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## North American Migrants Working as Tour Guides in Alamos in Mexico Mobilities and Imaginaries

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### **Abstract**

The article focuses on the guide's narratives and practices when guiding "House Tours" that is the most visited tourist attraction in the Mexican town. We argue that these guides provide narratives about concrete imaginaries that constitute not only authenticity but also utopia – that we consider one of the core elements in tourism imaginaries. The guides inscribe themselves in the utopian imaginaries in the Western hemisphere that continue to be essential in the socio-cultural and political construction of society. We conclude that these tourism imaginaries of places (and people) cannot be considered only as commoditized representations with a symbolic content. Alamos displays that way the significant connections that exist in terms of both representations and mobilities.

**Key words:** Mobilities, North American migrants, Mexico, Imaginaries, Tour Guides

*Amigos de Educación*, (AE)<sup>11</sup> is one of several transnational organizations founded and managed by North American immigrants who live in Alamos, a town in the northern state Sonora in Mexico. This organization grew out of an earlier social-assistance project that began in 1975, when two immigrants initiated a fund-raising drive to support the public library. In 1985, when the

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<sup>11</sup> These organizations that we analyse are equivalent to the so-called Hometown Associations (HTAs), in the sense that their purpose is to develop or help a community. The key difference is that HTAs organized by Latin Americans have the objective of developing the community of origin, whereas in our case, the purpose is to develop the destination or receiving community.

Mexican federal government took over the management of the library, the organization stopped funding it. In 1990, the non-profit organization altered its central objective to now focus on granting school scholarships to the poorest children in Alamos. AE has several ways of raising funds. Currently, two-third of its budget comes from dues and the money made from the guided “House Tours” to different residences, which for the most part have been bought and restored by North Americans who have moved to Alamos<sup>12</sup>. The last one-third comes from membership dues donations, and an annual auction (Clausen, 2008). The article focuses on the guide’s narratives when guiding “House Tours” and argues that these guides provide a visual as well as written narrative about concrete imaginaries that constitute not only authenticity but also utopia – that we consider one of the core elements in tourism imaginaries. The article explores how the guides communicate the town’s history and culture and will argue that the guides’ interaction with tourists, do not merely reproduce the narratives they have been taught; they also themselves become co-creative storytellers, inscribing themselves in the global complex constellations where myths and symbols are represented.

The tourism imaginaries are perceived as ideas, interactions, objects and places that a person or a social group socially construct relating to a specific region or country and these imaginaries have been the focus of an increasing research interest. However research is still very scarce when it comes to pursuing precise definitions of the existing types of imaginaries. Furthermore, almost any fantasy, dream or image, seems to be related to “imaginaries”; consequently this generates a conceptual problem why the article seeks to generate a more accurate discussion about existing tourism imaginaries. The article argues that one of the core imaginaries of modern Western societies is utopia, namely these idealized and non-existent places consisting of an ideal societal model based on community cohesion, which aspires to be real. These

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<sup>12</sup> This is not the only place in Mexico where this same category of immigrant is present. Groups of North Americans have established communities in various cities in states like Yucatán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Sonora, and Sinaloa. An indirect indicator of this growing interest on the part of the North Americans for selecting Mexico as their residence is the sustained expansion of the North American real estate companies that operate in the United States but that specializes in or has a portfolio of properties located in Mexico.

places suddenly seemed to exist when the Americas also called the New World were discovered and conquered (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Clausen, Gustafsson & Velázquez, 2008). These societies were considered “natural”, exotic and pre-modern and contrasted industrialisation and the hasty development related to urbanization and modernity in the European societies. Several of the utopian societal projects that were constructed in this period became central in the conceptual models that we continue to consider valid today e.g. in social areas when we analyse tourism such as indigenous/civilized; community/society.

Furthermore, the article also seeks to emphasise in line with Salazar (2005, 2011) that tourism does not exist in a vacuum but is deeply embedded in larger sociocultural phenomena and processes. Thus, tourism operates within social constructions that create and reinterpret societies, where ideas, relations and spaces are embedded. Then, this study of tourism involves looking into how the socio-cultural and political processes operate on and through tourism, rather than studying tourism with the environmental, economic and socio-cultural impacts of tourism. In other words, tourism cannot be seen as a marginal phenomenon in the general reproduction of society, on the contrary it is one of the central frameworks for constituting identities and activities in contemporary society. By doing a micro-sociologic study focusing on specific practices as the guided tour in a Mexican town, the article seeks to understand the imaginaries that are at play, produced and reconstructed by the guides.

## Methodology

The main idea was to analyse the guide’s role in how ideologies, myths, objects were produced, reconstructed and might form part of the performance. Furthermore, the focus was the daily practices of guides and the way they represented, actively produced and reconstructed local culture for tourists. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted and complemented with the use of mobile ethnography. As the mobile ethnography provides insight into “*performances as constructed through routes and moorings, connecting home and away as well as physical objects, imaginative, virtual and communicative mobilities*” (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009: 49). The tourists and guides were followed from their hotels and locations, through their guided tours and back

again to their hotels. That way it also became possible to follow images, objects and rumours as they circulate and create place myths. One way to pursue mobile ethnography is to become part of the object either as guide (see Bruner, 2005) or as tourist (see Haldrup & Larsen, 2009). Materials, observations and small talk were collected from seven guided House Tours to get familiar with the different guides' way of presenting the town, history and how they promoted objects, images, environment and landscapes as magic and authentic. In order to better situate the practices of the guides semi structured in depth interviews were conducted (Spradley, 1980) with guides, local Mexicans and North American tourists and expatriates in the town. Additional semi structured interviews, were conducted with the owner of the hotels, restaurants, cafes and personnel, expatriates, and tourists and local people. Most interviews were conducted in English, and of course in Spanish when interviewing Spanish-speaking people. All data were triangulated (Spradley, 1980). The analysis of the raw empirical data was greatly enhanced by embedding the practices of the guides within the broader sociocultural framework.

### Setting the scene

The ethnographic setting is located in the state of Sonora in northern Mexico, 700 kilometers from the U.S. border 350 kilometers from Hermosillo, the state capital, and 50 kilometers from the largest population center in the region. Alamos is notable for having a historic city center with colonial houses, cobblestone streets, and beautiful gardens. Another attraction is its cultural festival, Dr. Ortiz Tirado, which has gained international recognition as the most important cultural event in northern Mexico. Surrounded by verdant mountains, the town is also famous for its picturesque landscapes. The houses in the historic center are painstakingly maintained, and the streets are paved with cobbles and entirely clean. In the historic city center are a mission-period church and a small central plaza. The houses in this area have impressive wooden or iron doors, framed by bougainvillea and other decorative plants. Many of the doors stand ajar or their upper half is kept open, so that it is possible to see the lush gardens sheltered inside.

Alamos is an important cultural centre, not only for the aforementioned festival but also for several events held annually, including film festival, and silver festival. Having this set of artistic events, which surpasses what other similar-sized towns in the region offer, is extremely important for Alamos. If one tours the region's other towns, one realizes how unusual it is that Alamos has a bookstore carrying specialized books on Mexican history, as well as Latin American literature, best sellers in English, a section on Mexican handicrafts, tourist guidebooks, records, and video rentals. It is also notable for having an art gallery and a small cinema that shows the latest films. Additionally, open-air classical music concerts, painting- and photography exhibits are held periodically at one of Alamos's hotels (certainly, one of Sonora's most expensive establishments).

The North American immigrants live in the area described above. Nevertheless, not all of Alamos looks like that section. Walking from the city center toward the Alameda, we come to an old riverbed that is dry throughout most of the year. On the weekends, there is a *tianguis* (an open-air market) here. In this area, the difference between the houses that we left behind and those that are located along the river is quite stark. In the neighbourhood near the river, the buildings are much more modest than are those in the center. They do not have a uniform style, but most can be described as cubes or rectangles superposed one on the other. For the most part, the doors are made of metal, as are the windows. Rather than being a matter of taste, the use of this material is driven by the need for security. Assorted materials have been used in building these homes, some even seem to be only half-finished. The streets are not cobbled nor are they paved. In some parts, garbage is visible near the sewer drains, and there are oil stains and potholes in the roads. In short, this part of Alamos looks a lot like many other poor neighbourhoods throughout Mexico.

### Tourism imaginaries

Tourism is essentially an exercise in fantasy and that tourists buy to seek in "reality" the pleasurable dramas experienced in the imagination as emphasized by Crick (1988) and Urry (2002). Furthermore Urry states that under the impact of "international tourism," different countries are beginning to specialize in

providing particular types of objects to be gazed upon. Discourses of the past—orientalism, colonialism and imperialism— seem to be fertile ground for cultivating utopias (Clausen, Gustafsson & Velázquez, 2008) and romantic tourism dreams (Edensor, 1998). The circulation of tourism discourses and imaginaries is, in many respects, a negotiated process involving variously situated actors and their engagements with tourism to reproduce stereotypic images, discredited histories, and romantic fantasies (Bruner, 2005). Imaginaries often become the symbolic objects of a significant contest over economic supremacy, territorial ownership, and identity. They emerge not from the realm of concrete everyday experience but in the circulation of more collectively held images. Research reveals how these representations are created and mediated through cultural and ideological structures (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Mowforth & Munt, 2003; Urry, 2002). However, this article seeks to pursue more precise definitions of these imaginaries, and move beyond what usually is referred to as fantasy, dream or image.

In the encounter between different cultures, the “exotic” is one of the central imaginaries in modern Western societies. The “exotic” is highly subjective and influenced by the cultural discourse of the interpreter as seen in Western literature, historic or philosophic writings, where the descriptions of societies characterized as the “exotic Other” are referred to as excitingly strange, having a “natural”, unusual and different life style than the one in European societies (Pratt, 1998; Said, 1994). Having an exotic image of another place, such as fertile landscapes, involves assigning seductive, fascinating as well as positive attributes to an image. These differences are the very embodiment of the imaginaries of the “exotic Other” and form part of the characteristics and desires in tourist zones e.g. food with spicy or different flavour, almost hypnotising sounds and rhythms, magic impressive landscapes, and social manners that seemed to be eccentric for the modern observer, e.g. naked bodies, heavenly scenes and easy wealth.

One essential element of the “exotic” is utopia, the narrative about these non-existent places that bring together all these desired characteristics in a society that aspires to do better. Utopia reflects not only the non-existent or invented imaginary for certain social groups but also a concrete search after a better life, this can be manifested as political actions or social attitudes. Utopia

is not necessarily only one particular element and is not perceived as only one by the one's that aspire for a better life. These models were allocated with mythological status. The practices and utopian imaginaries have manifested itself in the Western hemisphere in multiple ways the last five hundred years and they continue being an important and essential social, cultural, political and economic mechanism. Utopia is the idea of a better world and it is possible to create. This also implies a dimension of "otherness". Utopia then will always be the "Other" in time and space; it can be based in the longing for the lost world as well as the expectations or aspirations that this type or model of society can be realized some day (Aínsa, 1999; Fernando Herrero, 1992; Clausen, Gustafsson & Velázquez, 2008). Departing from the failures of these social experiments that had tried to generate new forms to contest modernity and capitalism within modern Western societies, the indigenous people and pre-modern countries suddenly were perceived as "natural", pure and having a life style that contained the qualities to construct and live these utopian imaginaries (Fernández Herrero, 1992; O'Gorman, 1995). For instance when Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama began their respective journeys in the 1490s they were seeking sea-routes to Asia to the spice markets and all though they didn't return with different spices, Columbus' efforts were so successful that on the return his ship the Golden Hind was ballasted with gold and silver. This forms part of the myth about the Americas as an exotic, wild, and "untouched" land and why a lot of people searched for Eldorado – the Land of Gold, or Paradise on Earth in the Americas. Not surprisingly, many contemporary tourism tales and recurrent images are heavily influenced by the mythologized visions of "Otherness" from the travel literature and academic writings in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, art, and history (Aínsa, 1999; Said 1994; Clausen, Gustafsson & Velázquez, 2008).

### Imaginaries and the Authentic Mexico

Mexico has, as Velázquez (2008) states in his analysis of the US's perception of Mexico interpreted through films during the last century, fascinating and powerful images as the culture, music, moral values, traditions and landscapes. However, at the same time Mexico is considered backwards,



pre-modern and this is converted into conservative, lost values in the modernity that the US represents (Clausen, 2008). Mexico somehow is the “playground of the Western world,” and South America is an “enchanted forest,” yet the images portrayed in the glossy travel brochures and programs do not in fact exist (Crick, 1988; Casella, 1999). The local people are portrayed as existing in the past, not the present, as though time for them has stood still. Thus, for the duration of the holiday, the local people become the servile people of the former colonies by virtue of the images “sold” through the brochures (Casella, 1999, Hall & Tucker, 2004; Salazar, 2005; Salazar, 2011).

### The Guides’ Performance

The guide is considered to have three main functions: The tourist is able to do sightseeing within a limited amount of time. Secondly, the guide provide information (historical as well as practical e.g.) about a destination and assure tourists that they do not ‘waste time’ during their vacations by providing this information. Thirdly the guide combines the opportunities for adventurism, novelty, escape and educational experience such that they remain within safe limits (Schmidt, 1979). However, this does not imply an objective or impartial source of information. In the end the narratives and images presented by the guides are to sell the place as attractive as possible in order to be consumed by tourists. In that sense the guides do not seek to provide the entire picture of the tourist place, on the contrary they only focus on the sites considered attractive and authentic. Another element in the guides’ narratives is that they seek to guide and control the activities and interests including the tourists’ perceptions of a certain tourist site.

In the late 1970s Holloway explored the role of the guide, observing several guided tours conducted by the certified London guides. He notes that a guide’s work is to create a socially compatible environment by easing the interaction between the guide and the tourists and between the tourists themselves. Then the guide becomes a sort of catalyst (Holloway, 1980). Each guided tour is considered a unique performance involving a different audience, and the guides apply their dramaturgical skills to de-routinize the performance and involve the tourists. However, at the same time there are many often, contradictory

demands on the guide. Holloway (1980) argues that the guide role is actually little institutionalized. Similarly, Bruner (2005) depicts the tourists as active and co-producers and analyse how experiencing a sight is constructed in the performance of the sight, as the visitors move through it and interact with the guides, which may give rise to meanings that might not have been predicted before the visit. Bruner wants to transcend the dichotomies such as authentic/inauthentic, real/show, back/front stage that are applied to tourism by saying that all cultures are emergent and continually invented and reinvented: there is no original behind them. The production of any experience, including a touristic experience, is in an open format of dialogic interaction; each performance is constitutive and should therefore be understood on its own premises. Holloway (1981) states that the guide has sub-roles respectively the information-giver and the ambassador. Moreover, he argues that the majority of the guides perceive their prime role is to be information-giver. This points to one of the guide's roles as being ambassador or missionary for the country, when guiding. In addition, Dahles (2002) comments on the political, strategic choices available to the tour guides as a strategic factor in the representation of a destination area. Cohen (1985) also sustains that the guide seldom provide purely neutral information on the tour. As such, the tour guide has the opportunity to act as ambassador. However, tour guides are key actors in the process of folklorizing, ethnicizing, and exoticizing a destination (Salazar, 2005). They are often the only local people with whom tourists interact for a considerable amount of time during their trip. Guides are thus entrusted "to encapsulate the essence of place" (Pond, 1993). For many tourists a local guide is a primary source of information about a destination. At the same time the local guide may be the local resident to whom the tourists get closest. In this respect the guides are of the utmost importance in terms of which messages are conveyed and how, and which images of a destination are projected on to the tourists. It is important to note that, for tourists, travelling to the Americas, the local usually refers to an often pre-imagined authentic, exotic, traditional (not to say primitive) way of life. In other words, the local is much more than just a different space or place. The guides promote their version or model of "local" reality through their particular discourses of what is real and true and what is not. The guides then position themselves as locals when they tell about historic

important events or the traditions celebrated in the town. This implies that the guides often balance an ideological representation of “Otherness”. These ideologies as described in the tourism imaginaries circulate through a complex system of artefacts and communication devices: newspapers and magazines, television programs, museums, textbooks, student exchange programs, travelogues, and films (Salazar, 2005) and as stated by Clausen, Gustafsson and Velázquez they have origin in different utopias related to travellers writings and historical descriptions from stories and descriptions from the conquest of the Americas.

In addition it is important to note that the guided tour is a mobile stage in public space, and while some actors may have pre-determined or programmed roles, most do not; they just happen to be co-present in time and space with the group. Sometimes the guide will leave the stage to another actor for a while, and at other times the guide may drag other actors on to the stage to bolster their narratives or increase their own cultural or social capital in other ways (Meged, 2010). The tourists may also engage in direct interactions with third parties, and while positive interactions make a performance more credible and convincing, negative interactions are of course undesirable; in these cases the guide may act as a gatekeeper, just as a guided tour is limited to certain ‘front-stage’ paths. Meged (2010) argues that the tourist guides are viewed as active co-producers, who perform tourism experiences in interaction with the tourists. Furthermore, the guided tour is considered a performed practice, the tourists do not just engage in individual, introverted negotiations of meanings; as active co-producers they also negotiate meanings and content with the other actors on the stage (Holloway, 1981; Bruner, 2005; Haldrup & Larsen, 2009).

### The Guided House Tours in Alamos

In tourism studies less attention has been devoted to analysing the ways in which the global discourses about the Americas have been reconstructed and negotiated by local tour guides. Such research is especially salient in Mexico, where there is currently nor official policy nor program implemented to train, certify, and license guides, and the authorities have little or no control over their narratives and practices. In the same vein it is important to point to the fact that

several local guides in Mexico form part of the global migration flows - as in this case – which means that the “local” tour guides are not necessarily natives of the tourist destination or even from the same culture or country. In Alamos the group of North American immigrants forms part of Mexican civil society and their involvement in transnational organizations makes them active agents in the social, cultural, and political processes that are contesting and reformulating structures of power and ideologies not only in Alamos but also in Mexico<sup>13</sup> (Clausen, 2008, Clausen & Velázquez, 2010).

In Alamos one of the main tourist attractions is the guided House Tour. It is promoted in all museums, hotels and B&B and restaurants and at different web sites about Alamos. These tours are considered the gateway to understand and sense in an authentic way the town’s history and more important the town’s particular magic. Each Saturday morning the guided tours are offered departing from the main square in the town and the groups usually do not contain more than 15 tourists the majority from North America. There are twelve North American guides, all members of AE. They have all been living in Alamos for more than five years and consider themselves well integrated into the local Mexican life in town. Before starting their current job, most had other working experience in within hotels or working as artists. None have had formal guide training or studied to be a guide and they were chosen and privately instructed by the AE. These exceedingly popular guided House Tours give tourists a chance to “experience” several aspects of the Mexican daily life and the town’s history and traditions. Most of the guides start their House Tours by stating:

It is a special place on earth ... you could compare it with paradise (...) Do you know what they say about this village: The first day you just love [this village], the second day you hate it, and the third day you buy a house here. (5)

By this statement the guide projects a certain image or version of the local

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<sup>13</sup> This form of transnational charity organizations are present in all the Mexican towns where there exist expat communities that make their influence important to assess also taking into consideration that the North American immigration to Mexico is increasing (Croucher 2007).

reality related to the magic of the place and - in line with Salazar's (2005) studies - exoticize the town by comparing it with paradise. Furthermore, the local in a Mexican context refer to an often pre-imagined authentic, exotic, and traditional way of life.

The guided tour starts out in the morning at one side of the main square in the city centre. The tourists cross the central square surrounded with mainly impressive colonial style houses and with the church on the right hand side and the museum at one side and the municipality at the other which is how a typical Mexican town is designed as well as the decorated kiosk in the center of the square always filled with playing kids and people talking and passing by. The guide tells the glorious history of Alamos as the dowager queen of southern Sonora, immersed in memories of an elegant and rich past, steeped in its cultural heritage. Between 1533 and 1540 the Spanish conquistadores Diego de Guzmán and Vásquez de Coronado and the famous traveller Alvaro Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca passed by the site of Alamos. In 1630, Jesuit missionaries built an adobe church on the spot where the Iglesia de Alamos now stands. At one time, the capital of the state of Sonora was located here, and the town was home to one of Mexico's most important silver mines as well as having one of the most famous mints in all of Spanish America. However, with the closure of the mine and the mint, and the transfer of the state's seat of power to Hermosillo, most of the people emigrated, leaving the previously flourishing city essentially abandoned and it became nothing more than a footnote in Mexican history. By the time that the tourists have crossed the square the guide has finished the brief description of the town's history and stops at the plaza's corner in front of a huge colonial style house. The guide then in line with Schmidt (1979) fulfils the main functions as information giver. At the same time however, this case study asserts as Cohen (1985) stresses that the guide only provides partial historical descriptions and narratives dedicating about ten minutes to a historical review and the next almost three hours of guiding to the recent history of the town based upon the North American migrant community's role in the city's development. Now the guide starts telling the legendary story about how Alamos succeeded in becoming the attractive tourist site it is today. This due to - according to the guide's narrative - the visionary North American tourist that arrived in the 1950s fell in love with the more or less abandoned town and

invested a lot of money in reconstructing the city center, and in restoring the colonial style houses. He settled down in the town and started inviting North American to visit the town. In 2010 he was honoured both by the local government and the North American migrant community as one of the most important historic persons for the further development of the town. The town is now recognised for its beautiful landscapes, colonial style houses, cobblestones streets, nice and helpful local Mexican people and not the least for its prestigious festivals; one about culture and music, another about films and the town has also a famous festival about photos.

The guide goes on telling that some tourists decide to stay as migrants and end up buying a house in the centre or nearby neighbourhoods that are now only inhabited by North Americans. After this extensive story of the revival of Alamos, the guide continues the tour walking through several cobblestone smaller streets framed by bougainvillea and beautiful flowers, and talks about how the community of North American migrants now forms part of the town and have reintroduced several Mexican valuable traditions as the “Dance of the reindeer”, and the *callejornadas*<sup>14</sup> which the tourists can see performed on Sundays and Mondays. The guide continues: “...*México is just like being in another century (...) you could go out before in the States and leave your car without locking it.*” Apart from providing safety and information as Holloway and Cohen state, the guide is also confirming the image of Mexico as traditional, based on authentic values and pre-modern. This is further emphasized in the talks with the owners of the colonial houses, all North American migrants.

On our way to the first stop at a colonial house the guide tells about the indigenous women outside the hotels in the center, selling their handcrafts and how the North American community helped these women to start their small business by inviting them to Alamos. They are from the State of Chiapas dressed in typical, colorful traditional skirts from Chiapas and selling the traditional indigenous dolls and pillows corresponding to the stereotyped image of Mexico.

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<sup>14</sup>This is originally a Spanish tradition where musicians perform traditional ballads in the small streets. It is now often performed in Mexico in tourist sites as in the international recognized Cervantina music festival in Guanajuato, Mexico.

As Salazar's studies (2005) point to this case study also demonstrates how the North American guides are folklorizing and even exoticizing the town, as the tour focus on how everything is in another pace, the guide say "*hola*" to the passing locals even though they are North Americans living in the town and afterwards the guide says: "*It is very nice every body is polite and says hello, it is just like the old days*"; the traditional values are conserved, the traditional indigenous culture and very important, how the local Mexicans always help out even though the North American do not speak Spanish. That way, the guide "encapsulates the essence of place" (Pond, 1993). However, the local in Alamos is promoted as much more than just a place or space, it refers to an often pre-imagined authentic, exotic, traditional way of life. This is further confirmed when the tour goes on to visit the three or four private homes that are considered to represent the town and its history. Explicitly this involve visiting colonial style houses decorated with impressive wooden or iron doors, that often are left open to let the tourists gaze inside the lush gardens with palm trees and exotic flowers and other decorative plants. In each house the owner (all North American migrant that have been living in the town for several years) tells the story of the house and focus the talk upon how they have felt living in the town emphasising the friendly local Mexicans and their willingness always to help and being polite. In line with Megeed's (2010) findings this guided tour also includes third parties. In this case study the visits are to further emphasize the sensation of having an authentic back-stage experience. During the time spent in the houses the tourists are given ample opportunity to interact with the owner, that are considered to have knowledge and insights to local life style and practices due to living there and at the same time they are considered to form part of the North American culture. One house owner when asked about her opinion of Mexicans and living in a Mexican town:

*We love our Mexican hosts. We love them for their uniqueness, for their ability to cope, and we love their humanity. We try to accept and live with what we think are their foibles, just as they try to accept and live with what they are sure are ours. (...). [We the American community] never forget we are guests in their country and unless asked we should not try to tell them how to replant the plaza and offer to pay for it; or interfere in local politics.*

Furthermore, tourists who partake in these tours experience the nostalgic, exotic and idealised world of pre-modern values and friendly, relaxed life style. In line with Holloway (1981) the case shows how the guide's narratives and practices are information giver and ambassador for the town's particular characteristics as the guide plays out the imaginaries of Mexico. Through their work, the guides actively help to reconstruct, folklorize and exoticize the local, "authentic" distinctiveness and uniqueness of Alamos and some cultural Mexican characteristics that are constantly being fragmented by outside influences. However, through both their narratives and nonverbal practices, the guides present a commoditized and mystified version. They position themselves as locals when they tell anecdotes, about local traditions and historic events however, they also identify with the North American tourists as they themselves are North Americans. This implies that they balance an ideological representation of "Otherness". When the guides identify with the same culture as the tourists, they give the tourists a feeling of getting first-hand insight into the 'cultural other'. However, the guides also identify with the host culture, as they themselves are North Americans interpreting Mexican culture. By viewing the culture from inside, guides become ambassadors presenting "their" country, which probably fulfil the tourists' expectations. The guides then create a sense of 'we'. Consequently, the narratives and practices performed by the guides are colonial inspired stereotypes and images and these become the means by which the tourist is introduced to this authentic colonial Mexican town and the local Mexican people and culture even though the tourists only interact and are presented to only North American migrants (the colonial style house owners and the guides) and are guided around in the part of town belonging to the North American community.

### Final reflections

The article has looked into analysing the ways in which the global discourses about the Americas are reconstructed and negotiated by North American migrants that work as local guides at the most visited tourist attraction in the town. The article argued that during the guided tours the narratives and practices promoted by these guides show that the utopian imaginaries in the



Western hemisphere continue to be essential in the socio-cultural and political construction of society. Álamos becomes intimately related to the utopian imaginary even though the Mexicans in the town do not identify with these narratives and practices told by the guides. *That way* Alamos also displays the significant connections that exist in terms of both representations and mobilities. The organization (AE), the guides, and third parties (owners of the visited houses) and tourists are all actively taking part in shaping a mythologized tour product. However, the guides' narratives and practices propagate historically inherited symbols based on utopian imaginaries. These tourism imaginaries of people and places cannot be considered simply as commoditized or commercial representations with a symbolic content. Rather as argued they have to be seen in a broader socio-cultural and historical context.

In this case about Álamos there exists a construction -due to the North American guides that create y produce utopian imaginaries related to the US society (the North American tourists) and not related to the culture where they are located (in Mexico). The guides present the town or place as utopia en three different dimensions: 1) Community/society: here Álamos is considered a quite, secure town based on community cohesion. All the members of the community know each other and feel that they belong to the community opposed to the complex large cities that also implies anonymity. 2) The colonial constructions: here the guides not only refer to the colonial houses' architectural constructions or urban characteristics but also to the historic period that was characterized by the social order. The elite enjoyed luxury and comfort. This do seem to be very important as emphasized several times one of attractive elements in tourist areas for middle and lower social classes is the possibility to receive services that they do not have in their everyday life. 3) Indigenous/occident. Here the indigenous cultures (in Alamos the indigenous group is "an invented tradition" to fulfill the tourists' expectations about Mexico) provide the exotic and authentic environment. The sale of indigenous crafts and development of festivals or indigenous dances are necessary to generate this specific imaginary. Overall, the guides also provide an image of Alamos very much influenced by post-colonialism, although the colonial era in its more obvious form no longer exists, the prejudices and racial discrimination that were part of its underlying ideology.

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