Framing Maya culture: Tourism, representation and the case of Quetzaltenango

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Abstract
This article examines the representation of Maya culture in travel and tourism literature. It compares and contrasts framings in historical, promotional and online tourist media. Two main tropes are identified that have been central to this literature since the mid-nineteenth century, culminating in a current practice described here as Maya cultural tourism. In Guatemala, promotional texts replicate earlier tropes to portray Maya culture as a primary source of attraction. What these dominant commercial framings consistently ignore, however, are Maya contributions to global tourism narratives and exchanges. To address this gap, the second part of the article focuses on the ways in which local actors use online media to present themselves to tourists in the case of Quetzaltenango. This serves to illuminate key differences in how tourism marketers and local actors package Maya culture for global consumption. It is concluded that overcoming a preoccupation with the same tired tropes involves paying closer attention to cultural narratives emerging in cyberspace that acknowledge Maya agency in their relations with tourists and portray these exchanges in a more nuanced and robust manner.

Keywords
framing, Guatemala, guidebooks, indigenous peoples, Maya culture, Quetzaltenango, representation, tourism, travel

Introduction
The signing of the Peace Agreements in 1996 marked the end of 36 years of armed conflict in Guatemala. In the post-war climate, the country’s diverse regional geography, its indigenous cultures and ancient archaeological sites began arousing interest among global tourists. A steady rise in tourism numbers created new economic opportunities,
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particularly for inhabitants of the country’s western highland region. The region is home
to a large concentration of Guatemala’s Maya population whose experiences have been
marked by violence, poverty, racial discrimination, high levels of illiteracy and low lev-
els of educational attainment. In many highland Maya communities, the legacy of colo-
nialism and further damage inflicted by decades of devastating civil war continue to
linger. However, rising levels of tourist mobility have also presented Mayas with new
means of confronting the powerful legacies of racism and discrimination. This article
considers how and to what extent the perspectives of Mayas who work in the tourism
sector have surfaced in different modes of representing indigenous cultural tourism in
Guatemala.

With a population of approximately 225,000, Quetzaltenango is the second largest
city in Guatemala. Centrally located in the western highland region, people of diverse
social and cultural backgrounds have come into contact in this meeting place for centu-
ries. Today Quetzaltenango is home to a large multi-ethnic, urban indigenous population.
K’iche’ and Mam peoples are the two largest ethnic communities. Members of several
other ethnically distinct groups, including Q’anjob’al, Ixil and Kaqchikel peoples, inhabit
the city as well. Another third of the population is ladino, a term used to describe people
of mixed Spanish-indigenous heritage often said to reject Maya cultural values (Holbrock,
2004: 43; Menchú, 1984: 249). Quetzaltenango is also a regional centre for education
with universities and colleges that attract students from all over the country. The city
offers tourists a convenient nexus for exploring indigenous villages located in the sur-
rounding highland region. Long-term visitors are drawn to a wide selection of local and
international development projects and a host of language schools. These characteristics
differ significantly from the indigenous villages and ancient ruins consistently repre-
sented as Guatemala’s main Maya attractions in promotional literature.

Tourist media and the framing of Maya culture

The tourism industry has used media to produce and circulate promotional imagery since
tourism emerged as a popular practice in the mid-nineteenth century. While planning a trip
or making decisions abroad, tourists have access to a vast repository of materials produced
by tourism marketers. Tourism scholars have observed the influential role guidebooks,
travel brochures and other promotional media play in framing tourist attractions for popu-
lar audiences and the limitations of such representations. Building on the foundational
work of Dean MacCannell (1976) and John Urry (1990), recent works have examined the
role and function of promotional media within wider tourist systems (Bhattacharyya, 1997;

Olivia Jenkins (2003) identifies a resemblance between promotional images of
Australia in travel brochures and photographs taken by backpacker tourists. Jenkins
(2003) argues that backpackers unwittingly contribute to ‘circles of representation’ by
producing images of Australia that reinforce cultural myths initially constructed and cir-
culated by tourism marketers (p. 308). The outcome is a hermeneutic circle where the
same images occur repeatedly while other renditions of tourism are consistently
neglected or ignored. Another strand in this literature considers how guidebooks influ-
ence tourist behaviour, functioning as a key source of cultural mediation (Bhattacharyya,
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1997; Degen and Wainwright, 2010; Tegelberg, 2010). Bhattacharyya (1997) demonstrates how Lonely Planet guidebooks frame India without acknowledging that they offer just one of many possible images of India (p. 376). These scholars arrive at the consensus that commercial framings of tourism have a tendency to homogenize tourist displays by sidelining distinct political–economic, cultural, spiritual and gendered dimensions of local experience.

Edward Bruner (2004) points to an irony inherent in these critical assessments of promotional tourist media. He notes how these scholars have inadvertently aligned themselves with marketing rhetoric by ‘… working within the frame of commercial versions of their sights’ (p. 128). This research remains fixated, in other words, with the same iconic images and stereotypes favoured by tourism promoters. Consequently, these works contribute an added layer to the circle of representation by failing to offer more ‘… nuanced analyses of the variety of tourist displays within any culture area’ (Bruner, 2004: 128). The observation raises questions regarding how local actors contribute to tourist systems and what media channels they use to package these cultural displays for outsiders.

This article responds to these questions by illuminating key differences in the way tourism marketers and local actors represent Maya cultural attractions in Guatemala for global consumption. I do so by using frame analysis (Entman, 1993, 2007) to compare and contrast the representation of Maya cultural tourism in popular and scholarly literature with texts created by Mayas who participate in Quetzaltenango’s local tourism sector. Frame analysis is a method commonly employed by researchers to demonstrate how media texts are constructed by ‘… selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others’ (Entman, 1993: 53). These studies focus on headlines, pictures and other conspicuous aspects of a text in order to identify dominant framing techniques as well as those perspectives that have been neglected or ignored.

The article begins by tracing the origins of a Western fascination with Maya culture by revisiting key works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century travel and tourism literature. Critical analysis of these texts points to the emergence and lasting legacy of two dominant techniques of framing Maya culture: one portrays Mayas as objects of touristic desire by foregrounding authentic, timeless and mysterious qualities and the other consistently places Mayas in positions of subordination in relation to their Western counterparts. The next step is to demonstrate how these classic tropes continue cropping up in commercial framings of Maya cultural tourism in Guatemala. Analysis of popular guidebooks and national promotional literature reveals a tendency for these texts to replicate framing techniques established in the nineteenth century.

The second part of the article reviews an emerging body of scholarship on tourism in Maya communities that focuses on the contributions Mayas make to tourism narratives and exchanges. I then contribute to this literature by examining material produced by local actors to portray Maya cultural tourism in Quetzaltenango. Local actors use online channels to present themselves to tourists by introducing framing techniques that deviate from the circular patterns of representation observed in popular and scholarly literature. I conclude by linking this observation to a broader shift in the dynamics of touristic representation that calls for further recognition of local agency and innovation in the presentation of themselves to tourists.
Inventing the Maya

A Western fascination with Maya culture was born with the arrival of the first waves of explorers in the mid-nineteenth century (Castañeda, 1996). Although there had been prior knowledge of these ancient sites (Gage, 1958 [1648]), travel and exploration literature from this period invented techniques of framing Maya culture, which remain prevalent today. These frames emerge in the work of John Lloyd Stephens, a prominent nineteenth-century travel writer. Critical analysis of his writing points to two central tendencies: tropes that emphasize mysterious, authentic and timeless dimensions of Maya culture and tropes that portray indigenous locals as half-witted subordinates, incapable of comprehending the importance of Stephens’ historical undertaking.

John Stephens (1969 [1841]) and his companion, Frederick Catherwood, travelled extensively in the interior of Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán between 1839 and 1844. *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* is an account of their primary expedition. The episodic narrative centres on the challenges these men faced trying to explore several ruined cities during a period of political turmoil. It contains numerous detailed drawings that Catherwood took during the excursion with the aid of a camera lucida. The book was widely circulated and gained critical acclaim almost immediately. Edgar Allan Poe (1841) refers to it as ‘… perhaps the most interesting book of travel ever published’ (p. 96). Quetzil Castañeda (1996) attests to its continuing relevance, suggesting Stephens’ writing ‘… cleared a field for both modern Mesoamerican studies and tourism in the Maya world: in conjunction with the illustrations, the narrative images formulated an enduring vision of Maya civilization for Western … imagination’ (p. 5). These powerful statements call for further investigation of what accounts for this lasting legacy.

In *Incidents of Travel*, Stephens recounts a series of events that led to the ‘discovery’ and subsequent purchase of the ruins at Copán. The author places himself at the centre of a revolutionary historic and scientific event. This conceit is exemplified when he emphasizes that prior knowledge of Copán was ‘most meagre and unsatisfactory’ and that the ‘… ignorance, carelessness, and indifference of the inhabitants of Spanish America on this subject are matter of wonder’ (Stephens, 1969 [1841]: 98, 101). This sets the stage for Stephens to become the first contributor to an exciting new area of study. His testimony introduces techniques of framing ancient Maya culture that have endured:

We sat down on the very edge of the wall, and strove in vain to penetrate the mystery by which we were surrounded. *Who were the people that built this city?* In the ruined cities of Egypt, even in the long-lost Petra, the stranger knows the story of the people whose vestiges are around him. America, say historians, was peopled by savages; but savages never reared these structures, savages never carved these stones. We asked the Indians who made them, and their dull answer was ‘Quien sabe?’ ‘who knows?’

There were no associations connected with the place; none of those stirring recollections which hallow Rome, Athens, and ‘The world’s great mistress on the Egyptian plain’; but architecture, sculpture, and painting, all the arts which embellish life, had flourished in this overgrown forest; orators, warriors, and statesmen, beauty, ambition, glory, had lived and passed away, and none knew that such things had been, or could tell of their past existence. Books, the records of knowledge, are silent on this theme. The city was desolate. *No remnant of this race hangs round the ruins*, with traditions handed down from father to son, and from generation to generation.
The place where we sat, was it a citadel from which an unknown people had sounded the trumpet of war? or a temple for the worship of the God of peace? or did inhabitants worship the idols made with their own hands, and offer sacrifices on the stones before them? *All was mystery, dark, impenetrable mystery,* and every circumstance increased it. (Stephens, 1969 [1841]: 104, emphasis added)

The framing techniques that surface in this excerpt reappear on numerous occasions. The first is a set of rhetorical questions that place emphasis on the mysterious qualities of these ancient ruins. A second technique is to ascertain what makes this location authentic by weighing it against the ruins of European and Middle Eastern antiquity. A third practice is the erasure of any temporal linkage between these ‘mysterious’ structures and the region’s modern day inhabitants. Evidenced here by the parallel assertions that while these ancient structures were not the product of a continent ‘peopled by savages’, Stephens purports to have discovered no trace of the people whose ancestors erected them. This conclusion arouses suspicion since the author was surely aware of the ancestral linkage of locals he encountered living close to the ruins.

The indigenous locals these explorers employed as guides and excavators (arguably, the region’s earliest archaeologists) are persistently represented as a source of dissatisfaction. They are presumed to have little knowledge of their ancestors and seldom gain credit for the important role they played in uncovering these ancient structures. Stephens (1969 [1841]) describes their work ethic as follows: ‘... the Indians, as in the days when the Spaniards discovered them, applied to work without ardour, carried it on with little activity, and, like children, were easily diverted from it’ (p. 118). Instead of making an effort to comprehend these differing viewpoints, the author portrays this local point of view as a major shortcoming. In a systematic description of the ruins, for instance, Stephens (1969 [1841]) stresses that ‘The people of Copán could not comprehend what we were about, and thought we were practising some black art to discover hidden treasure’ (p. 145). Locals are framed as subordinates, incapable of appreciating an event that should be heralded by Euro-American audiences as a great historical undertaking.

The examples draw attention to writing techniques that prefigure the emergence of tourism narratives that continue placing Maya locals in positions of inferiority. Couched in the language of scientific rationality, these representations acted as justification for successive waves of foreign researchers and travellers to visit the region with the expressed purpose of preserving a timeless and forgotten culture. It is the ‘altruistic’ Western type who must come to the aid of a non-Western population incapable of recognizing the importance of its own antiquated culture. Moreover, by diminishing the significance of existing local cultural knowledge, this vocabulary positions Stephens at the centre of a major cultural discovery. Readers are far less certain what contributions locals made to the process of uncovering these ancient structures or to the narratives that emerged about them.

**La Ruta Maya and the emergence of Maya tourism**

By the mid-twentieth century, interesting parallels had emerged in the framing techniques of Mayanist scholars and tourism promoters. *La Ruta Maya* is a contemporary
tourism network popularized by Wilbur Garrett, a former editor of *National Geographic Magazine*. The Maya route spans across Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador and southern Mexico. Today, these ancient ruins from the classical era (800–300 BCE) draw thousands of visitors to the region annually. The main attractions are the same system of archaeological sites that captured the imagination of Stephens and Catherwood. Garrett (1989) introduces *La Ruta Maya* as follows:

A 1,500-mile, all weather route I’ve come to think of as La Ruta Maya encircles this area like the drawstring on a treasure pouch … you’ll find steaming tropical forests little changed since the Pleistocene and villages that, for better or worse, stand as mementos of an earlier time. Centuries of isolation and poverty have preserved attitudes, architecture, and crafts lost to wealthier industrialized societies. As we approach the 1992 quincentennial of Columbus’s arrival in the New World, no area better evokes the unique lands he found. (p. 435)

Peter Hervik (1999) associates this imagery with a genre of twentieth-century travel writing influenced by archaeologists and ethno-historians. These scholars sought to bring tourism to the region because of the important role they felt it would play in preserving an authentic Maya culture. Readers of National Geographic are guaranteed that ‘… an authentic, unspoiled, genuine, pristine, untouched and traditional cultural experience’ awaits them on *La Ruta Maya* (Hervik, 1999: 177). Albeit masked in twentieth-century vocabulary, this Maya imagery closely resembles that of Stephens’ nineteenth-century works.

Moreover, a technique of placing contemporary Mayas in positions of subordination replicates presumptions inherent in earlier genres of travel writing. According to Garrett (1989), indigenous lifestyle ‘remains basically unchanged’ (p. 447) and ‘homesteader mentality’ remains prevalent in indigenous communities on *La Ruta Maya* (p. 468). These framing devices provide the basis for the author’s urgent calls for an international intervention to prevent ‘… the destruction of their cultural and environmental wealth’ (Garrett, 1989: 444, 478). This establishes a binary division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ with Garrett placing *National Geographic*’s large Western readership in a superior position. Maya tourism functions as a remedy to help save backward locals, intent upon destroying their own landscape and culture, from themselves.

Twentieth-century guidebooks, travel magazines and scholarly texts invented *La Ruta Maya* by replicating conventions established in nineteenth-century travel literature. Today, these narratives continue to be reproduced in the marketing of Maya cultural tourism in Guatemala. Promotional texts frame encounters with Mayas who continue living in the tradition of their ancestors as one of the nation’s primary attractions. This theme stands out in the introduction to a recent edition of *Lonely Planet Guatemala*: ‘Most stirring of all, perhaps, is experiencing Guatemala’s thriving Maya heritage. This amazing culture has left some of the most impressive ruins in the region, many of which are still used for sacred rituals’ (Vidgen and Schechter, 2010: 11). The imagery is more pronounced in *The Rough Guide to Guatemala*:

As the birthplace and heartland of the ancient Maya, the country is in many ways defined by the legacy of this early civilization. Their rainforest cities were abandoned centuries ago, but Maya people continue to thrive in the Guatemalan highlands. (Stewart, 2009: 6)
National promotional literature mirrors these global representational practices. Brochures published by the Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (INGUAT) (2010) claim that ‘Guatemala is the Heart of the Mayan World. Magical, mystical and ancestral history dating back four thousand years when the Mayan civilization emerged, whose legacy is still present today with the traditions and culture of its people’. The country’s western highland region is depicted as the ‘heartland’ of present day Maya culture. Tourists are encouraged to visit the highlands to experience ‘living Maya culture’ in a place where ‘… ancient traditions and beliefs of the Mayan people are reflected in every habit inherited from the ancient historical diversity of the region’ (INGUAT, 2010).

Guidebooks add to this emphasis on the authentic and timeless dimensions of Maya cultural tourism in the western highlands. Rough Guide refers to highland Mayas as people who ‘… have lived here continuously for the past two thousand years, and whose society, languages and traditions remain largely unchanged’ (Stewart, 2009: 121). Highland destinations with attributes that reinforce this prevailing mythology are represented as primary attractions. Lago de Atitlán (Lake Atitlán) is a picturesque lake surrounded by a ring of volcanoes and 13 indigenous villages situated on the shoreline. The more remote villages can only be reached by boat. Panajachel is the largest of these communities due to its close proximity to the Pan American Highway and the wide range of accommodations it offers tourists. Kaqchikel and Tz’utujil Mayas from neighbouring villages travel to Panajachel to sell handicrafts to tourists, a practice that has become a primary source of local revenue. This passage gives Lonely Planet readers a dramatic first impression:

"Today even seasoned travellers marvel at this spectacular environment. Fishermen in rustic crafts ply the lake’s aquamarine surface, while indigenous women in multicoloured outfits do their washing by the banks where trees burst into bloom. Fertile hills dot the landscape, and over everything loom the volcanoes, permeating the entire area with a mysterious beauty. It never looks the same twice. (Vidgen and Schechter, 2010: 116)"

Rough Guide reassures readers that this destination has not been tarnished by its immense popularity among tourists:

"Another remarkable aspect of the Atitlán area is the strength of Maya culture evident in its lakeside villages. Despite the holiday homes and the thousands of tourists who venture here each year, many of the pueblos remain intensely traditional … in the hills above the lake are some of the few places in the entire country where Maya men still where traje. (Stewart, 2009: 15)"

Evidently constructing a timeless, authentic image of Maya culture remains a prominent framing device in these contemporary tourism discourses. These narratives arouse expectations of a pristine Maya culture, un tarnished by modernization, while downplaying the significant economic role tourism has come to play in these communities.

**Maya communities in tourism research**

Research on Maya cultural tourism has tended to focus on communities located close to principle destinations on La Ruta Maya. A growing body of literature examines Maya
tourism in southern Mexico (Van den Berghe, 1994), Yucatán (Castañeda, 1996), Belize (Medina, 2003) and Guatemala (Little, 2004; Moreno and Littrell, 2001). The earliest works frame host communities or ‘tourees’ as central objects of a tourist gaze that robs them of agency. Located in the highland province of Chiapas, in south-eastern Mexico, San Cristóbal de las Casas is a key stop on the Maya route. Van den Berghe (1994) attributes a steady rise in tourism numbers to ‘ethnic tourism’ or a ‘search for the other’: a specific approach to tourism that involves the active pursuit of peoples with cultural traits that tourists classify as exotic (p. 9). He characterizes this asymmetrical relationship as follows:

As an object of curiosity, the touree is on show, whether he wants to be or not; he must make a spectacle of himself. But he remains authentic only as long as he does not consciously modify his behaviour to make himself more attractive to tourists. Therein lies the great irony of ethnic tourism: it is self-destroying. The presence of tourists spoils the tourees. The tourists must forever push beyond the waves of spoilage created by their intrusion, in search of more and more remote Shangri-las, just beyond the reach of the bulldozer and on the heels of the missionary and the anthropologist. The live fringe of ethnic tourism is the outer reach of the second class bus. Like the advancing line of a savannah fire, it consumes the commodity it searches: the authentic other. (Van den Berghe, 1994: 9)

This statement is exemplary of a tendency for scholarly rhetoric to position tourees as void of any agency or control. Tourees must remain ‘authentic’ since tourists may perceive a change in behaviour as a disappointment. Tourists exert agency and influence on these exchanges since they determine whether tourees are worthy of their gaze or not. This sets the tone for an investigation of ethnic tourism in San Cristóbal, which places emphasis on the consumption side of tourism while mostly ignoring the extent to which tourees actively participate in these exchanges.

Various instances of a tendency for ‘… the public eyes of the international media and the academic community [to] assimilate all Maya to a homogenizing category of a uniform identity’ (Castañeda, 2004: 37) have now been considered. In promotional literature, this uniform identity is evidenced by framing techniques that ignore Maya perspectives and represent these subjects as mysterious, timeless and authentic cultural objects. Likewise, while scholars have identified a tendency for dominant discourses to ignore the lived experiences of Maya peoples, many remain complicit in the reproduction of ‘… the same representations and routine ways of perceiving the Maya’ (Hervik, 1999: 186). Consequently, the voices of contemporary Mayas continue to be silenced in discourses where these subjects are given no ‘… active role as caretakers of their own destiny … [and] are not allowed to respond to their own situations’ (Hervik, 1999: 192). By ignoring Maya perspectives, both genres contribute to ‘… a monolithic stereotype that erases the heterogeneity and cultural diversity of the Maya’ (Castañeda, 2004: 37). The question this raises is why, after decades of critical scholarship that questions the validity of Western colonial and post-colonial discourses, asymmetrical patterns of representation in popular and scholarly media have not been overcome. In response, a more recent and nuanced wave of tourism scholarship has begun to recognize Maya contributions to popular and scholarly discourses (Castañeda, 1996; Little, 2004).

Quetzil Castañeda’s (1996) book titled In the Museum of Maya Culture is an ethnographic account of continuous interactions between three distinct subjects at another
popular destination on *La Ruta Maya*. Chichén Itzá was chosen as a focal point since tourists, anthropologists and Mayas have come into contact in this place for more than a century. Castañeda (1996) articulates a highly nuanced understanding of how these disparate subjects have each participated in constructing an image of Chichén Itzá and Maya culture:

> Anthropology and tourism have not simply imposed ‘culture’ onto Maya peoples as the frame through which they and we experience their sociality; rather, it should be added that the Maya have invented the anthropology (and tourism) of the Yucatán. Maya participate in this invention as active agents or subjects in the guise of informants, workers, and ‘real culture-bearers’, as objects engaging and contesting Western knowledge, as the pretext of investigation, and as ideal representations of alterity that are refashioned in Western imagination. (p. 8)

The author widens the scope of Maya tourism research by calling attention to transnational or transcultural dynamics inherent in the invention of Maya culture that are frequently neglected in the extant literature. Whether or not it is always balanced or explicit, constructing a Maya tourism aesthetic has always incorporated the diverse opinions and perspectives of Mayas themselves. Thus, following Castañeda, more robust analyses of Maya tourism must begin to pay closer attention to the diverse actors who participate in these complex networks.

Walter Little (2004) demonstrates what new insights can be generated when such an approach is put into practice. *Mayas in the Marketplace* is an ethnographic account of the experiences and perspectives of Maya artisans who sell handicrafts at a tourist market in Antigua, Guatemala. The author maintains that global tourism has transformed the experience of these indigenous vendors by blurring distinctions between the global and the local. Drawing on the work of Edward Bruner (2005), Little (2004) characterizes Antigua as a transnational tourism borderzone ‘… where national and international, developed and underdeveloped, indigenous and nonindigenous come together’ (p. 33) and provides a rich account of how Maya handicraft vendors make sense of these encounters.

Castañeda and Little each make it clear that tourism research has seldom adequately accounted for the differing perspectives of locals. Castañeda (2004) suggests that these framing techniques fail to recognize an ‘… ongoing dynamic of cultural reinvention of the collective self via “cross-cultural” exchange, borrowing, selective adaptation, and refashioning’ that occurs on the host-side of tourism exchanges in Yucatán (p. 55). This calls attention to the need for further investigation of how these dynamic processes transpire in other locations. Furthermore, the authors provide models for generating new insights into the motivations, practices and perspectives of the host communities who participate in tourism networks on a daily basis. The remainder of this article builds on these findings by examining the representation of Maya cultural tourism in a place where Maya identities and practices do not always conform to the wider narratives that circulate about them.

**The case of Quetzaltenango**

If Guatemala’s western highland region is the place to discover ‘living Maya culture’, Quetzaltenango is geographically positioned at its centre. Accounting for more than half of the local population, Maya citizens have always played an influential role in
municipal affairs (Grandin, 2000; Rasch, 2011). And yet, in promotional narratives, Maya citizens do not attract the same kind of attention as they do in places, like Lago de Atitlán, which tourism marketers have designated to showcase a timeless and authentic Maya culture. In the case of Quetzaltenango, promotional texts mostly ignore the city’s vibrant local indigenous culture and history. This is exemplified by the following introductory statement:

The city of Quetzaltenango can’t claim to be a tourist attraction in its own right, but its ordinariness is in many ways its strength – a resolutely Guatemalan highland centre, off the main gringo trail but with a hospitality and friendliness that belies its size. It certainly makes an excellent base for exploring this part of the country, making day-trips to markets and fiestas, basking in hot springs like Fuentes Georginas, or hiking in the mountains. The Xela plain and surrounding hills feature numerous smaller towns and villages, mostly indigenous agricultural communities and weaving centres. On market and fiesta days these villages explode into life. (Stewart, 2009: 173, emphasis added)

The impression of what makes Quetzaltenango distinct differs from highland destinations heralded for their unique displays of Maya cultural identity and heritage. The city is framed as a regional centre that functions as a convenient nexus for arranging trips to observe authentic indigenous life elsewhere. Although thousands of Mayas live and work in the city, it is not portrayed as an ideal location to encounter ‘living Maya culture’. On the contrary, day trips to rural villages are where cultural exchanges between tourists and Mayas allegedly occur.

Urban indigenous life in Quetzaltenango contrasts with a Maya tourism aesthetic that foregrounds images of rural life in indigenous villages. Maya women wearing traditional clothing, subsistence farmers, colourful handicrafts and indigenous spiritual practices are central to a highland aesthetic that caters to tourist sensibilities and desires. By contrast, Quetzaltenango’s Maya citizens participate in a diverse urban economy, working across a range of different sectors. Tourists encounter Mayas with fluid identities ‘… formed in relation to multiple transnational flows’ (Nelson, 1999: 30) that have evolved over centuries of contact with outsiders. Thus, while many locals maintain strong Maya identities, expressions of these identities are not limited to the confines of an aesthetic that privileges the ‘timeless’ traditions highlighted above. Maya locals with diverse professions in education, business, security, fast food and custodial services contribute to a distinctive and highly nuanced urban Maya aesthetic. This accounts for a shift away from the dominant representational practices observed repeatedly thus far.

When promotional texts represent Maya culture, in the case of Quetzaltenango it happens distinctly. A thriving niche language tourism industry and a host of opportunities to participate in community development initiatives are framed as the primary reasons to visit. One guide suggests that this is ‘… one of the most popular places in the world to study Spanish’ (Stewart, 2006: 192) and another adds that ‘Quetzaltenango is not overrun with foreigners … [and] seems to attract altruistic types’ (Noble and Forsyth, 2004: 141). This altruistic trope is employed to align language study programmes with local development projects. Tourists are encouraged to participate in these initiatives: ‘Most schools provide opportunities for students to get involved in social action programs working with the local K’iche’ Maya’ (Vidgen and Schechter, 2010: 162). Mayas enter
this representational framework not as timeless and authentic objects of the tourist gaze but rather as benefactors of a niche tourism sector that helps support the local Maya community. And yet, although supposedly the benefactors of these efforts, it remains unclear who the K’iche’ Maya people are or why ‘social-action programs’ have been designed to support them.

These examples allude to several factors that have created a unique scenario for Maya cultural tourism in Quetzaltenango. However, what continues to stand out in these commercial framings is an absence of host perspectives. These omissions attest to the limited capacity of global tourism narratives to adequately account for the perspectives of actors who participate in tourism at the local level. This produces a disjuncture between promotional texts that frame cultural attractions in accordance with the needs and desires of tourists, while relegating local perspectives on tourism to separate spheres. However, in recent years, access to the Internet and other low-cost communication technologies has begun to alter these dynamics. Websites enable local actors to resist the homogenizing power of dominant commercial framings by developing specialized promotional materials that engage tourists more directly and in different ways. The implications of these developments shall become increasingly clear as focus shifts to framings of Maya cultural tourism on the web.

**Framing Maya tourism on the Internet**

Online content produced by locals to promote tourism in Quetzaltenango does not offer a more authentic version of Maya culture. However, closer scrutiny of these narratives provides evidence of significant differences in how tourism marketers and local actors package Maya culture for global consumption. The second part of this article demonstrates how locals (re)appropriate and expand upon existing culture themes, putting them to use in the service of their own interests. Rodrigo Grünewald (2009) identifies a related practice in the Brazilian Amazon where indigenous groups have been complicit in the construction of cultural tourism narratives that cast dance rituals, shamanism and an ongoing struggle against ‘white men’ as authentic traditions with deep roots. He argues, accordingly, that the commodification of these cultural practices does not diminish their local significance. Instead, Grünewald (2009) observes how these traditions evolve, in the context of tourism, taking on new meaning for their creators as forms of employment and as sources of indigenous ‘cultural revival’ (p. 235). Moreover, local complicity in the construction of these cultural products performs an important political function by creating arenas where indigenous groups can present themselves to tourists (p. 236).

In Quetzaltenango, local actors use online media to engage in similar forms of cultural commodification. These actors create images of Maya culture that deviate from the century old conventions established in travel and tourism literature. They do so in two main ways: first, by (re)appropriating dominant myths and stereotypes to advocate for and sustain local, pro-Maya development initiatives and second, by using online narratives to familiarize global tourists with local issues and perspectives rarely acknowledged in popular offline tourist media. This online mode of address resembles the Zapatista network’s unprecedented efforts, in the late 1990s, to create online narratives that heightened global awareness of their movement by appropriating existing cultural
myths and stereotypes. Adrienne Russell (2005) observes how, in the Zapatista case, cultural myths lost their regressive status and became core components of a calculated media strategy (p. 569). To demonstrate how a similar process transpires in the case of Quetzaltenango, I analyse how local actors frame Maya culture for tourists in two different online contexts.

Locals exercise agency in the presentation of themselves to tourists on websites designed to promote language tourism in Quetzaltenango. This is evidenced by the selective layering of specific indigenous words, concepts and images in the promotion of certain schools. Pop-Wuj Spanish School explains that

> It takes its name from the title of the great epic saga of the Maya-Quiché (sic) people (sic), Pop Wuj (The Book of Time). Through a unique mix of intensive Spanish language study and community development, students come to a better understanding of the political, social, and cultural realities of Guatemala. (Pop-Wuj.org, 2012)

The page layout combines graphic images of ancient hieroglyphics with photographs of teachers, Maya community members and language students participating in ‘collaborative’ development projects. Juan Sisay Spanish School takes its name after a well-respected Maya painter and activist. A page entitled ‘Sisay, the Painter’ offers the following short account of his life:

> Juan Sisay was considered one of the most important ‘primitivist’ painters of Guatemala. Born in 1921 in the village of Panul Atitlan, he spent his early years working, and therefore could not attend school. Never instructed formally in the art of painting, he taught himself, and developed a unique and personal style. Juan Sisay painted in a time of great civil unrest and social protests, and throughout, he displayed the talent to represent, in a fresh and sincere way, the world which surrounded him. His unique artistic perspective came not from an outsider formally educated in painting, but rather from a self-taught member of the indigenous community. He was killed on the 21st of April, 1989 after painting the victims of a massacre of indigenous people in his hometown.

> The school was founded in his name to help preserve the memory of a person who stood for the preservation of the customs and culture of the indigenous population of Guatemala. The school hopes to stand by these ideals. (JuanSisay.org, 2011)

Adjacent to the paragraph, an image portrays the painter deep in contemplation. Beneath it a reproduction of one of Sisay’s works depicts a group of Maya women in traditional clothing seated together. The words ‘Juan Sisay’ double as a hyperlink that guides users to a digital archive of paintings by Sisay and other highland Maya artists.

In the first example, the name Pop-Wuj is contextualized and juxtaposed with imagery that emphasizes a connection between ancient Maya culture and contemporary tourism in Quetzaltenango. This contrasts with a tendency for dominant discourses to ignore relations between ancient and modern Maya cultures, privileging static conceptions of a timeless and mysterious Maya culture instead. The second example sheds light on the ‘unique artistic perspective’ of an influential ‘member of the indigenous community’. It depicts Juan Sisay as a key historical figure and martyr for indigenous causes. The final line indicates that the programmes at Juan Sisay Spanish School resonate with this
indigenous leader’s core values. The passage gives the distinct impression that Mayas have been involved in an ongoing struggle to preserve their traditions and cultural heritage. It is evident that this movement has evolved over time, with tourism represented as one recent manifestation of wider efforts by Maya activists to resist the hegemonic pressures of a dominant ladino culture.

Centro Maya Xela is even more explicit about its commitment to pro-Maya activism. The following passage from the main page makes these aims explicit:

Centro Maya Xela is a non-profit Spanish and Mayan language school that was founded in 1993 by a small group of indigenous people in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Our school was created with the vision to provide jobs for educated Mayans, to help preserve the beauty of indigenous languages and culture, and create a scholarship program that would allow our young Mayan women the opportunity to attend university. In Guatemala, there still exists discrimination against indigenous people, but for Mayan women, the discrimination is not only ethnically-based, but gender-based as well. In our poor country 70% of indigenous women are illiterate, and there are no government funds to support scholarship programs like ours. Centro Maya Xela is a small school, but an important one. Several of our scholarship participants are now attorneys, physicians, teachers and community leaders in their towns and villages. We are replacing poverty and illiteracy with education.

Our teaching staff are from various highland pueblos and we are all native Spanish speakers. Many of our instructors also speak a variety of indigenous languages native to our communities, and classes in indigenous languages are also offered online. Every teacher is university educated with years of experience in teaching to foreign students and cultural exchange is an important part of the program. This not only offers the students excellent language instruction, but also an ample knowledge of the Guatemalan and Latin American reality. (CentroMayaXela.org, 2012).

On the website, above the passage, a timed sequence of photographs juxtaposes popular conceptions of Maya culture with less conventional images depicting Mayas, tourists and local citizens enjoying themselves together. The content produced for Centro Maya’s website articulates a clear mandate for social change. It conveys the message that tourists can help to sustain a Maya-oriented social and cultural development project by choosing to study at this particular school. The site features many images that resemble dominant patterns of representation with a key difference lying in the context of their representation. Classic motifs are employed strategically in the service of the interests of the Maya staff that own and operate this school. This narrative runs counter to passive renderings of a culture shrouded in mystery or trapped in the past, channelling the voices of contemporary Mayas empowered through their participation in tourism at the local level. The viewpoint of a collective ‘we’ replaces the linear tone that characterized the promotional narratives examined above. This inflection crops up repeatedly as the authors describe how Maya spirituality, weaving and natural medicine are integrated into Centro Maya’s curriculum and elaborate on cultural, political and educational dimensions of Maya identity and experience in Quetzaltenango.

These examples illuminate a distinctive approach to the representation of Maya culture online. Like other promotional texts, these websites continue to integrate iconic Maya words and images into their marketing strategies. However, these narratives
overcome a dominant representational logic where references to Maya culture are superficial at best and fail to delve into the deeper significance of particular words, concepts and imagery. Access to the Internet enables local entrepreneurs to develop alternative techniques of framing local tourism by providing contextual background, advocating for local causes and calling attention to issues that matter to Maya participants. The new perspectives on tourism that emerge in these contexts engage global audiences and simultaneously stand in contrast to dominant patterns of touristic representation.

*XelaWho* is an online culture and entertainment magazine that caters to tourists, volunteers and other members of Quetzaltenango’s expatriate community. The website features content produced by Mayas employed locally in the tourism sector. Susana Raymundo is a columnist who studies Physical and Occupational Therapy at the *Universidad Rafael Landívar* in Quetzaltenango. She works part time as a language instructor at Centro Maya Xela to subsidize the costs of her education. Raymundo’s monthly column for *XelaWho* covers a range of topics, including local gastronomy, adventure tourism, physical fitness, gender politics and Maya identity, culture and spirituality. Her articles convey the multifaceted perspective of a Maya woman, an employee in the tourism sector and a student of physical therapy.

In a series of articles on adventure trekking, a popular tourist practice in the region, Raymundo recounts some of her experiences guiding treks in the highlands. Her stories draw attention to aspects of Maya spirituality and culture that tourists are likely to encounter on a highland trek. One article describes an important spiritual dimension of a popular trek to *Laguna Chicabal* (Chicabal Lagoon). Raymundo explains why tourists will notice altars covered with plants and rum bottles used for religious ceremonies scattered along the trail. ‘The lagoon is sacred for the Maya’, she explains,

> It’s an important site, and the Maya expect visitors to respect it, but they would never say ‘don’t swim or fish or sleep in our altar’ – instead they say that you will drown if you swim here, that spirits will haunt your dreams if you fall asleep on the bank, and if you fish, you will pay dearly in other ways for your catch, but they rarely elaborate, and leave people to make their own decisions. (Raymundo, 2011)

This statement encourages tourists to be sensitive as they hike through this sacred place. Raymundo plays the role of a cultural intermediary, oscillating between two distinct cultural traditions, by sharing personal knowledge of Maya spiritual practices in the guidance she offers tourists.

In another story, Raymundo describes an object used by Mayas to carry goods along the highland trails:

> The Mexa Tze’ is what we call a backpack today, only made of wood with straps that went around the head. It’s where my grandfather and grandmother carried me when I was very small and they had to go to the cotton, sugarcane and coffee farms, to work for a little money. The Mexa Tze’ was also the place my ancestors carried the invaders so their feet would not get muddied or the soles of their boots worn. We no longer use the Mexa Tze’ to carry the sons of bitches. We are tired of doing it. Our back is hunched, but not broken, and can be straightened with physical therapy. (Raymundo, 2010)
This explanation of the cultural significance of the Mexa Tze’ doubles as an indigenous critique of the powerful legacy of colonialism in Guatemala. Raymundo uses the Mexa Tze’ as a metaphor to stand in for various stages in colonial history: ‘the place my ancestors carried the invaders’ refers to the Spanish conquest of Guatemala, which began in 1525, whereas having ‘to go to the cotton, sugarcane and coffee farms, to work for a little money’ refers to the exploitative practices of elite landowners exacted on the highland peasantry from the colonial period through to the twenty-first century. Raymundo concludes that education, a theme evoked by her reference to ‘physical therapy’, can help Mayas lessen the burden associated with the legacy of colonialism. This correlates with Raymundo’s own status as a language instructor, tour guide and student of physiotherapy. Proficiency in English, and other knowledge gained from working in these various capacities, has enabled Raymundo to share these views with tourists.

In both instances, Raymundo frames Maya culture by taking a stance that differs from dominant patterns of representation. Her use of the web to associate local tourism with contemporaneous Maya identity politics resembles what Diane Nelson characterizes as a form of hacking. Mayan cultural activists ‘… deploy intimate understandings of technologies and codes while working within a system they do not control … appropriating so-called modern technology and knowledges while refusing to be appropriated into the ladino nation’ (Nelson, 1996: 289). These ‘Maya hackers’ transcend ‘… the binary semiotics of identity in Guatemala [where] you cannot be both Indian and modern’ (Nelson, 1996: 288) by dismantling the expectation that with an education Mayas must set aside their ‘indigenousness’ and redefine themselves as ladino. Likewise, Raymundo views education as a source of empowerment that enables Maya cultures and identities to flourish in the present. This distinct cultural narrative acts as a form of resistance to historical and commercial framings that have consistently represented Mayas in positions of subordination.

By integrating this Maya voice into its representational framework, XelaWho sets a new precedent for travel writing. Raymundo articulates the perspective of a Mayan woman who participates in linguistic and cultural tourism at the local level. This further evidences that Internet access provides local actors with new arenas to produce and circulate their own messages about indigenous cultural tourism in Quetzaltenango. It should be acknowledged, however, that the capacity for this type of resistance is arguably limited to a group of educated, urban Mayas with the economic capital and literacy to appropriate these technologies and knowledges. Cynthia Ord (2008) has acknowledged the privileges associated with working in Guatemala’s language tourism industry, which include higher than average salaries and flexible working hours. Consequently, some would argue that only Mayas like Raymundo, ideally positioned in relation to global tourism, stand to benefit from participation in local, cultural tourism initiatives. This ultimately serves to heighten class distinctions between privileged Mayas and those employed in other sectors. However, Raymundo provides at least some evidence to the contrary, conveying a desire to use her education to minimize the level of social and economic stratification in Guatemala.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have described how Maya culture is represented in different genres and contexts. Frame analysis of travel and tourism literature pointed to the continued
centrality of nineteenth-century tropes across several writing genres. I argue that this fixation with classic tropes marginalizes other expressions of Maya identity and experience, especially as they pertain to tourism in the twenty-first century. What these dominant patterns of representation consistently neglect, in other words, are stories of tourism told from the perspectives of local actors who actively participate in these complex networks.

Consequently, the second part of this article looked beyond these dominant patterns of representation by examining local accounts of Maya cultural tourism in Quetzaltenango. I started from the premise that, on a broader scale, the rapid and widespread diffusion of low-cost communication technologies has lead to a shift in the dynamics of touristic representation at the local level. Drawing inspiration from works that offer complex analyses of local expressions of agency in touristic contexts (Bruner, 2004; Castañeda, 1996; Grünewald, 2009; Little, 2004), I identify some of the online channels Quetzaltenango residents are using to present themselves to tourists. Websites and other online platforms are opening up arenas where local entrepreneurs and individual participants become complicit in the construction of tourism narratives that differ fundamentally from popular offline framings of Maya cultural attractions. Accordingly, my analysis of the texts worked toward a better understanding of how Maya cultural tourism is represented from the point of view of locals who are employed in this sector. This ultimately poses new questions for tourism scholars as a growing proliferation of online tourist narratives works to erode the representational authority of traditional media.

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Notes
1. In Guatemala alone, approximately 1,715,426 international tourists visited national archaeological sites and other destinations in 2008 (Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (INGUAT), 2008).
2. Grappling with the complexity of Maya identity politics in Guatemala is beyond the scope of this article. For a comprehensive survey and critique of key contributions to the study of Maya identity, see Fischer (1999).

References


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Matthew Tegelberg currently teaches in the Arts & Contemporary Studies program at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. He is a research associate with MediaClimate, a transnational network of media scholars that studies global media coverage of climate change. His writing on cultural tourism, media representations of indigenous peoples and environmental journalism has appeared in the Canadian Journal of Communication, the International Journal of Cultural Studies and in several edited collections. His current research examines the complex nature of cross-cultural exchanges between tourists and local Maya residents in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.