On- and offstage: Encountering entangled waste–tourism relations on the Vietnamese Island of Phu Quoc

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Vietnam’s most popular island, Phu Quoc, is undergoing rapid social-ecological change. Two crucial drivers of this are tourism development and plastic-intensive everyday practices. The growing amount of wasted single-use plastics is increasingly shaping the appearance of places on the island and challenging the creation of tourist imaginaries of a pristine tropical landscape. Very few qualitative empirical studies have analysed the place-making quality of waste in tourism settings, along with everyday waste management practices and their social-spatial implications. The paper draws on Goffman’s theatre metaphor of front- and backstage places to explore waste-tourism relations as an ongoing place-making practice aimed at creating the image tourists are seeking. We scrutinise the place-making efforts of both the international tourism industry and local authorities. Our empirical findings reveal that the frontstage paradise makes backstage places necessary to accumulate or store discarded items. As our research shows, this has led to increasing spatial fragmentation of the island into clean places for tourists and dirty places for residents, reflecting an unequal distribution of the waste burden.

KEYWORDS
everyday practices, marine litter, place-making, plastic waste management, tourism, Vietnam

1 | INTRODUCTION

Plastic products such as single-use to-go packaging are part of a modern lifestyle and are an integral part of everyday life across the globe. Their usage is largely inconspicuous. Yet, people leave behind unmistakable traces of rapid consumption – a plastic cup here, a food box there. When such plastic packaging items are discarded, they shape the way places “smell, feel and sound and are experienced” (Arnall & Kothari, 2020, p. 12) by locals and visitors. Its capacity to “linger and haunt places” (Arnall & Kothari, 2020, p. 2) makes plastic as an everyday material very ambivalent. Like no other material, plastic embodies the ambiguity of fast usage and slow decay. A troublesome mélange arises when the integrity of the landscape is vital for the development of tourism, while the locally available waste infrastructure is unable to cope with the amount of plastic waste generated, for example, by the tourists, as it is the case in many countries of the global South (Garcés-Ordóñez et al., 2020; Kapmeier & Gonçalves, 2018; Kothari & Arnall, 2017; UNEP, 2019).

We will take the Vietnamese island of Phu Quoc, famous for its sun, sand and sea tourism, as a case in point to detangle waste–tourism relations. Here the current trajectory of tourism is evidently leading to ever-more visible plastic waste pollution. Phu Quoc has gained dubious fame in the Vietnamese media and international travel blogs (Thanh Nien News, 2014; Urbanist Hanoi, 2018). The image of the island’s natural beauty is fading. At the same time, the constant efforts by
the tourism industry and the local authorities to maintain clean places have led to an increasing fragmentation of the island. Is this at the expense of the locals, marginalising their needs? More generally, what are the spatial and social implications of the production of places in waste–tourism relations in a concrete setting?

The paper explores how the materiality and mobility of plastic embodies place-making qualities and triggers a process of constant performance. In particular, it examines the everyday waste-management and place-making practices of local authorities and the tourism industry, within high-end tourist resorts and across the rest of the island, taking Goffman’s theatre metaphor of front- and backstage places as an analytical frame. Concepts from geographies of waste and place-making tourism further enrich the analysis. The paper draws attention to patterns of inequality in mass tourism settings in the global South. It aims to enrich qualitative empirical studies of entangled waste–tourism relations from a geographical perspective.

2 | GEOGRAPHIES OF TOURISM AND WASTE RELATIONS

Different studies from a broad disciplinary range have analysed the disruptive character of solid waste with respect to tourism (Dileep, 2007; Ezeah et al., 2015; Kothari & Arnall, 2017). Recently, plastic waste pollution in coastal tourism places has come to the fore (Corraini et al., 2018; Garcés-Ordóñez et al., 2020; Krelling et al., 2017; Marks et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2018). Research has shown that marine plastic pollution is due to waste left behind by coastal visitors, or to plastic waste being carried by natural forces such as wind and water from inland places to the coast or being washed ashore from more or less distant places. Within the growing body of research, littered beaches and coastal landscapes are often framed as an economic risk for the tourism industry. For instance, Wilson and Verliis (2017) and McIlgorm et al. (2011) argue that marine plastic pollution is a threat to the tourism economy because it is the opposite of the postcard motif sought by tourists. Some authors have explored the scenic impacts of marine plastic pollution on “sun, sand and sea tourism” (Botero et al., 2017). For example, Corraini et al. (2018) analyse how increased litter and thus a loss of idyllic scenery is linked to a decline in tourism. Consequently, the tourism industry undertakes costly endeavours to keep beaches and other sites clean in order to avoid loss of revenue. In this context, researchers have analysed the economic costs and the effectiveness of different policies, as well as perceptions of marine plastic pollution (Hartley et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2014; Krelling et al., 2017). The literature shows that hard work is needed to produce authenticity or an impression of unspoiled nature (Hennessy & McCleary, 2011; Rickly, 2018; Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019). For example, Kothari and Arnall (2017) have described how the apparently untouched landscapes in the Maldives require constant maintenance of nature.

In tourism geography, different types and processes of place-making have been identified, ranging from individual travel to intentional global theming by tourism authorities and governments (Lew, 2017; López-López et al., 2006; Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019). The notion of “place-making” refers to processes and interactions that create geographies people experience (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 54). For instance, the planning and marketing of tourist destinations are practices that create authenticity, images, and imaginative geographies of places (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013; Lew, 2017; Rickly, 2018). Places are “the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist” (Massey, 2005, p. 9). They are constantly constructed and shaped by underlying social, political, and material processes, and thus dynamic in time and scale.

Goffman’s theatre metaphor of front- and backstage introduces a complementary perspective on places. Goffman argues that people tend to act in front of other people in a way that meets their expectations and makes a good impression. The frontstage performance is “painstakingly fabricated” and “openly constructed” (Goffman, 2008, p. 53). But there is always a backstage, which Goffman defines as “a place, relative to given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (Goffman, 2008, p. 53).

Goffmann’s work on frontstage and backstage has been taken up in tourism research and tourism geography (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013; Edensor, 2001; Larsen, 2010; MacCannell, 1973). For instance, MacCannell (1973) uses this metaphor to argue that tourists are eager to enter the backstage in order to experience the authenticity of other cultures and the intimacy of how others live.

In the geographical literature, waste is a relative concept with different associations. Among other things, it is framed as: a resource, a hazard, a commodity, a filth, a risk, a fetish, a governable or manageable object, an actant, disorder, or matter out of place (Davies, 2012; Millington & Lawhon, 2019; Moore, 2012; Viney, 2015). Douglas has argued it is not “what objects are but where those objects are” (Douglas 1966 in Viney, 2015, p. 2). For example, a fishing net on a boat is not waste, but abandoned in the sea it becomes marine litter. Besides, plastic waste is highly mobile, moved by water and wind. Due to the mobility of waste, different zones of accumulation and temporalities of accumulation evolve at the coast (Arnall & Kothari, 2020; Davies, 2012). The materiality of waste is also capable of politicing spaces (Baabereyir et al., 2012; Cornea et al., 2017; Davies, 2008; Moore, 2012). Waste marks spaces by its presence or absence. Its control is embedded in multi-scalar power structures and relations of inequalities (Cornea et al., 2017). For instance, the location of
waste infrastructure such as incineration plants or landfills is often contested, with respect to both the chosen space and the practices by which they are selected (Davies, 2012; Millington & Lawhon, 2019; Zhang & Klenosky, 2016).

While geographers have analysed different qualities of waste, waste governance (failures) and waste flows, and tourism geographers have focused on coastal tourism and place-making processes in (mass) tourism settings (Davies, 2008; Gössling, 2003; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004; Millington & Lawhon, 2019; Moore, 2012; Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019; Wilson, 2017), yet a critical qualitative reflection on everyday waste practices in (mass) tourism settings that analyses everyday practices of waste governance and marginality is rare. Moreover, there is very little qualitative research into the place-making qualities of waste along with its spatial and social consequences, or into the place-making endeavours of tourism entrepreneurs to produce and maintain imaginaries of pristine landscapes in order to attract tourists.

We will use Goffman’s perspective to disentangle tourism–waste relations. In contrast to MacCannell (1973), we argue that tourists are looking for frontstage places that meet their scenic expectations rather than seeking to discover authentic backstage settings. In our study waste takes up the role of what Zizek (2006) has called a “parallax object,” “which disturbs the smooth running of things” (Zizek, 2006, p. 17). We argue that the materiality of waste (and of its predecessors, like single-use items) plays a strong role in place-making.

3 | METHODS

This article is based on qualitative research findings assembled by the first author during two field visits for a total of four months in 2017 and 2018, and on observation by the second author during a one-week field visit in 2018. The fieldwork on Phu Quoc was conducted in cooperation with WWF Vietnam and WWF Germany, which started a plastic pollution reduction project at the same time. This cooperation gave us field access, the possibility to interview local decision-makers, and mutual exchange of key findings that made our results more robust.

The research takes an ethnographic perspective and an actor-oriented, case-study focused approach (Bohnsack, 2010; Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Hitchings & Latham, 2020). The ethnographic perspective allows applying a mixed-methods approach for data collection and analysis. Further, it suits the purpose of revealing what people do and how they view their activities. Finally, this perspective allows us to shed light on the construction of meanings.

Based on the literature and the exploratory first field visit, we identified the following six groups as relevant for creating or experiencing front- and backstage waste-related settings: international tourism businesses, local tourism businesses, tourists, local authorities, environmental activists, and residents. We defined for each of these groups, subcategories, for example “rural” and “urban” for residents as well as “Western,” “Russian,” or “Vietnamese” for tourists. Thus, we included different places comprising urban and rural as well as touristic and non-touristic areas. Moreover, we tried to conduct about the same number of interviews with each group. Interviews with representatives of the local tourism business as well as with tourists and residents took place randomly, while interview appointments with representatives of the international tourism industry, local authorities, and environmental activists were arranged in advance. The island’s limited geographical area offered a convenient site for the actor-focused analysis. It was possible to get in touch with all relevant place-based actors and to observe their everyday waste practices, as well as waste–tourism entanglements and place-making actions.

This article draws on 40 semi-structured interviews (translated by an assistant when originally in Vietnamese) chosen from the over 100 interviews conducted. They meet two criteria: on the one hand, they reflect the range of opinions and, on the other hand, they can be effectively evaluated due to the adequate language skills of the interviewees and the sound quality. We used semi-structured interviews to allow a balance between openness and space for narrative passages, while at the same keeping the focus on the topic. The interviews aimed to embrace a wide variety of contexts and perspectives, to enlighten perception of waste–tourism relations, and to understand how and why these perspectives come about. The interviews were supplemented by off-the-record conversations, visual documentation, participatory observation, and media analysis. These more open, informal settings allowed us to capture non-verbal dimensions, as well as information about non-placed actors like the provincial government, and (inter-)national tourism companies. This broadened our understanding of environmental agency and the governance of waste on Phu Quoc. The data analysis was qualitative, following a thematic and content-focused interpretation to produce a thick description of the tourism-related plastic waste phenomenon.

4 | SETTING THE STAGE OF PHU QUOC

“Vietnam – timeless charm” is the new slogan for Vietnam’s fast-growing tourism industry, promoted by national and provincial strategies and master plans. Phu Quoc is Vietnam’s largest island, spanning 589 km², with approximately 120,000 residents (2018), and is located in the Gulf of Thailand. Tourists choose Phu Quoc mainly for beach holidays. The
island’s image of tropical vegetation and pristine beaches attracted almost 2 million visitors in 2017 and almost 4 million visitors in 2018, with an increase particularly in foreign visitors. Since 2012, the visa waiver policy and the opening of the international airport fuelled the influx of international tourists. It is envisaged to have 7 million visitors by 2030. Rapid tourism development as a key pillar of Vietnam’s economy – promoted *inter alia* by the central government and transnational corporations – is not without social-ecological consequences. Luxury resorts and places for mass tourism have (re)shaped the island’s landscape. Environmental degradation by deforestation, land sealing, and pollution due to waste and wastewater are becoming increasingly apparent.

Economic growth has led to a massive increase in waste: the overall amount of waste collected increased from roughly 31,000 tons in 2014 to 57,000 tons in 2018 (LA1806). In 2018, the daily volume of waste produced was approximately 160 tons, of which an estimated 130 tons were collected, according to local authorities. However, statistics are often inconsistent and information about the amount of (un-)managed waste is difficult to obtain due to lacking data collection. Likewise, there are no reliable data on the composition of the solid waste, but visual documentation of landfills and littered waste suggest a high amount of plastics besides organic waste (Figure 1b). In general, waste governance is characterised by the overlapping dynamics of formality and informality, as within the rest of Vietnam. In principle, the district and the communal people’s committees as state institutions are responsible for the island’s waste management. The island’s Public Work Management Board acts on behalf of the district people’s committee in taking care of the public collection service. However, the elementary waste management infrastructure cannot keep pace with fast-growing waste levels, and a nationwide practice of littering underscores this problem (Figure 1a). Moreover, Phu Quoc’s waste management is ill equipped to treat waste in an environmentally safe manner, or to recycle plastic. What makes things worse, depending on the season and ocean currents, is that either the east coast (during the dry season) or the west coast (during the wet season) struggles with marine litter, often everyday plastic items that are washed ashore, mainly coming from mainland Vietnam or Cambodia. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the “trash season” (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 1** (a) Littered waste at the popular pier in Duong Dong; (b) waste composition at the landfill; (c) and (d) impressions from the popular Sao Beach © Fotographisches Atelier. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
Against this backdrop, Phu Quoc struggles increasingly to handle the ever-growing problem of plastic pollution, which is not likely to disappear quickly. Headlines in Vietnamese media, such as “Untreated waste threatens Vietnam’s pearl island” (Thanh Nien News, 2014) and “Phu Quoc Island drowning in rubbish” (Vietnam Net, 2017), point towards crucial environmental problems that contradict “Phu Quoc’s bright future” (Vietnam Economic News, 2018) as a special economic zone for tourism. The need to address environmental degradation and plastic waste pollution is becoming increasingly important for destination management.

5 | EXPLORING “ON- AND OFFSTAGE” SETTINGS

In this section we explore the making of front- and backstage places. We will zoom first into high-end resorts (Section 5.1) and then out onto the rest of the island (Section 5.2) to examine everyday practices in dealing with (marine) plastic pollution, the material quality of waste, and its socio-spatial consequences.
5.1 | Front- and backstage in the resort

Getting a first sense of a resort’s frontstage is easy via the internet. Scrolling down the Tripadvisor website for Phu Quoc with the top 10 accommodation offers, we encounter images of pools framed by palm trees, sunshades, and beach chairs along the beach, and beautiful sunsets. Many resorts belong to well known international hotel chains. Two common features are that they are run by international managers, and that these managers follow environmental standards for tourism as specified by their chain. We focus in this section on these high-class resorts.

Tourism research has shown that tourists visit a destination “to enjoy particular environmental features, and that the quality of these directly shape their enjoyment of a particular place” (Kothari & Arnall, 2017, p. 983) and determine whether they will return to that place. Accordingly, for international tourism the impression of a clean island is essential. This applies to Phu Quoc as long as it aims to attract Western visitors. Our interviews and other authors comment on the fact that Europeans, Western tourists respectively, value a clean environment and eco-friendly practices (Esparon et al., 2015). However, the tourism industry is increasingly geared towards Russian and Chinese tourists, who are flocking to the island in increasing numbers. Both Russian and Chinese tourists are described by our interviewees to be less environmental conscious.

Since hoteliers have realised that Phu Quoc faces a serious (marine) plastic pollution problem, they are eager to make it as invisible as possible within their resorts. Inaction on the part of the industry is deemed harmful to its reputation, and Chinese tourists are described by our interviewees to be less environmental conscious.

In backstage areas such as the kitchen, the food that is so nicely presented to the visitors on glass and ceramic dishes is unwrapped from its plastic packaging. Staff members clean the beaches every day early in the morning and late in the evening, while the guests are sleeping, and take care of waste during the day. They strive to maintain the appearance of the beautiful natural setting so that the tourists will have their expectations met. These backstage practices are important if frontstage performances are to maintain an image of being green and clean. One manager described the resorts as “islands of cleanliness” (IntT1801). However, as a tourist remarked, “the beach at the hotel is nice, but then I walked 50 metres or so along the beach and I saw the garbage. So much garbage” (IntT1807). A hotel manager said: “The tourists say your beach is very nice but on the other beach there is a lot of trash. Then I have to reply I can only keep my beach clean; I cannot go to somebody’s house and clean up there, right. Nobody will accept that” (IntT1804). These statements demonstrate that the line between front and backstage is porous, elusive, and not fully controllable.

5.2 | Front- and backstage on the rest of the island

In this section, we use three examples to examine how (high-end) tourism, tourists, and locals are embedded in a larger setting of front- and backstage places. The example we have named “Tourists in-between” sketches the island’s landscape and highlights contrasting places experienced by tourists and locals. “Matter in and out of place” draws attention to local authorities’ motives and reflects on how the materiality of plastic challenges its governance. Finally, “Contesting backstage” sheds light on backstage places and discusses conflicts arising from frontstage-making.
Tourists in-between

Driving across Phu Quoc, we observe the increasing fragmentation of the island into “clean” places for tourists and “dirty” places for residents. One passes by construction sites for new luxury resorts, and existing tourism spaces, including a spectacular cable car ride, a safari and amusement park, or attractively styled sandy beaches that seem to fulfil the promise of a tropical paradise. Yet, outside the touristic hotspots and carefully designed exclusive high-end resorts, plastic bags, cups, straws, polystyrene, plastic food packages, coconut shells, and construction waste colourfully line the streets, small waterways, and coastlines. As one tourist states: “So, there is a strong contrast between the touristic parts and the real part. So, the real part is a shithole and the touristic part is, as an exception, tidy” (TGER1804). Indeed, development of the tourist sector has enhanced waste collection services in selected tourism areas. Now, collection services cover the island’s major settlements and tourist hotspots daily or every other day, but are non-existent in rural areas, making waste disposal the responsibility of the householders. In the absence of state services, residents often create their own infrastructure. Fishing villages and residential areas are thus marked not by an absence of infrastructure but by different modes of organising waste disposal. However, the increased density of single-use plastic (packaging) materials has made the long-standing practices of burning and burying environmentally hazardous. Further, the spatiality of fishing villages and rural settlements, far from the urban centres, up hills, and along narrow roads, along with unwillingness or inability to pay for public services, make it difficult for formal services to expand in conventional, purportedly modern ways (Millington & Lawhon, 2019). López-López et al. (2006) found such a similar segregation of tourist spaces in Mexico, manifested in the socio-spatial distribution of infrastructure: “While the touristic areas have excellent urban infrastructure and services, the opposite occurs in areas occupied by the local population” (López-López et al., 2006, p. 359). Ordinary package tourists do not see the backstage places of Phu Quoc. But more curious tourists who set out to explore the island are shocked when they see them: “When you’re not yet on the road, when you’re 500 m before the village oh my god. I never saw that before, it’s a big, big garbage mess. And people say, how is this possible. It’s in the jungle” (IntT1807).

In many places, the boundary between front- and backstage is fragile and porous, resulting in enclave stages. Such enclaves include the old airport in the modern capital of Duong Dong, or unmanaged beaches close to luxury resorts, where tourists pass by, experiencing them as “eyesores,” as one interviewee put it (IntT1803). The famous sandy Long Beach is a vivid example of the porous, overlapping, not fully controllable lines between front- and backstage spaces. The resorts are lined up like pearls, but with undeveloped spaces in between. Those sections of the beach that are maintained by the resorts correspond to the postcard image, while abandoned fishing equipment, old furniture, and discarded plastic items accumulate in the unmanaged sections, disturbing the idyll, especially for more environmentally concerned Western tourists. Against this backdrop, resorts that are particularly keen to maintain clean beaches for their high-paying guest have started the “Phu Quoc clean and green” initiative, organising regular clean-ups along the beaches and tourist hotspots, such as the pier in Duong Dong.

When it is hit by the “trash season” during the internationally most popular time of year from November to February, the aesthetically unappealing quality of waste is also tangible at Sao Beach with its light-coloured sand and lush tropical vegetation. During that time, Sao Beach is referred to as “Sao trash Beach,” and the line between frontstage and backstage is dissolved. Frontstage is the garbage-free view of the ocean from the line of sun loungers, while waste accumulates behind them or beside the managed beach sections. The tourists handle this frontstage–backstage entanglement very differently. While some are put off by the washed ashore (plastic) waste, others seem inured to it and take their nap beside it, and yet others obstinately seek the tropical paradise displayed in the travel guides. The latter look for waste-free sections of the beach and pose there for souvenir pictures in the shallow water, cutting out everything that disturbs the image of a tropical paradise, with the sea in front of the camera while behind it the waste is piled up on the beach (Figure 1c, d). Clearly, the visibility of (plastic) waste plays a key role in problem recognition and is a crucial impulse to take action, which tends to be driven by self-interest rather than being part of a concerted effort. Frontstage-making is tough for tourism entrepreneurs, because it is repeatedly thwarted by the mobility and place-making quality of the waste. But surprisingly, the tourists seem less concerned by it than is assumed by the hotel managers and local authorities.

Matter in and out of place

The local authorities also pursue frontstage-making practices. Reducing the visibility of waste, the immediate experience of it, is also a major driving force of the actions of local authorities. As an officer of a local authority states:

If the environment is polluted, the tourists from other countries will not come to visit the island. We will lose our reputation … if we don’t care about garbage, plastic packaging and plastic bottle pollution; our image is not good in the tourists’ eyes. (LA1801)
As a strategy, the local authorities label places as waste-free, such as the streets in the centre of Duong Dong, which are highly frequented by tourists and which have been transformed into so-called “no waste streets.” This involves the placing of litter bins, frequent waste collection, and additional regular clean-ups. It gives, or should give, tourists a waste-free, feel-good experience, inspired by the political vision of a clean and green Phu Quoc pushed by the provincial and national government in the interest of attracting tourists. Moreover, across the island, communal people’s committees mobilise residents to clean up the residential areas and coastlines, especially on international environment days. However, the absence of waste lasts only briefly. Cleanliness in frontstage streets is only superficial, as waste accumulates in nearby backstage locations. In addition, local authorities aim at awareness-raising via the media, public loudspeakers and in political meetings intended to encourage environmental awareness among residents. Yet, the authorities and the local people consider the success of clean-up events and awareness campaigns as marginal. Campaigns remain ineffective as long as not much is done to bridge the gap between inadequate disposal practices and an enhanced state-serviced waste infrastructure.

As within the rest of Vietnam, open, often unsecured dumpsites constitute the waste management infrastructure. On the island, one passes the older of the two official very simple dumpsites en route from the capital Duong Dong to the island’s northern resorts. This so-called “trash mountain” is the most famous eyesore on the island, where the waste problem becomes especially tangible. As one resort managers puts it:

Driving here they go ‘woah this is not really what I expected to see’ … going through the rubbish tip … it is a bit of an eyeopener … it is not the best impression when you are coming particularly to the North. (IntT1803)

The dumpsite is a tangible relict of times when tourism was located along the beach southwards, with the dumpsite located in a backstage area. However, tourism is now expanding rapidly to the island’s north, and this relict challenges the image of a paradisal pristine environment. The construction of new roads to connect new frontstage resort spaces went faster than the relocation of backstage sites. What spurred the local authorities into action was a Vietnam-wide beauty competition on Phu Quoc in 2017, when provincial and national government representatives visited the island. The local authorities decided to do their best to enhance the image of Phu Quoc as the “pearl island” of Vietnam, as promoted on tourism blogs, in newspapers, and in the tourism development plan. Since a complete relocation of the overfilled dumpsite was impossible, the authorities decided to go for a rather superficial strategy of frontstage-making by closing the dumpsite on an interim basis and by installing a fence that now serves as a screen. The fence also holds back waste from being blown onto the street or detaching itself from the piles of garbage and pouring over the street, making mopeds swerve. In these rather superficial efforts to govern (plastic) waste pollution as a case of “matter in place,” it is obvious that waste escapes regulation since it is constantly in the becoming (Davies, 2012). It is a recalcitrant and unruly material, which by its mobility and materiality steadily thwarts plans for creating frontstage settings. As a “parallax object” (Zizek, 2006) it interferes with governance operations. Carried by natural forces such as wind, storm water, waves, and ocean currents, it pops up where it should not (Arnall & Kothari, 2020). Plastics, organics, and construction materials, as well as medical and e-waste, leak into carefully designed places and not-yet-arranged frontstage places, creating an unappealing environment, unpleasant odours, and groundwater and soil pollution. Thus, waste refuses to be a manageable object. Moreover, its sheer amount, its constant production, and its unpredictable mobility create a feeling of impotence in actors from the tourist resorts and the local authorities, who like to see waste as matter in place, out of sight, and open to be handled by technical solutions.

Contesting backstage
Waste, if not well managed, results in “manifold conflicts in communities, particularly over the siting of waste management facilities such as landfills and incinerators” (Davies, 2012, p. 191). The location choices for new (technical) infrastructure do not always go down well on Phu Quoc. The spatial distribution of waste collection services and waste disposal sites reflects the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of tourism, and illustrates an uneven distribution of the waste burden (Arnall & Kothari, 2020; Baabereyir et al., 2012; López-López et al., 2006). In order to extend frontstage places, waste infrastructure has been relocated to new backstage places in rural areas that have not yet been opened up for tourism.

The sites for the new landfill in An Thoi and the waste incineration plant in Bai Bon were chosen by provincial and local authorities because they were relatively hidden away from tourist centres – at least for the time being. However, managing the environment in this way is not without conflict. The resistance of residents to the landfill (An Thoi) and the waste incineration plant (Bai Bon) has created a pressing situation for the local authorities:
The commune aims to progress with the waste management system ... there were these kinds of difficulties [protests by residents] ... people usually don’t want a landfill, it is like a mountain. (LA1803)

In fact, the landfill in An Thoi has already reached its capacity, while the newly built waste incineration plant has not yet gone into service. The latter is still seen as the main solution to the island’s (marine) plastic pollution problem, despite doubts as to whether it will ever work. The “not in my backyard” (Zhang & Klenosky, 2016) phenomenon manifests itself in the repeated blockading of waste trucks by residents. While waste-related issues such as odour, flies, and leakage of polluted water are similar at both sites, the outcome of the protests is different. Newspapers reported on the blockade of the waste treatment plant in Bai Bon during its (technical) testing phase. This created negative publicity and high political pressure. Hence, the political decision-makers revoked the project. The new dumpsite, which is located off the main road in a small forest near An Thoi, has not attracted that media attention. It is a latent conflict involving the (local) governments of the commune, the district and the province on the one hand, and local residents and local residents on the other. So far, negotiations result in top-down decisions, and existing inequalities when it comes to sharing the waste burden are not only ignored but become entrenched (Baabereyir et al., 2012; Vietnam Net, 2018).

Among all groups of people interviewed, there is a belief that tourism makes a positive contribution to the waste situation overall. It is frequently argued that with the development of tourism the island has become cleaner, as internationally managed resorts and expats have initiated clean-up activities within and beyond their premises, as well as introducing more eco-friendly alternatives. Against this backdrop, the local authorities and many residents endorse tourism, rather than complaining of its drawbacks (Gössling, 2003; Pegas, 2016). It is not contested that the future of the island is determined by non-place-based actors, like decision-makers from the mainland and the international tourism industry, who ignore the fact that large-scale tourism has proven disastrous for local social-ecological environments (Nepal & Saarinen, 2016). Yet, if the current trend of frontstage-making continues, there will soon be scarcely any backstage places left, and access to the coast will be largely privatised. This fosters exclusion of the local people from places of recreation, and diminished access to important marine resources, especially fishing grounds. This raises the question for whom the island will provide places for their well-being in future.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our findings illuminate waste–tourism entanglements that embody place-making qualities. Goffman’s (2008) theatre metaphor has proved helpful for making a geographical dense description of these entanglements. The space-related duality between front- and backstage highlights the importance of looking behind the scenes, which allows us to discover ambiguities within waste–tourism relations and shed light on practices that produce socio-spatial inequities. Taking his idea of front- and backstage settings for an analytical structuring, our findings reveal that, and how, these entanglements drive spatial fragmentation of the island, creating a duality between what tourists see and what residents experience.

To preserve the island’s image of an idyllic, pristine tourist destination, the international resorts and local authorities engage in a constant manipulation and maintaining of waste-free environments that tourists can enjoy. However, our results show that the boundary between front- and backstage places is fragile and porous. The mobile quality of plastic waste, the widely lacking waste infrastructure, and the island’s small size challenge the nicely arranged frontstage. This creation of frontstages by the local authorities and the resort managers has two side effects. Firstly, frontstage-making influences where waste infrastructure is (not) enhanced and where it is (not) located. Secondly, it fuels the discussion on privatisation of beachfronts because it is said to be an effective measure for combating coastline (plastic) pollution. Our case study provides evidence that the current place-making practices must be understood as powerful and divisive, resulting in unequal distribution of the waste burden, and marginalising local needs.

By examining backstage arrangements, we have shown that ascribed waste responsibilities need to be questioned. The apparent clarity of “clean” and “dirty” places leads to false assumptions concerning who contributes most to the increasing plastic waste pollution. All actors interviewed tend to blame the locals, who live in “dirty” places, rather than the apparently clean international high-end resorts. But these are less clean than is often assumed. While frontstage places like restaurants convey the image of being eco-friendly, backstage places like the kitchen still use plenty of single-use plastic packaging.

Taking all this together, our research contributes to the refinement of qualitative empirical studies of entangled waste–tourism relations and their critical place-making qualities. Our case study follows calls for geographical case studies on waste management practices in the global South, such as that expressed by Millington and Lawhon (2019). Moreover, it provides a critical reflection of social-ecological impacts arising from tourism by highlighting the increasing socio-spatial
fragmentation of the island with its potential negative social and environmental risks. Furthermore, this case study offers transferable insights for other islands and coastal touristic settings that are experiencing a rapid development of tourism and waste pollution. Our findings will contribute to rethinking everyday waste management practices in touristic settings, and the development of just socio-spatial practices that hinder spatial fragmentation and tourist enclaves.

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**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

Research data are not shared due to privacy restrictions.

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