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GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Imagination and Anticipation in Tourism

Edited by
Jonathan Skinner
Dimitrios Theodossopoulos

Berghahn Books
New York • Oxford

First published in 2011 by

Berghahn Books

www.berghahnbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Skinner, Jonathan, Ph. D. Great expectations: imagination and anticipation in tourism / Jonathan Skinner, Dimitrios Theodossopoulos.
p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-85745-277-1 (hardback : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-0-85745-278-8 (ebook : alk. paper) 1. Tourism--Psychological aspects. 2. Travelers--Psychology. I. Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. II. Title.
G155.A1S5615 2011 306.4'819--dc23
2011029397

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper

ISBN: 978-0-85745-277-1 (hardback)
ISBN: 978-0-85745-278-8 (ebook)

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On Difference, Desire and the Aesthetics of the Unexpected: *The White Masai* in Kenyan Tourism

George Paul Meiu

Introduction

In 1998, Swiss author Corinne Hofmann published *The White Masai*, recounting her four-year experience in Kenya as the wife of a Samburu warrior. The narrator, a 27-year-old middle-class Swiss woman, arrived in December 1986 on a vacation in the coastal town of Mombasa, Kenya, accompanied by her Swiss boyfriend, Marco. There, Corinne met the Samburu warrior Lketinga. She fell in love instantly. 'I can't explain, even to myself,' she reflected, 'what secret magic there is about this man' (Hofmann 2005: 14). Her desire for the 'tall, dark brown, beautiful exotic man' (2005: 2) came suddenly and unexpectedly. Corinne confessed that '(i)f anyone had told me two weeks ago I would fall in love with a Masai [*sic*] warrior, I would have laughed out loud' (2005: 14). From then on, 'my whole life has been thrown into chaos' (loc.cit.). Upon return to Switzerland, she broke up with Marco. In July 1987, she flew back to Kenya to find Lketinga. Mesmerized by this 'strange and alien' warrior (2005: 7), Corinne decided to give up her bridal gown store, her apartment, and her car in Switzerland, and move to Kenya. The couple married and settled in a Samburu village in the north of the country, where they opened a small store. Later, they moved to Mombasa to start a tourist souvenir business. The narrator describes the hardship of her life in the bush, her illnesses, her conflicts with Lketinga, and the birth of their daughter,

Napirai. Because of Lketinga's growing jealousy, excessive drinking, and violent behaviour, Corinne eventually decides to run back to Switzerland with her daughter, never to come back.

The White Masai became an international bestseller. In the ten years following its publication, it was translated into twenty-eight languages, and sold more than four million copies. The book also played an important role in shaping the expectations and desires of numerous European female tourists travelling to Kenya and developing intimate relationships with Samburu men. The historical context of these relationships, however, emerged more than a decade prior to the publication of the book. Already in the 1980s, young Samburu men from northern Kenya had begun travelling seasonally to the town of Mombasa, on the coast of the Indian Ocean. There, they earned money by performing 'tribal' dances, selling souvenirs, and developing relationships with female tourists. Corinne's relationship with Lketinga had itself been a product of this context. The publication of *The White Masai* and the international media popularization of the author's story furthered the growth of these intimate exchanges in Kenyan tourism. For many women travelling to Kenya, experiencing 'culture' in the style of *The White Masai* came to refer to a desire for intimacy, love and sex, which were perceived as a self-fulfilling pilgrimage beyond the market and the world of tourist consumption.

Throughout the narrative of *The White Masai*, the primitivist expectations that shaped Corinne's desires for Lketinga and for life in the African bush seem to collapse repeatedly in the face of her 'unexpected' encounters with the everyday realities of contemporary Kenya. The 'unexpectedness' of such encounters, I wish to suggest, carries a double-potentiality. It can further marketable percepts of 'cultural difference' at the same time that it can also offer a critical lens for their historical interrogation. If, for Corinne, falling in love with a Samburu warrior has 'thrown (her) life into chaos', the very possibility of the chaos, of the unknown and the unexpected came later to possibly hold value for some of the tourists developing relationships with Samburu men. The ambiguities generated by the tensions between the production of expectations and the desire for the unexpected are at the core of the present analysis.

In this chapter, I argue that a critical examination of the 'unexpected' outcomes of embodied experience can unveil some of the hegemonic mechanisms through which marketable stereotypes of cultural difference are reproduced. To illustrate my argument, I read the narrative of *The White Masai* against the plot of the Swiss documentary *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi* (Reunion in Barsaloi). This documentary, which celebrates Hofmann's return among the Samburu fourteen years after she fled, actively produces an 'expectation for the unexpected' among consumers of cultural difference. I contextualize these elements of public discourse through ethnographic data of my own. This will raise important questions with regard to the production of expectations in tourism: what are the ways in which the unexpectedness of experience – its unpredictability – resists and

reinforces processes of commodification and consumption? What are the political implications of commodifying the 'unexpected', by generating an expectation for it? And what do the ambiguities surrounding the 'unexpected' tell us about the constitution of the ethnic and cultural commodity?

Commodifying Culture

By emphasizing how the consumption of cultural difference is generative of unexpected experience, I wish to reveal some of the subtle processes through which commodified culture, or the 'ethno-commodity' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) is reconfigured in historical context. Herein, the dialectical relationships between difference and desire, expectation and the unexpected, reshape the particular phenomena that tourists consume as 'culture'.

The White Masai is part of a wider historical moment, in which popular and academic representations increasingly approach cultural difference as an essential reality and as explanatory principle for contemporary phenomena. In contrast to this trend, postcolonial theorists showed that cultural difference and categories of alterity are discursive mechanisms which define positions of power and legitimize various forms of domination and exploitation. Discursive figurations of the Other constitute conditions of possibility for modern, Western sovereignties and subjectivities (Fanon 1952; Fabian 1983; Said 1978; Trouillot 1991). Social domination works, herein, through particular media to create the effect of distance, objectification and inherent difference (Ahmed 2000; Stallybrass and White 1986; McClintock 1995; Magubane 2004; Masquelier 2005). Since the eighteenth century, visual and textual representations played an important role in European figurations of the Orient as an object of contemplation, or in the construction of a 'world *as* exhibition' (Mitchell 1989). By the late twentieth century, international travel and tourism had facilitated growing venues for the cultivation of a 'hegemonic gaze' that reproduced representations of alterity in contexts of inequality and exploitation (Little 1991; Lutz and Collins 1993; Kratz 2002). Anthropological studies of tourism showed how visual and textual representations mediate the asymmetrical relationships between tourists and hosting communities (e.g. Bunten 2008; Bruner 2002, 2005; Kasfir 2007; Phillips and Steiner 1999). While, on one hand, such representations reflect tourists' expectations and desires for cultural authenticity, on the other, they also constitute emblems through which indigenous peoples can brand and market their cultures (Chanock 2000). In late capitalism, cultural difference is often reproduced on the market, through commodified representations of alterity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

Nevertheless, marketable representations of the Other also carry the possibility of incommunicability, miscommunication, or other kinds of unintended readings. Because such representations are always rooted in the concrete practices

of subjects, they are never fully determined in terms of their indexical properties. Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that stereotypes of cultural difference must be perpetually reiterated in the face of their inability to fully reflect actuality. The disarticulation between actuality and abstraction is generative of a certain excess, of a certain material ambivalence (1994: 66, 77; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 23–24). Embodied encounters with various particular Others can both reassert and subvert established representational paradigms. Sara Ahmed (2000) maintains that encounters with strangers 'involve both fixation and the impossibility of fixation'. Such encounters have a 'surprising nature' premised on the 'possibility that *we may not be able to read the bodies of others*' (2000: 8). I build on these approaches to understand unexpected experience as a challenge to consuming cultural difference. Unexpected experience constitutes an excess produced by the failures of both commodity fetishism and the fetishism of cultural difference to fully obscure the historical relations of their production. Faced with unexpected experience, consumers can resituate the locus of cultural difference to new forms of experience, bodily qualities and contexts. Such reconfigurations of the ethno-commodity generate new desires and produce new sources of value.

In the narrative of *The White Masai*, unexpected experience perpetually reorients the narrator's desires away from some of the objects and events where cultural difference is initially presumed to rest. In the plot of the documentary *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi*, however, the 'free play' of unexpected experience is commodified, becoming itself an object of desire, a new source of value. I will draw on Deleuze and Guattari's notion (1983) of 'deterritorialized desire' to suggest that the desires produced by unexpected experience mark at once a limit of the commodity, and a new source of surplus value. I will also revisit Terry Eagleton's definition of aesthetics to argue that the realm of unexpected experience, like the bourgeois world of art, represents both a space of critical potentiality and an ideological condition for the commodity form (1990). In this sense, I refer to an emerging 'aesthetics of the unexpected' among consumers of culture.

Samburu Men, European Women and *The White Masai* in Kenyan Tourism

In order to understand the political implications of *The White Masai* for Kenyan tourism, we must first familiarize ourselves with the historical context in which its narrative emerged. British colonialists as well as traders and travellers to Kenya had long depicted the Samburu people as primitive, exotic, and change-reluctant pastoralists (Kasfir 2007). Following Kenya's Independence in 1963, such images continued to attract travellers and tourists from West European countries, while also generating new contexts in which the Samburu could produce capital.

Meanwhile, as I shall suggest, the shifting forms of intimacy between local youth and European travellers also shaped representations of Samburu cultural difference. Herein, *The White Masai* was to play an important role.

Tourist ads and ethnographic texts typically describe the Samburu as a Maa-speaking ethnic group of semi-nomadic cattle pastoralists, inhabiting the semi-arid savannahs of northern Kenya. These texts often specify that the Samburu are closely related, culturally and linguistically, to the internationally more famous Maasai people of southern Kenya. Drawing on the visual resemblance of Maasai and Samburu dress, decorations, and bodily postures, tourist agencies and publishers of coffee-table books and postcards often brand representations of Samburu people with the highly marketable label of the 'Maasai'. Many tourists, thus, come to know the Samburu as 'a clan of the Maasai' – hence also the title of Hofmann's book. Most strikingly, nationalist discourses and tourist advertisements index Samburu ethnicity through the emblematic image of the tall, slim, light-skinned, half-naked, exotic young male warrior (*moran*), carrying a spear and a club, his hair dyed with ochre, his body adorned with colourful beads. Borrowed from the representations of early travellers, colonial officials and anthropologists, the image of the moran became an icon of tradition and a core brand of Kenya as an international destination (see also Bruner 2005: 35; Kasfir 2007). According to the website of *Kenya Cultural Profiles*,

> the Samburu still cherish and retain the customs and ceremonies of their forebears, unlike most other tribes in Kenya who have been influenced by Western civilization. ... The moran, or warriors, are the most striking members of Samburu society and are inevitably attractive to young girls. They enjoy a convivial and relatively undemanding life with permissive sex for roughly 14 years. Most of them will at one time or another have many lovers who demonstrate affection with lavish gifts and beads.[1]

As the 'most striking members of the Samburu society', the anachronistically perceived moran not only index the Samburu 'tribe' as a whole, but their beauty, so 'inevitably attractive to young girls', and their 'permissive' sexuality is associated with the 'liberated' desire of a lost paradise. The moran become an element of a primitive past that carries value for tourists and travellers because it holds the transformative potential of a temporal and cultural transgression, the possibility of 'becoming different'.

With the spectacular rise of the Kenyan tourist industry throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s,[2] being a Samburu or Maasai moran became a way of embodying value on the market. Beginning in the early 1980s, numerous young Samburu men migrated seasonally some thousand kilometres, from their home communities in northern Kenya to the tourist resorts of the coast. There, they sold spears and beads along various beaches, and performed dances in hotels and cultural villages. Meanwhile, more and more female tourists from Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands, France, Belgium and England, among other European countries, began developing intimate relationships with Samburu moran.

Samburu Men in Coastal Tourism

Faced with the economic challenges of a rapidly declining pastoral economy, and a receding national labour market, many young Samburu men decided to earn money in tourism. Young men initiated, through circumcision, in the age-grade of the moran benefited from twelve to fifteen years of relative independence from their families, before marrying and settling down as elders. During this time span, the community expected them to provide for themselves (usually by living apart, in the forests), and to begin accumulating some capital for future bridewealth payments. While many moran achieved capital by raiding neighbouring ethnic groups for cattle, many others, increasingly since the 1950s, entered the labour market as soldiers, policemen or watchmen. Meanwhile, the Samburu have also come to be aware of possessing capital that is globally marketable, by virtue of the distinctiveness of their ethnic identity. The growing demand for things Samburu, regardless of whether visual depictions (Askew 2004; Kasfir 2004), spears (Kasfir 2007), necklaces (Straight 2002), dances and lovers (Meiu 2009), intensified the attempts of many Samburu to take their cultural and ethnic identity to the market. As neoliberal economic reforms in East Africa placed the possibility of social reproduction in uncertainty and unpredictability (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 306; see also Weiss 2004; Ferguson 2006; Smith 2008), young Samburu men came to envision liveable futures through the commodification of their cultural difference and ethno-sexuality in tourism.

Among young Samburu men, intimate relationships with European female tourists held the potential of securing a future. Through such relationships, they could achieve the prestigious commodities associated, in their home communities, with 'development' (*maendeleo*), respectability, and high status. For them, the Otherness of white women came to signify the possibility of 'overnight' wealth accumulation. A Samburu man told me that he decided to go to Mombasa when he 'saw (that) some people came into white women and built houses'. 'I saw they had a good life,' he added, 'and that's why I decided to go.' Numerous men of Lketinga's age-set (the *Lkuroro* moran, circumcised in 1976) and, even more so, of the following age-set (the *Lmooli* moran, circumcised in 1990) enriched themselves through relationships with European women. Men received money, more or less regularly, from their foreign partners, through Western Union. With this money they bought themselves various goods, from goats and bicycles, to cows and cars, even houses and hotels. Some also managed to use this money to pay bride prices for one or two Samburu wives. They also opened stores, bought land, and built commercial spaces for rent in their home area of Maralal. Many of them owned televisions and videocassette recorders, mobile phones, cars, large cattle herds, and had at some point travelled to Europe. All these were indications of wealth and prestige that marked them out in their home communities (Meiu 2009).

In a context that is characteristic of the manifestations of the neoliberal market in East Africa, where increased unemployment and the growing gap between the

rich and the poor fuel the insecurities of everyday life, the possibility of success came to be associated with an ethos of gambling (Weiss 2004: 9). For many young Samburu men, the figure of the white woman seeking to 'become different' offered itself as a prize to some of those who managed to successfully perform neo-imperial fantasies for tourist consumption, and who were ultimately lucky enough to attract tourists' desire. 'My family was very poor,' one Samburu man told me, 'so I went to Mombasa to try my luck with a little bit of business.' 'I (had) also heard,' he explained, 'that if you get a white woman, you will never lack anything again.' However, the neoliberal market and its gambling-like contexts of value production generated high anxieties among moran in tourism. The large number of men returning home without any capital or aging in poverty on the coast added an air of urgency to finding a white woman.

European Women in Kenya

Female tourists on the Kenyan coast encountered Samburu moran on the beaches, in hotels, in bars and clubs, or on the streets of towns such as Mombasa, Mtwapa, Ukunda or Malindi. Many of them viewed the distinctive attire and the proud demeanour of the young moran as more 'originally African' than those of other locals. 'The morans,' a German woman told me, are not only 'naturally beautiful', but 'they are all that Africa is about; they are its essence'. Therefore, many women desired intimate relationships with the moran as a way to authenticate their own travelling experiences. The Samburu moran, many women knew, came to the coast from far-away places of the country, and, therefore, seemed less 'corrupted' by the commercialized nature of the everyday in tourist resorts. By developing intimate relationships with Samburu moran, by visiting their home villages in northern Kenya, and by establishing strong affective ties with their families and friends, female tourists hoped to escape the seeming artificiality of the tourist market, for a more 'authentic', more 'real' Africa. A woman from France, who had been visiting Kenya for over fourteen years, told me that after meeting her Samburu partner on the coast on her first visit, she never returned again to coastal tourist resorts. 'I always come directly here, to the Samburu District,' she explained, '(because) this is real Africa, not the Africa of tourists.' 'Real Africa' appeared to offer a sense of affective community that seemed to have been lost in the West, and appeared to be only superficially mimicked in tourism.

There is a wide variety of types of relationships that European women developed with Samburu men. While many sought the company of moran for one-night stands, or for the duration of their vacation, many others engaged in long-term relationships or even marriages. In the latter case, women sometimes moved permanently to Kenya, at other times, more rarely, their partners moved to Europe. Most often, the partners visited each other regularly, preferring to maintain separate

residences. In all cases, however, women were more likely to determine how the relationship would unfold, because they were the ones financing their male partners. Although most women were older than their partners (by ten to thirty years), and only few had children with them, they often adopted or sponsored one or several children of their partners' lineage. While all women arrived to Kenya firstly as tourists, many eventually returned to work for NGOs, or to start various small businesses while living with their partners. Relationships usually, but not always, ended when women were no longer able to finance their partners, or when men decided to also take on wives from their own communities.

European women, who were in long-term relationships with Samburu men, often saw themselves as having come to embody cultural difference. This added a sense of value and authenticity to their lives. Numerous times, women actualized their sense of authenticity by writing autobiographic poems and memoirs, by giving interviews about their lives to journalists and film-makers, or by merely narrating their experiences to families and friends in Europe. All these modes of articulating experience cultivated a Western subjectivity that produced the truth of the self through the power of confession (see Foucault 1978; Gusdorf 1980). Although not all women wrote, and although there were many women who regularly refused to be interviewed about their lives in Kenya, numerous other women had already published their memoirs (e.g. Bentsen 1989; Oddie 1994; Mason 1995; Hofmann [1998] 2005, 2006; Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004; Hachfeld-Tapukai 2004, 2009; Wiszowaty 2009). Overall, these writings share a set of presuppositions and rhetorical techniques. For example, authors often depict socio-economic inequalities as 'cultural difference', and figure material poverty as a source of authenticity. They also often avoid reflecting on their own capacities to freely enter and exit sites of cultural difference, thus trying to authenticate their experiences in the African bush. Meanwhile, there is an overarching presumption that the narrating subject can have the Other, carnally or otherwise. The Other often appears to be perceived by the narrator as raw material to which she adds value in the writing process. But, besides this, as we will see with *The White Masai*, these narratives are, in fact, much more complex.

'The White Masai'

Hofmann's memoir was first published in German in 1998 and was soon to become a bestseller. In German-speaking countries, the book was part of a wider genre of women's life writings that celebrated the authentic experiences of cross-cultural romances or marriages to foreign men. Most widely read among these are, for example, Betty Mahmoody's (1987) *Not Without My Daughter*, the story of an American woman trying to escape her oppressive marriage to an Iranian man, and Hachfeld-Tapukai's (2004) *Mit der Liebe einer Lowin* (With the Love of a Lioness), the story of a German woman married to a Samburu man in Kenya.

Next to such titles, *The White Masai* was widely available in book stores and 'Flohmarkts', and appealed mostly to a female readership. Elise, a German traveller I interviewed in the Samburu District in 2009, said that she first received the book from a relative, long before deciding to come to Kenya. The book, she said, was a favourite topic of debate in women's circles in recent years and was known to provoke both positive and negative reactions. With its translation into English, in 2005, the book also became available at stores in Kenya, where it was sold mostly to tourists, along with postcards, coffee-table books and other souvenirs.

Most women travelling to Kenya and developing relationships with Samburu men read the book, at some point, and often compared and contrasted their own experiences with those of the narrator. For example, some women criticized Corinne for 'misunderstanding her husband' or 'misrepresenting Samburu culture', while others tried to learn, from her experiences, ways to deal with their own relationships. Meanwhile, Samburu people knew of 'Lketinga's story' more by word of mouth rather than through the book itself. This story was part of a growing genre of folk narratives about the failed relationships between moran and *muzungu mamas* (white women). However, with the book's translation into English, the story had a second coming. Suddenly numerous journalists visited the district in search of Lketinga and of white women who had married Samburu men and had been living there. These journalists wanted to capture the 'sensationalism' of such cross-cultural marriages. In 2004, the German company Constantin Film went to the Samburu District to make a film after Hofmann's book. In this context, many Samburu were hired either as extras or as members of the cast. Furthermore, since 2005, several copies of *The White Masai* also circulated among school-educated people in Maralal. Meanwhile, Samburu men in tourism often heard about the book from their European partners. Joseph, a young Samburu man, recalled how his British girlfriend once told him 'Oh, I read about Lketinga and *The White Masai* and I love your culture.' She told him: 'I want you to make me experience it like that.' By 2008, Samburu men in tourism had already begun occasionally to refer to any foreign woman in a relationship with a moran, as 'a white Maasai'.

In this context, Hofmann's memoir has important implications with regard to the commodification of cultural difference, the production of tourist expectations, and the reconfiguration of desires and intimacies. In what follows, I outline some of the potentialities of unexpected experience, by critically reading *The White Masai* and the documentary *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi* in relation to the context outlined above.

Unexpected Experience in *The White Masai*

In the eyes of Western readers, Hofmann's memoir unquestionably makes an argument for cultural difference as an irreconcilable ontological reality (Berman 2005: 211, 214). However, *The White Masai* does more than just reiterate cultural difference. Because Corinne's unexpected encounters with the everyday realities of contemporary Kenya continuously disrupt the desiring process, her inability to locate and consume the desired difference becomes a recurring theme. In the process, the narrator perpetually resituates cultural difference to new realms of embodiment and experience as a way of explaining incommunicability or miscommunication.

Corinne's desire for intimacy with Lketinga destabilizes, from the outset, the visual paradigm through which the body of the moran is marketed in Kenyan tourism. At the beginning of their relationship, Corinne contemplates Lketinga's bodily beauty in terms of its visual aspects. She sees a 'tall, dark brown, beautiful exotic man' who 'is wearing almost no clothes – just a short red loincloth'. He wears beads, '(h)is long red hair has been plaited into thin braids, and his face is painted with symbols' (Hofmann 2005: 2). However, the visual beauty of the iconic moran soon generates a desire for tactile proximity. Corinne explains that 'all that is running through my mind is how I can make contact with the breathtakingly beautiful man,' because 'just staring at him isn't going to get me anywhere' (loc.cit.). For Corinne, expectations of cultural difference gradually move away from the stereotypical visual idiom to a realm of synesthesia and affect. This is reflected, for example, in her desire to engage the moran through bodily proximity: 'I want to stroke his face and know what it's like to kiss him' (2005: 19). But, before she finds out from a local woman that 'Masai [*sic*] men ... don't kiss (because) (t)he mouth is for eating, and kissing ... is contemptible' (2005: 21), Corinne undergoes a deep sense of disappointment when Lketinga unexpectedly refuses to kiss her:

> At long last I dare to come close to his beautiful mouth and softly touch my lips to his. All of a sudden I feel all of his body go rigid, and he's staring at me in horror. 'What you do?' he asks and takes a step backwards. Brought down to earth with a bang I stand there, understanding nothing; then, suddenly ashamed, I turn around and run into the hotel distraught. In bed I'm overcome by a fit of crying. (2005: 19)

The sense of communicational failure, the initial impossibility of establishing a common ground for an embodied engagement with each other comes unexpectedly, disrupting desire.

Throughout the narrative, Corinne experiences various circumstances pertaining to sex, food sharing, sleeping practices, defecation, disease, bureaucratic corruption, or the expression of emotions in similarly unexpected and disruptive manners. Initially, she had imagined her life with Lketinga as a

true 'romance'. Said Corinne, 'in my mind's eye I'd lain in this man's hands often, imagined kisses and the wildest of nights' (2005: 19). Yet, every expectation can produce something unexpected. After her first attempts at intimacy, she is faced with the challenge of an embodied difference that needs to be overcome if a common premise of pleasure and intimacy is to be established between the partners. This becomes more obvious in Corinne's reflection on her first sexual encounter with Lketinga, narrated in a typically confessional mode:

> When it gets dark and we can no longer hold off the moment of physical contact, I sit down on the narrow little cot and wait with pounding heart for the minute I have longed for. Lketinga sits down beside me and all I can see is the mother-of-pearl button on his forehead, the ivory rings in his ears, and [the] whites of his eyes. All of a sudden everything happens at once. Lketinga presses me down to the cot, and already I can feel his erection. Before I can even make up my mind whether or not my body is ready for this, I feel a pain, hear strange noises and it's all over. I feel like bursting into tears of disappointment. *This was not at all what I had expected. It's only now that I realize that this is someone from a completely alien culture.* But my thoughts don't get any further than that when suddenly the whole thing happens again. It happens again several times during the night, and after the third or the fourth time we 'do it', I give up trying to use kisses or caresses to prolong the experience. Lketinga doesn't seem to like it. (2005: 21; emphasis added)

Corinne confesses her experience in detail not only as a way to speak the truth about the Self (cf. Foucault 1978), but also to suggest that difference is deep-rooted. The narrator comes to understand all that which she encounters unexpectedly as a difference in culture. Cultural difference always emerges in a new, unexpected form, irritating and frustrating the desiring subject. For example, when Corinne realizes that Lketinga constantly refuses to eat with her, she asks Priscilla, a young Maasai woman, for an explanation. Priscilla tells Corinne that the moran are not allowed to eat in the presence of women; neither, for that matter, anything that a woman has touched or looked at (Hofmann 2005: 21). This upsets Corinne:

> So Lketinga can't even eat with me and I can never cook anything for him. Funnily, this is something that shakes me even more than the idea of never having good sex. … I'm speechless. All my romantic fantasies of cooking and eating together out in the bush or in a simple hut collapse. I can hardly hold back my tears. (2005: 24)

Expectations of primitivist romance collapse, once again, in the face of the unexpected. But Corinne does not give in to the initial disappointment, instead trying to learn about Lketinga by translating unexpected experience into cultural difference. In this way, initial reasons of disappointment become new sources of excitement. For example, increasingly stimulated by the 'savage perfume of his long red hair' (hair dyed with ochre), Corinne notes that 'the wholly alien' and

'the barriers' begin to appear less distant, and that she feels a 'whole new sense of joy' (2005: 25). Hence, unexpected experience produces new expectations and new objects of desire. Ironically, however, Corinne's desire to overcome the cultural difference of her partner, as a condition for the realization of their love, is premised on her fetishistic desire for the very same Otherness that Lketinga seems to embody. This central contradiction sets in motion the dialectics between expectation and the unexpected: unexpected experience produces new expectations, while every expectation can have unexpected outcomes.

The perpetual disruption and regeneration of desire as a result of unexpected experience carries an important critical potential for the historical analyst. Unexpected experience upsets desire in ways that can indicate limitations in the consumption of the ethno-commodity. Such desire, I suggest, can be imagined in terms of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983) refer to as 'deterritorialized desire'. Deleuze and Guattari argue that, in order to function, all societies must structure, limit, and 'code' infinite, interminable flows of desire. But, they explain, structures are never fully determinate, and every structural organization produces its forms of excess or 'deterritorialized' desire. In capitalism, such forms of desire (as evidenced, for example, in alcoholism or schizophrenia) often resist coercion into the productive process, and thus facilitate a terrain from which the system can be critically engaged (1983: 140; see also Roffe 2005). For us, unexpected experience deterritorializes desire, in that it allows it to slip away from its structurally established, normative object. In this sense, unexpected experience opens up a space from which we can begin to question the objects of our desires, and to investigate historically the hegemonic mechanisms through which these objects are reproduced.

Deterritorialized desire reshapes both the Other and the desiring subject. The stereotypically perceived moran melts away in the face of Corinne's desire for proximity, destabilizing the consumptive process. The unexpected, therefore, not only unfixes the Other, but also threatens the boundaries of the subject. Throughout the narrative, the tensions between the solid and the fluid moments of Corinne's self-perception are a recurring theme. In her first meetings with Lketinga, the narrator perceives her own body becoming fluid: 'My knees have gone weak, I can hardly stand. Sweat is flowing from every pore. I have to hold on to a pillar on the edge of the dance floor to stop myself collapsing' (Hofmann 2005: 6). But when Lketinga leaves, the terra firma returns under her feet (2005: 3). The initial loss of the terra firma is pleasant yet annoying, ecstatic yet dangerous. It pushes the subject off her limits, making her 'a complete wreck' (2005: 3). The subject and her capacity to desire and consume can only reemerge by reestablishing the boundaries between herself and the Other. Discovering cultural difference anew, the narrator also shapes these boundaries in new forms. For instance, Corinne sees herself as gradually coming to embody Otherness. She is no longer just a white woman, but a 'white Maasai'. 'I feel myself at one with this man,' Corinne reflects of her intimacy with Lketinga, 'and now, this night, I

know that despite all the barriers between us, *I have already become a captive of his world*' (2005: 25; emphasis added).

In the narrative of *The White Masai*, unexpected experience reconfigures the ethno-commodity. The desiring subject is initially faced with the impossibility of concretely locating and consuming the cultural difference that is abstractly marketed through the visual image of the moran. But, eventually, she rediscovers difference in new media and new contexts. Unexpected experience, therefore, unveils, here, an experiential limitation of the consumption of cultural difference, from which the ethno-commodity can reemerge in new ways.

The Commodification of the Unexpected in *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi*

If, on one hand, unexpected experience destabilizes the ethno-commodity, on the other hand, the unexpected can also become a new source of surplus value. In this section, I turn to the Swiss documentary film *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi* (2005), to show how unexpected experience is commodified in the representations that foreground the popularity of Hofmann's book. Such representations now produce and market an 'expectation for the unexpected'.

The film *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi* (Reunion in Barsaloi) documents Corinne Hofmann's experience while returning to Kenya, to 'her African family', fourteen years after she had fled with her daughter. The film was to serve as documentation for a further memoir of her experience in Kenya (Hofmann 2006). Corinne is now accompanied on her trip by her publisher and by a cameraman and film producer. The two men carefully capture and document every step of her trip. The film begins with her flight into Nairobi, her short stay in the Kenyan capital, and continues with her gradual move towards the Samburu District in northern Kenya. The documentary reaches its peak with Corinne's actual reunion with Lketinga and his family. Towards the end of her stay in Samburu District, Corinne visits an Italian missionary who had helped her on her first trip. She also visits the set of a movie that is now being shot after *The White Masai*. In the end, she returns to Mombasa to revisit the place where she had first met Lketinga. Celebrating the authentic image that Hofmann had built for herself, the film is entirely based on her confessions. At almost regular intervals, Corinne appears in the focus of static scenery, confessing her perceptions and emotions to the camera. Although, at first sight, the confessional mode of the documentary resembles that of Hofmann's memoir, the film actually stages and commodifies unexpected experience by inscribing it into well-known colonial representational paradigms.

The documentary opens with Corinne sleeping in the aeroplane on her way to Kenya. Suddenly, she wakes up, notices the camera, and confesses: 'I was calm and now I get cramps in my stomach again (and) wet palms. I am nervous (*gespannt*) to find out what will happen. Man, it's been almost fourteen years. I am anxious to see

how everything has changed and how the people will react. I am anxious.' (My translation from German). The German verb *gespannt* (nervous or anxious in anticipation of something that will happen), produces the unexpected as that which gives value to the film, effecting the viewer's tension in the face of the unknown.

The suspense grows. Sitting down on the terrace of a lodge, with an exotic savannah scenery at her back, Corinne confesses on the morning of the day when she was supposed to meet Lketinga: 'I am nervous. I am also a little down, because all this can excite you. One doesn't know what to expect. I don't know if I should laugh or cry. We will see what wins out.' (My translation from German.) The impossibility of predictability, the fact that 'one doesn't know what to expect' fuels the viewer's tension, generating strong contradictory emotions. However, the outcomes of Corinne's trip to Kenya were, in fact, more predictable than the film will have us believe. She was visiting Kenya as a special guest of the set of the movie *The White Masai*. She had earned extensively both from her book and the movie and had also sent money to Lketinga and sponsored his community throughout those years. Consequently, the remaining anxieties associated with the reunion are amplified in a confessional mode, producing a marketable version of the unexpected.

The film stages unexpected experience within a highly recognizable narrative structure, by using colonial stereotypes, such as the rehearsal of a modernist temporality and of the visual paradigms associated with it. The film begins with a scene from the plane, a sign of Western modernity to which Corinne and her companions belong. The plot then gradually descends the evolutionary ladder, from Kenya's capital of Nairobi, a chaotic middle space between tradition and modernity, to the authentic, 'primitive' space of the savannah and the Samburu villages. There, Lketinga continues to live in an archaic past, in a traditional 'mud' hut. Leaving Nairobi, and reaching a cliff of spectacular scenery on the Rift Valley, Corinne confesses that '(y)esterday, Nairobi still wasn't really it'. 'There,' she explains, 'I wasn't yet at home.' But, faced with the exotic beauty of the landscapes of the Rift Valley, she suggests that this 'looks much more like that which I know, like I used to live'. 'We are approaching my homeland (*Heimat*),' she adds, '(a)nd I'm nervous about what is waiting for me.' Similarly, when she visits her missionary friend in the romantic landscapes of the Samburu lowlands, she explains that we arrived 'for real, at the end of the world'. The film orders the visually objectified sceneries on a modernist temporal axis, so that Corinne's return to 'her African family', is also a return in time (see Fabian 1983). Through a well-known imperialist archetype, 'the journey is figured as proceeding forward in geographical space but backward in historical time' (McClintock 1995: 30). Using stereotypical images and stylistic modalities, the film brings unexpected experience into the 'secure' space of recognition and marketability.

The film not only commodifies unexpected experience, but, in doing so, it also tries to foreclose the disruptive effects that the unexpected can have on the desiring subject and on the consumptive process. This can be imagined in terms of what

Deleuze and Guattari (1983) refer to as the commodification of deterritorialized desires. This is a way for the economic system to transform that which is anti-productive into a new source of value. Deleuze and Guattari argue that, under the guise of 'liberation', late capitalism cultivates a regime of unrestricting ('decoding') flows of desire (e.g. 'the liberation of sexuality'), only to assign them monetary value (1983: 140; see also Roffe 2005: 36). For this purpose, such unruly desires cannot remain anti-productive, but must 'throw themselves into desiring production' (Pronger 2002: 106–7). In the narrative of *The White Masai*, unexpected experience entertains, to some extent, deterritorialized desires that are anti-productive, disrupting the consumption process and threatening the desiring subject. The plot of the documentary, however, attempts to 'tame' such desires, reorienting them towards economic productivity.

Through commodification, unexpected experience becomes a fetish, disconnected from any critical potentialities.[3] What is marketed here, then, is particularly the 'fascinating' experience of cross-cultural incommunicability and miscommunication. It is not ironic then, that, when Corinne finally 'reunites' with Lketinga and 'her African family', few words are exchanged. Instead, the silence that emerges between them becomes itself a cause for tension and suspense, a product of cultural difference, and a new source of value.

Towards an Aesthetics of the Unexpected

In the previous two sections, I set up an analytical contrast between the narrative of *The White Masai* and the plot of the documentary *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi*. I suggested that, in the former, unexpected experience reconfigures cultural difference, whereas, in the latter, the unexpected offers itself for consumption, as a desirable product of difference. The narrator of *The White Masai* seeks Otherness at the same time that she tries to overcome it; she continuously resituates cultural difference, at the same time that she needs to stabilize it, in order to consume it. In this way, she allows objectified notions of difference to shift in the fluidity of embodied experience. This experiential fluidity, I suggest, carries critical potential, because it helps us question those forces that intervene to restrict and commodify experience, in order to make it valuable to the larger system of production. Such forces become visible with the hegemonic reproduction of marketable expectations in *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi*. Through the rehearsal of colonial stereotypes, the film attempts to capitalize on overwhelmingly diverse desires and experiences by shaping them in ways that are commensurable with the commodity form. Read against each other, the memoir and the film show how the unruly desires produced by unexpected experience can, firstly, emerge as a limitation of the commodity, then, as a new source of value.

Nevertheless, from a different analytical viewpoint, the memoir and the film might not be that different after all. Both are forms of public discourse that

circulate representations of cultural difference to a wide audience. Both are also commodities generative of desires among Western consumers. Therefore, one can go a step further and argue that both the book and film can share similar contrasting potentialities. First, looked at from the perspective of the market, the memoir, like the film, also commodifies the unexpected. Because its narrative is circulated as a commodity, the described unexpected experience reaches the reader in the 'secure' space contained between the two covers of the book. For the reader, Corinne's experiences might as well confirm previous assumptions of unbridgeable cultural difference (Berman 2005: 214), and figure the unexpected as a pleasurable addition to the quality of travelling experience. Not unlike the film, the book can, then, also produce an 'expectation for the unexpected'. For example, Elise, a German traveller I interviewed in the Samburu District in 2009, explained that 'the most important thing I took from *The White Masai* was that you should never have too strong ideas about what to expect when you come here'. The book had inspired Elise to travel with an appreciation for surprise, the unknown, and the unexpected. 'I always think,' she added, 'that the best moments of travel are those that you seek least.'

Second, the commodification of the unexpected is itself never fully determined. The marketable experience of the unexpected can itself be disrupted in various contexts of consumption, producing new desires and new expectations. For example, when I discussed the book and the film with Sabrina, a French woman who had been married to a Samburu man for over twenty years, she offered to explain that 'everything is so surprising for (Corinne) because she is stupid: she doesn't speak Samburu (language) and she doesn't realize (that) the people around her only want her money'. Sabrina spoke the Samburu dialect of Maa language fluently and also considered herself knowledgeable on issues pertaining to Samburu culture. For her, the marketable appeal of the unexpected was of little importance, because it was premised on Corinne's ignorance of local issues. Here, Sabrina's desire to assert the authenticity of her own experience over that of Corinne disrupted marketable notions of the unexpected in new ways.

Therefore, in a more dialectical analytical lens, in which expectations and the unexpected perpetually reconfigure each other, unexpected experience can be at once an experience generative of surplus value, and an anti-economic space from which the hegemonic reproduction of the ethno-commodity can be critiqued. In order to capture this double-potentiality of unexpected experience I speak of an 'aesthetics of the unexpected'. Aesthetics, Terry Eagleton (1990) argues, came about in the struggles of the Western bourgeoisie to account for the lives of bodies (1990: 15). It attempted to produce a new type of human subject that would not threaten political unity, 'one which, like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive external power' (1990: 19). The commodification of the unexpected, similarly, has the capacity to cultivate a consuming subject who does not question the historical forces that have shaped objects of desire, but rather seeks meaning in fetishized subjective

experience. However, Eagleton suggests, as much as the domain of aesthetics reflects bourgeois ideas of subjectivity and political unity, it also offers itself as a refuge to the bourgeoisie from their own repressive values. Therefore, aesthetics produces, at once, a body repressed by law, and a sensuous body fuelled by creativity and the revolutionary energy of anti-instrumentalist thought (1990: 8–9). Similarly, one can read unexpected experience, in the instances of public discourse analyzed above, as a new aesthetic space of the tourist and traveller at the turn of the millennium. This aesthetic space of unexpected experience can be simultaneously subordinated to the laws of exchange value and commodity fetishism, while also maintaining a realm of indeterminacy, from which the hegemonic abstractions of capital can be questioned and critiqued.

Conclusion

The White Masai is the product of a context in which Samburu male bodies have become highly valuable in Kenyan tourism, in which European female tourists desired more authentic lives through intimate relations with moran, and in which Samburu young men imagined futures by capitalizing on their ethnic sexuality. In this context, *The White Masai* is also productive of new expectations, new desires, and new ways of imagining cultural difference. In this chapter, I mapped some of the political potentialities of the book for its historical context. Further ethnographic research should also show what role the book plays in shaping diverse forms of desire and intimacy among tourists, more particularly. By reading the narrative of Hofmann's memoir in relation to the film *Wiedersehen in Barsaloi*, I identified an emerging aestheticization of the unexpected. The aesthetics of the unexpected, I argued, is an experiential realm based on the indeterminacy of representations of cultural difference, on their possible incommunicability, or, for that matter, on the limits of commodity fetishism. This aesthetic realm entertains shifting forms of desire which can also regenerate and reconfigure cultural difference and the ethno-commodity.

Marketable forms of cultural difference are, therefore, perpetually shaped, in historical context, through the dialectical relationships between particular forms of difference and desire, and between expectation and unexpected experience.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Jean Comaroff, John L. Comaroff, Jennifer Cole, Judith Farquhar, Anita Hannig, Larisa Jasarevic, Fred Ketchum, Willam Mazzarella, Kathryn McHarry, Erin Moore, Nancy Munn, Jen Smith, and the participants in the *Medicine, the Body, and Practice Workshop* at the University of Chicago, for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

Notes

1. Kenyan Cultural Profiles website (http://www.enchanted-landscapes.com/profiles/Samburu.htm, accessed on 22 October 2004).
2. Although tourists were coming to Kenya as early as the 1900s (Kibicho 2009: 63), their numbers boomed in the last three decades of the century. Following Independence, in 1963, the government of Kenya embraced tourism as a main path to economic development, establishing, for this purpose, the Kenyan Tourism Development Corporation (1965), and the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife (1966). Throughout the 1970s, the number of visitors levelled at 350,000 per annum. However, following global economic reforms, in the 1980s the number increased twofold (Schoss 1995: 36–38). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the number of tourists visiting Kenya increased further (by 94.4 per cent), reaching in 2004, 1,361,000 per annum. Wildlife safaris, coastal beaches, cultural villages, and historical sites were some of Kenya's main tourist attractions (Schoss 1995; Bruner 2005; Kasfir 2007); sexual relations with locals were yet another (Kibicho 2009).
3. Elizabeth Povinelli (2001) encounters a similar situation among the Wadeye of Australia. She shows how the indigenous Australians of Wadeye are caught up in situations wherein they are pivotal to the production of surplus value for national and global tourist industries, and yet stand to benefit little, if at all, from their pursuits. Povinelli observes how, in Wadeye, a growing sense of trauma and panic in the face of contrasting social obligations comes to be commodified as Aboriginal spirituality – as *Geist*, and Dreaming – in response to tourist desires. And, if panic marks here 'a limit to capital internal to the subject' (2001: 249, 251), 'such moments are quickly fetishized as authentic culture – as the valuable "real stuff" of culture' (2001: 252).

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