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Tourism Research as "Global Ethnography"

Tourism is a topic that has traditionally been treated with great ambivalence in anthropology, particularly compared to related issues such as mobility and globalization. This is certainly curious considering that tourism continues to be the largest and fastest-growing industry in the world, even in the post-9/11 environment of terrorism fears and economic recession. This may explain why business schools, hospitality departments and management programs—particularly those outside of the United States—have embraced tourism studies, but it does not explain its relative neglect by, for example, economic anthropologists and others who are concerned with global flows of money, peoples, or information. (To be fair, tourism is so ubiquitous that many of us cannot but deal with the topic, but often in a tangential way).

Indeed, it is even more curious that Malcolm Crick's seminal exposé, "Representations of International Tourism in the Social Sciences" (Annual Review of Anthropology 18(1) 1989)—now some 20 years old—still seems relevant today: Crick pointed to a pan-literati prejudice towards tourism, which is often perceived as a (post-)modern bourgeois distortion of more honorable and edifying forms of journeying such as pilgrimage and Grand Tour-era travel (see, for example, Boorstin's diatribe on tourism in his 1961 classic *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*). It probably doesn't help that tourists (religious and secular) are often loathe to even consider themselves tourists, and often prefer to mark themselves out as different from the tourist masses. For example, those who walk at least 100 km along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela wear scallop shells to denote themselves as "real" pilgrims, as opposed to the other devotees who come by car or tour bus; and both low-end backpackers and high-end "FITs" (free and independent travelers) often try to avoid popular "tourist trap" destinations by visiting less prized, but presumably more "authentic" sites.

Fortunately, tourism may finally be taking its place as a legitimate realm of anthropological inquiry, if a recent issue of *Anthropology News* (November 2010) dedicated entirely to the topic is any indication. Articles dealt with heritage appropriation, the representation of material culture, "pro-poor," community-based, and volunteer tourism, and especially the tourism industry's growth in developing countries in Asia and Africa. But as classically situated in a particular "field site" as many of these articles were—the Chinese ethnic village, the African archaeological excavation, or, in my case, the World Heritage site of Angkor—it was evident that the field of inquiry was not local, but global.

In light of this, I propose here that anthropology can better embrace tourism's relevance and dynamicism when research is undertaken as a form of "global ethnography."

While this form of research emerged over a decade ago during the globalization craze (see, for example, Michael Burawoy's classic, *Global Ethnography*, University of California Press, 2000), anthropology is beginning to truly embrace global ethnography—if not always the terminology. A global ethnography examines the forces, mechanisms, and social effects of globalization—the compression of time and space, the disembeddedness of social life, and the empowerment of individuals over formal political units. It considers the social world as existing in networks, -scapes or flows; it looks at social relationships between sites; it follows objects and peoples and re-presentations as they move across time and space, in order to better understand the increasing interrelatedness of world cultures.

The first step when carrying out a global ethnography of tourism, however, is to recognize that there exists a particular culture (or particular cultures) of tourism, which differentiates this phenomenon from other ways of life. That is, a “tourist culture” espouses a particular worldview, it links a diversity of peoples together who share a unique identity, it utilizes particular processes to organize and order diversity.

1) A Cosmological Concern for Culture

It may be obvious, but tourism revolves around culture—the very realm of anthropologists. Indeed, the work of archaeologists and museum anthropologists are particularly valorized by tourists, whose often-fatiguing travels are motivated by interacting with material culture. Archaeological sites, religious structures, museums, and “picturesque” landscapes (See Roland Barthes's classic essay on “The Blue Guide” in *Mythologies*, 1972)—particularly when considered cultural or natural heritage—count among the top tourist attractions, and serves as touchstones in creating a collective tourist identity throughout time and space. Tourists are likewise attracted to all those intangible markers of identity that have traditionally been the realm of anthropological inquiry: ritual performances, religious ceremonies, art and craft production, music, cuisine and other authentic “traditions.” Indeed, as the first wave of tourism-focused sociologists and anthropologists pointed out in the mid-1970s, tourists are drawn to authenticity—or the perception of authenticity (see, for example, Dean MacCannell's classic, *The Tourist*, 1976); they are seduced by tension-ridden Freudian preoccupation-cum-fascination with transience, and particularly valorize those monuments or cultural practices that seem to have withstood the inevitably destructive flow of time.

2) Organization of Diversity

There are a number of definitions for “culture,” but Anthony F. C. Wallace and Marshall Sahlins (among others) both pointed to the fundamental role of culture in “organizing diversity” (See Wallace's essay, “Epilogue: On the Organization of Diversity.” *Ethos* 37(2), 2009; and Sahlins' essay “Goodbye to Tristes Tropes” in *Culture and Practice: Selected Essays*, Zone Books 2002). Tourism, as both a practice and a worldview, is fundamentally predicated on this. Tourists not only understand that there exists alterity outside of their everyday boundaries, but they actively seek it out—as John Urry pointed out in his seminal book, *The Tourist Gaze* (Sage 1990). The “tourist gaze” is a form of seeing that is predicated on difference, on literally looking for alterity. In Valene Smith's classic edited volume, *Hosts and Guests* (U Penn Press, 1977), Nelson Graburn asserted that tourism is

fundamentally a break from the work-a-day normalcy, an endeavor to temporarily step out of one's comfortable (or uncomfortable) everyday life, to experience difference. While the experience itself is ephemeral, the taking of photographs, the bringing back of souvenirs, the exchange of travel tales, and, most importantly, the frequent desire to repeat or relive the experience (perhaps in a different destination) all point to tourism's formative and lasting role in fashioning and re-presenting one's identity through time. As the anthropological truism goes, people often describe themselves by what they are not, rather than what they are.

Tourism also has a social structure that helps to organize diversity. In my book, *The Heritage-scape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism* (Lexington Books, 2009), I argued for the existence of a "field of touristic production" (cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Columbia U Press, 1993). Bourdieu's Marxist overtones aside, it should be recognized that there are a number of different epistemic groups—knowledge-based groups that often transcend geographic boundaries (cf. Karin Knorr-Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures*, Harvard, 1999)—who interact in various ways to produce a touristic experience: global tour operators, local service providers, tour sponsors, site managers, tourists themselves, the local community, and other so-called "stakeholders." These groups espouse different understandings of the site, and often conflict in how a destination is re-presented to, and consumed by, others. Like other cultures, they also police the borders of their own groups, often through language: Tour operators, for example, have particular idioms—a secret language of buzzwords—that differentiate their members from the common traveler. (Use the right terminology when booking and a provider might just give you 10% off their service, which is the industry norm!)

3) Ritual practices

In the vein of symbolic anthropology, and building on Sir Edmond Leach's ritual theory, Nelson Graburn first asserted that tourism has a particular ritual structure which serves to foster those formative in situ experiences. (See also his article, "The Anthropology of Tourism," in the *Annals of Tourism Research* 10(1), 1983). Implied in this is Victor Turner's assertion (in his work on pilgrimage) that these voyages foster a sense of *communitas*—a way of temporarily transcending the social structure that divides its varied participants—creating a sense of unity in diversity. As a ritual, it can also serve as a rite of passage (like a birthright tour, an Anglo-Australian "gap year" trip, or even a honeymoon) and a rite of intensification (periodic rites that refresh the natural and social order, such as the summer vacation, or an annual pilgrimage).

4) Tourism's perspectival nature

As Urry intimated, tourism is fundamentally perspectival. It is a particular way of seeing the world through contrasts, a way of literally looking for difference. Urry defines the tourist gaze as being defined by its opposite—non-tourist forms of social life. I would go further, insisting that tourism's perspectival nature is more fundamental a quality than mobility; one can be a tourist without traveling long distances, or spending inordinate amounts of money or time. All one needs is a change in perspective: one can be a tourist in his/her own backyard, (think about a college student who takes, or leads, a campus tour for incoming freshmen). This concept thus frees the analyst from always identifying economics as a primary motivating factor (or constraint) on tourists, and focusing

squarely on more “socio-cultural” elements (such as ritual). It also allows us to examine more fully domestic tourism—that is, the relatively under-researched, extra-ordinary consumption of local sites by locals themselves.

With these structural and phenomenological qualities in mind, here are some preliminary suggestions for conducting a “global ethnography” of tourism:

1) Visitor analysis at a fixed “control” site

Many of the great ethnographies of tourism locate the anthropologist in a fixed site or village, analyzing the flows of tourists as they pass by. This has many benefits: it is a way of identifying how visitors treat the site, what characteristics of the site are attractive to various demographics, what rituals are performed and how this creates unity and/or difference. It also reveals how locals treat various demographic groups and vice versa. Since the site serves as a “control,” it is also a way of understanding broad demographic trends in tourism.

2) Follow the tourist

The converse of this methodology is to follow the tourist as (s)he moves from site to site during the course of a tour. This allows the anthropologist to focus squarely on the rituals and practices that occur throughout the entire tourist experience, which includes bus transfers from monument to monument, drinks in the bar after a long day, and sleeping in the hotel at night. Many tourists candidly talk of their impressions of a monument or the trip in general during casual periods at restaurants and bars, offering valuable insights into the progression of their experience.

Should one be able to travel with the same group of tourists to different destinations over a long period time (alumni associations, fraternities, and business departments often do these types of annual “rites of intensification”), (s)he may be able to gain valuable insights into common meaning-making processes of tourism.

3) Study a particular epistemic culture

As many tourist ethnographies have done, one can also study a particular stakeholder group within the field of touristic production. Many of these epistemic groups are themselves global; their identities are predicated less on geographic proximity, but rather on the forms of knowledge they possess. Indeed, for all of its materiality, tourism is fundamentally a knowledge-based industry: For example, the best tour guides possess the best knowledge of the destination, but also understand how best to communicate that knowledge to different constituencies; and the most successful tour operators and service providers know the right people to obtain the best rates, or the inside scoop on a new destination or rare private visit. Conducting an ethnography among these groups as they produce and re-present their knowledge—in the vein of William Mazzarella’s ethnography of an Indian marketing firm, *Shoveling Smoke* (Duke 2003)—can helpfully reveal the ways in which meaning of a site is shaped, disseminated, and mediated.

4) Research the social networks connecting epistemic cultures

It follows that the networks that connect different epistemic groups should be analyzed fully through social network theory, interviews with key mediators, and other forms of

inquiry aimed at viewing how knowledge is constructed, contested and mediated. Understanding that a Bourdieuan field of production is created through the positioning and position-taking between and among these diverse groups, it is helpful to fully examine those instances in which groups clashed—publically and privately—over ideological control of a destination or its narrative.

5) Analyze the production of tourist imaginaries

If tourism is perspectival, then tourist imaginaries—production, diffusion, consumption, and re-presentation—become a fundamental area of study. Noel Salazar’s recent book, *Envisioning Eden* (Berghahn 2011), which examines the practice of disseminating knowledge (and imaginaries) by tour guides in developing countries is an excellent example of such a global ethnography. Other ethnographies have taken the Appadurai approach and “followed the object”—in this case, examined how a souvenir, relic, or photograph changes in meaning and value as it physically (or even through representations) moves across cultures or epistemic groups.

6) Conduct a “virtual ethnography”

One can analyze how these imaginaries are re-presented by various constituencies on the Internet by examining tourist blogs, postings on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and user-generated photo databases such as Flickr and Picasa; websites by service providers, cultural ministers, and other promotional entities; Internet databases from heritage and conservation groups such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, World Monuments Fund, SAFE, Global Heritage Fund, and others; and even social networking sites for particular diasporic communities (how does the global Khmer community appropriate Angkor Wat?). But conducting a “virtual” participant observation may also entail posting and interacting with members on message boards, commenting on user-generated tourism sites such as TripAdvisor, and chatting with tourists (either those who are currently traveling or who have returned) on Facebook or Skype. Best of all, this can be done in the comfort of one’s own home, with minimal funding!

These are just a few of the methodological approaches to conducting a global ethnography of tourism, and by no means is this list intended to be exhaustive. I hope that readers may comment on this posting, adding their own methodology suggestions and creating what could be a helpful resource for future global ethnographies.

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