# Tour Guides as Cultural Mediators: Performance and Positioning[1]

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## Introduction: Hosts, Guests and Mediators

This special issue devotes comparative and ethnographic attention to the topic of the tour guide as cultural mediator. Based on studies in a panoply of countries (UK, Israel, Peru, Cuba, Reunion, Germany) and sites (museums, pilgrimages, casual street-guiding, mountain treks, folkloric displays), we demonstrate how various settings, power relations, and tourist gazes enable or constrain intercultural guiding performances. Tour guides embody a wide range of roles, cultures and positions on the tourism stage. Their presentation of 'their' culture to others carries a certain authority and implicates them in positions towards aspects of their own culture and those of the tourists that they may come to acknowledge, appreciate or resist over time. Thus, approaching tour guides as cultural mediators offers new insights into the anthropology of tourism and cultural contact as a whole.

The anthropology of tourism was first conceptualized under the rubric of host-guest relations (Smith 1977). In their retrospective survey, Candea and da Col (2012) asserted that 'hospitality' could be a term no less productive to think with than the gift, which has generated a multitude of reflections and research, since Marcel Mauss' initial work produced nearly a century ago. The past three decades have witnessed a shift from the conceptualization of tourism as an interaction of 'hosts and guests' (Smith 1977), to the processes of institutionalization and commodification that underlie the 'hospitality industry' (Greenwood 1989, Cohen 1988, Watson and Kopachevsky 1994). While the 'gift of hospitality' is often promoted by tour operators and vacation destinations, this classification mystifies and obscures the economic relations between visitors and service providers in the tourism industry (Candea and da Col 2012).

As empirical research at tourist venues increased, and postcolonial movements removed the veil of innocence from many taken-for-granted practices of power (such as exoticization), anthropological and sociological studies of tourism often turned their attention to the power differentials of the tourism encounter and the practices that propagate it. Foucault's medical gaze was adapted by John Urry (Urry and Larsen 2011) to describe the power of the tourist gaze: how it is propagated through media images, itineraries, and discourses; how it changes as a result of socio-historical processes in the touring society, and how it affects the toured culture.  These gazes often extend and mask the oppressive relations of financial and social inequality (Crick 1989). They were also reproduced by management-oriented tourism research and the neo-liberal values of performativity, consumerism and profitability that have dominated those research interests (Ren, Pritchard and Morgan 2010: 887).

Under the influence of the critical turn in anthropology and sociology, the notion of 'culture' was called into question in tourist studies (Ateljevic et al. 2005), as the integrated (and isolated) whole societies, often promoted by tourist industry literature ('romantic Paris', 'exotic Thailand') were examined in detail. This led to the application of new analytic categories of class, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Thus, empirical research began to ask 'which natives?', 'what kinds of tours?', 'what kind of tourists?'

Most 'natives' do not engage with tourists. Rather, the encounter – especially in the framework of the guided tour - is specific to certain members of the 'host' culture and certain members of the 'guest' group. It usually takes place in contact zones or what Ed Bruner called 'touristic border zones': 'distinct meeting places between the tourists who come forth from their hotels and the local performers, the "natives", who leave their homes to engage the tourists in structured ways in predetermined localities for defined periods of time' (Bruner 2004: 17; cf. Edensor 2001: 63-4). In such spaces, the tourists and locals can be considered to be actors improvising their interactions (Bruner 2004: 19). Among the most prominent persons inhabiting such zones, and often demarcating them, are tour guides. A nuanced look at the performances and perceptions of guides in a variety of situations can thus teach us a great deal about the cultures and their boundaries as reflected and shaped through the tourist encounter.

J. Christopher Holloway (1981: 385-6) was the first to place mediation at the centre of tour guide analysis, citing the multiplicity of roles played by tour guides acting variously as directors, choreographers, stage hands and virtuoso performers. (Note the theatrical metaphor and suggestion of performance that we return to in this special issue). Among the roles he lists are: information-giver and fountain of knowledge, teacher or instructor, motivator and initiator into the rites of tourist experiences, missionary or ambassador for their country, entertainer or catalyst for the group, confidant, shepherd and ministering angel, group leader and disciplinarian. We find a similar approach to the guide taken in Erik Cohen's path-breaking article (1985) where he provided a classification of tour guide roles into pathfinder, animator, mediator and communicator. In the guide's communicative role, processes of selection, provision of information, interpretation and fabrication make sites and societies accessible and interesting for visitors. The communicative role, in which interpretation is the essential component, Cohen adds, becomes most prominent as the tourism infrastructure and institutionalization expand, while new roads, signage, communication and infrastructure may make the pathfinder's role superfluous.

Heidi Dahles writes that:

> Guides […] sell images, knowledge, contacts, souvenirs, access, authenticity, ideology and sometimes even themselves; their knowledge of the local culture is not limited to facts, figures and other *couleur locale*, it includes the art of building a network, of monopolizing contacts, a familiarity with the operations of the tipping and commissions system […] Successful guides know how to turn their social relations and narratives into a profitable enterprise. (Dahles 2002: 784)

Insofar as they master this role, they may be classified as culture brokers (Salazar 2014). The guide integrates the tourists they guide into the visited setting as well as insulates them from that setting. They do this by interposing themselves between the party and the environment, thus making it non-threatening to the tourist. They thereby come to represent the party to the setting, as well as the setting to the party (Cohen 1985:13). Thus, the guide may bridge conflicted relations and build understanding across communities as in Sarajevo (Causevic and Lynch 2011) or up the Falls Road, Belfast (Skinner 2016). Alternatively, guiding may perpetuate power relations inherent in colonialism and Orientalist understandings of 'natives' (Bruner 2004: 33-70; Bunten 2008; 2015; Crick 1989).

More recently, Weiler and Black (2014:32-43) developed and modified Cohen's typology, employing an expansive use of the term 'mediation' in tour guiding to include provision of access, encounters, understanding and empathy. This includes mediation between visitors and destinations, within tour groups (this subsumes Cohen's 'animator' category) and within individuals as guides to inner journeys (Weiler and Black 2015:266). They claim that with the shift to an experience economy, the communicative role has been to some extent pre-empted by media (including social media), so that dramaturgical and interactive skills have become more important in tailoring tours to the individualized demands of the public. Insofar as what tourists are seeking is to broaden their **experience** (rather than obtain information or access to places) and become 'co-producers' of tours, the broker of experience and the 'mediator' are synonymous (Weiler and Black 2015:365-366; Salazar, this issue).

We have chosen to frame the various guide roles and tasks discussed in the articles in this issue as 'cultural mediators', rather than 'brokers' (Salazar, this issue), in order to highlight the multiplex, performative, interactive dimensions of guiding as well as the fluidity of the 'cultures' they seek to negotiate. Brokers negotiate between distinct entities and demonstrate their mastery of manoeuvering and translation - the stock market crashes, the brokers move on to the next cushy job. Guides are often heavily invested in their work, and their performance is often inseparable from their persona. The 'cultures' they negotiate are often those they feel they belong to, and their representation to others may demand intense emotional labour. 'Mediation', for us, conveys the tentativeness, the liminality and the vulnerability of being in the middle.

The articles in this issue place much emphasis on the guide's performative role but, rather than positing a progressive change in forms - say from information to experience (Weiler and Black 2015), they demonstrate the need for grounding the multiplicity of guide-tourist interactions in specific local histories, power situations and institutional frames. Cohen (1985) points to this multiplicity by outlining some of the constraints of the guiding frame (cf. Bras and Dahles 1999). The structure of the tour and its marketing may facilitate certain roles for guides, while marginalizing others. To give an example, Heidi Dahles (2002) uses her example of the state control of guiding in Indonesia to demonstrate the constraints that the political context may impose on guides' behaviour. Some countries, sites and institutions exert a great deal of control over guide narratives, either through intensive training courses which limit guides' explanations to tightly-controlled scripts, or through licensing regulations or surveillance (Dahles 2002, Simoni, this issue). In many cases, however, guides have great agency in developing their own narratives and tours, loosely directed by shared points or values (Wynn 2011). The step-on guide who boards the tour bus for an hour's city tour may be evaluated by different criteria than the trek pathfinder or the museum docent (Dekel, Skinner, this issue). Guides hustling for business on street corners or near tourist attractions may perform differently than 'official' guides licensed by governmental bodies (Simoni, this issue). The guide hired for two hours by a shop-owner to present Bethlehem and get the tourists into the souvenir shop has less agency than one who accompanies a group for ten days on a coach tour across Poland or Ireland (Feldman 2016: 85-87; Costa 2009).

As Cohen's typology was applied to a wide variety of situations on the ground, scholars attempted to expand the classification of mediation to situations in which the borders of

'cultures' have become more fluid, and in which other categories are more salient. In her study of tour guides at the former Nazi party rally grounds in Nuremberg, Sharon Macdonald (2006) makes the point that cultures are no longer seen to be discrete, and so cultural mediation is not necessary solely between one culture and another. Macdonald (2006: 123) suggests that the tour guides she observed encoded preferred site readings as part of a wider process of mediation and that they took care to *position themselves* vis-a-vis their tour site. This is exemplified by tour guides in Nuremburg who established dominant narratives of the place and its difficult Nazi heritage while dis-establishing or closing off readings of the place that they consider inappropriate such as a celebration of Nazi grandeur. Macdonald's example, in which guides elicit tourist interpretations of images which they then undercut, serves as a counterpoint to the atrocities of the subject matter being revisited. It demonstrates the complexity of seeing and mis-seeing, and the careful and strategic negotiation and positioning of the guide with their audience, one that shifts aligns, opposes, agrees, deceives, interprets and misinterprets, and re-aligns. These strategic negotiations are a central theme informing many of the articles in this issue.

## Performing under the commodified tourist gaze

The processes of commodification in the tourism industry affect services as well as goods (Watson and Kopachevsky 1994). Commodification replicates gazes that are shaped by tour agents' itineraries, pre-trip briefings (Kaell 2014), glossy publications, postcards and brochures, and in the case of pilgrimage – religious discourses. As part of the tourist product, guiding is open to the larger debates over commodification and authenticity[2] (MacCannell 1976, Greenwood 1989, Cohen 1988, Crick 1989, Edensor 2001). It continues to be seen as more 'real' than the second order and sometimes secondhand guidebook – described as 'a mediator of understanding' by Peel and Sørensen (2017: 50); hence, perhaps, the stigma associated with the book mediating the gaze as opposed to the enhanced gaze of the human guide. Where the guidebook acts as technology in the hybrid performance of sightseeing, the guide is the cosmopolitan technician.

Edward Bruner (2004: 238) maintains that most tourists 'accept no moral or political responsibility for the people they visit.' Instead, they exhibit what Rosaldo calls an 'innocent yearning' that serves 'to conceal its complicity with [the] often brutal domination' of the communities that they visit[3] (Rosaldo 1993: 69-70). In the research of many scholars, tourist gazes (Urry and Larsen 2011) cause toured cultures to produce flattened-out, essentialised and sometimes degrading versions of themselves in order to correspond with foreign tourists' preconceptions and prejudices (Crick 1989, Bruner 1994). Thus, Anabel Black (2000: 112) wrote:

> I was struck by the number of ways in which one becomes involved in colluding with a remarkably strict set of expectations and ideas about one's own culture. These may bear little resemblance to the parameters which structure one's own world outside the context of acting as a host, and yet they somehow make sense, or at least contain an internal logic, irremovable from the spaces marked out and sometimes constructed through tourism.' (cf. Greenwood 1989, Edensor 2000, Salazar 2010).

This negative view of tourism as a means of domination and debasement of local culture is countered by other studies that illustrate how tourism may become not only a means of livelihood but a resource for the shaping of identity (Boissevain 1996, Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Crang finds that tourism workers not only produce a product, but produce themselves as part of their jobs: 'identity politics are at the heart of tourism labour processes [...] Identities are not just brought to work by employees; they are forged through it' (Crang 1997: 152, see also Bunten 2008). The discussion has also been enriched through the application of new conceptualisations of culture and identity which see them as fluid projects that can be shaped through performance and interaction (Scherle and Nonnenmann 2008) rather than the fixed essences that much of the tourist industry promotes. The questions that remain are: to what extent do tourist motivations and expectations determine the guide's performance; can this interactive performance be a positive resource in fostering one's sense of self; and how much control do guides have as wilful and skillful mediators, especially they find themselves caught in the middle of conflicting cultural forces and caught up in the dynamics of their own performances (Ren, Pritchard and Morgan 2010, Meged 2017)? Alexis Bunten's recent auto-ethnography, *So, How Long Have You Been Native?: Life as an Alaska Native Tour Guide* is an excellent reflection on this issue (see also Feldman, this issue).

Recent research has provided a more diverse picture of tourist imaginaries and how these impact on the guiding role:

> Tour guide interpretations largely feed off wider imaginaries, culturally shared and socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making devices, mediating how people act, cognise and value the world, and helping them to form identifications of Self and Other. (Salazar 2014: 212, cf. Salazar and Graburn 2014)

As tourist imaginaries and tourist gazes vary (Urry and Larsen 2011: 15-40), so too does the content of guiding and its effects on the persona of the guide. To properly comprehend the effects of power differentials in tourism, however, we need to enlarge our scope beyond the space-time of the interactive performance to engage questions of identity and resistance to the tourist gaze as the guides understand them (Dahles 2012, Salazar 2013, Feldman 2016).

**Multiplex mediation: guides on the move**

As cosmopolitans (Scherle and Nonnenmann 2008), leaders, gigolos (Bras and Dahles 1999), father figures, pathfinders (Cohen 1985) and anthropologists (Bruner 2004), the tour guide negotiates a complex terrain of physical mobility and virtual and existential imagination. They interpellate sites and re-animate streets (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, see Skinner this issue). While they often take pride in their skills as entrepreneurs, adept in code-shifting, translating, presenting and dissimulating, the long list of guide roles certainly generates contradictions and role strains. If 'no one can serve two masters' (Matthew 6: 24), guides must do so or be prepared to pay for the consequences.

These contradictions and tensions have been well illustrated through reflective articles written by scholars who worked as guides themselves: Ed Bruner (2004:6-7; see also Bunten

2008, 2015; Feldman 2016) highlights the discordances between the tour bus and the academy, between expert guide and anthropologist. He found that 'his' tourists had neither the patience nor the desire to invest in getting behind the scenes (backstage) of an Indonesian festival, and that his academic commitment to revealing the behind-the-scenes power relations and peeling the façade of Balinese heritage displays ultimately resulted in his dismissal from tour guiding. Moreover, Noel Salazar, building also on his experience as tour guide in Tanzania and Indonesia writes of the cosmopolitan guide straddling both host and guest fantasies and imaginaries (Salazar 2010; cf. Scherle and Nonnemann 2008, Meged 2017). This bicultural nature is akin to the cosmopolitan nature of the anthropologist, 'betwixt and between', to invoke Victor Turner. While some studies celebrate the cosmopolitan competence of guides (Nonnemann and Scherle 2008, Meged 2017), it may also be dangerous or suspect in its 'neitherness' – neither entirely of one or the other, multiplex and nuanced rather than straight-forward – as Hannerz (1996: 110) warns.

The danger, then, is that mediation becomes an over-simplification for a complexity of push/pull factors, strategic behaviour and political constraint, fabrication, dissimulation and staged commodification (cf. Bunten 2008; Feldman, this issue). The concepts of cultural mediation can be complicated by documenting both the institutional and social constraints under which guides labour, as well as by following the guide as they move on and off the tourist stage, indeed even as they try to define the tourist stage in certain ways.  The constraints may include national, company or site administration surveillance and training (Bras and Dahles 1999, Dahles 2002), or normative societal models of ideal guides and guiding tropes (Wynn 2011; Cohen, Ifergan and Cohen 2002; Katz 1985).  In addition, tourists' perception of the generational, ethnic, religious, racial or national identity of the guide may determine the 'storytelling rights' (Katriel 1997:75-88) they grant them. Thus, whereas anyone of the appropriate (Jewish-Israeli) ethnonational and generational group may speak of kibbutz pioneers in the first person (Katriel, ibid), only native Alaskans (even if not of the same tribe) may speak for Sitka natives on Pacific Coast Inner Channel cruise tours (Bunten 2008). Guides who are veterans of the battle of Pearl Harbor (White 2004) present first-person narratives which others may not; likewise for Holocaust survivors on Israeli youth trips to Auschwitz (Feldman 2010) or Republicans along Belfast's Falls Road (Skinner 2016) – a politicised tour guiding that differs notably from the political neutrality of Blue Badge guides carefully guiding through the Maze/Long Kesh prison outside of Belfast (Skinner 2014). Local and foreign guides use different strategies of mediation and are granted different speaking rights by various groups (Salazar 2010). Thus, the guide's body, accent, gender and appearance may become semiotic objects of the tourist gaze and limit or enhance their possibilities as cultural mediators.

Furthermore, the increased use of the internet by visitors using smartphones may further devalue the role of guides as didactic information-givers while further increasing the practice of storytelling (Urry and Larsen 2011: 203). On-site technologies, staged attractions and interactive media may render guides' roles as information-givers less important (Weiler and Black 2015, 369-371; Skinner, this issue) or provide tourists with a set of pre-images (Edensor 2001: 68-9) to which guides' performances may be expected to conform. Yet, as the articles in this issue bear out, smartphones and social media often play little role in the performance of tour guiding; the full-bodied performance of the guides *in situ* provides tourists with a sense of 'being there' that they cannot get from the screen. They are more a record than co-agent. We accept that this is different to the smartphone and self-guided

tour where the medium also informs the tourist experience such as the use of QR codes in each room in the Memorial Museum (ESMA) in Buenos Aires.

**The articles in this special issue**

The major contribution of this special issue is in making tour guides the subject of comparative ethnographic inquiry, and thus problematizing tour guiding as practice. As cultural mediators, tour guides do not merely interpret one culture in terms comprehensible to another; nor do they just facilitate access to sites and provide information and local colour. Tour guiding is a bodily practice that implicates guides in its performance. Guides must constantly negotiate changing perceptions of self and other, guiding work and daily life, intimacy and economic exchange, past and present. Unquestionably, the personal experience of most of its authors as tour guides themselves (Dekel, Feldman, Picard, Ron, Salazar, Skinner) contributed to the richness of the descriptions.

Several articles document how guides move in and out of tour stages to their private lives. Sometimes guides deliberately blur the distinctions between guiding and daily life to advance their interests, whereas in other cases the tour frame 'leaks' into offstage life. Thus, Valerio Simoni's study point to informal touristic encounters of foreigners and locals in Cuba that are both an opportunity for Cubans to earn scarce foreign currency, but also a way of establishing longer term relations that escape the worker/customer binary. The article draws attention to shifting boundaries between 'work' and 'leisure', and documents the subtle strategies and tactics that guides develop in mediating the attraction and suspicion of tourists in intercultural encounters.

David Picard's article describes performances of heritage, sociability, knowledge of nature, and 'being Creole' for tourists on the island of Reunion. For the tour guide, the publicly performed act of guiding tourists and 'giving a good image' of Reunion and local creole traditions legitimated his participation in the social life of the village. The same performances that mark 'tradition' for tourists become the means of affirming participation in an emerging local modernity in the village. Thus, the performances on and off the tourist stage emplace the guide as a mediator belonging to both the world of modernity and that of the traditional past.

Jackie Feldman analyses the performances of the Holy Land for Christian pilgrims by Jewish-Israeli immigrant guides. Ritualized acts of hospitality - greetings and offerings of food and drink accompanied by scriptural references and readings – are claims to Jewish nativity expressed in terms recognizable by Christians. The article compares the 'commodified persona' these guides develop to protect their integrity with those of Alaskan guides expected to perform the exotic or primitive native. It shows how guide performances are assertions of identity and belonging developed under particular tourist gazes and power inequalities.

Amos Ron and Yotam Lurie explore a similar field - the contact zone between Holy Land Christian pilgrims and their Jewish-Israeli tour guides - as an area of intercultural intimacy.

Employing Wittgenstein's concept of "seeing as", Ron and Lurie show how guides can understand the joy and meaning that the pilgrims experience, bypassing grand theological disagreements to find a shared sense of fellowship and spirituality. They identify three narrative strategies of guides - imitation, distinction and fabrication - through which intimate mediation is achieved and probe their ethical implications. They demonstrate what kinds of intimacy and trust may be achieved in spite of religious differences.

Another ethically and politically charged issue involving tour guide mediation relates to tips and commissions. Annelou Ypeij, Eva Krah and Floor van der Hout examine the ethnic and gender hierarchies between Spanish-speaking male guides and Quechua-speaking female weavers selling to tourists along the Inca Trail in Peru. Rural Quechua women weavers are dependent on the urban Spanish-speaking male guides for their livelihood. Guides may take a paternalistic or even disdainful attitude towards the women, manipulating them into paying high commissions. In response to this, the women develop tactics that attempt to achieve greater trust and reciprocity.

Several of the articles explore the ways guides manipulate tropes of pastness and presentness to create proximity or distance towards the sites they mediate. This is made explicit in Irit Dekel's research on home museums of diplomats, artists and political leaders in Germany. Here, she documents guides' selections of objects and stories, and correlates them with the degree of reconstruction and type of display in each of the home-museums. She classifies guide narratives along two major axes: those of hierarchical distance and temporal displacement. By 'playing' with various tropes of distancing and proximity, guides and tourists negotiate the meaning of politics and history through the perspective of home life.

Finally, Jonathan Skinner shows how an ostensibly empty heritage house on the outskirts of London is re-animated by the tour guides and room stewards for the different visitors through dramatic imagination and guidebook props. Though the house was already conceived by Horace Walpole in the eighteenth century as a tourist attraction, present-day reactions to the house and the house's creator differ considerably from then. The playful narration lives on in guides' living embodiment of a past that bleeds out into the everyday life of the host and the sold imagination of the host. Together, both jostle for a similar position – to inhabit the heritage of their minds.

Taken all together, the papers mark an anthropological shift in conceptualizing the tourist encounter from one of hosts and guests to a focus on the mediators of tourism and their practices. In the meeting grounds of the tourism frontier area, the cultural differences and misconceptions call forth for a creative framing of the tour, dramatization, and dissimulation; these may result not only in satisfied customers but in the establishment of deep intimacy (Ron and Lurie, this issue). Furthermore, as we have shown, the forces under which the guide performs, and the sweep of the performances themselves, overflow the tour frame and impact upon the daily lives of guides. Though always positioned, guides are not a fixed bridge between two distinct cultures. Their shifting positioning raises questions

about the relation of guests and hosts in tourism while reminding us of the dynamic and emergent nature of seemingly rigid cultural boundaries.

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[1] We are grateful for the comments from anonymous peer reviewers and the editors of *Ethnologia Europaea: Journal of European Ethnology*, as well as to Noel Salazar and Erik Cohen, who have contributed the Introduction and Discussion to this issue. Its genesis as a volume originates from extended conversations started at an EASA panel in Tallinn, Estonia, in 2014 on tour guides as cultural mediators. Since then it has morphed from an interest in technologies used in tour guiding – technologies being used expansively to include digital practices, the tricks and rhetorics of guiding, and harnessing technologies of the imagination in the performance of the guide – into an exploration of cultural mediation in the practice of the tour guide.

[2] For a still-relevant survey of tendencies in this literature, see Harrison 2002: 13-24.

[3] Preceding the cultural turn, several niche markets such as ecological and "alternative" political tours may have provided an exception to the rule that tourism narratives and gazes refashion politically and financially weaker areas in the image of the more powerful touring culture (Crick 1989, Stronza 2001).