

Fact, Fantasy, Fiction: On the “Truth” of Tourist Narratives

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What does it mean to say that an account is *true*? This paper concerns itself with tales of tourism encounters, specifically those recounting moments of peak emotion and heightened experience. Beginning with the fundamental question of the relationship between narrative and experience, building upon Ed Bruner’s foundational work on the topic (Bruner 2005; Leite et al. 2019), I extend the discussion to encompass written accounts alongside oral ones and to introduce the question of the *audience* for these tales. As early as the late 1970s, Bruner drew our attention to the discrepancy between reality as lived, as experienced, and as told, emphasizing the ever-present gaps between what is objectively “real” in any given moment, what participants sense as living beings, how they express their experience, and what is ultimately understood by others. He argued that both tourist experiences and the stories they tell about them are given shape and meaning by widely circulating narrative models (in film, fiction, popular culture) and by broader metanarratives about types of travel and travellers (homecoming, pilgrimage, jungle exploration). Given the many layers of narrative and imagining shaping all tourist tales—which, depending on the audience, may be interpreted variously as fact, fantasy, or fiction—we are thus confronted with three levels of “truth”: that of the external material world, that of the significance attributed to experience as narrated by the interlocutor/character, and that as assessed by the listener/reader. Viewed in this light, all tourist tales are fictions and all may be equally true. The difference lies in the eye of the beholder, based on the logics of coherence and inference applied. Drawing on a series of oral narratives and fictional accounts, followed by an analysis of their reception by others, I outline methodological and epistemological considerations for scholars seeking to capture tourist experience in whole or in part through stories told—that is, as conveyed via the written or spoken word. These considerations are particularly important, I suggest, when we seek to grasp the lived experience of tourists’ somatic, spiritual, and similarly ineffable encounters—and the experience of those who engage with their stories.