

*New Directions for Tourism in Guanajuato:  
Stakeholder-Driven and Regenerative Post-Covid Microinitiatives*

A White Paper

*Submitted by Klaudia Aguirre Oliver  
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Capstone Committee:  
Robert Baron, Advisor  
Rory Turner  
Barry Dornfeld

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## Introduction

Contributing 1.7 trillion USD to the global economy in 2019 alone, tourism was the largest service sector in the world before the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic struck. Here in Mexico, the 2019 World Tourism Organization report shows that the annual 45 million international tourists contributed to a travel surplus of 300 billion pesos (\$15 billion), critical to the country's balance of payments. San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, located in the central highlands in the state of Guanajuato, had a bustling tourist economy, and while this generated income and livelihoods for many, the once sleepy town had in recent years turned into a pandemonium of traffic, congested streets, and a noisy city center. San Miguel's prominent wedding industry was at a breaking point with as many as twenty weddings happening simultaneously. Large foreign-owned international hotel chains were to be built, and rampant housing developments were permitted. The accelerated growth alienated local residents, and the unique flavor of the town was getting tarnished. San Miguel de Allende, like many other heritage destinations worldwide, was becoming a victim of its own appeal.

And then the world ground to a halt. International and domestic travel was restricted, images of empty city centers were captured worldwide, and restaurants and hotels closed haphazardly to mitigate the pandemic's spread. While Covid-19 certainly and momentarily shaped tourism, talk of change to the current model of tourism-particularly toward emphasizing domestic and sustainable tourism- into a regenerative model has been a hot topic in industry circles for some time. The great reset caused by the global pandemic, the rise of promads, and the increased interest in immersive and purposeful tourism puts Mexico, and the world at large, at a nexus of opportunity to move away from the old mass tourism model fraught with economic leakage and environmental damage to a regenerative and culturally sustainable model of tourism

that emphasizes authentic experiences, driven by local stakeholders, which puts the environment first and has the reciprocity between host and visitor.

Had the pandemic not struck, projections from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2016) show that two billion people would be traveling worldwide, consuming \$2 trillion, contributing \$8.9trillion or 10% to the global GDP in tourism-related industries, and creating jobs for close to 400 million (or 1 in 11) people. This demonstrates the crucial economic contribution of tourism that often overshadows its socio-cultural benefits that is best understood by both culturally-savvy individuals/stakeholders and the cultural bearers-be it at formal or informal levels. The great pause challenges people to question what they seek most in a travel experience. Gmelch and Kaul shed light on some motivations and say that tourism is primarily a means to experience other people, cultures, and places: that it "removes them from their everyday routines and responsibilities, if not their home society, yet not really part of the part of the places they visit" (2018,p.3). In post-COVID-19 travel, many travelers are seeking meaningful and authentic encounters, not staged performances used to lure the masses, but smaller lesser-known destinations that provide experiential transformation through close contact with nature and traditions. For the local people in the tourist destinations, the pandemic has given them a chance to experience the beauty of their own places, and, compounded with closed international borders; this has created an upsurge in domestic tourism.

Post-Covid, an opportunity that presents itself is, the ability not to reset, but to significantly upgrade tourism from mass tourism to culturally sustainable and beneficial tourism in what Anna Pollock (2020) of Conscious Travels says is "not different software but a whole new operating system." This paper peers through the cracks, revealing small pockets of passion, resilience, and collaboration necessary for survival and upgrade to the emerging tourism model.

The paper achieves this by discussing and providing recommendations for a regenerative tourism model in Guanajuato centered on local traditions, with educational and experiential experiences in areas of the state where tourism has not yet been developed. I will examine emergent locally-generated micro-initiatives that began during the pandemic, and which have generated benefits that will remain in the community. . These micro-initiatives not only offer insight into potential growth areas for meaningful travel, but they suggest new possibilities for niche travel, take advantage of underutilized local resources and ecology, all the while sustaining traditions for the next generations. What is more, they include an experiential education model of travel at the forefront of their *raison d'etre*, veering outside the beaten path into unique sojourns, meaningful encounters with local residents while using technology and social media to position themselves to a local and international market. The paper does not assume that things will return to normalcy as we once knew it post-pandemic. Yet, these three vignettes sprouting from the debris illustrate a possibility of stakeholder-driven micro-initiatives in Guanajuato and Mexico at large that can shape the paradigm shift to regenerative tourism.

### **Where is the Challenge?**

The current tourism model is more than sixty years old. As noted by Chambers (2010), the model was driven by Western nations in the period rife with colonial undertones where mass international tourism rather than domestic tourism was encouraged. This largely remains the same, particularly for tourism happening in developing countries in the Southern Hemisphere, and in most cases, the model does more harm than good to local people. According to Andriotis (2014) and Pollock (2020), there are signs that mass tourism is increasingly becoming unsustainable, producing diminishing returns for host communities, viewing tourists as targets to be exploited for profit and employees as money-making resources, exerting excess pressure on

scarce natural resources like water and forests, and converting cultural heritage destinations into money-making sites. An example of this is where the marketing of culture and handicrafts has developed as a form of over-commodification. Targeting tourists in their masses-be it the coastal ports or airports of entry into game parks-handicrafts are sold to tourists at prices that do not necessarily turn a profit to the local women who sew them. And the tourists buying them remain oblivious of the handicraft's true value and meaning as could have been demonstrated by the local woman making it.

An important concept that has come to the forefront in terms of locals losing out on tourism benefits is leakage. The term 'leakage' describes economic benefits leaving the host community or country, which mostly happens with foreign capital (Chambers, 2010). The current dominant tourism model perpetrates this through airlines, foreign employment, importation of goods, ownership of hotels, and entertainment by outsiders. The focus of tourism for the affluent masses implies fewer visitors but often cancels out informal economies. With locals being shut out economically, the presence of an informal economy is necessary for the mainstay of many locals overrun by tourism. Leakage has also taken the form where workers in the mass-tourism model are often imported to meet the social criteria of the visitors (e.g., having Italian chefs at 5-star safari hotels). This has increased socio-economic marginalization between the longtime residents and tourism workers.

Mass tourism is responsible for environmental degradation. When the pandemic shut down mass tourist hotspots like Venice in Italy, residents reported the Venice canals being clear and with dolphins, illustrating how twenty four hour boats and tourists' traffic had polluted the channels (BBC News, 2020). Overtourism, not just in Venice but also here in Mexico, as seen with places like the Museo Nacional de Antropología, is associated with cheap airlines and

cruise ships running on fossil fuels which significantly increase the carbon footprint. Additionally, the heavy tourist traffic in some destinations disturbs the ecological balance as these places are not given a chance to regenerate. To meet the demands of the large number of tourists, a sense of authenticity has been lost as some providers resort to what Dean MacCannell (1976) terms as "staged authenticity." While niche tourism, voluntourism, for instance, has tried to rectify the adverse impacts of mass tourism, it also has its negative repercussions like perpetuating the "white savior complex" and the lack of long-term commitment by volunteers that makes it unsustainable.

As such, the current tourism model needs an upgrade of purpose-not an upgrade for numbers as popularized by most country tourism boards-if it is to stop benefitting the few huge and established tourist actors to also benefit the community. Such an upgrade embraces reciprocity and culturally sustainable tourism, gives an opportunity for community members to reclaim and redefine a sense of place, and extends tourism within a region to the backlands and rural areas. Such an upgrade starts at the grassroots, is local-stakeholder-led, and may feature occasional mom and pop shops that not only have a negligible impact on the ecology but ensure that profits generated remain in the community.

## **Toward a Paradigm Shift: The Emerging Future of Tourism**

The 2020 pandemic created a gigantic pause which paradoxically had most people taking time off while staying home. It may have changed the nature of travel forever. What we took for granted in terms of access and affordability is morphing into a new world. Our business meetings, school and family vacations, and leisure activities will increasingly move into virtual worlds (Fallows et al., 2020). There is little indication as yet that the old normal will ever return, and for some sectors like domestic tourism and ecology, this could be a good thing. Current trends in the tourism industry point away from overtourism that has decimated many heritage sites. At this time larger congregations are few and far between, and weddings are a risky undertaking. Nevertheless, the good news is that it is now possible to shape something better—a tourism model that goes beyond simply "doing less harm" to delivering value to more communities and people.

### **Deceleration**

This is the foremost concept characterizing the tourism paradigm shift, it borrows from the philosophy of degrowth. In the current dominant tourism model, capitalism has been so deeply ingrained to the extent that "mass production" targeting "mass consumption" has led to unsustainability. The degrowth philosophy emphasizes "creating sustainable change which results from a deepened interest in locality and place, a focus on small and medium-sized enterprises, creation of meaningful jobs with less working hours to enjoy a quality of life,

de-commodification of tourism activity, reducing the carbon footprint, a changing emphasis on regeneration in consumption, and a high priority on traveler experience" (Andriotis2014,p. 40-42). In espousing some of these elements, deceleration in the new model moves tourism from being 'goods centered to being 'people-centered and, beyond that, "earth-centered."

Deceleration carries with it a resistance to cultural homogeneity in the wake of globalization, which generates places that more or less seem to look alike. With the concept of deceleration in the emerging tourism model, the unsustainable and inequitable growth pattern is reoriented to a smaller economy with less production and consumption but where the well-being of the people and the local ecology take precedence (Andriotis, 2014). When applied to the post-Covid tourism context, deceleration calls for the need to reconnect with the natural world and emphasizes human connections. While the traveler experience matters, stakeholder experience also equally matters, and the encounters are reciprocal.

### **Regenerative Tourism**

Regenerative tourism is a concept where tourism is meant to support all life and be in harmony with nature. It is all about leaving the place better than one found it by "restoring and then regenerating the capability to live in a new relationship in an ongoing way" (Glusac, 2020). Regenerative travel is ethical and responsible, and players who adopt this model value smaller, more intimate, and stakeholder-driven activity that has a concern for the environment and creates a positive and reciprocal exchange. Visitors can participate in ecologically immersive activity to help provide a sense of existential meaning to their sojourn

## **Promadic Travelers (The Digital Nomad, Neonomad, and Modern "Hippy")**

This time has also given rise to the promads. Spread across the globe, they are characterized not by their material wealth or spending power, but rather with their escapism, need to dive into the local culture, altruistic, sustainability, intellectual, and experiential needs of touring (Future Laboratory, 2020). The promads seek a break from toxic urban life and being digital masters than their millennial parents; they comprise innovative promads, neighborhood promads, peace seekers, and grazing promads depending on what they seek. The neighborhood promads are an interesting lot as they are untethered and uncoupled, moving from town to town to escape expensive and over-toured locations while seeking co-working spaces, residing in a network of clubhouses, and identifying as global citizens rather than claiming specific nationalities (The Future laboratory, 2020). Promadic travelers prefer neighborhood hotels-hotels that have expanded their offerings to socially and economically support residents.

Closely related to promadic travelers are the digital nomads- computer-based workers who are flocking to Mexico (and other less developed countries) in search of a more tolerable haven than their first world country and no longer need to report to brick and mortar offices. What MacCannell (1992) described as neo-nomads can be applied to a host of millennials whose capacity to work online is creating a changing taste and demand in tourism (Andriotis, 2014, p.39). For one, they favor the natural environment instead of the established touristic routes. With the lockdowns that have been experienced in the pandemic, pristine environments create meaningful interactions and a perceived concept of freedom. This will help shift us from the age of the digital nomad to that of the promadic traveler, who, in seeking simplicity, will be producers, not consumers. According to Fallows et al. (2020), the projected growth in neo

nomads is as a result of cheaper prices in destination localities, the simple life full of nature found outside developed cities, and novel travel approaches as exemplified by Airbnb for accommodation and virtual reality where the digital nomads are motivated to visit the places they encountered the virtual worlds. Digital learning has also contributed to this, and the closing of borders indicates a larger appeal in staycations and local travel.

The transformative traveler is also a key pillar of the changing tourism model. Smaller groups and individual travel is favored. The "transformative" travelers use their trips to "re-invent" themselves and the worlds they live in (WTO, 2016, p.12). These are not tourists looking for cheap thrills, but tourists who want to have fun while learning something, contributing towards a bigger social goal like empowering local artisans, or simply making sure they don't hurt Mother Nature in their process of touring. According to the 2016 annual World Tourism Organization affiliate members report, the number of transformative tourists has grown significantly to a point where 10-15% of all tourists are transformative travelers. They are a well-traveled population and like to travel independently (82%). This cadre seeks to learn new skills (62%), get knowledgeable about various aspects of sustainability (60%), deepen their body awareness knowledge (57%), and pursue hobbies or special interests (50%). For the majority (54%), a desire to connect with local people is important, as well as the engagement in volunteering (39%) (WTO, 2016). While not directly related, the modern 'transformative' tourist mirrors the 1960s hippy given that the 21st-century tourism paradigm shift is underpinned by what the report terms as a "silent revolution" having roots in "cultural" creatives.

## **Stakeholder-Driven, Culturally Sustainable and Authentic Tourism**

An increasing and unmet need for millennials (who have outnumbered baby boomers and are set to become the most prominent touring group) is authentic tourist experiences. Millennials are rebelling against the traditional tourist roles where the visiting tourist (often to a less developed country or region) is patronizing, and everything, including faking roles, is done to please the visitor. Millennials want to be involved, and as Fenton (2021) advises, travel and tourism targeting millennials should be structured in such a way that it is contemporary and technology-based, authentic, and highly personalized. Such tourism is alive to the reality that social media like Instagram can be a platform to advertise traditional handicrafts, and as long as it creates meaningful and sustainable livelihoods for the people and enterprises who own the culture at hand, it is an avenue to enhance innovation and continuity. This commodification is not something to frown upon on the basis that it destroys the meaning of cultural products even though it may change it or draw new meanings to old ones (Cohen, 1988).

Anna Pollock (2010) of Conscious Travel gives arguably the best prescription of what the new model of tourism roots for; that it "enables all stakeholders to experience positive net benefit and develop their full potential as human beings" while "actively celebrating and nurturing the uniqueness of places and people." Modern travelers are seeking an exotic experience, something engaging and which benefits the local person. As Gmelch (2018) observes, when local people become objects of the 'tourist gaze' when they are watched and photographed, even when doing the most mundane things, their lives may be altered, and this is what is to be avoided in the new tourism model. The tourist's experience becomes meaningful

when people have significant control over their lives and play an active role in determining what changes occur in their society, and this is a core pillar of the emerging tourism model.

However, a key point of departure and which cultural anthropologists may disagree on is: if we fake authenticity for the benefit of the people, does this *actually* benefit the people who are making a caricature of their own culture? On this, Bruner (2001) and Cohen (1988) have observed the phenomenon Dean MacCannell (1973) referred to as "staged authenticity". Cohen points out that authenticity is negotiated over time, and is constantly changing. His term "emergent authenticity" is when the cultural patina of traditions changes over time to become authentic. Traditions and culture are constantly evolving and sometimes produced events or traditions brought on as touristic performances are self-driven (stakeholder-driven) and lucrative to locals. Bruner's (2001) study offers a partial answer to this by suggesting that as long as the locals have the final say in programming and leakages are avoided to give them a basis of profit; then it might be incorporated in the culturally sustainable model.

### **Culinary Tourism**

The emerging tourism model takes a small-scale culinary tourism route. Culinary tourism provides a conceptual framework to expand the nature of food as a vehicle and destination in travel scholarship. The nature of the encounter is what defines a food experience as culinary tourism. It is a space of contact and encounter, negotiation, and transaction at home and abroad. Be it the 19<sup>th</sup>-century corner street restaurant in Dolores Hidalgo or the open food court in Mexico City; food places are sites of designed experiences that are collaboratively produced. According to Long (2013), food has the capacity to hold time, space, and memory. This renders food as both a destination and vehicle for tourism. One of the observations made by

Luoh et al. (2020), and which directly shapes how tourism is being approached today (and possibly compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic), is that the food tourism industry is trending toward small-scale, local, and niche forms of culinary tourism that appeal to both local and global tourists. This shift is being led by the cooking learning tourism (CLT), where perceptions of stage, authenticity, sense of personal growth, mental stimulation, and active performance/cooking roles are shaping positive experiences.

### **Cases and Recommendations**

This paper observes three local stakeholder-led micro-initiatives that embody a paradigm shift in value systems and are examples of immersive touristic activities which offer a sense of reciprocity and meaningful encounters between cultures and tourists. They are sensitive to nature preservation, educational learning, and prevention of 'leakage.' As both a cultural worker and a folklorist working in the experiential and immersive tourism industry, I will elaborate on what, in my opinion, is worth nourishing about the three micro-initiatives. All are at varying degrees of development, deal with vulnerable dimensions of culture, and are worth taking a closer look to enable the continuation and preservation of a delicate aspect of culture or the environment. How can tourism and the commodification of handicrafts be a force of good? Who are the people benefitting, and what can we do to generate positive change amidst the restructuring of our lives post-pandemic as the world increasingly moves away from mass tourism?

The first two initiatives to be described are micro-enterprises by young people passionate about a niche market, and the third is an institutional example of how local government is working to empower rural stakeholders through establishing walking routes that can be part of a

reforestation project in the outlying areas regions of San Miguel De Allende. Taking the 'bigger picture approach,' the observations and recommendations made are not solely targeted to the stakeholders (the artists, entrepreneurs, and local government) involved in these initiatives: they are meant to trigger and inspire any reader interested in the topic-be it the front office tourism bureau or the young climate activist- to dare to think of new opportunities of sustainable tourism that could benefit the host while providing unique, immersive experiences in regenerative travel.

### **San Miguel de Allende, Guajauato**



*Image 1. San Miguel de Allende. Copyright free image.*

Nestled in central Mexico's central highlands in the Bajio region of Guanajuato state, San Miguel de Allende is a colonial city of around 160,000 inhabitants. Known for its springtime weather and 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century architecture, San Miguel has an expat population of over 10K which dates back to the 1930s when an influx of veterans came to the pueblo to study art at Bellas Artes and Instituto Allende under the American GI Bill (Covert, 2017). The school's

founders, Peruvian intellectual Felipe Cossio del Pomar and Chicago-born Stirling Dickinson, are credited with initiating what Senator and current mayor, Luis Alberto Villareal, referred to as a mostly beneficial mixing of cultures. (Cole, 2016). In 2008, as the world was reeling from the economic collapse and swine flu, San Miguel de Allende was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site as luxury hotels such as the Rosewood and Hotel Matilda, which were funded by foreign investment, continued to attract luxury travelers (National Geographic, 2019; Kandell, 2010). The city has been awarded various accolades in the international press, including Best Small City in the World by Conde Nast Traveler for a second time in September of 2020.

As Fish (2008) wrote in the *Sunset Magazine*, "*San Miguel can seem almost unbearably beautiful.*" Yet, in recent years, San Miguel has become a victim of its own success. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the streets increasingly teemed with street processions and noisy celebrations that went on through the night. The outskirts of the city have been flooded with new real-estate developments, targeting an affluent market. As Cole (2016) notes, many locals have been priced out of their own homes, and an increased rate of violence in the state has raised safety concerns. When the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic hit, San Miguel—whose primary industry was the hospitality service sector—was paralyzed. The state tourism board issued a new publicity campaign dubbed "*Guanajuato Lives Stories*" in an effort to revitalize its financial lifeline (Tore, 2020). The reopening strategy included citywide certifications of the Guanajuato Sano Distrito (Healthy Guanajuato), following international protocols. All service providers were required to show certification before reopening. When the World Travel and Tourism Council announced its "Safe Travels" stamp, the state swiftly obtained the certification, becoming the first non-coastal Mexican destination to do so.

It was during this tumultuous time—in the backlands, with the town's center on total pause—when the following micro-initiatives took root.

### **Citlalli Parra-Weaving with Natural Fibers**



*Image 2: Citlalli Parra, weaver, social entrepreneur photo: Citlalli Parra*

Citlalli Parra is a 27-year old Jalisco native who moved to San Miguel in 2017 to help with her family's artisanal honey production and commercialization. Born in a family of 9 children, it was while at San Miguel that she had the opportunity to take weaving classes from *Bellas Artes*, a prestigious yet affordable arts college also known as *Centro Cultural Nigromante*. Today, Citlalli owns an online shop for handwoven and artisanal natural fiber textiles ranging from the luxury

limited edition *Agave* rug selling at around \$400 USD to the *Bolsa Palma* bag selling at \$900 USD. Citlalli attributes her growth with having access to high-level instruction in the weaving arts and cultural heritage while at Bellas Artes, as it was her teacher who compelled her to go for natural dyes and elements.

Citlalli's passion to connect to and explore her native Mexican roots prompted her to use various multimedia platforms, the key being Instagram, to sustain, represent, commodify, and 'weave her cultural heritage onto her social media feed.' A digital native and arguably the embodiment of what the Future Laboratory (2020) terms as a new breed of conscious, purposeful, rarefied, and connected millennial, Citlalli uses Instagram to turn the lens towards herself as her own primary muse. Yet, instead of a self-serving, self-obsessed, and vacuous messaging of digital feeds, which are often found across social media platforms, Citlalli ignites her sense of agency and uses Instagram as a tool for self-representation.

What Citlalli's case demonstrates, among other things, is what Olga Reiche- a Guatemalan natural dye artisan-observes as a "future and potential" in traditional techniques of weaving like backstrap loom weaving and natural dyes, which can be unlocked if "artisans connect to innovative-minded teachers" (Fitzgerald, 2020). Citlalli's self-generated content on her Instagram illustrates a self-motivated example of a stakeholder-driven initiative, which uses the benefits of multimedia platforms to gain visibility, tell her story, and shed light on underrepresented culture-keepers in her trade. Her students and customers are growing organically. Since her first post in August of 2017, Citlalli has gained a total of 3,161 followers with over two-hundred posts. The earlier posts were of her store, Citlantzin, which represented artisanal fabrics from Chiapas and Oaxaca. One can see the shift in trajectory as her feed develops alongside her portfolio of weaving products, including wearable fashion, handbags, and an increasing

collection for interiors such as blankets, bags, ponchos and rugs (See image 3)



*Image 3: Screenshot of Citlalli's Instagram feed.*

The feed is a thoughtfully-presented curation of herself wearing the items she makes, interjected with posts that highlight the process of weaving and the types of looms, techniques, materials, and natural landscapes that influence her practice. Most importantly, she features the various artisans with whom she learns and collaborates with—providing them with a platform while further cultivating a sense of closeness with her following. (See image 4)



*Image 4: Josefina and Hermelinda, a mother / daughter duo in Oaxaca who collaborate with Citlalli. Photo credit Citlali Parra*

What makes Citlalli not just any other meztizo fashion designer is her candid storytelling: taking us through her journey of positionality and intersectionality as evidenced by her multiple cultures' origin, her connection of the millennial and baby boomer generations, and her lived experiences in multiple socio-economic sectors. As a social entrepreneur, Citlalli has identified a core strength of creating an equitable web of positive impact by partnering with the traditional artisanal weavers to create value-driven commerce. Her growing following on Instagram, particularly during the pandemic, caught the attention of young digital promads who spent their time during the lockdown in San Miguel. She began giving private lessons from her studio, where she has her artisanal pedal loom installed. One of her students, a thirty-year-old museum worker from New York City, stated that, for her, learning to weave provided an immersive opportunity to learn about Mexican culture. Citlalli's bilingual abilities have allowed her to pass on the knowledge

she gained from her teachers to foreign cultural seekers. (See image 5))



*Image 5: One of Citlalli's foreign students, learning weaving basics. Photo credit: K Oliver*

Citlali's mission from the beginning has been to illuminate her underrepresented culture, and from an anthropological lens, she is sharing a cultural 'gift.' According to Hyde (2007), a gift cannot be bought, and neither can it be acquired through an act of will: it is bestowed upon us, and it keeps giving just as it should be given out (p. xvii). Citlali's ancestral roots inspire her creations. An excellent example of this is the '*Venado's* collection, inspired by a representation of the deer from a textile sample dating to the mid-1500s in San Miguel. One can already interpret that Citlali's creations have a story behind them. This reflects what Kini Zamora, a native

Hawaiian and Filipino, advises: that to be sustainable, the fashion and apparel industry should focus on high-quality, unique pieces: pieces that have a story behind them and which consumers will continue wearing and sharing for years to come given that "*if we can tell a tale through our prints and create a special piece for the customer, we create a connection and keep the story of our lineage alive*" (Fitzgerald, 2020).

After giving meaning to her art by connecting it to the community, Citlalli has had to negotiate a meaningful and reciprocal exchange with the local traditional weavers so that she can transmit this in her work and to her online audience and students. As has happened with the commodification of traditional crafts, there has been an exploitative approach that has cheapened the industry and left many indigenous cultural guardians wary of outsiders, and Citlalli notes that she has sometimes had a difficult task negotiating with source artisans. Just as Hyde (2007) observes on the need for reciprocity and avoidance of mass reproduction of 'gifts,' Citlalli has had to walk a thin line in trying to fairly price her art to be commensurate with the work and time that goes into each piece. Citlalli's valuing of the cultural products joins that of several indigenous and native artists like Louie Gong, a Native American and founder of Eighth Generation who argues that cultural art is a natural resource and hence it should be appropriated and priced in a holistic, conscientious, community-minded approach that creates a win-win situation for all.

This monetary value negotiation, in turn, reflects what Cohen argues: that "commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products, although it may change it or draw new meanings to old ones" (1988 p.377). Modern artists have to respond to the economic realities, and if they are to flourish, they need to view works of art as gifts and means of exchange that carry value that needs to be appreciated. According to Hyde (2007), the

gain derived from such exchanges cannot be termed as "profits": gifts are not functions of capital, and the passing of the gift from one party to the second and even third party "gives increase|" that moves along with the gift, unlike profits which stay behind after commodity exchange. Perhaps the strongest support for commodifying culture while retaining its value, something that Citlali has moderately achieved, is what Luie Gong says in Fitzgerald's interview for Harper's Bazaar (2020, p.7); "When companies sell "Native-inspired" products without actually working with Native artists, it's a loss for us all. Every fake piece of art has a fake story to go with it. And every fake product represents a missed opportunity for a cultural artist. Fewer people are practicing [cultural art] because it's hard to make a living from it."

### **Recommendations for Citlalli Parra: Weaving with Natural Fibers and Similar Indigenous Fashion Startups**

Citlalli's preservation of culture and empowerment of the local indigenous artisans is worth nourishing. A possible step forward considering the rise in virtual tourism and digital learning would be to create virtual tours as well as short films that contribute toward cultural heritage preservation. As Citlalli deepens her connection and mastery of her craft, and develops a sense of trust with the master artisans and local tradition bearers, she is well-positioned to document her own journey to rescue traditional weaving techniques through creating a virtual learning platform and offering tours. Her unique contact with the weavers and her skillful use of the camera allows her access, which would be an invaluable contribution to folk arts and crafts. In doing so, Citlali, and initiatives like hers, could exploit the opportunity offered by universities and cultural institutions such as Penn State or the Smithsonian that have a growing interest to partner with native storytellers to offer a virtual learning space. The reasoning behind this

recommendation is that technology is bridging cultures as physical travel is further limited while keeping masses away from cultural guardians. Citlalli would need to deepen her ethnographic documentation skills, and feel increasingly confident with a video format. One challenging aspect will be to negotiate a pricing model that is equitable for source artisans when a virtual weaving master class is presented for commercial gain.

An excellent collaboration would be to partner with local visual storyteller Sky Owens Richards, a filmmaker who turns his lens towards giving voice to underrepresented people in Mexico. Collaboratively, they could work to create virtual learning content with master traditional weavers. Another good model and possible collaborator for Citlalli is the newly formed Thread Caravan (<https://www.threadcaravan.com>) that designs small immersive tours connecting visitors to source weavers and master artisans, promoting collaborations with individual stakeholders. An opportunity also exists in the exporting space, and Bambalina store ([https://www.instagram.com/bambalina\\_store/](https://www.instagram.com/bambalina_store/)), an online platform focused on exporting genuine handcrafted pieces from Mexico, comes to mind. There are definitely more such exporting opportunities with private entities and even NGO/INGOs, but care needs to be taken to avoid the slippery path of alienating the master traditional weavers in the business model due to misappropriation and weaving patent issues.

Assuming that limitations on huge gatherings will be lifted in the future, workshop-driven events and cultural festivals are great platforms for marketing and connecting for initiatives like Citlalli's. Her success can be attributed to teachers who were willing to hold her hand and a father who came from a social justice background, something that gave her a chance at acquiring a nuanced understanding of product development and marketing. As Olga Reiche, an Indigenous Guatemalan natural dye artisan and icon, opines in a 2020 interview, the

gap between Indigenous textile artisans and consumers of the traditional arts should be bridged and that this can be achieved through what she occasionally does: guiding local artisans on marketing and product development by exposing them to the global market and connecting them to international and regional cultural festivals like the Santa Fe annual festival (Fitzgerald, 2020). Even for Citlalli's case, sustaining and growing her customers requires that she finds ways of physically and virtually connecting with people to extend her reach.

The role of local tourism departments in marketing and offering support for social entrepreneurs and artisans like Citlali cannot be understated. Help for budding artisan initiatives has often been misconstrued to solely encompass financial and microfinance initiatives, but Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu, an Ethiopian weaver in Addis Ababa, argues that indigenous artists are not charity cases; all they need is a connection to markets, training, and facilitation of what they do (such as reduced taxes and positive country tourism marketing) as they already have "all they need" in terms of talent. In San Miguel's case, Citlali would benefit from entrepreneurial and digital training as well as seeking support in integrating with the municipal tourism board, who could reignite relationships with American universities, and could support a virtual classroom with mutual benefit. The courses and workshops can be open to expats, English-speaking Mexican nationals, and a virtual audience worldwide. Utilizing multimedia platforms in innovative ways can be of great benefit to safeguarding heritage and empowering stakeholders. Working closely with the next generation of cultural guardians will help test and define new public-private partnerships. Such initiatives should have transformative tourism concepts at their core, as happens at MODUL University, Vienna, where workshops are organized to engage stakeholders and locals on the same (World Tourism Organization, 2016). By positively marketing indigenous fashion among Guanajuato locals, there is a chance that the

local tourism department can help lead the foreign-to-local tourism dependence shift recommended by Fenton (2020). The catch here will be to avoid mass production should the marketing efforts result in many customers for indigenous art, but this can be overcome by adopting a 'more is not better' philosophy.

### **Mushroom Foraging in Santa Rosa De Lima**



*Image 6 : Arif Townes Alonso, explaining the importance of mycelium. Photo credit: Symbiosis*

In his mid-thirties, Arif Towns Alonso exudes the passion of a mycologist and fungi cultivator innately interested in letting the world know of the important world of mushrooms.

Originally from Mexico City, he arrived in San Miguel de Allende with his wife and two daughters with the intention of producing and marketing edible and medicinal mushrooms to take advantage of the ever-growing gourmet culinary segment of San Miguel de Allende and the alternative health movement. His company, Simbiosis, first appeared as a stall in the local organic market. He sold cultivated varieties of fresh and dried mushrooms and medicinal tinctures. His personalized treatment of clients and suppliers endeared him to the community, and he quickly gained a following amongst expat locals and chefs.

Although San Miguel de Allende is located in a semi-desert area, Arif wanted to locate a forest in the region to search for wild mushrooms. His search led him to Santa Rosa de Lima, a small alpine town on Guanajuato's northern side. In recent history, the small town of around 2,700 inhabitants was notoriously associated with the origin of the Santa Rosa de Lima cartel, a group dedicated to stealing gasoline from federal pipelines and causing violent incidents in recent years. Yet the village has a rich cultural art history exemplified by hand-painted Majolica style ceramics and conserved fruits (National Geographic, 2019). On the outskirts of the town, a campsite and adventure ground owned by a local brother and sister duo was home to pristine oak forests with natural streams. During the June to September rainy season, the forests become moist enough for spores to form, and Arif initially contacted them to forage fresh mushrooms to serve the local chef's market. He also wanted to educate local stakeholders on the plethora of mushrooms and the opportunity that lay in commercializing a portion of the community's bounty by selling them in nearby San Miguel de Allende.

Reflecting what the World Tourism Organization (2016) says are transformative millennial-led initiatives to empower local communities while preserving Mother Nature, Arif was able to persuade locals to stop burning down the forest for carbon to sell. This was after

reports of violence had nearly brought business in the town to a stop. Arif's social entrepreneurship mindset has also been documented among cultural creatives in Auroville, South India, who have managed to create an "eco-village" tourism destination (World Tourism Organization, 2016, p.21). As the relationship with the brother and sister owners of the campsite evolved, they reached an arrangement to give exclusive rights to Arif to forage mushrooms in a certain area of the forest. This also enabled safeguarding over-consumption of the mushrooms and the responsible spreading of the spores which were not used. Local park men and women were trained to identify the various specimens besides land management of the forest.



*Image 8: Local park ranger is learning to identify and lead visitors into the mushroom forest*

Arif's popularity with chefs and gastronomically inclined residents helped spark an idea to create a local experiential tour that would combine close contact with the natural world, an educational segment, and a gastronomic experience.

### **Marketing the Mushroom Foraging Experience**

Arif's mushroom foraging excursion occurs during various weekends in the rainy period from late August to early October when the lush forest is full of wild mushrooms. Groups of around 25 people organize to meet in San Miguel, and from there, chartered vehicles pick them up, or the visitor can opt to use their own vehicle. Those who take chartered vehicles pay \$75 USD while those who use their own pay a lower fee. The trip is designed in such a way that tourists start experiencing the picturesque hills of the locality as soon as they leave town, and upon being welcomed by the owner, they are flagged to go past the normal camping grounds with ziplines, tents, and swimming activity, towards an area on the edge of the grounds reserved for the group. Arif then takes over to talk about his own background and lifelong fascination with mushrooms. Throughout the 15-30 minute welcome session, professional mycologists are on standby to discuss the various traditional uses, edible, medicinal and psychotropic, of mushrooms. The visitors are then divided into groups of two, given small handmade baskets and made to go into different directions of the forest from where they can discover and forage their own bounties. The roughly 1-hour foraging exercise concludes with a session where Arif teaches the participants to identify the mushrooms. Preparation of the edible mushrooms by local chefs on a nearby open fire and an installed kitchen follows next. (See images 7 and 8)



*Image 7: the identification process led by Arif and invited mycologist*

*Image 8: Mushroom risotto with saffron prepared onsite by local chef.*

After eating, the guests can rest and spend a relaxing afternoon in the streams or on the meadows. The whole experience usually ends at 4.00 p.m., after which the visitors are ferried back to San Miguel.

## **Recommendations for Mushroom Foraging in Santa Rosa de Lima and Similar Microinitiatives**

Though seeking to break away from the establishment in terms of operations, microinitiatives like Arif's should embrace and use the digital tools present in the dominant system as these can be powerful in gathering a niche audience. According to the Future Laboratory , promadic travellers prefer engaging hotels and tour providers on platforms like

Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram as they would engage friends, and in their quest for "raw, undesigned marketing strategies, something that feels a bit more real – not as beautifully retouched or styled," they hop from website to website depending on the area they want to visit (2020 p.21). In addition to setting up Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp pages, an increasing amount of digital platforms such as Airbnb experiences, or digital bookers for experiential travel such as [Easol.com](https://www.easol.com) would empower Arif's and his organizers with the necessary tools for booking. Pragmatically, this will enable him to reach a wider audience and enhance his online presence. Another recommendation that ties to the use of these digital tools is that such an initiative as Arif's should collaborate with an aligned destination management company. This company can double as the owner of the digital platform, and they can, among other things, offer mentorship in managing the business, help in fundraising, financial management, marketing, and archiving.

An additional key recommendation under exploiting digital technology is the use of VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality) targeting promads. As Future Laboratories (2020) notes, the roll-out of 5G technology will facilitate AR and VR to tap into the new and perpetually online middle class emerging from developing countries like China and India (p.11). Investing in this technology will not only mean that the mushrooms get time to regenerate (by keeping visitors away but simultaneously making them feel as if they are present in the forest), but it helps such micro initiatives attract the new conscious yet connected digital tourists spread evenly around the world.

As Mishan (2019) observes, mushrooms only recently became a fascination in the West, and this presents a culturally and ecologically sustainable opportunity for tourism given that mushroom growing comes with careful nurturing of the environment in which they grow. This

means that Arif's initiative is just at the right intersection to exploit the new form of tourism and to get the most out of it-and I am refraining from saying 'reap maximum benefit' because the new model of tourism is all about *more is not always better, take only what is needed*. This paper recommends that the initiative adopts better organization in terms of logistics. Arif's foraging trips is an example of a collaborative approach featuring different stakeholders - Arif, the forest owners, the mycology professionals, and local chefs. This niche tourism combines ecotourism, gastronomy, and educational tourism, and to get all the stakeholders to work together to achieve the deliverables seamlessly, Arif should deploy a bus dedicated to ferrying visitors from San Miguel at once. This way, there would be no need to have to wait for other visitors who took private vehicles to arrive.

While it is understandable that Arif would personally want to induct the visitors, his extensive knowledge can be employed to train locals in the world of mushrooms, thereby empowering the residents and promoting stewardship. The gastronomic element of the foraging experience could also use some efficiency, and this paper recommends that the high-end San Miguel chefs be integrated with local women and involve the visitors themselves. This recommendation stems from Luoh et al.'s findings regarding culinary tourism in Thailand: that learning experience provided "a kind of stage, a performance for tourists that heightens their perceptions of authenticity" (2020 p.2). To enable this, it is recommended that additional meticulous safety measures be put in place. Mexico, and Santa Rosa de Lima, in particular, have been painted negatively and unfairly as an insecure place, and tourists need to be reassured that their safety is guaranteed. Having additional easily identifiable local security guards might help fix this, and so can assurance of security from the local government. Safety also encompasses health and hygiene efforts (sanitizing), especially in the face of Covid-19.

The initiative is already doing well when it comes to customer satisfaction. However, having a stand for the purchase of tinctures and local artisanal foodways for sale can enhance their memory of the outing while boosting the local economy. According to Luoh et al. (2020), in successful culinary experiences, tourists can make purchases directly from the makers. Based on this, Arif's initiative, and others that are similar, can showcase artisanal liquors and food products from local producers. Pricing should be sensitive to both luxury and average clients. If Arif, as a founder, is to source these products on his own, then the recommendation is that the local tourist departments or organizations working to empower locals should consider investing in such initiatives through microfinancing.

If Arif is to adapt to the shifting mushroom narratives to attract the promadic sector who happen to be the drivers of the symbolic and literal proliferation of mushrooms in art, fashion, and technology, then he has to think of mushrooms more than just medicine and food and take deliberate steps to market them as a form of expression. According to Mishan (2019), mushrooms are no longer just a conduit of the divine, but also an enhancement and expression of productivity and creativity. As such, Arif's micro initiative can begin marketing mushroom microdosing tinctures on the basis of Psilocybin-an anti-depression/anxiety substance banned in the US. This way, the startup can exploit the present opportunity where the pandemic has exacerbated depression and other mental health conditions and be ready for the increasing demand of psychedelic therapy tourism, a growing niche.

## Reforestation and Walking Paths: Hiking and Reforestation in San Miguel de Allende's backlands



*Image 9: A digital nomad from Russia takes in the sunset view after a 3 hour hike in La Joyita  
Photo Credit: Hugo Chevalier*

During the great pause, San Miguel's Environment and Sustainability Minister, Francisco Peyret, began an ambitious reforestation campaign by identifying twelve rural communities surrounding San Miguel. Six of these locations, Agustín González, Sosnabar, Los Torres, El Salitre, Doña Juana, and Puerto de Nieto, were chosen based on forecasting that they would result in a more natural, ecological, beautiful, and distanced touristic hiking experience. This initiative was also inspired by the recognition that many residents needed work after being laid

off from factories. The reforestation project was designed to help recover the soil bed in 14 community lands that had been eroded by years of overgrazing and neglect (The Mexico Daily Post, 2020). Using the city's Green Fund, which came from taxation on new industries on the outskirts of the municipality, the ministry partnered with a set of nonprofits, the heads of the '*ejidos*' (community-owned lands), and began the long task of agave agro-reforestation. The more than 82,000 native plants planted by locals in the first phase of the project were supplied by two companies, Rancho Juan León and Avalon Fresh.

The first job was to call the community leaders into a meeting to propose the projects and work in tandem with various ecological non-profits. From there, a team composed of mostly women began the work of creating stone retainers to prevent further erosion, plant agaves, and other native plants, capture water in natural pools, and hand pick parasitic plants from the mesquite trees. In each community, extensive negotiations were required with individual stakeholders to identify walkable trails that would be accessible and to coordinate the grazing of animals, mostly goats, away from the reforested areas. While the nature trails are yet to take their full shape (the native trees need at least five years to reclaim the land completely), hiking activities are already taking place with 2-3 hour-long hiking, depending on the area. The hiking may include a meal with a local household serving food outside the house. Tourism plays a vital role in helping the local residents maintain a sense of pride and stewardship towards their own land. As one woman who participated in the initiative commented, "I want my grandchildren who are small now to know that these maguey cactus were planted by their grandmother and invite everyone to come and see this beautiful landscape we have, and I hope the youth respects all of this work we have done " (See image 10 below)



*Image 10: A local woman who worked the agave reforestation discusses her hopes for the future.  
Photo K.Oliver*

The municipality has also been using multimedia filming to document and create short videos to upload on social media platforms belonging to state and local governments targeting the new trends towards exploring undiscovered lands and immersion in nature. ([click here for the video, Caminos de San Miguel](#)).

### **Recommendations for the Hiking Trail Micro-Initiative**

The hiking micro-initiative in San Miguel is a first-of-its-kind public-private partnership in Guanajuato, and if properly nurtured, it may end up as a success story in sustainable,

community-owned ecological tourism. This paper recommends that more money be set aside by the Environment and Sustainability Directorate at the state and federal level to see to it that the project fully takes off. This recommendation is made in light of the fact that most public-private partnerships in tourism are at risk of failing when governments, as the main stakeholder, pull out their support (World Tourism organization, 2016). Given that nature trails take time and immense dedication to become viable, a long-term policy plan spanning at least 10 years needs to be put in place, and this should actively continue consulting the community stakeholders, as has been the case so far.

With many local residents increasingly flocking the surroundings to get away from the increasingly polluted, crowded, and noisy town center, the tourism department of San Miguel could focus on conversions led by independent and probably informal small-scale hospitality. As was observed during the hike, there are no established eateries for hikers, and the locals who were actively involved in developing the trail could be encouraged to offer traditional food options, with locals women, and even incorporate a cooking class into the experience, to augment the value proposition of the experience.. According to Fenton (2020), smaller hotels and 'mom-and-pop shops' deliver unmatched authenticity to travelers and are critical economic engines for their regions": a factor that can drive tourism at the grassroots and ensure success at the national and regional level. Apart from the wide range of products that local actors avail, Fenton (2020) notes that the improved structure featuring small local owners can translate into enhanced, unique, and authentic tourist experiences. Tourists in San Miguel's hiking trails can also be invited into residents' homes from where they can learn more about their culture in a relaxed exchange.

The conversions mentioned above can target a variety of segments, including families, domestic and international travelers, Boomers, Gen-Xers, and the increasing numbers of Millennials and Gen Z's. As such, digital tools could be used to design hiking routes based on local destinations-be it an art museum or historical center- in San Miguel that an individual has not visited, as has been done in Peru (Fenton, 2020). This creates a win-win situation: the region remains competitive as there are many offers to tour, and the tourists get to explore as much as possible.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There is an opportunity to weave a new experiential tourism reality that champions a regenerative model: one replete with experiences that heal, inspire, educate, entertain, and connect the visitor to the rich cultural and natural treasures in the Bajio region. Referencing Victor Turner, the great pause, caused by Covid-19, can be thought of as a point of liminality where a growing amount of stakeholders in the tourism sector stand at the threshold between the old and destructive mass-tourism model and the emerging model that embodies the building of relationships with ourselves, each other, and the natural environment. With an overarching gift that keeps giving in the form of reciprocity, this culturally-sustainable model creates a symbiotic 'web of good' where everyone in the system equally benefits, as exemplified by the three local micro-initiatives assessed.

The local stakeholder-driven micro-initiatives shaping the new tourism reality are vulnerable. As with any other initiative seeking a paradigm shift, the government's framework support as led by tourist boards, be it financially or through spearheading cultural incubators to mentor some of the young talents leading the micro-initiatives, is highly recommended. The

young social entrepreneurs need to exploit the digital tools dominant in their environments if they are to reach the promads and mostly-millennial demographic that is driving regenerative tourism, and this can be made possible by what I shall call public-private people partnerships (PPPPs). The PPPPs are partnerships where, as facilitated by local tourism departments, institutions and international organizations reach formal and informal agreements to support and collaborate with these micro-initiatives. For instance, The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) (<https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/306.html>), a German international development agency, supports native environment and climate change initiatives in Mexico, while the University of Pennsylvania's multimodal approach to ethnographic documentation is just one of the promising methods for augmenting current content with digital stories. It would be much easier and effective to secure their support if local tourism departments facilitated interactions between such organizations and the local micro-initiatives.

In their capacity as scholars and connoisseurs of culture, 'cultural brokers,' who might happen to be folklorists or anthropologists, are called upon to complement the connective role in the PPPPs. Given that they are intersectional beings and are predisposed to work in a diagnostic environment encompassing government, scholars, and administrators, it is recommended that they focus on identifying regenerative grassroots initiatives and help bring their efforts to the table. Given they already know how to communicate professionally using tools like the internet, 'cultural brokers' should seek to showcase the local micro-initiatives as a way of mitigating the dangers of a single story, and a good starting point can be collaborating to develop cultural self-representation in performances like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (<https://festival.si.edu/>) that offers a global narrative stage to stakeholders. These co-created collaborations, in turn, help to democratize heritage and create a rebalance of power to traditionally marginalized voices.

The following recommendations can help address this rebalance of power and help microinitiatives thrive.

1. The creation of governmental incubators and educational platforms for empowerment and entrepreneurial skills for cultural microinitiatives
2. Employing cultural brokers by the government to connect the dots between stakeholders and tourism boards and initiatives
3. Employing cultural brokers by the government to connect the dots between stakeholders and tourism boards and initiatives
4. Designing different tiers that target varied sectors, from affluent to locals
5. Testing and co-creating virtual platforms such as Airbnb experiences

In terms of Post-Covid travel, travellers post-pandemic, some of whom are flocking to Mexico one can look towards a poem on a [video](#) of the landing page of a newly launched experiential and virtual travel company. The poem written by Alexcia Panay, encompasses what travel aspires to in its highest transformational ideals. It begins with the Leonard Cohen song lyric, “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in,” and then reads:

*a jagged line - the perfect map  
Leading us home to wholeness  
To a life of togetherness*

*stretching the canvas of our imagination  
wider beyond the limitation of the mind and what we were told is possible*

*Willing to let go into the unknown,  
trusting that, on the other side*

*we will stand tall as conscious beings  
evolving into a sparkling clear way of seeing.*

*We must get in the water alone  
But then we fly together as one*

*Closer and closer to the sun*

*A playful dance  
True remembrance*

*Remembering what is and has always been true  
Available to all but only the brave few step-throughs*

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**REFLECTION PAPER**

My journey through my capstone has been one of experiential discovery. And like an explorer, one of being flexible and open to constant change. Like commandeering a ship in tidal waters, it has required navigation and not abandoning ship. When I first started the MACS program, and later when I was to start writing this capstone, one of the salient points that stuck in my head was a handout that was given to us on *impostor syndrome*. Though I was good at organizing tours and travels and cultural communication, I felt my writing skills in academia were inadequate. I felt like an impostor: enrolled on the MACS program yet I could not write an academic journal-worthy paper as required of masters students like me. The term *folklorist* particularly felt far and distant. Though the readings made sense, and were applicable in observing my positionality as a cultural worker, it has taken this capstone to arrive at a place where my capacity and thereby responsibility to sustain culture through the lens of the MACS program has more deeply ingrained itself into my psyche.

As I continued on the program, every module would present a useful and applicable revelation and moments of deep reflection towards the work I do here in San Miguel de Allende. This has helped me carve out a meaningful role that espouses some of the major takeaways that I have integrated during the writing of the white paper. When I moved to San Miguel de Allende in 2006, working in the cultural space seemed a good fit. I felt that I followed in the footsteps of some of the trailblazing expat women who have come here since the 50's, except that in my case, the issue of positionality comes strongly into play. I am a Mexican-born American, returning to her native land. This intersectionality-being binational, bicultural, and *mestizo* comes with a heavy responsibility, and completing this capstone has given me plenty of time to reflect upon that.

When I first came to San Miguel, I barely spoke Spanish and was culturally more American and European than my birth country. Over the years, I have felt a deepening of my own heritage with “mexicanidad” woven into my wanderlust and biliculturality. This position, given the MACS perspective, makes me aware of my potential role as a bridge and informs the kind of professional development as a travel design specialist and cultural broker or mitigator. My access to different levels of society, natural curiosity, communicative skills, and sense of social justice and responsibility have been heightened in navigating a more equitable and regenerative tourism sector. Through working with and experiencing the three case studies first-hand, a new professional possibility has emerged as a new travel operator or destination management company founded on some of the principles I have researched, namely that of small-scale, immersive and reciprocal tourism .

In working with some of the cases, there was a clear lack of somebody to help bring people to these kinds of experiences-what I consider as the role of a cultural broker. I am currently in the process of establishing test runs with small excursions in the backlands. . Throughout the research, I came across many of the themes and learnings from the classes I had at Goucher woven into current issues in my professional life. Some of these include future trends in tourism, the over-commodification of handicrafts, stakeholder-driven enterprise, ethnographic documentation, virtual tourism, niche markets, authenticity, cultural partnerships, social impact, technology as a force of good, positionality/intersectionality, and the next steps of my journey professionally.

The academic path I have chosen through the MACS program has strengthened me to evolve my innate capacities into one of service. I hear Rory Turner’s question to me, ”Who benefits?” It is a question that guides many of my actions now. When I began some of my

cultural activity here in San Miguel in the festival space, much of my motivation was to create a different narrative of Mexico to the one prevalent in the news. Yet after years of instigating *La Calaca*, a city-wide arts and cultural festival that activated San Miguel into a major destination for *Dia de Los Muertos*, the question of “Who benefits?” was one which led me into a deeper analysis of who really benefited. We asked businesses, governmental agencies, local and international artists to come together to create a wide gamut of activity that resulted in a very successful event, at least in the media. Thanks to completing the capstone, it now dawns on me that it is the luxury tourism industry and real estate developments that used the media storm, which permitted a rampant amount of developments targeting weekender homes. Many local stakeholders, including our non-profit, did not derive the same benefits.

Those of us working at the festival, though well-intentioned, did not have a clear plan which was equitable and inclusive of all. What’s more, our festival was intended to attract foreign visitors to Mexico during *Dia de Muertos* instead of safeguarding the nature of the town and the welfare of the locals. We did not have a financial plan in mind, and our volunteer-driven team and all artists received no recompense. *La Calaca* was successful in its original intent to place San Miguel as one of the premier destinations for *Dia de Muertos* only two years after its UNESCO World Heritage title. However, with that came problems of over-tourism and non-equitable policies that raised issues of social justice. Since 2012, when we began, I have witnessed some of the woes of a heritage city with some policies which served to increasingly attract a more affluent visitor. The destination wedding industry, the constant festivals in gastronomy, film, music, dance all contributed to what we felt was a positive move towards making our town thrive and create employment. With the pause caused by the pandemic, as with many heritage places worldwide, the town was restored to a beautiful, if empty, place to stroll

around. And this, referencing Victor Turner's notion of liminality, is where I feel I stand alongside the people and organizations involved in the case studies: at the threshold between the old and destructive mass-tourism model and the emerging model that embodies the building of relationships that benefit the natural environment and all the involved parties. All benefit.

My time at Goucher has greatly informed much of what I now place value on, which is about shining a light on micro-enterprises that benefit Mexican stakeholders and cultural workers directly. The concept of leakage made me recognize how much of the work I had done was not often benefiting the locals. While San Miguel has a 70-year old history of expats, and by now, many of the establishments have been here for decades, they are nonetheless foreign-owned. A Harper's Bazaar article written by fellow MACS alumni and the reason I began the program at Goucher, Sunny Fitzgerald, on indigenous designers, featured interviews that really struck home for me. One of them was Louie Gong, a Native American and founder of Eight Generation, who argues that cultural art is a natural resource. He recommends that cultural art should be celebrated; it is a gift after all, as opposed to being appropriated.

A rare video I watched, interviewing Simone de Beauvoir at her museum-like home, has a solid insight into why cultural artifacts/souvenirs hold immense value: that they are meant to preserve the present, and when one buys them, this is an investment in the future. A cultural artifact connoisseur who has collected artifacts throughout the world herself, Simone's insight has influenced my views on thinking about the commodification of handicrafts in a sense that when we buy these souvenirs, we are collecting beautiful gifts that we can then keep in our homes-getting the aesthetic value therein, and holding them for the future. In this act of commodification, I think that we are simultaneously ensuring cultural sustainability while increasing the value of these handicrafts to ensure that they "keep giving" as gifts into the future.

As a travel and tour organizer and as a MACS student, I see a connection between Gong and Beauvoir's perspectives as embodiments of a holistic, conscientious, community-minded approach that's rooted in cultural heritage preservation to create a win-win situation for all, albeit Gong's view being more contemporary.

On the value of handicrafts during their commodification, a reflection point that came up, which I am yet to fully understand, is luxury pricing for cultural items and how this informs the trade's sustainability. In Sunny Fitzgerald's article, Luie Gong observes that "Fewer people are practicing [cultural art], because it's hard to make a living from it." In the process of researching for this capstone, I found that part of the reason behind what Gong observes are poorly priced artifacts that do not reflect the value and time invested by the artisans. The rational option is to price handicrafts in a way that reflects their value, but here is the catch, what if the pricing locks out the bearers of these cultural items? Is it still fair trade? At USD 400 for some pieces, it was a paradox to me that Citlali's pieces target the luxury traveler, which interestingly excludes most local Mexican price points. Is there sustainability in such an approach, and if we are to balance the trade, how would we make sure that artisans like Citlali don't run out of business?

As this capstone unfolded, I was personally involved in promoting and experiencing the microinitatives I presented in the paper. One of the things I have valued about the MACS program was looking deep to see the nuances of possibility or peering through the cracks, as Mary Hufford writes. In many ways, these experiences called me. At a time of confusion and disillusionment with the state of the world, these small outings, the mushroom foraging, the hikes in the mountains, and the weaving classes, helped me focus on what is worth safeguarding. As a participant-observer, I immensely enjoyed these forays in the countryside alongside documenting and conducting interviews with the various stakeholders and visitors enjoying the

day. In doing so, I experienced first-hand the wonders to be had as a tourist while simultaneously honing my ethnographic documentation skills. Still, I hope to deepen my knowledge of documentation and digital storytelling as I feel there are more stories to be told. In a world infiltrated with digital technologies, a simple iPhone, a mic, and permission are all one needs to document folkways, courses, and divergent traditions.

The class I did with Heather Gerhart on digital storytelling in the Chesapeake Bay was liberating. We learned how to document and arrange the presentation into stories, and I felt a kinship to the oyster fishermen and the people I documented. Citlalli's videos and some of the ones I shot whilst in the field provide small vignettes that transmit a sense of place in an honest way. The tourist gaze would be more focused on our community, not on our differences. Short digital videos and Instagram stories are a good way to do this, and they should be uploaded in a thoughtful way to give voice to community stakeholders. As Baron writes, this is key to diminishing and erasing the different power dynamics between community members. I relate to folklorists who interact in a variety of roles in collaboration with communities to develop cultural determination and exercise a sense of agency and self-representation in a variety of cultural platforms. It is my aim to co-create these experiences. Collaborations are crucial to democratize heritage and create a rebalance of power to traditionally marginalized voices. Baron describes it as a "praxis of dialogic engagement with communities." For the purposes of my work, the people working in the mushroom forest, as well as the Oaxacan weavers weaving Citlalli's designs, as well as the local families who serve as tour guides and cooks in the rural *ejido* walks, are crucial voices to weave into the narrative represented to visitors in both experiential and virtual platforms.

The capstone project has also re-affirmed the role of the folklorist working within the cracks. Looking back at what I did with revitalizing San Miguel for tourists to visit, I find that I was working in a diagnostic environment with scholars, government, practitioners, non-profits, artists, and cultural bearers at the table. I now see that my position as a binational and bilingual citizen helped me understand varying interests, what they wanted in terms of cultural performance from *La Calaca*, or simply how the locals wanted tourists to view them. In doing so, we enabled some, though certainly not all, community voices to be heard on a wider platform. The folklorist's part might also be described as 'brokering' in nature, a critical role that can help avert the danger of a single story. As Adichie argues, in her TED Talk, while single stories risk-reducing whole communities into misconstrued stereotypes and on this, the folklorist utilizes tools like the internet to professionally communicate to the world the variances contained in certain cultures and communities. In doing so, one also promotes and showcases the local culture that is emergent and evolving. Single stories threaten whole livelihoods, and during the capstone research process, I came across one example in Santa Rosa de Lima, a small alpine town on the northern side of Guanajuato. The town of Santa Rosa de Lima had been associated with cartel activity which would siphon oil from government pipelines. Their violent excursions became notorious in recent years to the extent that business died in the town. Few tourists were willing to spend a night in the town despite its rich history of hand-painted Majolica style ceramics and conserved fruits. Residents had been reduced to cutting trees and converting them to carbon for sale. It took a passionate stakeholder, like Arif, who marketed another story: that Santa Rosa de Lima has this beautiful alpine climate with an oak tree forest campsite where people can forage for mushrooms, have a gorgeous family day out, and a gastro touristic and educational adventure in nature. Seeing the locals benefit from the bunch of tourists was pure joy

for me as it reaffirmed that niche tourism can indeed break the single story to create a win-win situation.

The single story has not just been in Santa Rosa de Lima only; here in Mexico, it seems people were afraid to come visit as they had a completely different version of the Mexico that I lived in. That is until the pandemic. What was most problematic to me was that I felt Mexicans themselves would start to believe these stories: that Mexico was just a country full of violence and Narcos and every other negative stereotype. I looked upon the *Day of the Dead* festival as a beautiful means that can unite humanity through the celebration of death. It seemed to be a good place to start. Though I had not enrolled in the MACS program yet, I feel that I was already playing the role of cultural mediator. Back then, I quickly gathered among my expat friends the motivation and capacity to go to local government and ignite *La Calaca*. Completing this capstone has not only enlightened me that I overlooked having some of the most pertinent stakeholders at the table, but it has also made me realize the great potential I hold in transformative tourism, which is aimed at economic empowerment and social justice issues as described by the World Tourism Organization.

With regenerative tourism, the economic gains from tourism benefit all involved. A redistribution of knowledge or expertise is mapped to give authority to locals as made possible by digital narrative vehicles. Through this journey, I have also learned that digital storytelling projects help maintain cultural representation as an open-ended story. I hope to use this knowledge to design multilayered sojourns and events that can provide a robust, immersive travel experience while maintaining a sense of self appointed authenticity. Here now the word authenticity is taken away from a staged performance and presented as *real*. Narrative stages once seen in person, such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, are increasingly going digital as

with Citlali's creation of their Instagram channel where her feed immerses us in her world, introducing us to her teachers, her travels, her hopes, and challenges.

Completing this capstone has made me question the various approaches to the commodification of cultural items through cultural partnerships and the notion of authenticity in all of these. I found Bruner's article on the Maasai about a comparative view of the ways in which Maasai culture has been presented and represented across three platforms fascinating and a mirror to what I have seen here in Mexico. In the article, the first scenario presented is a safari park owned by a longstanding British family living in Kenya who turned their land into a safari and traditional Maasai culture encounter. The Maasai are hired and paid a wage to depict warrior-like attitudes in the dance. They do not mingle with the audience and nor do they participate in the share of the income. The place is staged to seem like postcolonial representations to reflect what tourists may find 'authentic.' The audience is usually foreign. They are like hired *conchero* dancers who are plumed and provide Mexican spectacle for tourists. The tourist gaze is entertained, but the opportunity to meet at a more level playing field is not so easy. There is distance between spectator and performer.

The second scenario presented is a national dance troupe who features various 'tribal' dances to support the notion of a unified Kenya. It is at a large amphitheater with modern facilities, including a bar and light show. The dances are interpretive and not necessarily authentic yet have a leaning tone of Kenyan nationality. The audience intended is mostly Kenyan nationals. Similarly, here in San Miguel, the *Tradicionalistas* (the tradition bearers) teach the various regional dances and present them often in the city squares on different days, at least before the pandemic. The third example in Bruner's article is a high-end luxury safari experience where the guests are treated to a hybrid musical experience featuring easy reggae; the Maasai

dancers invite tourists to join in their dance and mingle with tourists. The event, entitled “Out of Africa,” is designed to make visitors feel safe and secure, and the tone is light-hearted and jovial. However, the main point of difference in this example is that the Maasai stakeholders directly participate in a large and consistent percentage of income generated from the events. So while the show was the least ‘authentic’ and almost a comedy sketch of globalization gone wild, it was also the case study in which local constituents had a basis of profit sharing. One begs the question of how much programming they had a hand in. I have seen several of these postmodern hybrid representations of cultural events here in Mexico. It is interesting to note how local dancers and cultural performers modify their own heritage to suit the needs of tourists.

On authenticity, I am yet to find a definitive answer as to whether such displays can be considered authentic, particularly when these performers, even if they are members of the culture being performed, do this outside their community settings. I mean, shouldn’t a Maasai circumcision song be performed during circumcision for it to be authentic? Yet I also resonated with Bohn Gmelch, who writes in *Tourism and Tourists* that when local people become objects of the ‘tourist gaze’ when they are watched and photographed even when doing the most mundane things, their lives may be altered, and this is what is to be avoided in a culturally sustainable and regenerative tourism model. Authenticity exists when people have significant control over their lives and play an active role in determining what changes occur in their society, but it remains to be seen if this can be said about the Maasai dancers presented in Bruner’s article.

Bruner’s article further led me to reflect on the repercussions of faked authenticity. In the course of gathering views of Native artisans, Luie Gong's reflection, that “Every fake piece of art has a fake story to go with it. And every fake product represents a missed opportunity for a

cultural artist,” got me thinking on what is to be considered fake or real. Who decides this demarcation? As a budding folklorist, I wonder: if authenticity is to be faked for the benefit of the people, does this ‘actually’ benefit the people who are making a caricature of their own culture? Further exploration during the capstone research led me to the concept of “emergent authenticity”-where the aspects of a culture change over time to become authentic. On this, and thanks to the MACS program, I have come to appreciate that authenticity is negotiated over time. I now view culture as something that is living, something that changes over time, and if the *tradicionalistas* I observe here in Mexico stage their traditional performances for an income, why not? It is still authentic culture, given that traditions and culture are constantly evolving. As long as the staged events or traditions brought on as touristic performances are self-driven (stakeholder-driven) and lucrative to locals (avoid leakage), then my professional insights so far demand that I classify these as authentic.

Erve Chambers opines that ethnic minorities view tourism as a means of economic development, and so one assumes the touristic performances were modified to please the visitors. This is what led me to incorporate the aspect of having local stakeholders as the owners and drivers of this economic exchange in the emerging tourism model that I recommended in the capstone. For me, part of the impetus for designing tourism experiences in my area is certainly economic, as a means of sustenance for myself as well as the stakeholders involved, and as an approach to avoid “leakage”. Though in San Miguel much of the touristic money is owned by smaller individual owners and less multinationals, most of the hotels, restaurants, transportation companies, and other services are foreign-owned, and larger hotel chains such as the Marriott, Sheraton, and the Rosewood are currently under construction. These are the entities that rake in millions of dollars. This suggests that tourism in San Miguel may be heading towards economic

leakage. It is, therefore, imperative that these and other micro-initiatives be linked to the concierge departments who wish to offer their increasingly demanding visitors new forms of travel. A strong push from the tourism board towards the inclusion of the three case studies I presented in the capstone, and similar stakeholder-driven outings, would prove invaluable to help get the outings on their feet.

In considering future activities as there are signs of tourism returning, I am contemplating a *Día de Los Muertos* event that can integrate some of the things I learned on this Capstone journey-particularly on sustainable tourism. For example, last year, the team who organized the mushroom foraging trip in Santa Rosa de Lima was set to organize an event on the campgrounds on November 2, on *Día de Muertos*. It would be much more rooted in nature and far away from the loud city center, which I ironically helped create. The programming can be distanced and virtual yet meaningful. On the way to one of the *ejidos* of the reforestation project, I recall that Francisco Peyret, my friend and Minister of Sustainability, told me that one of the few lush forests in the cliff heading to the *ejido* land was on the migration route of the monarch butterfly. In this new tourism model, I would be proposing a hike with the *ejido* to create an *ofrenda* on the top of the hill. We would go see the butterflies and create an outdoor meal together with the women. All proceeds would go to the individual stakeholders and a percentage to be kept for the reforestation project. *Ofrenda* means an “offering,” and calling to mind, Hyde’s *The Gift*. It is an opportunity to integrate the gift of wisdom I have received in this capstone and pass it on.

This last weekend saw many visitors to San Miguel due to Benito Juárez's (one of the most consequential Mexican presidents when it comes to democracy and indigenous human rights) birthday. As crowds began to return to the streets, I could not help but wonder if some of the lessons learned during the research I did on the capstone will be put into effect. I am rooting

for the concept of “less is more,” as explained by Kini Zamora, a native Hawaiian, and Filipino, to function. At the basic, “less is more” entails taking only what is needed, and it is a good approach to conserving the environment. There was a gathering of sorts where an affluent group of youngish visitors came for a four-day immersive experience that billed itself full of culture, gastronomy, music, and dance. I was asked to consult on some of the programming. I could not help but think of the way in which leakage was going to be prevalent if I did not step in to help out. The main organizers were from New York, and they had a four-person crew from abroad. Though they were willing to explore local stakeholders and cultural workers, there was little knowledge on who to work with.

I found my role important as I felt passionate about letting some local chefs, performers, musicians, and producers gain work in their field and provide the international set of visitors with what could be a fulfilling experience. I did make mention to them that, while well-intentioned, they would benefit greatly from employing local folks to help create unique experiences. My role was to connect and curate a selection of chefs, flower carpet makers, set designers, performers, artists, and craft vendors that would provide a taste of San Miguel. I made sure that all were given just pay and was happy to see some of the guests taking ceramics classes, cooking lessons, and purchasing handicrafts within the private retreat. I noted the various measures such as Covid tests, constant disinfecting, and a distanced outdoor space in the countryside helped generate a sense of safety among the visitors. I would describe most of the guests as promadic travelers-tourists that want unique experiences while empowering the community and leaving the place better than they found it. They were from varying countries though many were now living in Mexico since the pandemic. Places like Mexico City, Tulum, Puerto Escondido, and San Miguel have seen an increase in these kinds of visitors. In my role as

a cultural broker, I feel that I need to double my involvement in connecting such tourists to the immersive and regenerative tourism experiences that exist in San Miguel.

A key lesson I have taken away from the MACS program and in completing this capstone is the need to be proactive-finding solutions rather than asking for someone else: the government or political leaders- to provide solutions to contemporary socio-cultural issues. When I was asked to present the white paper, an idea for a tourism company I am developing, and which would include the three case studies I presented as tourism packages, came up. I decided to create a presentation (still in draft form) on how I would package the three outings. I have attached this presentation for discussion. The company is called Peregrinos, which means pilgrims. In it, the three case studies and their outing offers are described in an easy-to-read format. I hope to develop this idea further into a regenerative form of a travel company. I was inspired by a recent New York Times article, *Move Over, Sustainable Travel. Regenerative Travel Has Arrived*, published in August 2020, where Elaine Glusac heralds the new trend in tourism post-Covid from sustainable tourism to regenerative travel. Regenerative travel is leaving the place better than you found it and stewarding the land for future generations.

Immersive experiences like mushroom foraging, hiking in rural backlands, and learning craft and food traditions (culinary tourism) as part of niche tourism that embeds regenerative practices are on the rise, and, professionally, I think this is the way to go for me immediately after completing MACs. Glusac's article came out when I was doing the fieldwork for the capstone, and I can say that I witnessed most of what she writes about- new companies in the travel industry that value smaller, more intimate, and stakeholder-driven activity that has a concern for the environment, and wants to leave a positive and reciprocal exchange. I think that it is a good model to activate possibilities that will attract visitors to the new hiking and rural

routes that the Ministry of Sustainability San Miguel is currently developing. While the first part of the mission saw community stakeholders planting trees on eroded mountains and creating stone hedges to retain water, visitors can still participate in similar ecologically sound activity which will help provide a sense of existential meaning. Voluntourism also comes into play here, though I am still skeptical about the true value of this practice; when I reflect on one of the articles I came across arguing how voluntourism creates outsider savior dependence. A new way would be to ceremoniously take visitors to plant agave as part of the attraction, thereby reframing the giving quality of it.

Regenerative tourism is a model I feel is deeply aligned in the post-Covid tourism activity which I wish to participate in. In a Glusac's New York Times article on regenerative travel, Bill Reed, an architect of the Regensis Group, a design firm that has been implementing regenerative design initiatives, including tourism projects, since 1995, states, "Regeneration is about restoring and then regenerating the capability to live in a new relationship in an ongoing way." (2020). As it happens, one of the NGOs that partnered with San Miguel's Ministry of Environment and Sustainability project on reforestation is called Regenerative International. The site visit I did that day involved a walk to La Juanita, then to the agricultural research center, organic farm, and restaurant Via Organica farm that empowers, educates, and lobbies for regenerative farming practices in the region as well as developed programs like the "One Billion Agave Project" a part of a larger carbon-sequestering initiative in arid lands. In Glusac's article (Move Over, Sustainable Travel. Regenerative Travel Has Arrived), she mentions six non-profits that have come together to form the Future of Tourism Coalition aimed at building a better tomorrow. The non-profits created a list of 13 indicators that create a more humane and responsible form of travel, including less carbon emissions, better wages for

workers, and ecological givebacks. There is a list of links in destination companies and tour operators such as Regenerative Travel, who are putting regenerative initiatives at the forefront of the travel network, creating a criteria for ethical and responsible travel at the center of their selection process. I see this group as a potential web to network with as they are aligned with the kind of travel I would like to promote. In fact, one of my mentors and personal relations, Anna Pollock of Conscious travel, was mentioned in the article. She helped create the Visit Flanders campaign, which argues that travelers value deeper and more meaningful interactions with the host country.

Yet, with establishing this enterprise, which would help support these micro-initiatives, I am aware of my shortcomings. I feel I lack business training, so an incubator for myself would be helpful, just as it would be with Citlalli. Many people, especially women, don't have the self-confidence to fulfill their entrepreneurial vision, and to change this reality, incubators and educational platforms of empowerment are essential. When I recently sat with Citlalli, she expressed disappointment that her move to Oaxaca is not going as planned, at least for now. While San Miguel and Guanajuato state have policy and safety measures to welcome back a trickle of tourism, Oaxaca is proving more isolating for her. I plan to help her design an online weaving instruction platform and trial it out on Airbnb Experiences and or on Peregrinos. I would like to do the same with Arif. Going forward, where it is predicted that virtual reality and augmented reality are going to be mainstream given the proliferation of digital technologies like 5G, virtual forage or identification lessons would be much-sought-after content. An online course into the various types of mushrooms and the elaboration of medicinal tinctures could also present new opportunities for Arif. Platforms like Airbnb Experiences create a possibility of financial benefit while sustaining culture. In this way, technology is a force of good and

development in online educational platforms can be of service and provide education and inspiration to a targeted audience looking to deepen their knowledge of culture in an experiential way.

It may be my American upbringing that gives me the self-belief to innovate, that I always have that personal drive to accomplish things, but through completing this capstone, I am cognizant that this is not true for some of the young social entrepreneurs in Mexico. This is why incubators and educational platforms for empowerment are essential. I met a young American woman over the weekend who had moved from Mexico City from Nairobi . In just under a year, under lockdown, she managed to start a microfinancing incubator for nascent enterprises. It is called La Chispa (The Spark). As I was writing the final parts of this reflection, she sent me the following note.

[3/16/2021] *Hey Klaudia! How are you?! It's Ryden, Johnny's friend.*

[3/16/2021] It was great meeting you this weekend 

[3/16/2021] I'd love to chat more about your capstone and the work you are doing with impact entrepreneurs.

She sent me this video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6o316FHxjM>) and a link to her website. While her incubator is focused on empowering kids in violent and urban neighborhoods in Mexico City, we are going to meet and exchange information as well as design some trips hiking to some of her entrepreneurs. An outing and retreat to San Miguel to the new hiking trails would be a pilot program to design escapes for marginalized youth in need of the natural environment.

As this capstone was coming to an end, I was asked to present the white paper. At first, this seemed like a daunting task, particularly on the academic writing side. Although I am well-versed with presentations given my role in organizing and presenting TEDx Talks in San Miguel presenting a piece of academic writing like the capstone seemed an uphill task for me as I did not have the confidence to put my thoughts in writing in a cohesive structure. I also wanted it to be meaningful and of use. I, therefore, had to dedicate some time with my instructors, of whom I am thankful and grateful for their guidance, on how the capstone project should look like. Robert Baron suggested that doing a white paper was a good way for me to target an audience such as a tourism board. I also took some time in the online library just refreshing my mind on the associated components of a capstone-be it the annotated bibliography that would guide me in constructing concepts or the proper updated APA citation style. In retrospect, completing the capstone has not just been about enhancing my cultural sustainability knowledge; it has been about holistically developing as a scholar who can communicate professionally to other scholars and students of culture.

In conclusion, completing the capstone project as part of the MACS program has been an exhilarating experience full of learning for me. As I write this reflection, I can honestly say that I am a changed person academically and professionally. Completing the capstone re-affirmed my desire to continue working in the cultural tourism space here in San Miguel de Allende, albeit with a nuanced understanding of the regenerative and cultural sustainability concepts that are essential in driving the next phase of environmental and social justice-sensitive tourism. Compared to the profits-oriented mass tourism that I advocated for years ago, I am now acutely cognizant of the dynamics of the economics of cultural tourism, particularly for local and indigenous people. At a personal level, my biculturality and binationalism have been put at the

forefront thanks to this capstone and especially when I reflect on the work of Baron regarding the role of the folklorist-who I consider myself to be, albeit as a cultural broker. When the capstone journey began, I felt inadequate in my capabilities, just like some of the social entrepreneurs leading the sprouting micro-initiatives feel. However, I have slowly built my core strengths during this capstone writing journey, and while I do not claim to have reached the pinnacle of whom I am supposed to be in the academic space, I certainly am in a better position to positively impact the people and communities I serve.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review conducted to frame this white paper began with some of the prevalent readings in the anthropology of tourism, including works from Sharon Gmelch & Kaul, (2018), Erve Chambers (2010), Edward Bruner (2001), Lucy Long (2013), Eric Cohen (1998), Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett (1998), Kris Rutten & Blancke Stefaan (2018), as well Lewis Hyde (2007). This was alongside reports by various authorities like the World Tourism Organization on various topics surrounding tourism relevant in the case studies included in the whitepaper. The prevalent discourse in tourism today is that there is a need for more sustainable practices and a leaning towards regenerative practices. The literature collected touches upon the thematic areas of regenerative travel, cultural and ecological sustainability issues, social inclusion, social justice, and improving local quality of life through sustainable tourism practices. The literature collected is thematically organized into topics of the reasons for travel, commodification of cultural artifacts, the socio-economic impacts of the dominant mass tourism model, culturally-brokered stakeholder-driven tourism, the emerging type of traveler segments, and the directions of regenerative tourism in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Reasons for Travel**

In pre-Covid-19 projections, the World Travel and Tourism Council (2019) estimated that at least 2 billion people would be traveling worldwide for tourism purposes. While people travel for many reasons, from an anthropological perspective, Gmelch & Kaul, (2018) observe

that travel is a way to experience other people, cultures, and places; offering a moment for people to be “removed from their everyday routines and responsibilities, if not their home society, yet not really part of the part of the places they visit.” (p. 4). Historically, travel motivations ranged from religious pilgrimage, exploration, and education to health tourism, and the subsequent mass tourism that was structured around these motivations was made possible by transportation availability from agencies like Thomas Cook (Gmelch & Kaul, 2018). Most vacations represent a ‘time-out’ during which tourists occupy a liminal status. This liminal state is consistent across the different niche forms of tourism, including ecotourism, adventure travel, and other niche markets. In the end, travel, since time immemorial, offers a chance for direct contact with a “difference” that MacCannell (1976) says is key in determining whether a tourist will revisit a place. In addition to the cultural difference being sought, the World Tourism Organization (2016) argues that 80% of people travel to satisfy their innate desire of learning, particularly learning about the food and customs of other people and cultures.

Arguably, the economic drivers of tourism are the most significant factors shaping tourism, and various authors (MacCannell 1976; Chambers 2010; Andriotis 2014) have analyzed how the economic repercussions of tourism can be a force of good for development in the host countries and communities. Estimates from the World Tourism Organization (2016) point to tourists consuming \$2 trillion, contributing \$8.9 trillion or 10% to the global GDP in tourism-related industries, and creating jobs for close to 400 million (or 1 in 11) people. From these figures, Gmelch & Kaul, (2018) observe that tourism is indeed an anchor service industry as it provides cultural workers and artisans with a livelihood. For most of the stakeholders in tourism, be it the indigenous artisan or the local tour guide, the impetus for being involved in the tourism chain is certainly economic as a means of sustenance. However, issues of social justice

kick in, especially when mass tourism that favors large corporations and foreign-owned nationals is at the center, in other words, economic leakage. In most of the countries in the Southern hemisphere, Mexico included, many of the hotels, restaurants, transportation companies and other services are foreign-owned (WTO, 2016; Chambers, 2010). Some reasons include a legacy of colonialism, inadequate empowerment of local people, and tourism that extensively focuses on the visitor rather than the host.

Due to economic leakage, cultural tourism has seldom helped local people in the destination countries economically, and proponents of a more sustainable model have argued for designing a stakeholder-driven financial model that works equitably for all involved (Chambers, 2010; Andriotis, 2014; Cave & Dredge, 2020). The term 'leakage' describes economic benefits leaving the host community or country, which mostly happens with foreign capital (Chambers, 2010). The current dominant mass tourism model perpetuates this through airlines, foreign employment, importation of goods, ownership of hotels, and entertainment by outsiders. According to Pollock (2020), the focus of tourism for the wealthy masses implies fewer visitors but often cancels out informal economies. With locals being displaced and shut out economically, the presence of an informal economy is necessary for the mainstay of many locals overrun by tourism. Leakage has also taken the form where workers in the mass-tourism model are often imported to meet the social criteria of the visitors (e.g., having Italian chefs at 5-star safari hotels). This has increased socio-economic marginalization between the longtime residents and tourism workers.

Chamber's (2010) study also highlights how ethnic minorities view tourism as a means of economic development. It is easier for tourism initiatives to be justified for economic reasons than for cultural and social variables. Leakage mostly happens for foreign capital. In some

instances, more than 90% of profits leave the country (World Tourism Organizations, 2016). A concept that has been observed as possible mitigation for leakage is the 'multiplier effect.' This is similar to the trickle-down economy, where the benefits of tourism reach the small vendors-be it the 'mom and pop' shops along some tourist trail or local artisans who sell directly to tourists. A further problem of leakage identified by Chambers (2010) and reiterated by Glusac (2020) is the socio-economic marginalization between the longtime residents and foreign tourism workers imported to meet the social criteria of the tourists. Hasan Zafer Dogan (1989) describes six forms of adjustment to this form of tourism: resist, retreat, boundary maintenance, revitalization of local customs, or adoption of what is being fronted.

The current tourism model encourages mass international tourism as opposed to domestic travel. Chambers (2010) traces this problem to colonial legacies, and this largely remains the same, particularly for tourism happening in developing countries in the Southern Hemisphere. In most cases, the model does more harm than good to local people. According to Andriotis (2014) and Pollock (2020), there are signs that mass tourism is increasingly becoming unsustainable. Mass tourism produces diminishing returns for host communities, viewing tourists as targets to be exploited for profit and employees as money-making resources, exerting excess pressure on scarce natural resources like water and forests, and converting cultural heritage destinations into money-making sites. The unsustainability of the dominant mass tourism model stems from its environmental degradation associated with cheap airlines and cruise ships running on fossil fuels which significantly increase the carbon footprint. Additionally, Fallows et al.(2020) argues that the heavy tourist traffic in some destinations disturbs the ecological balance as these places are not given a chance to regenerate

## **The Commodification of Culture, Handicrafts and Authenticity**

One of the consequences of an unsustainable mass tourism model that locks locals out of the economic system has been the over-commodification of culture and handicrafts. Targeting tourists in their masses-be it the coastal ports, airports of entry into game parks-handicrafts and cultural artifacts are sold to tourists at prices that do not necessarily turn a profit to the local women who sew them even as the tourist buying it remains oblivious of the handicraft's true value and meaning as could have been demonstrated by the local woman making it, raising the question of authenticity (Deitch, 1989; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). With the over-commodification, Cohen (1988) in *Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism*, has examined the arising concept of “staged authenticity.” According to Cohen (1988), “Commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products, although it may change it or draw new meanings to old ones.”(p. 374). Cohen (1988) questions Greenwood's commentary: that the commoditization of cultural products renders them meaningless. According to Cohen, culture, and traditions are constantly evolving, and sometimes produced events or traditions brought on as touristic performances are self-driven and lucrative to locals; something that is reflected by Bruner's (2001) seminal work on the commodification of Maasai culture in Kenya.

According to Dean MacCannell (1976), “staged authenticity” arises when, in a bid to meet the demands of the large number of tourists, providers lose authenticity and that this is closely related to over-commodification. An excellent example can be found in Bruner's (2001) study. In the article, the scenario presented is a safari park owned by a longstanding British family living in Kenya who turned their land into a safari and traditional Maasai culture

encounter. The Maasai are hired and paid a wage to depict warrior-like attitudes in the dance. They do not mingle with the audience. The place is staged to seem like postcolonial representations to reflect what tourists may find 'authentic.'-something that can be linked to the culinary tourists in Luoh et al.'s (2020) study who are served by native Thai chefs on their trip. In Bruner's research, the audience of the staged cultural dances is usually foreign, and in yet another scenario in his study, the Maasai dancers pitch their cultural dance in a large amphitheater with modern amenities, and the foreigners are allowed to mingle and dance with them. They are like hired *conchero* dancers who are plumed and provide Mexican spectacle for tourists (Covert, 2017). However, the main point of difference in this example is that the Maasai stakeholders directly participate in a large and consistent percentage of income generated from the events. So while the show is the least 'authentic' and almost a comedy sketch of globalization gone wild, it lays a basis of profit-sharing for locals.

Cultural anthropologists seem not to agree on whether staged authenticity is authentic in light of culture being a transient concept. Writing in *Tourism and Tourists*, Bohn, Gmelch & Kaul, (2018) refute the idea of staged displays being authentic culture as it exposes local people to the "tourist gaze" where they are watched and photographed even when doing the most mundane of things to the extent that their lives are altered. Authenticity exists when people have significant control over their lives and play an active role in determining what changes occur in their society, but it remains to be seen if this can be said about the Maasai dancers presented in Bruner's article. However, Cohen (1988) argues that authenticity is negotiated over time, and his term "emergent authenticity" is when the cultural patina of traditions changes over time to become authentic. Still, the requirement that local residents modify and commodify their own heritage to suit the needs of the tourist is something that Gmelch & Kaul, (2018) argue has given

rise to the new type of travelers seeking meaningful and authentic encounters, not staged performances used to lure the masses, but smaller lesser-known destinations that provide experiential transformation through close contact with nature and traditions.

The repercussion of faked authenticity is best described by Luie Gong in Fitzgerald's (2020) article on the empowerment of indigenous and native artisans. Gong argues that "When companies sell "Native-inspired" products without actually working with Native artists, it's a loss for us all. Every fake piece of art has a fake story to go with it. And every fake product represents a missed opportunity for a cultural artist. Fewer people are practicing [cultural art] because it's hard to make a living from it." Cohen's (1988) idea of emergent authenticity tries to address this: that there is no such thing as faked authenticity as long as the activities/products in question are led by the owners of the culture. Bruner (2001), on the other hand, lauds the intersectionality of mixing cultures between the tourist and the locals when staging cultural performances, observing that "Points of origin become lost or are made irrelevant. Old binaries are fractured. The distance is narrowed between us and them, subject and object, tourist and native. What is left are dancing images, musical scapes, flowing across borders, no longer either American or African but occupying new space in a constructed touristic border zone that plays with culture, reinvents itself, takes old forms and gives them new and often surprising meanings" (p.893).

### **The Value of Cultural Products as "Gifts"**

At the center of the commodification of culture and handicrafts is the debate on how pricing should be arrived at to ensure sustainability while maintaining the core identity and value of cultural items as gifts. As Hyde (2007) argues, a gift cannot be bought, and neither can

it be acquired through an act of will: it is bestowed upon us, and it keeps giving just as it should be given out (p. xvii). An overarching theme of having cultural products and handicrafts as gifts in their price negotiation is that these items keep giving in the form of reciprocity, and in such a culturally-sustainable model, a symbiotic 'web of good' where everyone in the system equally benefits, is created. This monetary value negotiation, in turn, reflects what Cohen (1988) argues: that "commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products, although it may change it or draw new meanings to old ones" (p.377). According to Hyde (2007), the gain derived from such exchanges cannot be termed as "profits": gifts are not functions of capital, and the passing of the gift from one party to the second and even third party "gives increase|" that moves along with the gift, unlike profits which stay behind after commodity exchange. Perhaps the strongest support for commodifying culture while retaining its value is what Luie Gong says in a 2020 interview with Harper's Bazaar; "When companies sell "Native-inspired" products without actually working with Native artists, it's a loss for us all." By encouraging companies to work with indigenous creators, Gong observes that commodification is actually helping locals eke out a living-just like a natural resource would-, and this somehow maintains the value of the handicraft.

An interesting perspective on cultural items argued by Hyde (2007) regards the cardinal property of gifts: whatever we have been given needs to be given away. If the gift cannot be given back, then something of similar value has to be exchanged in its stead: the 'gift must always move.' Hyde (2007) also describes the concept of 'storm damage,' where the social fabric of a group/community is invariably damaged; when someone manages to commodify the community's gift relationships. He recommends positive reciprocity and cautions mass production and private gain from gifts.

## **Stakeholder-Driven, Culturally Sustainable Tourism**

In a sustainable tourism model, inclusive community involvement plays a crucial role in understanding each place's uniqueness and showcasing the narratives emerging from local history and community stories. Community engagement encourages deep sharing of values and aspirations, facilitates dialogue between different actors and sectors, and contributes to fostering a higher sense of community, ownership, and community empowerment that will prevail over time (Deitch, 1989; Fitzgerald, 2020; WTO, 2016; Future Laboratory, 2020). An increasing and unmet need for millennials (who have outnumbered baby boomers and are set to become the most prominent touring group) is culturally sustainable tourist experiences. Millennials are rebelling against the traditional tourist roles where the visiting tourist (often to a less developed country or region) is patronizing, and everything, including faking roles, is dictated by what the visitor wants.

Millennials want to be involved, and as Fenton (2021) advises, travel and tourism targeting millennials should be structured in such a way that it is contemporary and technology-based, authentic, and highly personalized. According to Rutten, Blancke & Soetaert (2018), such tourism is alive to the reality that social media like Instagram can be a platform to advertise traditional handicrafts, and as long as it creates meaningful and sustainable livelihoods for the people and enterprises who own the culture at hand, it is an avenue to enhance innovation and continuity. This commodification is not something to frown upon on the basis that it destroys the meaning of cultural products even though it may change it or draw new meanings to old ones (Cohen, 1988).

Arguably, Anna Pollock (2020) of *Conscious Travel* gives the best prescription of what stakeholder-driven and culturally sustainable tourism roots for; that it "enables all stakeholders to experience positive net benefit and develop their full potential as human beings" while "actively celebrating and nurturing the uniqueness of places and people." Modern travelers are seeking an exotic experience, something engaging and which benefits the local person. Albeit from a different perspective, this is echoed by Gmelch & Kaul, (2018), who observe that the tourist's experience becomes meaningful when people have significant control over their lives and play an active role in determining what changes occur in their society as part of the touristic activities occurring in their community.

### **The role of Culture Bearers and the Folklorist**

Within the cultural tourism sector, the intermediation role of cultural brokers and folklorist and cooperation networks seems to be increasingly important, such as social artisan entrepreneur-mediators who connect artisans to creative tourism (Andriotis, 2014) and small businesses associations and collaboration networks among diverse stakeholders (Chambers, 2010). Baron (2016) gives a clear picture of the role of folklorists and practitioners of intangible cultural heritage who span the intersection praxis involving administrators, scholars, and government officials. Folklorists interact in a variety of roles in collaboration with communities to develop cultural self-determination and exercise a sense of agency and self-representation in festivals, initiatives, and other performances. Co-created collaborations help to democratize heritage and create a rebalance of power to traditionally marginalized voices. Baron also mentions culture as "emergent and constantly in the making while rejecting static representations of cultures as ideal types maintained out of time in the ethnographic present." Clifford describes

it, where locals and cultural workers are authors of cultural representations. This is reflected by Rutten, Blancke & Soetaert (2018), who say that culture is a living concept that is constantly changing with time. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, folklorists, as masters of storytelling, are increasingly adopting digital tools like the internet to play their mediating role while simultaneously representing cultures on bigger stages.

A role that has traditionally been under-represented in literature and has seen renewed interest in the emerging forms of travel is the culture bearers' role. Culture bearers are the gatekeepers of cultural heritage. As custodians of culture, their role is to share the gifts with tourists while simultaneously safeguarding the cultural heritage from misappropriation where necessary (Deitch, 1998). Sunny Fitzgerald's (2020) Harper's Bazaar article interviews some of the rising stars in the indigenous fashion and apparel industry, touching on how knowledge of indigenous cultural heritage might help transform the fashion industry toward a sustainable direction. In the article, cultural art is deemed a natural resource only held by individuals as cultural heritage, which should be treated as more important than "revenue or target numbers" when the bearers decide to commodify it.

As noted by multiple authors (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Long, 2013, Luoh et al., 2020; Chamber, 2010), consumers of traditional handicrafts are often disconnected from the indigenous artisans. Olga Reiche, a Guatemalan natural dye artisan, recommends that the gap between indigenous textile artisans and consumers of the traditional arts should be bridged and that this can be achieved through what she occasionally does as a cultural broker: guiding local artisans on marketing and product development by exposing them to the global market and connecting them to international and regional cultural festivals. According to Fitzgerald (2020), and quoting Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu, an indigenous Ethiopian weaver in Addis Ababa, the

local artisans often “have all they need,” and the role of the folklorist or cultural broker is to link them to opportunities for development.

### **Sustainable Immersive travel/Culinary tourism/Mushroom Foraging**

Culinary tourism provides a conceptual framework to expand the nature of food as a vehicle and destination in travel scholarship. The nature of the encounter is what defines a food experience as culinary tourism. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlet (1998) writes in the introduction of *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* that food is a space of contact and encounter, negotiation and transaction at home and abroad. This is reflected by Mishan (2020), who notes that restaurants, and other food places, are sites of designed experiences that are collaboratively produced. Food has the capacity to hold time, space, and memory. According to Long (2013), the basis of tourism is a ‘perception of otherness,’ and based on this, food can be a destination for tourism, not only a vehicle. Food can be a way for a person to experience another culture, an entry into an unfamiliar way of life.

In culinary tourism, a concept that has gained attention over the last decade is cultural learning tourism (CLT). In their groundbreaking study in Thailand, Luoh, Tsaur, and Lo (2020) dissect the sources of fun in culinary learning tourism into five exhaustive factors: exotic food experiences and a sense of accomplishment, unique cooking learning experiences, a fun learning experience, market tour experiences, and positive interpersonal interactions (p. 100442). Many destinations have jumped on board to develop unique representative cuisines, including food festivals (Long, 2013), farm tourist activities (Glusac, 2020), and restaurants (Mishan, 2020) that, in turn, significantly and economically empower the local communities. In the process,

Luoh et al. (2020) acknowledge and stress the motivating factor behind CLTs: craving authentic and fun cultural experiences where food tourists get to be challenged and learn something new.

One of the consequential researches mentioned by Luoh and her colleagues is the one that analyzed cooking blogs from Asia, particularly Thailand and Indonesia, to find out why cooking schools in these destinations have become popular in the recent past. For one particular cooking school in Thailand, it was found that the Thai cooking learning experience provided “a kind of stage, a performance for tourists that heightens their perceptions of authenticity” (Luoh et al., 2020, p.10442). One of the observations made, which directly shapes how tourism is being approached today (and possibly as compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic), is that the Asian food tourism industry is trending toward small-scale, local, and niche forms of tourism that appeal to both local and global tourists. This shift is being led by the cooking learning tourism (CLT), where perceptions of stage, authenticity, sense of personal growth, mental stimulation, and active performance/cooking roles shape positive experiences. Appealing, lively, and humorous cooking teachers who double as interpretive guides to local cultures are also critical in the CLT.

Immersive travel is characteristic of the new sustainable tourist model that moves away from unsustainable mass tourism. Mushroom foraging is one such immersive tourist activity. According to Mishan (2020), mushrooms only recently became a fascination in the West, and this presents a culturally and ecologically sustainable opportunity for tourism given that mushroom growing comes with careful nurturing of the environment in which they grow. The shift to vegetarian diets is driving the global edible mushroom market to \$69 billion by 2024. Mishan (2020) links this to the embrace of mushroom-savvy cultures, like the Japanese notion of “umami”-the flavor beyond flavor, by countries in the West, whereas Glusac (2020) emphasizes

that this is part of the regenerative tourism that is sweeping the globe. The fact that mushrooms can be ecological saviors thanks to their low carbon footprint when re-purposed is adequately discussed by Mishan (2020). Such uses include brick making and biodegradable textiles, as can be seen with MycoTEX, a malleable textile by Dutch designer Aniela Hoitink and Reishi, a textile developed by San Francisco-based startup MycoWorks. Mushrooms are also noted to be “nature’s alchemists” as they can break down plastics, toxic waste, petrochemicals, and even absorb radiation, thus making mushrooms a key attraction to the transformative tourist conscious of environmental preservation.

Mushroom foraging is also made possible by a revisionist take on the increasing costs of healthcare. Erosion of faith in the medical-industrial complex has driven greater numbers of people to homeopathy, itself a multibillion-dollar industry, one in which fungi are promoted as aphrodisiacs and immunity boosters. Mishan (2020) and Long (2013) have also observed that mushrooms are interpreted differently by different communities and people, from totems of immortality reserved for the Pharaoh to “holy children” among the Mazatecs of Southern Mexico. The topic of using mushrooms to treat anxiety and mental issues on the basis of psilocybin is an ongoing contentious issue in the medical community, but some tourist destinations in Mexico are already marketing psilocybin as the substance is legal in Mexico. All the authors who have written on culinary tourism (Long, 2013; Luoh et al., 2020; Mishan, 2020) agree that successful food experiential marketing for a destination is one where authentic purchase plays multi-sensory experiences for tourists are provided with benefits going to the local people. For instance, Luoh et al. (2020) advise role-playing activities where tourists use woven baskets to shop at the local food market with the money directly benefiting the local

stores run by the residents. This can significantly increase tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions while remaining culturally sustainable.

## **Regenerative travel**

Closely related to the cultural sustainability being sought as a remedy to the unsustainable mass cultural tourism is regenerative tourism. Regenerative tourism is a concept where tourism is meant to support all life and be in harmony with nature. It is all about leaving the place better than one found it by “restoring and then regenerating the capability to live in a new relationship in an ongoing way” (Glusac, 2020). As noted by the World Tourism Organization (2016), regenerative travel is ethical and responsible. Players who adopt this model value smaller, more intimate, and stakeholder-driven activity that has a concern for the environment and creates a positive and reciprocal exchange. Arguably, Cave & Dredge (2020) offer the best explication as to what precisely regenerative tourism entails: “regenerative approaches acknowledge the existence of new alternative or post-capitalism economies/markets that focus beyond growth and profit.” Viewing tourism activities as more than tourism “business as usual,” regenerative tourism approaches may “deconstruct economic practices in tourism and opt for holistic development over economic growth.” (p. 507). Visitors can participate in ecologically immersive activity to help provide a sense of existential meaning to their sojourn, just as seen with mushroom foraging or the culinary learning tourism. Cave & Dredge’s (2020) idea of regenerative travel is expanded upon by Duxberry et al. (2020), who argue that regenerative tourism is of high value as it 1) views tourism as a way to regenerate marginalized landscapes, places, or communities which are not necessary tourist destinations but hold the potential to become tourist destinations, and 2) regenerates touristic destinations that have been

decimated by mass tourism by taking deliberate steps to mitigate the negative impacts of mass tourism (p. 5).

### **Types of the new traveler**

The way digital technology is shaping tourism transcends the folklorist, tour companies, and the local artisans who can now advertise their services on a worldwide platform. The rapid proliferation of digital technologies, particularly in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has facilitated the meteoric rise of promads, digital nomads, and neonomads. Spread across the developed Western world, Future Laboratory (2020) characterizes promadic travelers not by their material wealth or spending power, but rather by their escapism, need to dive into the local culture, altruistic, sustainability, intellectual, and experiential needs of touring. The promads seek a break from toxic urban life and being better digital masters than their millennial parents; they comprise innovative promads, neighborhood promads, peace seekers, and grazing promads, depending on what they seek. The neighborhood promads are an interesting lot as they are untethered and uncoupled, moving from town to town to escape expensive and over-toured locations while seeking co-working spaces, residing in a network of clubhouses, and identifying as global citizens rather than claiming specific nationalities (The Future laboratory, 2020). Promadic travelers prefer neighborhood hotels-hotels that have expanded their offerings to socially and economically support residents.

Closely related to promadic travelers are the digital nomads- computer-based workers who are flocking to Mexico (and other less developed countries) searching for a more tolerable haven than their first world country and no longer need to report to brick and mortar offices. What MacCannell (1992) described as neo-nomads can be applied to a host of millennials

whose capacity to work online is creating a changing taste and demand in tourism (Andriotis, 2014, p.39). For one, they favor the natural environment instead of the established touristic routes. With the lockdowns that have been experienced in the pandemic, pristine environments create meaningful interactions and a perceived concept of freedom. This will help shift us from the age of the digital nomad to that of the promadic traveler, who, in seeking simplicity, will be producers, not consumers. According to Fallows et al. (2020), the projected growth in neo nomads is as a result of cheaper prices in destination localities, the simple life full of nature found outside developed cities, and novel travel approaches as exemplified by Airbnb for accommodation and virtual reality where the digital nomads are motivated to visit the places they encountered in the virtual worlds. Digital learning has also contributed to this, and the closing of borders indicates a larger appeal in staycations and local travel

The transformative traveler is also a vital pillar of the changing tourism model. Smaller groups and independent travel is favored. The transformative travelers use their trips to "re-invent" themselves and the worlds they live in (WTO, 2016,p.12). These are not tourists looking for cheap thrills, but tourists who want to have fun while learning something, contributing towards a bigger social goal like empowering local artisans, or simply making sure they don't hurt Mother Nature in their process of touring. According to the 2016 annual World Tourism Organization affiliate members report, the number of transformative tourists has grown significantly to a point where 10-15% of all tourists are transformative travelers.

### **Covid-19 implications (Virtual tourism, safety measures, and collaborations)**

In 2020, the extreme downturn of travel and tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a time to pause and reflect and has reinforced the need to think about new models and

approaches when tourism fully re-emerges. This calls for new ways of thinking about tourism, and as Duxberry et al. (2020) observe, virtual tourism, augmented reality, and creative tourism will be at the center of the emerging models. Latin American countries, and Mexico in particular, has been hard-hit by Covid-19, and it is likely that domestic tourism will have to reinvent itself. Fenton (2020) and Glusac (2020) have attempted to project what tourism might look like going forward and the underlying suggestion in all of their projections is that strategic domestic tourism-which is authentically and competitively planned by private and public sectors- might be a way out for many tourist destinations. According to Fenton (2020), contemporary technology-based, authentic, and highly personalized tourism will gradually replace the mass cultural tourism model. On the need to strengthen small businesses as a strategy, Fenton argues that “Smaller hotels and ‘mom-and-pop shops’ deliver unmatched authenticity to travelers and are critical economic engines for their regions,” a factor that can drive tourism at the grassroots and ensure success at the national and regional level. This is echoed by the Future laboratory (2020) and Cave & Dredge (2020), who add that tourists will look out for safety measures based on health protocols as long as the pandemic is still around.

Fenton (2020), in particular, remarks that, “Increased awareness related to health presents an opportunity to go beyond standard implementations and focus on the visitor’s overall experience” and that “Destinations will need to partner with their cities’ policymakers and local governments to help rebuild and form conversations around an economic, health and tourism flow management policies to help ensure infrastructure is prepared for travelers that go beyond the pandemic.” In line with Chambers (2010) and Fallows et al.’s (2020) emphasis on the need for countries to focus on conversions, especially when it comes to independent and private sector hospitality that benefits locals, Duxberry et al.(2020) and Cave & Dredge (2020) note that the

improved structure featuring small local owners translate into enhanced, unique, and authentic tourist experiences that may further drive tourism.

## **Conclusion**

The literature is characterized by regenerative travel where tourism seeks to reclaim areas decimated by mass tourism or to transform under-explored destinations into spaces that support all life and are in harmony with nature. Regenerative tourism is ethical and responsible, and players who adopt this model value smaller, more intimate, and stakeholder-driven activity that has a concern for the environment and creates a positive and reciprocal exchange. The commodification of cultural heritage and handicrafts is certainly not a practice to be frowned upon as long as the cultural bearers directly benefit, and over-commodification is avoided. The theme of authenticity is also important in the new tourism model, and the concept of “emerging” authenticity comes into play when considering that authenticity and value of cultural goods are negotiated over time.

In seeking authenticity, immersive tourist experiences, exemplified by mushroom foraging and culinary learning tourism, will shape the new tourism model. Such activities are being sought by the millennial population, which has surpassed the baby boomer population and comprises emerging promads and neonomads. Digital tools are also giving rise to new possibilities: both in how cultural tourism is being marketed, the self-representation of cultural bearers and how local artisans are benefiting from the tourism chain. The literature shows that Covid-19 is and will significantly shape tourism in the future. Safety concerns and increased domestic travel are key areas that stakeholders, including local tourism departments, should look out for.



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