Authenticity and Status in an Age of Globalization: Travel Television and the Touristic Imaginary

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Introduction

Beginning with an initial surge of research in the 1970s, tourism has become an established object of social science inquiry for researchers interested in the global phenomenon’s economic and cultural implications. Yet despite investigations into the origins of tourism, the varieties of modern tourism, and tourism’s effects on tourist destinations, relatively little has been written about mass media representations of tourism that reflect and inform commonsense assumptions about places abroad and tourists’ relationship with these places (Crick 1989; Smith 1989; Stronza 2001). In particular, travel television, by virtue of its medium, has the potential to influence thousands, if not millions, of tourists’ beliefs and behaviors, thereby influencing tourism’s impact on countless destinations. To use terminology articulated by Arjun Appadurai, travel television helps constitute the touristic imaginary, an imaginary that, like all mass imaginaries, “is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.” (1996:31)

In this thesis, I will examine representations of tourism on four popular contemporary television shows – An Idiot Abroad, Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations, Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown, and Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern – as a means to better understand the touristic imaginary, especially as it relates to anthropological issues of authenticity, status, and globalization. Importantly, all four shows extensively feature forms of anti-tourism, or tourism that avoids common destinations, activities, and attitudes in favor of ones that are “off the beaten path.” Not surprisingly, the rise in popularity of travel shows featuring anti-tourism mirrors the rise in popularity of alternative forms of tourism in general as more and more tourists become
aware of the social and environmental costs of their activities (Stronza 2001:274). In their own eyes, anti-tourists are “travelers” rather than tourists as a result of their desire for more than a tan and souvenir. As I hope will become clear, however, anti-tourism, regardless of whatever negative costs of tourism it might mitigate, serves the function of reinforcing class distinctions. Anti-touristic discourses posit a difference between tourists and “travelers” on moral or intellectual grounds, while effacing the different social possibilities available to different individuals.

The distinction between tourists and “travelers” has existed since the rise of mass tourism in the West. Industrialization allowed middle class individuals to travel for the first time, creating a need on the part of aristocrats to differentiate their itineraries from those of the masses. To this extent, claiming the title of “traveler” has always been about the possession of cultural capital, or privileged forms of knowledge, experience, and dispositions. Like its economic counterpart, cultural capital shapes individuals’ social trajectories and thereby engenders social reproduction. In the case of tourism, individuals perform the role of “traveler” in order to signal and cement their place in a certain class or class fraction. Indeed, “travelers” are typically educated middle-class individuals who value cultural capital more than upper- and working-class individuals precisely because they tend to have more of it. The middle class is locked in a battle primarily with the upper class to increase society’s valuation of the kind of capital they possess (cultural capital) over forms of capital that they lack (financial capital).

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1 Pierre Bourdieu, the originator of the concept of cultural capital, writes, “the notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis that made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success…to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions.” (1986: 80) In this way, one concrete way in which cultural capital engenders social reproduction is by influencing academic success.
According to the four shows I look at, twenty-first century “travelers” acquire cultural capital by consuming “authentic” experiences and by cultivating an “authentic” outlook on travel. For “travelers,” experiences abroad are only “authentic” if they are genuine reflections of a culture and not mere performances put on for unknowing tourists. Ideally, these experiences are also departures from the familiar that vividly engage the senses and make one “feel alive.” Further, hosts like Anthony Bourdain who ironically engage in touristy behaviors without tarnishing his “traveler” identity evidence that authenticity is not only “objectified in economic or cultural goods,” but also “internalized in dispositions.” (Bourdieu 1984:113) To this extent, cultural capital can be acquired not only by consuming “authentic” experiences, but also by demonstrating one’s ability to differentiate between “authentic” and “inauthentic” experiences. In this way, analyzing travel shows help us answer some of the fundamental questions about authenticity that Charles Lindholm identifies in Culture and Authenticity:

How has the global quest for the certainty of authenticity been realized in practice? What are its different forms, when and why do they occur? What consequences follow from pursuing various modes of authenticity? What are the sources of the modern thirst for the genuine? (2008:2)

The four shows I examine confirm the significance of authenticity in capitalist cultural production in general, while also revealing unique articulations of anti-touristic discourses of authenticity. This diversity of discourses suggests that travel shows need to present themselves as unique “brands” in order to distinguish themselves from their competition. In the end, the four shows I examine not only represent a departure from the

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2 From here on out I will place scare quotes around the word “authentic” and “inauthentic” in order to foreground my questioning of the validity of any notion of authenticity. Like George Hughes, who is himself influenced by Appadurai, I hold that “the notion of both locality and the sovereign individual [and by the same logic the notion of authenticity] are illusions or fetishes.” (1995:796) Authenticity will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.
stereotypical travel show, which typically highlights popular touristic circuits with the average tourist in mind, but also demonstrate how new anti-touristic discourses of authenticity continue to function as propagators of class distinctions.

In different ways, hosts Andrew Zimmern and Anthony Bourdain present themselves as knowledgeable “travelers” who, unlike your average tourist, can identify and consume “authentic” experiences. *Bizarre Foods* follows host Andrew Zimmern as he eats particularly unusual, and therefore by his logic particularly “authentic,” dishes from cultures around the world. In contrast, *No Reservations* and *Parts Unknown* see host Anthony Bourdain showcase quotidian dishes overlooked by undiscerning tourists, fashioning himself as someone who can present both popular and unpopular destinations from a local’s “authentic” point-of-view. Finally, even *An Idiot Abroad* features an implicit anti-touristic discourse of authenticity despite being a parody of anti-touristic travel shows. By using unwilling and unknowledgeable host Karl Pilkington’s lack of cultural capital as the basis of much of its humor, it demonstrates the stakes of being a “traveler” rather than a tourist. Through their shared obsession with authenticity, then, the shows I analyze remind us that both mass tourism and the societal obsession with authenticity are unique features of modernity. That is, while I maintain that anti-touristic discourses of authenticity serve to augment individuals’ cultural capital, the modern desire to travel in hopes of encountering authenticity might be interpreted more generally as symptomatic of individuals’ desire to assuage the alienation engendered by modernity and its radical transformation of culture and society.

For all of the shows’ discourses of authenticity, however, none of them actually challenge the notion of authenticity itself. Whereas *Bizarre Foods* deploys an essentialist
notion of culture according to which the most “exotic” foods are automatically the most “authentic” ones, *No Reservations* and *Parts Unknown*, despite emphasizing the ubiquity of cultural hybridity, also deem tourist experiences that are “off the beaten path” more “authentic” than their commercialized counterparts. *An Idiot Abroad* complicates all three shows’ notions of authenticity by simultaneously reinforcing and deflating the aura of popular and “off the beaten path” experiences alike. Nonetheless, it falls short of suggesting that authenticity might in fact be nothing than an illusion. In this way, travel television propagates the idea that “authentic” tourist experiences are there to be found if tourists are willing to look hard enough, encouraging individuals to be “travelers” rather than tourists.

Besides deploying culturally pervasive discourses of authenticity, no less than three of the shows I look at suggest their role and the role of alternative forms of tourism in general is to promote “global understanding,” a phrase I borrow from a CNN executive’s promise that the network’s *Parts Unknown* will not stray from “CNN’s longstanding commitment…to promoting global understanding.” (Zurawik 2013) Similarly, *Bizarre Foods* is informed by host Andrew Zimmern’s belief that “absolutely nothing makes friends and breaks down [cultural] barriers like sharing a good meal…” (Season 6, Episode 1: 1:15-1:20) Finally, one of the ways in which *An Idiot Abroad* portrays host Karl Pilkington as an idiot is by emphasizing the fact that travel does not at all seem to broaden his mind. In essence, these travel shows corroborate the narrative that the world is increasingly becoming a “global village” due to globalization, or the constellation of forces resulting in economic, political, and cultural integration. According to this narrative, globalization is inevitable or universally desirable, given that its end outcome is
cosmopolitan, global citizens. Contesting this easy conflation of cosmopolitanism and globalization, of course, are the many indications that globalization is an uneven process that is creating as many inequalities among peoples and places as it is similarities (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:4). To this extent, travel shows’ implicit message that “travelers” are superior to mere tourists as a result of the fact that alternative forms of tourism promote “global understanding” cannot be accepted without interrogation.

Indeed, despite some shows’ promise of greater “global understanding,” travel television reproduce problematic representational tropes rooted in histories and present realities of Western colonialism and imperialism. The most conspicuously problematic of such tropes is the imperial gaze, a gaze that “reflects the assumption that the white, Western subject is central.” (Waugh 2006:514) Even a show like Parts Unknown that foregrounds issues of empire, class, and nationality in productive ways occasionally portrays the Other in shockingly crude and stereotypical ways. Further, as instances in which the very act of filming is met with hostility by locals demonstrate, adamantly anti-touristic shows reflect the imperial gaze in their mere assumption that their presence in any part of the world is warranted, let alone desired. Related to the imperial gaze is the notion, articulated by Renato Rosaldo, of imperialist nostalgia, or a longing for a place to remain unchanged, despite the fact that one is contributing to its transformation (1989). Dovetailing with tourists’ desire for cultural capital, imperialist nostalgia constitutes one of various strategies of anti-conquest, or a representational strategy that presumes that acknowledgement of one’s complicity with transformative social forces such as tourism constitutes an absolution of that same complicity (Pratt 1992). In this way, the current iterations of tropes such as the imperial gaze, imperialist nostalgia, and “global
understanding” speak to travel television’s colonial baggage as well as to the ideologies underlying travel television’s representations of tourism in an increasingly globalized world.

The proliferation of anti-touristic discourses of authenticity is symptomatic of a global economy in which patterns of consumption are simultaneously converging and diverging. In the case of tourism, this means that while there are more tourists with every passing year, there are also more destinations and more forms of tourism. To this extent, “travelers” increasingly need to prove themselves superior not only to tourists, but also to other “travelers.” The travel shows I examine, however, not only reflect the increasingly diverse methods by which “travelers” attempt to acquire cultural capital, but also the need for travel shows to develop a unique “brand” in a competitive market. After all, the authenticity they construct for consumers generates economic value for their producers and networks as well as cultural value for their hosts and viewers.

Ultimately, then, I argue that contemporary travel shows, like so many other products wrapped up in discourses of authenticity, should be seen as capitalizing on “new economic opportunities to profit from heritage” in the global economy and not as thoughtful attempts to overcome the fraught history of Western representations of the Other (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014:11). I also make the claim that authenticity might be so appealing to consumers due to the culturally pervasive notion, expressed by tropes such as imperialist nostalgia and the “global village,” that the integration of the entire world into a global capitalist system is either unavoidable or desirable. From this perspective, “authentic” tourist experiences ought to be consumed immediately as they may not be around forever given capitalism’s insatiable desire for new commodities.
Methodology

As mentioned, the primary objective of my study is to trace the ways in which the representational strategies of four popular contemporary travel television shows negotiate the history and present reality of tourism and thereby shape the touristic imaginary. I hope to accomplish this task by combining a discourse analysis of the shows with analysis of their visual and auditory elements. Besides this, I hope to delineate the shows’ sites of production and reception by outlining some of the market factors influencing their production and by looking at viewer reviews on sites such as IMDB.com (Internet Movie Database) and Amazon.com. IMDB.com is an online database of films and television shows, while Amazon.com is the world’s largest online retailer. Both sites allow users to review television shows (or DVDs of shows in the case of Amazon.com). As reviews for Parts Unknown are not available on Amazon.com due to its current unavailability on DVD and few and far in between on IMDB.com for unknown reasons, I will instead look at the show’s companion website, which features very short travel guides and the occasional reflective essay on the destinations Bourdain visits. In doing this, I hope to better understand what producers have in mind as the show’s target audience as well as the ways in which the touristic imaginary is shaping viewers’ and potential tourists’ thoughts.

My understanding of discourse analysis draws heavily on Paul Gee’s insights in his book An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method (1999). I understand all acts of speech and writing, therefore, as constructing or staking a claim about “seven things or seven areas of ‘reality’”: significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems (Gee 1999:17-20). To give just one relevant
example, a host like Anthony Bourdain enacts his identity as a “traveler” and not a tourist when he expresses disdain for traditional tourist practices or discloses his acquaintance with locals. Yet while linguistic acts are constantly constructing or staking claims about certain aspects of social reality, it is not always transparent how they do so or what is at stake in their doing so. To this extent, it is helpful to look for the presence of discursive features such as social languages, intertextuality, situated meanings, Discourses, Conversations, and figured worlds in linguistic data for it is through these means that certain practices, identities, relationships, etc. are constructed in certain ways by language (Gee’s capitalizations). Another way to think about these discursive features is to think of them as “tools of inquiry” since they offer a way into a deeper analysis of a text (ibid:121).

Of the six tools of inquiry, three of them - intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations - will prove particularly useful to my investigation. Intertextuality frequently occurs in contemporary travel television shows in the form of references, whether visual or verbal, to historical representations of travel and tourism from both popular and “high” culture. For example, in the season one finale of *Parts Unknown*, Bourdain relates how he, like Charles Marlow, the protagonist of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, always dreamed of visiting the Congo (Season 1, Episode 8: 27:06-27:17). Discourses refer to specific ways of speaking, acting, and being in order to “enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity.” (Gee 1999:29) As already alluded to, one Discourse in which I am interested is the touristic discourse of authenticity through which travel television hosts and, by proxy, audience members, seek to define themselves as savvy “travelers” rather than frivolous tourists.
Finally, thinking about Conversations as a tool of inquiry entails connecting linguistic acts with the historical and societal discussions to which they contribute. As these discussions invariably encompass opposing opinions, linguistic acts that participate in Conversations also necessarily weigh in on the issues at hand. Indeed, many scenes in the travel shows I look at participate in heated Conversations about globalization and cosmopolitanism. Specifically, the four shows I examine subtly proffer a positive valuation of globalization by emphasizing the benefits of cultural exchange while effacing not only the privilege global mobility presumes, but also the more dire consequences of globalization affecting millions around the world. Conducting a discourse analysis of the shows in question, then, means watching episodes with an eye towards the way in which the seven areas of social reality are constructed by the six discursive features of linguistic acts. I also transcribe important passages for closer analysis. In the end, my discourse analysis reveals the ways in which these shows’ spoken content, often in conjunction with its visual and auditory choices, colludes with narratives that play a role in shaping global economies, polities, and cultures.

While I will discuss each show’s production company in future chapters, it may prove useful at this time to make a few general points about the business of travel television. The boom in travel programming which began in the 1990’s and continues today is a result of the changing global dynamics of production and consumption: “the globalization of the [television] industry and fragmentation of the audience due to an increased supply of channels have increased the demand for programming of any kind.” (Fürsich 2002:207) Given the fact that nonfiction entertainment typically costs a fraction of what is needed to produce a drama or comedy, demand for such programming,
including travel shows, rose considerably. The 1990’s also witnessed “the rise of the so-called “experience economy”...[that] has put imaginative storytelling at the heart of global tourism.” (Salazar 2013:674) To this extent, travel television hosts cannot merely relay commonplace information about destinations, but must provide narratives and commentaries that are at once unique, informative, and entertaining. For this reason, I use the term guide/host from now on, for travel television hosts double as tour guides whose contacts with cultural insiders ostensibly provide them with “authentic” insights into a culture and community.

The popularity of travel shows has also been buoyed by the simple fact that the tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world. Tourism’s increasingly global reach translates into both more tourists and more potential destinations (UNWTO 2013:2). To this extent, travel television potentially appeals to diverse groups such as armchair tourists, future first-time tourists, and seasoned tourists seeking inspiration for their next trip. On Fürsich’s analysis, however, the globalization of television has led to a certain conservatism when producing programming intended for global audiences (2002:208-209). While the necessity to appeal to audience members of diverse backgrounds has in part led to the consideration of local contexts when producing programming, this has in part translated into an emphasis on themes “‘neutral’ enough (not reflecting or upsetting specific national interests, tastes or themes) to be appealing to a global audience.” (ibid:208) It is important to keep in mind when analyzing contemporary travel shows, then, who their potential or intended audience is and the extent to which they, by focusing on “neutral” themes, efface tourism’s complicity with the negative effects of globalization.
The rise of websites such as IMDB.com and Amazon.com as well as of companion websites for television shows makes the process of tracing travel television shows’ sites of production and reception both easier and more fruitful. While IMDB is a database of films and television shows and Amazon is an online store for a diverse array of goods, both sites feature user reviews of the four shows I look at. These reviews contain robust data about the way in which actual viewers consume and think about these shows. The indicate that viewers are asking themselves, among other questions, “why are guides/hosts speaking/acting as they do? What do their words/actions reveal about their identity? Are they being ‘authentic’ or are they performing? What would I do in their place?” As a whole, viewer responses largely validate the typologies of travel shows and consumers of travel shows that I delineate in my investigation as well as my hunches about the efficacy of these shows’ discursive work. For example, some reviewers demonstrate that they recognize how the representational strategies of Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern, which conflates exoticness and uncommonness with authenticity, is distinct from those of No Reservations, whose host Anthony Bourdain locates authenticity in instances of cultural hybridity. Further, other reviewers indicate that they unproblematically accept the experiences of guides/hosts as “authentic” and that they, too, aspire to be “authentic” “travelers” rather than gullible tourists.

Like IMDB and Amazon, the companion website to Parts Unknown offers information about how the show is consumed. Parts Unknown’s companion sites features miniature travel guides for every episode. These travel guides consist of interactive maps that allow viewers to see some of the places where Bourdain ate, slept, and partook in activities during the episode. Again, reader reviews on IMDB and Amazon confirm that
people utilize this information in order to plan their own itineraries. Travel guides are also occasionally paired with essays in which Bourdain offers insight into his thoughts on the destination and his experience producing the episode. Each episode’s page also provides links to three related articles. One is always titled “x things to know before visiting y,” the second pertains to the cuisine of said destination, and the third consists of travel photography. In short, consumption of travel television in the twenty-first century occurs through the computer as well as through the television set. As a result, conducting an online ethnography of sites like IMDB and Amazon as well as Parts Unknown’s companion site proves to be indispensable for investigating the societal implications of contemporary travel television.

In the next chapter, I will provide a brief history of tourism and recount the historic representations of the tourist and the “traveler” in travel writing and travel television. In Chapter 2, I summarize the literature on authenticity and consider the contrasting anti-touristic discourses of authenticity deployed by Bizarre Foods and No Reservations. In Chapter 3, I focus on how Parts Unknown, despite its ostensibly cosmopolitan perspective, sometimes deploys the tropes of the imperial gaze and anti-conquest. Finally, in Chapter 4, I look at An Idiot Abroad and how it challenges, albeit superficially, the discourses of authenticity deployed by the other three shows. In the end, the four shows reveal that notions of authenticity and alterity continue to inform the touristic imaginary in an age of globalization and not only propagate class distinctions, but also perpetuate problematic representational strategies. Nothing else might be expected, for contemporary travel television is essentially about offering viewers
consumable difference, even if difference is made legible in different ways than in the past.
Chapter 1: The Tourist, the “Traveler,” and their Representations

Contemporary travel television is only a recent addition to the long history of cultural representations of tourists, “travelers,” and the places they visit. As a result, it recycles many strategies of representation developed by travel writers and anthropologists alike. As alluded to in the introduction, the most relevant tropes to the current analysis are the imperialist gaze, imperialist nostalgia, and the “global village.” Anti-touristic discourses of authenticity are also featured in each of the shows I analyze. Not surprisingly, the contemporary iterations of these tropes and representational strategies cannot be understood without recourse to both their own histories and the more general histories of travel and tourism.

In this chapter, therefore, I hope to accomplish the following things: 1) create a working definition of tourism; 2) attempt a brief genealogy of the tourist based on this definition; 3) demonstrate the particularity of the touristic discourse of authenticity to modern Western tourism; 4) describe the historic strategies of representation utilized by travel writing, many of which reappear in travel television; 5) begin a discussion (to be continued in later chapters) about how and why contemporary travel television shows identify their guides/hosts as “travelers” rather than tourists. By doing these things, I hope to lay the groundwork that will allow me to demonstrate that the four shows I examine fail to fully overcome the Western history of travel and tourism as a result of their deployment of, among other tropes, anti-touristic discourses of authenticity, the imperial gaze, and imperialist nostalgia. In essence, anti-touristic discourse of authenticity cannot fully efface either the social privilege it presumes or its affinity with strategies of “anti-conquest,” that is, “strategies of representation whereby [Western]
bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert [Western] hegemony.” (Pratt 1992:7) To this extent, travel television’s negotiation of travel and tourism’s history concerns not only those interested in tourism specifically, but also those interested in local and global inequalities in general.

**Travel vs. Tourism**

The very fact that a commonsense understanding of the differences between travel and tourism exists, according to which tourism is motivated by the desire for pleasure and travel is motivated by a more lofty idea such as self-discovery, is a product of historical developments. Indeed, the word tourist, which first appeared in the late eighteenth century, was originally synonymous with “traveler.” By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the word tourist had already acquired the negative connotations of philistinism and cultural insensitivity it carries to this day (Buzard 1993:1). The key to this semantic transformation lies in the touristic discourse of authenticity, a discourse evidenced by contemporary touristic descriptors such as “off the beaten path” as well as by the proliferation of guide books, television shows, and websites promising to give you an “local’s perspective.”

In essence, the commonsense understanding of the difference between tourists and “travelers” is that whereas “travelers,” by virtue of eschewing fellow tourists in favor of locals, seek “authentic” experiences, tourists are (Turner and Ash) Tourists, in other words, are not just an eyesore, but are also blind to the difference between “authentic” and “inauthentic” experiences. As a result, they are supposedly the main culprits behind tourism’s deleterious effects for tourist destinations, namely the commodification of culture and the proliferation of destructive development projects such as luxury hotels.
and resorts. In reality, however, “travelers” are also complicit with processes of commodification and development, as their presence often anticipates the penetration of these processes into areas formerly untouched by tourism (Stronza 2001:275; Lindholm 2008:40; Salazar 2013). Further, if the guides/hosts of travel shows are any indication, “travelers,” too, are guilty of cultural insensitivity, deploying the imperial gaze, imperialist nostalgia, and problematic understandings of authenticity. Indeed, as will be seen, the touristic discourse of authenticity, which posits the difference between tourists and “travelers,” is a historic construction stemming from European aristocrats’ perceived need in the nineteenth century to distinguish themselves from the middle classes for whom tourism was first becoming a possibility.

Yet before tackling the history of Western tourism, we first need to understand what travel and tourism are in the first place, since anti-touristic discourses operate under the assumption that there is in fact a difference between the two activities. To begin with, it should be noted that travel, when contrasted with tourism, is understood in a more narrow sense than its most general meaning of movement between two points. Rather, only travel that, like tourism, consists of movement made away from a geographic location with the intention of returning at a point of time not too far in the future is concerned. Indeed, William F. Theobald writes in Global Tourism that, “the word tour is derived from the Latin, ‘tornare’ and the Greek, ‘tornos’, meaning ‘a lathe or circle; the movement around a central point or axis’.” (1998:6-7)

In other words, both travel and tourism are taken to be different from migration, whether voluntary or forced. The United Nations, for example, in its 1978 publication “Recommendations on Tourism Statistics” excludes temporary and seasonal migrant
labor from the definition of travel and tourism by defining a visitor (a term employed to cover both tourists and “travelers”) as someone “whose main purpose of trip is other than the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited” (UN 1978:6). What counts as “not too far in the future” is also contextual. On one hand, Marco Polo’s journey from Venice to Kublai Khan’s Shangdu and back lasted twenty-four years and included two decades of service under the Khan. On the other hand, the United Nations, again in its “Recommendations on Tourism Statistics,” defines travel and tourism as being limited to journeys lasting one year or less (1978:3). To this extent, what counts as a relatively brief journey is contingent on historically and socially conditioned possibilities of transportation.

The difference between travel and tourism, then, lies not in their spatial and temporal structure, but rather the intention of the journeying subject. The first of two important distinctions between “travelers” and tourists, then, is that the tourist has pleasure as his or her primary motivation. Indeed, though both tourists who travel for business and leisure are generally considered tourists for the purposes of tourism statistics, Alister Mathieson and Geoffrey Wall argue convincingly that the normative cultural understanding of tourism is travel undertaken for pleasure (1982). Naturally, what counts as pleasure is a difficult assessment to make for pleasure takes different forms for different people. To summarize, I am defining tourism as the social phenomenon of journeys undertaken for pleasure along defined circuits featuring touristic infrastructure such as shops and accommodations catering primarily or only to visitors, along which tourists travel.\(^\text{3}\)

\(^{3}\) Phenomena such as pilgrimages, however, continue to complicate attempts to define any definitive difference between travel and tourism. On one hand, the spiritual edification pilgrims
It comes as little surprise, then, that one of the original contributions of social science research into tourism was the production of various typologies of the tourist and his or her desires. Valerie Smith, for example, outlined five common forms of tourism in the modern world: ethnic, cultural, historical, environmental, and recreational tourism (1989:4-6). In essence, she describes five sets of pull factors driving tourist demands. Complementing such analyses are typologies of tourist personalities that investigate the factors that push individuals toward their preferred touristic experiences (Smith 1989:12; Cohen 1979:94-104). Studies that see touristic desires as widely divergent contest theories such as Daniel Boorstin’s and Dean MacCannell’s that posit a universal tourist as the object of inquiry (Boorstin 1964; MacCannell 1976). Nonetheless, the diversity of types of tourism and tourists does not detract from the general principle that tourists primarily seek pleasure.

In contrast, “travelers,” while they may also derive pleasure from their journey, ostensibly also travel for reasons like education, self-realization, and the promotion of “global understanding.” Andrew Zimmern in Bizarre Foods, for example, cites as a motive for traveling his belief that “absolutely nothing makes friends and breaks down [cultural] barriers like sharing a good meal, changing the world one plate at a time.” (Season 6, Episode 1: 1:15-1:20) Further, movies like Eat, Pray, Love, based on the best-selling novel of the same name, attest to the popularity of the notion of travel as a means to better understand oneself and one’s place in the world. In this way, “travelers” are seek may be interpreted as a more abstract form of pleasure akin to forms of anti-tourism in which tourists seek a spiritual or existential experience. On the other hand, pilgrims themselves in both past and present times are likely to interpret their own motives in a very different light. This is not an issue that can be definitively settled within the scope of this essay. For current purposes, however, pilgrims will be counted as tourists since pilgrimages typically consist of well-established itineraries and therefore lead to the development of touristic infrastructure.
supposedly motivated by profound motives like altruism and self-discovery, rather than by a desire for cultural capital and guilt over their equal complicity with tourism’s harmful consequences. In accord with these alleged motives, “travelers” avoid defined tourist circuits along which tourists travel. This is particularly the case today as, although tourism has always prompted commercial development at sites of visitation (more on this in the following section), modern mass tourism is in a class of its own when it comes to its impact on development. To give just one shocking figure, tourism is responsible for creating one in eleven jobs around the world as well as 9% of the global GDP (direct, indirect, and induced) (UNWTO 2013:2).

A Genealogy of the Tourist

Finally armed with a working definition of tourism as travel made for pleasure along a defined touristic circuit, a (brief) genealogy of the tourist can be attempted. Such a genealogy can be seen as stretching as far back as the ancient world of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in which Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and other people traveled to see cultural, religious, and historical sights both near and far from home. Inns and restaurants sprung up to meet the needs of these first tourists, but travel was mostly restricted to an elite few and very often difficult, dangerous, and time-consuming. Ancient tourism also took place along routes around the Mediterranean that had been popular for centuries (Casson 1974:94, 149-150, 253-261, 279). To this extent, there is no evidence that ancient tourism was accompanied by a touristic discourse of authenticity, further demonstrating that the discourses of authenticity are singularly modern phenomena. Similarly unchanging pilgrimage routes were arguably the medieval European equivalent of the touristic circuits of the ancient Mediterranean world. Whether
traveling to the Canterbury Cathedral or Santiago de Compostela, medieval pilgrims could expect plenty of fellow “travelers” in spite of travel’s lingering difficulties and dangers (Ohler 1986).

Though preindustrial instances of tourism were not restricted to Europe and the Mediterranean world, tourism studies suffers from a lack of information about historic forms of tourism in non-Western societies. Erve Chambers notes, for example, that while pre-Columbian Native Americans are known to have traveled extensively throughout North America, a lack of data prevents researchers from knowing whether or not they traveled not only for trade, but also simply for pleasure (2000:5). An exception to this rule is the research conducted by scholars such as Kanzaki Noritake and Susanne Formanek into proto-touristic practices that took place Japan’s Edo period (1600-1868). Centered around group pilgrimages to Shinto shrines, it is estimated that up to one in twenty-five persons in Edo Japan participated in this form of tourism. Arguably, modern Japanese touristic practices such as the continuing popularity of group travel have been shaped by the touristic practices of the Edo period (Chambers 2000:6). More than other instances of preindustrial tourism, then, Edo period tourism resembles Western leisure tourism in its scale and lasting influence. Edo period tourism, however, was apparently not accompanied by the development of a touristic discourse of authenticity. Instead, Edo period tourism revolved around a confirmation of Japanese tradition and collective identity. In Susan Formanek’s words, “[Edo period] pilgrims sought sites of national importance or at least such sites that were officially recognized and known throughout the country.” (1998:167)
In contrast, the advent of mass leisure tourism in late eighteenth century England, the first of its kind in Europe, quickly fostered the development of a touristic discourse of authenticity. It is highly likely that the emergence of this discourse had much to do with the fact that mass leisure tourism first appeared at the same time that the aristocratic tradition of the Grand Tour was at the peak of its popularity. The Grand Tour, popularized by guide books like Thomas Nugent’s *Grand Tour* (1749), was a custom that flourished between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth century among young male European, and in particular English, aristocrats. Considered an essential part of their education, the Grand Tour called for its participants to visit sights of particular cultural and historical significance such as Paris, the perceived cultural capital of Europe, and Rome, which was understood as one of the birthplaces of Western civilization (Withey 1997:5-7). Importantly, going on one’s own Grand Tour, an endeavor demanding extensive financial resources, initiated one into the elite ranks of English or European society. On the one hand, then, participants of the Grand Tour were not too different from Edo period tourists, seeking as they did a confirmation of their belonging to a class and cultural tradition. On the other hand, however, the Grand Tour was a practice centered more explicitly on the class-specific accumulation of cultural capital than group pilgrimages in Edo Japan were not, for Japanese pilgrims visited the same shrines regardless of their class standing, while only aristocrats had the means to take their own Grand Tour.

Unlike the Grand Tour, however, mass leisure tourism made tourism a possibility for the middle class and therefore produced a need among upper class and educated individuals to distinguish their tourist itineraries from those of the “vulgar” masses.
In other words, it was amidst already existing elite touristic practices that mid-nineteenth century developments in mass tourism, enabled by new technologies such as the railroad and steamboat, occurred. In the 1840’s, Thomas Cook revolutionized tourism by offering for the first time travel packages covering transportation, food, and accommodations at prices middle class individuals could afford. While these tours began as trips to destinations within England, their popularity allowed Cook, in the following decades, to offer packaged vacations to Scotland, France, Switzerland, Italy, the United States, and Egypt (ibid:135-158). The middle class’s conquest of the tourist routes once reserved for the aristocracy did not go unnoticed: “For wealthy Europeans, the expansion of travel among the middle class fostered efforts to separate themselves from undesirable ‘Cooks’ tourists’ and their ilk by traveling first-class, creating enclaves in popular destinations, and seeking out new, and often more distant and “exotic,” destinations.” (ibid:168) Moreover, Cook’s tourists were lampooned in magazines of the time as “so many sheep racing mindlessly from one sight to another with little appreciation of what they saw.” (ibid:162) Touristic itineraries had become a reflection of individuals’ level of cultural refinement, serving as a social mechanism by which members of the upper class could protect their class status.

It was in the contrast between Cook’s mass tourism and the supposedly venerable principles of the Grand Tour that the distinctly modern touristic discourse of authenticity, where accumulating allegedly “authentic” tourist experiences is equated with the possession of cultural capital, was born. As we have seen, while other forms of tourism existed in the past, they did not spur similar accompanying discourses. Further, while the eighteenth century iteration of the discourse did not place nearly as much emphasis as the
contemporary touristic discourse of authenticity on consuming “the unknown Other, the adventure, the not-to-be-found-at-home authenticity,” it can certainly be seen as laying the foundations for the discourse’s historical development (Graburn 1983:62).

**Historical Representations of the “Traveler”**

A genealogy of the “traveler” is a daunting, if not impossible, feat given that men and women have traveled since time immemorial. A genealogy of representations of the “traveler” that have influenced contemporary representations of travel and the touristic discourse of authenticity, however, is a far more feasible task. A good place to begin, then, is with narratives of exploration and discovery in early modern Europe. One of the most famous writers in this genre was Christopher Columbus, who, inspired by the writings of earlier explorers like Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville, wrote about the “discoveries” he made during his four voyages between 1492 and 1504. Already in this early instance of the genre, writing about geographic and cultural Others was linked to the desire to economically exploit these regions. Similarly, throughout the 1500s travel writing was an important genre due to the knowledge it produced for aspiring colonial powers (Thompson 2011:42). In fact, Richard Hakluyt, arguably the most famous travel writer of the period, was himself not a explorer, relying on eyewitness accounts to write his *Principall Navigations* in which he urged England to spread her civilization through colonization (Youngs 2013:31-32). Sir Walter Raleigh’s *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Beautifull Empire of Guiana* (1596) also fit the mold of countless past and future (proto)colonial narratives in representing the territory of Guiana as bountiful in resources, but impoverished in culture and order (ibid:35-36). In short, the travel writing
of early modern Europe was never an innocent endeavor for it patently colluded with colonial ambitions.

Of course, both European colonialism and colonial travel narratives hardly ended with the sixteenth century. In the Victorian and Edwardian eras from 1837 to 1914, British colonial ambitions were trained on, among other regions, Africa and the Middle East. Accordingly, two of the most popular works of travel writing during this period were Henry Morton Stanley’s *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) and Richard Francis Burton’s *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah* (1855-56). While both Stanley and Burton were ethically complex figures, their texts nonetheless contributed to the legitimation and advancement of the colonial project by reproducing racist tropes and inspiring generations of aspiring adventurers (ibid:56-57).

What’s more, the very fact that Stanley and Burton could make illustrious careers out of their travels points to both the unequal global power relations of the time and the existence of an economy consisting of the production and consumption of representations and knowledge of the “Orient.” As Edward Said famously noted, Orientalism, the “corporate institution for...dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” was made possible by the fact that “the scientist, the scholar, the missionary, trader, or the soldier,” not to mention the pioneering explorer, could travel to and in the “Orient” “with very little resistance on the Orient’s part.” (1978:3, 7) Further, given that Western nations’ material and political interests informed representations of the “Orient,” Orientalist representations invariably reveal more about the West than about the “Orient” itself. Regardless of the authors’ own intentions, then, the historical inequalities that enabled the production of Victorian and Edwardian travel narratives not only implicated
them in the colonial project, but also rendered their representations more reflective of
their own identities than those they presumed to describe.

As a result of travel writing’s patent historical contribution to the establishment
and maintenance of empire, contemporary travel writers employ a number of strategies of
representation to demonstrate their relative enlightenment. Yet while many of these
strategies demonstrate genuine advancements in travel writers’ reflexivity about their
own positionalities, much travel writing also exhibits problematic tropes and themes that
are in part rooted in history and in part uniquely modern. To demonstrate this point, I
look here at three popular contemporary travel writers: Paul Theroux, Bill Bryson, and
Pico Iyer. Paul Theroux, author of such popular and critical hits as *The Great Railway
Bazaar* (1975), *The Old Patagonian Express* (1979), and *Dark Star Safari* (2002), is a
writer who cannot be disparaged for a lack of reflexivity, at least in regards to certain
facets of his writing. His work’s “[inability to] escape its fictional ambitions,” for
example, can be seen as representing a subversion of some travel writing’s claims to
authority and factuality (Lisle 2006:50). It eschews “factualizing strategies” that derive
from a long history of presenting one’s text as disclosing objective truths about the places
and people that one saw and instead presents these representations as colored by his own
subjective interpretations (Thompson 2011:87, 72-95). Nonetheless, Debbie Lisle
convincingly argues that Theroux’s work evinces a deep-seated Eurocentrism (2011:83-
85). She writes, “for Theroux, others are at their primitive and ignorant when they fail to
achieve the self-consciousness and individuality so central to modern subjectivity.”
(ibid:83-84) She notes, for example, how Theroux portrays the Japanese as almost
inhuman due to what he perceives is their conformist culture. To this extent, Theroux’s
work betrays an imperial gaze despite its problematizing of the notion of objective travel writing.

Whereas Theroux undermines his own authority as an author through his disregard for generic conventions, Bill Bryson accomplishes this through humor in books such as *Neither Here nor There: Travel in Europe* (2001) and *Bill Bryson’s African Diary* (2002). By making himself the butt of many of his own jokes, he acknowledges those personal limitations and idiosyncrasies that cannot help but color his perceptions. Indeed, he often refuses to differentiate himself from a common tourist, contesting the very distinction between “traveler” and tourist. More generally, too, he seems to believe that coexistence between people with cultural differences can be facilitated by not ignoring said differences, but by acknowledging them in our jokes (ibid:100-102). His uniquely humorous brand of cosmopolitanism, then, is a departure from the traditional conventions of the genre. A legitimate critique of his work, however, is that this new form of cosmopolitanism evades the difficult questions pertaining to cultural differences. Arguably, his work is in collusion with a neoliberal brand of multiculturalism that embraces token expressions of difference so long as they do not question the economic and political status quo.

In many ways, Pico Iyer is representative of a new generation of travel writers who explicitly thematize the contradictions of globalization as well as their own transnational positionalities. He belongs, by his own admission, to the fast growing community of “global souls,” as he was born to Indian parents, educated in the UK and America, and now lives in Japan (2000:20). By virtue of his transnational perspective and the attention he pays to the themes of migration, hybridity, and cultural imperialism, Iyer
transcends some of the epistemological and ethical shortcomings of historical and contemporary travel writing. Nonetheless, Iyer’s work exhibits the deployment of at least one problematic historical trope as well as a complicity with normative narratives of globalization. In Video Night in Kathmandu and Other Reports from the Not-So-Far East (1989), Iyer writes about how various Asian cultures have managed to partly resist American cultural imperialism. In his chapter on the Philippines, however, Iyer takes a grim tone, a fact reflected by the chapter name “The Philippines: Born in the U.S.A..” (ibid:151-193) On his analysis, the historical colonialism and ongoing cultural imperialism of America has rendered Filipino culture a parody of American culture. Not only does he decry how “the Filipino,” armed with American songs, “[plays] minstrel to the entire continent [of Asia],” he also bemoans how the Filipino obsession with commercial entertainment has left them politically naive and impotent (ibid:153, 190). He writes with a rather disturbing sense of privilege that, “at the [political] rally, as so often in Manila, it was the happiness [i.e. naivety] of the Filipinos that left me saddest.” (ibid:190) Iyer clearly displays what Mary Louise Pratt (1992:216) calls “the white man’s lament,” if white is taken to refer to Western subjects in general. Iyer bemoans the cultural regression inflicted by American colonialism and imperialism without questioning his essentialist depictions of Filipinos, his denial of their agency, or even his own contribution, as a Western tourist, to the perceived problem.

A more consistent issue with Iyer’s work is “the assertion that the truth of the “global village” is simply unquestionable.” (Brennan 1997:186) Iyer accepts, even if with reservations, the economic, political, and cultural processes that constitute globalization. From this perspective, resistance against the glaring injustices produced by these
processes is moving but quaint, for he presents globalization and its accompanying cosmopolitanism as simply inevitable. Furthermore, Iyer only cursorily acknowledges the fact that his ability to embrace his identity as a “global soul” is a reflection of his incredibly privileged position. Though he himself admits that the majority of those 220 million “transnational” people are “refugees who never wanted to leave home and ache to go back home,” he conveniently forgets this fact when he proclaims our global era an enlightened one (2013).

Travel writers, however, are not the only ones to blame for problematic representations of the geographic Other. Anthropologists, too, have a long history of “objectifying, reifying, homogenizing, and naturalizing peoples” in their attempts to present readers with the “truth” of peoples and cultures (Salazar 2013:672). In particular, ethnology, a popular discipline within anthropology before the twenty-century turn to the ethnographic paradigm, attempted to get at the “truth” of peoples and cultures in order to compare them with other peoples and cultures:

Ethnological studies emerged from a more general, prescientific literature of the exotic, those collections of odd customs and summaries of travelers’ tales... Nonetheless, it was the Renaissance concern with the understanding of a distant cultural world (that of ancient Greece and Rome) which made a more general effort at cross-cultural interpretation possible, for ‘it created a ‘perspective distance’ at which antiquity or any more recent culture might be seen whole.” (Winthrop 101; my emphasis)

In short, ethnologists, in their attempts to develop a comparative method, perceived a need to see cultures as whole and bounded entities that tended toward stasis rather than change. Early ethnography, too, utilized a notion of culture that privileged harmony and homogeny over unevenness and inconsistency.
Of course, crude notions of the culture concept, that is, the notion that cultures are essentially “a shared and stable system of beliefs, knowledge, values, or sets of practices,” have mostly been jettisoned from contemporary anthropology (more on this in the following chapter) (Rapport and Overing 2000:94; authors’ emphasis). Nonetheless, the essentializing practices first promulgated by anthropology continue to find a second home in touristic discourses: “ethnographic monographs and other anthropological productions are part of the ‘circuit of tourism’ [and by the same token part of the touristic imaginary].” (Salazar 2013:673) Indeed, according to Noel Salazar, anthropological knowledge continues to inform contemporary touristic narratives and practices in Yogyakarta, Indonesia and Arusha, Tanzania in problematic ways. In the end, while anthropologists obviously cannot be faulted for the appropriation of its flawed history, they must at least recognize the ways in which the “knowledge” their discipline produced in the past is contributing to problematic aspects of the touristic imaginary and thereby magnifying negative aspects of tourism itself.

Like contemporary travel writing, travel television shows of the late 1990’s and early 2000’s negotiate the history of Western travel and tourism in different ways. Elfriede Fürsich codes three popular travel shows of the era - *Lonely Planet, Rough Guide* and *Travelers* - as using representational strategies of “untourism,” “post-tourism,” and “multicultural tourism” respectively (2002). In essence, all three strategies are iterations of what I have been calling anti-tourism. As mentioned, anti-tourism is characterized by the rejecting of common touristic destinations, activities, and attitudes in favor of alternative ones. In doing so, it rejects the label tourist in favor of the label “traveler.” In theory, then, anti-tourism represents a kind of tourism that is critical of
traditional tourism’s often negative impact on its destinations. Anti-tourism encompasses not only journeys in countries without a significant tourist presence and unusual itineraries in traditional destinations, but also, as will be seen with shows hosted by Anthony Bourdain, the subversion of culturally essentialist discourses through satire and irony. So while “travelers” certainly travel for pleasure, they subvert the logic of traditional touristic circuits or bypass these circuits altogether. I also stake the claim here that anti-tourism has both modernist and postmodern tendencies, variously exhibiting a desire for authenticity and skepticism towards normative notions of authenticity (Corrigan 1997:145; Urry 1990:100). Importantly, however, anti-touristic discourses such as those deployed in travel television do not question the notion of authenticity itself.

Given this inclusive definition of anti-tourism, Fürsich’s notion of “untourism,” or tourism that seeks “authentic” experiences away from well-traveled routes, may simply be considered a modernist strand of anti-tourism in the sense that it considers authenticity spoiled but not irrecoverable. For example, Lonely Planet, the show that, for Förlich, embodies “untourism,” is a show that concerns budget adventure travel in “Third World countries or formerly politically unstable countries (e.g., Ethiopia or Romania).” (2002:210) Despite its rejection of commercial tourism, however, “the commercialized and commodified environment in which Lonely Planet airs contradicts the independent and critical perspective of its untourist perspective.” (ibid:211) Indeed, this tension between representing “authentic” locales and experiences and commodifying them for television audiences is a tension that persists in contemporary travel shows like No Reservations and Parts Unknown. “Post-tourism,” too, is essentially a kind of anti-tourism, for it pokes fun at traditional tourists’ naivety in believing that they have
“authentic” experiences. In the travel show Rough Guide, “post-tourism” also translates into a critical examination of the problems engendered by mass tourism. To this extent, Fürsich considers it to have been the most progressive travel show that she analyzes (222). Rough Guide, however, was canceled when the Travel Channel was purchased by Discovery in 1999, suggesting that such critical content was not so commercially successful.

Interestingly, arguably none of the four shows I later address are as forward thinking as Rough Guide, raising the question why travel television has become more commercial and less reflexive over the years. I believe Fürsich is on to something when she notes how “the globalization of the media industry,” rather than diversifying consumer tastes, has resulted in attempts to create a homogenized product that appeals to as large of a global audience as possible (208). The final type of anti-tourism Fürsich mentions is the “multicultural tourism” found in Travelers that “avoids conflict and celebrates difference.” (215) Clearly, “multicultural tourism” and its “sanitized version of cultural distinctions” is an extreme contrast to “post-tourism” and its foregrounding of tourism’s negative consequences (ibid:215). Further, in order to cast difference in a positive light regardless of tourism’s contradictions, shows using the strategy of “multicultural tourism” do not tend to feature more “tame” destinations than shows featuring “untourism.”

All the travel shows I will discuss, like the three shows Fürsich analyzes, attempt to negotiate the history of travel and tourism by adopting various anti-touristic strategies of representation. By portraying their guides/hosts as people who, by virtue of their critical attitude towards traditional forms of tourism, ostensibly deserve to be
distinguished from “vulgar” tourists, these shows inspire some of their target audience to travel in a similar manner or at least imagine themselves as being a similar type of “traveler” with a similar quantity of cultural capital. Indeed, it is incredibly interesting that the most popular travel shows are all anti-touristic, even though most people are necessarily tourists rather than “travelers.” Despite its insistence on the superiority of “travelers,” however, contemporary travel television reproduces a number of problematic tropes, whether it is the narrative of exploration or the neoliberal celebration of multiculturalism. In short, these strategies of representations play into the touristic discourse of authenticity, which correlates one’s touristic behavior with one’s worth rather than one’s class and which effaces its own identity as a tactic of anti-conquest. Furthermore, these discourses reinforce the problematic notion of cultural authenticity, whereby cultures are seen as bounded, immutable entities.

Clearly, both anti-touristic discourses of authenticity and problematic representations of the Other are rooted in Western histories of travel and tourism. Anti-touristic discourses of authenticity, for example, have been around since the advent of mass tourism in the West, a phenomenon that prompted aristocrats to seek ways to distinguish themselves from the masses of tourists in order to hold onto the cultural capital that was once reserved for them. Importantly, anti-touristic discourses of authenticity did not arise in Edo Japan, an era that also witnessed mass forms of tourism, as Japan did not prior history of aristocratic tourism such as the European Grand Tour. As was seen in Fürseih’s analysis and as will be seen in my own analysis, contemporary iterations of the rhetoric first deployed by European aristocrats survive in travel
television, though in the guise of discourses that emphasize the “authentic” and edifying nature of “off the beaten path” tourism.

Problematic representations of the Other have an even longer history than anti-touristic discourses of tourism and have similarly persisted in travel narratives to this day. Orientalist and essentializing tropes deployed by explorers and anthropologists as early as Columbus’s “discovery” of America, for example, were closely linked to the colonial ambitions of European powers and to the concomitant desire to “know” the “Orient.” Contemporary travel writing and travel television, including the four shows I examine, only partially succeed in overcoming these problematic tropes. Even texts or shows espousing multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism reveal on closer inspection complicity with normative narratives of globalization, a point I will elaborate on in chapter 3. As will be seen, however, each show I analyze features a unique constellation of representational strategies and tropes and therefore commodifies culture for viewers’ consumption in novel ways.
Chapter 2: Anti-touristic Discourses of Authenticity in *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* and *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern*

From the mid-2000s to the early 2010s, two shows on the Travel Channel, *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* and *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern*, were among the most popular travel shows on television (Carr 2012; Platt 2013). *No Reservations*, in particular, had a devoted following, drawing in up to 450,000 viewers on a regular basis (Carr 2012). It also garnered critical acclaim, getting nominated for an Emmy Award in 2007 and winning one in 2009. Currently, new episodes of *Bizarre Foods America*, a spin-off of *Bizarre Foods* draw in the Travel Channel’s largest audiences (Platt 2013). Part of their success likely lies in the fact that they combined two already established genres of travel television: culinary travel and alternative travel. The two shows, however, also departed from previous programming in unique ways. *Bizarre Foods*, for example, follows guide/host Andrew Zimmern as he scours the world for strange dishes, rather than dishes that might appeal to most viewers. In contrast, *No Reservations*, though it also features unusual dishes, more consistently emphasizes eateries too quotidian for most tourists to notice, while also featuring a guide/host who acerbically mocks tourists and their behavior. In this way, both shows deploy anti-touristic discourses of authenticity that distinguish their hosts as enlightened eaters and “travelers” by commodifying the “exotic” and quotidian respectively. In doing so, they also construct a unique “brand” identity in order to distinguish themselves from each other and other shows.

Yet while both shows proclaim their hosts to be “authentic” for their embracing of atypical dishes in the case of Zimmern and itineraries in the case of Bourdain, they go about doing so in very different ways. In the case of *Bizarre Foods*, Zimmern gives the
following explanation for why he loves to try strange dishes: “I’m a chef, writer, and culinary explorer who understands that what’s common cuisine in one country can be an exotic edible in another. I believe that sharing food is the best way to experience other cultures, so I travel the world sampling one tasty morsel at a time.” (Bizarre Foods Season 1, Episode 1: 0:30-0:48) Zimmern considers himself a culinary explorer, perhaps in a way not too different from the explorers of the age of European colonialism, who instead of bringing back objects from his travels brings back experiences. Further, while he considers “sharing food” to be “the best way to experience other cultures,” he himself focuses almost solely on the strangest dishes a culture has to offer, suggesting that dishes that are the most “exotic” from a Western point-of-view are the ones that are most “authentic.” In this way, Zimmern utilizes a problematic definition of cultural authenticity in order to construct his own identity as a “traveler” who experiences the most “authentic” aspects of the cultures he encounters. Further, Zimmern imagines himself to be a kind of cultural ambassador for America and the West given his belief that “experiencing food and sharing culture does more to bring us together than any other shared activity.” (Season 2, Episode 5: 42:45-42:50) In doing so, he employs an unimaginative rhetoric of multiculturalism that simultaneously fetishizes and sanitizes the cultural diversity it purports to cherish. That is, while he places undue emphasis on the “exotic” aspects of various cultures, he also reduces these cultures to one-dimensional entities.

No Reservations’ Anthony Bourdain, on the other hand, comes across to some as an “authentic” host precisely because of his skepticism towards the educational and moral benefits of travel as well as towards the notion of authenticity in certain contexts. In the
Making of India episode, which gives a behind-the-scenes look at the production of an episode on Kerala, Bourdain says to one of his producers: “Look! It’s locals in indigenous garb performing their traditional folkloric dances. One more of those scenes and I’m right out the fucking window.” (No Reservations Season 6, Episode 22: 2:45-2:51) Clearly, Bourdain believes that most travel shows would film such a scene as such scenes are of interest to most tourists. He implies that the ubiquity of such scenes have not only rendered them stale, but also, by increasing tourist demand for such dances, possibly rendered them “inauthentic.” Importantly, however, he does believe that some touristic experiences can be “authentic,” since he himself is so keen on ferreting them out. Given this fact, No Reservations can be seen as taking the position that even if a “traditional folkloric” dance was “authentic,” it is not necessarily any more “authentic” than the food vendors, markets, and other local haunts Bourdain prefers to visit. In this way, the concept of cultural authenticity utilized in No Reservations is fundamentally different from the concept employed by Bizarre Foods. While both hosts reject typical tourist itineraries as inauthentic, Zimmern looks for authenticity in ever more “exotic” experiences, while Bourdain locates authenticity in quotidian, albeit strictly local, experiences. To this extent, No Reservations does not diminish tourists’ appetites for “authentic” experiences, but merely complicates their search for them.

The Concept of Authenticity in Tourism and Anthropology

A clearer understanding of authenticity as it relates to both tourism and anthropology is vital to an analysis of No Reservations and Bizarre Foods. In the broadest sense, claims to authenticity have to do with origins and identity. Charles Lindholm writes: “Authentic objects, persons, and collectives are original, real, and pure;
they are what they purport to be, their roots are known and verified, their essence and appearance are one.” (2008:2; emphasis mine) Tourists, then, seek authenticity inasmuch as they seek to consume goods and experiences that are not only unique to their chosen destination, but also not fabricated for the sole purpose of touristic consumption. The longing for authenticity is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. As feudal European societies became capitalist, urban ones, centuries-old norms and hierarchies began to disintegrate: “henceforth, people were no longer quite sure where they belonged, what their futures held for them, or who their neighbors were.” (ibid:3) The pace of “progress” seemed (in fact, continues to seem) to constantly increase, prompting Jean Jacques Rousseau to “[proclaim] that European society was ‘at the edge of the abyss’.” (Berman 1988:17) Perhaps not so coincidentally, Rousseau might also be considered “the inventor of modern authenticity in both its personal and collective guises...Rousseau presaged the present-day search for the really real within.” (Lindholm 2008:8-9) Early social scientists, of course, also saw a connection between modernity and increasing feelings of discontent throughout Western societies. Karl Marx called it alienation, Emile Durkheim anomie, and Max Weber the “iron cage,” but all three pioneers of the social sciences reported that modernity’s upending of historic social formations was taking its toll on individuals’ psyches by producing a sense that one’s new and unfamiliar surroundings were “inauthentic.” (Giddens 1971:10-16, 79-81, 235-236)

In many ways, authenticity lies at the heart of the equally uniquely modern phenomenon of tourism. In one of the first studies of tourism, *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery*, Louis Turner and John Ash write that “tourism is, everywhere, the enemy of authenticity and cultural identity.” (1975:197)
Clearly, Turner and Ash believe “authentic” culture exists and is being destroyed by its commodification. Ironically, however, it is tourists’ misguided desire for authenticity that is destroying “authentic” cultures everywhere. Similarly, Dean MacCannell argues in *The Tourist* that tourism is essentially the phenomenon of the modern, alienated subject consuming “authentic” experiences unavailable to her/him in her/his daily existence: “modern man [sic] is losing his attachments to the work bench, the neighborhood, the town, the family, which he once called ‘his own’ but, at the same time, he is developing an interest in the ‘real life’ of others.” (1999:15) On his analysis, the modern subject is alienated from her/his work and feels as if s/he has no roots as a result of modernity’s and, more specifically, capitalism’s propensity for inducing rapid technological change while ignoring a corresponding development of values and a sense of community. As a result, s/he is compelled to break her/his daily routine in order to consume “authentic” existences as a tourist.

Certainly, the introductory sequence for episodes of *Bizarre Foods* beginning with season six suggests guest/host Andrew Zimmern fits MacCannell’s mold of a tourist: “It happens suddenly, right in front of you. A fascinating friend, an amazing meal, and, before you know it, *you’re alive in a way you never imagined.* I live for those moments, pursuing the exotic and unfamiliar, especially when it comes to the food.” (*Bizarre Foods Season 6, Episode 1: 1:40-2:03; my emphasis*) For Zimmern, experiences are “authentic” not only because they are “exotic and unfamiliar,” but also because they, by virtue of their vibrancy and immediacy, create a rupture from the monotony of everyday life. Yet while *Bizarre Foods*’s introduction corroborates MacCannell’s point about the relationship between modern anomie and some tourists’ appetite for
authenticity, MacCannell’s argument is weakened by the fact that not all tourism can be explained by his analysis. Leisure tourists who are satisfied with a weekend at the beach, for example, do not seem particularly motivated by a search for the “real.” To this extent, it suffices to say that many, but not all, tourists do in fact seek to penetrate the “‘real life’ of others,” going to greater and greater lengths (literally and figuratively) to ensure that the cultures they encounter are “authentic.” (ibid:91) This incessant search for ever more “authentic” experiences explains the prevalence of imperialist nostalgia, since tourists increasingly penetrate regions removed from tourist circuits while being well aware that if they are there more tourists will surely follow.

Since MacCannell, other social scientists have expanded our understanding of what tourists seek to get from their travels. In Consuming Places, for example, John Urry writes:

\[\text{Part of what people buy [when they consume] is in effect a particular social composition of other consumers…The satisfaction is derived not from the individual act of consumption but from the fact that all sorts of other people are also consumers of the service and these people are deemed appropriate to the particular consumption in question. (1995:131)}\]

From this perspective, tourists might be seen as being less motivated by their personal sense of alienation than they are by their desire to maintain or acquire a certain class standing through the accumulation of cultural capital. In other words, they are compelled to seek what is considered “authentic” in order to distinguish themselves from those who lack the cultural capital to recognize their “inauthentic” experiences as such or the economic capital to afford more expensive forms of travel. Both MacCannell and Urry, then, can be read as shedding light on the rise of alternative forms of tourism outside of popular tourist circuits. Put simply, “middle-class people now want much more out of
their holidays...they desire at minimum a taste of something foreign and exciting.”
(Lindholm 2008:41) Further, they want to participate in forms of tourism that appear
“consistent with natural, social, and community values, and...allow both hosts and guests
to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences.” (Stronza 2001:274
quoting Eadington & Smith 1992:3) MacCannell and Urry, however, ascribe tourists
motives other than self-discovery and altruism. Importantly, MacCannell’s and Urry’s
theories are not mutually exclusive since consuming an alternative tourist experience,
whether perceived by the tourist as “authentic” or not, can serve for him/her the function
of both accumulating cultural capital and assuaging feelings of anomie.

As discussed in chapter one, precisely what makes modern tourism modern is the
fact that it is, in Urry’s words: “a huge industry, and it is the industry which serves to
organize the modern experience.” (1995:142; my emphasis) The idea goes, therefore, that
any discerning consumer, whether seeking authenticity or cultural capital by his/her own
understanding, recognizes the inauthenticity of mass tourist experiences and seeks those
experiences that are not prefabricated and therefore “authentic.” Of course, however,
mass-produced tourist experiences are more universally accessible, creating a class divide
as to who can afford or even have the knowledge of the existence of alternative tourist
experiences. For those who can afford it, then, “mobility has served to authorize an
increased stance of cosmopolitanism – an ability to experience, to discriminate and to risk
different natures and societies, historically and geographically.” (ibid:145) It should not
be forgotten, then, that the “semiotic liveliness” sought out by “the postmodern tourist
[visiting] Paris for its Vietnamese restaurants, African music, and Arab markets” as
thematzied on *No Reservations* represents a kind of travel that is not necessarily available to tourists of all classes (Harkin 1995:660).

An important distinction between MacCannell and Urry is that while MacCannell’s theory presumes that all tourist experiences are by definition “inauthentic,” Urry’s theory only concerns the *perceived* authenticity of tourist experiences. Going further than Urry are writers like Daniel Boorstin, who argue that tourists do not desire authenticity in any real sense at all (1961). Influenced by Jean Baudrillard and his notion of simulacra, such writers claim that tourists are perfectly happy with touristic experiences corresponding to “stereotypical media presentations of a fantasy hyperreal world.” (Lindholm 2008:44) Arjun Appadurai goes even further and does away with the notion of authenticity altogether (1995). In any case, while it is true that some tourists might be perfectly content with consuming prefabricated experiences as long as they are entertained, the boom in alternative forms of tourism suggests that many other tourists do in fact desire “authentic” experiences and are willing to go to great lengths to find them (indeed, on Urry’s analysis, this extra effort is part of alternative tourism’s appeal since it brings social distinction). As shows like *Bizarre Foods* and *No Reservations* demonstrate, however, there is potentially no end to the cycle of seeking out ever more “authentic” experiences. To this extent, such shows’ fanning of tourists’ desires “makes their struggle to find authenticity more arduous, more ambivalent, and the results more unsatisfactory. Their hope of discovering something real is not non-existent, it is just doomed.” (Lindholm 2008:44)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, anthropologists were historically like tourists in seeking authenticity in destinations, peoples and cultures. Indeed, if
authenticity is understood as “a deep rooted ‘sense of place,’ structured through shared language and social practices, which [cohere] into a local identity,” then it is not hard to see that authenticity was one of anthropology’s key concerns in its early days as an academic discipline (Hughes 1995:790). At that point in time, anthropologists tried to describe peoples and cultures in their “authentic” settings. What defines an “authentic” setting, however, is far from clear. For canonical anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead, at least, distance from home and relative isolation from Western culture appear to have informed their understanding of the authenticity of the peoples of the Trobriand Islands and South Pacific respectively. Likewise, functionalists like Malinowski, Emile Durkheim, and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown popularized variations on the idea that “culture refers to a systematically harmonized whole with each therefore comprising a shared and stable system of beliefs, knowledge, values, or sets of practices.” (Rapport and Overing 2000:94; authors’ emphasis) From this perspective, the more stable and impervious to outside influence a culture is, the more “authentic” it might be said to be.

Not all anthropologists, however, agreed with this notion of culture. Franz Boas, for example, gave primacy in his definition of culture to individuals’ ability to “incorporate and transform new and foreign elements.” (ibid) More recently, anthropologists such as Tim Ingold have claimed “it might be more realistic…to say that people live culturally rather than they live in cultures,” acknowledging the fact that subjects themselves are only on rare occasions cognizant of being embedded in an entity known as a culture (Rapport and Overing 2000:94 quoting Ingold 1994:330). Nonetheless, the idea of culture as a static, bounded entity remains in the discipline, even
if only as a legacy that people must continue to push back against since the discipline’s reflexive turn. In February of 1999, for example, the journal *Current Anthropology* released a special issue entitled “Culture – A Second Chance?” referring to the heated disciplinary debate about whether the concept of culture should be abandoned altogether given the historical and contemporary prevalence of its misuses. It cited as critiques of the concept not only the fact that it misrepresents the dynamic nature of culture and flattens intracultural difference, but also that, in the words of vocal critic Lila Abu-Lughod, “‘Culture’ operates in anthropological discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy…” Culture is the essential tool for making other.” (Brumann 1999:2 quoting Abu-Lughod 1991:137-138, 143) On her analysis, the culture concept evidences anthropology’s failure to move past its colonial and imperial legacy, as it necessarily renders the objects of its analysis the Western subject’s Other.

As a result of its colonial legacy and its development of the culture concept, anthropology has fed and continues to feed the touristic imagination. Besides the obvious example of ethnic tourism, which invites “tourists traveling to developing countries to play the role of the adventurous anthropologist-discoverer,” anthropological knowledge has been put to use in the service of attracting tourists of all kinds (Salazar 2013:670).

Salazar explains:

But while anthropology has undergone significant shifts in thinking since it arose as a discipline, ideas of old-style ethnology – objectifying, reifying, homogenizing, and naturalizing peoples – are widely used by all kinds of tourism shareholders (transnational corporations, travel guides and books, government agencies, policy makers, tourism service providers, local communities and individuals, and tourists themselves), staking claims of imagined identity and cultural belonging on strong notions of place and locality. (ibid)
To this extent, anthropological discourse, among other discourses, created some of the problematic representational strategies used by tourism shareholders, including producers of travel television. Exploiting the fact that tourists desire an encounter with the “authentic,” tourism shareholders market the cultures of remote destinations as stubbornly, perhaps even anachronistically, holding onto their “deep rooted “sense of place”.” (Hughes 1995:790) More often than not, a “deep rooted ‘sense of place’” means that a culture is particularly different, that is, particularly “exotic” in comparison to the West. Given that travel shows continue to exotify the places and cultures they portray and unquestioningly deploy discourses of authenticity, then, the legacy of anthropology’s troubled relationship with the culture concept and the notion of authenticity is far from irrelevant today.

“Exotic Appetites” in Bizarre Foods

Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern premiered in 2007 on the Travel Channel as a result of the commercial success of a stand-alone documentary called Bizarre Foods of Asia also featuring Andrew Zimmern as host. Each episode of the show faithfully reproduces the documentary’s format, following Zimmern as he travels around the world eating dishes that most Western tourists, even ones that revel going “off the beaten path,” would find strange and unappetizing. To give just a sampling of the show’s fare, Zimmern eats a cobra’s beating heart in Vietnam, duck embryo in the Philippines, and raw crocodile in Uganda. Bizarre Foods, along with its spin-offs, the short-lived Bizarre World and the currently popular Bizarre Foods America, was produced by Tremendous! Entertainment, a production company specializing in niche reality and travel shows. According to their website, “nothing’s more important to us than telling a great story.”
Especially one with unexpected twists and turns... We can handle anything – from the far reaches of the world to the unique corners of human culture.” (Tremendousinc.com) This ethos is exemplified by their shows, including features on over-the-top foods, competitions at state fairs, ghost hunters in Tennessee, and the unique houses of individuals around the world. Though Bizarre Foods sometimes features Western countries or regions of the United States, then, most of its episodes evidence its production company’s ability to grant access to “the far reaches of the world.”

Despite its emphasis on unusual dishes, however, Bizarre Foods is in many ways a very uncreative travel show. For one, it provides viewers with broad, simplistic, and often problematic descriptions of the places it features. According to Zimmern, Morocco is “mysterious and exotic,” Bolivia “remote, mysterious, and aboriginal,” and Tanzania “captures the essence of Africa.” (Season 1, Episode 2; Season 2, Episode 5; Season 4, Episode 1) Fun facts also sporadically pop up from the bottom left of the screen to inform viewers about the culture and history of the relevant country. Clearly, the idea is that viewers are supposed to learn about the cuisines and cultures that the show features while also being entertained by Zimmern’s interactions with them. To this extent, learning through eating is held up as a valid and even superior method of learning, since by Zimmern’s estimation “sharing food is the best way to experience other cultures.” (Season 1, Episode 1: 0:30-0:48) Another vital aspect of the show is its deployment of a relatively simplistic notion of authenticity, suggesting that the food Zimmern eats is “authentic” due to its “exotic” nature, which supposedly evinces relative isolation from the homogenizing force of Western culture. Since his status as an enlightened “traveler” depends on consuming the “exotic,” the show, as already seen, emphasizes the “exotic”
nature of his destinations. In this way, beneath the show’s superficial celebration of radical difference lies an exotifying drive with profound roots in histories and present realities of Western colonialism and imperialism.

Arguably the second most obvious theme of the show after “bizarre” foods and locales is Zimmern’s professed belief in the ability of travel and food to facilitate the promotion of “global understanding.” In other words, his goal is not only to entertain and educate, but also to serve as a cultural ambassador for the United States and the Western world. Importantly, the above quotation is drawn from the Bizarre Foods episode on Syria that premiered in 2011, a place that, by his own admissions, is commonly perceived as unfriendly or even hostile to American visitors. For Zimmern, then, adventurous Western tourists’ unchecked consumption of ethnic cuisines is to be lauded not only as educational, but also as contributing to intercultural understanding. In contrast, Malcolm Crick writes that “the “peace and understanding” rhetoric…disseminated by tourism promoters and some national tourism authorities, should be seen for what it is – a mystifying image that is part of the industry itself.” (1989:329) For Crick, the idea that tourism automatically translates to intercultural understanding is not only rather vapid, but also masks tourism’s negative consequences for tourist destinations.

In Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer, Lisa Heldke examines the implications of Westerners’ increasingly adventurous appetites as evidenced by the popularity of ethnic restaurants and cookbooks, let alone television shows that showcase ethnic cuisines. Describing herself as a one-time food adventurer, Heldke writes that she eventually became unsettled by her relationship to the cuisines she consumed and championed. She came to think of her and other food adventurers as agents of cultural
colonialism given the fact that their activities “often bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the attitude of, say, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European painters, anthropologists, and explorers who set out in search of ever ‘newer,’ ever more ‘remote’ cultures that they could co-opt, borrow from freely and out of context, and use as the raw materials for their own efforts at creation and discovery.” (Heldke 2003:xvi)

In all likelihood, Heldke would see Zimmern as a representative food adventurer and cultural colonialist, seeking out ever more “bizarre” and therefore “authentic” dishes in order to augment his own cultural capital and identity as a cultural ambassador. Indeed, the opening sequence of *Bizarre Foods* episodes from season one to five features Zimmern surrounded by what looks like a wooden conveyer belt on top of which are items as varied as a beetle, cactus, and brain as well as a pagoda, double-decker bus, and the Dome of the Rock. As a Westerner, Zimmern is portrayed in a position of power, able to and justified in commodifying and consuming objects from any and every culture. The arbitrariness of the items displayed as well as the implication that they are all, despite their cultural specificity, in essence interchangeable brings to mind Heldke’s following comment: “Is my fascination with novelty *really* equivalent to an interest in culture (whatever that might mean)? I’m frankly suspicious.” (2003:13; author’s emphasis)

Heldke’s analysis of culinary colonialism also contains a critique Zimmern’s notion of culinary authenticity:

What we food adventurers “expect,” in the case of authentic food is, paradoxically enough, the unexpected and the unfamiliar; we expect the food of the other to be distinctly different from our own foods, and we tend flat-footedly to identify the unfamiliar elements as the authentic ones. (2003:27)
Two cases in point are when Zimmern accidentally eats the starfish meant as a garnish in a restaurant in Guangzhou, China and when he eats a kind of Mongolian butter that is typically not eaten but used as tallow (*Bizarre Foods* Season 2, Episode 7: 21-22:20; Season 5, Episode 3: 16:35-18:10). Zimmern also regularly notes that some of the dishes he tries are dying out because of their unpopularity with the younger generations. Indeed, some of his young guides such as Roula Nasralla of Syria and Jargal Byambasuren of Mongolia admit to not having tried many of the foods they suggest Zimmern eat (Season 6, Episode; Season 5, Episode 3). According to Zimmern’s logic, then, the food popular among young Syrians and young Mongolians is less “authentic” than the food popular among the older generations even if, as is often the case, the former food is popular while the latter is rarely eaten.

In essence, Zimmern can be seen as employing the same distinction between international and regional cuisine put forth by Jean-Francois Revel and attacked by Lisa Heldke. According to Revel international cuisine “has curiosity as its motivating force,” while regional cuisines are “obliged to remain routine and exclusive.” (Heldke 2003:97 quoting Revel 1992:246) In other words, regional cuisines, while “authentic,” are traditional to the point of being static. Clearly, Revel operates under the notion, first promulgated by early anthropologists, that “authentic” cultures, of which “authentic” regional cuisines are a part, are bounded and immutable entities. Even when delicious, they do not evince the kind of creativity and brilliance displayed by international cuisines. Of course, international cuisine for Revel primarily means Western cuisines and French cuisine in particular (ibid 2003:98-99). It is only Western societies with their ostensible transcendence of tradition and embracing of innovation, then, that can produce
an international cuisine. Indeed, Revel deems international cuisine art, while he dismisses regional cuisine as something closer to “a mixture of biology and ethnology.” (Heldke 2003:97 quoting Revel 1992:246)

While Zimmern might have a bit more respect than Revel for regional cuisines, many of his comments nonetheless suggest that his typology of cuisines is not fundamentally different from Revel’s. Take for example his following remark on Cantonese cuisine: “there’s an old Chinese proverb: preserve the old, but know the new. A more fitting modern slogan might be: if grandma didn’t eat it growing up, we don’t eat it now.” (Bizarre Foods Season 2, Episode 7: 27:05-27:18) Similarly, he says in Mexico: “[in] the cosmopolitan capital of Mexico City…locals chefs like the world renowned Patricia Quintana have turned traditional Mexican cooking into an art form.” (Season 1, Episode 8: 2:20-2:28) In other words, according to Zimmern, while traditional Cantonese and Mexican cooking may be remarkable in their own right, they are not art, being rooted as they are in traditional, non-cosmopolitan communities. To this extent, Revel’s insidious notion that regional cuisines are more ethnology than art, a notion that is itself indebted to antiquated yet still influential notions of the culture concept, is faithfully reproduced in travel shows such as Bizarre Foods.

According to viewer reviews on Amazon.com and IMDB.com, Bizarre Food is variously received as informative and entertaining or ridiculous and contrived. Importantly, however, the majority of reviewers, whether positive or negative, agree on Zimmern’s notion of authenticity. Amazon user barbstpaul, for example, entitles her/his review “Food anthropology adventure,” writing: “as someone who loves food, travel, and considering the cultural constructions of normal, this series has it all.” (Amazon.com)
User L. Nottingham agrees: “after watching, I really got an understanding of the culture and which dishes were considered ‘iconic’ so to speak.” (ibid) For viewers like barbstpaul and L. Nottingham, then, Bizarre Foods sets itself apart from other “brands” by using “exotic” and “authentic” dishes to question “cultural constructions of [the] normal.”

Bizarre Foods’s very same “brand” identity, however, is also the reason why some viewers dislike the show. User Benjamin Gobel writes, for example:

This show is ok, but I don’t feel as if its “REAL.” A lot of the shows have Z eating items that the people of the area don’t really even eat anymore. Some episodes irritate me because it almost embarrasses the US! “Look at that stupid American eating that!” (Amazon.com)

In other words, this viewer does not buy Zimmern’s claim that “exotic” dishes are necessarily the most “authentic” ones since many of these dishes are unpopular even within their own culture due to their extreme natures. Similarly, IMDB user hamnh writes, “I also feel that Zimmern goes out of his way to find these foods in remote places.” (IMDB.com) Even barbstpaul, in the same review mentioned above, acknowledges that “Zimmern can sometimes be embarrassingly over the top in his enthusiasm and often culturally less than competent.” (Amazon.com) Unlike positive reviewers, then, negative reviewers are skeptical of the authenticity of Zimmern’s intentions and do not equate his consumption of “bizarre,” “authentic” dishes with an enlightened outlook on travel. Nonetheless, Bizarre Foods’s commodification of dishes that most Westerners find “bizarre” or even repulsive is appreciated by some viewers and represents an anti-touristic discourse of authenticity that now exists in the touristic imaginary.
No Reservations and the “Authentic” “Traveler”

When No Reservations premiered in the summer of 2005, Anthony Bourdain was already relatively famous thanks to his bestselling book Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly, published in 2000. By exposing the dark underbelly of the world of professional cooking, Bourdain had already begun crafting his image as an irreverent, snarky, and hedonistic chef, a “culinary bad boy” who harshly criticized celebrity chefs whose ranks he, ironically enough, would soon be joining (“Anthony Bourdain Is Opening An International Food Market in NYC”). A year after Kitchen Confidential, he published A Cook’s Tour in which he detailed his exploration of cultures and cuisines around the world. A television show based on the book soon followed. The introductory sequence for episodes of the show, featuring the following words spoken by Bourdain, informs viewers that they are watching an alternative travel show:

As a cook, taste and smell are my memories. Now I’m in search of new ones. So I’m leaving New York City and hope to have a few epiphanies around the world. And I’m willing to go to some length to do that. I’m looking for extremes of emotion and experience. I’ll try anything. I’ll risk everything. I have nothing to lose (A Cook’s Tour Season 1, Episode 1: 0:18-0:37).

Like Bizarre Foods, A Cook’s Tour showcases Bourdain’s willingness to “try anything” in episodes such as Cobra Heart-Food That Makes You Manly (Ho Chi Minh City) and Tamales and Iguana, Oaxacan Style. After all, Bourdain proclaims to be on the lookout for “extremes of emotion and experience,” for “epiphanies” that, so he implies, can only be found abroad and not at home. He equates activities that one has “to go to some length to do” with authenticity and resembles the food adventurers Lisa Heldke criticizes for “[setting] out in search of ever “newer,” ever more “remote” cultures that they could co-opt…and use as the raw materials for their own efforts at creation and discovery.”
Far more than *No Reservations*, then, *A Cook’s Tour* employed a rhetoric of exoticization resembling *Bizarre Foods*’s problematic representational strategy. While *A Cook’s Tour* only lasted two seasons, the far more successful *No Reservations* picked up where that show left off while toning down its exoticizing tendencies. Its title refers not only to Bourdain’s unchanged willingness to travel anywhere, but also his frankness (some might say bluntness) as a host. Arguably the most iconic quality of the *No Reservations* “brand” is Bourdain’s unfailing irony and sarcasm, even if he was also quite the wit in *A Cook’s Tour*. Many of his jokes stem from his disdain of typical tourist itineraries, a disdain only exceeded perhaps by his disdain of the overly commercial world of celebrity cooking. At every step of the way, he mocks tourists and tourist circuits and if he partakes in some kitschy tourist activity, he usually does so with a heavy dose of irony. He stays almost entirely clear of touristy landmarks, restaurants, and shops, instead opting for places popular among locals (the episode on Egypt, for example, contains many adamant declarations by Bourdain that he will not, under any circumstance, visit the Pyramids). As he says in Puerto Rico: “This is the anti-tourist show, right?” (Season 2, Episode 6: 2:40)

More than anything, however, Bourdain loves street food, local markets, and hidden gems of restaurants, featuring them in almost every episode and even dedicating an entire episode (Season 5, Episode 14) to clips of street food scenes from past shows. His culinary predilections as well as his proclaimed identity as a “traveler” are made clear by scenes such as this one in Malaysia: “we’re meeting for lunch at a road-side eatery. Wedged in between a row of auto-body repair shops and steel fabricators, and aptly named ‘The Place Under the Big Tree,’ this is a locals-only joint. A tourist ain’t going to
find this, and I wouldn’t stop until I did.” (Season 1, Episode 5: 11:40-11:46) By his own admission, it is almost an obsession of his to ferret out places like “The Place Under the Big Tree” that tourists would never find on their own. As he says to his guide Jorge in Colombia while searching for an eatery hidden deep in a market whose clientele mostly consists of market workers themselves: “you know, if it’s a little difficult to find, sometimes people like that.” (Season 4, Episode 12: 6:45-6:48)

A final element of Bourdain’s identity as an enlightened eater is his ability to stomach differences that would deter most tourists. Replying to his Chinese guide’s warning that a certain dish is unappealing to most Westerners, Bourdain says, “I am not any random Westerner, my friend,” separating himself from tourists too timid or ignorant to dine like the locals do and acquiring cultural capital by doing so (Season 6, Episode 8: 4:38-4:40). Yet while “bizarre” dishes like those featured on Bizarre Foods and A Cook’s Tour also appear in No Reservations, the show puts a greater focus on relatively quotidian (or perhaps especially quotidian) locales and activities. To this extent, Bourdain still believes in the existence of “authentic” experiences, but simply employs a different notion of authenticity than Zimmern. He is still a food explorer who goes to greater and greater lengths to “discover” local gems to appropriate for his “traveler” identity. What’s more, his “discoveries” are beamed to viewers around the world, transforming eateries like “The Place Under the Big Tree” from local gems to trendy destinations for “travelers.”

One facet of Bourdain’s notion of authenticity is that whereas Zimmern associates cultural isolation with authenticity, Bourdain emphasizes the extent to which cultural hybridity is a norm throughout many societies. Malaysia is “a land of natural fusion, a
collision of cuisines and cultures,” Puerto Rico “a centuries-old mix of Spanish, African, and native Taino culture,” and China “taunts one with its sheer size, its age, its depth, and variety, its unknowability in a single lifetime.” *(No Reservations* Season 1, Episode 5; Season 2, Episode 6; Season 2, Episode 1) The idea of hybridity as opposed to boundedness as the norm for cultures also manifests itself in the show’s portrayal of the ubiquity of tourism and its consequences for tourist destinations. In contrast to popular depictions of the Amazon rainforest as one of the final frontiers for the globalized economy, the *No Reservations* episode on Peru notes that 5,000 tourists visited its featured Amazon lodge last year (Season 2, Episode 3: 22:55). Further, it thematizes the potentially problematic relationship between host and guest:

> The Amazon: a famous destination for eco-tourists…who come snapping photos and chanting their rallying cries of cultural appreciation. Wearing LL Bean, Gortex, and sleeping in $300 mummy-bags, do they really get to know these people when they visit?” *(ibid: 15:58-16:05)*

Importantly, however, Bourdain refrains from specifically pointing out what the negative effects of this encounter might be, instead drawing attention to the general discrepancy between eco-tourists’ motives and actions as well as to the superficiality of claims about the intercultural understanding gained by participating in such forms of tourism. After all, addressing the negative effects of such tourism would make it that much more difficult for him to ignore his own impact as a tourist in the Amazon, not to mention the impact his show will certainly have in increasing tourism to the Amazon.

Unlike *Bizarre Foods* or even, as will be seen, Bourdain’s most recent show *Parts Unknown*, *No Reservations* occasionally explicitly thematizes its own role in the feeding of tourists’ desires and therefore its complicity with tourism’s negative consequences. While filming a procession of Buddhist monks in Laos, for example, Bourdain comments
on the gradual but undeniable growth of tourism to this relatively unknown destination:

“it’s a hauntingly quiet affair, the only sound the patting of bare feet and the occasional passing motorbike. Lately, though, a new sound: the clicking of cameras.” (Season 4, Episode 11: 32-32:16) He then admits to the show’s own complicity in changing places like Laos:

If you’re from this neighborhood, if you’ve lived here either all your life or most of your life, this [procession] is very much a community neighborhood thing. We’re here because it’s beautiful, because we’re fascinated by traditional Laos culture. I’m afraid sometimes that because we take pleasure in showing people with these cameras how beautiful the place is that we help to destroy it. I hope we don’t...That’s the problem in making travel television. When we succeed, we inspire others to travel to the places we care about and in a sense, we help kill what we love. (ibid: 32:25-33:29)

Bourdain’s admission that “when we [travel television producers/hosts] succeed...we help kill what we love,” while refreshing to hear, is also an almost verbatim iteration of Renato Rosaldo’s concept of imperialist nostalgia: “Imperialist nostalgia thus revolves around a paradox: a person kills somebody and then mourns his or her victim. In more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention.” (1989:108) Importantly, however, Bourdain’s nostalgia is preemptive, as tourism has not yet dramatically altered the lives of people in places like Laos but is expected to do so given the presumably unstoppable march of global tourism. Given the cultural capital he has to gain by being among the rare few to visit a place like Laos, then, Bourdain’s tortured conscience must be seen as a part of his performance of the role of “traveler.”

The scene in Laos elucidates the intractable paradox of travel television. While no one is fundamentally obliged to produce travel television that focuses on “off the beaten
path” destinations, such programming is seen as an antidote to the kind of vapid tourism that most tourists are imagined as participating in. Of course, in reality no one is obliged to produce travel television at all. It is produced because it sells and alternative travel shows in turn sell because they depart from traditional programming. Bourdain’s claim that “we’re here because it’s beautiful, because we’re fascinated by traditional Laos culture,” therefore, while not necessarily a lie, nonetheless elides the fact that he and his production crew are also in Laos because this is how they make a (rather good) living. Moreover, they are making an episode on Laos because, in Bourdain’s own words, “this is in many ways kinda like the last unexplored frontier of Southeast Asia. The word mysterious was practically created for this place.” (Season 4, Episode 11: 1:30-1:46) To this extent, Bourdain’s comments here and elsewhere on the show about the vicissitudes of travel television must be seen as constituting, at least in part, a strategy of anti-conquest whereby a recognition of guilt is supposed to lessen said guilt in the eyes of viewers.

Yet another way in which Bourdain’s persona as a “traveler” differs from that of Zimmern’s is that Bourdain allows himself to occasionally participates in stereotypical tourist activities so long as he recognizes them as such. This post-modern stance allows Bourdain to enjoy tourist kitsch without lessening his authority as a “traveler.” In Rajasthan, India, for example, he says the following about a festive procession in the Jaisalmer desert festival: “streaming in from miles away dressed in traditional costumes, it’s all colors, sounds, movements, and guys on camels playing brass instruments. This is one of the scenes you get kind of slack-jawed and tourisy feeling, in a good way.” (Season 2, Episode 8: 36:20-36:30) Bourdain implies that it’s ok to sometimes be “slack-
jawed and touristy,” while also pointing out how nontraditional brass instruments can be part of parcel of a traditional Rajasthani ceremony. Similarly, while taking a train to Machu Pichu he exclaims: “sure this train with all its gilded comforts put a bit of the tourist back into the “traveler.” But I guess sometimes, that’s not a bad thing.” (Season 2, Episode 3: 40:02-40:10) Again, he justifies his touristy behavior by demonstrating that he understands the difference between a tourist and a “traveler” and that he is, for the most part (”sometimes, that’s not a bad thing”), a “traveler.” In his discourse of authenticity, therefore, his consumption of the occasional touristy experience is absolved by the fact that he maintains an “authentic” disposition in approaching “inauthentic” experiences with irony.

A final tactic Bourdain utilizes to justify his momentary lapses as a “traveler” is irony, as this scene in Hawaii shows: “We had asked for a typical tourist luau, you know the worst case scenario, the kind of thing I hate…I was gonna have a field day with this scene, put on my snarkologist helmet and rip into this bogus “for-tourist” only spectacle like a junkyard dog.” (Season 4, Episode 9: 40:40-41:30) In other words, Bourdain has no qualms with occasionally participating in things such as a tourist luau so long as he uses such moments to expose and critique them. Interestingly, however, the scene takes a very different turn: “I look at these people [tourists] on stage and, for once in my life, I’m not instinctively angry. Look at them up there: hard-working people, retired people, probably worked their whole lives to come down here and do this.” (ibid: 40:40-41:30) In a rare moment of sympathy, Bourdain gives the American tourists a reprieve from his sarcastic wrath, suggesting that, although he himself may never give up his “traveler” ways to become a tourist, he understands that others do in fact find things like the luau enjoyable.
Even so, Bourdain’s comment is classist, implying as it does that enlightened “travelers” should not judge working-class tourists who lack the cultural capital to recognize an “inauthentic” experience. He does not consider the possibility that ostensibly philistine tourists might be aware of the luau’s authenticity but simply don’t care or that they may lack the means to pursue alternative travel itineraries like he does. Regardless, this scene demonstrates how Bourdain does not feel hypocritical for occasionally acting like a tourist as he interprets such moments as anomalies or studies in irony.

A dramatic difference between Bourdain and Zimmern is that the former views on travel’s lessons are more ambivalent, even though he still advocates for people to become “travelers.” For example, at the end of the first No Reservations episode on Beirut, which was not in fact a regular episode but an account of how the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict derailed Bourdain’s and his crew’s plans to film and left them temporarily stranded in Lebanon, Bourdain comments:

I’d begun to believe that the dinner table was the great leveler where people from opposite sides of the world could always sit down and talk and eat and drink and, if not solve all the world’s problems, at least find for a time common ground. Now, I’m not so sure. Maybe the world’s not like that at all. Maybe in the real world, the one without cameras and happy food and travel shows, everybody, the good and the bad together, are all crushed under the same terrible wheel. (Season 2, Episode 13: 42:55-43:29)

The extreme circumstances surrounding this episode notwithstanding, Bourdain’s ambivalent view on travel is also expressed in such queries as “Do we get smarter, more enlightened as we travel? Does travel bring wisdom?” (at the end of the episode, which takes place in Peru, he answers both yes and no) (Season 2, Episode 3: 3:00-3:05)

In this way, Bourdain does not position himself, as Zimmern sometimes does, as an expert: “As you’ve probably noticed, I’m not an expert on the places I visit. I’m not an
authority, I’m a traveler, an enthusiast...[In travel] you take something with you, hopefully you leave something good behind.” (Season 1, Episode 5: 2:50-3:10)

According to Bourdain, a “traveler” is not the same thing as an expert on peoples and cultures. Indeed, not even extensive travel guarantees expertise. All one can hope for is to “take something with you” and to “leave something good behind,” the implication being that this “something” is likely quite small and almost certainly not as large and profound as one might hope or think. Unlike tourism, then, travel should be challenging: “Travel isn’t always pretty, it isn’t always comfortable, sometimes it hurts, it even breaks your heart.” (Season 1, Episode 5: 3:05-3:15) To this extent, Bourdain, in contrast to Zimmern who, in Amazon user barbstpaul’s words “can sometimes be embarrassingly over the top in his enthusiasm,” crafts an identity that is ostensibly more “authentic.” (Amazon.com) Referring to his utter inability to enjoy eating warthog anus with San people in Namibia, for example, Bourdain says:

Do I sound ungrateful, culturally insensitive, rude? Maybe. There are limits to what I can bear, even me, and I’ve reached my limit...Everything I’ve said about enjoying indigenous cuisine, about suspending squeamishness, it now seems like a terrible lie.

(Saison 3, Episode 4: 35:30-36:00)

In a strange way, then, Bourdain, by admitting to instances when his identity as an enlightened “traveler” is challenged, accrues cultural capital as a travel television host. To this extent, the show’s trademark irony and sarcasm allows it and Bourdain to profit from travel, even as it complicates the notion of travel’s benefits. In doing so, the show utilizes a strategy of anti-conquest, obscuring its commodification of culture by superficially thematizing the vicissitudes of travel.
Like viewer reviews of Bizarre Foods, reviews of No Reservations on Amazon.com and IMDB.com reveal that viewers disagree on how good the show is, but not on what its conception of authenticity is. IMDB user cmmcclurg writes, for example, that “[Bourdain is] like the world’s most sarcastic tourist that travels off the beaten path and goes to more rural areas. His interest in the bizarre and the most common food of each country he visit [sic] is amazing to see.” (IMDB.com) Amazon user Daniel P. Johnson similarly embraces Bourdain’s notion that authenticity in travel, while harder to find in today’s world, is still achievable: “I love how...they always search for the heart and soul of a place and don’t always focus on simply the glam high-end places. Street food is just as important.” (Amazon.com) Viewers like xylokopos even directly contrasts Bourdian with the multicultural perspectives of other travel shows:

He certainly is no Ustinov or Michael Palin, but Bourdain is a better travel show host than the legion of other generic hosts at TLC [the Learning Channel] – you know the type, everything is exciting, everything tastes great, all the locals are fantastic, blahblahblah. He has no apparent interest in the history or architecture or archeology of the places he visits, but then again his focus is the food… (IMDB.com)

Unlike hosts who invariably exaggerate the pleasure they are having, then, Bourdain is perceived by some viewers as a guide/host who is honest and all the more “authentic” for that reason.

In contrast, negative reviewers like IMDB user planktonrules perceive Bourdain’s sarcasm as pretentious and uncouth: “If you like his acerbic and often insulting ways, you’ll probably enjoy the show.” (ibid) Amazon user MATZ also appears to feel the same way about Bourdain’s obsession with traveling “off the beaten path”: “you never feel that you’re really getting on with Tony, who remains aloof mostly while trying to maintain his Big-City guy image. (I hope he travels around with a body guard, because
guys like him can really irritate some folks.” (Amazon.com) Finally, an ambivalent 
review by IMDB user PartialMovieViewer reveals her/his frustrations at Bourdain’s 
“traveler” persona: “a very enjoyable host (even though half of the show is spent 
throwing Americans under the international bus) and his program is always worth a look 
(regardless whether he paints himself as the only GOOD American or not)... We get it, 
Americans don’t know squat!” (IMDB.com) Like reviewers of *Bizarre Foods*, then, 
reviewers of *No Reservations* have similar perceptions of each show’s “brand” regardless 
of whether or not they find the brand appealing.

All in all, online reviews of both *No Reservations* and *Bizarre Foods* reveal that 
viewers participate in the anti-touristic discourses of authenticity employed in the two 
shows. While some viewers accept the discourse of authenticity in question as valid and 
praise the show and its guide/host on that basis, others reject the same discourse and 
critique the show and its host for being “inauthentic.” Like the shows they watch, 
however, viewers do not challenge the idea that consuming “authentic” experiences is 
how to be a “traveler” rather than a tourist. Capitalizing on “travelers’” desire for 
authenticity, then, *No Reservations* and *Bizarre Foods* commodify the “exotic” and 
quotidian respectively, implying that authenticity does in fact exist and that it is to be 
found “off the beaten path.”
Chapter 3: Representing Globalization in Parts Unknown

As its name suggests, Parts Unknown distinguishes itself from other travel shows by putting an even greater emphasis on “off the beaten path” destinations than its predecessor. Venturing to countries like Myanmar, Libya, and the Congo that are not part of tourists circuits due to war and/or political instability, the show also places more emphasis on geopolitical issues and less emphasis on food compared to No Reservations. Nonetheless, a significant portion of each episode is usually devoted to local cuisine, just as more than a few episodes of No Reservations take place in relatively “unknown” places. Given that Bourdain is the guide/host of both shows, it is not surprising that the two shows have many similarities.

As alluded to, the two shows both feature an anti-touristic discourse of authenticity whereby the “authentic” nature of the show’s featured destinations is secured through recourse to their exclusion from traditional tourist circuits. At the same time, however, the show, like its predecessor, partially contests the simplistic conflation of obscure destinations with authenticity and popular ones with inauthenticity by presenting episodes about the hidden, “authentic” side to certain popular destinations. Further, as in No Reservations, even when Bourdain occasionally consumes tourist kitsch, his ironic demeanor allows him to always remain the consummate “traveler.” Again, then, Parts Unknown, like No Reservations, demonstrates the interconnected nature of the “authentic” subject and the “authentic” object of consumption. Moreover, as a result of the show’s thematization of geopolitical issues, Bourdain’s complex negotiation of his own complicities as an upper-class, American tourist is often more evident in Parts Unknown than in No Reservations.
Besides having a common host, another reason why *No Reservations* and *Parts Unknown* are ultimately fairly similar shows is the fact that both shows were/are produced by Zero Point Zero Production Inc., a New York City-based production company that was founded in 2003. Zero Point Zero specializes in travel and food related programming, having produced multiple shows for the Travel Channel, Food Network, and Cooking Channel, among other channels. On top of television programming, the company produces digital media (e.g. apps, animations, web series) and coordinates live events featuring chefs, authors, and journalists. Zero Point Zero has a particularly good working relationship with Bourdain. Not only did it produce *No Reservations*, but it was also responsible for other shows such as the Travel Channel’s *The Layover* and PBS’s *The Mind of a Chef* that Bourdain once narrated or hosted. Two out of the three shows produced by Zero Point Zero that have won an Emmy Award have been shows of Bourdain’s as well (Zero Point Zero’s Facebook page).

Importantly, *Parts Unknown* airs on CNN rather than the Travel Channel. Indicative of the network’s new strategy of combining “serious news” and entertainment, the show is part of CNN’s attempt to rebrand itself as more than just a news channel in order to combat their lowest ratings in a decade. While it was CNN that approached Bourdain to produce a new show, Bourdain certainly had something to gain from the move as well. In his words: “I have had an excellent relationship with the Travel Channel, but CNN is a big company with a lot of international juice…I’d like to do a show that goes up Congo River, or get back to Libya. CNN has the resources and know-how to help make that happen.” (Carr 2012) In other words, he was interested for both personal and commercial reasons in going to even remoter locales than those that the
Travel Channel could manage to send him to. And while the show represents a departure from CNN’s previous programming, CNN Worldwide Executive Vice President and Managing Editor, Mark Whitaker, assured CNN viewers that *Parts Unknown* would not stray from “CNN’s long-standing commitment to international reporting and to promoting global understanding.” (Zurawik 2013) To this extent, the show consistently thematizes, even if superficially, geopolitical issues such as Colombia’s “war on drugs” and Detroit’s post-industrial woes.

The idea that *Parts Unknown*, or any travel show for that matter, contributes to “global understanding,” however, is a contentious one to say the least. For one, the very notion that some kinds of travel and travel television promote “global understanding” while other kinds do not, is imbricated with a touristic discourse of authenticity by means of which “travelers” seek to obtain cultural capital. Further, narratives of increasing “global understanding” in an age of global tourism and globalization more generally obscure globalization’s uneven character. After all, as a television show that offers these destinations up for mass consumption by both “living room tourists” and potential future tourists in the flesh, *Parts Unknown* contributes to the commodification of the destinations it features, including many destinations that have been relatively immune to commodification due to their absence from tourist circuits. To this extent, the show’s appeals to travel’s edifying qualities function as a form of anti-conquest, masking inequalities while purporting to alleviate them. Finally, the presence of the imperial gaze in episodes of *Parts Unknown* reveals that CNN’s stated goal of promoting “global understanding” has not resulted in the show overcoming historical tropes rooted in Western histories and present realities of colonialism and imperialism. In short, despite
"Parts Unknown"’s attempts to present not only diverse cultures and cuisines, but also complex geopolitical issues, it fails to push the boundaries of how travel television might be critical of tourism’s negative consequences as well as its own commodifying practices⁴.

**Tourism in an Age of Globalization**

While much has already been said about globalization and the importance of understanding its various dimensions to understand contemporary tourism, it may prove useful at this point to make explicit what is actually meant by globalization. The short answer is that globalization refers to “the complex mobilities and interconnections that characterize the globe today.” These mobilities and interconnections are a result of “a world where borders and boundaries have become increasingly porous, allowing more and more peoples and cultures to be cast into intense and immediate contact with each other.” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:2) A more concrete way to think about globalization is through Arjun Appadurai’s five -scapes: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanescapes, and ideoscapes. Respectively, these “-scapes” correspond to the increased movement of people, images and narratives, technology, capital and commodities, and ideas across borders (1996:33-36). Tourism, for example, is imbricated with ethno-, media-, finance-, and ideoscapes around the world, while travel television more specifically constitutes a media- and ideoscape in its own right. Further, alternative travel shows are symptomatic of porous borders given their penetration into destinations previously ignored by tourists.

⁴ As "Parts Unknown" is such a new show, there are not enough viewer reviews to get a sense of trends in viewers’ perceptions of the show. Instead, I will analyze the show’s website as it offers insights into the show’s intended audience.
A heated debate exists over whether globalization’s effects are, on the whole, positive or negative. Whereas those who see globalization in a positive light point to economic growth, international cooperation, and multiculturalism, those who see it in a negative light point to growing inequality, failures of global governance, and cultural imperialism. Speaking to this debate, and especially to the economic points of contention, Joseph Stiglitz writes in *Globalization and its Discontents*:

Those who vilify globalization too often overlook its benefits. But the proponents of globalization have been, if anything, even more unbalanced. To them, globalization (which typically is associated with accepting triumphant capitalism, American style) is progress; developing countries must accept it, if they are to grow and to fight poverty effectively. But to many in the developing world, globalization has not brought the promised economic benefits. (2003:5; author’s emphasis)

Globalization’s failure to provide its “promised economic benefits” can in part be attributed to the fact that “the West has driven the globalization agenda [meaning neoliberal economics for Stiglitz], ensuring that it garners a disproportionate share of the benefits, at the expense of the developing world.” (2003:6-7) To this extent, at least some of those in the West who deem globalization inevitable and ultimately beneficial might be seen as having a vested interest in the veracity of their prognosis. Stiglitz’s analysis also points to the fact that globalization is far from a uniform process, as some countries win while others lose. To put it simply, “not everyone and everyplace participates equally in the circuits of interconnection that traverse the globe...this, too, is the world of globalization.” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:4)

The title of Appadurai’s essay in which he introduced the notion of “-scapes” – “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” – also specifically speaks to the uneven quality of globalization’s cultural dimensions. Referring to Pico Iyer, a
travel writer I address in my first chapter, Appadurai writes “Iyer’s own impressions are
testimony to the fact that, if a global cultural system is emerging, it is filled with ironies
and resistances, sometimes camouflaged as passivity…” (1996:29; author’s emphasis) In
essence, amateur and professional scholars of globalization are increasingly realizing that
theorists like Marshall McLuhan, who posited the emergence of a “global village,” likely
“overestimated the communitarian implications of the new media order.” (ibid) In other
words, rather than passively and gladly receiving cultural goods from abroad, individuals
everywhere are actively engaging with and resisting received cultural influences, creating
new forms of locality and difference. Arguably, tropes like the “global village” are in
collusion with economic processes of globalization that arguably do as much or more
harm than good. That is, by presenting globalization’s consequences as inevitable and
universally beneficial, such tropes facilitate their acceptance and hasten their course.
What is for certain is that narratives that blindly herald the triumph of multiculturalism
and cosmopolitanism elide globalization’s oppressive and exploitative elements.

As already mentioned, Parts Unknown, like Bizarre Foods, claims to promote
“global understanding” by increasing individuals’ knowledge about other peoples and
cultures. Moreover, they suggest that tourism is the vehicle through which such
knowledge is obtained, presenting tourism in a positive light while downplaying its
negative effects. Admittedly, the two shows are hardly identical in their complicity.
Whereas Bizarre Foods essentially never mentions the negative impacts of tourism and
other aspects of globalization, Parts Unknown regularly presents such phenomena as
complex and ambivalent in nature. Nonetheless, as will be seen, Parts Unknown’s
deployment of tropes such as the imperial gaze and imperialist nostalgia undermines its
supposedly edifying qualities. Further, while the show criticizes tourists’ impacts on
many destinations, it rarely turns its critical lens on its own complicities, thereby
constituting a strategy of anti-conquest as seen in the Laos episode of *No Reservations.*
This strategy shields Bourdain and “travelers” who may emulate him from the criticism
that they, too, reproduce the normative narrative of “global understanding” that is in turn
in collusion with the globalization agenda.

**Feeding/Resisting the Touristic Imagination in *Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier),
Detroit***

A blurry shot fades to a close-up of mint tea being poured into a glass. This in
turn fades to a shot of the sky filled only with palm trees and birds flying frame left. The
shot after that also features flying birds, but they are now over a coastal city. A blue
green sea and a coral hued sunrise or sunset is visible in the horizon. All the meanwhile,
an adhan, or Islamic call to worship, is heard in the background. Finally, the viewer sees
Bourdain sitting restfully and looking pensive. Through voiceover, he reads the following
quotation by Paul Bowles, American composer, writer and resident of Tangier for fifty-
two years: “I’ve always wanted to get as far away as possible from the place where I was
born. Far both geographically and spiritually. To leave it behind.” (Season 1, Episode 5:
0:27-0:43)

So begins *Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier),* an episode brimming with
intertextual references to historical representations of Tangier produced by its many
famous visitors and expats, among them William S. Burroughs, Tennessee Williams,
Henri Matisse and the Rolling Stones. Over the course of an hour, Bourdain considers the
legacy of these famous visitors and talks with both expats and native Moroccans,
including a Fulbright Scholar, a famous Moroccan musician, and the Moroccan owner of
a luxury antique store. He visits tourist favorites such as Café Tingis and the Grand Socco Market as well as unnamed street vendors and a Bedouin feast. As in *No Reservations*, then, Bourdain in *Parts Unknown* can play the role of both tourist and “traveler” without any injury to his “traveler” identity. What *Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier)* foregrounds most of all, however, is the ways in which cultural representations of places abroad produce the touristic imagination and touristic desires. Already within the first few minutes of the episode, Tangier is represented as an absolute Other to the America where both Bowles and Bourdain were born. And while Bourdain is critical of the commodification of Tangier at the hands of visitors and expats wanting to experience the “exotic,” he does not in fact call into question their representation of Tangier as such. As a result, this episode likely contributes to the stoking of tourists’ desires to experience “exotic” Tangier. For this reason, Bourdain’s disdain for tourists who diminish Tangier’s authenticity can be seen as a strategy of anti-conquest given his own complicity in commodifying the very authenticity he supposedly cherishes.

Bourdain explains that Tangier’s allure to Westerners stems from its historical image as a place where “everything was permitted, nothing was forbidden.” (ibid: 1:46-1:51) Importantly, he provides the historical context for the city’s promiscuity and large foreign population. Tangier was loosely held by Western powers (primarily France, Spain, and Britain) as an international zone from 1923 to 1956 (ibid: 1:39-1:45). In other words, “Tangier was a magnet for [Western] writers, remittance men, spies and artists” not by sheer happenstance, but because of European hegemony (ibid: 1:57-2:02). Further, if we are to take seriously Edward Said’s claim that the production of cultural representations of the “Orient” was part and parcel of establishing and maintaining
European empires, then the hold Tangier has held on the Western imagination and its historic status as an “international” city cannot be seen as unrelated phenomena (1978:3). Take, for example, the following quotation from William S. Burroughs, seen as an intertitle three minutes and nine seconds into the episode: “As a young child I wanted to become a writer...they lived in the native quarter of Tangier, smoking hashish and languidly caressing a pet gazelle.” (Season 1, Episode 5: 3:09) According to Said, such representations might be seen as maintaining empire by shaping the touristic imaginary. Burroughs portrays the lifestyle of the typical Western writer in Tangier, for example, as opulent (“a pet gazelle”) and hedonistic (“smoking hashish”). This lifestyle cues us into the class status imagined to be held by Western writers, a status undoubtedly augmented by his or her position as a Westerner in a city under Western hegemony. This expectation of status in turn likely attracted more writers and tourists like Burroughs, deepening the West’s influence on the city and beginning anew the cycle linking Orientalist desires and tourism.

All of these implications are contained in Bourdain’s initial recounting of Tangier’s political and cultural history. Nonetheless, he neither makes explicit the connection between Western hegemony over Tangier and the overwhelmingly Orientalist character of representations of the city nor contests the Orientalist representations themselves. While this kind of Orientalism would be fairly quotidian for an average travel show, it is somewhat surprising to see in a show that portrays itself as committed to promoting “global understanding.” Indeed, the first Tangier resident Bourdain meets, Jonathan Dawson, is presented as living “a life not too distant from Burroughs’ fantasy” for the following reasons: “cake and tea at four served everyday by his man-servant. He
may not have a gazelle, but a pet rooster will do. And everyday he makes the rounds of the cafes...” (Season 1, Episode 5: 4:15-4:33) British by birth, Dawson seemingly lives the Orientalist’s dream life, a fact that Bourdain seems perfectly comfortable with. The show acknowledges Dawson’s class privilege, however, by also presenting the opinion of someone like Othman Noussairi, a young Moroccan and owner of an urban magazine: “[Western artists think] that, you know, coming and being an artist is going to be enough, it’s not enough…it’s pretty tough for them.” (ibid: 39:30-39:40) Nonetheless, by presenting Dawson’s life as enviable and, at least for upper class individuals, reproducible, it is likely that some viewers might be inspired to consume Tangier in a similar fashion. Like the written representations before it, then, this episode of *Parts Unknown* suggests that Tangier still offers to some individuals, particularly upper class individuals, the opportunity to live out their Orientalist fantasies. In other words, *Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier)* suggests that while the “exotic” Tangier of Bowles and Burroughs may be harder to find, it is, like all “authentic” touristic experiences, still there to be found by a dedicated seeker.

Bourdain notes in his online essay “Burroughs, Bogey and Bourdain: A portrait of Tangier,” found on the page for the episode on the show’s website, that there is a “fight to keep Tangier’s unique character alive” due to the incursion of “elements like investors, tourists and European purchasing power.” With his trademark sarcasm he adds, “Imagine if Burroughs’ trash and hashish-laden one-room dwelling in the native corner’s maze of twisting streets and alleys was turned into something really depressing like a boutique hotel?” (*Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier)* website) Bourdain purports to appreciate “Tangier’s unique character,” but to what extent is he complicit with forces such as
“investors, tourists and European purchasing power” that are bringing about the construction of depressing “boutique hotels?” As I hope I have made clear in my discussion of the episode’s reproduction of reproducing centuries old Orientalist desires, Bourdain does little but pay lip-service to the idea that Tangier’s commodification is to be lamented. Further, while Bourdain writes how he is glad that “the days of predatory poets in search of literary inspiration and young flesh are probably over for good,” he fails to recognize how he and his crew might be predatory television producers in search of juicy material for their show. Again, his strategy of representation in this episode might be called one of anti-conquest for Bourdain, by waxing on about the travesty that is Tangier’s loss of authenticity, wants to blind viewers to his own contribution to the persistence of Western hegemony in Tangier.

In a very different way, Parts Unknown: Detroit also simultaneously feeds and disavows the touristic imaginary. Unlike Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier), however, it does in fact acknowledge its complicity. Focusing on Detroit’s dramatic history of urban decay and depopulation, the episode speaks to the city’s tragic past, but also to its residents’ resiliency and to signs, however tentative, of recovery. For example, besides the requisite local eateries, Bourdain visits D-Town Farms, one of the most successful urban farming programs in the city. Nonetheless, as the episode’s introduction, which juxtaposes archival footage of Detroit’s golden age with a contemporary shot of an abandoned house, makes clear, the primary narrative of the episode is the contrast between the city’s past affluence and present dilapidation.

The first full scene of the episode takes place at the Packard plant, a factory complex that, when in opened in 1903, was the most modern automobile manufacturing
plant in the world but is now the site of the largest abandoned buildings in the United States. The scene is filled with shots of an industrial wasteland that arguably possesses a stark and unique beauty. As a result, the plant as well as other ruins littered around the city have become popular among “urban explorers, people shooting music videos, [and] taking pictures.” (Season 2, Episode 7: 7:00-7:06) Bourdain notes, however, that “Detroiter hate it”, hate “all the visitors like us... wallowing in ruin porn.” (ibid: 7:33-7:38; my emphasis) He not only recognizes the problematic nature of “ruin porn,” especially given that Detroit’s urban issues are just as much current issues as historical ones (at one point he calls the city the “great American ongoing tragedy”), but also his own complicity. Nonetheless, the episode features take after take of what some might consider hauntingly beautiful ruins (ibid: 7:25-7:27). In other words, despite his clear admission that there is an exploitative aspect to glorifying and commodifying Detroit’s abandoned landscape, he seems impelled by the logic of the market, that is, by the need to create appealing television, to take part in this practice. Going further than Renato Rosaldo’s imperialist nostalgia, then, *Parts Unknown: Detroit* takes aesthetic pleasure in the very spectacle of the ruin. In this way, these two episodes evidence how *Parts Unknown* participates in the paradoxical strategy of representation whereby travel television shows lament the destruction of places they are in the process of helping destroy.

**The Imperial Gaze in *Parts Unknown: Congo, Peru***

Similar to *Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier)*, which featured an uncritical presentation of historical Orientalist tropes, *Parts Unknown: Congo* and *Peru* demonstrates the show’s reproduction of the imperial gaze, or a gaze which “reflects the
assumption that the white, Western subject is central much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject.” (Waugh 2006:514) For one, *Parts Unknown: Congo* evidences Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan’s claim that “nearly every modern travel book [or, in our case, television show] that features the Congo as travel zone at some level reinscribes Conrad’s classic novella *Heart of Darkness* (1898).” (1998:69) Two minutes and twenty seconds into the episode, Bourdain loosely quotes the novella: “When I [Marlow] was a little chap, I had a passion for maps. At that time, there were many blank spaces on Earth. But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank – that I had a hankering after.” (Season 1, Episode 8: 2:20-2:30) In case the reference is lost on the viewer, Bourdain explains: “this, then, is the Congo.” (ibid: 2:44-2:46) What’s more, Bourdain admits that he, like Marlow, has long been fascinated by the Congo: “I’ve had something of a multi-decade obsession with the Congo. It’s been kind of a personal dream, if you will, to travel the Congo River.” (ibid: 27:06-27:17) As his multiple references to Conrad’s novella throughout the episode suggest, Bourdain’s fascination with the Congo is fed by this and other popular representations of the Congo.

It is little surprise, then, that Bourdain at times echoes Conrad in presenting the Congo as, “[a place where] history disappears; the landscape becomes sinisterly primeval; human figures become either hypersensual or abject; politics becomes anarchy.” (Holland and Huggan 1998:70) Indeed, the episode begins with what is portrayed as a typical scene from Bourdain’s travels in the Congo. The truck carrying him, his film crew, and their equipment needs to be ferried across the Congo River, but progress is delayed by difficulties in communicating with locals and by mechanical issues with the ferry. The crew discusses rumors of trucks that have been held up for hours or
even days (Season 1, Episode 8: 0:31-0:36). After what appears to be a long and difficult time getting everything in order, the ferry finally begins its journey across the river. A resigned Bourdain, sitting on top of a white truck surrounded by Congolese men arguing with one another, announces, “welcome to the jungle.” (ibid: 1:11) In just this short scene, the Congo is represented as a place where chaos is the norm, rather than the exception, a place where the jungle is not merely a natural feature, but rather a metaphor for the country as a whole.

Bourdain, however, connects the Congo’s current economic and political problems with its historical colonization, depopulation, and exploitation by Belgium. He explains that when the Congo achieved independence, Belgium “left behind a completely unprepared, tribally divided, and largely ungovernable landmass filled with stuff that everybody in the world wanted. And things pretty much went downhill from there.” (ibid: 3:35-3:45) He forgets, of course, to mention the U.S.’s role in replacing democratically elected Patrice Lumumba with the authoritarian Joseph-Desiré Mobutu, but includes a visual sequence that is meant to demonstrate the veracity of the idea that “things [in the Congo] pretty much went downhill from there.” Beginning at three minutes and forty-six seconds into the episode, the approximately thirty five second sequence consists of the following images in the following order: a rusty jet plane on a landing strip overgrown with grass; a house seemingly on the verge of collapsing; a man lighting a pile of grass on fire; feet kicking up dirt; dried monkey heads; a group of children playing; a woman ladling soup in a roofless shelter; the word apocalypse printed on a sign next to a dirt road, a dark, smoky tent containing a cauldron over a fire, a woman holding a cigarette, and a young boy holding a cup; a close-up of a hand grasping for something in a bowl.
full of some red liquid; two hands holding up cash near several loud, gesticulating men; UN peacekeeping troops; a group of children posing for the camera; someone swimming in a highly turbulent river; a marketplace littered with debris; more peacekeeping troops; feet walking on uneven asphalt; a person on a boat throwing a goat into a river; hands playing drums with sticks; a throng of children; a double exposure of a river and a pair of feet amidst a cloud of dirt.

These images plainly reveal the episode’s imperial gaze. Juxtaposed with images of armed troops and refugee camps, totally quotidian images of, say, children playing take on a menacing quality, playing into colonialist fears of unchecked propagation. Cultural differences are also exploited, for example, in the presentation of dried monkey heads, since the average American viewer might be shocked at the image, not realizing that they are normal fare in parts of Africa. The sequence also features many shots of limbs isolated from the people to whom they belong, bringing to mind Chinua Achebe’s critique of *Heart of Darkness* for having almost no African characters “who [are] not just limbs or rolling eyes.” (1978:5) Finally, the rate at which the images are shown as well as the speed of the music played in the background increases as the sequence progresses, implying a descent into chaos. This series of images, which, to reiterate, follows the line “[and] things [in the Congo] pretty much went downhill from there,” is presented as if it discloses the Congo’s essence. How else could one explain the meaning behind a slew of images that would never be seen as related if it were not for a visual and auditory continuity that renders the sequence a coherent whole? For Bourdain, then, the Congo is not so much a blank space on the map as it is overdetermined by history, a place forever destined to remain a place of utter abjection.
Even more than the Orientalism of *Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier)*, then, the imperial gaze in *Parts Unknown: Congo* operates by the colonial logic of being horrified by the very same difference one desires as a “traveler.” As already mentioned, Bourdain long wanted to come to the Congo due to its reputation, built by texts such as *The Heart of Darkness*, as a “blank [space] on Earth.” (Season 1, Episode 8: 2:22) In other words, what attracts him to the Congo is its radical alterity, an alterity so extreme that it was simply unknown to the West for much of its history. At the same time that he desires the Congo’s supposed difference, however, the episode makes clear, through images such as the ones discussed above, that this difference exceeds acceptable limits. In the age of Western colonialism and imperialism, this dangerous alterity of the geographic Other was used as justification for the colonial and imperial project. Today, it serves to augment Bourdain’s cultural capital by bolstering his identity as a “traveler” who consumes “authentic” experiences. In this sense, the imperial gaze functions alongside touristic discourses of authenticity to render difference legible in the twenty-first century.

Similarly, *Parts Unknown: Peru*, an episode featuring Bourdain and his fellow cook and “traveler,” Eric Ripert, as they investigate the conditions under which their very own line of chocolate is produced (this aspect of the episode will be discussed in more detail in the last section of the chapter), demonstrates how the show sometimes reproduces an imperialist gaze that privileges Western forms of knowledge over non-Western ones. Halfway into the episode, Bourdain and Ripert prepare for and then partake in a Peruvian shamanic ritual. From the beginning, Bourdain expresses his skepticism about its efficacy, while Ripert is enthusiastic about both the ritual and Peruvian shamanism in general. As Bourdain puts it in a mildly sarcastic tone, “Ripert is,
how shall I put it, well, let’s just say he’s got more of a spiritual side than me.” (Season 1, Episode 7:02-7:09) Exploring a market, the two eventually decide upon a vendor from which to procure “medical, medicinal herbs with supposed magical properties and stuff for this shaman dude to bless us and our cacao crop.” (ibid: 7:24-7:30) Upon taking a whiff of one ingredient, Bourdain exclaims, “Hmm, smells like hippy,” equating Westerners’ appropriation of Peruvian and other non-Western medicinal ingredients and cures with an actual Peruvian medicinal ingredient in its proper context (ibid: 7:44).

Bourdian’s cultural insensitivity only continues when they actually meet the shaman and have him conduct the ceremony. The composition of the scene, which begins approximately twenty three minutes and twenty three seconds into the episode, is meant to lend a vaguely menacing and mysterious air to the process (the menacing and mysterious qualities are arguably sarcastically invoked as so many things are on Bourdian’s shows; nonetheless, the episode not only cannot be certain of viewers’ understanding of its sarcasm, but also, following the logic of anti-conquest, reproduces imperialist tropes in the act of subverting them). We first see a shot taken from a low angle and behind a tree that shows a person crouching on the ground so that we cannot see what he is doing. The music is suspenseful, drawing suspicion as to his behavior. The next shot shows the person’s torso. He is wearing a Peruvian poncho and in his hands he holds a small bottle of green liquid and an object that resembles a rattle. The shot after that is of knotted trees and roots, adding to the scene’s ominous air. Finally, we meet the shaman, Francisco, who introduces himself to Bourdain and Ripert. He proceeds to spiritually cleanse Bourdain and Ripert using traditional techniques and ingredients. Not surprisingly, Bourdain has a skeptical look during the entire ceremony, while Ripert is
enthused. Upon the ritual’s completion, Bourdain characteristically exclaims, “My aura is now cleaner than Gweneth Paltrow’s colon after a three-month juice cleanse.” (ibid: 24:58-25:01) Ripert, on the other hand, tells Bourdain, “I know you don’t really believe it, but your energy has changed. I’m serious. I’m not joking.” (ibid: 25:12-25:18) While Ripert may be fetishizing the shaman’s knowledge given his surface level understanding of its cultural context and outsider status in the community, Bourdain is certainly portraying the shaman’s knowledge as a sham in comparison to Western forms of medical knowledge. All in all, then, *Parts Unknown: Peru* and *Congo* reveal the presence of an imperial gaze that renders its “objects” the absolute Other of the show’s Western viewers.

**Resisting the Imperial Gaze in Parts Unknown: Libya, South Africa, Jerusalem**

The fact that the imperial gaze necessitates a gazing subject with relative power compared to the gazed upon “object” does not preclude the gaze being creatively and forcefully resisted and subverted by those it objectifies. After all, the gaze’s “objects” are none other than agentive human beings. Yet while this may seem obvious now, tourism studies has not always acknowledged this fact:

> hosts are [often] portrayed in these interactions [with tourists] as passive, unable to influence events, as if they were somehow physically locked in the gaze. Missing in these analyses is the possibility that locals can, and often do, play a role in determining what happens in their encounters with tourists. (Stronza 2001:272-273)

To take a historic example, Malek Alloula writes in *The Colonial Harem* about how the veil worn by Algerian women in French colonial postcards, might be read less as a social custom (for indeed some unveiled women were also photographed) and more as a
conscious act of resistance against the French imperial gaze that would present them as
erotic and “exotic” objects of desire:

These veiled women are not only an embarrassing enigma to the
photographer but an outright attack upon him. It must be believed that the
feminine gaze that filters through the veil is a gaze of a particular
kind...Thrust in the presence of a veiled woman, the photographer feels
photographed; having himself become an object-to-be-seen, he loses
initiative: he is dispossessed of his own gaze. (1986:14; author’s emphasis)

Taking Alloula’s cue, therefore, I want to highlight those points in the show when the
people that Bourdain’s crew tries to film resist the gaze of the Western camera, often by
rejecting its presence altogether.

The most obvious moments when the imperial gaze is resisted occur when locals
simply forbid Bourdain’s crew from filming. At multiple times in Parts Unknown: Libya,
for example, locals refuse to let themselves or the spaces that they occupy be filmed for
reasons that they do not disclose. Most prominently, hostile men force Bourdain and his
crew off the premise of the ruins of Muammar Gaddafi’s palace, perhaps due to fears
about how the footage might be used to depict Libya (Season 1, Episode 6: 18:25-20:28).
Indeed, Western media’s portrayal of Libya is a major theme in the episode, Bourdain’s
admitted goal for the episode being to show a side of Libya other than war, terrorism, and
Gaddafi’s authoritarian regime.

The gaze of the Western camera is similarly rejected in a heated scene in Parts
Unknown: South Africa. Bourdain and his local contact, DJ Lez, are being filmed walking
down the street in Hillbrow, “a notoriously dangerous district,” when “one of the many
enterprises doing business on corners and in doorways around us becomes alarmed at the
sight of our cameras.” (Season 2, Episode 6: 16:05-16:08; 18:43-50) Bourdain continues,
“soon there’s a mob of very angry people coming our way. We do not turn around our
cameras for obvious reasons.” (ibid: 18:50-18:58) Here, Bourdain’s encounter has a particularly pronounced class and racial dimension given South Africa’s history of apartheid. Not a single white face is seen on the street Bourdain is walking down and the camera crew he has in tow must be an obvious signal of class and outsider status for Hillbrow residents. Further, being filmed potentially endangers the livelihood of merchants whose businesses might be less than entirely legal and whose consent was in all certainty not acquired before filming began. The suspicions of both South Africans and Libyans towards foreign film crews and their presumptuous presence are, therefore, well founded. What’s more, the choice to include the footage of the show’s film crew getting rejected by locals in the final cut for these episodes is revealing of *Parts Unknown*’s touristic discourse of authenticity. In other words, rejection by locals is meant to indicate the extent to which these destinations are “off the beaten path.” Further, showing these rejections can even be seen as an act of anti-conquest, since the implication is that although locals rejected the camera’s gaze in these situations, the camera’s gaze was accepted by locals in every situation beside these.

*Parts Unknown: Jerusalem* features one instance of what might be a local adopting a more implicit form of resistance than an outright rejection of the camera’s presence. Bourdain is having dinner with Laila El-Haddad, his contact and translator, and the Sultan family at their house in the Gaza Strip (the episode not only features Jerusalem, but also the Palestinian territories) when he asks Um Sultan whether she thinks she will be able to visit her hometown of Jaffa within her own lifetime. She answers that she is optimistic, after which her husband chimes in. Laila translates his response as such: “First he said, you’re not allowing us to. Then he self-corrected and
said, the Israelis are not allowing us to.” (Season 2, Episode 1: 33:15-33:20) It is possible that he momentarily forgot Bourdain was an American and not an Israeli, but it is also possible that he meant what he originally said and only claimed to have misspoke in order to appease the show’s producers. If the latter is the case, then he pulled off the unlikely feat of criticizing America’s pro-Israeli policies on an American television show. Indeed, while Bourdain is vocally critically of Israel throughout the episode, he does not acknowledge the U.S.’s complicity in the occupation of the Palestinian territories. To this extent, Um Sultan’s husband potentially meant to draw attention to this involvement, all while allowing the crew’s camera to gaze upon him. In all likelihood, many more instances of resisting the imperial gaze occurred in the filming of episodes of Parts Unknown than I have been able to mention here. Further, most instances when locals forbade Bourdain’s film crew from filming were, not surprisingly, probably edited out or simply never shot. Again, then, those that were included in the final cut were likely included in order to enhance Bourdain’s status as a “traveler” and suggest consent was acquired for all the other scenes of the show. In the end, I hope this brief section reinforces the fact that locals, like Alloula’s veiled women, are subjects with the power to consent to or to resist, whether through rejection or subversion, the camera’s gaze.

**Negotiating Class, Nationality, and Empire in Parts Unknown: Colombia, Peru, Libya**

Because Parts Unknown has a strong emphasis on geopolitical phenomena that are intertwined with histories and current realities of class, nationalisms, colonialisms, and imperialisms, Bourdain and his film crew’s own class status and nationality come to the forefront in many of their encounters abroad. This dynamic has already been discussed in previous sections, for example, in my discussion of Bourdain’s class and
nationality in *Parts Unknown: Morocco (Tangier)*. Nonetheless, I hope to explicitly focus here on these positionalities as opposed to, say, the role they play in Bourdain’s use of a touristic discourse of authenticity or in constructing situations where the imperial gaze is variously deployed or subverted.

To give one example, in *Parts Unknown: Colombia* (Season 1, Episode 3) Bourdain and his local contacts discuss the “war on drugs” at length. Much of the episode revolves around demonstrating how the Colombian government’s decade long war against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and drug cartels is slowly finding success and around enticing tourists to visit Colombia amidst these increasingly safe conditions. To this extent, Bourdain and his local contacts cannot help mentioning America’s role in the Colombian “war on drugs” in the form of guns and military training as well as in the form of demand for Colombian drugs. As an American, therefore, Bourdain is far from occupying a neutral positionality (not that such a positionality ever exists). His complicity in the “war on drugs” is foregrounded by Pablo Mora, Bourdain’s main contact in Colombia, when he suggests that the only solution would be for both Colombia and the U.S. to end the “war on drugs.” (ibid: 11) In response, Bourdain, presumably voicing what he sees as the only realistic opinion, claims that this will never happen, for the “the United States will never legalize drugs.” (ibid: 11:47-11:50)

It should be noted that Bourdain is personally critical of the “war on drugs” for both its faulty logic and devastating consequences: “But the ludicrous futility of any fully successful “war on drugs” is apparent with a single look out of a plane window [when flying over the countryside].” (*Parts Unknown: Colombia* website) Nonetheless, he does not see its cessation as a realistic future and, by saying as much on national television,
may further cement its seeming immutability in the minds of many viewers. In this way, Bourdain’s portrayal of the “war on drugs” falls short of productively critiquing American foreign policy and Americans’ complicity, no matter how minor, with policies such as the “war on drugs.” In a similar fashion, the following two episodes that I will look at feature scenes that foreground Americans’ or Westerners’ complicities with deleterious forces of globalization. Bourdain and his producers’ variegated negotiations of such charged encounters reveal both successes and failures in recognizing and critiquing these complicities.

As discussed earlier, the premise of Parts Unknown: Peru is that Bourdain and his friend and fellow chef Eric Ripert are interested in visiting the source of the cocoa beans that go into their very own brand of gourmet chocolate. It is also more generally about how Peruvian cocoa beans are “drawing outsiders to [Peru’s] hidden mountain valleys” due to the fact that chocolate is “now becoming as nuanced as fine wine, making the pursuit of the raw, good stuff all the more difficult.” (Season 1, Episode 7: 00:10-00:33) In essence, then, the episode is about the business of chocolate and the links between its often poor producers in Peru and its affluent consumers in the U.S. and elsewhere. Bourdain is well aware that not all global trade is just for the smaller, less powerful actors involved in the transaction. As a result, he contemplates the ethical dimensions of his business throughout the episode: “three men [Bourdain, Ripert, and their business partner, Chris Curtain] and a chocolate bar. Good thing for this world or exploitative opportunism?” (ibid: 11:51-11:57)

Bourdain’s investigation into whether or not his chocolate bar is responsible for the exploitation of Peruvian farmers takes him to the Marañón canyon, where he meets
Don Fortunato, his local contact and “a farmer whose family has been working these mountains for over 40 years.” (ibid: 00:50-00:54) A graphic proceeds to explain how much the different parties involved in the bar’s production, including farmers like Don Fortunato, get. Apparently, farmers involved in producing the cocoa for Bourdain and his business partners earn a relatively sizable portion of the proceeds compared to farmers indirectly employed by other chocolate makers. The local farmers that Bourdain talks to also report that they are doing quite well, although not as well as when they used to farm soybeans and coffee before those crops became, for unexplained reasons, unprofitable (ibid: 4:10-4:35). Despite all this, Bourdain cannot shake off his ambivalence towards the whole enterprise and is still questioning himself towards the end of the episode:

So, did we do the right thing? Is it alright for two New Yorkers to make money, however much or however little, off the work of struggling farmers in a faraway land? Fortunato and Alberto [another farmer they meet], Chris, everybody down the line, all the way to families who pick the pods off the trees, seem pretty happy doing what they’re doing. But do I want to be in the chocolate business? (ibid: 11:15-11:42; my emphasis)

In short, Bourdain suggests that the episode cannot give a definitive answer as to the nature of the economic relations that exist between businessmen like himself and farmers like Fortunato and Alberto, despite the fact that he went all the way to Peru to meet them himself. To this extent, he recognizes the complexity of the issues at hand (for example, the farmers may not be as happy as they claim to be on camera) and renders the episode a potential catalyst for viewers’ reflections on their own economic complicities. In this way, though *Parts Unknown: Peru* does not suggest ways in which trade could be made more fair, it nonetheless demonstrates how an episode of *Parts Unknown* can critically thematize the class and national positionalities of both its producers and viewers.
Parts Unknown: Libya aired on May 19, 2013, less than two years after the end of the Libyan Civil War which saw Colonel Muammar Gaddafi disposed of after forty two years of authoritarian rule. Not surprisingly, the episode focuses on showing a side of Libyan life excluded from the news: “What you see [on the news] is not encouraging... But if you only look at what’s on the news you can miss, maybe, what’s a bigger picture [shot shows what appears to be a quotidian religious ceremony].” (Season 1, Episode 6: 21:05-21:28) One such scene takes place in Uncle Kentucky, a fast-food restaurant clearly modeled after the American chain Kentucky Fried Chicken. Bourdain explains that it is a recent addition to the Libyan culinary landscape: “revolution has bought changed tastes. Libyans, especially young Libyans, hunger for more than just freedom. They hunger for places like this.” (ibid: 14:35-14:51) What follows is a sarcasm-saturated scene in which Bourdain and his local contact, Johar, equate American fried chicken with freedom. The scene is disconcerting because it is uncertain whether or not Johar understands the extent of Bourdain’s sarcasm at all times. While Bourdain clearly mocks the notion that fried chicken can be equated with freedom, suggesting that such an idea is an example of the most vulgar kind of American ideology, Johar may only be partially ironic, given that possibilities of consumption often represent genuine signifiers of political freedom in post-authoritarian states.

Bourdain, who explained earlier that “the Colonel [KFC’s mascot] and his buddies, the King [Burger King’s mascot] and the Clown [McDonald’s mascot], have not quite made it here,” ironically suggests we see Libya’s present and future Americanization as a sign of its increased freedom (ibid: 14:56-15:00). He adds in a voiceover, “to Johar, a few pieces of greasy fried chicken eaten in a brightly lit fast food
setting means something more than a calorie bomb.” (ibid: 16:37-16:45) Johar concurs, all the while pointing to his chicken sandwich, “that’s why we fighting. That’s why we giving a lot of blood from my country. Because I want the feeling that - the taste of freedom [sic].” (ibid: 16:46-16:56) It should be noted that Johar sports a grin while saying these lines. He may or may not genuinely think that the increase in food options is part of the newfound freedom of the post-Gaddafi era. After all, while Uncle Kentucky may be a sign of the impending Americanization of Libya, it is also a genuine mark of the country’s newfound global integration. Again, while Johar’s opinion remains ambiguous due to the scene’s highly sarcastic atmosphere, Bourdain’s attitude of mockery is plain and clear.

Bourdain is not sarcastic, however, when he says, “It’s nice to see freedom. It’s nice to see the bad guy gone. It’s nice, I feel welcome here.” (ibid: 16:21-16:27; my emphasis) He implies that Libya’s increased freedom is making it an increasingly pleasant place for Americans like himself to visit. At the same time, the foreshadowed American tourist is simultaneously enticed and castigated in advance when Bourdain says in reference to Leptis Magna, a spectacularly well-preserved Roman city, “anywhere else in the world this place would be overrun with tourists. But look: no one.” (ibid: 39-39:08) In this way, America’s incursion into Libya, whether in the form of fast food restaurants or tourists, is at once dreaded, lauded, and accepted as inevitable. It is perhaps lauded most of all, however, given the clear, even if ironic, association made between American fast food and that enigmatic yet allegedly universal object of human desire, freedom.

While a show that purports to contribute to “global understanding” through its thematization of geopolitical issues, *Parts Unknown* commodifies destinations that are
not currently on tourists’ radars and reproduces tropes rooted in histories of colonialism and imperialism. In particular, it is rife with examples of imperialist nostalgia and the imperial gaze, demonstrating its failure to overcome or even critique problematic representational practices. Similarly, the show even exploits its instances of failure, that is, instances where locals refuse to be filmed, by portraying these moments as proof of Bourdian’s willingness to push the boundaries of travel. These aspects of *Parts Unknown* contradict the show’s appeals to its own edifying qualities, revealing a complicity with normative narratives of globalization that efface its uneven and inequitable qualities.
Chapter 4: Pilkington as Ironic “Traveler” in *An Idiot Abroad*

In 2010, one of the most unique travel shows currently on air made its debut. Called *An Idiot Abroad*, the first season of this British show followed Karl Pilkington around the world as he visited the so-called New Seven Wonders of the World, a list containing such tourist favorites as the Great Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, and Machu Pichu (“World of New 7 Wonders”). Yet *An Idiot Abroad* is not a real travel show, but a parody of one, for “host” Karl Pilkington has absolutely no interest in traveling. His travails, engineered by “producers” Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, are meant as one big practical joke: “I [Ricky] want him to hate every minute of it [traveling] for my own amusement. Nothing is funnier than Karl in a corner being poked by a stick. I am that stick.” (*An Idiot Abroad* Season 1, Episode 1: 1:26-1:37) Quite simply, Pilkington is unlike any other travel host on television (ibid: 0:33-0:42).

Pilkington first became famous as a producer for comedians Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant’s radio program on XFM who occasionally made appearances on air. His odd remarks and comic dimwittedness made him popular among fans and led to appearances on *The Ricky Gervais Show*, which ultimately landed him his role in *An Idiot Abroad*. Indeed, Gervais and Merchant appear in *An Idiot Abroad* as the producers of the show who send Pilkington around the world to make television. Gervais and Merchant have worked together on numerous occasions, not only having co-hosted *The Ricky Gervais Show*, but also having co-written and co-directed the television shows *The Office* and *Extras*. Even so, Gervais is clearly the bigger personality on the show. His sense of humor, described by some as “cruel and cynical,” comes through strong and clear in every episode. In Gervais’s own words, however: “I never actively try to offend…But I
believe you should say what you mean…No one should ever be offended by truth…my job isn’t just to make people laugh but also make them think.” (2011) In the case of *An Idiot Abroad*, Pilkington embodies Gervais’s philosophy by saying what whatever he thinks, assuming that his comments are allowed to be crude as long as they are true. Another aspect of *An Idiot Abroad* that reflects Gervais’s influence is its utterly offbeat nature. According to his thinking, “quirky, different, fringe projects that may only be cult, often travel a lot better internationally…People everywhere will recognize and appreciate its innovation.” (2013) To this extent, the strange idea of a show following an idiot tourist as he follows the itinerary of a “traveler,” was concocted with the intention of conquering foreign markets through its sheer eccentricity. Indeed, the show, which runs on Sky1 in the UK and on the Science Channel in the United States, has proven successful both domestically and abroad.

Described by Gervais as a “round, empty-headed, chimp-like, Manc [inhabitant of Manchester] moron,” Pilkington dislikes the unfamiliar, is culturally insensitive, and evinces little knowledge of or appreciation for the sights he visits (Season 1, Episode 1: 0:38-0:41). Season one, then, does not have him marvel at the New Seven Wonders of the World, but rather sees him consistently underwhelmed. In this way, he is a most peculiar kind of tourist, for while he rejects popular tourist itineraries, he does so, as will be seen, in part because he has some insights worthy of the “savvy traveler” and in part because he is more vulgar than even the stereotypical “vulgar tourist.” The show also employs a unique discourse of authenticity that values honesty, no matter how ugly, above all else. Indeed, despite the incredibly offensive nature of some of his remarks, some viewers find Pilkington’s frankness his best quality as a tourist. Unlike Zimmern and Bourdain, then,
who at least a few viewers found to be “inauthentic” due to a discrepancy between their explicit and implicit motive, Pilkington is critiqued on the ground of his political correctness rather than of his “authenticity.” In fact, viewers see some of Pilkington’s comments as demonstrating a folk brilliance precisely because they cut through the pretense of other anti-touristic discourses of authenticity. In this way, An Idiot Abroad’s discourse of authenticity absolves, for some, Pilkington’s cultural insensitivity, while also confirming that authenticity is just as much a function of subjects as it is of objects.

Combining the tourist’s oblivious insensitivity and the “traveler’s” disdain of other tourists, Pilkington defies both labels. Further, as a parody of anti-touristic travel shows like Zimmern’s and Bourdain’s, An Idiot Abroad critiques the anti-touristic discourses of authenticity deployed by these shows. While some of Pilkington’s remarks are offensive or just down right bizarre, then, others point out the social pressures that determine the behavior of tourists and “travelers” alike. As evidenced by Pilkington’s own deployment of a discourse of authenticity in relation to disability, however, the show ultimately suggests that anti-touristic discourses of authenticity are equally flawed and by the same logic equally valid. In dong so, it not only fails to critique the notion of authenticity itself, but also gives a green light to other shows’ commodifying practices.

Karl Pilkington: Tourist or “Traveler?”

Episodes of the first season of An Idiot Abroad open with breathtaking shots of the New Seven Wonders of the World accompanied by exceedingly dramatic music. A deep voice pronounces: “The Seven Wonders of the World…Truly man’s greatest achievements. But there’s one man who sees them differently.” (Season 1, Episode 1: 0:01-0:20) At this point, we see Pilkington for the first time. He is sitting in Gervais’s
office and, in reference to a picture of the Great Pyramids, says, without an ounce of awe or irony in his voice: “if that was on my road, the council would be on it. They’d go, ‘Get that down, it’s a death trap’.” (ibid: 0:22-0:25) The shot cuts to Gervais, who bursts out laughing at this most peculiar comment. At this point, the deep-voiced announcer returns and identifies the man who sees differently from all other tourists: “Karl Pilkington.” The introductory sequence proceeds to show scenes of Pilkington being a fool around the world while Gervais and Merchant explain the extent of Pilkington’s idiocy. Merchant tells us, for example: “we’ve often described him as being like some kind of real-life Homer Simpson.” Towards the end, Gervais finally explains the premise of the show, which is to send Pilkington around the world to capture his odd remarks about cultures as well as his suffering at the hands of Gervais (Season 1, Episode 1: 0:25-1:55). Clearly, we have a bizarre travel show on our hands.

Following the introductory sequence unique to its season, a typical episode of An Idiot Abroad in seasons 1 and 2 begins with Pilkington in Gervais and Merchant’s office, discussing where he will be going and what his ultimate objective is. In the first season, his objective is one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, while in the second season he is checking experiences off a bucket list, or a list of things an individual might want to accomplish during his/her lifetime. Without fail, he makes a strange, uninformed, and/or cantankerous comment about the destination and the sight or activity he must see or do, as demonstrated by his comments about the Great Pyramid discussed above. Having established his quirkiness, ignorance, and irritability yet again, the episode proceeds to follow Pilkington to the destination where he has invariably already begun complaining about pretty much everything around him. In the first episode of the first season, for
example, Pilkington has only just arrived in Beijing when he complains about the fact that no one speaks English. He also pays for a massage in the street only to immediately regret it as it turns out to be much rougher than he expected (Season 1, Episode 1: 4:55-6:10).

Further cultural misunderstandings as well as Gervais’s spontaneous meddling with Pilkington’s itinerary to make it that much more unpleasant (by downgrading his hotel reservation at the last minute, for example) ensure comedic content. Gervais interferes with Pilkington’s trip by calling Pilkington or requiring Pilkington to call him at numerous points throughout the trip. Thanks to Gervais’s maneuvers, Pilkington never gets to the primary sight or activity he is in a country for until the very end of an episode. In the meantime, he does a number of other activities, the vast majority of which he does not want to do and therefore complains about while doing. When Pilkington travels to India in the first season, for example, he participates in the Hindu festival of Holi, visits religious Babas at the Kumbh Mela festival, and bathes in the River Ganges with another Hindu holy man before he even gets to the Taj Mahal.

Pilkington’s often astounding ignorance of other cultures need only be briefly addressed given that its manifestations, like so many of the show’s jokes, are quite repetitive and similar. His first thoughts on being told he is going to see the Great Wall, for example, are “[Chinese people] wreck everything, they make everything weird.” (ibid: 2:55-2:58) According to Stephen Merchant, Pilkington’s consistent ignorance is attributed to the fact that he is “a typical little Englander and he doesn’t like going out of his comfort zone.” (ibid: 1:03-1:06) Unlike Gervais, who simply wants to laugh at Pilkington suffering, Merchant “genuinely [thinks] travel broadens the mind” and
therefore wants to see if travel might in any way “change [Pilkington’s] outlook on the world.” (ibid: 1:23-1:26; 1:13-1:21) Unfortunately for Merchant and in contrast to the rhetoric espoused by so many travel shows, however, Pilkington’s travels don’t seem to change him much at all. In this way, Pilkington challenges the notion, present since the Grand Tour up to the current day, that travel always results in either a cultural education or a moment of self-discovery. Pilkington’s ignorance also prompts Warwick Davis, Pilkington’s companion in season 3, to say, “I don’t understand what’s odd [about this tradition]... I don’t know why you can’t just accept things for the way they are. You just always want to change stuff. This has been happening for a hundred and fifty years like this.” (Season 3, Episode 1: 34:15-34:36) In short, Pilkington epitomizes the stereotype of the dense tourist who learns next to nothing through his travels. After all, even if some travel shows might exaggerate by suggesting that tourism promotes “global understanding,” even a show like No Reservations that is suspicious of claims about tourism’s edifying qualities suggests that travel indelibly changes the “traveler” in one way or another.

Another tourist stereotype that Pilkington exemplifies is that of expecting Western amenities regardless of the destination. He expects locals to have gone out of their way to accommodate him and is indignant when he discovers this is not the case. Upon seeing that his transportation out of Iquitos, Peru, is a seaplane, for example, he remarks, “I’m not getting on this. Why is it landing on water? There’s enough land here, chop some of those trees down. There’s shit loads of land, make another runway.” (Season 1, Episode 7: 3:58-4:03) Similarly, upon arriving at his lodge in the Amazon, he comments, “this isn’t a campsite. I’ve been to campsites. They have toilets, showers, maybe a little arcade,
a fellow on the, you know, on the front gate checking you got a pass to come in.” (ibid: 9:18-9:30) Finally, a reoccurring gag in the show is Pilkington’s horror at squat toilets, a rather common sight in many parts of the world. In all these cases, Pilkington presumes to know how things should be done, which is to say they should be done as they are in the West. Planes are supposed to land on runways, campsites are supposed to have certain features, and toilets are supposed to have seats. Again, Pilkington is a caricature of the stereotypical Western tourist who desires difference (though in his case it is Gervais who is forcing him to encounter difference), but only to a degree.

At the same time, Pilkington is in other ways more like a “traveler” than a tourist. Most strikingly, he is skeptical of overly popular destinations and is avoidant of crowds of tourists. In Mexico, for example, Pilkington notes that while he liked Mexico more than any other destination he had been to so far in the season, he disliked the sight he went there for, Chichen Itza, because of the crowds. At the same time, his inability to appreciate the Wonders are portrayed as related to his dimwittedness for he is distracted while at Chichen Itza by a phone call from a friend confused about how to set up his or her DVD player (Season 1, Episode 4: 34:37-35). As is the case in Mexico, Pilkington is incorrigibly grumpy when visiting the Taj Mahal, exclaiming, “how can you have an emotional feeling here? There’s like forty people standing around.” (Season 1, Episode 2: 39:27-39:32)

Nonetheless, his similar dislike of the “off the beaten path” activities Gervais forces him to partake in differentiates him from the stereotypical “traveler.” In particular, his itineraries in Season 2 and 3, which have him complete tasks off a bucket list and retrace Marco Polo’s journey respectively, feature such activities as wrestling with
Mongolians in the annual Nadaam festival and witnessing a private Sufi ceremony in Macedonia. Both experiences are very much “off the beaten path” and could therefore be described as ones that would be coveted by the consummate “traveler.” As the scene in which he troubleshoots how to use a DVD player in front of Chichen Itza demonstrates, then, his disdain of tourists has more to do with his general irritability than with a pretense of eschewing less “authentic” sights in favor of more “authentic” ones. In this sense, Pilkington may essentially appear a tourist whose dislike of crowds occasionally makes him an accidental “traveler.” As will be seen, however, Pilkington’s blunt comments occasionally get at the heart of other anti-touristic discourses of authenticity, making him a figure that genuinely complicates the tropes of the tourist and the “traveler.”

“Deep down, we’re all Karl Pilkington”: Authenticity in An Idiot Abroad

In its own way, An Idiot Abroad deploys a surprisingly nuanced notion of authenticity, for it simultaneously reinforces and deflates the aura of the touristic experiences it features. Namely, viewers are prompted to laugh at Pilkington’s idiocy as evinced by his inability to appreciate what, depending on the sight or activity in question, either tourists or “travelers” would consider highly enviable experiences. The online travel section of The Telegraph, for example, writes in the caption for a gallery of photos from An Idiot Abroad paired with travel tips: “read our guide to the dos and don’t’s of travel and you won’t end up looking like Karl…” (“How not to be an idiot abroad”) To this extent, the show reinforces the notion that one should outwardly demonstrate one’s appreciation for experiences that are socially agreed upon to be superior to other travel experiences if one is to avoid “looking like Karl”.

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Whether he is rejecting touristy or “off the beaten path” experiences, however, Pilkington sometimes reveals the touristic discourse of authenticity at work. After all, the fact that his refusal to respond to sights and experiences like other tourists is material for comedy reveals the truth of Dean MacCannell’s claim that, “touristic shame is not based on being a tourist but on not being tourist enough, on a failure to see everything the way it “ought” to be seen.” (1999:10) As already mentioned, viewers and press reviews have been praising Pilkington for his honesty. Joey Slamon writes in his review on Splitsider.com that, “Instead of sugarcoating every new experience he has, Karl lets us know what’s on his mind every step of the way…deep down, we’re all Karl Pilkington. We are all more comfortable with what we know. Pilkington just has the lack of social graces that make it hilarious.” (2011) In essence, Slamon’s comment that “deep down, we’re all Karl Pilkington” corroborates John Urry’s claim that what motivates tourism, especially alternative tourism, is the seeking of cultural capital (Urry 1995). Slamon suggests that “travelers” and tourists alike feel the urge to make boorish comments about their cultural others, but suppress them to the best of their abilities for the sake of appearing to be an enlightened “traveler.”

Pilkington corroborates Slamon’s interpretation of him when he says: “That’s the problem with the world these days. You’re not allowed to laugh at things that you shouldn’t really laugh at.” (Season 3, Episode 2: 6:36-6:40) He implies, of course, that the things he laughs do in fact deserve to be laughed at due to their undeniable strangeness at least to Westerners. He suggests, therefore, that others are merely suppressing their laughter in order to seem a “traveler” and thereby accumulate cultural capital. Further, given that he does not even enjoy popular tourist destinations like the
New Seven Wonders of the World, Pilkington accuses tourists and “travelers” alike of pretense. In other words, Pilkington’s obstinate crankiness points to the ways in which cultural understandings of the canonical nature of certain touristic sights are as wound up in constructions of authenticity as are discourses of authenticity deployed by “travelers.”

While most positive viewer reviews on sites such as Amazon and IMDB agree on the point that Pilkington is dull but honest, some go further to suggest that his dimwitted honesty constitutes a kind of folk brilliance. IMDB user derektrotteresq, for example, asks: “Is Karl Pilkington an idiot? Is he a genius?” (IMDB.com) User edumacated, however, has no doubts: “if gervais actually thinks carl is a fool, then i have to say the joke is on him. Pilkington is a master of everyday, ultimate truth.” (ibid) Amazon user K. Harris “Film aficionado” also has a similar interpretation: “Pilkington has a precious and skewed world view which combines faulty logic with unsubstantiated facts, yet for all its absurdity--there is often a nugget of wisdom in Pilkington’s ramblings.” (Amazon.com) Presumably, edumacated, derektrotteresq, K. Harris “Film aficionado” are thinking of scenes when Pilkington exposes the touristic discourse of authenticity for what it is: a prescribed sense of what one ought to see and feel. Concerning Rio de Janeiro’s Christ the Redeemer monument, for example, Pilkington says,

But if you’re gonna come up here, it’s not about that [the statue]. It’s about that lot [of tourists]. It’s about coming up here and seeing all of you there. Knock that down, you’d still have a crowd coming up here. You could stick anything there…and people would come up here. (Season 1, Episode 6: 38:48-39:00)

Similarly unimpressed by the US’s Route 66, he wonders, “Why do people say, do the Route 66 thing. Am I meant to enjoy it now whilst doing it or is it something you appreciate after, you know what I mean?” (Season 2, Episode 6: 5:05-5:17)
In the case of his responses to both Christ the Redeemer and Route 66, Pilkington echoes Urry’s point that “the satisfaction [of consumption] is derived not from the individual act of consumption but from the fact that all sorts of other people are also consumers of the service…” (1995:131) MacCannell also writes: “an aggregate of sightseers is one indicator that there a sight nearby, or a marker, and like all markers it can be transformed into a sight.” (1976:127) On both their analysis, then, what is being consumed is not Christ the Redeemer or Route 66, but other tourists’ presence. After all, it is social recognition, whether during the act of traveling or once one returns home, that grants tourists and “travelers” varying degrees of cultural capital. Moreover, Pilkington suggests that social pressure makes tourists obligated not only to feel awe for certain sights, but also to presume their authenticity. He notes the irony, for example, of the fact that the more commonly visited segments of the Great Wall of China were in fact largely restored in the 1950’s and 80’s (Season 1, Episode 1: 22:00).

Further, unlike Andrew Zimmern, for whom “exotic” and “authentic” are cues that something ought to be consumed and appreciated, Pilkington sums up his blunt attitude towards claims to authenticity with the following words: “Don’t just stand there saying it’s traditional, it’s traditional, it’s what they do here, it’s a delicacy. What is it doing [for me]?” (ibid: 39:27-39:31) While in this scene he is specifically referring to his displeasure with a Chinese form of massage, it is clear that this attitude is one that he embodies throughout the show in reference to all the sights and experiences Gervais compels him to see or do. While his comment in part arises from his lack of tolerance for other cultures, it also critiques tourists and “travelers” for making fetishes out of tradition and authenticity simply for their own sake.
On top of exposing the touristic discourse of authenticity at work, Pilkington expresses an opposite attitude to Andrew Zimmern and Anthony Bourdain’s implicit belief that Westerners have the right to go wherever they want, when they want. While in India, for example, Gervais orders Pilkington to attend the Kumbh Mela, the largest spiritual festival in the world, countering Pilkington’s reluctance with: “Karl, you don’t have to find spirituality or God, you don’t have to become Hindu. Just go…” In response, Pilkington simply states, “either you [should] get involved or you shouldn’t be there,” critiquing, perhaps consciously perhaps unconsciously, the notion held by many Westerners besides Gervais that their presence must be embraced or at least tolerated no matter the setting or cultural context (Season 1, Episode 2: 17:18-17:29).

Pilkington evinces a similar skepticism towards Western attitudes of charity when traveling. Forced to do community service in a township of Johannesburg called Diepsloot while in South Africa, he remarks, “I think these people are sick and tired of people coming in from England with their camera crew. That’s probably why they’ve not moved on. They probably want to build new houses and all that. They can’t, they haven’t got time.” (Season 2, Episode 5: 3:32-3:45) In short, unlike Andrew Zimmern, Pilkington does not see himself as doing anyone any favors by traveling. Towards the end of his time in Egypt, for example, he utters in true “traveler” fashion, “they say travel broadens the mind, but I don’t know if it does. It buggers it up, I’m knackered.” (Season 1, Episode 5: 41:40-41:47) While Pilkington may come off as dimwitted, then, his unexpected insights into notions of authenticity and Western attitudes when traveling (notwithstanding his own cultural insensitivity) are far from simple-minded.
A final oddity of Pilkington’s that reveals a great deal about the show’s ultimate stance on authenticity is his distasteful fascination with individuals with physical disabilities. This fascination manifests itself on at least three different occasions in the series. In India, for example, he visits the Elephant Baba, a holy man with a deformed face due to elephantiasis. When Pilkington revisits China in Season 2 he also visits the Kingdom of the Little People, a theme park showcasing people with dwarfism. Finally, when he revisits India in Season 3 he becomes obsessed with seeing the Spider Girls, the stage name of conjoined twins Ganga and Jamuna Mondal. For Pilkington, these three experiences represent the rare occasions when he gets to do something during his travels that he actually wants to do. For whatever reason, these experiences, as opposed to say seeing the Seven Wonders, are in his mind once-in-a-lifetime opportunities: “What you’re going to see now [the Spider Girls], you’ll never get the chance to see again...[It’s] my cup of tea.” (Season 3, Episode 2: 34:34:25-34:33) Further, when probed by Warrick Davis, the dwarf actor who accompanies Pilkington in the third season, concerning the reason for his fascination, Pilkington replies, “Because it’s different, it’s something different! I’ve never seen Siamese twins, I’ve only seen pictures, photographs.” (ibid: 35:10-35:19)

Pilkington’s logic is bizarre, of course, since he has also only seen the Seven Wonders and other activities he partakes in through media like photos. According to Dean MacCannell, a central logic of tourism is that of seeing for one’s self what one has already seen a million times in mediated forms. Indeed, he argues that a famous sight appears to tourists “as an incomplete plan, model, or image of itself,” explaining why tourists so often seem to “[exchange] perception for mere recognition.” (1976: 121-122;
In other words, on his analysis, tourists are less interested in the details of a sight itself as they are in the social prestige and sense of immediacy that come with having seen it in person. Yet while Pilkington rejects this logic when it comes to sights and experiences, he accepts it in relation to individuals with disabilities. In spite of his criticisms of anti-touristic discourses of authenticity, then, he himself utilizes perhaps the crudest discourse of authenticity yet according to which visible disability is the truest mark of alterity and therefore of authenticity.

*An Idiot Abroad* genuinely complicates the “traveler” and tourist tropes as well as the anti-touristic discourses of authenticity deployed by *Bizarre Foods, No Reservations,* and *Parts Unknown.* Combining elements of the “traveler” and tourist in his persona, Pilkington critiques both the insensitivity of tourists and the pretensions of “travelers.” Specifically, he reveals that both tourists and “travelers” are compelled by social norms to correctly perform their respective identity. Having criticized various anti-touristic discourses of authenticity, however, the show ultimately seems to suggest that since all discourses of authenticity are equally flawed, they are by the same token equally valid. After all, Pilkington, rather inexplicably considers tourist sights exploiting individuals with physical disabilities “authentic” despite being skeptical of other anti-touristic discourses of authenticity. In this way, *An Idiot Abroad,* not only fails to jettison discourses of authenticity that commodity culture for the global marketplace, but also accepts their proliferation as inevitable.
Conclusion

As Arjun Appadurai so keenly noted in Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, understanding “the image, the imagined, the imaginary” will prove vital to understanding today’s globalizing world (1996: 31). He writes: “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (ibid). Contemporary travel television vividly illustrates Appadurai’s insights into the role of imagination in our world. As we have seen, the narratives travel shows tell concerning their guides/hosts and the kind of travel they undertake constitute a commodity available for mass consumption through the television and Internet. In a sense, the different approaches to travel presented by travel shows represents distinct “brands,” each of which appeals to a different kind of consumer. Some consumers, for example, prefer Bizarre Foods’s multicultural perspective on cultural difference, while others appreciate the more skeptical and ironic mood of No Reservations and Parts Unknown. Finally, other consumers feel an affinity with An Idiot Abroad and its irreverent satire of anti-touristic discourses of authenticity.

The fact that the four shows I have examined only constitute a part of the landscape of travel television demonstrates the extent to which the touristic imaginary constitutes “an organized field of social practices.” (ibid) Further, while travel television in itself constitutes a field of social practices, it also reflects a field constituted by the social practices of off-the-screen tourists. In other words, as revealed by user reviews of the four shows, the “traveler” identities performed by travel shows’ guides/hosts are
indicative of identities performed by other self-proclaimed “travelers.” By this logic, we must understand travel television as both responsive to and influential upon the touristic imaginary as a whole. Not having tracked the actual ways in which various “traveler” identities are enacted off-the-screen, however, my focus in this thesis has been on how travel shows influence the touristic imaginary, thereby shaping tourists’ attitudes and behaviors. A future inquiry utilizing surveys and/or interviews of self-proclaimed “travelers” might reveal the extent to which their practices align with the identities constructed by travel shows. Ideally, such a study would also look at some “travelers” who also watch travel shows, deepening our understanding of the connection between the touristic imaginary and actual tourist practices. In any case, what my preliminary analysis has revealed is that travel shows present individuals with a finite number of blueprints for being a “traveler,” negotiating, as Appdaurai suggested, between individuals’ agency and social possibilities.

Certainly, *An Idiot Abroad, Bizarre Foods, No Reservations*, and *Parts Unknown* all populate the touristic imaginary with different blueprints for achieving the status of “traveler.” In laying out these blueprints, the shows reveal how the touristic imaginary is shaped by contemporary global developments as well as by representational strategies rooted in Western histories of tourism, colonialism, and imperialism. Two specific tropes I traced were the imperial gaze, which stereotypes the cultural Other and privileges the position of the white, male subject, and imperialist nostalgia, which laments the very thing one is helping to destroy in an attempt to absolve oneself of one’s complicity. For the purpose of my analysis, I focused on instances of the imperial gaze in *Bizarre Foods*, *Parts Unknown*, and *An Idiot Abroad*, and on cases of imperialist nostalgia in *No
Reservations and Parts Unknown. Nonetheless, this does not mean either trope only appears in the shows with which they were associated in this paper.

Another trope that appears in some form in all four shows is the notion, propagated by normative narratives of globalization, of “global understanding” or the “global village.” At one extreme is Bizarre Foods, which unproblematically equates consuming the “exotic” with expanding one’s worldview and breaking down cultural barriers when in reality the show deploys a multicultural discourse that commodifies and flattens difference. Similarly, despite Parts Unknown’s thematization of “serious” geopolitical issues, it reproduces tropes such as the imperial gaze and imperialist nostalgia, drawing attention to its failure to overcome histories of colonialism and imperialism. Even No Reservations and An Idiot Abroad, both of which contest the notion of “global understanding” in their own way, ultimately fall short of addressing the ideology behind the trope. In other words, the four shows I examined are complicit with narratives that present globalization as inevitable and universally desirable, despite much evidence to the contrary. In this way, these shows facilitate the process of globalization, a process, which, in its current manifestation, is highly uneven and inequitable.

As I have argued, the ultimate purpose of these shows’ elaboration of “traveler” blueprints is to augment the cultural capital of their guides/hosts and viewers. While acknowledging the connection between the societal obsession with authenticity and the alienation engendered by modernity, then, I argued that class distinction was more central to the seeking of “authentic” tourist experiences. Like European aristocrats responding to the success of Cook’s tours by seeking out more exclusive destinations, contemporary “travelers” are implicated in social reproduction, even if they understand their own
motives through touristic discourses of learning and self-discovery. Andrew Zimmern, for example, is portrayed as being more worldly than tourists who don’t venture to push their culinary limits as a result of his consuming “exotic,” “authentic” dishes. Similarly, Anthony Bourdain presumes himself a sophisticated “traveler” due to his seeking out of local hangouts too obscure for typical tourists. Even Karl Pilkington who combines elements of the “traveler” and the tourist is ultimately more of an object of humor than a fount of wisdom. In the end, his exposing of the pretensions of other travel shows’ discourses of authenticity is less central to the show’s “brand” than his cultural insensitivity and lack of “appreciation” for difference. In this way, all four shows I examined prominently feature anti-touristic discourses of authenticity, suggesting that the desire for authenticity, which itself masks a desire for cultural capital, is the logic around which the entire field of anti-touristic practices is organized.

All in all, the anti-touristic discourses of authenticity deployed by travel shows constitute new ways of commodifying culture and “heritage” in the twenty-first century. As shows that are compelled by the market to develop a “brand,” they construct unique “traveler” identities for their guides/hosts. In doing so, they are not only complicitous with social reproduction, but also forced to make problematic distinctions between “authentic” and “inauthentic” experiences. Most of all, however, they commodify aspects of cultures that were previously immune to the inexhaustible commodifying drive of global capitalism. Whether it is “exotic” dishes, local haunts, or “parts unknown,” seemingly everything is fair game for “travelers” to consume for their own benefit.
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