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Exploring a unifying approach to peacebuilding through tourism: Abraham and Israel/Palestine

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ABSTRACT

This work emerges from the encouragement of peace studies scholars to seek out commonalities that can unite rival sides in a conflict. Based on this call, I propose the *unifying approach to peacebuilding through tourism* as one where tourism initiatives use unifying points (such as figures, sites, stories and symbols) that help conflicting sides see commonalities and thus facilitate cross-cultural understanding. In particular, I look at how the story of Abraham (communal father of Jews, Christians and Muslims) appears to be used as a *guiding fiction* for the work of two tourism initiatives in Israel and Palestine. Based on mixed qualitative data, I use Creative Analytic Practice to present two semi-fictional stories that explore this use of Abraham, exposing the potential benefits and risks associated with striving for a unifying peace in an arena as charged as the Israeli-Palestinian context. These stories reveal that the unifying approach provides a valuable vocabulary of progress that challenges the dominant sectarian narratives of tourism in the region, yet simultaneously rubs awkwardly against the sharp divisions and imbalances of the Israeli-Palestinian context.

Introduction

The peace through tourism (PTT) debate is growing in both volume and sophistication. Despite the trauma of 2020, the year did produce news of another book celebrating tourism's role in peacebuilding (Da Silva et al., 2021). It also saw the continuing support of a number of world organisations, such as the United Nations (UN), for the notion that tourism promotes peace. On World Tourism Day 2020, for example, the UN lauded tourism's ability to bring people together and promote "solidarity and trust" (United Nations, 2020). Such a public conversation on tourism's role in peacebuilding has arguably become even timelier as the future of tourism is reconsidered in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Critical tourism scholars have been at the front line of this reconsideration, arguing for a rethink of the status quo, growth-first agenda of tourism and a reaffirmation of tourism's social power (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021).

However, the promise of tourism in peacebuilding often fails to match its plaudits. Tourism is repeatedly shown to aggravate conflict in some of the world's most contested spaces, most notably in its ability to amplify sectarian narratives (Clarke, 2000; McDowell, 2008). It is therefore

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essential that tourism scholars provide what this special issue calls for – critical reflections on the peace through tourism debate.

Consequently, I offer one such critical reflection on the efforts of two tourism initiatives in Israel/Palestine that attempt to use tourism for peacebuilding. In particular, I explore how their attempts at a *unifying approach to peacebuilding*, represented by their employment of the unifying figure of Abraham, biblical ancestor of both Israelis and Palestinians, as a *guiding fiction* for their work, stands up in the face of an on-going conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Although some may struggle to see how PTT is possible in such a contested space, peace scholars shine a hopeful way forward for such an investigation. Galtung (1969) affirmed that peace is more than the absence of physical violence, which he termed a negative peace; it is also about building social justice - or positive peace. Galtung does not suggest a negative peace presupposes a positive one, and therefore in a place like Israel/Palestine, his conceptualisation shows how we can work for positive peace even in settings of violence. Moreover, Koopman (2011) argues that peace is a process; that it can exist even in the midst of war. In this way, they justify discussing peacebuilding in environments where evidence of peace is hard to find.

A unifying approach to peacebuilding (through tourism)

According to Lederach (1997), peacebuilding is an inclusive concept that "encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships" (p.20). Although the term peacebuilding is often used in post-conflict situations, I appreciate the processual and performative nature of the term "building", which speaks to the belief that peace is not a static point to be attained or lost, but rather an ongoing process of building, doing and redoing peaceful relations (Koopman, 2011). Based on Lederach's definition, I introduce the notion of a *unifying approach to peacebuilding* as an approach to transforming conflict towards more sustainable and peaceful relationships through the use of unifying points (such as figures, sites, stories and symbols) that help conflicting sides see commonalities and thus facilitates cross-cultural understanding.

Finding unifying points around which conflicting sides can rally is one of the cornerstones of peacebuilding. Abu-Nimer (2003, p.18–19) writes, "one of the guiding principles in the practice of mediation … is to identify commonalities and build on the small agreements achieved by disputants". He sees such a focus on commonalities as an effective way of encouraging conflicting sides to reflect on how they can relate to one another and recognise a relational responsibility for resolving the conflict (Ibid).

The recent peace agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in August 2020 reflect this approach. Named the Abraham Accords, these agreements describe how the unifying figure of Abraham, common ancestor of both Arabs and Jews, encourages these previously antagonistic nations to commit to "a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect" (United States Department of State, 2020). Another religious figure that has served as a unifying point in conflict is the figure of Saint Patrick in Northern Ireland. Nagle (2014) explains how even in the midst of 'The Troubles', Saint Patrick served as a unifying symbol of peace by activists on both Republican and Unionist sides. Moreover, in Syria, scholars argued that Syrian heritage sites, such as Palmyra, hold significant unifying potential for Syrian students. Their findings forward that such unifying points can "reclaim a common national identity among diverse groups of Syrians" split by years of civil war (Abdullah et al., 2020, p.64).

As a point of reference, the unifying approach stands in stark contrast to another approach to peacebuilding called agonistic peacebuilding. Agonists see conflict as an essential part of social life. For them, peacebuilding is not an exercise in finding commonalities. Instead, peacebuilding is about ensuring political struggle occurs democratically rather than antagonistically (Shinko, 2008). Agonists are suspicious about peacebuilding based around unifying points. Nagle (2014)

vocalises these concerns in saying, "While reasonable, the assumption that common symbols and rituals in divided societies generate peaceful intercommunal relations is deeply problematic" (p.480). He explains that despite being seen by some as a unifying point in Northern Ireland, Saint Patrick was also a point of conflict, with both Protestants and Catholics claiming ownership of the saint.

This paper posits that the unifying approach to peacebuilding can be applied within a tourism context. Based on the discussion above, I define a unifying approach to PTT as an approach to PTT where tourism initiatives use unifying points (such as figures, sites, stories and symbols) that help conflicting sides see commonalities and thus facilitate cross-cultural understanding. Such an approach is seldom reflected in either tourism scholarship or in the public institutions tasked with promoting PTT. Tourism scholars have largely focused on tourism's role in promoting first-time encounters and dialogue between conflicting groups, an idea rooted in Allport's (1954) contact theory. The results of these inquiries are mixed, yet often do not show significant shifts in attitudes (e.g. Anastasopoulos, 1992). The institutions, such as the UNWTO, have largely toed the same line, often coupled with a liberal peace approach (Megoran, 2011) that stresses tourism's potential to promote economic development.

Although I am proposing a new concept in this paper, the unifying approach to PTT is reflected in a number of existing cases. In South Korea, for example, tourists to the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea are encouraged to buy into the narrative of a unified Korea instead of focusing on the current conflict. As such, tourists take the "Peace Train" from Seoul to Dorasan station with its "Unification Platform", where they are told trains will one day continue over the border to Pyongyang (Korea Tourism Organization, 2020). Jung (2019, p.317), however, remains sceptical of the potential of such tourism to promote peace, suggesting it risks remaining "tourism longing for peace". In Israel/Palestine, Gelbman (2019) describes the Bethlehem to Jerusalem Peace Run as an event where Israelis, Palestinians and Italians put aside their differences and unite through their love of sport. Gelbman appears convinced in the run's potential to highlight a mutual hope for peace in this troubled region. Sadly, however, the run ceased its operations as of 2011. In Europe, an interesting project is developing along the former trench lines of World War One. Tourists from all sides of The Great War are being invited to walk the new 1000 km long Western Front Way hiking trail and reflect on the unifying points of both a lasting European peace and a shared history of relatives lost in Flanders' fields (Western Front Way, 2020).

Guiding fictions

In this paper, I seek to demonstrate how the use of Abraham at two tourism initiatives in Israel/Palestine reflects a unifying approach to PTT. A key element of this analysis is the way in which these two tourism initiatives use the story of Abraham as a *guiding fiction* in service of their peacebuilding efforts. By *guiding fiction*, I mean a fiction that is used for its potential to guide one towards a beneficial goal.

Although I explain later how the story of Abraham has the potential to do this, it is important to note that referring to the story of Abraham as a guiding fiction does not deny the very real attachments to Abraham felt by billions of his followers. Referring to Abraham and his story as a fiction is based on the fact that there still exists no verifiable historical evidence for his existence outside the religious texts that mention him (Gopin, 2002). Suggesting the story of Abraham can serve as a guiding fiction does not deny its utility, power or meaning; in fact, I argue it does quite the opposite, in opening up the possibility for multilayered meaning and therefore value to both believers and non-believers. After all, as is made clear in literary theory, a fiction is not an act of duping, falsehood or fallacy, but "something made for its own sake" (Smythe, 2005, p.300).

My understanding of guiding fictions is grounded in the ideas of German philosopher Hans Vaihinger in *The Philosophy of As If* (Vaihinger, 1924). The main thrust of this magnum opus was that fictional ideas are invaluable tools "for finding our way about more easily in the world" (p.15). For example, although we know that negative square numbers, the ego or the tourist gaze are not independent objective realities, mathematicians, psychologists and tourism scholars each use these concepts to make important scientific observations. As Vaihinger writes, ideas "whose theoretical untruth or incorrectness, and therewith … falsity is admitted is not for that reason practically valueless or useless, for such an idea, in spite of its theoretical nullity, may have great practical importance" (Ibid, p.8). Therefore, in terms of science, fictions are vital. Kant proffered the moral value of fictions in his categorical imperative, arguing that people should behave *as if* their actions "were to constitute a universal law" (Smythe, 2005, p.299). Recently, Harari's (2014) popular history of humanity, *Sapiens*, rebooted such ideas, stressing the fictional nature of many moral concepts such as human rights. Harari's main thesis was, however, that fictions unify. They help us cooperate in large numbers through our shared belief in fictional constructs like money, nations and empires. They are, for Harari, the main reason for our success as a species.

Of course, not all guiding fictions are beneficial. Although they help us cooperate, as Harari makes clear, such cooperation does not always end well. One only needs to think of the darkest chapters of human history to see they were the products of a guiding fiction of some sort, from fictions of eugenics theory to national glory. It is therefore important that whilst accepting the potentially positive power of guiding fictions, we remain open to the risk that the fiction may lead us further away from our intended positive goal.

The benefits and risks of guiding fictions are clearly seen in the subject matter of this journal. Sustainable tourism is without doubt the most successful guiding fiction in our discipline, with over 5000 papers published on the topic in the last twenty years (Sharpley, 2020). I call it a guiding fiction for its fictive premise that we can continue to develop tourism so that "it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical)" (Butler, 1993, p.29). This premise falls flat when we realise that sustained growth cannot occur sustainably on a planet with finite resources. Despite criticism, it remains unimaginably successful, given that its core message is undeniably attractive - that tourism can continue developing in a way that does not degrade the resources it depends upon (human or physical) – and inexplicit – an ideological Play-Doh that can be moulded to suit the individual. The quaffable and malleable nature of this guiding fiction is what makes it powerful in engaging people in sustainability issues (Berno & Bricker, 2001). In true guiding fiction fashion, Hardy et al. (2002, p.438) argue that defining sustainable tourism "is less important than the journey towards it".

Yet such ambiguity can also be problematic. The lack of substance in the concept can lead it to serve as a "smoke screen" (McCool et al., 2013, p.222), covering up a failure to tackle the environmental, social and economic problems created by tourism, with an ecolabel here and a carbon offset there. In essence, that it helps maintain the status quo, when "the status quo clearly cannot hold" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018, p.158). Recently, scholars have said that sustainable tourism fails to face up to the bare reality that tourism is "addicted to growth" (Ibid, p.157) and in need of de-growth, not continual, sustain-ed/-able development (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021; Sharpley, 2020).

The peacebuilding potential of Abraham in Israel/Palestine

Several commentators have noted how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is rooted in a divergence of Zionist and Palestinian interpretations of the land that makes up the former British mandate of Palestine (1920-1948). The Zionist narrative is that this land is the historic home of the Jewish people who have been in diasporic exile for two thousand years. The State of Israel, established

in 1948, is therefore more than just a life raft for the Jewish people after centuries of persecution, it is the rightful home of the descendants of the Israelites (Oz, 1995; Shavit, 2013). The Palestinian narrative is that the land is theirs by virtue of having resided there for millennia; that Zionism represents a settler-colonial movement by largely European Jews; and that the removal of the indigenous people of Palestine in 1948 to create the State of Israel (the Nakba) was an act of ethnic cleansing that is still ongoing today (Khalidi, 2020; Said, 1992). Clearly, such narratives leave little room for common ground and contribute to the sense that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is intractable. Indeed, the conflict has raged for nearly a century, and the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank is now over 50 years old. Yet despite the strength of these two narratives, the crude reality is that "Palestinians and Israeli Jews are now fully implicated in each other's' lives" (Said, 1992, p.49). Neither Israeli Jews nor Palestinians are going anywhere, despite what the other might wish.

Within this context, Abraham represents a rare potential unifying point (Gopin, 2002). Abraham is a central figure in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim holy texts. Although the exact details of his life vary in the three religious traditions, there is a common narrative of a man and his family moving through the Middle East at the behest of God. Abraham is essential for each religion. For Jews, it is through Abraham that their covenant is made with God as God's 'chosen people' (Genesis 17). For Muslims, Abraham is considered the first Muslim through his complete submission to God (The Qur'an 1:3). For Christians, Abraham represents the power of and reward for complete faith in God (Romans 4).

When used in the context of peacebuilding, Abraham's story offers the possibility of serving as a guiding fiction, helping conflicting sides work towards the beneficial goal of peace. Three aspects of Abraham and his story can be leveraged for this purpose.

Firstly, Abraham is recognised by followers of the three most prominent religions in Israel/Palestine (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) to be the communal father of their faith. Although each religion sees their connection to Abraham differently, i.e. Muslims believe they are descended from Abraham's first son, Ishmael, whereas Jews stress their progeny from Isaac, the potentially unifying power of the figure of Abraham is undeniable (Gopin, 2002). We see this aspect of Abraham leveraged in the aforementioned Abraham Accords.

Secondly, the story of Abraham places great importance on hospitality. Abraham spent much of his life on the road, travelling across the Middle East with his family and animals. Although always a stranger in other people's lands (Gopin, 2002), the sacred texts show Abraham as deeply hospitable. His tent was always open to strangers, where he would welcome passers-by, wash their feet and feed them (Genesis 18:1-8; The Qur'an 51:24-30). Abraham's hospitality appears to go well beyond Kantian expectations of the cosmopolitan right of strangers not to be treated as enemies, instead demonstrating an unconditional welcoming and ethics of care (Ramadan, 2011). As Gopin (2002, p.23) asserts, Abraham represents the "eager embrace of the unknown other". This central message of the Abrahamic story, in particular the symbol of his open tent, has already inspired peacebuilding activities in Israel/Palestine. For example, outside of Bethlehem stands the Tent of Nations project. Using the symbol of Abraham's open-sided tent, the project seeks to be a place of dialogue and peacebuilding on the threatened land of Daoud Nassar, a Palestinian farmer who invites people of all backgrounds to participate in tree planting and harvesting (Megoran, 2011). Similarly, in 2013, Jewish anti-occupation activists tried to set up a mock-up of Abraham's tent in the heart of the deeply contested city of Hebron, Palestine. They hoped to embody Abraham's message of openness and tolerance in a city marked by closure and violence (Hammami et al., In Press).

Thirdly, the Bible describes Abraham as a mediator of conflict. In Genesis 13, a conflict arises between the herders of Abraham and his nephew Lot's livestock, as the land they are on does not support both herds. Seeking to avoid conflict, Abraham asks Lot to part from him saying, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we

are close relatives". Israeli novelist and peace activist Amos Oz has suggested this gesture could serve as a metaphor for "a pragmatic peace in an imperfect world" (Oz, 1995, p.65).

Using the figure and story of Abraham in this way is not, however, risk free. As stated, there are differences in the understanding and interpretation of Abraham amongst the three religions. Moreover, those whose work reflects the use of Abraham as a guiding fiction have faced significant opposition. The Tent of Nations project is routinely targeted by violent Israeli settlers (Megoran, 2011), and the Israeli army not only prevented the Hebron activists setting up their Abrahamic tent, but also arrested them (Hammami et al., In Press).

Inviting tourists into Abraham's tent

Tourism has largely reinforced the two separate Israeli and Palestinian narratives (Clarke, 2000; Strömbom, 2019). Tourists visiting the region are usually presented with "polished, national narratives, telling single-faceted, partisan stories about the past" (Strömbom, 2019, p.77), in an effort to turn tourists into political agents for one particular side in the conflict. It is therefore unusual when tourism promotes ideals of unity, such as the story of Abraham.

This study looks at two tourism initiatives that reflect the unifying approach to PTT in that they appear to use Abraham as a guiding fiction to promote cross-cultural understanding in the Israeli-Palestinian context. These initiatives are the Abraham Hostels in Israel and the Abraham's Path in Palestine.

Abraham Hostels is the largest hostel chain in Israel with a capacity of over a thousand beds. The company operates four hostels in Eilat, Jerusalem, Nazareth and Tel Aviv. The first Abraham Hostel opened in Jerusalem in 2010, although the Nazareth hostel opened in 2005 under a different name (Gelbman & Laven, 2016). In their online presence, the hostel group champions Abraham as a "unifying symbol among the area's most prominent faiths" and one who embodies a "fitting representation of what we hope to bring to the world" (Abraham Hostels, 2020). Guided by the story of Abraham, the hostel has advanced its vision to provide unbridled hospitality to guests, to be a welcoming space for people of all backgrounds, and to stand for "pluralism, acceptance of the other, equality and democracy, hope and unity" (Abraham Hostels, n.d.). As part of this mission to engage the Other, the company also runs a popular tour offering called Abraham Tours that provides opportunities for tourists to meet Palestinians living in both Israel and Palestine. Although Yang (2020) argued these tours are too apolitical and thus normalise the Israeli occupation, Gelbman and Laven (2016), as well as Shepherd and Laven (2021), have demonstrated the hostels' ability to encourage cross-cultural dialogue between Israelis of different ethnic groups, as well as between tourists and Israelis at large.

The Abraham's Path is a long-distance hiking path and the brainchild of Harvard professor and negotiator William Urry. Seeing the conflicts of the Middle East as in need of a helpful "third side", Urry seized upon the figure of Abraham as someone whose "basic message is unity" (Urry, 2010) and through whom the people of the Middle East can redefine one another as kin. Consequently, Urry established the Abraham's Path Initiative (API) in 2004, which set out to create a hiking path that would trace Abraham's journey from his supposed birthplace near the modern Turkish city of Şanlıurfa, through what is now Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestine, to his tomb in Hebron (Isaac, 2017). The idea was that the path would serve as "a step towards a reunion of the often-warring members of the patriarch's three-branched family (Leary et al., 2009, p.5) and change people's perceptions of the Middle East through the Abrahamic act of giving and receiving hospitality.

In this paper, I focus only on the Palestinian sections of the trail — 330 km of waymarked paths running the length of the West Bank (Isaac, 2017). These sections are, at the time of writing, managed by a Palestinian NGO called Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil (MIAK), which translates as the Path of Abraham the Friend – a nod to the Qur'an, which describes Abraham as a friend of God

(The Qur'an 4:125). The MIAK's online presence draws heavily on Abraham's reputation for unconditional hospitality and the survival of such cultural heritage in 21st century Palestine (Masar Ibrahim Al Khalil, 2020). The path has been subject to previous academic investigations, both for its significance for tourism development in Palestine (Isaac, 2017) and as a site of social non-movement (Sellick, 2019).

Together these sites represent attempts to invite tourists into the Abrahamic guiding fiction; to encourage visitors to see through the existing conflict in the region and focus on the message of unconditional hospitality and inter-cultural unity that Abraham embodies. This approach makes sense in an industry where stories are central to both the practice, promotion, experience and recollection of tourism (Moscardo, 2020).

Method

To explore what happens when stakeholders and tourists are, metaphorically speaking, invited into Abraham's tent, I crafted two semi-fictional stories from data collected in Israel/Palestine, using an approach to research called Creative Analytic Practice (CAP). These two stories, entitled *One day at the Abraham Hostels* and *One day on the Abraham's Path* follow a character called Tristan as he visits both these initiatives and engages with tourists and stakeholders.

CAP is an approach to analysis and representation that generates contextualized creative representations of synthesized data (Berbary, 2019). It seeks to blur the boundaries of science and art, being scientifically "true to a world known through empirical work and study" (Richardson, 2004, p.212), whilst embracing the creative arts to produce work that is evocative and open to interpretation.

Although data collection for CAP research can resemble conventional qualitative approaches, the analysis, and in particular the representation of the research, is very different (Berbary, 2019). The reasoning for this difference centres on the narrative turn and the crisis of representation. For Bochner (2001, p.134), the narrative turn represents a shift "away from a singular, monolithic conception of social science towards a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research". It champions narrative as a form of human meaning making (Glover, 2003), and research representations that provide thick descriptions that evoke a sense of being there for readers, so they too can connect with those whose stories are being told (Berbary, 2019). The narrative turn also champions the role of the researcher as an impassioned storyteller, not as a detached observer (Bochner, 2001). Recognising the influence the academic storyteller has over their interpretation of the stories of others, CAP rests heavily on the crisis of representation, which challenges the assumption in traditional qualitative research that we can represent the authentic voice of others (Grant, 2018). Given our inability to truly represent this voice, CAP stresses that as we subjectively engage with our research and (re)represent others, we construct but one possible depiction of our data. In this way, CAP is open about "our abilities and inabilities to capture and re-present reality" (Berbary, 2019, p.164). Conversely, CAP appears to reflect what Grant (2018) terms the "hermeneutics of suspicion", that the "meaning of a text can't, and indeed shouldn't, simply be read off in a straightforward way, and that myriad interpretations are possible" (p.108).

CAP takes many different creative forms. Although rarely used in our field, CAP in tourism studies has taken forms such as autoethnography (Shepherd et al., 2020), ethno-drama (Wright, 2020), and storying (Grimwood et al., 2019). I seek to forward this research agenda and contribute to a growing demand for creative and disruptive methodologies in tourism studies (Ivanova et al., 2020).

Although the stories below are a reflection of three years extensive fieldwork in Israel and Palestine, they most closely reflect data collected in the region in May and November 2019. During this time, I gathered three forms of data: participant observation data, autoethnographic

data, and data from a questionnaire. These three sets of data represent three key research per-spectives - tourism stakeholder, tourist, and tourism academic – that should illuminate our understanding of the use of Abraham as a guiding fiction for a unifying peace.

Participant observation was conducted at both initiatives. In Israel, I spent two weeks at three of the Abraham Hostels – sleeping at the hostel, speaking with guests and staff, and taking tours that the company offered. I focused my participant observation and my dialogue with staff and guests on how the story of Abraham is leveraged as a guiding fiction for the work of the hostel, and how tourists and staff respond to this appeal. The tours I took, such as a tour of the Gaza border and a food tour celebrating Tel Aviv's often-ostracised African communities, reflected the hostel's mission to engage tourists with the Israeli 'Other'. To compare and contrast my own and the other tourists' experiences, I conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with two of the hostel's senior management; interviews that were recorded and then transcribed.

In Palestine, I spent four days walking the Abraham's Path with a group of 15 hikers as part of a thru-hike - a group hike along the entire length of the Palestinian section of the trail. As in Israel, I focused my conversations with the hikers and our guides (who changed frequently) on their perspectives towards the aims of the API and their use of Abraham. Together with the hikers, I slept at Palestinian guesthouses and with host-families, who I also engaged with when language permitted. One guesthouse owner, whose English was fluent, agreed to an in-depth, unstructured interview, which was recorded and transcribed. Throughout observations at both initiatives, I kept detailed notes of relevant comments made by tourists and guides, and took over 200 photographs.

In addition, I kept an autoethnographic field diary in which I wrote my reflections on and emotions of these experiences. I call it an autoethnographic field diary because, in line with Ellis et al. (2011, §1) definition of autoethnography, I explicitly tried to describe and analyse how my personal experience (auto) at these sites helped me understand the cultural experience (ethno) in question. This field diary amounted to 30 pages of data.

The third source of data was a questionnaire I sent out to the hikers I joined on the Abraham's Path. This short questionnaire asked specific open-ended questions related to their motivation for walking the trail, their experiences on it, and their thoughts on the use of Abraham as it relates to peacebuilding in the region. The questionnaire, completed by eleven hikers after they had returned from Palestine, provided me with reflective prose data that was difficult to obtain on the trail.

I analysed the data according to the recommend steps laid out by Berbary (2019) for CAP analysis. I began by reading the data repeatedly until I was deeply familiar with all its stories. Then I identified the stories that needed to be told. This selection process was based on what spoke most clearly to the aims of my research, on where there were clear moments of similitude or divergence, and on when the data spoke to me for its aesthetic appeal or emotional gravitas. Following this, I decided on the genre of semi-fictional storying as the best way to synthesise these moments. As Glover (2003, p.159) argues, all narrative work includes fictive elements in the quest to be aesthetically pleasing. Relatedly, my choice responded to a need to blend space and time in order to bring together disparate key moments in the data. It also stemmed from an inspiration – that of the ability of fiction writers, such as Colum McCann and his sensational novel *Apeirogon* (McCann, 2020), to tap into the emotive core of the overlapping storylines of the Israeli-Palestinian context.

This semi-fictional story was then given a plot – a way of connecting a series of events with meaning, with a start and an end (Polkinghorne, 1995). In both stories, this plot revolves around Tristan, a character who is largely the product of my autoethnographic data, as he spends a day in both initiatives. In basing Tristan on my experience, I hope to make clear my own involvement in the events of the story as well as my own positionality in this context (Bochner, 2001). Although Tristan remains the central figure in the plot, he is continually brought into dialogue with other characters who represent informants in the data. Their words largely come verbatim

Figure 1. Abraham – The First Backpacker. Photo taken by the author. November 2019.

from the data and reflect identifiable individuals in the data, yet at times, composite characters are used (Berbary, 2019). Naturally, the plot of both stories focus on the engagement of Tristan, tourists and stakeholders with the invitation to participate in the Abrahamic guiding fiction; to "enter the tent" for peacebuilding in a context of conflict. In this way, the stories are shaped by this invitation, in much the same way that an interviewer shapes the voices of respondents through their line of questioning (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009).

Once complete, I shared my stories with informants and asked for their views on how I represented their words and our shared experiences. I also asked them to choose their own pseudonyms – both to give them ownership of their characters and to protect their identities. The feedback was positive and I inserted the informants' suggestions for improvement into the stories.

Results

One day at the Abraham Hostels

When Abraham set out for Canaan, he did not face a full body scan, a comprehensive bag search or a series of penetrating questions from border security. Tristan, however, gets such a privilege each time he travels to the Holy Land. He tries to think positively about it; at least his laptop gets a swab dusting twice a year.

Hailing a taxi from the airport, he sits in the back and relishes the warm breeze slicing through the open window as the driver hurtles towards the city in undecided lanes. It's 4am, so it's no surprise the driver is silent. Yet the landscape is speaking; palm tree-lined roads only half-covering radar stations that seem a little too far from the airport.

Reaching the Abraham hostel, Tristan only manages a short, sweaty sleep. He has an early meeting with Moran, one of the founders of the Abraham Hostels. Racing out for a desperately needed iced Americano from the aptly named 'Way Cup Coffee', Tristan is reminded of why he is here (Figure 1).

"Our vision is to bring Abrahamic hospitality to the 21st century," beams Moran. "Abraham was the first backpacker in the Middle East, and we want to bring this image, this hospitality, back to life in the Middle East. Hospitality is the core of our business and Abraham was known for it!"

Put at ease by Moran's Hawaiian shirt and approachable disposition, Tristan relaxes into his coffee in Moran's surprisingly pokey office. He takes it all in. Hospitality, Middle East, Abraham. Wait, Middle East? Israel is hardly famous as a cross-border destination.

"We are operating in Israel, Palestine, Jordan and now in the Sinai, Egypt. So we see the Middle East as more of our arena, even though we started in Israel. We are not just an Israeli, or a Jewish, or a Zionist company."

"So do you have plans to set up Abraham hostels in other countries in the region?"

"We are really trying to touch the ground in Jordan but it's not acceptable now," he says, sighing. "Inshallah, someone will open one!"

"But at least if you do, Abraham is the perfect figure right?"

"Exactly!" he says. "Abraham is the communal father for Jews, Christians and Muslims. So no matter where you're from in this region, this is your story. Tourism, branding and marketing is all about making a story that will connect people. So why not bring that story to life? We are all from the same origin; we all love to host other people. This is the story of our life so why not emphasise it."

"But do you see any risks in using a religious figure in a region so marked by religious division?"

"If you want I can change it," says Moran with a wry smile. "Well, to be honest, I don't see it as a religious figure; I see it as a historical figure. You can't please everyone though. Some people don't like that we are liberal either, that we put Pride flags over the hostel, but that's their problem, I don't care."

A staff member comes in and interrupts the conversation. She is wearing a black t-shirt with coloured letters that say 'Come As You Are'. Her name badge has two flags on it: Israel and Palestine. It seems it is okay to be both here.

Giving Moran the space to talk privately with his staff, Tristan goes upstairs to stroll the lobby.

There, the help desk is engulfed in tourists planning weekends in Petra, sunrise in Masada, even trips to the Pyramids! Abraham Tours might not stretch from Haran to Hebron but that's certainly not for a lack of trying. Yet Tristan is drawn to a series of posters selling tours with names such as 'Meet the Ultra-Orthodox Jews', 'The Other Tel Aviv', 'The Best of the West Bank', 'The Gaza Border Reality Tour'.

The Gaza Border Reality Tour, where the reality of the Gaza Border got in the way. 'The first hour led by the Israeli guide, and the second hour led by an academic or activist Palestinian resident of Gaza, by video or phone call'. The phone call lasted 2 minutes. Electricity is limited in Gaza – as is water, as is food, as is patience. Two months after taking the tour, Tristan saw a news article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, "Hamas Arrests Gazans for Holding Zoom Video Chat With Israelis".

Lost in memories not yet made, Tristan hears a voice from behind.

"There you are! Let's go get some *rugelach*."

As they walk down bustling Allenby Street, Tristan asks Moran, "You said you want to bring Abraham's story to life. Does that mean you see the hostel as working for peace between Israelis and Palestinians?"

Moran pauses for a minute. "Hmm, I'm not so naïve. 15 years ago, maybe I would have said yes. I am convinced we can become great neighbours. I don't say friends but neighbours. What we are doing, it's not about creating world peace. Our agenda is that tourists will meet new people and that we can share some of our values with our guests, with our staff, with the communities we are operating in. Those Abrahamic values I talked about, right, that hospitality, that openness. You know, the truth is that people tend to come with their own agenda and leave with their own agenda. We just want tourism to become more sustainable so that everyone has a better chance of surviving in this crazy capitalist world. And in that respect, I think we bring great hope. At least that is what people tell me."

People like Mahida. A Muslim and of Palestinian origin, she manages the Fauzi Azar Inn - Abraham's hostel in Nazareth. Alongside her Jewish colleague. Tristan catches her in her office

before she leaves for the last bus of the day to Nazareth, before Shabbat sets in and all of Israel draws to a sudden halt.

"I respect this place a lot," Mahida says, "because they make it feel like it doesn't matter if you are Jewish, Muslim or Christian."

Despite this, Tristan wonders what the people of Nazareth make of the Fauzi Azar Inn now being an Abraham hostel. Sensing this might be sensitive material, Tristan asks his question delicately.

Mahida's eyes flicker around the room. "Well, it not that they don't like the name Abraham in Nazareth, but you know, it's a Jewish company and Nazareth is all Arab. So there are many questions asked, like how can that Jewish company be working here? Many people can't accept this, a Jewish company in the heart of the Old City of the Arab's town. But for me, it doesn't matter. We are all human, and if someone wants to support the community, it doesn't matter if you're Jewish or Arab."

She pauses and smiles nervously. "I'm sorry; I don't like to speak much about politics."

Mahida leaves for her bus that will take her up the heavily developed coastline towards Nazareth. The roads will be congested as everyone rushes home for Friday's Shabbat dinner. Some will cook for one extra person in case an unexpected guest arrives, honouring the memory of Abraham who sat at the front of his tent awaiting unknown guests. Eventually, the bus will reach Nazareth, but only once it has passed by Jewish, Circassian, Bedouin, Arab and Druze communities. The many nations of Israel.

God told Abraham, "You will be a father of many nations."

They say you cannot choose your family.

Not all families are functional

One day on the Abraham's Path

Despite being early November, the Christmas decorations are up in the Shaheen household. They are last year's decorations but the family never took them down. As members of Palestine's diminishing Christian minority, their decorations represent a stubborn affirmation of their faith. Their youngest son, Omar, watches their guest Tristan brush his teeth. Tristan smiles at him; he enjoyed playing football with Omar last night, even if the British tourist's goal attempts broke his mum's plastic garden chair, which Omar had used as an impromptu goal post.

Omar is too young to know what else the British broke here, but he will learn. The streets of the village may be short, but their memories are long.

For Omar, Christmas will be different this year. One month ago, his older brother was ripped out of bed and arrested by Israeli soldiers in the middle of the night. The family was never told what crime their son had committed, but they knew well enough the crime of being Palestinian; of their existence violating the sacred mythology of 'a land without a people'.

This thought weighs on Tristan's mind as he straps on his backpack for another day on the Abraham's Path. It also jars with the bucolic atmosphere of the village that morning – the crowing of roosters, the hum of old tractors moving into the olive groves, and the thick smell of the earth recoiling from the sun.

Nowhere is that smell more powerful than the group's destination for the day. A town 250 m below sea level, Jericho.

At the head of the group this morning is Ricardo, a good-humoured French Canadian whose Coquille Saint Jacques from pilgrimages past bounces on his backpack straps as he walks. He likes to walk in front. Seeing the open road clears his head. "It's my own personal therapy," he says, placing one hiking stick in front of the other, as he walks in the footsteps of Abraham, of David, and most importantly for him and his friend Luigi, of Jesus Christ.

Figure 2. Wadi Diba. Photo taken by the author. November 2019.

Other members of the group are less interested in the biblical dimensions of the trail. They are here to learn about the Palestine of today.

"So, guys, up here on your right you can see the settlement of Na'ama," points today's guide Zahed. "They took over 5000 dunams of our land to build it."

The group has become used to these observations by now. The landscape narrated as undulating hills of dunams stolen and olive trees uprooted.

Nathalie, who is new to the group, plucks up the courage to ask a question others have learnt not to ask: "Would you ever consider having the path go through these settlements? Or connect up with other sections in Israel?"

"I don't want that to happen. No," Zahed says, "even if it did, I am not allowed to go there."

"But wasn't that the original idea? The Abraham's path … "

"There is no Abraham's Path. This is Masar Ibrahim."

"Doesn't that mean the same thing?" wonders Tristan.

"Ok, *yani*, Abraham's Path, it's a nice idea and all. It is true that Abraham is the father of Muslims, Christians, even Jews … but for all I care this could be called the Olive Trail or the Palestine Trail. People don't come here for Abraham, they come for Palestine."

Many nod enthusiastically. It is true; most did not come here for Abraham. Yet Jewish-Canadian Jacob is quietly disappointed. Like Nathalie, he is walking the path, in part, because of William Urry's call for a helpful "third side" to the conflict. Jacob expected more conversations about peace. At the same time, he is clear-eyed about what he has seen since he set out from Rummanah nine days ago. He is still trying to square Urry's vision of inter-faith unity with what he saw yesterday: a charred house in Duma, where Israeli settlers incinerated a Palestinian family in July 2015. Standing beside that burnt out skeleton of a home, the silence was deafening.

The day's walk is tough going under an oppressive sun. The little shade of the Wadi Diba, or 'Valley of Hyenas' (Figure 2), providing welcome relief during a simple lunch of *hummus* and *labneh*.

Unlike the other days on the path, the group are yet to receive a thimble-sized cup of cardamom-spiked coffee; a practice that has become almost routine to the hikers as they pass each small, threatened village. Therefore, when they reach the village of Al-Mughayyir that afternoon, they are glad to be welcomed by a coffee-bearing village elder.

He passes around the coffee. "Welcome to Al-Mughayyir. We welcome you to Palestine in the name of Ibrahim, the father, the friend," embarrassing the hikers in their sweat stained clothes with his bright white *qamis*.

Tristan, however, is distracted by graffiti in Hebrew on the wall behind him (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Graffiti in Al-Mughayyir. Photo taken by the author. November 2019.

Seeing Tristan's puzzled face, Clayton, who mastered Hebrew at one of America's top divinity schools, whispers, "It says 'Death to Arabs'."

The coffee bitters in Tristan's mouth. The words, the graffiti, and its echoes through history, haunt the hikers as they thank the village and move on.

Having been a heavy day on both the hikers' backs and hearts, they are more than ready for a beer by the time they reach Jericho. Frankly, they are grateful to have made it, given Israeli settlers are constantly erasing the red stripes and green oak tree motifs that mark the path (Figure 4).

Luckily for them, beer can be found at Saqer's guesthouse, their accommodation for the night. Unassuming from the outside, the guesthouse is a miniature Eden inside, with a small swimming pool and a garden filled with palms and pomegranate trees. While some of the group retire to their rooms to rest, the others sit with Saqer on the balcony to read and savour well-deserved bottles of Taybeh beer.

Although the group had spent all day discussing the 'issue', Tristan seems unable to relax.

"I'm really struggling to understand how we fit together the Ted Talk idea of the Abraham's Path and all the shit we saw today. Demolition orders, burnt houses, settlements, arrests. I don't know, I just ... ." he trails out, seeking reassurance.

Emma replies, "Well, yeah, it certainly is odd to think about unity when there is an ongoing war, if that's what you mean." Her eyes widen. "But I would say that in this case, I don't think that idea of Abraham risks depoliticizing or unity-washing the conflict. I've seen that in other projects and I don't feel that's what's happening here." She swigs her beer before continuing. "And to be honest, I'm not sure how you could do this walk and feel more connected with the settlers."

Quinn snickers, putting down his iPad, "Quite! I think what this walk allows tourists to see is the reality of the occupation and the expansion of apartheid in the West Bank. I don't think it's going to help peacebuilding but it definitely helps understand the hopelessness of the current situation."

The group sits in a moment of muted agreement.

"It brings me hope actually," Luigi counters. "That story, it's a perfect unification for so many people and you can see how important it is for locals. I guess I just want to believe that it might bring some understanding of shared values."

Jacob was listening keenly, unsure how to respond. Staring into his already empty bottle of Taybeh Gold, he adds, "It might not bring peace no, but if it's a story that brings Muslims, Christians and Jews together then maybe it's worth the risk of 'unity washing'." He pauses. "That

Figure 4. Spoiled markings. Photo taken by the author. November 2019.

said, if we are all rallying around Abraham, what about the folks that aren't Abrahamic, who aren't Christian, Muslim or Jew? We aren't all 'children of Abraham'."

Saqer emphatically puts down his coffee. "Well, it's a terminology," he says, "so the trail could be called something totally different. It could be called the Abraham's Path and still be the shittiest trail in the world so it's what we make out of the trail itself."

"Secondly," he continues, lighting a cigarette, "it's a story, a historical one, an imaginary one. From a marketing perspective, it's very attractive because it applies to the Holy Land perfectly. But I have my doubts. Maybe it gives a good idea about co-existence for people who do the trail as clients, but for people who work on the trail, a story like this is not sufficient to change their perspective of the reality that they see every day and no marketing campaign is going to convince them that things are going to be better unless something actually happens on the ground."

"You know," he says, leaning in, "there is always this conflict, this schizophrenia, between tourism and daily life, because in tourism you have to have a happy narrative, one that makes people feel good about themselves, which is not necessarily the case when it comes to the daily reality of Palestinians. So I feel there is this political agenda, one that promotes peace and co-existence, which is nice and makes a very good pitch for reaching foreigners, but it's quite far from the reality people live with."

"It's a nice story but it has its limits," Tristan says.

"Yeh, man, I'm sorry, I am very to the point, but this place is so old that even religions start to smell bad."

Unlike the *maqluba,* whose spiced scent floats up from Saqer's kitchen. Sadly for Tristan, however, dinner is back in Jerusalem tonight.

When his taxi arrives, Zahed helps him put his bag into the boot of the car. With a pat on Tristan's back, he says, "When you get to the checkpoint, tell them we are all sons of Abraham. Talk about peace blah blah blah. They like that."

The taxi speeds out of Jericho and onto Route 1. Tristan ignores the flashing warning lights on the car's dashboard, too engrossed by a landscape that suddenly seems so alien to the past days' walking. Gone are the patchwork of olive-pregnant valleys. Now, the occupation rakes the roadside; signs only in Hebrew and Israeli wineries squatting on hillsides. Passing the Alon settlement, Tristan notices a billboard advertising an Israeli tour company: "Genesis Land - The best place to start any tour of Israel is with the story of Abraham in the Judean Desert". Some call this spaciocide.

When Tristan finally reaches the checkpoint, he is grateful that tonight is a quiet night. No traffic, no tear gas, no shouting. The checkpoint's turnstiles turn their slow, claustrophobic

contortions, allowing Tristan to give his passport to the soldier. He thinks it best not to mention Abraham, or peace.

Conclusion

Although entitled "conclusion", this section does not intend to conclude this conversation. Rather, as befitting CAP work, I encourage a multitude of interpretations, based on the polysemy of the stories and the hermeneutics of suspicion (Berbary, 2019; Grant, 2018). However, I do feel there is room to provide critical reflections on what I see these stories as telling us about a unifying approach to PTT, attempted here through the guiding fiction of Abraham.

If such an approach begins with a unifying point, then Abraham is unquestionably a valid one. The stories demonstrate that despite the social chasm between Israelis and Palestinians, and the differing perceptions of Abraham's centrality to the work of both initiatives, those on all sides promote the idea of Abraham as a common ancestor. He thus represents a commonality, which Abu-Nimer (2003) stresses is a first step of peacebuilding. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the Abrahamic guiding fiction is that it provides a valuable vocabulary for those who wish to challenge the dominance of sectarian narratives in Israeli and Palestinian tourism (Clarke, 2000; Strömbom, 2019). This vocabulary is enthusiastically employed by Moran who uses it to assist him in carving out an Israeli tourism space that celebrates engagement with the Other. With the narrative buttressing of Abraham, 'Come As You Are' moves from being a woke corporate slogan to a tangible and historic element of a shared local culture that prioritises the welcoming of strangers and an ethics of care through hospitality. The Abrahamic vocabulary allows both initiatives to break the boundaries of the current nationally routed tourism imaginary, and makes accessible the idea of a multi-cultural Middle East, a vision that tourists can help co-create, and one that Said (1992) argues is ultimately inescapable. Hazburn (2012) has forwarded that such a de-territorialisation of tourism in the Middle East will improve tourism's potential to promote peace.

Yet, using the guiding fiction of Abraham to operationalize the unifying approach is also problematic. Just as Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) highlighted how the drive for sustainable tourism rubs up against the unsustainability of a market-driven tourism industry, the stories demonstrate that the unity aimed for with the guiding fiction of Abraham rubs violently against the harsh reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Asking us to see unity in the midst of conflict is, as Emma points out, extremely difficult. Try, for example, standing next to that burnt out house in Duma or sharing tea with the mother of the Shaheen household and talk about unity. In such circumstances, the call for unity risks seeming tone-deaf, especially when it comes from foreigners not living under a military occupation. The guiding fiction, therefore, struggles in narrative transportation - to get us to a point where we "cease to pay attention to the world around [us] … and become part of the story world itself" (Moscardo, 2020, p.9). There appears to be too great a dissonance between the story world of Abraham invoked by both initiatives and the objectively real world of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The case of Zahed is most instructive here. Despite the API arguing for Jews, Christians and Muslims to walk in the footsteps of Abraham for peace, Zahed explains that, unlike Ricardo and Jacob, he cannot do this. He cannot walk in Israel. Although he does not feel the need to explain what is to him obvious, this is because of Israeli restrictions on Palestinian mobility. Here, the invitation to follow in Abraham's footsteps on the Abraham's Path only underlines Zahed's immobility. It also underlines the simultaneous inability of Palestinians – juxtaposed against the ability of foreign tourists - to move freely in the region, as Tristan so seamlessly does. This imbalance in the guiding fiction's applicability is further highlighted by Saqer's description of a "happy narrative", suitable for tourists, but inappropriate for Palestinians living in the conflict. If the

benefits of the guiding fiction of Abraham are uneven, then it struggles to fit within Galtung's (1969) concept of positive peace, which prioritises equality and social justice.

The unifying approach to PTT can therefore be criticised for encouraging tourists and locals to suspend their disbelief and focus on a utopian future of inter-cultural unity that may prove unreachable. In our case, its apparent inability to challenge the power differentials between Israelis, Palestinians and tourists is also problematic, although far from unique in PTT initiatives in the region (Strömbom, 2019). Yet the power of such an approach lies in its ability to promote a future vision that does not rely on the "nullification of one by the other" (Said, 1992, p.244). It challenges the supremacy of existing sectarian narratives; narratives given too great a platform in Israeli-Palestinian tourism (Clarke, 2000; Strömbom, 2019). Although it might struggle to challenge the status quo, it does, to use Hannah Arendt's words, "gives access … to reasons for rejecting the status quo", which she argues, "is sometimes all the revolt one needs or can muster" (Shuster, 2018, p.7). Mustering the stomach for peace in an ongoing conflict is challenging, yet this is precisely where peacebuilding begins. After all, as Koopman (2011) argues, peace and conflict do not occlude one another. Sellick (2019, p.878) confirmed this during her time on the Masar Ibrahim, in saying that, "peaceful and violent relations are entangled within [this] same space."

My hope is that this paper offers insights for stakeholders and researchers into the positive and negative potential of using a unifying approach to PTT, particularly when doing this through a guiding fiction. Supporting Moscardo's (2020) call for more attention towards the use of stories in tourism, I propose that stakeholders in contested spaces look closely at the ability of local stories to promote fruitful visions of cross-cultural unity in the midst of conflict. Abraham, in particular, being well suited in the Middle East given the popularity of religious tourism in the region, catering to tourists who might be receptive co-creators of such a vision in their desire to honour Abraham. For researchers, I hope that the concept of a unifying approach to PTT proves helpful in our on-going debate about PTT, and can serve as a theoretical counter to agonistic PTT put forward by Strömbom (2019). I also anticipate that such concepts encourage other PTT scholars to delve deeper into the wealth of knowledge that can be found in peace studies scholarship.

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