

# Discursive Extraction: Language, Value, and Capital in Myanmar's Tourism Frontier

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**Abstract:** The mid-2010s tourism boom in Myanmar (Burma) shows how discourse creates and extracts value in tourism frontiers. Building on studies documenting tourism's operation as an extractive industry, interviews with 60 tourists, residents, and industry stakeholders in Myanmar in 2018–20 reveal that tourism in frontiers is oriented by an extractivist logic. The high-value symbolic goods pursued by tourists are experiences with people who are otherised as “premodern”, which tourists accumulate and exchange on a linguistic market in a process described as *discursive extraction*. What is theorised as an extractive relation grounded in colonial hierarchies of value commodifies people and places as repositories of symbolic capital, supporting the territorialisation of spaces for tourism development and revealing discourse to be a constitutive force in the extractive geographies of tourism.

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ (ဗမာ) တွင် ၂၀၁၀ ခုနှစ်များအလယ်ပိုင်းကာလအတွင်း ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်း ထွန်းကားမှုတွင် ဘာသာစကား ဆက်သွယ်မှုများက နယ်စပ်ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်းများတွင် မည်သို့သောတန်ဖိုးကို ဖန်တီးပေးပြီး မည်သို့သောတန်ဖိုးကို ထုတ်နုတ်သည်ကို ပြသပါသည်။ ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်းကို သယံဇာတထုတ်ယူသည့် လုပ်ငန်းတစ်ခုအဖြစ် မှတ်တမ်းတင် ဖော်ပြထားသည့် လေ့လာမှုများအပေါ် အခြေခံ၍ ၂၀၁၈-၂၀ ခုနှစ်တွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ ခရီးသွားအဦး ၆၀၊ ဒေသခံများနှင့် လုပ်ငန်းဆိုင်ရာ အစုရှယ်ယာပါဝင်သူများနှင့် တွေ့ဆုံမေးမြန်းမှုများအရ နယ်စပ်ဒေသများတွင် ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်းသည် သယံဇာတထုတ်ယူသည့် ယုတ္တိဗေဒတစ်ခုဖြင့် အလေးပေးထားကြောင်း ထုတ်ဖော်နေပါသည်။ ခရီးသွားများ လိုက်စားသည့် တန်ဖိုးမြင့်သင့်ကတေကုန်စည်များမှာ “ခေတ်မီမှုမရှိသေးသော” ဟု သတ်မှတ်ထားသော လူများနှင့် ရရှိသောအတွေ့အကြုံ များဖြစ်ပြီး ဤအရာများကိုစုဆောင်းပြီး ခရီးသွားများသည် ဘာသာစကားဆက်သွယ်မှုဆိုင်ရာ ထုတ်ယူမှု ဟု ဖော်ပြ ထား သော လုပ်ငန်းစဉ်တစ်ခုအတွင်း ဘာသာစကားနှင့်ဆိုင်သောဈေးကွက်တွင်လဲလှယ်ပြုကုန်သည်။ ကိုလိုနီခေတ်တန်ဖိုးအဆင့်များ အပေါ် အခြေခံ၍ သယံဇာတထုတ်ယူသည့် ဆက်သွယ်မှုတစ်ခုအဖြစ် သိအံ့ရိပြုထားသည်မှာ အထိမ်းအမှတ် ဆိုင်ရာပြတိုက် အဖြစ် လူများနှင့် နေရာများကိုမှတ်ယူသဘာဓာထားပြီး၊ ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်း ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးအတွက် နယ်မြေချွေထွင်မှုများကို ထောက်ပံ့ ပေးပြီး ဘာသာစကားဆက်သွယ်မှုသည် ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်း၏ သယံဇာတထုတ်ယူသည့်နေရာများတွင် ဖွဲ့စည်းပုံအခြေခံဥပဒေ တစ်ရပ်ဖြစ်ကြောင်း ထုတ်ဖော်ပြသနေပါသည်။

**Keywords:** extractivism, modernity, discourse, travel, authenticity, Burma

Myanmar is essentially the last uncharted frontier. So it follows that everybody wants a piece of it.—*Condé Nast Traveler* (Lin 2014)

For a brief period in the 2010s, Myanmar (Burma) was the doyen of global tourism. After 58 years of harshly repressive military dictatorship, in 2010 the South-east Asian country's ruling junta announced a transition to an elected civilian government, leading the democratic opposition to lift a tourism boycott it had advocated since the 1990s. The impact was swift: between 2012 and 2015, tourist arrivals in Myanmar<sup>1</sup> surged by 573% (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism 2016). The rush to visit the formerly isolated country was largely motivated by what the magazine *Condé Nast Traveler* called the promise of experiencing a “place and people stuck in a time-warp” (Lin 2014), one of few tourist-friendly states where globalisation had yet to make landfall. This, however, was an ephemeral condition—one that would last only so long as the bulk of the world's tourists stayed away. Such did the magazine *Travel + Leisure*, in naming Myanmar the 2014 “Destination of the Year”, urge its readers to:

Go before the place internationalizes and loses the look of old Asia that has been preserved by its harshly imposed self-isolation ... Go before the people in remote villages grow accustomed to tourists and lose their curiosity about you, before people switch to global ways of dressing and thinking ... Go before everyone else goes. (Solomon 2014)

The trope of an “authentic” time-space untouched by modernity, a rhetorical frame widely applied to Myanmar, was often paired with another long-running discourse in tourism: evading the masses by stepping “off the beaten track”. At the core of Myanmar's popularity as a tourism destination was the value of going “before everyone else”, and the potentiality of converting this experience into capital.

The mid-2010s rush to visit Myanmar exemplifies how discourse, or language that performs ideological work, plays a fundamental role in both creating and extracting value from frontiers. I describe *discursive extraction* by enjoining recent perspectives on the geographies of extractivism with scholarship developed in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, tracing the creation and exploitation of Myanmar as a tourism frontier—a space where land, goods, and people are territorialised for tourism industry development (Mostafanezhad 2020)—before the COVID-19 pandemic and then the 1 February 2021 military coup brought an end to the tourism boom. In doing so, this article diverges from influential tourism scholarship, which argues that tourists seek experiences in a quest for authenticity (Cohen 1988; MacCannell 1999) and/or a process of reflexive identity construction (Bruner 2005; Desforges 2000). Instead, the case of Myanmar indicates that much tourism—and especially that in frontiers—is motivated by an extractivist logic to accumulate symbolic capital. “Authenticity”, in this understanding, is a collectable asset for the entrepreneurial self, and its pursuit undergirds the expansion of tourism development under neoliberalism with consequences for residents, tourists, and ecologies.

Global tourism is an extractive industry that, as Córdoba Azcárate (2020:12–13) writes, “invades, plunders, and exhausts places, bodies, and resources in order to satisfy short-term consumer demands at the expense of long-term considerations for their renewal”. This vampiric dimension of contemporary capitalism was first conceptualised as *extractivismo* by Latin American activists and scholars, who observed how neoliberal deregulation and privatisation granted transnational corporations unmitigated access to resources which subsequently created systems for the highly efficient seizure of wealth, leaving local communities and ecologies devastated (Gudynas 2009; Riofrancos 2017). Extractivism is a highly dynamic and flexible form of accumulation, which mines a resource to the point of exhaustion before shifting operations to a new zone of accumulation (Ye et al. 2020); in this, extractivism is dependent upon the continual identification of new frontiers. While extractivism defines the contemporary harvesting of fossil fuels, minerals, and other raw resources, it also reaches into human relationships and social practices (Gago 2015; Mezzadra and Neilson 2017), infiltrating the “ordinary geographies” of social reproduction (Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda 2020) and reshaping relations and bodies (Postar and Behzadi 2024). Accordingly, extractivism is “best conceived not as an activity or thing, but as a relation or logic” (Pasternak et al. 2023:6), “a way of organising life” that today demands the same level of conceptualisation as processes such as globalisation (Chagnon et al. 2022:763).

While the role of discourse in extractivism is underexamined, resisting extractivism demands confronting the language through which it is mobilised. This begins by understanding how language is entangled with the material geographies of extraction, with tourism in Myanmar an indicative case. This article begins by examining how discourse fosters the creation of frontiers, after which the theoretical framework for discursive extraction is described. While this framework of orienting to others as resources for capital accumulation through language can likely be applied to other domains, focus is hereafter turned upon the field of tourism, wherein symbolic economies are negotiated through an historically entrenched linguistic market. The case of Myanmar is then considered in detail, as discourse constructs “premodern” signifiers and authentic experiences that are then exchanged in bids for symbolic capital. Discursive extraction is finally shown to mobilise an expansionary developmental logic, in which tourism frontiers are continually created in the drive to “get off the beaten path”.

## Tourism Discourse and the Geographies of Frontier Extraction

Frontiers are established when powerful agents recognise an extractable resource, leading to the suspension of normative rules of governance as private or state actors hurry to reap its value (Kelly and Peluso 2015). As novel spaces for capital accumulation, frontiers are constitutive of territorialisation (Rasmussen and Lund 2018) and temporalisation (Aung 2023), as new regimes of spatial and sociopolitical control are asserted in a formerly peripheral region and resources are allocated for the use of private actors or the state (Peluso and Lund 2011). Tourism is an adept instrument of territorialisation (Szadziewski et al. 2022), and

in frontiers serves as a geopolitical strategy for advancing state sovereignty as infrastructure is created under the aegis of tourism development. Studies highlighting the material inequalities that result from frontier tourism development (Bennike and Nielsen 2024) follow work demonstrating how tourism development often occurs through dispossessive accumulation by enclosure and other violent re-spatialisations (Devine and Ojeda 2017; cf. Harvey 2005), which is well documented in domains ranging from allegedly low-impact ecotourism (Ojeda 2012) to the rampant and accelerating consumption of popular hotspots known as overtourism (Milano et al. 2024).

While much scholarship examines how the resources accumulated through tourism development consist of land, labour, and services, further work points to the political economies of *discursively* created value that operationalise development. Tourism has long been recognised as a semiotic activity, with tourists seeking to encounter and appropriate a sign of something consecrated as a genuine symbolic good (Culler 1981). As the sociolinguists Thurlow and Jaworski (2010:8) write:

the ultimate goods purchased by tourists during their travels are images, lifestyles, memories and their narrative enactments ... [of] the fantasy and performance of 'going native', of adventure, of meeting new peoples, of exotic cultures and of unexplored places.

While these signs may not be material, they nonetheless circulate as commodities within economies of symbolic exchange through narration and remediation (see the following section). The existence of these discourse-created commodities, however, is predicated on networks of material production (Young and Markham 2020:282–283), entangling discourse with finance and development; as Wijburg et al. (2024:717) observe, “constructed ‘sign values’ and imaginations of places” drive processes of commodification and property investment in the expansion of tourism-led rentier capitalism.

Discourse is especially potent in the constitution of frontiers, which are created through envisioning geographical spaces as wild and unmapped and when narratives of adventure intersect with the flow of capital (Tsing 2005:28–29; also see Smith 1996). The construction of Myanmar as “uncharted” and “caught in a time-warp” reprised some of the most recurrent discourses at play in globally circulating tourism imaginaries (Salazar 2012), which have territorialised space since tourism emerged as a modern industry. The valuation “of being caught in time or slowed down” is a mainstay of global tourism (Norum and Mostafanezhad 2016:158). Traceable to 17<sup>th</sup> century English antiquarianism’s fascination with “traditional” ways of life (Bauman and Briggs 2003), the trend of picturesque tourism that arose in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain marked the introduction of “time-warped” signs into tourism economies, as rural and working-class people and places became objects for tourist consumption within Britain’s rural periphery (Andrews 1989) and, later, throughout the European colonies (Smith 2019). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and especially 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, commodification of the premodern gave rise to “primitivist” tourism, the practice largely undertaken by tourists from the Global North or wealthy metropolises who travel to meet “people they

understand to embody an archaic condition outside global consumer culture" (Stasch 2015:433). As tourists strive to escape modernity, language frames the notion that "a specific historical moment can be re-experienced through spatial travel" (Singh 2022:166). The deeply ideologised and colonial narrative of premodernity is discursively constructed by tourists using the less politically fraught terms of "'unspoiled', 'untouched', 'unadulterated', 'pure', [and] 'authentic'" (MacCarthy 2016:62), which to varying degrees of euphemism, describe a socio-cultural and developmental state antithetical to the Global North.

The touristic attraction to "anachronistic space" (Braun 2002:120), or places and people supposedly outside the temporal space of modernity, spurs the development of tourism in ever further-flung frontiers. In Myanmar, the attractions that in 2012 seemed rarefied were, by the late 2010s, increasingly perceived as part of a well-defined tourist trail. As a result, tourism began to develop in parts of difficult-to-access Shan State, as tourists sought "authentic" encounters with rebel groups in the restive northeast (Mostafanezhad 2020). Similarly, tourists were increasingly undaunted by the high cost of travelling to the southernmost Myeik (Mergui) Archipelago, an alleged redoubt of "untouched" nature and home to the indigenous Moken people (Smith 2023). The value of experiences in these respective frontiers was directly proportional to how remote each were from developed tourism attractions elsewhere. Yet as more tourists "go before everyone else goes", more development follows—and the demand for a new frontier is created.

This is an extractivist logic: a high-value resource is identified, hurriedly consumed, and ultimately exhausted, as a tourism destination "no longer appears adequately exotic, or its landscapes fail to signify modernity's 'outside'" (Braun 2002:145). Capital responds by migrating to an as-yet unexploited frontier (Ye et al. 2020:158). Tourism discourses of the "premodern" and authenticity thus promote an endless horizon of accumulation, which as the next section describes is pursued by agents of development as well as tourists.

## Discursive Extraction: A Theoretical Framework

Extractivism is facilitated by discourse, even as extraction itself can be a discursive act. This argument follows long-established critical perspectives on language as fundamental to the performance of an act (Austin 1962), with *discourse* meaning "language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals' interaction with society" (Jaworski and Coupland 2014:3). Discourse further shapes markets; as sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have argued, language is fundamental to the creation of "authentic" value and of commodities (Heller and McElhinny 2017; Karlander 2017; Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012). Following recent moves toward bridging disciplinary perspectives (e.g. Thurlow 2020), the framework of discursive extraction enhances the linkages between sociocultural linguistics and geography through yielding insight into an underexamined form of extractivism.

Discursive extraction is grounded in relations of exchange within a linguistic market, Bourdieu's (1991:81) concept of a social space in which utterances are

made according to “the anticipation of profits” that are accrued through the accumulation of symbolic goods. The “manner” in which symbolic goods are used—such as through language or performance—constitutes a key marker of distinction, or the status through which status and class is exercised (Bourdieu 1984:66). Linguistic markets develop in relation to a particular *field*, the social network(s) in which distinction is naturalised. The speech acts through which individuals establish their position in a field are derived from the *habitus*, or the subconscious mental dispositions and bodily comportments that undergird an individual’s evaluation of and interaction with the phenomenal world (Bourdieu 1984:466). In other words, what people say and how they say it has an exchange value in particular contexts, which individuals learn through exposure.

The symbolic goods exchanged on linguistic markets can be understood as what Ahmed (2006:114) theorises as “supply points”, a discursive object that fulfils a fantasised “lack” and towards which individuals operating within a field establish an “orientation”. Speakers pursuing distinction within a field, for instance, seek established points of symbolic value which may be signified through objects, places, or people. One may consider how “modernity” orients to “premodernity”: through the repeated search for premodernity’s mythologised vitality, modernity acquires a subjectivity—a “we” around which “we are orientated” (Ahmed 2006:116). Crucial to Ahmed’s argument is that not only does such a repeated collective orientation produce group consciousness, but it creates the material parameters within which bodies inhabit space. Thinking with the concept of *habitus*, she posits that subjects who “line up” (Ahmed 2006:141) in a collective orientation are both inculcated into a disposition and are mentally and physically constrained within a range of actions.

Discursive extraction links the orientations produced within a frontier to the widely circulating discourses which created conditions for a frontier’s emergence. Next to designating supply points that fulfil a “lack” according to dominant discourses, the individuals pursuing symbolic capital adopt a role to which they have been discursively appointed. Bearing Ahmed’s argument out, these orientations do not simply predispose action but rather create the limits of its possibility. Being inducted into a *habitus*’ orientation inhibits the ability to engage with “others” as anything but potential supply points, resources for accumulating (symbolic) capital, as individuals are continually “straightened” into an extractive relation.

This relation is reflected in the language through which symbolic goods are identified and appropriated. The “anticipation of profits” (Bourdieu 1991) that orients speakers’ choices within a linguistic market has only become more deeply ingrained in the strengthening of neoliberal governmentality, in which “entrepreneurs of the self” have disciplined “their tongues to produce the language of economic dominance” (Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2019:11; cf. Foucault 1988). While the financial system has long encouraged a perception of “human relations as a matter of cost-benefit calculation” (Graeber 2011:410), the circulation of neoliberal ideology has affectively produced “a generalisation of a particular form of the market—competition between unequals” (Anderson 2016:740). The competition for profits is naturalised at the level of *habitus*, such that entrepreneurship

now undergirds practice as speakers navigate the symbolic economies of multiple fields.

### ***Tourism: A Field-Based Analysis***

Analyses of discursive extraction must attend to the field in which it takes place. Tourism, as other forms of development-entangled practice, is oriented through historically particular discourses—and tourism has just about always been driven by distinction. Modern tourism began in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries with the aristocratic Grand Tour, yet the elitism of leisure travel was ensured by its extraordinary cost until the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the accumulation of mercantile wealth and new technologies of mobility had defrayed costs to the extent that Continental travel was suddenly accessible to a vastly expanded class of tourists, all vying for the “symbolic goods” (Bourdieu 1984:66) that were readily bequeathed by the Grand Tour. Yet with travel no longer an elite activity, a new strategy of distinction emerged, with tourists seeking differentiation from their allegedly uncultivated peers. In the shift to “anti-tourism”, tourists sought to distinguish themselves as “travellers” possessing the perspicacity to access bastions of “authentic” culture deemed to be “lurking in secret precincts ‘off the beaten track’” (Buzard 1993:6). Rather than the mere act of travel, it was the ability to locate and represent one’s experiences in an “authentic” place that became the hallmark of a tourist’s cultural competence.

As tourism grew throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “pioneer tourists” (Turner and Ash 1976:12) escaped the “masses” as visiting frontier regions remained a widely recognised source of distinction (Munt 1994). For demographics ranging from the most mobile members of the middle class (Kontogeorgopoulos 2003) to virulently anti-tourist backpackers (Sørensen 2003), such travel secured “bragging rights and great stories” (MacCarthy 2016:3). Yet in this period, authenticity acquired a further valence beyond merely that of place to encompass the interactions a tourist had with local residents, in how one managed to get “in with the natives” by stepping off the confines of the beaten track and into the “backstage” (MacCannell 1999:97).

In tourism’s linguistic market, authenticity is displayed by branding oneself as a “traveller” who acquires experiences in places that are not spatialised for tourism. From a discourse perspective, this self-branding is achieved by performing one’s accumulation of high-value signs in tourism’s “semiotic field” (cf. Babel 2022), such as the constructed signifiers of getting “off the beaten track” to encounter “premodern” people. Tourists use language to commodify their experiences (Sharma 2018), with capital derived from exchanging these experiences on the linguistic marketplace. Tourism’s linguistic market is invoked during spoken interactions among tourists (Smith 2021b), and it further orients communication in social media. The attention economies of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are integrated with tourist bids for distinction, as posts illustrating one’s “traveller” status or experience with “premodern” others are exchanged for visibility and can even be monetised (Smith 2021a). The generation of symbolic capital through documenting one’s travels on social media is leveraged for status

back home (Pak and Hiramoto 2022), and like other forms of discourse is entangled in tourism development (Oh 2022).

## Tourism in Myanmar

As a tourism destination, Myanmar's place in global "Top 10" lists proved to be short-lived. In August 2017, the state military launched a pogrom against the Rohingya minority, forcibly expelling some 750,000 residents of Rakhine State into Bangladesh in what the United Nations condemned as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" (Cumming-Bruce 2017). The Western media narrative that had upheld Myanmar as a success story of democratisation crumbled, and Euro-American tourist numbers fell by 50% as the largest share of arrivals shifted to China (San 2019). Overall tourist numbers continued to grow, albeit at a less fervid pace than the mid-2010s, until COVID-19 led to the closure of Myanmar's borders in April 2020. Then, on 1 February 2021, the military overthrew the civilian branch of Myanmar's government. Massive opposition to the coup in the form of protests, civil disobedience, and militia combat has been met by the military's brutal reprisal, killing more than 6,000 civilians in 2021–23 (Oo and Tønnesson 2023). Meanwhile, a prominent branch of the opposition—the National Unity Government—called for a new tourism boycott (Tan 2021).

The coup brought an end to the third period of tourism development in Myanmar, each of which has been bookended by significant transitions within the country's governance. The first period of British colonial tourism began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and ended with the Second World War, and the numerous insurgencies in the postcolonial period saw few visitors before the first military coup in 1962, after which tourism was extremely limited. The second period began in 1988, when the military junta introduced a market-based economy. Efforts to develop tourism infrastructure were largely focused on the areas around Yangon (formerly Rangoon), Mandalay, Bagan, and Inle Lake (Kraas et al. 2020), with investment in roads and hotels often flowing to the pockets of members of the military or close allies; meanwhile, most of the country remained inaccessible due to poor infrastructure or off-limits on account of armed resistance to the military regime. While the junta launched a tourism promotion campaign in 1996 (Hudson 2016), democracy advocates responded with calls for an international tourism boycott.

The announcement of a transition to an elected civilian government in 2010 marked the inauguration of the third period of tourism development, ending the tourism boycott and transforming the country's name from "synonymous with a brutal military regime" to "associated with authenticity, 'the last frontier of Asia'" (Michalon 2017:163). Myanmar became one of the fastest-growing economies in Southeast Asia as foreign direct investment soared, with tourism a key growth sector along with real estate and mining (Stokke et al. 2018). With investors ranging from Singapore and China to the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, tourism supported Myanmar's integration within global neoliberal flows of capital (Clifton et al. 2018) even as it extended the state's control over ethnically plural and contested regions (Michalon 2020). The destinations promoted in the second period



acquired infrastructures akin to other Southeast Asian tourism destinations, as package and self-guided tourists embarked on tours of Inle Lake and Bagan's temples, and stayed and ate at a continually growing array of accommodation and restaurants. In the later 2010s, formerly restricted regions such as Chin State, Tanintharyi Region, and parts of Kachin and Karen States attracted investment in accommodation and attractions, as largely self-guided tourists went on hill treks or sought out beaches.

As the 2017 pogrom against the Rohingya showed, however, the celebrated transition to democracy was always partial, privileging the Bamar ethnic majority while the military retained a pivotal stake in government and the economy (Prasse-Freeman and Kabya 2021). This largely escaped the notice of international press and tourism media, which instead focused upon the "crumbling" relics of the colonial era or emblems of stasis wrought by the decades of strict military control that had ostensibly ended (Rhoads and Wittekind 2018). Alongside these accounts, the texts most familiar to (Western) tourists were typically those penned in the British colonial era. George Orwell's novel *Burmese Days* (1934) was widely read and English copies sold on the streets of Yangon, while Rudyard Kipling loomed large: once, at a budget accommodation in Bagan, I even overheard a young man delivering a dramatic reading to his friends of Kipling's poem, "Mandalay" (1890). In this tourism context, the decontextualised aesthetics of an allegedly authentic premodernity were nearer at hand than a more nuanced understanding of Myanmar's history, comprising a semiotic field through which tourists discursively constructed their encounters.

## From Language to Capital: Discursive Extraction in Myanmar

The following analysis is organised in four parts, each informed by fieldwork in Myanmar. I begin by tracing how tourists use language to construct Myanmar as an anachronistic space through signifiers of premodernity, which supports the constitution of a high-value tourism frontier. Then, I discuss how this alleged redoubt of authenticity is understood to be limited, as tourism development ushers in the commodifying logics of global capitalism. However, as the next section shows, these ostensibly uncommodified spaces are transformed into repositories of (symbolic) capital, which is discursively extracted as tourists exchange experiences with premodern others on a linguistic market. The final section examines how discourse territorialises tourism frontiers, sustaining a logic of continual development as prior frontiers became developed and then exhausted of "authentic" value.

Fieldwork took place over ten weeks and multiple sites in May 2018 and from November 2019 to February 2020, with further engagement rendered impossible by the outbreak of COVID-19 and then the 2021 coup. Access to tourist spaces and discourses, however, was nonetheless afforded in depth, and in this time I recorded 37 interviews in English with 60 tourists, Myanmar residents, and industry stakeholders while holding many more off-record conversations.<sup>2</sup> These interviews were transcribed and coded using a grounded theory approach to identify

common themes, which were subsequently evaluated in the tradition of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995). In the time preceding and following fieldwork, I additionally collected digital representations of Myanmar tourism largely in the form of Instagram posts.

The argument advanced in this article is further supported by my own familiarity with tourism spaces, abetted by the mobilities of a middle-class cis white man with a US passport and by having lived outside my country of birth since 2012, in Hong Kong at the time of fieldwork. Plenty of my own time spent as a tourist was uncritical; my first visit to Myanmar, in 2015, was orientated through the same discourses expressed by the tourists quoted here.

### ***Speaking Symbolic Goods: Constructing Value in an Anachronistic Frontier***

Experiences “off the beaten track”, among the most high-value symbolic goods to be accumulated in tourism, are often represented as an escape from modernity. Tourists linguistically constructed Myanmar as an anachronistic space containing the living artefacts of a common era which, in “modern” places, has disappeared. As Melisa (23, Turkey) described:

Obviously Europe has reached its—it hasn’t reached, but you know? It’s more developed, like, this is undeniably the truth, compared to, like, these areas ... You get to see the different livelihoods ... The herder, with his cows or whatever, and I think that that’s also, like, this picturesque view. I mean, how many herders do you see in the Netherlands with their cows? No, they’re in fucking industrial farms, you know?

The “fucking industrial farm”, with all its connotations of abuse, is like other fruits of modernity evaluated with regret. By contrast, temporal markers of premodernity like the cowherd appreciate in value. Similarly, Roman (29, Ukraine) noted of Myanmar:

It’s like [a] museum, you know, like people used to live long time ago. They still use cattle, to carry things, to work on the land ... And still people, people still have electricity but they are living, they are keeping the old style of life, living in these bamboo houses, very national clothes ... It’s a little, a little, ah, the same as it was before.

Collected within Myanmar’s “museum” are familiar signifiers in the semiotic field of picturesque tourism: animal husbandry, manual labour, traditional dress and architecture (but not electricity). Bundled together, these signs communicate an escape from the “beaten track”.

That the “premodern” holds value in linguistic markets may account for how signs that misalign with anachronistic space may be ignored. Like Roman, Robert (27, Aotearoa New Zealand) described life in Myanmar as temporally distant, and also maintained this frame despite signs that suggest otherwise:

Their life hasn’t, doesn’t seem like it’s changed much, for a long time. They have cows ... like ploughman’s cows, that pull the plough ... Yeah a few of them had cell phones. Probably most of them had cell phones, but that, that would be not so timeless, but every other way nothing much has changed.

Although cell phones do not “fit” (Braun 2002:123) the tourism narrative of “timelessness”, Robert rejects a potentially contravening sign in order to confirm that “nothing much has changed” in accordance with dominant renderings of Myanmar. Instead, animals pulling the plough eclipse uneven development and are upheld as proof of a premodern time-space.

The discursive move of fixing on one sign while ignoring another was a strategy widely deployed by both tourists and tourism media in mid-2010s Myanmar. Rather than trace the contours of modernity through the history of Myanmar’s on-and-off again isolation, discourse constructed value in the frontier through such picturesque signs. So did Passion Passport, a US media company with 1.1 million followers on Instagram, in 2016 post an image of two fishermen on Inle Lake lighting an oil lantern, quoting a tourist who says: “as they lit their lantern it reminded me that life isn’t always changing rapidly in this modern world”.<sup>3</sup> At a time when hotels and other tourist infrastructure were being rapidly developed around Inle Lake (see Michalon 2017), all of which was lit by electricity, orientating to emblems of premodernity shaped a scarce yet extractable resource.

### ***Escaping Development: Authenticity in a Shrinking Frontier***

More than entering a premodern time-space, interacting with “authentic” others is a testament to the possession of symbolic goods in tourism. As “proximity” to the premodern is accorded value (Stasch 2011:14), tourists seek to develop relationships in spaces of intimacy with the residents of places they visit. Hannah (23, Cyprus and UK) related:

For me, an authentic experience is living with locals, maybe working on a farm, working with locals, trying the food, living in villages, getting—speaking to a lot of people.

With “living in villages” indexing a premodern time-space, interpersonal relations with the people who live within them are for Hannah and many other tourists constitutive of an authentic experience. Simply interacting with “locals”, however, is no guarantee that one will have an authentic travel experience. Ajay (29, India) described how communities that become popular tourism destinations adopt a “fake identity of themselves” to accommodate tourists’ habits back home. The infiltration of the global market, he argued, drapes a veil between tourists and local communities:

[If] you come from a land of McDonald’s and KFCs, they’re going to tell you to eat the same thing. Like, I don’t want that ... I want something that you guys make in your kitchen. Invite me to your home ... If I go somewhere I want to live with those families, I want to at least interact with those families, and know what their family systems are.

Crossing over the threshold into a resident’s home is a near-definitive sign of an authentic experience.

Once a place becomes another attraction on the “beaten track”, however, its authenticity is corrupted and such interactions with residents become rare. This was recognised by the vast majority of tourists with whom I spoke in Myanmar,

who—in the words of Juliette (47, France)—“wanted to come here before it was too late”. Tomas (29, Argentina) came to see the:

most unspoiled country in Southeast Asia ... at least try to glimpse what's a Southeast Asia country like—well, I dunno, what the other ones were like 20 years ago, in a way.

For tourists, the greatest threat to the time-warped condition of Myanmar is tourism development. “We love, we search for the moment that the tourist has not arrived corrupting the places”, said Antonio (40, Italy). As Celina (33, Denmark) attested:

you just have the opportunity to discover a country in a whole other way, on another level. Yeah, it's not ruined by the tourism and it seems more like, what is it called—authenticity. Like, yeah, that's the real thing, not a fake tourist trap.

Tourism is seen to corrupt an “authentic” place as it acts as a vector for the global market economy. That “money and authenticity are mutually exclusive” is well established in tourism literature (Desforges 2001:362), yet even among these tourists who managed to “go before” the encroachment of the global economy they still met its impacts, principally in how banal relations between tourists and residents become governed by market logics. When asked what she found unique about Myanmar, Juliette remarked:

The authenticity of the people ... they are still authentic, not like other country where you can, where they see you as, like, money, not people ... Except in Bagan, because it's much more touristic. And you can see the difference. I was walking in a small village in Bagan, and a woman told me to come in her house to have a look, and at the end she wanted to sell me cigarettes made by her ... It was not authentic, because it's too much touristic.

In such a “touristic” place as Bagan, the proverbial “backstage” moment—being invited into a local's home—is invariably motivated by an interest in capitalising on the tourist dollar Juliette represents. The authentic experience of an uncommodified interaction with locals can only be found in places where tourism industries have yet to penetrate—that is, “off the beaten track”. Or, as Gijs (19, Netherlands) put it, “In the more developed tourism countries, they're trying to rip you off more”.

“Travellers” avoid such settings, in contrast to common “tourists”. Gabrielle (36, Switzerland) explained:

You know, they don't see you as a human, they just see you like a dollar ... Yeah, you get upset. It's maybe easier for certain people who don't have experience of travelling. For them it's very easy, you know, they just go to the counter, they could make their tour...

In her implicit “disavowal” of the practices of mass tourism (Smith 2021b), Gabrielle affirms her distinguished “traveller” status. Along with Juliette, she further expressed an allergy to the extractive relations that are a hallmark of global

capitalism. Yet in discursively constructing the premodern experiences that are global capitalism's obverse, tourists commodify the supposedly uncommodified.

### ***Entrepreneurial "Travellers": Commodifying Everyday Encounters***

Despite stated intentions, tourists fleeing the impacts of tourism development often end up bringing the market with them—not just by wielding transformative amounts of disposable capital, but in their very relations with the people who live in the places they visit. This is illustrated by a conversation I had in Bagan with Joshua (32, New York City), Joseph (32, NYC), and Annika (26, Germany), following a day we spent riding motorbikes in a part of town not popular with tourists. Joshua recounts how, at one point during the day, a Burmese family shared snacks with us unprompted and across a language barrier:

The fact that they offered a snack to us—I mean, it's nothing to us, right, but I think it means a lot to them. And for them to actually come and approach us and do that, you know, obviously this country isn't Thailand or Cambodia ... 'cos they're not looking out for anything else but to be in our presence, which is pretty cool. I think that's one of those things that I'll remember about the trip forever. Honestly. Nah, I don't think too many tourists would have that experience—until they do what we did, like just get off the beaten path and roll into something that's not in the tour guide.

For Joshua, the unscripted offer of snacks extended across a substantial socioeconomic gulf is freighted with meaning, and would almost certainly not happen in highly developed tourism economies where locals' interactions with tourists are typically motivated by the pursuit of profit. By contrast, we experienced an uncommodified exchange. Getting "off the beaten path" and finding a favourite local hangout like the lake demonstrated uncommon acumen: despite the enhanced possibility for such encounters in Myanmar, only those like us—the proverbial "travellers"—manage to push past tourism's façade.

When Joshua finished speaking, however, Annika then shared how, when she first landed in Yangon, she met a Myanmar woman in the street who "was 70 years old" and invited her to her home. Despite having just "one pot in her whole kitchen", the woman cooked Annika dinner:

Annika The next evening, I went to her house, and she cooked for me, like three hours.

Joseph Wow.

Joshua Damn.

Annika And I was just like, what...

Joshua You definitely win this experience! [laughs]

Contrasted with Joshua's account, Annika's dinner invitation extends much further "off the beaten track". The intimacy of sitting in a Myanmar person's home for "three hours" is a superlative instance of accessing the "backstage"; as Ajay wished, she ate "something that you guys make in your kitchen". Annika's

procurement of one of the most treasured tourist experiences accrues value in hierarchical relation to the experiences of other tourists—as we see in Joshua and Joseph’s reactions:

- Annika And that was, like, on my first day in Yangon.
- Joseph Why? Where can we meet this person? [laughs]
- Joshua Yeah, right, you, you—
- Annika It was so sweet.
- Joshua You definitely win, you definitely win the best one. [laughs]
- Joseph I know, right?

When compared, Joshua’s and Annika’s encounters acquire the status of symbolic goods of unequal value. Joshua’s meeting with the family by the lake, while at first noteworthy, is revealed to be of only moderate merit when contrasted with Annika’s three-hour dinner in an elderly working-class Myanmar woman’s home. Annika’s experience is so distinguished that Joseph laughingly wonders “where can we meet this person?”, in a seeming aspiration for a symbolically valuable encounter of his own. For his part, Joshua recognises both the contest and the score, telling Annika that “you definitely win, you definitely win the best one”.

This wholly amicable interaction is typical in a field in which experience is colated, however unconsciously, with the negotiation of distinction. In sharing an orientation toward the “premodern” and “off the beaten track” experiences, tourists also share a habitus in which competition for “traveller” status is naturalised. Discourse is wielded in the construction of a self-brand, as tourist experiences—such as those described above, of food freely shared—are reshaped into commodities ready for exchange on the linguistic marketplace. The logic of extractivism is yielded not necessarily by this single act of linguistic entrepreneurship, but in how all encounters become potential repositories of symbolic capital. People met abroad become high-value “others” who are perceived primarily in terms of how much symbolic capital can be generated from them (“where can we meet this person?”).

There is of course a well-established tourism genre of taking photos of or with “locals”,<sup>4</sup> yet more consequentially extractivist relations reach past such performances to infiltrate the everyday geographies of interaction and production. Reprising the expansionary logic of the frontier, the horizon of accumulation is extended almost indefinitely into the very fabric of day-to-day life, as the local leisure spot, the home, the conversation with a resident become potential repositories of symbolic capital that can be discursively extracted and exchanged on a linguistic marketplace.

Extractivism’s reach is not limited to tourists, however. This is evident enough with the Bagan resident who invited Juliette into her home as a tactic to sell her cigarettes, described in the previous section as an example of tourism’s “corrupting” influence. Yet what of the family who shared their snacks by the lake, and of the woman who cooked dinner for Annika? Are we to imagine that their

interactions with tourists were somehow unimbued by the pursuit of symbolic capital? To expect that they lacked any motivation would be to ratify the discourse of premodernity, remaining blind to how even the most “peripheral” peoples are entangled in global processes. While the voices of the family or the woman cannot be brought into this discussion, we might look to one of Joshua’s statements about sharing snacks by the lake:

I, I just thought that was super sweet, you know? And I know they were not super interested in me, maybe not him [gesturing to Joseph], but, probably you two [gesturing to Annika and Sean].

Joshua is referring to how Annika and I are white, while he and Joseph are of Chinese descent. With his observation, we can see how, even in “off-the-beaten-track” destinations, the politics of modernity can shape symbolic economies that span cultural contexts. In acknowledging the family as enwrapped in discourses of racialisation and relations of power that are all too “modern”, the permeation of extractivist orientations is shown to be part of the global flows of uneven development, of which Myanmar has been a part since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***Discursive Territorialisation: Creating New Extractive Frontiers***

While tourists who are driven to encounter ostensibly premodern people may not conscientiously seek out experiences that have a high symbolic value, the imperatives of the linguistic market are never far behind—and next to generating capital for speakers, discursive extraction produces material impacts. In Myanmar, this was most visible in the development that ensued as a direct result of the perceived overdevelopment of neighbouring Thailand. Lucas (31, Brazil) remarks:

I’ve been to Thailand, and I really didn’t find what I was looking for in a way, I felt like Thailand was already very Westernised ... so I felt like Myanmar I could more, like, this rural atmosphere, people connected to the land, to their own traditions.

For Myanmar people contending with the rapid growth of tourism in the mid-2010s, Thailand among other global destinations presented an example of the dangers of tourism development. This was described to me by Aung Win in February 2020. The former chief of a village in the southern Tanintharyi Region, which then was a “frontier” in the developmental hierarchy of destinations within Myanmar, he had recently returned from Aotearoa New Zealand on a sustainable tourism course and was consulting for his coastal community amidst rapid tourism development in the region. Aung Win sought a different trajectory:

As you can see, a lot of country ... for example in Thailand or Indonesia, you know that most of the beaches are polluted by the tourists. And also, you know, not suitable for people to enjoy there, and some time ago they close[d] some of the beach. Those beaches [do] not allow tourists to go because of the pollut[ion]. So we don’t want our beach to be pollute[d] like that.

At the time, this was a very real threat. Only an hour’s drive away from where I met with Aung Win, another beach was being developed for tourism. When I first



**Figure 1:** A newly constructed road leads to a beach in Tanintharyi Region, February 2020 (photo by the author)

visited in November 2019, I had to navigate a challenging single track by motorbike. When I returned in February 2020, however, a large road had been paved and a parking area created to generate business for beachside services (Figure 1). “The road developer pushed all the dust [dirt] into the sea when they did the road”, Kyaw Sein, a local journalist and community organiser, told me on a separate occasion; “The government doesn’t know how to manage things”. As he explained, the dangers posed to nearby communities and the marine ecosystem by this kind of development were matched by the proliferation of illegal structures, many of which were already accommodating international tourists.

For Aung Win, resisting forms of rapid and destructive tourism development that have become notorious throughout Southeast Asia was essential. As if to underscore the precarity of his community’s situation, as we were sitting together at a village café, a man on a motorbike pulled up. He drew our attention by stepping off his bike and falling into the ditch, shrugging off our concern to pull himself out and sit down with us at the café’s single, long table and order a coconut. He then proceeded to address me alone, asking my name and where I am from, before telling me about his reasons for coming to the region. He was from Belgium, and after working in tourism for 25 years in southern Thailand he was in Myanmar looking to start a new enterprise. There are too many people in Thailand, he told me, as Aung Win sat listening. The man was riding around the region looking for inroads into the tourism market. “I want to build a bamboo castle”, he said.

Every frontier has its prospectors. What makes the future so uncertain for the residents of places that become spatialised as frontiers is that these prospectors are often backed up by capital and state sympathies with which they cannot compete. Yet as the case of Myanmar suggests, discourse is one of the strongest and earliest forces working to territorialise a frontier, and thus discourse must also be accounted for in the geographies of extraction in tourism—if not many other industries, too.



## Conclusion

The mid-2010s tourism boom in Myanmar shows how discourse both creates and extracts value in a frontier. Tourism frontiers like mid-2010s Myanmar are often perceived as yet to be impacted by modernity, and tourist experiences in such “time-warped” and “authentic” places are accorded high value within historically entrenched symbolic economies. This dynamic facilitates a process described here as discursive extraction: people and places are constructed as “premodern” through a repertoire of ideologically laden linguistic and/or visual signs, which are commodified as goods that can be exchanged on a linguistic marketplace in return for symbolic capital. Despite how tourists’ avowed interest in frontier regions is motivated through a disavowal of the global market, the entrepreneurial orientation to this premodern semiotic field fosters an extractive relation with ostensibly un-globalised spaces, as the ordinary geographies of interaction in tourism frontiers become potential repositories of capital. Tourists, travelling in search of premodernity, end up (re)producing modernity’s very mores.

Discursive extraction shows how everyday life comes to be governed by market logics, with the field of tourism offering but one example of the ways that language is used by entrepreneurial subjects to create value. Building on scholarship developed in geography, this discourse perspective affirms that tourism naturalises extractivism to the point that its myriad actors become orientated through an extractive relation (cf. Córdoba Azcárate 2020:187–188). Not only tourists, but also the people who live in spaces territorialised for tourism are inducted into a shared orientation to others as repositories of capital. The endpoint of this extractive logic is that the world becomes a resource, and people, relations, and experiences are rationalised as accumulable assets.

Yet discursive extraction can be resisted. As Aung Win explained in relation to his community’s fight against dispossession, identifying the economies of value that drive development is a key step in maintaining sovereignty. The semiotic field through which frontier tourism objects are commodified and exchanged must be located within a history of colonial extraction, as identifying these legacies—and turning instead to pre- and anti-colonial histories—is a way of refusing “euro-western notions of hierarchy and extraction” (Todd 2022:21), and of disclaiming the linguistic market through which these objects circulate. Such a radical re-orientation unsettles not just extractivist tourism, but a core reflex of modernity, in which the subject engages the other as a resource for self-edification. Following this re-orientation leads us far beyond the field of tourism, and back to Graeber’s (2011:25) enduring question: “If not exchange, then what?” Training a lens on discursive extraction shows how market logics imbue everyday life, but also how everyday life is a space for resistance, in the continued struggle for equitable relations.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Burma was renamed Myanmar in 1989 by the then-ruling junta, yet many still use the name Burma. While I apply the latter nomenclature here, both are valid.

<sup>2</sup> All names of people are pseudonymised, and I have left some place descriptions deliberately vague. I spoke only basic Burmese, limiting this research.

<sup>3</sup> Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/BEvu\\_EVKWHd/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BEvu_EVKWHd/) (last accessed 13 November 2024).

<sup>4</sup> While examples abound, the image of an influencer taking a photo with a Burmese boy as part of a clothing giveaway—a common brand-building exercise on Instagram—keenly illustrates the value of “others” in the symbolic economies of tourism and social media. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BpRjihKhsPg/> (last accessed 13 November 2024).

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