

The figure of the guide: arctic nature guiding as productive behaviour on Svalbard

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Research Article

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Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic participation in a ski excursion among a group of Arctic Nature Guide students on the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, this paper explores guiding as a model of practice embedded in relations – material encounters, discursive frictions and collaborative efforts. The article pays attention to practical negotiations and navigations of these relations while making use of historical scholarship on the role of the guide as a basis for theoretical reflections on the role's mediation activities. More precisely, the paper advocates a “creation-model of mediation” that challenges modernist representational discourse (and conceptualisations of nature) through a recognition of guiding as productive behaviour. Displaying agency in meaning-making and embodying Svalbard's transient cosmopolitan population, the guide emerges as a figure on ground far from fixed and settled, and as a tool with which to appraise Svalbard as more geo-aesthetical condition than bounded place.

Introduction

The natural environment is essential to tourism on Svalbard (Andersen, 2022); most people travel to the High Arctic archipelago of Svalbard to experience the scenery. While this experience is easier to achieve on Svalbard than elsewhere in the High Arctic for a number of reasons (a relatively mild climate; well-developed infrastructure; the absence of an indigenous population), for any visitor experience outside Svalbard's main settlement, Longyearbyen, the guide is an invaluable asset.

Following a pre-COVID tourist boom in the world's northernmost settlement (Saville, 2022), a number of scholars have paid attention to local tour guides (Andersen, 2022; Kotašková, 2022) – a role that otherwise features only rarely in Svalbard tourism research. Building from established scholarships on the crucial role of the guide for the guided tourist experience (Black & Weiler, 2005; Suryana, 2022), in the light of an experience economy paradigm (Gelster, 2013) and a performative turn in tourist studies (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Larsen & Urry, 2011), this attention reflects a critical approach to conceptions of sustainable tourism. Here, the recognition of tourism as a local vehicle for economic and political investment and its future geopolitical presence on the archipelago are notable (Hovelsrud et al., 2021; Kaltenborn et al., 2020; Viken, 2011). Importantly, many guides strive to ensure that tourists, through the experiences they gain, also adopt a knowledge-based approach to the increasing awareness of global climate and environmental crisis (Kramvig et al., 2016). But even if such trends in nature-based tourism are favoured over more environmentally destructive forms of mass tourism, the use of concepts such as nature, sustainability and environmental friendliness is increasingly experienced and felt to be contradictory, if not paradoxical, for both locals and guides in Longyearbyen (Andersen, 2022). It is worth considering the extent to which political responses to mass tourism cohere in the transformation of ordinary people into “Arctic ambassadors” (Eijgelaar et al., 2010), representing the region in the context of climate change.

This paper concerns the mediation activities of the certified Arctic Nature Guide (ANG) on Svalbard, when approached as an assemblage-maker with a potential to affect ecological discourses in the Arctic and beyond. By mediation I do not refer to instances when different spheres or separate entities come into dialogue or dialectic interaction, but to a process of differentiation (Zhang & Doering, 2021). This is a process or milieu never foreclosed (Anderson, 2019). Drawing from historical scholarship on the role of the guide (Cohen, 1985; Dahles, 2002; Smith, 1989) I engage with a contemporary turn towards humble epistemologies (Saville, 2021), to reflect upon the ways in which the act of showing something to other people affects the revealing of the subject under discussion.

The article also explores this question as an experiment in ethnographic writing. Reflecting a constant interplay between doing and thinking, reading, writing and reflecting, the writing is not structured in sections setting out a review of the literature, methodologies, theories and results; rather, drawing from my training in artistic research in the field of media and visual anthropology, it seeks to circumvent the propensity of conventional structures of academic writing to disrupt, separate and stage what is actually going on (Grunfeld, 2021). More explicitly, I have

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chosen to write with a strong emphasis on my participation in a one-week ski excursion with a group of ANGs in May 2018 in the context of an autoethnographic journey that began more than 10 years ago, when I visited Svalbard for the first time. This is part of a journey of personal experiences and observations which has allowed a process of long dwelling (Stewart, 1996) on various “somewhat contingent encounters” (Lien 2021, p. 1).

I have written elsewhere that Svalbard is different to the colonial Arctic as we know it (la Cour, 2022). But this does not mean that Svalbard is not colonial. I suggest, rather, that my ethnographic participation in the ANG excursion offers interesting perspectives on the complexity that Svalbard embodies: Svalbard’s cosmopolitan population challenges conceptions of “the Arctic” as a fixed, homogenous region bound by insider/outsider relations (Dittmer et al., 2011), or coloniser/colonised relations as embodied by indigenous communities elsewhere in the circumpolar North. Yet, in doing so, the ANG also discloses the Arctic as an extraordinary geopolitical space worth considering *geo-aesthetically* – a term that signals the impossibility of fully grasping how image-making unfolds in concrete and skilled practices (la Cour, 2022). A geo-aesthetical approach is thus fundamental to the main argument in this paper: there is an urgent need of a “creation-model of mediation” that recognises guidance as productive behaviour. The felt contradictions between “nature” and “tourism” among both guides and residents in Longyearbyen (Andersen, 2022) confront and express how the discourse available to the discussion of nature-based tourism is, to a large degree, founded on the modernist dichotomy in colonial history that authorised the tourist industry in the first place: the imaginary of travelling to the borders of civilisation and beyond; the idea of a dichotomy of inside and outside. How, instead, may the guide epitomise the 21st century visitor to a Svalbard understood to be more condition than bounded place? Can the guide, as a figure distinguished from issues of authority and generality, nurture our relationship with place as an indeterminate possibility?

Let me now turn to the autoethnographic perspective.

The ANG ski excursion

After two long days of introduction, packing, planning and logistics, I found myself eating dinner with students on the annual six-day ski trip and exam excursion, part of the one-year practice-based ANG programme focused on “value-based guiding and teaching in Arctic Nature” at UiT (the Arctic University of Norway). We were a party of seven, composed of many different nationalities.

Having travelled by boat across the Ice Fjord from Longyearbyen to Trygghamna, we skied for a couple of hours before setting up camp for the night. Once our tents were pitched and our equipment organised, we ate our first joint dinner, sheltered by a circular wall of snow carved out by hand by the guides. Afterwards, warm and less hungry, we were encouraged to share our expectations of the days to come. It turned out that we would create such a shelter each night, eat dinner and, one by one, talk about our impressions and experiences of the day. By encouraging us, the participants, to contribute with observations, to share perspectives and to tell stories, the guides prompted us to actively engage in moments of narrative framing instead of otherwise remaining passive listeners to their explanations or arguments.

Having been to Svalbard several times before, I could personally share anecdotes from earlier encounters. In terms of mountaineering, however, I had nothing to offer in comparison to the two trained mountaineers from Spain. Similarly, the kind of

perspectives that an elderly Norwegian couple contributed, in terms of how the Svalbard–Norway relation had been subject to changing narrative framings throughout their lives, re-embodied a particular kind of historical knowledge. As our conversations deepened throughout the tour, our guides also communicated the various individual ambitions and life stories that had led them to begin their training as guides on Svalbard. One came from a research background but wanted official recognition of her leadership competencies; another was driven by his personal desire to cross Svalbard from south to north. A third was trained as an artist like me and involved in socially engaged outdoor projects. But in all cases, the guides expressed an appetite for being *in* nature rather than for looking *at* nature, as scenery from a distance.

When I am in Longyearbyen, I am just waiting to get out in nature again.

To be in nature is really to be present with whatever happens around you.

(Conversation with guide; fieldnotes, May 2018)

Statements like these evidence that the guides were talking about something more and other than a contemplative experience and their ambition to convey this “something more” to other people.

Thinking through encounters of an open-ended journey

I have myself embodied the role of guide on Svalbard. After my first encounter with Longyearbyen in 2010, which I then experienced only as a kind of temporary base camp for a boat journey and artist residency, I was left with a puzzling and contradictory impression. I therefore decided to return in 2011 to conduct two-and-a-half months of fieldwork with a focus on a group of taxi drivers and the place-making dimension (Margaryan et al., 2020) of their narratives and interactions with laypeople in Longyearbyen – tourists, temporary locals and long-term residents alike. This research utilised mixed methods, with an emphasis on semi-structured, wide-ranging interviews, visual annotation and participatory observation; as part of my fieldwork among taxi drivers, I worked as a taxi driver myself employed in one of Longyearbyen’s two taxi companies. Without ever hiding my research agenda but often perceived as a “local,” I was confronted with the assumed binary relation between “tourist” and “local,” and between “seasonal service worker” and “long-term resident.”

Since then, I have returned several times, increasingly interested in the figure of the guide. Between 2011 and 2018, I have added to my initial fieldwork experience both through ethnographic tourism experiences (2013 and 2014) and training excursions (2015 and 2016) not unlike the ANG ski excursion in 2018. This has resulted in a bank of material composed (apart from fieldnotes, visual annotations and policy documents, institutional travel descriptions and promotional material from tourist companies) of video recordings and audio files. But embedded within my created data rests, also, a proliferation of memories and lingering anecdotes of a place I have come to care about. In the still-ongoing process of twisting and turning my data for presentations, papers and artistic works, I have come to understand it as a process of “long dwelling on things remembered and retold, forgotten and imagined” (Stewart, 1996, p. 7). Methodologically, to think through encounters is to pay attention to the ways in which Svalbard is constituted through narratives and images as much as by geological layers, permafrost and polar bears; I recognise how narratives and images may continuously afford changes in the relationship to that which we think we recognise and understand (Dalsgaard & Frederiksen, 2013).

Twisting and turning my fieldnotes from the ANG excursion, then, the ANG stands out as a figure that connects with an approach to tourism as an assemblage of actors and materials that interacts with other assemblages to (re-)produce Svalbard (Saville, 2019). While living off the tourism industry's capitalisation of experiences and stories about Svalbard, the ANG guides are situated in and working upon an assembled materiality that includes different social backgrounds, affects, attitudes and memories; as a transient constellation of affective relations and historical knowledges, the ANG excursion enacts an open-ended process of affects, attitudes and memories to potentially shape future geopolitical actions (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016).

The value of tying a knot

Before setting off on the ANG ski excursion, I attended a full-day introduction seminar at the University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS), during which the ANG guides students held a presentation and reflected upon the training they had received during the one-year ANG programme. For one, a student from Romania:

I think we came closer to what some scholars in value-based guiding and tourism are talking about, this passage, where we slowly move from season to season. We live with the nature and all the time try to adapt ourselves to its cycles and . . . here [gesturing towards a PowerPoint and photograph taking during polar night] it is a really interesting moment, at least for some of us, when the total darkness comes. And some of us have never experienced that, and it is something that is quite powerful and puts into perspective what it means to see light, to see sun when it returns in March and April. It is about valuing small things that you have every day and maybe being more grateful for them, and about understanding contrasts. To understand more about yourself, answer some question with regard to why you are here, in order for you to better be able to go out and be with the nature, and with the guest and share the nature with them. (Transcript of recorded presentation, Longyearbyen, May 26, 2018.)

Confirming the ANG programme to be part of a trend in sustainable tourism focused on active bodily participation and experience-based knowledge in nature, the guide students affectively conveyed the programme's emphasis on nature as something living: something one must seek to be a part of, rather than to master. Contrasting to modernist notions of the human species in the Western history of ideas in which humanity, despite its biological origin, is perceived to be above – or at least categorically different from – nature, as noted, among others, by the French philosopher Bruno Latour (1993), the ANG guides refused “fantasies of human mastery” (Bennett, 2010, p. 122).

Emphasising interpretation, hostmanship and transparency as important aspects of the skilled practice of value-based guiding, beyond safety as the more obvious integral aspect, this was further acknowledged in my conversations with the ANG guides during the exam excursion:

In the programme, we have talked a lot about the importance of finding out what kind of guide one is, about finding one's inner motivation to be a guide, and what it means to be a host in nature. But also about safety, and how this connects.

Me: Do you mean that to care for safety is to care for nature?

Yes, because in understanding the need of safety, guests automatically gain respect for nature. Now you have just seen yourself, how much time it has taken to get off the boat and everything. I also think of this patience as kind of care because it makes one feel a kind of humbleness and respect for nature.

(Conversation with guide; fieldnotes, May 2018)

An example of this was how we spent most of the morning on the second-day preparing to traverse a glacier; to this end, learning to tie safe and intricate knots so that we could ski in procession, one by one, tied together by a rope, was an essential preparation. “Surrendering to the feeling of being one big organism,” as one of the guides articulated, afforded us means of acting as a collective safety net should one of us fall into a glacier crevasse. But the careful preparation exposed, also, another aspect of the safety measure: the so-called “soft skill” of patient teaching. Both “soft skills” and “hard skills” are necessary and at best deeply intertwined.

The guide as a highly composite role

In his seminal text *The Tourist Guide: The Origins, Structure and Dynamics of a Role* (1985), the sociologist Eric Cohen defines two main roles: the pathfinder and the mentor. Seeking to provide a general theory aimed towards structural approaches to analysis in the field of tourist studies, Cohen explores the guide's historical roots. For him, the function of the modern tourist guide is determined by these roles (and other different subroles), characterised by what Cohen calls the leadership sphere and the mediatory sphere of the modern guide role. Here Cohen classifies mediation, particularly, as “culture broking” – a form of “communicative mediatory” work in a sphere including selection (the indication of that worthy of touristic attention), providing information and, sometimes, fabrication (the invention of accounts or the deception of tourists). Communicative mediation is then distinguished from “interactional” mediation, which consists of representation (the guide negotiating between tourists and hosts) and organisation (the guide dealing with practical arrangements).

Despite the scope of activity covered by “mediation” and the large number of subcategories identified, Cohen's complex attempt to set out the roles and activities involved in tour-guiding posits mediation as just one of two main types of tour guide activity, and indeed as characteristic of the type of guide that he refers to as the “mentor.” “Pathfinders,” by contrast, engage in leadership rather than mediation (which, like “mediation,” is broken down into a range of components and subcomponents). It is important to stress, meanwhile, that the professional guide draws on the spheres of both leadership and mediation (Cohen, 1985).

Cohen's schematic treatment permits an understanding of the guide as a highly composite role, and a look through the ANG course literature, confirms this (see the ANGs programme, 2017/2018). The course literature reveals an approach to the guide role which, apart from safety and local policies, is concerned with questions of value creation, experience and learning, hostmanship and cross-cultural communication, hospitality, Arctic nature and ecology. It thereby also further certifies a certain development in sustainable tourism, where “nature-based tourism” is one of the fastest growing subsectors of tourism, also becoming a mature area of academic research (Margaryan, 2017). Effectively, all the ANG students distanced themselves from what they considered to be the conventional role of the guide in mass tourism.

Guiding against mass tourism

It is worth briefly dwelling on the ANG guide's resistance towards the role of the guide in mass tourism. In mass tourism, guides are often understood to execute their roles as what the cultural geographer Tim Edensor (2001, p. 334) terms “actors who re-enact the same script at each performance” upon an overdetermined stage where “there is little room for reflectivity or improvisation given

the narrow repertoire and the rigid script around which performance is organised.” For Edensor, the guides perform “disciplined rituals.” In contrast, ANG guides consider their “guests” active and equal co-producers (Larsen & Meged, 2013) – something attested in their insistence on the use of the term “guests,” which itself is connotative of a performance turn in tourism studies (Gelter, 2013). The performance turn thus opposes the idea of the tourist gaze, “dislocating attentions from symbolic meaning and discourses to embodied, collaborative and technologized doings and enactments” (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009, p. 3) resulting in a “very open format, more like a discussion than a lecture” (Bruner, 2005, p. 410). Consequently, the guided tour is regarded as a space of dialectical relations between structure and agency; the experience of a sight is constructed in the performance of the sight (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009).

Following this, encouraging us participants to give a little information about ourselves, the ANG guides were enacting partly a mode of involving us and partly a means of “de-routinizing” their guiding performance (Bruner, 2005). In engaging with our different kinds of social prerequisites (including the various previous experiences and perceptions of guided tours), a gap was opened for improvisation, interpretation and negotiation – maybe even investigation. Or simply for “passion and genuine interest in people as well as the subject matter” to be “at the heart of guiding” (Widtfeldt Meged, 2010, p. 27). Yet ironically, then, in distancing themselves from the conventional role of the guide, the ANG guides expressed a rather stereotypical perception of guided tours in general. A performative turn in tourist studies offers a theoretical challenge to “value-based guiding” as something at odds to the received idea of what usually happens. In fact, emphasising being so, the ANG programme arguably reflects current economical imperatives to embrace the value-based as a (demanded) add-on in Arctic tourism.

Nevertheless, in recognising the impossibility of exercising guidance by means of methods or strategies that can be objectively valued, claiming to be “value-based” speaks to a politics of the figure of the guide, as far as it speaks to an understanding of guiding as being always infused with sensibility and sensitivity towards value from the outset, and in a sense where “value and values are conceptualised as fluid, relational and not always easy to trace” (Saville, 2022, p. 4). In figuring the guide as an assembler, guidance is revealed to be embedded in a web of relations: encounters, contradictions and frictions. At stake, then, is less an idealised version of the ANG than a mode of thinking about the guide that potentially defies idealised portrayals of the Arctic as a barren land, touched only by expert and scientists: a politics that urgently complexifies popular public discourse, and what it truly means to guide with care and respect for nature.

Mediation is all about creation

Returning to the ANG excursion, the overall excursion was planned in daily sections. Two of the six ANG guides took responsibility for these in turns. Each day was a matter of getting from A to B, with tentatively planned stops along the way where we would eat and rest our legs. But these stops were also the moments when the guides more explicitly took upon themselves their roles as mediators.

It was a very clear intention that the guides should build the competence to respond to questions about the Arctic environment, the ecosystem and other important questions that guests asks. . . . In that aspect the guide

should be able to interpret scientific articles and new research so they can be communicators or middlemen between what is going on in nature science and guests coming up here.

I think we are quite good in the other areas – getting the guides to find their inner motivation to be a guide and to be a host in nature, with safety and everything – but in getting the latest research and being attractive for nature scientific researchers . . . nah, we’re far away, I am sorry to say. (Video-interview with head of the ANG programme, June, 2018)

As communicators, or middlemen, the ANG guides are thought to mediate a complex range of different contexts, in the sense of bringing these contexts together for the sake of a knowledge-based approach to the increasing awareness of global climate and environmental crisis. Meanwhile, tourism agents and organisations in Longyearbyen, the ANG programme among them, are largely founded on economically supported initiatives that, historically speaking, were established by the Norwegian government as political vehicles intended to establish a year-round community on Svalbard. Considering that there was virtually no tourism whatsoever in the 1970s and 1980s but that today it is crucial to the sustenance of the local economy and society (Arlov, 2003; Saville, 2022), the question of mediating agency in the context of tourism on Svalbard underlines the status of the guide as image-builder in a place that became a tourist destination only this century (Viken, 2011).

Any professionally guided tour is inscribed in larger institutional set-ups and within value frameworks (Saville & Hoskins, 2019) and guides “always work with reference to a global framework which influences the tour and the relations between tourists and guides” (Widtfeldt Meged, 2010, p. 25). This reflects how tourism ushers in the “new imperialism” associated with capitalist globalisation (Harvey, 2003; Norum, 2016) and makes it important to emphasise that while a performative turn shows the degree to which experiences of place are mediated through subjective stances and situations, it does not oblige the rejection of symbols selected as Arctic ideals. Experiences only rarely possible in person – acquiring close-up images of polar bears and glaciers, for example – continue to be meaningful for many visitors of Longyearbyen. Hence, while tourist destinations are, of course, more than constructed symbols, techniques and images, travel continues to be constituted by dominant discourses and mythologies advanced by media technologies and circulating in the “imagescapes” (Larsen, 2004). While a performative turn in tourist studies emphasises embodiment and participation, ontology and practice as valuable assets, the worth of the experience economy is often constructed by theories and strategies (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Accordingly, any guiding on Svalbard is somewhat choreographed by desires for, and imaginaries of, the Arctic.

Interestingly, then, the tourist scholar Heidi Dahles has noted that scholars in research on tour-guiding have historically shared “a strong emphasis on the mediation activities of guides,” portraying the guide as “someone who builds bridges among different groups of people” (2002, p. 784), and relation to a government or an industry. However, concerned with politically or ideologically strategic use of tourism, she points out how a consideration of guiding as operating “according to a harmony model of ‘mediation’ of keeping all parties involved satisfied” is problematic as it “fails to capture the political component of guiding” (Dahles, 2002, p. 785). Dahles’s problematisation of a “harmony model of mediation” thus serves to contest considerations of the ANG guides as simply middlemen assembling the interests of the tourist industry according to their own values and expectations; demands

from guests and both scientific (epistemic regimes) and politically driven discourses and imaginaries are folded into the mix. And yet, the historical scholarship on tourism – situating the political dimension of the experience-economical aspect of tourism through a prism of imperialism (Smith, 1989) and disclosing Dahles's "harmony model of mediation" – helps me to acknowledge another politics of the mediation activities of the ANG guides. This politics is implied in thinking of the guide's mediation activities as a navigation and negotiation of increasingly charged modernist assumptions of binary nature/culture relations.

As I am considering this, a particular situation comes to mind. At one point, a guide was asked to interpret the "landscape" during a break in an open hilly glacier terrain. The guide chose to talk about an organ in the gigantic head of the sperm whale that produces a white waxy substance once mistaken by early whalers for sperm. This, however, led the situation to be used as an example of a complete failure of interpretation; the guide had talked about the sperm whale in a context where there was no ocean and thus, it was asserted, it was hard for us as guests to relate and gain knowledge from their story. However, as one of the other guides observed in a later casual conversation, to talk about the sperm whale in the hilly glacier terrain had made her aware of this discordance and so even more aware of her own interpretation of her surroundings. Consequently, she found the moment revelatory. And I would agree. The mediative aspect of the ANG guide's interpretive effort challenged interpretation as meaning-making while simultaneously embodying a conceptualisation of nature as something authentic and worth travelling for (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Situated somewhere between the planned and the unplanned, the ANG guide's "failed interpretation" rather challenged a paradigm concerning the source and transmission of knowledge by evoking a sense of being in a momentary constellation of different registers "working" on each other (without, of course, anyone assuming equal distribution). I suggest that the instance exposed a sort of "creation model of mediation" – or simply communication as difference rather than consensus or dialectic interaction (Zhang & Doering, 2021) – revealing the guide's care for nature as a form of performative, improvised and co-production.

"Creation is all about mediators," wrote Gilles Deleuze (1995, p. 125). "Without them nothing happens."

The sperm whale anecdote exemplifies how the ANG guides on Svalbard, as emblematic representatives of the High Arctic and a symbol of climate change, are deeply entangled in negotiating representation as an (experience-economical) authenticity effect. Effects of representation condition their guiding. Importantly, the guides do not escape their own role in producing the Arctic. The guide discloses problems with the representational discourse without escaping it.

Nature: A useful analytical category

It is perhaps simpler to grasp the increasingly charged nature/culture confrontation by pointing at the ways in which social imaginaries of Svalbard are closely connected to social imaginaries about nature. While the tourist body Visit Svalbard strives to make Longyearbyen a sustainable tourist destination (a label scheme, owned by Innovation Norway), tourists travel to Svalbard in increasing numbers to experience nature, based on the basic premise that there are areas on Svalbard where very few people have been. This paradox challenges Longyearbyen's label as a sustainable tourist destination: there is an inherent tension between this status and the visible and environmental effects of tourism in a

place where technology, imaginaries and people – including myself – come and go at an extraordinarily high frequency.

Locally, the anthropologist Zdenka Sokolíčková (2022) has noted how the environmental effects are translated into difficulties that people living in the "meltdown" of Longyearbyen experience when being confronted with the overwhelming dilemmas without the support of a collective sense of belonging to a community. The notion of Longyearbyen as a "meltdown" refers to the fact that while the limit of a 2°C target limit has been set (over the preferable 1.5°C) globally, on Svalbard there is a local increase in temperature of 8–10°. Svalbard is becoming more humid and greener, and the sea ice in the fjords is disappearing. Some species are disappearing; new species are arriving. In this context, what Sokolíčková has further pointed out is the observation that while it may not be possible to talk about "communities" on Svalbard in any traditional anthropological sense, Longyearbyen residents strive to conjure a local community precisely and particularly by emphasising certain values and attitudes towards living in nature. These values and attitudes, however, do not necessarily match the geopolitically motivated strategy of Norwegian central authority.

What I take from this is how nature emerges as a useful *analytical* category (Hornborg, 2017). Whether the aim is to ensure its sovereignty over Svalbard (the Norwegian government), to attract tourists (Visit Svalbard) or to conjure a local community, nature – often coupled with terms such as eco-friendliness and sustainability – is exposed as a term used and exploited in public debate and political institutions alike. Put differently, as image-builders of Svalbard as a tourist destination, the guides, navigating and negotiating social imaginaries of nature, display an image-politics of nature. Consequently, the idea of nature as an analytical category, playing a central role in conversations about future developments on Svalbard and in the Arctic at large, further adds to the idea that Svalbard is a place constantly narrated – an indeterminate image (la Cour, 2022).

Colonial legacies of (Gendered) authority in no man's land

Recalling the ANG ski excursion and the long day of roped walking across the glaciers, the following, third, day offered us a chance to move at our own pace. We crossed a large open plateau, which meant that the polar bear guards (the guides carrying the rifles that day) had a good view and that we could therefore ski a little more spread out from one another. For a while, then, I skied next to another participant, someone I had already chatted to about the sometimes tiring need to be patient when operating as a group. He said that if ever he became a millionaire, he would prefer to buy a personal tour guide – it was a "mindfuck" to be serviced by our guides, on one hand, and to have to show patience for their "exam training" on the other. While he was of course referring to the specific form of exam excursion we were participating in, I noted the comment as an expression of a desire for some kind of "unspoiled" experience.

Revising my fieldnotes in my studio a year later, the (imagined) millionaire seems to exemplify a common ignorance of that which the sperm whale anecdote revealed: the weight of a variegated companionship. Nature is necessarily relational; there is no place outside the imaginaries carried by our relations to our surroundings. Meant as an informative and pedagogical act, aiming towards us as guests gaining knowledge through an affective experience, the sperm whale interpretation was interruptive and, in the Brechtian sense, alienating. The guide arguably made it comprehensible by making it strange. There exists already an established

recognition of the experiential worth and “client value” of the tourist guide’s dramaturgical skills (Røkenes et al., 2015) and a wider debate on the role of interpretation in guiding (see Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). But concerned with a creation model of mediation, the ANG guide displayed agency in “value-based” as a common, and communalising, process towards knowing differently; this functions through an evocation of perceptive sensibilities that resonates with increasing attempts to recognise the value of affect and emotions in Arctic geopolitics (Sörlin, 2021) while exploring multiple epistemic authorities (Brattland et al., 2018).

I shall elaborate this as a geo-aesthetical condition (a term I will define below). But first I will briefly return to Cohen’s (1985) historical tracing of the role of the modern guide as the pathfinder of Greco-Roman antiquity, where guidance was in demand from the army, the traveller and the explorer. Cohen’s idea of the pathfinder offers a perspective on the relationship between the role of the guide on Svalbard and the archipelago’s status, maintained until 1920, as a no man’s land, different to the various historical understandings of the guide as a local with the authority of a cultural broker, an authentic representative of a locale (or mentor, when, according to Cohen, involved in communicative and interactional mediation). The guide, as “host,” has thus often been assumed to be a local. Precisely for this reason, for a long time, the idea of a host was considered contradictory to Svalbard’s apparent lack of inhabitants and infrastructure, making the archipelago a site seemingly irrelevant for the social sciences. Roughly speaking, the authority of the guide on Svalbard has derived from the possession of a rifle or from the specific, hard-earned skills one must possess if one is to survive outside settlements. From a contemporary perspective, however, there is a contradiction between the ways in which imaginaries of Svalbard as an empty wilderness, based on the historical observation that the archipelago never had indigenous inhabitants, played a role in the authorisation of extractive activities which continued for decades. While there is a somewhat long history of human activity on the archipelago, what is contradictory is the fact that human presence and extraction have been *permanent*, and year-round, since the turn of the last century. Coal, scientific data and images have all been extracted. There is, in other words, an interesting relationship between the historical lack of interest in Svalbard on the part of the social sciences and the kind of authority that the pathfinder, as a heroic male guide, holds in anthropogenic imaginaries of the “empty” High Arctic. An effect of contemporary and more self-questioning approaches in the social sciences, so to speak, arguably implies that historically the social science researcher encounters himself as a male explorer and guide, as much as researcher.

Furthermore, in accordance with Cohen’s definition of the guide as pathfinder and mentor, a gendered reading of the figure resonates across a spectrum bridging the roles of the safety officer and the spiritual mentor. While exposing the term “guide” as hopelessly broad, the two ends of this spectrum connect in an interesting fashion in the context of the Arctic – continuously “an arena for the performance of conflicted narratives about masculine heroism, supposedly anchored through recourse to normative male rationality and beliefs in technological progress” (Körber et al., 2017, p. 4) – through a long trajectory of heroic male explorers. The influential authors of the Arctic from the Dutch navigator Willem Barentsz (1550–1597), recognised as the discoverer of Spitsbergen, to the English explorer Sir Martin Conway (1856–1937), author of *No Man’s Land* (Conway, 2011), or the Norwegian polar hero Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930), are precisely those conquerors of the inhuman, empty, Arctic wilderness. They become mentors

for other like-minded adventurers embarking on new expeditions. These are authors often thought to have accumulated particular, almost superhuman, insights and authorial knowledge: hard and soft skills, the acquisition of which speaks to highly productive behaviour and supreme mental strength. Countless diaries, texts and photographs have functioned as sources for like-minded adventurers in search of new (unspoiled) experiences, and in this instance, not only do authorisation and authorship connect with the Arctic expert; the role of the polar explorer in the construction of the Arctic is rendered deeply entangled with the production of the modern state’s territory and sovereignty precisely through notions of civilisation and non-civilisation; imaginaries of no man’s land.

Guiding as epistemological practice

Michel Foucault’s description of a regime of representation is fundamental here. Foucault proposes that modernist conceptions of nature as a realm outside society have evolved through the coalescing of a network of discursive strategies since the Renaissance (Foucault, 1991). In these strategies, in which an agent is basically a productive subject, a (hu)man who produces representations produces knowledge. But through Foucault we are increasingly trained to conceive of such knowers – from Barentsz, Conway and Nansen to contemporary Arctic experts – as situated in particular relations, both to what is known and to other knowers. What is known, and how it is known, reflects the situation and perspective of the knower.

Importantly, from a feminist perspective, the world is experienced according to the various constitutions and locations in space and time those bodies enjoy (Braidotti, 2022). Briefly, as feminist epistemologies function as a sort of commentary on the (Foucauldian) idea of authorial constraint, disclosing that what is at stake is not only epistemological transformation (what is known) but a politics of ontological pluralism (how it is known; see Povinelli, 2016).

All of this activates the figure of the guide as a tool with which to enable and explore a shift in focus from representation to mediation. Informed by trends in new materialist ideas of human culture and non-human nature as inseparable entities (Povinelli, 2016), the figure of the guide becomes less concerned with transformation – even if “transformation” was a term used by many of the ANG’s students – than with the negotiation and investigation of what and how we know. To care for nature emerges as a concern that reflects a move towards a “rethinking of the role of research and researchers as co-creators” (Ren et al., 2021, p. 6); value-based guiding and teaching in Arctic Nature emerge as self-affective processes, based on somewhat contingent encounters (Lien, 2021, p. 1). The human geographer Samantha Saville (2021) writes that

shifts towards encountering “lively matter,” taking other than human, material thingness into account, distributing agency and value more widely, all destabilise our certainty. Claims to knowledge are no longer absolute but provide some of many possible perspectives.” (p. 4)

What emerges from these shifts, she argues, is a re-shaping of the self which potentially changes the way a researcher works. This is, of course, inherently political. Being widely recognised that the colonial legacy of tourism is caught up in the enduring (albeit historically shifting) symbolic politics of imaginary geographies (Salazar, 2012), and how the field of the social sciences – and the field of anthropology in particular – has played an equivocal role in producing these imaginaries, at stake is an epistemological

strategy to challenge continuous productions of the Arctic as exterior to the global West (la Cour, 2022). The figure of the guide emerges as an analytical tool for interrogating illusions and ideas of authenticity, pure authorship and undisturbed knowledge production.

On Svalbard, complications in the politics of image production and guiding, then, potentially contribute to a “vision for Svalbard as a progressive testbed not only for technical Arctic solutions and tourism management beyond ‘sustainability’ but also for alternative ways of thinking,” as Saville (2022, p. 10) has it. Or a mode of thinking tourism that disconnects “from the growth paradigm and strengthens alternative visions and futures” (Ren et al., 2021, p. 117; Hall et al., 2021).

Guiding in geo-aesthetical terrains

The striving towards “alternative ways of thinking” reflects the need to develop a more integrated critique of colonial and neo-colonial presence in the Arctic. There is an urgent need to transgress a historically purified separation between “natural” and “social” phenomena (Latour, 1993, p. 99), and its subsequent assumptions of binary relations between “local” and “tourist” or “long-term resident” and “seasonal service worker.”

As assemblage-makers, the ANG guides contribute to this. Even if the categories of the “natural” and “social” are widely used in guides’ discussions about environmental preservation and resource management on Svalbard, as Trine B. Andersen (2022, p. 6) has shown, “the guides do not adhere only to the binary division of nature and society.” Rather, she argues, “they transgress it . . . by engaging in pro-environmental practices.” I have the same impression of the ANG guides. But, considered as creative, I have come to understand their mediation activities as a more fundamentally pro-environmental model of practice that contributes to a contemporary striving, so urgent today, towards more circular modes of thinking and acting. For example: on the last day of the ANG ski excursion, we experienced a white-out. As a result, plans were changed; we stayed in our tents for the entire day, only striking camp at three in the morning the following day when the blizzard began to abate (one can easily swap day and night on Svalbard in summer on account of the constant light). This was principally a matter of safety. It is, naturally, crucial to be able to see. Nevertheless, the situation created a moment of reflection on the difference between considering the white-out to be a phenomenon making it impossible to see nature, and a phenomenon considered to be nature itself. In a rather simple manner, the white-out was an outside manifestation of Svalbard as a situated set of material conditions rather than as scenery or bounded place. This includes both the agency of weather and ideas of so-called value-based guiding as educative and transformative ends of an experience economy.

This resonates with how, elsewhere, I have tried to grasp a sense of lack – or gap of potential differentiation – in the representational discourse, with reference to the term “geo-aesthetics,” a neologism combining the terms “geography” and “aesthetics” (la Cour, 2022). The Oxford English Dictionary defines “geography” as the study of the earth’s physical features and the interactions of human activity with those features; etymologically, the Greek origin of the word “aesthetics” designates perception and perceptible objects. Thus, the term geo-aesthetics proposes the idea of aesthetics as understandable through situated global infrastructures alone.

“Geo-aesthetics” is a term used primarily by geographers attending to the visual arts as a mode of bringing together considerations of

environment, place, and geology (Hawkins, 2013; Hawkins & Straughan, 2015), in media art histories, and as a mode of disclosing a geology of media (Parikka, 2015). It is also a topic for artists and theorists coupled with so-called geophilosophy (Shapiro, 2004).¹ In relation to the figure of the guide, however, geo-aesthetics is principally a term allowing material contingencies in a place like Svalbard to connect with the context of its constant change – of public values, climate, economy and geopolitical relations (Kaltenborn et al., 2020). I redefine geo-aesthetics by hyphenating “geo” and “aesthetics,” coupling the terms whilst acknowledging the gap remaining between them. Stressing that a grid of representational discourses interact to produce Svalbard as we know it, the hyphenation between “geo” and “aesthetics” discloses a temporary (and temporarily communal) space for negotiation, brought forth exactly by time – time as duration, time as memory and time as consciousness (Kember & Zylinska, 2012). Embodying the Arctic’s historical signification as a critical and exceptional space of modernity, the figure of the guide connects the ever-more serious global environmental crisis scenarios of the future to a larger representational breakdown (Scott, 2016). The different kinds of knowledges and relations to the real that exist and play out in the interplay between non-human formations, human practices and knowledges of guides and guests remain “larger than and beyond the knowing subject” (Grosz, 2005, p. 5) and can perhaps best be considered as effects of the mediative aspects of collaborative efforts.

Guidance as productive behaviour

The problem with image production and guiding in relation to Svalbard is not so much a matter of “coming from the outside” (as is so often the case elsewhere in the Arctic) as it is a matter of the ways in which Svalbard imaginaries are produced through the images people create of, from, or in relation to, embodied and situated encounters with and in the archipelago. While often promoted as a frozen diorama threatened by climate change, and historically used and imagined by “outsiders” (and continuously) as “a location where the past, present and future of the planet’s environmental and geopolitical systems are played out” (Körber et al., 2017, p. 1), the guide emerges as a figure on an ever-shifting ground.

This is relevant for the manner in which geopolitical means of ordering the world are implicit in tourism as a practice – not only in the sense of a top-down/distanced geopolitical analysis of tourism, but in the sense of an analysis of transient constellations of both affective relations and temporarily available historical knowledges. As the human geographers Mary Mostafanezhad and Roger Norum have shown, a performativity of imaginative geographies reflects the co-constitutive relationship between tourism practice and geopolitical imaginaries (2016), and these are crucial for comprehending place as exceptional. But the guide’s locatedness more fundamentally certifies that geopolitical spaces are reconfigured through representations, places and experiences in their co-constitutive aspect, insofar as we can understand the guide to display agency in meaning-making. The guide puts their agency to the service of what can perhaps be thought of as a kind of ontologically conditioned politics of experience – or what the cultural geographer Ben Anderson calls “representations-in-relations” (Anderson, 2019), relational configurations of which representation is but a part.

¹Other kind of examples include organizations such as The Center for Land Use Interpretation in Los Angeles and educational programs on, for example, Land Art, Art & Ecology, and Landscape Architecture.

Western imaginaries of the Arctic are founded in no small measure on heroic figures and “great” authors, announcing the names of “strange things” and, by naming them, bringing them into being. But the figure of the guide affords a model of practice that considers a multiplicity of agencies at play. Importantly, it requires an ontological register to drive representation. In this sense, the guide reveals how both social and natural stories emerge from being *in* – or *part of* – nature: an increasing lack of sea ice does not only complicate safe crossings of fjords (requiring nature guides to seek new paths in the terrain), but also it reveals also how human behaviour and communities are constituted as an improvised negotiation of environmental and social stories (Tsing, 2005, p. 11); the remains of blubber ovens, oil boilers and now-ruined huts, left behind by whalers of the 18th century to become cultural heritage in the present, allow the nature guide to track human presences and histories in a landscape often narrated as barren and empty. Meanwhile, perceptions of nature are mobilised in an effort to frame Longyearbyen as a sustainable tourist destination.

Of course, the title “guide” may cover a wide range of job functions; “the guide in the global perspective may be anything from someone who is self-taught to someone holding a university degree,” as the tourism scholar Jane W. Meged (2010) writes. Yet, the assemblage-maker emerges from a genuine understanding of guidance as productive behaviour affording temporal communality and action – both embedded within socially constructed imaginaries and affective perception, permitted by technology (Norum, 2021). Importantly, however, the guide’s agency (and thus power) does not originate in authorship as a first principle. While pathfinder and mentor, the guide’s authority is nonetheless quite different to that of the traditional author and expert; it is more an engaged attitude towards skilled differentiation.

It is in this sense, finally, I find the figure of the guide to be interesting in the context of Svalbard, where mediation as creation is so closely connected to questions of territory, sovereignty and ownership.

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