquel, a Brazilian-American descendant of *cristãos-novos* who was raised Catholic, through our mutual membership in several different online discussion groups related to Portuguese Jews. In our subsequent email correspondence, she wrote to me of how the sensory impact of walking in Portugal's medieval Jewish quarters (Figure 2) prompted a vivid sensation of *déjà vu*, so powerful that it seemed *she herself* had lived and suffered as a Jew during the Inquisition. For Raquel, physically moving through spaces in her ancestral homeland offered unexpected access to knowledge, memories, and emotions from the deep past:

Since coming to Portugal, land of my ancestors, I have been amazed. ... Walking the streets of the old Jewish quarters, I am overcome by emotion unbidden, by the feeling of having walked these cobbled alleys, of stepping through the stone doorways and knowing what is inside. All of a sudden I feel Jewish, I know in my soul that I have been fashioned by and persecuted for this. ... I am now living in Évora, whose Jewish quarter has moved me to tears, whose cobbled streets I once walked, whose stone doors I once entered, whose churches I once feared.

A traveler to Poland, a direct descendant of victims of the Holocaust, conveys how such journeys can produce transformational moments of personal identification with one's forebears. In a cross-generational merging of experience, he "enters" the past and "dies" at Auschwitz alongside his father and grandparents:

Last night [during a tour of Krakow] I was transported from 1987 to earlier times: before the war and even back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In that way I have become part of Polish Hasidic life, and I also enter the world of my grandparents Dora and Josef. Today we go to Auschwitz. By the time we enter, I have changed from being a "surviving grandson" to being equal, arriving at the gates from the past in the past. Only now can I finally die with Josef, Dora, and my father Hans. Later as I walk back through the camp entrance at Birkenau, I am reborn, in my present life. As witness, not as survivor.

(Dekro 1988:11, quoted in Kugelmass 1992:405-406, 1996:202)



Figure 2. Medieval Jewish quarter, Castelo de Vide, Portugal

It is thus through their embodied encounter with *lieux de mémoire* in the land of origin that these travelers find a way to “return”—somatically and emotionally, as well as intellectually—to the lost life-world of their ancestors.



## Conclusion: Homeland Regained?

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.

(Weil 1952:41)

The “homeland” to which diasporic tourists travel is not homologous with the geographical territory of their destination. It is, instead, a place of the past. Their “return” is thus a journey to a landscape of memory, one that is reached through the work of the imagination (cf. Louie 2001:352). At the same time, however, it must be emphasized that the journey is also a physical one; for these travelers, bodily presence and sensory engagement are critical elements in the homeland’s rediscovery. The sites they visit are, as Basu aptly describes them, “places of the imagination ... but places which may also be visited and revisited, reviewed and revised” (2001:334). And yet these places do not themselves constitute the longed-for homeland; they are *lieux de mémoire*, a bridge to the past. True, the diasporic homeland may be, by definition, “a place of no return” (Brah 1996:192, cf. Klein 2002:14-17). But to move among these sites, welcome the “memories” they provoke, and embrace with the fully sensing body the reconstructed experience of “being there, then” is, for many of these tourists, to find their way—even if only momentarily—back across the rupture of collective displacement and dispersal.

Such journeys operate through a complex, occasionally mystical interplay of past and present, imagination and embodiment, spirituality and physicality. The travelers’ accounts discussed here suggest that for many the trip has a lasting impact, both on their understanding of their origins and on their identity in the present. Particularly for those who feel disconnected from their ancestral “roots,” tourism of this kind can provide a newfound sense of belonging, an experiential tie to a place one can call “home”—even if that home no longer physically exists.

By way of conclusion, let me return to the tour of Jewish Portugal where Kevin and I first met. In the weeks following the tour, participants exchanged a flurry of emails reminiscing about the journey and reflecting on its meaning. As a highlight, several mentioned a particularly moving component of the tour: in Évora, Coimbra, and Lisbon, we paused in

public squares where Jews had been burned at the stake during the Inquisition and said a prayer in their memory (Figure 3). Ana, a Portuguese-born American who recently discovered that her ancestors were Jewish, may have spoken for many when she described how those moments, and the tour as a whole, affected her:

Do you ever wonder if the spirits of those who died burnt ... ever visit and stay with us? Perhaps on those days, when we prayed in Hebrew in their memory, perhaps they visited. Perhaps their souls were there. With us in harmony under the Portuguese beautiful blue skies. They were there to give us strength. They were there to tell us they are happy to be remembered after all these centuries.... Their descendants are coming back, finding out, returning. It was that trip that allowed us to come home.



**Figure 3.** Saying a prayer for the Inquisition dead, Lisbon, Portugal

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