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IN MEMORIAM: ED BRUNER

Edward M. Bruner
September 28, 1924 – August 7, 2020

Last month, our community—and indeed the world—lost a shining light in contemporary anthropology. On August 7, 2020, the humanistic anthropologist Edward Bruner passed away peacefully at his home. He would have been 96 today. This is a significant loss for the ATIG community, as Bruner made important contributions to the study of tourism and heritage—problematizing authenticity and host-guest interactions in the touristic “borderzone;” introducing post-modern constructivism to tourism analysis, and emphasizing narrative, experience, and interpretation in ethnographic research. The compilation of his tourism-focused essays, *Culture on Tour*, is a classic in our field.

Yet Bruner came to the study of tourism late in life, when he was nearing retirement from the University of Illinois and began leading study abroad trips and high-end educational tours in the 1980s and 1990s. He found it interesting that he became best known for this work—which emerged rather serendipitously—instead of his earlier and longstanding studies of kinship, acculturation and migration among Native Americans and Indonesian Bataks in Sumatra, or on his contribution to the anthropology of experience. However, it was this breadth of life experiences that allowed him to see tourism differently, and his well-established, alternative networks complemented those forged by the early leaders in the anthropological study of tourism such as Dean MacCannell, Valene Smith, Nelson Graburn, Dennison Nash and others, whose work he respected immensely.



Nelson Graburn, Naomi Leite, and Ed Bruner pose for a photo during the 40th anniversary celebrations of the anthropology of tourism, Chicago, 2014. Ed Bruner was a self-proclaimed “real New Yorker” who grew up in a West Side Jewish neighborhood, surrounded by cultural diversity. Attending Stuyvesant High School was formative for him; he received a holistic, liberal arts education that exposed him to the great literature of the world. He excelled at math and history, but also wrote short stories and poetry, setting the stage for his sensitivity towards narrative and storytelling that would inform his anthropological work. Determined to “head West,” he attended The Ohio State University, where he met his wife and life partner, Elaine “Cookie” Hauptman, who supported his budding interest in anthropology. After meeting with Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton during a summer course at Columbia University, he finished Ohio State and entered graduate school at the University of Chicago’s storied Department of Anthropology, where he studied with Fred Eggan, Robert Redfield, and Sol Tax. Although the physical anthropologist Sherry Washburn offered to take him as his assistant, he was drawn to socio-cultural anthropology and particularly the works on symbolic interactionism by George Herbert Meade and Herbert Blumer. He worked with Clyde Kluckhohn with the Navajo and lived on a Zuni reservation, where he studied acculturation and cross-cousin marriage.

Upon receiving his Ph.D., he first took a position at Yale that was vacated when Kroeber passed, then moved to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he would remain for the rest of his career. His time there

was most fulfilling; he read the European poststructuralists and participated for decades in the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory. He was particularly taken with the works of Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose works he found more humanistic and opposed to the structural linguistics that dominated anthropology at the time. Beginning in 1979, Bruner began collaborating with Victor Turner, who was of the same generation and seemed to gravitate to the same conferences, but who had already made a name for himself and would serve as a mentor to Bruner. Ed commented that this period of collaboration was a “turning point” in his career, one which “reinvigorated my anthropological self” as he delved into emerging postmodern, constructivist theories. Together with Barbara Myerhoff, Bruner and Turner organized an influential panel on the anthropology of experience; unfortunately, Myerhoff and Turner passed away before the [resulting volume](#) made it to print. Grateful and humble, Bruner added Turner’s name to the volume as lead editor in recognition of his support. After Turner’s death, Ed engaged more closely with humanistic anthropologists such as Renato Rosaldo, Barbara Babcock, and Paul Stoller, and later with James Clifford and others. He served as President of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology and the American Ethnological Society.

The shift to studying tourism—more particularly, luxury group tours—occurred first in 1982, when Bruner was asked to lead a semester-at-sea study abroad trip. The provider told him he could pick the itinerary and a co-instructor; he chose Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a folklorist and performance studies professor who—based on the same experiences—would write an equally influential book, *Destination Culture*, on the intersection of tourism, heritage and museums around the same time as *Culture on Tour*. Although they did not know each other well when he chose her, they quickly became close friends and collaborators. Perhaps Bruner’s most well-known article, “[Maasai on the Lawn](#),” was co-authored by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Bruner then served as a study leader for high-end educational tours, an experience that truly informed much of his anthropological writing on tourism. It was an eye-opening experience for him as he negotiated the tensions of mediating a touristic “frontstage” (as MacCannell would call it) and his ethnographic “backstage.” Perceiving of tourism as competition with ethnography, anthropologist friends such as Hilly Geertz would have nothing to do with him when he was with his travelers in Indonesia (except to have him help sell her informants’ tourist art to them), while tour operators and some of the tourists themselves expressed consternation when he fed them too much ethnographic information that would pop the proverbial bubble of perceived cultural authenticity they were supposedly witnessing.

Bruner began publishing on tourism in 1989, with a review essay of Dennis O'Rourke's film, *Cannibal Tours*, for the AAA-affiliated journal *Cultural Anthropology*. Importantly, he concludes that "tourism, like ethnography, is not equipped to handle the rigors of first contact [with native peoples], but does best after other agents of European civilization have pacified the indigenous peoples, and after power is firmly in the hands of the Europeans" ("Of Cannibals, Tourists and Ethnographers," pp. 438-439). This was not necessarily new, as Nash had written similarly of the colonial and imperial aspects of tourism back in 1977. But while he referenced early tourism theorists, Ed based his analysis on a different canon, integrating the insights of humanistic and interpretive anthropologists like Rosaldo and Clifford, and of postmodern cultural critics like Baudrillard, Said, and Barthes. He followed with a powerful reflection for the venerable *Annals of Tourism Research* on "The Transformation of Self in Tourism" (1991), in which he challenges the truism that the tourist encounter between host and guest can genuinely make profound changes on the visitor. Rather, he argues pithily that we should read local cultural displays as mirrors for Western fantasies—a notion at the core of the current "hot concept" of tourism imaginaries. Although informed by Goffman (as MacCannell was in his important theory of "staged authenticity" back in 1973), here Bruner pays attention to narrative, experience and the fluidity of ideas of authenticity. Authenticity is also critically appraised in one of my favorite pieces, "Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction" (1994), in which he discusses how culture is always emergent, and authenticity is always a social construction. Running through all of his works on tourism is a decidedly interpretative and constructivist approach, one that sees culture—and the mobile culture(s) of tourism—as a process, and one predicated on narrative. Bruner's notion of the touristic "borderzone," a liminal site of encounter between host and guest, is less a place than a process of encounter between the tourist imaginary, experience, reality and (re)telling. Tourist satisfaction, transformation, and imaginaries are all predicated on the refracting of these elements—and are constantly in the process of forming and reforming.

For all of Ed's contributions, he was humble and forthcoming about the limitations of his research. He wished he could follow up with travelers once they returned home, for that is really the only way processes of transformation could be understood. He wished he could study post-tour commentary to analyze the constant reformulation of imaginaries and tourist narratives. Towards the end of his life he was interested in social justice and the effects of race on tourism. And he wished he could have "written more if I had been

bolder.” Indeed, for all his important contributions, Ed only published about a dozen tourism-related pieces, but he made every one count.

The Anthropology of Tourism Interest Group has recognized Ed Bruner in many ways for his impact on tourism studies. In 2014, the organization’s first formal year as an interest group, we threw a 40th anniversary celebration of the first “anthropology of tourism” panel, convened by Valene Smith in Mexico City in 1974; her volume from that meeting, *Hosts and Guests* (1977), ushered in the dedicated study of the anthropology of tourism. Although Bruner was neither a contributor to the original AAA panel nor to the volume, the ATIG board under the founding Convenor, Quetzil Castañeda, added a session dedicated to Bruner’s own contributions to the sub-field. In a [recent webinar](#), Castañeda explained the choice to honor Bruner at the 40th anniversary celebrations: “Here’s an established scholar who has done other kinds of work and turns to tourism. And despite the fact that the earlier generation—Valene Smith and Nelson Graburn and others—are not nobodies, they suffered from a kind of stigma that they weren’t doing real work because they studied tourism (as they themselves have said in reflections). But what Ed Bruner did was to shift the degree of seriousness by which tourism was viewed in academic tourism sectors.”

The 2014 ATIG session would serve as the foundation for the recently published volume, *The Ethnography of Tourism: Edward M. Bruner and Beyond* (2019), edited by Naomi Leite, Quetzil Castañeda, and Kathleen Adams, which innovatively weaves the intellectual history of ethnography with a close analysis of the development of Bruner’s post-modernist, interpretive thinking. It features over a dozen original essays by many ATIG members who comment on the ways in which Bruner’s humanistic, constructivist perspective influenced their own approaches to ethnography and anthropological analysis of tourism. Ed was immensely proud of this work, and wrote an epilogue in which he said he “learned about myself... [and] many aspects of my work in a new light.”



Quetzil Castañeda and Michael A. Di Giovine interview Ed Bruner. Chicago, 2014.

For their part, ATIG members have expressed their appreciation for Ed and his contributions. The webinar, “[A Conversation with the editors of *The Ethnography of Tourism*](#)”—held exactly a month after his passing and attended by over 125 scholars from around the world—concluded with an hour-long memorial, attended by his wife and grandson, wherein the audience shared their own memories of Ed, and commented on how their own work was impacted by him.

Finally, in recognition of Bruner’s contributions to ethnographic writing, ATIG named its second book prize after him. Complementing the Nelson Graburn Prize for first-time authors, the [Ed Bruner Award](#) honors already-published authors for their second or subsequent book. The decision to honor Ed this way was clear. In his later work, “Around the World in Sixty Years,” featured in Alma Gottlieb’s 2012 volume, *The Restless Anthropologist*, Ed discusses how the anthropologist’s life history mirrors their professional lifecycle, and one’s changing abilities, social positions, theoretical perspectives, and serendipitous events should be embraced productively as a means of growth. Where anthropological memory seems to draw distinctions between his earlier work and shifting fieldsites, he sees continuity that reflects his own life circumstances. “I am me,” he states firmly, and then muses, “It is as if

anthropology has been a metacommentary on my life. In doing anthropology, I discover myself and explore who I am.” It was only fitting that the name of one who so built on his varied research and publications to move tourism studies ahead would honor scholars who reflect similar growth.

Bruner’s last major publication was “[The Ageing Anthropologist](#)” (2014), a wonderfully poignant and personal illustration of reflexive anthropology. Stemming from an emotional talk at the AAAs—one that left me teary-eyed in the audience—Ed ruminates on the life cycle of anthropologists, which corresponds with changes in their status, connectedness, level of power, and usefulness to the present generation. Rather than seeing age as a hindrance, rather than resigning oneself to physical decline, rather than focusing on growing isolation and loss of self-esteem, Ed seems to channel [Dylan Thomas](#) as he fights against his limitations, embracing Nietzsche’s dictum to “become who you are.” He writes:

The image of the youthful, vigorous Ed Bruner is still there, inside me, floating around in my head and body, in tension with the 89-year-old Ed. I’m still me, I think, but so much older. The young Ed was a fearless anthropologist: I lived in a village in the highlands of Sumatra, went to the forests of Ghana where malaria is endemic, visited an isolated Maasai compound in the Rift Valley in Kenya. I no longer have the stamina to be in those places. ... What to do? You acknowledge your limitations, come to terms with them, and work through them emotionally. ... Doing anthropology, even writing this essay, enhances my feeling of being in the world, restores my sense of self-worth, distracts attention from the physical infirmities of old age, and keeps me feeling more alive.

During the series of interviews I had with Ed for *The Ethnography of Tourism*—which was a highlight of my career—I asked him about his legacy. Ever the humble anthropologist, his answer was, “I’ve had a long and blessed life ...I have a wife who loves me and children who adore me. Things are pretty good.” This was certainly the case, and I would add that he was well-loved and well-appreciated by scholars near and far. We as a community are grateful for the often-serendipitous experiences that led Bruner to the study of tourism, the seasoned insights he could provide, the support he lent, and especially the mentoring and friendship he provided. Happy Birthday, Ed—you are missed.

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Michael A. Di Giovine is the Convenor of the Anthropology of Tourism Interest Group and the Editor of the series, The Anthropology of Tourism: Heritage, Mobility and Society (Lexington Books), in which The Ethnography of Tourism: Edward M. Bruner and Beyond was published.