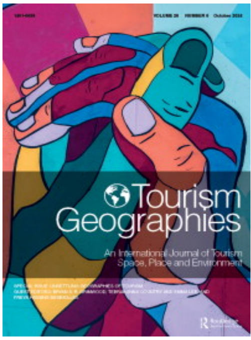

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Tourism ethnography and tourism geographies

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ABSTRACT

Akin to the parable of the six blind men and the elephant, we all have a sense of what constitutes tourism ethnography, but our understandings vary based on where we are situated. This paper examines this core methodology and writing convention in tourism research. It details ethnography's roots in colonial-era cultural anthropology and outlines classic elements of the ethnography of tourism. Following an overview of the more recent history of ethnographic work in tourism, the paper traces how tourism ethnography has evolved and expanded to address new research agendas and challenges that have emerged over the past 25 years. Newer interventions discussed in the paper include autoethnography and memory work, netnography, emotion-centered and embodied sensory ethnography, among others. Recent ethnographic strategies designed to decolonize and democratize tourism ethnography are also addressed, including participatory, collaborative, and social-justice-oriented approaches. Additionally, the paper outlines key gaps in the literature and indicates new areas of consideration for tourism ethnographers. These include the need for more penetrating reflections on ethical aspects of emergent permutations of tourism ethnography and the urgent need to develop new genres of ethnography equipped for lending constructive insights into tourism's entwinement with planetary peril. Creative reformulations of ethnography are essential for producing insights into how tourism and touristic practices are entangled with the ecological and climatic changes that constitute our greatest challenge. While the past 25 years have witnessed considerable advances in critical approaches to tourism, the project of using knowledge culled from tourism ethnography to constructively reckon with current social and planetary challenges is in its infancy.

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Introduction: the elephant in the room

Reflecting on ethnography in the field of tourism is often evocative of the Indian parable of six blind men's tactile encounters with an elephant: based on where each man is situated, a different conception of the beast emerges, ranging from a snake-like creature

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(trunk) to a rope (tail), or fan (ear). Likewise, all of us in tourism studies have a sense of what constitutes the ethnographic study of tourism yet the label has become a catchall for a broad array of research stances and practices. As Martyn Hammersley, the co-author of a foundational ethnography primer, recently wrote, "ethnography' has acquired a range of meanings, and comes in many different versions, …often reflecting sharply divergent orientations' (Hammersley, 2018, p. 1). Although Hammersley was addressing ethnography generally, his words are equally apt for tourism ethnography.

Even our labels for the enterprise within the field of tourism reveal different visions: some advocate terming it the 'ethnography of tourism' (e.g. Leite et al., 2019) whereas others gloss it as 'tourism ethnography' (e.g. Andrews et al., 2019). For the former camp, 'the ethnography of tourism' signals that ethnography is a consistent approach used across many different topics—there is nothing particularly unique about the ethnography one does with tourism (pers. comm. Leite, May 15, 2018). For others, the expression 'tourism ethnography' suggests something different. In unpacking their use of this term, Hazel Andrews, Takamitsu Jimura, and Laura Dixon argue that 'tourism ethnography' should be envisioned as a form of 'adjectival ethnography' (ibid, 2019). This expression, coined by Simon Coleman, describes ethnography's transformations since its launch from its mother port of anthropology. As Coleman explains, adjectival ethnography entails 'a situation wherein not only scholars outside…[anthropology], but also many within, react to shifting, increasingly hard-to-encapsulate 'fields' by deploying practices…evok[ing] some of the elements of ethnographically oriented fieldwork but strategically diffuse and fragment its physical intensity, moral density and temporal depth' (Coleman, 2010, p. 169). Coleman's conclusions about adjectival ethnography are cautionary: in such studies, he suggests, 'the fieldwork 'gaze' is replaced, in effect, by a 'glance'. Such work may seem to be more ethnograph*ic* than ethnograph*y*' (ibid, p. 169). Whereas for Andrews, Jimura, and Dixon (ibid), tourism ethnography's unmooring from its anthropological homeland yields new possibilities. In addition to these contrasting stances regarding the enterprise of ethnography in tourism research, there is yet another elephant in the room: that of the decolonization of ethnographic methods and scholarly accountability, a theme to which I will return shortly.

As a starting point, ethnography is classically defined as a methodological approach entailing an extended period of fieldwork in naturally occurring settings. It involves participant observation, personal engagement, and related research strategies (e.g. interviews, videos, and photography). Participant observation—the backbone of ethnography–requires months or years of living in the communities we seek to understand, cultivating rapport with community members, participating in everyday life, and taking detailed, daily field notes. Throughout and beyond the data collection period, ethnographers simultaneously draw on theory, environmental, historical, and political contexts to hone their understanding of the communities and dynamics they seek to understand. Ethnographers of tourism pursue nuanced insights into how people make sense of, experience, and navigate the world. Ideally, an ethnographic approach to tourism is holistic: taking into consideration various overlapping forms of movement (pilgrimage, heritage travel, labor migration, etc.), diverse actors with varied degrees of social, cultural, and monetary capital (domestic and foreign tourists, guides, residents, planners, etc.), and multiple institutions and spaces (airports, hotels, museums, TripAdvisor.com, and other locales sometimes distant from face-to-face

places of touristic encounters) (See Leite & Swain, 2015). Contemporary ethnography is experiential and reflexive, aimed at producing academic and applied understandings and knowledge (Pink, 2015, p. 4–5).

In what follows, I trace the anthropological roots of ethnography, address the classic use of ethnography in tourism studies, and its recent blossoming into myriad contemporary forms, including autoethnography, embodied/sensory ethnography, netnography, and participatory/collaborative ethnography. Ultimately, I argue that over the past 25 years, we have witnessed considerable advances in critical ethnographic approaches to tourism yet the project of decolonizing ethnographic studies of tourism and integrating social and planetary justice agendas into this methodology is still in its infancy. More work remains to be done if we are to successfully reckon with the full force of the 'elephant in the room.'

(Tourism) ethnography's history

Anthropological roots

Perhaps more than any other methodology used in tourism research, ethnography's history lies in travel and displacement (Adams, 2012, p. 340). One of the earliest ethnographers, Franz Boas (the geographer-cum-'father' of American cultural anthropology), left Germany in 1883 to spend a year researching Baffin Island Inuits' adaptation to their environment. For Boas, *direct* observation was essential for amassing scientific knowledge. Boas' subsequent field research trips were shorter and relied heavily on interpreters. Long-term immersion in the research setting and participation in daily activities were not hailed as essential to ethnography until anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's travel misadventure in the South Pacific in the 1920s. A Pole from Austria-Hungary, Malinowski was visiting British-controlled Melanesia during the eruption of World War I. As an overnight 'enemy' of Britain, Malinowski chose exile over internment and spent two years in the Trobriand Islands. This unplanned intensive immersion in village life ultimately inspired Malinowski to advocate a novel approach to researching cultural practices. This new approach, which he termed ethnography, required researcher participation in daily activities, proficiency in the local language, and efforts 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of the world' (Malinowski, 1922, p. 25). For Malinowski, *objective* insights were only possible *via* long-term immersion. He believed that when the researcher becomes an everyday fixture in the community, residents are likelier to resume normal activities and the scholar gradually becomes skilled at discerning between statements conveying idealized societal rules for behavior and actual behavior. Malinowski's novel research methodology birthed a new type of authoritative, scientific text, *an* ethnography, presenting a synthetic description and analysis of an aspect of cultural life.

Although anthropologists had long understood the imperialist contexts embedded in their field's history and their predecessors' methodologies, it was not until the posthumous publication of Malinowski's fieldwork diaries in 1967 that the problematic position of the ethnographer vis á vis those studied drew greater interrogation. Malinowski's diaries revealed his struggles with his own prejudices and sexual desires during his Trobriand Islands fieldwork: the publication of these personal journals sparked a crisis in ethnographic

authority (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). This discovery, alongside feminist and Marxist critiques of ethnography (e.g. Strathern, 1987) prompted greater recognition that ethnographers' 'reports' were never scientifically objective, but rather 'partial truths,' a mixture of subjective and objective observations (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Since this moment of crisis in ethnography, ethnographers have pursued strategies to address these biases, often by adopting a self-reflexive, power-attuned stance (Adams, 2006; Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994; Bruner, 2005; Causey, 2003; Errington & Gewertz, 1989).

By the 1960s, as jet travel became more accessible, scholars doing ethnographic research on other topics began to take note of tourists arriving in their fieldwork locales. However, most early 1960s-early 1970s ethnographically-grounded publications on tourism emerged as tangents to research projects on different topics. For instance, Conrad Kottak's (1966) ethnographic observations on second-home vacationing in an Atlantic Brazilian village was an off-shoot of his broader dissertation examining the relationship between marine-based livelihoods and the absence of social stratification. Similarly, Davydd Greenwood (1972) was in the Spanish Basque region conducting ethnographic research on the political economy of peasant family farming when he noted tourism's role as an agent of change. Greenwood and others contributed work to Valene Smith's (1977) *Hosts and Guests*, the first edited collection of ethnographic studies of tourism. Her volume helped legitimize tourism as a topic for a new generation of budding ethnographers. This first flush of ethnographic studies of tourism in the late 1970s and early 1980s tended to focus on rural or indigenous 'host' communities whose homelands were drawing growing numbers of tourists. As Naomi Leite, Quetzil Castañeda, and Kathleen Adams observed, 'True to the classic model of ethnography, these anthropologists remained in place for an extended period, [experiencing daily life] side-by-side with their respondents…What had changed was they now recognized tourists and tourism development as part of the mix' (Leite et al., 2019, p. 4). Some have characterized this early tourism-focussed ethnographic work as 'impact-oriented' and prone to representing host communities as passively facing tourism's decimation of traditional lifeways. However, some of these pioneering ethnographic studies were more nuanced than the 'impact' characterization suggests, highlighting locals' creativity and agency in their dealings with tourists, examining tourism's relationship with meaning-making and identity, and approaching the arrival of tourists as part of a longer history of interactions with outsiders (Adams, 2024; Lett, 1989, pp. 276–277; Leite et al., 2019, p. 4–5).

Ethnography of tourism in and beyond its disciplinary homeland

Tourism scholars from a range of disciplines soon came to recognize that ethnography, with its rich, multi-dimensional depth, is ideally suited for insights into representation and meaning-making (i.e. Edensor, 1998), identity (i.e. Malam, 2004), power dynamics (i.e. Adams, 2006), inequality (i.e. Dürr, 2012), and corporate capitalism's ramifications for touristic communities (i.e. Bartling, 2006). Ethnography can also dismantle ill-founded assumptions about what tourists seek and how local community members engage with them. Starting in the mid-1980s and 1990s, tourism scholars began drawing on long-term ethnographic research to challenge persistent and problematic stereotypes, such as the contrast between serious pilgrims and frivolous tourists (Pfaffenberger, 1983), assumptions about locals' passivity and disempowerment

in the face of tourism development (i.e. Adams, 2006; Vaccaro and Beltran, 2007), or that tourists uniformly pursue 'authenticity' and are disappointed by evidence of cultural change (c.f. Tucker, 2003). In *Tourism Geographies'* early issues, we see periodic ethnography-based scholarship addressing these themes. For example, Mary Conran's (2006) fieldwork with trekking tourists in Thailand reveals their desires for intimate reciprocal experiences with their Karen hosts, problematizing more simplistic assumptions about quests for object authenticity. Likewise, Sallie Yea's (2002) ethnographic research highlights how exotic stereotypes of Sarawak Iban longhouse-dwellers inform tour operators' decisions to remove communities deemed 'inauthentic' from their destination lists. Beyond documenting how exotic imagery drives tour operators' destination lists, Yea's research fueled insights into how this external control of tourism's destination maps diminished less 'exotic' longhouse communities' economic and decision-making power. Her fieldwork-honed insights also produced more power-attuned recommendations for interventions that could give longhouse dwellers greater authority over how tourism transpires in their communities (Yea, 2002).

One last intervention enabled ethnography to become a more appealing methodological tool for tourism scholars beyond its disciplinary homeland of anthropology. In its classic framing, ethnography entailed being anchored in a singular place, one's fieldsite, for an extended period. Yet by the late 1980s, as global flows of people, ideas, images, and things were increasingly the norm, the notion of a fieldsite as a spatially bounded location began to break down. Ethnographers interested in researching mobile populations (tourists, migrants, seasonal workers, etc.), or other forms of global flows began developing new research strategies. Some embedded themselves in the mobile groups, to better understand their experiences. For instance, Edward Bruner served as an anthropologist-guide, and engaged in participant observation with his mobile population of tourists (2005). Hazel Tucker's (2007) ethnographic work transpired on a package coach tour of New Zealand. Others spent more time anchored in one community studying interactions between locals and visitors, yet also followed the movement of iconic products, images, souvenirs, traders, or tourists beyond that community (c.f. Adams, 2006; Forshee, 2001). While other scholars conducted shorter stints of ethnographic research in various locations across the globe. For example, Lauren Griffith and Jonathan Marion (2018) followed educational travelers—apprenticeship pilgrims—to dance workshops and festivals as they pursued embodied knowledge and legitimacy unavailable at home. In a landmark review article, George Marcus termed these mobile approaches to fieldwork 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus, 1995), thereby signaling that ethnography no longer required long-term immersion in a single field site.

With these transformations, ethnography became more appealing to tourism scholars outside anthropology. Ultimately, ethnography's untethering from anthropology fostered new creative adaptations as tourism scholars from other disciplines fused it with their own field's orientations and objectives.

Current trends in tourism ethnography

While there are numerous current trends in the ethnographic study of tourism, I focus here on several that have made particularly significant inroads, namely (1) autoethnography and memory work (2) embodiment, affect, and sensory ethnography (3)

Netnography, and (4) participatory, collaborative, and social-justice-oriented ethnography.

Autoethnography and memory

Coalescing in the 1990s, autoethnography is a reflexive, interpretive approach that entails connecting one's personal experiences and perceptions to broader cultural, social, and political processes. Drawing on self-narration, sentient experiences, and story-telling, autoethnography demands researcher self-awareness and insight. Autoethnography is particularly well-suited for yielding insights into dimensions of tourism experiences that may not be otherwise easily captured—emotionally or culturally sensitive experiences, shifts in perception over longer timespans, or fleeting aspects of experience not habitually articulated. Autoethnography is also in keeping with critical tourism studies, for in unpacking one's own lived experiences, the classic power dynamic between authoritative ethnographers and their interlocutors is inverted and one is 'stripped of the comfort which depersonalized disinterest allows' (Morgan & Pritchard, 2005, p. 20). Early tourism studies adopters of autoethnography include Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard (2005). They reflected on their shifting ties to their personal souvenir collection, arguing that this reflexive approach enabled insights into the ever-evolving relationship between tourism, self-identity, and materiality. More recently, auto-ethnography has been effectively deployed by Jodi Skipper (2022) who chronicled her own and others' efforts to restore histories of slavery to plantation house tourism in the American South. In a similar vein, Tingting Elle Li and Eric Chan (2023) drew on autoethnography to capture their affective experiences as Chinese tourist-scholars confronting Liverpool's trans-Atlantic slavery heritage in the city's International Slavery Museum.

Memory work is, in some ways, a sibling to autoethnography. Remembered experiences have always been central to ethnography, often unfolding informally during participant observation, as when guides spontaneously recount stories about experiences with past tourists. However, contemporary tourism scholars more deliberately integrate this qualitative, interpretivist paradigm into their ethnographic toolkits (although they may not label it as such). Centered on eliciting and processing memories, ethnographers have found this approach particularly useful for heritage tourism research (Marschall, 2019), for insights into the interplay between ancestral homeland visits, ethnic and familial identity (Adams, 2019, 2021) and to better understand how personal memories serve as a generator of tourism (Marschall, 2015). Often, ethnographic memory work highlights sensory modalities. For roots tourists traveling to what are perceived to be ancestral homelands, sensory engagement is key, as it is 'imaginatively experienced as being *the same* as that of one's own ancestors' (Leite, 2005, pp. 286–87).

Affect, embodiment, and sensory ethnography

Whereas the body was largely overlooked in tourism ethnography twenty-five years ago, Sarah Pink's (2015) *Doing Sensory Ethnography* has inspired a growing corpus of research highlighting embodied experiences in tourism. Much of this work is reflexive, drawing on the researcher's own sensory experience, but sensory ethnography also entails attunement to how others engage bodily with the tourist spaces in which they

work or play. Sensory ethnography can offer unique insights into place and place-making, as well as into ephemeral dimensions of meaning-making and memory-making *via* travels. Some aspects of touristic experiences can *only* be captured *via* sensory ethnography. For example, Ellina Mourtazina's (2020) insights into tourists' intimate embodied experiences at a silent Buddhist retreat center in India necessitated sensory ethnography. Likewise, Maarja Kaaristo and Steven Rhoden's (2016) study of the convergence of the 'everyday' and the 'extraordinary' in tourist canal boating relied heavily on attunement to the physical rhythms of canal travel, tourists' bodily adjustments to narrow quarters, and their pursuit of corporal comfort and gastronomic pleasures.

Ethnographic attention to affect has also recently gained momentum in tourism studies. Given that travel is often driven by inchoate emotions and feelings, this development is significant. A pioneer in this area is Mary Conran (2011)/Mostafanezhad (2013), whose affect-oriented ethnographic work highlights how compassion and emotional intimacy are entwined with volunteer tourism, ultimately reflecting the broader depoliticization of global justice agendas. Other tourism ethnographers have mined their own embodied, emotional states (such as shame in encounters with tourists or hosts) to reveal broader uncomfortable truths about our scholarly complicity in tourism's modernist representational practices (Tucker, 2009).

Netnography

The transformative incursion of the internet into our everyday lives over the past twenty-five years has had dramatic ramifications for travel. Not only has the internet become a foundational source for inspiring and arranging travel logistics, but it has also transformed armchair travelers' imagery and imaginings of destinations. Moreover, the internet has facilitated new genres of participatory virtual travel, a phenomenon that greatly expanded with the 2020 outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic. These developments in tandem with the explosion of social media communities tied to travel, heritage, and places have spurred tourism scholars to develop new ethnographic strategies for the virtual realm. Netnography, or ethnographic research in virtual settings (e.g. on social media platforms, interactive virtual tours, or other online tourism and heritage-related consumption communities) is now blossoming, not only in tourism marketing studies but also in critical tourism scholarship.

Netnography entails *immersive involvement* and *participation* in the online community, ideally as a *recognized* member. It also requires that tourism researchers have a rich understanding of the cultural background of the online communities under study, as illustrated in Yue Ma and Cai's (2023) use of WeChat to understand Chinese outbound tourists. Moreover, as tourism netnographers underscore, ethnographic work on the internet is most effective when conducted in tandem with other forms of data collection, ranging from traditional ethnography to survey research.

Participatory, collaborative, and social-justice-oriented ethnography

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a slow but steadily rising interest in interventions that democratize research and aim to extinguish the neo-colonial relationships historically plaguing ethnography. Not only has our vocabulary shifted: for instance, we have abandoned the problematic practice of terming our interlocutors 'informants'

and now use words such as 'collaborators' and 'situated co-researchers' (Mostafanezhad & Swain, 2019, p. 246). But these terminological changes go beyond the superficial (yet important) level of semantics and signal a shift in understandings of the very fabric and goals of tourism ethnography. Collectively, whether labeled 'participatory ethnography,' 'collaborative ethnography', or 'para-ethnography,' these new ethnographic practices seek to decolonize research, often as part of broader regenerative tourism or social justice agendas. These evolving ethnographic approaches share an interest in co-producing tourism-related knowledge, problem-solving, or fostering community well-being. As such, they necessitate attentiveness to issues of local and global structural inequalities. In collaborative ethnography, the ethnographer does not drive the research: it is the local community that defines its needs and pursues local and external experts to develop the project. All parties are equal partners in the research, participating not only in the project's conceptualization, but the research design, data collection, and any publications that may (or may not) emerge (Lassiter, 2005, 16). The ultimate aim is for communities to engage in 'active participation, ownership, control, and power over tourism decision-making, resources, and lives' (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022, p. 3).

Participatory/collaborative ethnography can challenge tourism researchers, as it entails shedding much of what academia classically values—scholar-driven research, ethnographic authority, and even (potentially) journal publications. Rather, the ethnographer defers to the desires of community stakeholders. Since tourist places/spaces bring together diverse groups with divergent and competing interests (some with greater voices than others) the constitution of 'the community' can sometimes render collaborative ethnographic projects vulnerable to cooptation. In these worst-case scenarios, one can end up with something akin to green-washing, what I term 'community-washing' / 'indigenous-washing.' Yet, these new ethnographic approaches are being productively adopted in community-based tourism and have much potential for broader application in tourism studies.

Gaps in the literature and future research directions

As in other fields, tourism scholars have tended to enthusiastically adopt new methodologies without sufficient ethical reflection. In the future, it would be valuable to see more systematic reflection devoted to ethical issues in new forms of tourism-oriented ethnography. For instance, how do one navigate publishing ethnographies centered on intimate embodied experiences/exchanges in nonexploitative ways? Consider, for example, the ethics of an embodied ethnography of sex tourism: Does adopting such an approach contribute meaningfully to our understanding of broader structural gender, racial, and class inequalities embedded in tourism that might not be achieved *via* informal interviews? Likewise, we need more discussions of ethics in tourism netnography. Nuanced reflections on the problematic ethics surrounding lurking in netnographic tourism research remain rare (but see Jeffrey et al., 2021). As Harng Luh Sin observes, social media blurs the traditional divide between private and public spaces, offering new data feasts yet also serving up an ethical 'can of worms' (Sin, 2015, p. 680).

As alluded to earlier, far too little scholarship is sufficiently rooted in decolonial approaches to ethnography. Despite some movement in this direction, it should be common practice for tourism scholars to embrace more inclusive research processes

wherein local/indigenous experts or elders are equal players in shaping data-gathering methods and agendas in tourism scholarship. A promising example of this is Leon-Leon, Coronado Yagual, Cando Velasco et al.'s (2024) study of indigenous decolonial challenges and practices surrounding tourism in Pacific coastal communities in Ecuador. Their collaborative research efforts (which brought together indigenous leaders, scholars, and an undergraduate student) drew on native methodologies in tandem with classic ethnography and yielded insights into how indigenous collective land ownership buttresses cultural identity and locally-run tourism ventures, thereby enabling resistance to external capitalist incursions.

Given our current climate crisis, we must develop new genres of ethnography equipped for lending constructive insights into tourism's entwinement with planetary peril. Creative reformulations of ethnography are essential for producing insights into how tourism and touristic practices (by individuals, communities, and states) are entangled with the ecological and climatic changes that constitute our greatest challenge. Some promising first steps may lie in the recent formulation of multispecies ethnography, which is both a mode of writing and a research approach aimed at uncovering how 'a multitude of organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic and cultural factors' (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010, p. 545). While current tourism scholars have primarily used this approach to lend insights into topics such as holiday human-horse relationships or embodied tourist-reindeer encounters in Lapland (e.g. Haanpää et al., 2019), multispecies ethnography's attentiveness to the interrelations between all forms of life may prove inspiring for critical tourism studies interested in planetary justice. Also potentially promising is partigraphy (Jensen, 2019), a novel methodology for critically studying how particles ('particulate matters') are entwined with the global tourism industry as well as tourists' experiences. For an example of this, see Mary Mostafanezhad's (2020) ethnographically-grounded research on how Northern Thailand's air pollution crisis reshapes relationships between tourism practitioners, farmers, and natural scientists. More generally, if we are to play even small roles in righting the current course of the planet, we need to become more accountable for our complicity as traveling tourism scholars whose ethnographic writings inevitably contribute to the enchantment of travel.

Conclusion

This article has traced the shifting forms and practices of ethnography, from its positivist roots in colonial-era anthropology to its current manifestations in tourism research. Over the past 25 years, tourism ethnography has morphed to include reflexive approaches, to address new virtual tourism spaces, and to become more accountable to those whose lives we aim to understand. We have witnessed considerable advances in critical ethnographic approaches to tourism, yet the project of decolonizing tourism ethnography and integrating social and planetary justice agendas into this methodology is still in its infancy. Returning to the elephant that opened this commentary, if we hope to use knowledge culled from tourism ethnography to constructively reckon with current social and planetary challenges (the 'elephant in the room'), we must all throw in our hands to understand and face the challenges posed by this seemingly-overwhelming creature. More work remains to be done.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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