

# The Poetics of Tourist Experience: An Autoethnography of a Family Trip to Eilat<sup>1</sup>

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This paper is an autoethnographic exploration of a tourist's experience. Through interpreting qualitative material, in the form of a poem I wrote in 1994 about a short familial excursion to an Israeli seaside resort city (Eilat), the research seeks to sensitively describe the intricacies of travel experience. The research explores the advantages of the autoethnographic method of inquiry, and discusses tourism-related emotions and memories in the context of performance and representation. The paper joins recent efforts in attempting to challenge and loosen the grip of positivist epistemologies and discourses on mainstream tourism studies, by illustrating the emotional complexities and contradictions in the travel experience of tourists. In line with traditions of critical research in sociology, the exploration sheds light on the materiality of texts and on the role language plays in tourism, viewing the poem read in this paper ('Quiet Eilat') simultaneously as a representation, performance and material object of discourse.

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## Introduction: Performing Experience

Research into the experiences of tourists, commonly referred to as the 'tourist experience', has a respectable tradition within the sociological research of tourists (Cohen, 1974, 1979). Through employing the conceptual categories suggested by Cohen, various researches productively explored the typology of tourists' possible and actual experiential modes (Lengkeek, 2001; Sternberg, 1997; Wickens, 2002). These works have further enhanced as well as criticized Cohen's early tourist typologies. Generally, they directed scholarly attention to the unique experiential characteristics of tourists' phenomenology, and contributed to the growing understanding of the intertwined psychological, social and cultural possibilities that are promoted and embodied by modern tourism.

While invaluable, Cohen's formulations tended to stimulate highly theoretical research, often aiming at neat conceptual categories and clear theoretical typologies. Due to this tendency, researches neglected the details of tourists' lived experience, and did not allocate sufficient grounds for these experiences before theorizing and conceptually categorizing them. Indeed, although Cohen's

early works were inspired by phenomenological and existential trends of thought, new methodologies, that would have captured in more sensitive and informed ways the 'tourist experience,' did not follow. The present exploration addresses this state of affairs by pursuing the following sensitivities and sensibilities.

First, close – even intimate – attention is paid to the experiences themselves. Indeed, the bulk of the paper is devoted to a detailed evocation of the experience of a tourist excursion. The emotional dimension of the tourist experience is elaborated, with emphasis on negative hues, which are not commonly associated with tourists' experiences and emotions.

Second, the exploration seeks innovative methodologies – autoethnography in the present case, which can communicate experience and reconstruct it in vivid, lively and sometimes painful ways. By pursuing the research of experience in an evocative fashion, a presentation is possible whereby insights into and appreciation of the subject matter of experience is reached. In this regard, the present research is part of recent advancements in tourism research methodologies (Aitchison, 2000; Ateljevic *et al.*, 2007; Botterill, 2003).

Third, the field of 'tourist experience' is presently construed as an *integral part of everyday experience* of people living in late-modern times in affluent societies. Following the advancements made by Urry (1990), this research holds with the notions that the cultures of tourism, and the experiences these cultures embody and endow, are but one sphere of the whole of our lived, everyday experiences. According to this view, the notion of 'tourist experience' entails a dazzling array of human experiences that emerge when people engage in the sphere of tourism, via its many institutional extensions, representations and guises. The point is that people are constantly in touch with various cultures of tourism, and are, in one way or another, 'much of the time "tourists"' (Urry, 1990: 82). Hence the tourist experience is often an extension of people's everyday experiences, amounting, as Richards and Wilson (2004: 254) note, to a 'home plus' experience.

Fourth, tourists' behaviors, including the expression of feelings, emotions, experiences, and memories are presently conceived as performances. Following the above notion concerning the cultures of tourism, the category 'tourist' is construed as one which engulfs a cultural symbol of modern experience (MacCannell, 1976). This symbol can be embodied through different roles people assume when they uptake tourism endeavors. In this vein, embodying tourist roles means *performing tourism*. Tourism is construed as a discerned set of aesthetic activities which take place in discernable spaces wherein tourists do not only cast the tourist gaze, but are also the subjects and objects of that gaze (Adler, 1989; Edensor, 1998). More specifically, it means performing various states of experience and modes of being on the international social stages of tourism. However, since the borders between tourists' experiences and everyday experiences are continuously blurring, some tourism-related activities, which are *not* performed within designated tourist spaces, are also construed as tourist or tourist-related performances (Noy, 2004). Such is the present case, where travel writing in the form of a poem, is construed and interpreted as a product (and a trace) of tourist performance.

## **A Tourist Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is a critical and reflexive way of inquiry that flourished mainly within the North American qualitative movement in the social sciences during the last decade. Appreciating the strengths and weaknesses of this way of inquiry, as well as the implications it bears and the impact it carries on various fields of research, requires acknowledging its inherent relation to the diverse family of qualitative research methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Yet even within the family of qualitative research methodologies autoethnography presents a rather radical approach; a subversive and oftentimes provocative relative. Autoethnography is a way of inquiry that is wholeheartedly – morally, emotionally and ideologically – committed to the subject of the research, namely to people and to their complex, intricate lives and experiences. In this respect, autoethnographical research shares grounds with performance studies, symbolic interaction, feminist research, and similar schools of thought, both recent and traditional, within the social sciences.

Further, autoethnography is unique in that its power lies within its discursive, written mode. It is a text. The term literally entails the definition of the inquiry procedure: the researcher addresses herself or himself ('auto'), as a subject of a larger social, cultural or institutional group ('ethno'), by ways of revealing research and writing ('graphy', Ellis, 1997, see also Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 1996). The autoethnographic work aspires to tell of those constitutive dimensions that in conventional sociological research are erased or play a backstage role. In addition to personal, lived experience, autoethnographic research explores voice, emotions, processes (rather than results or products) and embodied senses and knowledges, as a part of 'the guerilla warfare against the repressive structures of everyday lives' (Denzin, 1999: 572). Often, autoethnographic research investigates the relationship between researchers, their fields of inquiry and their informants, thus supplying innovative perspectives on the underlying assumptions and discourses of various academic disciplines, as well as on the process of socialization and disciplining in academia (Jones, 1998; Noy, 2003). As a method that is centered on the scholar herself or himself, autoethnography is inescapably an emotionally painstaking exercise, a type of ethnography that 'breaks your heart' (Behar, 1996).

The evocative and provocative effects accomplished by autoethnographic work, are mainly due to the genre's literary form(s), including poetry, fiction, novels, personal essays, fragmented and layered writing, and more (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 739). These forms are tailored to the social and cultural reality that is being studied – tourism, in the present case. Hence through a poeticized and personalized case-study, autoethnography forces the tourists – ourselves – to inquire into and to challenge our experiences, which would otherwise be dismissed as 'recreational', 'superficial', 'fun', and so on, in a reflexive and informed manner.

Autoethnographizing our tourist experiences soon reveals that there is more, indeed much more, to the sphere of tourist experience than leisurely experiences or other types of positive experiences. Rather, this type of critical

and reflexive text forces us to admit to how much of tourism-endowed experience resonates with feelings of sadness and alienation. It seems that as tourists, i.e. people performing tourism, we are not permitted to feel or to acknowledge alienation or despair. While it is legitimate to occasionally admit to a sense of disappointment – as one traveler once revealed, ‘India was much warmer and humid than the pictures I saw show’, – or to cathartically experience powerful feelings of collective mourning and grief, such as is the case in dark tourism, expressing more mundane alienated feelings is almost a taboo.

Furthermore, regardless of the different type of tourism involved, in the capacity tourists are performers, they are constantly under the gaze of other people, such as tourists, locals, and tourist operators, and their behaviors are constantly regulated and monitored so as to avoid ‘improper’ expressions (Aitchison, 2000; Fullagar, 2002). While the show on the stages of international tourism must go on, ‘deviant’ behaviors, emotions and experiences are effectively, even if subtly, sanctioned.

Lastly, because the autoethnographic text presents highly personal, perhaps intimate moments of lived experience, and because it is ideally suited to explore the relationship between researchers and their disciplines, it is potentially a delicate endeavor. Autoethnography has the capacity of revealing and rearranging academic institutional relationships by illuminating the normative, taken for granted axioms of various fields of research, with which researchers comply, which they resist, and with which they engage in alternative ways (Jones, 1998; Noy, 2003).

### **Nathan and I**

The present exploration addresses a poem I wrote, that describes a short family excursion to the resort city of Eilat, located in the southmost tip of Israel (by the Red Sea, on the way leading to the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula). After presenting the poem, the paper turns to interpretation – integrating academic discourse and further personal recollections and insights in the aim of creating a rich and informed account of the trip’s experiences and the meanings they bear.

The poem, ‘Quiet Eilat’, is a naïve piece. It was written in the winter of 1994, before my academic career had led me to research tourism (and before I became reflexive about tourism discourses and research). Since I am not an accomplished poet, the piece is best conceived as a stylized journal entry, a part of a travelogue aesthetically depicting memories and feelings I had after spending an off-season, December excursion in a nearly empty resort city. It is a product of a literary form, and may thus be viewed, at least partly, as a tourist performance of the type of ‘reminiscing’ (Edensor, 2000: 135–148), revealing the emotional ‘lows’ of tourism.

Crucially, the journey took place during the winter, clearly an ‘off-season’ in Eilat. Although Eilat is located in the southern-most, warmer part of the country, it is windy in the winter and quite empty of visitors. This emptiness creates a sense of desertedness, which also radiates desolation.

Furthermore, the traveling family included several family relatives, including Nathan, who is particularly dear to me. Nathan is five years younger than

me and since I was an only child (and much closer to my mother's side of the family), Nathan was as close to being a brother to me in my childhood as I could ever have. We spent many enjoyable summer vacations together, both during the years he lived in Israel, and later, after his family emigrated to the United States. We usually made fun of our unmarried maternal aunts, would build 'pillow houses' in their living rooms, and would go together to the Kfar-Saba beach and have 'sand fights'. During Nathan's college years, an acute and degenerative mental illness irrupted. (Actually, the first irruption occurred while he was visiting Israel.) This chronic illness, with its various medications and long periods of hospitalizations, bleakly colors Nathan's young adulthood years. Although Nathan felt better during our trip to Eilat, and was able to travel, we were concerned with his health and well-being.<sup>2</sup> Nathan's illness, though in a latent state then, had colored the experience of the trip, and combined with the effect of an 'off-season', empty resort city, had created a melancholic sentiment. Finally, as I read the piece while preparing this paper, I realized it was addressed to him, then 21, as a birthday gift (which I never delivered).

*Quiet Eilat*

Playing table-tennis with Nathan in Eilat  
 in Winter-time Eilat  
 Muddy remains of floods  
 that swept across town  
 from the red-granite canyons in the East  
 to the deep marine-blue canyons in the gulf.  
 The air is fresh and the breeze is cool  
 Neta is happy-angry  
 Ruth is relaxing  
 Meira is not (she's being Meira)

At night we walk. All five.  
 Our silhouettes on the promenade are reflected in the dark water  
 where noiseless fish glide swiftly  
 You and I at front, marching an invisible colorful  
 American band  
 pam pararam pam pam pararam pam pam

*Quiet Eilat*

Playing table-tennis with Nathan in Eilat in the  
 late-afternoon  
 gusts of wind divert the light white ball.  
 We face south  
 to where our memories of Sinai are distant but crystal:  
 the striped red-and-white legendary air-mattress  
 floating gently atop the tide by the shore  
 a flaccid penis of a red-burned nudist lying outside our tent in Dahab and  
 I'm worried – when will my aunts wake up...  
 later in the afternoon

a nude couple walking hand in hand between the palms and the sea line  
 Nathan finds the beach exciting but  
 we drive into the mountains  
 to look back at the view: sparkling blue Red Sea  
 to find a Spring that the book says should be there ('volume: four cubic  
 meters')

Then we drive north on our way back home  
 We drink 'Yotvata' chocolate milk at Yotvata  
 We have a lot of fun

transformation of fun into memory  
 transformation of memory into a poem  
 transformation of a poem into a present

### Languages of tourism

What initially struck me about the poem is that it is written in English. Although for none of the persons mentioned in the poem English is a native tongue (albeit Nathan has been living in Los Angeles since childhood), the poem is nonetheless written in English. I take this point to be indicative of, and relating to, the subject of the poem and to the realm from which it is extracted. Writing in a different language is in itself an estranged experience, reminiscing through the act of writing the sense of foreignness evoked in the tourist trip.

English is the lingua franca of globalization and global capitalism, and in this capacity it is also the international language of tourism. In performing tourism, people symbolically depart from their daily habits and from the languages of their everyday lives and assume different modes of representation and being: different languages, experiences and identities (Clifford, 1997). In other words, suggesting that tourism offers vocabulary and syntax for behavior and experience can be a literal matter at times, which can assume the form of writing and talking in 'international English'.

This is most salient when at stake are non-Anglo-Saxon and non-Western tourists.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this 'translation' into the international language of tourism occurs even when the tourist excursion is not of an international nature, but of an *intra*-national nature; still, the experience is that of foreignness and distance. As Nathan Zach, one of Israel's foremost contemporary poets writes: 'we met outside our lives/in Eilat'. English, then, symbolically amounts not only to language but also to space: a foreign, unfamiliar and perhaps deserted space that lies 'outside' lives, much like the resort city of Eilat. Hence, in and through discursive representation the author's voice evokes different spaces which have different experiential hues. Writing a sullen poem in English echoes the feelings of being a 'sad tourist', employing the means of tourism – divides of spaces and languages, in order to communicate an alienated experience. Put differently, translation is in and of itself a medium of communication, one which is 'never entirely neutral; it is enmeshed in the relationships of power' (Clifford, 1997: 182). Obviously, this discussion pertains to the writing of this

paper as well, where translation is never complete and continuously frustrating.

### Bi-polar emotions

The title of the poem, 'Quiet Eilat', as well as the phrase 'Winter-time Eilat', present an expression that is oxymoronic. Being a resort city, the experiences related to Eilat are associated with summertime, amusement parks, golden, sandy beaches, ice cream cones and other such components of recreational times and experiences. Yet off-season, this manic state is reversed, and the noisiness and verbosity tourists produce is replaced by the quietness their emptiness leaves. This feeling is captured in the first stanza, where 'Muddy remains of floods' are mentioned, alluding metaphorically to floods of tourists who rush through spaces of consumption during the high times of consumption (the 'tourist season'). Visiting such sites out of season means encountering the 'trace' or the 'signature' (in the Derridian sense, Derrida, 1988) of masses of tourists. As Toni Morrison writes, 'a void maybe empty but it is not a vacuum' (in Bhabha, 1994: 77). That is, what is not present but somehow apparent bears powerfully on experience. While the tourist season represents the experience of being 'in the right place in the right time,' visiting Eilat during off-season amounts to being in 'the right place' yet 'in the wrong time'. Remains or leftovers of high times, of the 'right time', are clearly visible. A bi-polar effect is experienced, where no middle grounds are available: either high-season mania or off-season depression.

The remains of other times are crucial in evoking and in echoing an affecting sense of alienation and aloneness. They translate into an experience of being 'out of synch' – and also 'out of place', with other people, with the 'normative tourist' who travels at the right time. More concretely, the visibility of 'Muddy remains' indicates the obvious fact that during periods when no tourists or visitors arrive in Eilat, the mayor and council of the city are not concerned with the town's appearance. A sense of being in an empty 'ghost town' emerges. Yet this sense is complicated by the knowledge that Eilat is not truly a ghost town, but that its 44,000 residents are nearly invisible, even in the eyes of their chosen local council.

### Thin strip of sanity

The geographical scene at which the family arrives is of a dramatic nature: on one side, barren granite mountains of northern Sinai, on other side, the gleaming Gulf of 'Aqaba. In between these canyonsides a short coastal strip of plain extends, on which Eilat is built (Azaryahu, 2006; Lavie, 1990: 47). While the description is realistic and true to the region's topography, it also reveals the two-fold social tensions the poem evokes: a thin stretch of ground between the steep mountains and the underwater canyons indexes a thin stretch of time that exists between touristic 'highs' and 'lows'. Also, a thin stretch of inhabitable sanity exists between emotional extremes, a stretch of equilibrium on which Nathan, and all the rest of us, are pacing. In the capacity touristic sites and places, such as Eilat, are symbolic or of symbolic dimensions (Edensor, 1998), they possess unique qualities: *they can come to mirror and embody their visitors' state(s) of mind.*

Historically, such symbolic roles played by natural landscapes have early antecedents, which are located at the very moments of the emergence of tourism as a system of symbols encompassing nature. This occurred in the Romantic era, quite sometime before mass modern tourism appeared and commercialized the association between experience and nature (Tobias, 1979, 1995). In a book that poetically inquires into the relationship between nature, art and modernity, Tobias observes Shelley's description of scenic, mountainous landscape. The following short extract was written in the summer of 1811, upon the English poet's visit to Wales, where he compared the landscape to a 'situation of the mind':

This country of Wales is excessively grand; rocks piled on each other to tremendous heights, rivers formed into cataracts by their projections, and valleys clothed with woods, present an appearance of enchantment – but why do they enchant, why is it more affecting than a plain, it cannot be innate, is it acquired? (Percy Shelley, in Tobias, 1995: 182)

For Tobias, Shelley's writing represents a unique moment of emergence of a type of awareness, wherein the relationship between the 'external', the 'internal', and the social, are forged anew. Somewhere during the 19th century, physical travel has become experientially informative, or, in a word – transformative, in a familiar fashion. Hence arriving at Eilat on a tourist excursion brings together the triadic interrelation between physical scenery, the sociality of the travelers – us five, and the realm of personal experience both evoked by and performed in the poem.

### **Walking and remembering on the promenade in Eilat**

On the promenade ('above the surface') in the darkness of the quiet evening, the family is engaged in what tourists commonly do, in what tourists are supposed to be doing: enjoying ourselves walking, strolling, partaking in 'an activity central to tourism... [whereby] symbolic sites are negotiated via various paths' (Edensor, 1998: 105). Moreover, we engage in a particularly playful (ludic and reflexive) tourist behavior which is, literally, a performance: Nathan and I are generating noise, which is amplified by the content of our play – a dandy marching band, in order to overcome the closing quietness. We are generating movement in order to divorce stillness. We are playing the roles of the missing masses of tourists, evoking the jolly noises of how the place sounds in high season, mimicking melodies and rhythms that we cannot hear but only recall ('pam pararam pam pam'). Although it is a tacky North American band that we are mimicking, the 'post-tourist' type of parody is nonetheless enjoyable and reassuring (Feifer, 1985). We are also alluding to the acquired North American identity of Nathan and his family (a point to which I will return later).

During all this time Nathan and I are playing or rather trying to play table tennis. The uneven tick-tack of the hollow ball on the wooden table-board is akin to a broken metronome, and a metaphor for interrupted interpersonal communication. Although we try, we are not successful in establishing stable patterns of communication: as gusts of wind interfere in intra-traveler communication, physical reality and the reality of the social are entwined. This holds true for our interrupted interpersonal relations outside the domains of poetry



and tourism – I have not been able to establish communication with Nathan, and our once close ties are severed for a number of years.

Perhaps due to frustration at our ineffective attempts at playing-communicating, I recall (by way of psychological compensation) other journeys we had enjoyed, in more or less the same familial composition. These trips were held some 15 years earlier, during the late 1970s. In those trips we did not end our journey in Eilat, but rather crossed it on the way proceeding southward, to the famed beaches of Sinai. The Sinai Peninsula was conquered by Israel in 1967 and evacuated by in 1982. In the late 70s, when it was still under Israeli occupation, it played a unique role as a truly liminal tourist space (Cohen, 1987; Lavie, 1990). Sinai's primordial landscapes, imbued with mythical significance in the national memory, and its spectacular beaches, had been popular destinations and places of escape for many. This is wherefrom the memories originate. The legendary red-and-white striped air mattress, about which we often reminisced years later (and about which I wrote several poems), and the nude colony: so new, fascinating and shocking for me (nudity was always strictly prohibited in Israel, cf. Lavie, 1990: 7–26).

Recollecting our earlier travel experiences introduces yet additional spaces and times. It suggests that the present excursion to Eilat is hued by our individual and shared (familial) travel biographies and recollections thereof, stretching from the time Nathan and myself were young children; from the time Nathan was still living in Israel, and his younger brother and sister – Ophir and Naomi, not yet born. And, crucially, these memories stretch from the time Nathan was well, prior to the eruption of his chronic illness. In other words, the tourist family's retrospection is colored by major events that have *transpired* on the family's stages. Our memories of our childhood excursions to Sinai amount to a story within a story, a trip within a trip, a distance within a distance. Memories of spaces are unfolding within each other, generating a disoriented, post-colonial impression.

Within the context of tourism, remembering is performative. As Edensor (1998: 137) reminds us, '[c]ollecting memories is part of the common-sense understanding of what holidays are for'. Indeed, this is true of all tourists: their accumulated tourist biographies both unfold and expand with every trip (Neumann, 1992, 1999). On this occasion we did not pursue the Sinai experience, but halted our trip in Eilat. Although we traveled south, we chose not to 'break through to the other side [of Israel]', as it were, to places that generated memories of nearly mythical quality for us, and stopped short at the southmost point under Israeli sovereignty.

Down south, beyond and 'under' the borders of national sovereignty, the present, and the social taboo, the 'tourist body' is powerfully present (Crouch & Desforges, 2003). It primarily takes the form of a naked Scandinavian male body, with what then seemed to me to be a huge flaccid penis, next to two nude female companions (I realize in hindsight, that it was the first uncircumcised penis I ever saw, as well as the first vulva). The physical proximity to a foreign and adult male body left me shocked, and aroused pre-pubertal anxiety: I remember how concerned I was with the thoughts, 'when will my aunts wake up? Something must be done about this.' The blurring of social borders in this heterogeneous space – between the normative and the transgressive, the clothed

and the unclothed, the Bedouins (native), the Israelis and the Europeans, was of a liminal quality and left a powerful imprint in my memory (Noy, 2007b). Other memories had a more latency-period type of content, such as the striped air mattress, on top of which Nathan and I lay, snorkeling the truly amazing reefs at Dahab for hours, getting serious sunburns on our pale backs.

Gradually, from the evocation of the marching band to the childhood memories of our trips to Sinai, the 'tourist present' is becoming richer with echoes, shades and shadows. Furthermore, as I write these lines it occurs to me that Quiet Eilat is a piece in a string of descriptive travel poems which revolve around my relationship and interaction with Nathan in different spaces and times: from the backyards of apartment buildings in the towns of Herzliya and Kfar-Saba, though the beaches of Sinai in our childhoods, to the wide and alienated avenues of Los Angeles in our young adulthood.

### **Day excursions: Hindsight, reflexivity**

Although Nathan 'is excited with the beach', that is with the mundane, perhaps 'secular', recreational Eilatian experience, after a couple of days near the beach we decide to drive westward, spiraling up and away from Eilat and from the beach, into the granite mountains soaring behind the town. Like disciplined tourists, we favor a day with a guidebook in the mountains, rather than the 'shallow' experience of/on the beach, searching for a small spring. In this day-trip, we leave the urban setting of Eilat for the mountains, wandering off into the barren and rocky wilderness. Again, at stake is an excursion within an excursion, a 'second order' trip. The major destination – Eilat – is transformed into a temporary home from which we depart to experience nature. A star shaped type of itinerary emerges: tourists depart from and return to the major destinations repeatedly, each time to a different mini-destination (Löfgren, 1999; Noy, 2005: 130).

These mini- intra-trip excursions supply an opportunity for an *excursion-type of reflexivity*. By this term I mean that the tourist can view the destination from an additional perspective, by which she or he can then tell stories and recollections about it, about leaving Eilat and returning to it. As the travelers 'practice' repeated departures and returns in their trip, reflexivity and narrativity emerge, and tourists tell stories of the excursions they undertake. This is the same reflexivity that underlies the tourist photography mania: taking pictures requires but also constructs a symbolic, ontological distance between the tourist and the attraction. It creates reflexivity, or a narrative distance between the viewer and the viewed (Sontag, 1990). From a narrative perspective, taking a picture means one can now tell a story about the attraction. Looking (or overlooking) back at Eilat from the mountains, our eyes have become photographic [as Handelman (2003) observes of television viewers].

Although we traveled by ourselves, with no guides to direct or confine us, the family is complied closely with the requirements set by the tourist role. While Nathan enjoyed the beach and wished to stay near it, the rest of us felt we needed to fulfill an obligation which is to checkmark a 'day-excursion', and so we left to the mountains. We followed closely a 'tourist bible' of sorts, which told us that somewhere in the mountains a spring exists, of which exact (scientific) volume is that of 'four cubic meters'. It is as though we were making

the following argument (before Nathan): 'tourism is hard work. We cannot stay here by the beach, doing nothing, wasting valuable time. We need to engage in something more dramatic, something about which we can later tell stories; we need to accumulate more travel-related knowledge; we need to be on the move perpetually.' In this hypothetical utterance, the family assumes the authoritative plural voice (the authority imbued in the 'we'), while Nathan is regarded in the single person and occupies an oppositional position.

### Returning home(s)

The next move the poem describes concerns the return home, which is both a concrete and a symbolic gesture that bounds the time and the space of the trip. As we are northbound, heading back to the heartland, we stop and rest on the sides of a torturously long, dry and mind-numbing road leading from Eilat, through the Arava Desert to Jerusalem.

Different tourists have different homes, and different senses of what home means for them and what the sphere of everyday life that is associated with it means. Hence heading back home, and heading back to one's everyday spaces, means different things to different travelers. It was mentioned earlier that Nathan and his family were no longer living in Israel. They emigrated to the United States in 1980, a transition which was quite traumatic for the small family.

At the time they emigrated, leaving Israel was a near taboo. Emigrants were notoriously referred to as 'descenders' (*yordim*), individuals who deserted the national Zionist ideal and the spaces in which it was embodied. Although Israeli emigrants established large and lively communities abroad, leading social and cultural Israeli exilic lives, alienation colored and problematized cross Atlantic communication (Shokeid, 1988). Hence, when we leave Eilat and 'head back home', we are actually heading to different homes, located in different continents; and the everyday divides and distances between us sadly re-emerge. Aunt Meira returns home to her one bedroom apartment in Tel-Aviv (which looks like a crowded family museum), I return home to my parents' spacious apartment in Jerusalem, and Nathan and his family return home to their suburban home in the San Fernando Valley, where they have been living since they emigrated to the United States.

For our family, tourist spaces and activities are important places where we meet and spend time together. Somewhat paradoxically, but perhaps typical of the lives of modern families, we often meet only to travel more, and to spend time and place together outside our everyday times and places. The literature on family tourism accords with this observation. Following Smart and Neale's (1999) work on 'fragmented families', Haldrup and Larsen (2003: 26) discuss the roles reflexivity, narrative, and photography have in 'performing family' in tourist contexts. They observe that tourism 'becomes a drama of acting-out and capturing photographically conventional scripts of the "perfect" family in an era of "fragmented families"' (see also Johns & Gyimothy, 2003). Furthermore, while Urry's (1990) gaze is directed at 'material worlds', Haldrup and Larsen observe that 'the "family gaze" is concerned with the "extraordinary ordinariness" of intimate "social worlds"' (2003: 24). While the poem 'Quiet Eilat' does not refer explicitly to photography, it lends itself to the photographic eye

and imagination. One can easily imagine a picture of Nathan and myself playing table tennis near the hotel's pool (then empty), or a picture of the family walking pleasurably at night on the promenade, or a panoramic picture with the view of the Gulf of 'Aqaba from the mountains. In these instances we are indeed 'choreographing tourism places into theatres of family life' (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003: 32). Although travel writing is a verbal medium, under the semiotics of tourism it is also a visual or at least a vision-inducing medium. The verbal form, then, should not be confused with the medium, which is context-related: a poem describing a trip can supply a visual, picturesque experience by which it may actually be construed as a visual medium.

On the way back our mood is joyous. We are satisfied because everything during the excursion to Eilat proceeded well and no eruptions had occurred. In other words, we are content because *we fulfilled the tourist role successfully*. We did whatever was expected of us: playing table-tennis, strolling together on the promenade, reminiscing, and doing a day excursion, and we can now claim the cultural capital embodied in travel for ourselves as individuals and as a family. Perhaps we are also pleased that Nathan's illness has not broken out or otherwise hindered the trip in any explicit fashion.

Stopping at Yotvata on our way back, and engaging in one, last tourist pleasure, suggests Yotvata's famous chocolate and mocha drinks are a dessert for us. Stopping for sweet drinks further symbolizes – this time gastronomically – that the trip is indeed soon to end. After all, sooner or later after serving dessert, diners eventually leave the dinner table. In performative terms, diners/tourists end their performance and recede or continue from the tables or the stages of their social performances into their mundane lives. In this vein, the stop at Yotvata in both directions (to and from Eilat) amounts to passing through a culinary gate, functioning as the entrance to the departure from a space of tourist recreational consumption.

### Concluding translations and transformations

While the trip ends, the poem does not, and further translations and transformations take place. In the concluding stanza, which is meta-performative (dealing with the very process of composing a performance in the form of a poem), a different type of distance is described. It is an experiential distance that lies between the 'narrated events', embodied in the spaces and times of the excursion to Eilat, and their poetic and performative evocation. As noted by Edensor:

Selected sights and moments from holidays are recorded so that they can fit into personal life-stories, and provide stimulating and satisfying memories.... They are acts of recording, concerned with the compilation of memories that will be used at a future date. (Edensor, 1998: 137)

Travel literature concerns precisely the processes of 'recording' and 'compiling', which Edensor discusses. The recordings supply shared biographical 'substance', on which people – in this case our family – can later reminisce and romanticize. In the words of Haldrup and Larsen (2003: 39), tourists 'desire to arrest time and make memories'. These memories 'fit' – to use Edensor's term, into personal life-stories in many different ways, as the poem demonstrates.

The transformations described in the poem are threefold: first, a transformation of events into experiences in the particular form of hindsight recollection takes place. By narrativizing the memory of the excursion, the experience is reconstituted as a biographical 'event.'

Second, a transformation of recollections unto a stable and communicable form – namely writing – occurs. In this sense a poem, particularly if it has the traits of a journal entry, is like a photograph, or more generally, like a souvenir. As a text, it is a 'frozen' medium, a symbolic and highly condensed self-created type of souvenir. The translation of the 'memory into a poem', is thus also an attempt at describing and transporting a moment of travel at its entirety, a description of which 'failure is inevitable. An awareness of what escapes the "finished" version will always trouble the moment of success' (Clifford, 1997: 183).

A third transformation occurs when the written strip assumes a performative form, one which is audience-oriented. This is the second half of Edensor's 'acts of recording' (1998: 137). For sometimes things are recorded in order to be retrieved. 'Quiet Eilat' was initially written for Nathan, as a present for his 21st birthday, which was never delivered. The poem-as-souvenir was written in the aim of being a present that brings our family's lives and life stories closer. In this regard the act of writing is an *act of concretization*, transformation of the mental into the material within the context of tourism. Yet I never felt the (material) poem was complete, and therefore I never introduced it to Nathan. Somewhat akin to our interrupted table-tennis games in 'Winter-time Eilat', outside the excursion too we do not communicate. As a text then, the souvenir is akin to a postcard or a letter that has not been sent, but is nonetheless open for rereadings and reinterpretations (Derrida, 1987).

Akin to the Yotvata chocolate milk factory, located on the way to Eilat, these three transformations serve as gates on the journey back from the excursion. This is to say they are symbolic passages leading from the spaces of the excursion-memory, to the 'present'. With every successive transformation, an ontic step is made away from the 'raw events' ('fun'), in direction of the 'present' (whenever that is).

## Epilogue

Because 'tourism' takes place in spatiotemporally distinct places and times, the tourist experience inherently and inevitably involves processes of representation that, together with transportation, serve to compensate for distances and discontinuities (symbolic as well as concrete). These processes supply what sociologist Erving Goffman termed 'ritual access' or 'symbolic access', which afford access to the desired spheres of tourism, concrete as well as symbolic (Goffman, 1981: 187). Through their dislocation from ordinary places, recollections of tourist moments and places have a particularly enduring and memorable effect in and on the biography of individuals, families, groups and communities (Noy, 2007a). This is true of representations of the trip to Eilat, which, in popular Israeli culture, is commonly viewed as a liminal and paradoxical place: 'a virtual "abroad" in Israel', as Azaryahu (2006: 121) puts it.

In and through this autoethnography I set out to explore and to critically expand on Cohen's early notion of the 'tourist experience' (Cohen, 1979). Yet from a performative perspective, the paper asks of tourist representations of experiences not what they are but what are they *for*; not what they mean (subsequently conceptualizing intricate typologies thereof), but how are they (re)employed or (re)mobilized. It is here that the crucial moment of representation and performance arises. As mentioned earlier, the poem 'Quiet Eilat' – a 'piece' or artifact of tourist discourse – was written with the aim of being presented as a present. Through this act of writing, an instance of contextualized textualization, I cashed or materialized on the tourist memories we share, with the aim of reconnecting with my dear relative. The spaces and practices of tourism emerge as resources for shared experience, an experience that is accessible only vis-à-vis representation, usually in the form of memories. In this vein, tourism scholars are encouraged to adopt more constructivist rather than essentialist orientations, and thus consider conceptualizing tourists' expressions of motivations, desires, experiences and reminiscences in performative frameworks.

Reading the poem 'Quiet Eilat' both commences and concludes with language concerns, and specifically with the notion of translation which is an embodied movement and (e)motion between different languages, senses and spaces. While the interpretation commences with addressing the language of the poem – 'tourism English', it ends with a discussion of the various transformations and translations that travel writing embodies and evokes: between memory (past) and re-enactment (present), event and narrative, personal, familial and public spheres, tourism and hominess, and more. Metonymically, the poem offers a tourist space in and of itself, a textual self-made souvenir into which readers enter and from which they exit. As indicated in the Introduction section, translation and travel (auto)ethnography are construed as media of communication in and of themselves (Bhabha, 1994; Clifford, 1997). Indeed, these are transformative media, which afford the traveler/reader access to something alien (Clifford, 1997: 182). As texts, (auto)ethnographies are 'translations and not descriptions' (*ibid*: 183). From this perspective, 'Quiet Eilat' is not primarily a representation of a tourist experience, but part of the tourism (experiential) world.

The hiatuses mentioned above illustrate the complex, multi-varied nature of the tourist experience, a nature which, in the capacity we are (also, sometimes) laymen tourists, we often deny. In the capacity of conducting a 'guerilla warfare against the repressive structures of everyday lives' (Denzin, 1999: 572, and above), and in appreciating the fact that tourism is indeed part of everyday life, this paper also wished to shed light on the emotional downside of the tourist experience. Following the poem, the autoethnography too is hued with shades of aloneness and nostalgia, which it sets to explore. This is partly because Nathan's chronic illness did not simply disappear as we crossed the thresholds dividing the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary' – as capitalist commercial ads would have had it, and partly because we arrived in Eilat in the winter.

In 'Quiet Eilat', tourism spaces are not only recreational resources. Rather, they are both concrete and symbolic spaces – circumstances, perhaps – that offer vocabulary and syntax of a complex of experiences, memories, denials and emotions; 'a combination of the material and the metaphorical' (Crouch, 2002: 208). They offer a language wherein experience – whether it is individual or

familial – is reflected, reciprocated and reverberated by the surrounding. In this capacity the paper shows how disciplined tourists' notions are of the 'in' places and times in which leisure can be consumed. This discipline does not allow the expression of alienated sentiments.

Finally, following recent advances in ethnography, and in feminism and postcolonial studies, reading 'Quiet Eilat' raises issues concerning the discourse of tourism studies, that is writing *about* tourists and tourism. Although the poem was written naïvely, the question as to what is naïveté and whether there is indeed such an objective, 'naïve' perspective rises poignantly. Consider the power matrix that underlies the triadic relations between (1) the people who are described *in* the poem 'Quiet Eilat' (who traveled to Sinai in the late 1970s and to Eilat in the early 1990s) – mainly Nathan and myself; (2) the person who *wrote* the poem (in 1994); and (3) the person who wrote the academic text – the autoethnography, *about* the poem (in 2006–2007). Power relations and inequalities between the researcher, the writer and those represented in the text (the 'field'), are clearly at stake here, complicated by the particular arrangement of power relations within the family.

By way of epilogue I wish to return to the interconnection between professional life and disciplinary academic socialization, on the one hand, and personal life and familial relationships, on the other, an interconnection which is characteristic of autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis, 2007). In the professional sphere, writing an autoethnography amounts to an empowering and emancipating act, because it assumes a public state (i.e. publication). It positions the scholar within a particular field or sub-discipline, ties her or him to a particular social network etc. The autoethnographic text assumes, beseeches, and cultivates a particular type of (academic) readership, which can radically change the discursive and interpretative practices of academic writers and readers.

On the personal sphere, I have not been in touch with Nathan in the last few years. He has refused the invitations which I extended before and during a post-doctorate year spent in the US in 2001. Yet my invitations were admittedly sparse: coping with Nathan's severe illness is difficult for me, and I had and still have other needs to satisfy – my own growing family and my academic career. I was initially furious with my relative, blaming his refusal to receive therapy (and recurrent institutionalizations) for the continuous deterioration in his health and for causing a deep divide in our relationship. I guess this is what psychologists call the 'denial phase'. Only quite recently, and as a consequence of writing this autoethnography, I came by way of self-reconciliation to view Nathan's crude rejections as expressing perhaps an agentic decision to avoid contact with me in this period of his life, or to establish a different type of relationship, one which is yet to be conceived.

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### Notes

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David Botterill, and others whose names I regrettably do not remember, for their warm appreciation of this piece. I also wish to thank two anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*. The paper is dedicated to my cousins – N, N, and N, who are its protagonists.

2. All names and identifying markers were changed. Additionally, consent for this publication was given by those mentioned herein.
3. The acknowledged use of ‘international English’ as lingua franca is true not only of tourists, but also of academicians. An anonymous reviewer of *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* interestingly commented on the American English spelling used in this paper. Since I am not a native English speaker, my language resources are academic texts, most of which are published in the USA, and my computer’s MS Office Spell Checker, which too is an American-English compatible software.

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