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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent writings on transnational corporeal mobility have been dominated by at least two concerns: mobility as ever-expanding or even complete; and mobility as determined by economic restructuring. In this paper, I confront such writings with empirical material from primarily qualitative research into Australia's working holiday programme, which was established in 1975 to allow British citizens between the ages of 18 and 26 to work and holiday in Australia for a period of up to 12 months. And I confront such writings with M P Smith's (2001) agency oriented approach to transnational urbanism, which I extend with two arguments. First, since agency is not a simple possession of intent, motivated human beings, the achievement of mobility rests on both human actors and non-human actants. Second, since mobility is not simply increasing, the achievement of mobility rests alongside what we might call relative contingent fixity.

## **Key words**

Mobility, fixity, agency, Australia, working holiday

## **Introduction**

Recent writings on transnational corporeal mobility have been dominated by at least two concerns: mobility as ever-expanding or even complete; and mobility as determined by

economic restructuring. On mobility as ever-expanding or even complete, Urry (2000) holds that inhuman objects (machines, technologies, texts, images) are reconstituting social relations through the production of mobilities (risks, consumer goods and services, cultures, *migrants and visitors*, symbols and icons) across borders and that Sociology should refocus away from nation-state-society towards mobilities, including the travels of people, and their implications for experiences of time, space, dwelling and citizenship. And Appadurai (1996) holds that, combined with electronic media, driven by economic opportunity, leisure industries, drought and famine, and enabled by technologies (the airplane, the telephone, the computer), mass migration is an increasingly significant force in society: it offers new resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds; it produces transnational or even postnational social forms; it places the nation-state “on its last legs” (p19).

Michael Peter Smith’s (2001) *Transnational Urbanism* provides a starting point from which to consider mobility as determined by economic restructuring. He locates economic determinism in Harvey on time-space compression (1989), Friedmann (1986, 1995) and Sassen (1991) on global cities, and Jameson (1984) and the LA School (Soja 1986 and 1989, Dear and Flusty 1999) on postmodern urbanism. For Harvey, capitalism’s historical-geographical development produced the condition of postmodernity and, although a minor character in his tale of ethics, aesthetics and flexible accumulation, increasing mobility. To rehearse his argument, at times of overaccumulation, capitalism embarks upon drives to reduce the turnover time of capital and to search out new markets. Time-saving developments in processes of production and consumption demand equivalent

advancements in the circulation of goods, services and, almost incidentally, people. The result is time-space compression, “the annihilation of space through time” (p205). Briefly, in the cases of Sassen and Friedmann, global cities, and the mobility on which they depend (the mobility of both producer service workers and their immigrant builders and cleaners), have one author: transnational capital. Friedmann considers actors other than recent structural transformations of capitalism, but then concludes “the economic variable, however, is likely to be decisive for all attempts at explanation” (1986, cited in Smith 2001, p52). As for Jameson and the LA School, postmodern urbanism is late-capitalist urbanism, so that transnational migration to LA from the 1970s onwards is tied to global economic restructuring, and not to other factors, such as US foreign policy in Central America and Indochina for example, and LA’s immigrants are represented not as active agents, but rather as malleable victims, “a *subject population* [...] above all, the largest concentration of cheap, culturally splintered, occupationally *manipulable*, Third World immigrant labor to be found so tangibly available in any First World urban region” (Soja 1986, cited in Smith 2001, p91, my emphasis).

This paper addresses two questions. First, is mobility really simply increasing? Second, are not many of these writings economistic and therefore incomplete social constructions of reality, giving a central role to the logic of capital accumulation and marginalising, or even denying, other spheres of agency? On one level, very simply, I take M P Smith’s alternative approach to mobility and agency – his “focus on the interplay of the macro-politics of state policy-making, the cultural politics of transnational media representations [...] and the micro-politics of transnational migrant social networks”

(2001,p13) – and apply it to the following research problem: How has it come to this, that on any one day we may find almost 50,000 working holiday makers (WHMs) working and holidaying in Australia?<sup>1</sup> On another level, however, I make two claims in this paper, two extensions of Smith’s approach to mobility and agency, two contributions to theories of mobility in general and transnational migration in particular. First, mobility is not simply increasing, and so we might usefully consider the concept of relative contingent fixity. Second, agency is not simply a possession of intent or motivated human beings, and so we might usefully consider the roles of non-human actants in any achievement of mobility. These two claims unfold through the rest of this paper, which is organised around five constructed categories of agency, inspired by Smith and extended by myself: economics (micro and macro); macro-politics (state-policy making); cultural politics (transnational media representations); micro-politics (transnational migrant social networks); and non-human actants (technologies).

### **The research**

Australia’s working holiday programme (WHP) was established in 1975, allowing British citizens between the ages of 18 and 26 to holiday and work in Australia for a period of up to 12 months. Since 1975, the programme has been expanded in two ways. First, the upper age limit has been raised to 30 years. Second, reciprocal arrangements have been signed with a further 11 countries: Canada, the Republic of Ireland, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malta, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Hong Kong. The objectives of the programme, as stated on the visa application form, read as follows:

“The working holiday programme aims to promote international understanding. It provides opportunities for resourceful, self-reliant and adaptable young people to holiday in Australia and to supplement their funds through incidental employment”. As for the numbers, on one particular but ‘typical’ day in 2001, almost 47,000 WHMs resided in Australia, of which: 23,338 were British, 8744 Irish, 6506 Japanese, 2751 Canadian, 2263 Dutch, 1442 German, and 1277 Korean; 57% and 41% were aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 30 respectively; and 49% were male and 51% female.<sup>2</sup>

The research took place between November 2001 and July 2002. Of many fieldwork sites, the three most significant were Sydney, Cairns and Maroopna (a small community of fruit growers in Victoria). The research involved one philosophical position, two modes of research practice, and four methods or techniques. The philosophical position was influenced by social theory as opposed to positivism (Johnston 1997); reflexive realism and critical constructivism as opposed to more extreme versions of humanism and Marxist-realism (Delanty 1997); and pragmatic universalism as opposed to postmodernism-as-method (Albrow 1996). The two modes of research practice were political economy and ethnography (see Ong 1999 and Smith 2001 on using these two approaches together). My political economy involved two methods: paper-based contextual work and corporate interviews. Seventeen relatively unstructured interviews were completed with individuals involved in some official capacity with Australia’s WHP and backpacker industry, from Chief Executive Officers of tour companies to Desk Officers at the Commonwealth Government of Australia’s Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). My ethnography was influenced by

Geertz's (1973) thick description and Burawoy's (1998) extended case method. It also involved two methods: participant observation and in-depth interviews with WHMs. As I moved from 2001 to 2002, and from Sydney to Maroopna and on to Cairns, I also moved between the various roles open to participant observers: covert participant, overt participant, covert observer, overt observer. Nineteen WHM interviewees were recruited through snowballing. My sampling was theoretical as opposed to random (Cook and Crang 1995). Each WHM was interviewed twice in a relatively unstructured manner. Most interviewees kept one-week diaries between their first and second interview, detailing activities, communications and transactions against clock-time and map-space.

### **Mobility, fixity, agency**

#### *Economics*

I arrived in Australia to begin my fieldwork on November 15th 2001. The following morning I attended the Backpacker and Adventure Industry Conference at the Pump House Museum in Darling Harbour, Sydney. I am not an economic geographer, but sitting in that hall surrounded by hundreds of accommodation owners and managers, publishers and editors, transport and tour operators, and a myriad of other people with company names and occupational positions pinned to their chests, I realised I could not get away from the fact that there must be an economic story to be told here. The backpacker industry in Australia is significant in size and growing and maturing rapidly. Cheap, fast and flexible air travel means that Amanda, a WHM interviewee<sup>3</sup>, can comfort herself with the following: "You know home's only a day away. If it goes terribly wrong you can get back

on a plane and go home". Other than airlines such as Qantas, constituents of the industry include travel agents such as STA Travel; tour operators such as Oz Experience; gap year companies such as Gap Challenge, which arranges visas, flights, insurance, initial group travel, initial accommodation, work placements, and provides ongoing support; publishers such as Lonely Planet; accommodation owners such as the Youth Hostel Association (YHA); accommodation managers such as Sleeping With the Enemy, which oversees flat sharing among backpackers in Sydney; Internet cafés such as Global Gossip; entertainment venues such as The Coogee Bay Hotel, which shows soccer games from the English Premiership and hosts special parties on FA Cup night; recruitment agencies such as Recruitment Solutions; management companies such as Free Spirit, which packages salaries for contract workers living away from home; and much more besides. During 2002, I spoke with many representatives of this industry and, unsurprisingly, they foreground their own actions in explaining the relentless arrival of WHMs at Australia's airports: the services they market and then provide make it easy to get there, to keep in touch with home, to find work and accommodation, and to experience much of what Australia has to offer, all at an affordable price.

I should note here that Australia's backpacker industry, and the working holiday phenomenon more generally, cannot be fully understood independently of broader economic change. First, broad but mundane economic change. None of my WHM interviewees claimed to have given exchange rates much conscious consideration when planning their trip, but there is an interesting correlation between the average number of British WHMs residing in Australia through the late 1990s (under 16,000 1996-98; almost

22,000 1999-01) and the Australian Dollar's recent fall in average value against the British Pound (only AU\$2.25 1996-98; as much as \$AU2.61 1999-01<sup>4</sup>). Conversely, my backpacker industry interviewees often referred to macro-economics: to interest rates, as one important factor in the investment decisions of owners and operators; and to oil prices, of which airfares are in part an expression. And, second, broad and extraordinary economic change; the kind of restructuring of which Harvey, the global city theorists and the LA School speak. The organisational shift towards transnational production and consumption, for example, aids the mobility of WHMs in numerous ways. Members of HSBC bank in the UK find that there are HSBC branches located across Australia (recent and continuing rural branch closures notwithstanding). Customers of Vodafone find that they can continue using their UK-purchased mobile telephone in Australia, for an 'international roaming' charge. Employees of large firms, particularly in the banking and finance sector, find that it is possible to work in Australia for a year without straying outside of their employer's internal labour market, since many such firms offer secondments in their Sydney or Melbourne offices (see Beaverstock 1990 and 1994 on internal labour markets and migration). Other workers find that, prior to departing the UK, they can register with a recruitment agency which is either represented in Australia (as with Manpower and Michael Page) or else allied to an Australian agency (as with Jocelyn Roe, allied to Recruitment Solutions, and Harris and Willis, allied to Morgan and Banks).

I have one concluding point to make about economics as a sphere of agency. In the above paragraph, the present character of employment appears as a force for mobility. But for many of my WHM interviewees, employment is double-edged: it either has been, or is

expected to be, a force for relative contingent fixity too. Paul says of his decision to take a year out “It was quite a hard decision to make at the time. The pressure was kind of on with jobs. We wanted to get jobs straight after university”. In describing the reaction of her fellow employees to her resignation, Lisa raises an important psychological force for fixity: security. “People at work just didn’t get it at all. They couldn’t understand why I’d leave a Council job, which is supposed to be secure and quite easy, and go away and perhaps give up that security”. Imagining his return to the Netherlands, Frank succinctly captures, and is captured by, the imagined triangle of fixity – job, house, family – haunting many WHMs: “I search for a new job. When I find a new job I’ll buy a house next to the new job. Before you know it you have a house, a wife, children”. This haunting is complex. For some it resembles the haunting of children’s ghost stories: a fear or dread. But for others, it resembles a yearning or desire. Surprisingly, its character appears not to be gendered (might we expect more men to yearn for ‘domestic bliss’?). Importantly, this yearning provides a script from which some WHMs intend to perform on their return home. The claim here, then, is that, contrary to its characterisation by Appadurai (1996), the imagination can work both ways, for mobility *and* for fixity. And, contrary to its characterisation at times by Urry (2000), mobility is not all pervasive and unlimited but, rather, viewed through the lens of the family, and of personal life strategies such as job searching and house buying, is more a privilege, of the young-free-and-single person, with few bills to pay.

And I have two bridging points to make about economics as a sphere of agency, which lead to its undoing as the sole or even primary force in the achievement of the

working holiday. First, like Thomas Cook, whose first excursion in July 1841 was a not-for-profit affair involving transfer by rail of Baptists and other signatories of the Temperance pledge from ‘wet’ Leicester to ‘dry’ Loughborough (Inglis 2000), not all my backpacker industry interviewees are rational economic ‘men’. For example, Eleanor, who edits a free backpacker’s travel guide, is something of a romantic. She identifies herself as “the type of traveller that likes to get away and off the beaten track”, and says of her role at work “I really try and put a push on people who are a little bit more independent, will hitch a lift or, you know”. For the backpacker industry, the pure financial return from independent travellers – hitching lifts as opposed to purchasing bus tickets, free-camping as opposed to renting rooms – is relatively small. But for Eleanor, the return is more than financial, it is political and cultural too. Second, following M P Smith, I read the economy not as a thing, but as a social construct – an ongoing and contested project of practising people and the institutions they create (e.g. the nation-state, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation). Laclau writes “capitalism always has a constitutive outside [...] a framework of stable social and political relations” (1990, quoted in Smith 2001, p23). It is to this framework that I now turn.

### *Macro-politics*

The economy has a constitutive outside. Australia’s backpacker industry is heavily dependent on the decisions of politicians and civil servants, at the Australian Tourist Commission (ATC), which markets Australia as a backpacker destination, and at DIMIA,

which erected and administers the WHP, identified as central to backpacking Australia by many of my WHM interviewees. Yes, sometimes nation-states act out of economic necessity, operate under economic logic. For example, all six Government reports on the WHP published through the 1990s have as their main focus economic impacts in general, and labour market effects in particular (see Dignam 1990, the National Population Council's Migration Committee 1991, Bell and Carr 1994, Brooks *et al* 1994, Murphy 1995, and the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Migration 1997). Officers at DIMIA regularly receive representations from the agriculture and tourism industries. And in interview, one officer described domestic unemployment rates as "key" to the future direction of the WHP. But other times nation-states act under different logics. We see this in the specific case of the WHP, the objectives of which remain 'international understanding' and 'personal development', despite recent public interest in WHMs as labourers and consumers. We also see it in the contextual case of Australia's wider immigration policy. While the Liberal-National Coalition Government, since coming to power in 1996, has actively grown the WHP, deactivating the cap imposed by the previous Labor Government, and pursuing new arrangements with non-arrangement countries, it has also determinedly restricted Australia's refugee programme, pegging intake at 12,000, the level inherited in 1996, apparently not for the usual, if often discredited, economic reason (immigrants take Australian jobs), but for reasons of culture (the values of Afghanis and Iraqis are alien to Australia), security (terrorists may use the programme to enter Australia), and health (asylum seekers may carry disease with them) (*Sydney Morning Herald* 26/01/02 p12). The final point on nation-states and economic and other logics is

that nation-states are not unified monoliths. Rather, they are made up of departments of individuals. Regarding the future of the WHP, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) would like it expanded to include all those countries with which Australia wishes to develop trade links, while DIMIA would like it restricted to only those people who pose no risk in terms of overstay (Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Migration 1997).

So that's mobility. And, implicitly at least, a little bit of fixity too. But there is more to be said explicitly about macro-politics and relative contingent fixity. In the specific case of the WHP, the Liberal-National Coalition may have deactivated the cap imposed by the previous Labor Government, but it retains a long list of conditions – applicants must be from agreement countries, must be between the ages of 18 and 30, must have no dependent children, must be likely to find work (the visa application form requests “resourceful, self-reliant, adaptable” individuals), must have no criminal convictions, must be of good physical and mental health, and must have approximately AU\$5000 in their bank account – which ensures this particular path of travel is only open to relatively few people. In the contextual case of Australia's wider immigration policy, the Government may be developing further what it calls Electronic Travel Authority or ETA (a system which enables travel visas to be granted to citizens of countries with ETA status quickly, cheaply, and easily, even via the Internet in some cases), but it also announced in its 2002 Budget AU\$77 million for Maritime Unit Surveillance, AU\$28 million for Coastwatch Air Surveillance, and AU\$13 million for a new radar system for Customs. It seems that, as

regards mobility and fixity, technologies of government work both ways, enabling mobility for some, enforcing fixity for others.

### *Cultural politics*

For M P Smith, the world is not only materially constructed by capitalists, politicians and civil servants, but also discursively constructed, particularly by people in what are increasingly referred to as the cultural industries: writers, editors, publishers, photographers, film and show makers, critics and commentators. According to my interview transcripts, WHMs learn of Australia primarily from television. Katy says “I suppose Australia’s attractive ’cause on TV it seems laid back, it seems sunny, people seem to have a nice way of life”. When asked for specifics, she says “*Neighbours* and *Home and Away*. That’s what you base your ideas of Australia on. Life is centred on the beach. Everyone seems to be tanned. Everyone seems to be relaxed. No one seems to be stressed. You know, no one seems to be poor and slumming it”.

But television teaches us much more besides what to feel about Australia, and, as holidaymakers, we have many more teachers than just television. The holiday has a delicious cultural history (Inglis 2000). The sensibility of today’s holidaymakers – our thoughts, passions, values, imaginings – is not primal. It has been formed, shaped, contrived, from the literal stories our parents and teachers tell us, and from the many lived, embodied narratives (biographies, social roles) society offers us. Inglis writes of ghosts from the past: early travellers such as Boswell, Byron and Conrad; Romantic poets such as Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge; Romantic landscape painters such as Rosa, Claude and

Turner. These heroes or exemplary lives neither visited Australia nor celebrated its landscape, of course, but they provided the cultural foundations for contemporary backpacker idols and icons (*Crocodile Dundee*, *The Crocodile Hunter*, Ayers Rock/Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef), as did those more recent artists who specifically taught European writers, photographers, film and show makers etc. to see the Australian Outback anew: Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin of the late nineteenth-century Heidelberg School; and, of the twentieth-century, Sydney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and Fred Williams. And I have one further claim regarding cultural politics. In the shadows of travellers and travellers' tales, there persist not quite hidden (if much ignored of late) embodied narratives of relative fixity – the public servant or the carer, for example – also to be drawn on by WHMs and others, as “imaginative compost” (Spufford 1997, cited in Inglis 2000, p77).

### *Micro-politics*

Add to capitalists, politicians, civil servants, and culture-makers (acting from above) ordinary people, who are active, creative, capable, and who, within more or less narrow margins, practice life materially, discursively, strategically, through family and friendship networks, from below (Smith 2001). Pretty much all of my WHM interviewees foreground their own characters in their telling of the WHP story. WHM narratives are diverse. Ruth expects “to learn, you know, that the whole world isn't Sheffield”. Contrast this with Frank, for whom Australia is about “mountains [...] landscape [...] scenery [...]

views”. And again with Scott who’s “just here for a laugh”. These are common narrative tropes: travel for education, travel for nature, travel for fun. This we might expect, since we give form to or make sense of experience by working within society’s existing narratives (Inglis 2000). But individuality is also present in the transcripts. Ruth, who travelled to Australia with a gap year company, says “I chose Australia because there was a choice between sports camps, like with kids, horse places, like on a farm, and I’m interested in horses so”. Explanation? We don’t *simply* enter the narratives society offers us. Rather, we voluntarily, variously, selectively combine from the almost infinite stock, and inflect each one in our own way, to suit ourselves (Inglis 2000).

Other characters foregrounded by my WHM interviewees are family members and friends. Paul tells of a family friend he stayed with in Sydney:

The fact that when we found someone was there who was willing to help us out finding stuff and knowing what to take and, we had a face over there, really tipped the balance in our decision. Because we knew there was always something to fall back on if we had any trouble, which we didn’t at all, but I think it gave us just that added security to say right, let’s do it.

But forces for mobility can also be forces for relative contingent fixity. As for economics, macro-politics and cultural politics, so for micro-politics. On his return to England, Paul says of Australia “I wouldn’t emigrate there at the moment, because I have, you know, all my family over here. And I couldn’t put distance between me and my family”. Lisa explains the lag-time between making her decision to go to Australia and leaving England in terms of being “attached” to her boyfriend, Declan. Boyfriends and girlfriends are regular and problematic features of WHM tales. Ruth endured discouragement from her

boyfriend before leaving England, and then terminated their relationship upon arrival in Australia: “it’s too hard when you’re so far away”. Scott tells a similar story about his girlfriend. And in Young, NSW, I met a 55 year-old Dutchman who’d ridden his motorbike all the way from Amsterdam, and was heading for Sydney. “Why?”, I asked. “Because my wife left me and I am no longer tied”, he replied. Above, under the sub-heading ‘Economics’, I suggest that we might conceptualise some of the primary forces for contemporary corporeal fixity as an imagined triangle: job, house, family. Here, in view of the above quotations, I want to suggest that this triangle is for many an imagined stage in the life cycle; that period which begins with a new job, a mortgage, a husband, wife or long-term partner, possibly continues with children to be placed in schools, and ends with retirement, from work, and possibly from parenting (as children finish school and move in to work or off to university)<sup>5</sup>. And there is a broader point here. In recent decades, time has been called on the extended family by some commentators (see Braidotti 1994, for example). But in the narratives of many WHMs, it survives near the centre, not as the disciplinary institution we long to escape and disrupt (commendably), but as a resource: “someone to fall back on” (Paul).

#### *Non-human actants*

M P Smith’s (2001) *Transnational Urbanism* takes an agency-oriented approach to the construction of contemporary cities, and considers macro-political, cultural-political and micro-political actors. Smith’s conceptualisation of agency, however, is overly humanistic, so that technologies make only a few appearances in *Transnational Urbanism*,

and then they are always coupled with Harvey's reified economy, conflated with Sassen's economic forces, and critiqued for their dependence on intent, motivated human beings. Drawing on ideas primarily from science studies, I want to suggest that, since "humans are defined by their use of tools: they are technical from their very origins as a species" (Amin and Thrift 2002, p78), we might better think of agency as an effect of alliances between human actors and non-human actants.

The achievement of the working holiday rests heavily on things: passports, visas, jet engines, credit cards, telephones, the Internet, cameras, travel guides... The label backpacker is instructive. It describes a hunch-backed monster – a hybrid or trans-human entity combining person and backpack. Machines most commonly discussed by my WHM interviewees are telephones, computers, and their combination to achieve various outcomes: to keep them in touch with home; to make travel easier in an emotional sense. On telephones, Shirley says:

Everyone has mobile phones these days. All my siblings have, and I can text them, you know, so it doesn't, you don't have to have a conversation to find out what's going on in their lives [...]. So I can keep in touch with them that's private from the conversations I have when I ring them, 'cause my mother and father are always in the background.

And on the Internet, Carl says "I can still visit the same places I used to visit everyday when I was at home [...]. It allows me to feel more connected to home [...]. It also makes me feel like I don't, I'm not disconnected being here". Every lunchtime, he visits the BBC website and the Manchester City Football Club website: "things that are constant in your life when you live in the UK".

I have two comments about these technologies of communication. First, despite their productive application in contemporary capital accumulation, it seems that they arose to a large extent independently of economic logic. Castells (1996) attributes the technological revolution which occurred in the US in the 1970s to a culture of individual freedom and innovation on campuses in the 1960s, and to the US Defense Department Advanced Research Projects Agency, within which the Internet was developed to prevent the destruction of US communications in the event of nuclear war. Wolfe (2000), quirky yet convincing as ever, finds the origins of the computer as we know it in the biography of Bob Noyce (founder of Intel, arguably inventor of the microchip and Silicon Valley), a man from the religious West, who benefited from a number of coincidences and accidents, not to mention a great deal of space-race money. Second, even these seemingly pure forces for mobility have their other side; if not their face of fixity, then at least their mark of impurity. In science studies, much attention has been given to how technologies misbehave; how they disrupt the message between designer and user (see Michael 2000). Of British WHMs in Australia, Jenny Sinclair, a journalist with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, enquires “How can you find the real you when you’re talking to your parents as much as you did at home?” (03/7/99, p12 of ‘Information Technology’). Her point, by my reading, is that telephones and computers can make travel difficult as well as easy, at least in terms of achieving certain travel objectives.

## **Conclusion**

Of my two related arguments, the first, that mobility is not a simple story of economic determination, is a fairly obvious one, I hope, and has been made convincingly before, most recently by M P Smith. My contribution here is two-fold. I demonstrate how Smith's agency-oriented approach to urbanism may be usefully applied to what Latham and Conradson (forthcoming) have recently labelled middling transnationalism: the border-crossing activities of 'ordinary' people located between those two labour market poles which dominate contemporary writings on transnationalism. And I build upon this agency-oriented approach, with its humanistic conceptualisation of agency, drawing on ideas primarily from science studies, to suggest that we might better think of agency, in the case of middling transnationalism, as an effect of alliances between human actors and non-human actants. I return to this suggestion below, after clarifying my second argument.

I set out for Australia, inspired by the work of John Urry and others, in search of mobility. And I found it, in fascinating abundance: travelling bodies in airplanes, buses and campervans; travelling objects in rucksacks and parcels; travelling information in e-mails and web-pages. But I also found what I call relative contingent fixity too, and it is these three words that require further explanation. By relative contingent fixity, explicitly, I *do not* mean absolute fixity; the idea, so rightly critiqued by many (including Appadurai 1996, Urry 2000, Smith 2001, and Amin and Thrift 2002), that we live in bounded, static communities. Clearly, communities are "now routinely distanced" (Amin and Thrift 2002, p64), spatially open, cross-cut by mobilities or flows. And clearly, communities are always in process, coming, unfolding. But what I do mean, is that, at the present moment,

mobility is not unlimited, complete, and nor is it ever-expanding, linearly. Searching for mobility, I found persistent pockets of lesser and slower mobility (Lisa's fellow Local Authority employees, for example); numerous forces fixing bodies in space and, less effectively, time (DIMIA – its legislation and surveillance technologies – for example); and enduring yearnings, for proximate family and secure careers (that imagined triangle or life cycle stage of job, house and family), held by subjects intent on acting them out.

To conclude, then, there remains one outstanding question: what of the complex relationship between the multiple actors considered in this paper? Let me say first that the categories by which this paper is arranged are not so much 'out there' as 'in here'. They should be read as narrative-structuring devices, not discreet compartments of empirical reality, where the economic is always political and cultural, the political is always cultural and economic, the cultural is always economic and political, and everything always rests on moments of correspondence between human actors and non-human actants. Second, it should be clear by now that, like M P Smith, I reject the depth model of Harvey and others, their political *economy*, with its independent economic base, linearly connected to a dependent socio-cultural surface. Rather, I prefer the language of complicated material and collective situations, combinations and configurations, strings of events, which give rise to or unfold moments in the world; the language of people like Latour and Woolgar (1986), who write that people and things – ideologies, macrosocial factors, macroinstitutional factors, institutional requirements, group traditions, micro-processes, negotiations, skills, decisions, evaluations, knowledges, techniques, heterogeneous practices, machines, pieces of apparatus, energy inputs, supplies, materials, equipments,

instruments, local contexts, idiosyncratic circumstances, accidental events, chance encounters – come together in historically particular, horizontally arranged networks, or networks of networks. And I prefer this for no other reason than it seems to best reflect my subject of study, both from my position as researcher, but also from the position of my research subjects. Carl says “What I was saying about the circumstances, I dunno how to say it, but everything seemed to click and point to the same place. It so rarely happens, but everything seemed to be screaming you might as well do it [...]. Things just kept on adding up”.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Travel and Immigration Processing System, Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Commonwealth Government of Australia.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> All names of WHM interviewees have been changed to meet confidentiality requirements.

<sup>4</sup> Average values calculated using Federal Reserve Bank of New York figures.

<sup>5</sup> Mention of life cycle here points to writings on modernity and self-identity. I discuss WHMs with reference to such writings elsewhere (Clarke forthcoming).