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Cultivating Proximities: Re-visiting the Familiar

Gunnar Thór Jóhannesson  and *Carina Ren* 

Staying proximate with:	The places close to our hearts.
Methodological approach:	Experiencing and knowing slowly and repetitively, together with others.
Main concepts:	Proximate gaze and experiencing caught up in between the mundane and the exceptional.
Tips for future research:	Research is a way to move around, gather, and build up experiences and knowledge—to visit and encounter and travel with.

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We would like to welcome you to join us in exploring how proximity may be cultivated as a way to *re-experience and retell* tourism and how research—this powerful, world-building tool—might become more sensitive to modest and mundane tourism practices, particularly to proximity tourism. We are not alone on this journey. In an attempt to unsettle tourism as the usual antithesis of everydayness and, hence, to de-exotify it, Jonas Larsen (2019), for instance, argues that urban tourism practices are intertwined with those of the everyday to a point where they are not clearly delimited or distinguishable. Other tourism scholars have likewise attempted to challenge the often binary conceptualisations of tourism theory (see Ren 2021 for examples).

More than a theoretical exercise, experiencing and knowing tourism as something besides one of two ontological opposites—the mundane and the exotic—entails encountering it anew in messy, disruptive, and creative ways (Law 2004; Beard et al. 2016; Ivanova et al. 2021). In this contribution, we will approach proximity tourism as a fruitful way of *thinking-about-while-enacting* tourism that seeks to interfere with such binaries. This movement allows us to interfere with tourism as epistemology (knowing) and, simultaneously, ontology (doing). We use our personal experience with dwelling among others in well-known places to imagine and contemplate what this shift might look like. How, we ask, may we cultivate proximity as part of our research methodology to enact-through-knowing and care for (alternative) tourism?

Evading the grip of the usual ethnographic desire to know (about) places, we do not go ‘into the field.’ Instead, we invite you to two places close to our hearts that we have stayed in and with through many years—places that are, at first glance, mundane and unexceptional—to experiment with alternative methodologies to explore, narrate, and perform them. We write postcards, a classic touristic exercise, from these places and to each other as probes with which to revisit the well-known tropes of the *tourist gaze* and the *tourist experience*. Composing postcards as part of ethnographic fieldwork may assist in creating unexpected connections from field-sites, enacting these places in alternative ways to cause places themselves to travel and to allow them to be seen in new light (Dányi et al. 2021).

In fact, we have never written postcards to anyone from these places before. The form and image of the postcard help us to disrupt our own grounded ideas of these places, creating friction in the otherwise smooth

image that we have of those places that we maybe know too well to note anything special. Furthermore, this exercise urges us to rethink what a postcard, an iconic piece of tourist practice, can do and how it may matter in relating to places. Postcard narratives exemplify how proximity can help us cultivate modest and situated tourism research practices, proposing proximity as a research strategy for enacting places and landscapes as tourism sites in sensitive ways (Höckert et al. 2021).

While this framing serves as a creative challenge and opportunity to think together while apart, it also ties into ongoing conversations about the structural and economic challenges of conducting long-term fieldwork alongside more recent COVID-related fieldwork difficulties (Günel et al. 2020). Regardless of the reasons for not working in the field with each other, our experimentation is an attempt to work together—to be close in thinking, knowing, and enacting tourism knowledge—apart, at a distance. We ask as our second question: How may we cultivate collaborative ways of knowing tourism (Ren et al., 2018, 2021) while at a distance?

We mobilise the traditional conceptual heading of the tourist gaze as an entry point, aiming not to cement but rather to open up the term, to continue to explore these questions through postcards sent from the places close to our hearts. The accounts come from familiar fields that have been part of our everyday and holiday lives for many years. Here, however, we visit them with the purpose of rethinking ‘field’ (‘work’) accounts and challenging the implicit valuation of sites as afforded (or not) by tourist experience. Working from home, so to speak, challenges the idea of the field as being an exotic island waiting to be explored and discovered (Gupta and Fergusson 1997), which for Carina—usually conducting her field research in Greenland—offered reflections on ways of knowing and thinking about her usual geographical field of study. Well aware that the Arctic has commonly been positioned as an exotic periphery, a place at the world’s end, we see this encounter with the familiar as interfering in a still common narrative of the Arctic as a masculine and hazardous space (Pritchard and Morgan 2000; Loftsdóttir et al. 2017). By choosing more proximate entry points to the field, we may be able to rethink the relation between the exotic and the mundane while remaining in an Arctic context.

THE TOURIST GAZE AND PROXIMITY

As shown by John Urry in *The tourist gaze* (1990), vision and the ocular play an integral part in tourism. A central argument of the book's thesis is that destinations (and destination hosts) are produced and consumed through a meticulous process of staging, framing, and photographing views and panoramas. While this notion has received much approval, other scholars have also challenged Urry's (over)emphasis on the ocular in tourism and the narrow view of Foucauldian power discourses presented in making sense of the tourist gaze (e.g. Veijola and Jokinen 1994; Perkins and Thorns 2001). As argued by Haldrup and Larsen (2003), the gaze in tourism can also be infused with emotions and desires, as illustrated by the sociable gaze in the photographic practices of tourists.

As demonstrated by Larsen (2005) and later updated in *Tourist Gaze 3.0* by Urry and Larsen (2012), the gaze is not only an act of visual consumption but also one that is very corporeal and profoundly performative. As such, it can be played with and destabilised at all times. A stronger focus on performativity frames power as relational and distributed and tourism as tightly linked to ordinary and everyday practices. It stresses the understanding that reality is 'done and enacted,' and as such it is also partly performed through the gaze (Larsen and Urry 2011). Proximity tourism further challenges the image of tourism as revolving around the exotic and the extraordinary, itself referring to tourism that takes place in one's usual setting (Díaz Soria and Llurdés Coit 2013). It, thereby, urges us to appreciate and attend to the mundane and ordinary (Höckert et al. 2021), promoting an alternative, and perhaps more caring, gaze. As an example of such a gaze, we now turn to a postcard from Carina and her cabin in Småland (Fig. 5.1).

Hi Gunnar!

As long as I can recall, travelling up to my grandparents' cabin in the woods of Småland—a three-hour drive from my hometown of Copenhagen—was a contrast to life in an urban agglomeration. As the years passed, the cabin became mine and later also belonged to my husband and children. I have known and visited the cabin and its little plot of land and forest my whole life. I know the changing seasons, the sounds and smells of the forest and of the house. When we visit, typically for a weekend, for a week during the holidays, or for a few weeks in the summer, our routines are strikingly repetitive and our whereabouts short-ranged. We



Fig. 5.1 The proximate gaze: Småland

rarely move outside a territory defined by the lake across the road, the creek below the house, and well-known trails in the surrounding forests. I have sat and stood on the rock down from the house so many times, walked in, along, and across the little stream below the house countless times. Besides walks in nearby forests, short rides or drives to the grocery store or a flea market, and the occasional jog, we usually stay on the grounds of the cabin, repeating the season-based practices we have undertaken for so many years: mowing, digging, and cutting, painting the house, relaxing in the sun, picking berries and mushrooms, and burning a fire.

Thinking about all of these activities, surprisingly little photographic material exists to document them. What prevails in the family albums and on their successor, the smartphone, is the cabin. A factory-ordered,

cookie-cutter 70s log cabin painted in ‘Falun’ red and white, traditional Småland colours. In contrast to many of the region’s attractive *oddegårde* (deserted farms turned into summer houses), it is unassuming and easy to overlook. Yet, over 45 years, the cabin has been documented by its owners in countless, almost identical pictures, from all sides, during all kinds of weather. When I look at the pictures, such as those on the front of my postcard, I do not only see the house, the ‘main attraction.’ I think of changing seasons, of activities and phenomena linked to the biography of the cabin and our family—the always spectacular blooming of the hortensia planted by my late grandmother, the year we tore down the chimney, documenting the old one before it was replaced, the ever-welcomed snowy winter holidays, the new terrace built (with great pride!) by me and my dad.

THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE AND SERENDIPITY

Experiences are what makes tourism go’round. We travel to live, to paraphrase Hans Christian Andersen. But the root of travel, the word *travail*, also suggests its more taxing roots/routes. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2006), the Anglo-French verb *travailler*, from which travel is derived, originally meant ‘to torment’ but eventually acquired the milder senses ‘to trouble’ and ‘to journey.’ Through our travels, we *gather* experiences (G. *erlebnis*; D. *oplevelse*; I. *upplifun*) and *build* experience (G. *erfahrung*; D. *erfaring*; I. *reynsla*). These two concepts relate differently to time and space. While *erlebnis* refers to an impression of a particular event at a specific point in time, *erfaring* invokes longer experiences and movement through space, as it is connected to the German *fabren*—to ride or travel (Simonsen and Koefoed 2020). In Icelandic, this link is evident through its connotations of work and hardship (*raun*) and suggests that experiences are crafted over time and often through difficult and laborious embodied practice. Experience, in this sense, is derived through being (on the move) in the world, and it blurs the distinction between mind and nature. According to Ingold (2000, 99):

[E]xperience, here, amounts to a kind of sensory participation, a coupling of the movement of one’s own awareness to the movement of aspects of the world. [...] It is [...] intrinsic to the ongoing process of *being alive to the world*, of the person’s total sensory involvement in an environment. (emphasis original)

In much of tourism (management) literature, tourism experiences are seen as the strategic outcome of a process of commodification in which places, practices, and people are packaged, priced, and staged for the purpose of sales and more-or-less immediate and pleasurable consumption. Many destinations have dedicated significant work to identifying and promoting their unique selling points (Ren and Blichfeldt 2011). However, experiences in tourism are not necessarily easy to manage or order. They do not only happen at the final destination, at certain times, or at predefined stages of the key attraction. They are also much more mundane, ordinary, and close to and dependent on our daily habits, routines, and obligations taking place over time. They can happen by chance, through a spurt of creativity and play, or owing to unplanned encounters between hosts and guests or between human and more-than-human actors and elements.

Tourist performance is partly improvised, partly choreographed. We need to reproduce or cite particular performances in order to make them meaningful in a certain social context: to accomplish and secure the continuation of a given order (Edensor 2000; see Franklin 2012). Tourist destinations and attractions vary in how strictly ordered they are. While tourists invariably follow some kind of choreography or script, tourist performance also involves creativity and is shaped through an ambivalent relation between the intentional and unintentional (Edensor 2000). The stages of proximity tourism are often scripted as habitual rather than (spectacular) spaces for tourist consumption. The notion of proximity draws attention to the potential value that such spaces, steeped in the rhythms of everyday life, have in terms of the tourism experience (Fig. 5.2).



Fig. 5.2 The tourist experience: Torfalækur

Hej Carina!

For the winter holiday, we went, as usual, to visit my parents at the farm. While there is not much to do there, especially if you are a teenager and there is winter's cold and darkness, there is one thing that is (almost) always fun to do. Near my parent's farm runs a stream or a small river from which the farm takes its name: Torfalækur. For most, it is not a natural spectacle, as it meanders smoothly through the landscape and is rather unexceptional. For me, when growing up and living at the farm, the stream was a separate world that offered many opportunities for play and adventure, as well as solitude. I knew every nook and cranny of it, or so it felt. It still feels like that although it has been many years since I lived in the place. When I walk along it today, I remember the spots where I used to play. I remember where there was a perfect spot to find large stones to throw into it, where I could cross it on my bike, where I could almost always see fish in it, where a particular flower used to grow, or where I tried to dam it. When I visit with my family, I often go 'down to the stream' with my kids to play. Building a ship from a piece of wood and having it sail down the stream is always a joy; exploring for suitable stepping stones to cross it and going back and forth without getting wet can be a challenge and fun, and the classic act remains throwing stones in to create a splash. They have also figured out that it presents some nice Instagram spots:-) This time, it was really cold, and there was quite a lot of snow. The waterfall that we think is the best spot to throw stones was almost completely frozen. It was difficult to find any stones, and most of those that we found were also frozen to the ground. Still, it was fun—we did some primitive ice skating on rubber boots and hiking shoes instead. Anyway, I hope your holiday has been good—Greetings from snowy Iceland:-)

CULTIVATING PROXIMITIES

The two postcards above illustrate how people connect to places and draw them close to their hearts through performances and activities. As a field of inquiry, they are enacted through movement and practices (Jóhannesson et al. 2015). Unlike spectacular landscapes that prompt grand narratives, familiar places tell other, less sensational stories, stories that are, at first glance, 'non-touristy' in all their mundanity, even hidden out of sight or under the surface that we first encounter when visiting a place. With proximity thus defined as the *familiar*, we can tell alternative stories

that disturb the usual order of things, the usual storyline of tourism driven by a longing to experience and consume the extraordinary and to only be in and knowing places temporally (Franklin 2003). It allows for closeness, intimacy, and care; knowing something well and for a long time, in that sense, creates different paths to the memorable and spectacular.

Judging from the sheer number of pictures on her phone and in the family album, Carina's cabin appears to be a most spectacular attraction—yet it clearly is not. Looking closer, we see that the cabin is a modest and unremarkable structure. As a materialisation of the second-home phenomenon, it is quite average. Not much even seems to be happening in these pictures, almost like the 'nothing' described by Löfgren and Ehn (2010) in their accounts of transit spaces as in-between times, pauses, and moments of waiting or indecision. What is happening here? What kind of gaze do these pictures evidence?

The pictures are perhaps meaningless without a context and a 'biography' of the thing—that is, the cabin (Kopytoff 1986). This biography, literally the writing of life, offers an alternative account of the cabin and its surroundings, of the attraction and its destination. It is a biography full of vitality and sociality, one that is grounded and eventful and increasingly spectacular as it grows, gemmates, and unfolds over time. It concerns the ongoing and often cyclical chores of repairing, altering, and tinkering with the house and the landscape on which it rests.

The postcard reminds us that, upon stepping closer, the gaze can document and enact something extraordinary without othering. The postcard allows for a more proximate gaze that is both corporeal and sensuous, concerned as it is with the extraordinary ordinariness of intimate social worlds, as argued by Haldrup and Larsen (2003), and perhaps in our case also of cyclical and entangled nature cultures (Latour 1993) and the presence of often overlooked more-than-human actors (Höckert et al. 2021). A more performative version of the tourist gaze frames it as 'a relational, communal performance involving bodily and verbal negotiations and interaction [...]' (Larsen and Urry 2011, 1117). A proximity view of tourism is not concerned with the framing of majestic panoramas but with the appreciation of the mundane as extraordinary. The picture of the cabin—and the social gaze that frames it—portrays and enacts the cabin as extraordinary without abstraction, distance, or othering.

In somewhat similar ways, the Torfalækur stream is an open and unscripted stage for any kind of experience, standing in contrast to the nature attractions marketed for tourists visiting Iceland. The stream is

visited by Gunnar and his family not as an attraction but rather because it is near the home of his parents. However, when he and his family are at the farm, the stream does attract them. It provides an opportunity for play and various kinds of performance, which often happen to be photographed.

Viewed from a distance, the stream and the waterfall may seem devoid of meaning, unplanned, simply running there between small grassy hills. Still, when moving along the stream towards the waterfall, a choreographed performance unfolds that rests on and cites past encounters, interactions, and activities conducted by human and more-than-human actors with and in the landscape. These layers may remain hidden from the view of those who are not familiar with the place. The meaning of the stream is as much private as universal. It depends on personal connections to the place, the time spent with it, and the activities engaged in there. In that sense, the private stream is not ‘for everyone,’ which should remind us that the proximate gaze, as an ordering device or a tool for research, is not empty of power. While it may open up alternative viewpoints and avenues for exploration, it also simultaneously excludes others.

Even so, the stream also shares affordances with other streams and waterways, and it is, as such, open for others to connect with; for instance, you, as a reader of this text, might have had a similar experience playing in a waterfall. The stream is not the same place for Gunnar’s children as it is for him. It affords different experiences (*erlebnis*) and is performed in somewhat different ways today than it was before, for instance, as a stage for Instagram posing. Like everything in nature, it has changed through the years. Nevertheless, it is still the same to some extent, still carries the same affordances and brings forth somewhat similar play, play that cites enduring social performances, like throwing stones into the waterfall or sailing a piece of wood down the stream.

Spectacular places from the everyday world, such as the stream, afford proximate tourist experiences that question how to value tourism, or perhaps rather *what* to value in tourism. These mundane activities—the play of throwing stones in the stream repeated over and over again, as long as someone in the family remembers—creates a connection with the stream and through it a feeling of closeness, care, and fun. They bring forth how the repetitive, the familiar, and the revisited destinations are a valuable part of tourism and the tourist experience.

TOWARDS A PROXIMATE GAZE

We began with two questions that point in different directions: How may we cultivate proximity as part of our research methodology to know and enact (alternative) tourism? And how may we cultivate collaborative ways of knowing tourism while at a distance? Based on the experiment of writing postcards from places that are close to our hearts and that have been part of our family histories for decades, we can say that proximity tourism attunes us as researchers to the modest and careful relations through which places are enacted and experienced. Proximity assists in blurring the well-worn dichotomies of home and away and ordinary and extraordinary that shape public and academic narratives of tourism. The notion of proximity tourism can assist researchers in exploring alternative ways of doing and enacting tourism, ways that are likely not unique to everyday places at all but that can also be found in more traditional tourism settings, like the theme park, the museum, or the beach.

We used the medium of the postcard as a methodological tool to convey a proximate gaze of lived experiences in places close to our hearts. By creating and sharing these anecdotal narratives, the proximate gaze served as an epistemology through which to know and connect lived experience and, simultaneously, to enact an ontology of proximity tourism. Such research underlines the need to go slowly, take care of one's steps, and attend to the careful relations of tourist performances and the ways in which things, big and small, trace and enact tourism.

As an example of collaborative proximity tourism research, the postcard conversations and the gazes and experiences they unravelled display a way for researchers to see and think together through the sharing of moments that prove both transformative and unexotic, idiosyncratic and universal. While modest in its undertakings, such research proves profoundly disruptive (Ivanova et al. 2021), blurring the boundaries between the personal and the formal in research, between seeing and being, opening up questions surrounding what counts as valid knowledge while urging us to continue to journey, to experience, and to know.

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