**Virtual Authenticity: A Tour of Paris, Las Vegas**

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Las Vegas is the city of signs. It is a place where form is privileged over content, where great pride is taken in fakery, where simulacra reign supreme. In this city, architecture becomes subordinate to the sign. Sometimes the sign can be quite literal, such as the iconic sign of the former Stardust hotel, and at others, the sign can be metonymical, such as the Colosseum at Caesar’s Palace. Architects have long studied the relationship between this city and its signs – they’ve learned from Las Vegas – and many have declared it the sine qua non of postmodern space.

Tourists are unsung armies of semioticians, to borrow the figure from Jonathan Culler. Their primary impulse is to collect and reproduce signs. They take photographs. They buy souvenirs. They send postcards. It is no surprise that Las Vegas, the city of signs, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. In 2015, more than 42 million people visited Las Vegas, a far greater number than those who visited Paris the same year. Put another way, more tourists came into contact with the simulacrum of the Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas than with the original in France.

My paper explores Paris, Las Vegas. I ask what of France and *francité* becomes privileged at the iconic Paris hotel and casino, arguably one of the most famous simulacra of France outside of the country. The featured attraction at Paris Las Vegas is the Eiffel Tower Experience, advertised as an “exhilarating, adrenaline-charged glass elevator ride up 460 feet” to see “breathtaking 360-degree city views” with “optimal photo opportunities” at “the most romantic spot in Vegas.” Included in admission is an iPad loaded with the views of what one would actually see from the Tour Eiffel in Paris. Point the iPad toward the Strip and you’ll “see” Notre Dame, the Louvre, or a number of other sites on screen.

Authenticity returns to this simulacrum via virtuality. Given the Eiffel Tower Experience, I investigate how we might conceive of a virtual authenticity. Is simulation the necessary precondition for its existence? How is this different from virtual reality? How do we account for paradox – the structuring principle of the virtual authentic – in relation to a tourist’s search for authenticity? And what might all this mean for the city of light and the city of signs?

**Short Biography**

Stephanie Malia Hom currently serves as Executive Director of the Berkeley-based nonprofit, Acus Foundation. She formerly held the position of Presidential Professor of Italian at the University of Oklahoma. She took her MA and PhD in Italian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where she co-founded the Tourism Studies Working Group in 2003.

She is the author of *The Beautiful Country: Tourism and the Impossible State of Destination Italy* (U of Toronto Press 2015) and co-editor with Ruth Ben-Ghiat of *Italian Mobilities* (Routledge 2016). Her essays and articles have been published in a wide range of venues, including leading journals in the fields of Tourism Studies, Italian Studies, Urban Studies, and Folklore. She is finishing her second book manuscript, *The Empire Between: Mobility, Colonialism, and Space in Italy & Libya.*

Her research has been supported by a number of prestigious fellowships, including those from the American Academy in Rome, American Council of Learned Societies, American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Harvard University, and the Stanford Humanities Center.

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