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Abstract

There is a renewed interest among geographers in tourism and how tourism makes the world and its people modern. In this paper, I engage with this renewed interest by way of a case study: British working holiday makers in Australia. Drawing on two modes of research practice, ethnography and political economy, I argue that, while working holidays may be structured in numerous ways, they also involve challenges, active individuals, heterogeneous spaces, and slow time (for reflection and inscription), which together, in a sense, make their makers modern. I frame this engagement, this argument, with a debate familiar to geographers: the problem of Free Independent Travellers.

Key words

Australia, working holidays, ethnography, political economy, tourism, modernity

Introduction

Geographers have always had plenty to say about the way in which tourism makes places (see Williams 1998, for example). But recently, geographers and others have begun to consider the many ways in which tourism also makes people, or better, makes the world and its people modern. Following Löfgren (1999), who describes the spaces of tourism as laboratories (experimental zones) and training grounds, Franklin and Crang (2001)

argue that, since some time in the 1980s, when the Fordist economy collapsed and goods, information, culture and people became routinely mobile, we have been living in mobile times, and these times have been structured by the language and practices of tourism. They suggest that tourism is at least part of the way in which we now perceive the world. It is a way of sensing the world, with its own toolkit of technologies, techniques, aesthetic sensibilities and pre-dispositions. Franklin (2003) adds to this that tourism was primarily and intricately involved in the establishment of modernity. It helped develop our restless interest in the world, in things new and exotic, which is essential to consumer society, and it helped develop our access to and confidence in the world, which are essential to open markets, international peace and knowledge economies. He emphasises again the point that tourism is one means by which individuals seriously and passionately engage with the fluid conditions of modernity. It is a central means of (cosmopolitan and metropolitan) identity formation. It involves spaces and times of self-making, freedom and experimentation.

In this paper, I engage with this renewed interest in tourism among geographers and others, this idea that tourism not only makes places but also makes the world and its people modern, by way of a case study: British working holiday makers (WHMs) in Australia. I argue that working holidays have implications for their makers. They may be structured in many ways. But they also involve real challenges, reflexive individuals, heterogeneous spaces, and slow time (for reflection and inscription). So WHMs return home with strong narratives, confident in their ability to tolerate difference and cope with change, re-skilled for a world of episodes and fragments, prepared for the stresses of modern life (despite their purpose, in many cases, to temporarily escape those very

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stresses). I frame this engagement, this argument, with a debate more familiar to (tourism) geographers: the problem of Free Independent Travellers.

'Free Independent Travellers' is a term players in Sydney's backpacker industry use to describe their market. In interviews with these players, a common concern emerged. Hartmut Finke of Sydney Central Youth Hostel Association states 'The Free Independent Traveller, I think they are a dying breed'. Mark Williams of The Word asks 'How free are the Free Independent Travellers?'. James Parker of TNT Magazine states and then asks:

> They jump off. They get on a backpacker bus. They go to a backpacker hostel. They get picked up for a backpacker tour. They drink in backpacker pubs. Is the whole thing becoming so packaged that, and what's gonna be the effect of that? Are they independent travellers in name only? Is it really a package tour described as independent travellers? To me, the interesting one is: Is Australia becoming too safe as a destination? Is it still challenging enough?

The binary implied by these quotations (and numerous others), of yesterday's difficult travel, undertaken by conscientious explorers, productive of meaningful experiences, and today's soft tourism, packaged for the masses, productive of serious drinking and casual sex – in other words, the narrative of loss implied by these quotations – is by no means new or limited to the business growth concerns of Sydney's backpacker industry. We find it among journalists. Writing of e-mail, for example, Jenny Sinclair asks 'How can you find the real you when you're talking to your parents as much as you did at home?' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, July 3rd 1999, p12). And we find it among two classics of the tourism literature: Boorstin (1964), who writes of 'the lost art of travel' (p77); and MacCannell (1976) who writes of the increasingly futile search for authenticity. There are other positions in the tourism literature of course. One relevant tradition views

tourists as unique, creative and capable human beings, and emphasises some positive outcomes of tourism: knowledge, empowerment, friendships, refigured selves (Crouch 1999, Löfgren 1999, Inglis 2000). On refigured selves, Desforges (2000) and Elsrud (2001) usefully draw on Giddens' (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*: self-identities are no longer firmly structured in advance by social hierarchies and traditional authorities, so individuals face a diversity of possible selves, and must maintain a sense of continuity reflexively through autobiography.

This paper, then, considers these positions – travel as soft and dull; travel as intense and meaningful; travellers as passive consumers; and travellers as active human beings – through the case of British WHMs in Australia. Australia's working holiday programme was established in 1975. At the time of writing, it allows people between the ages of 18 and 30 to work and holiday in Australia for up to 12 months. Applicants must be from one of 12 arrangement countries: Britain, Canada, the Republic of Ireland, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malta, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Hong Kong. Interestingly, the objectives of the programme, as stated on visa application form 1150, 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' (my italics). In 2000-01, 76,570 working holiday visas were issued by Australia, 39,554 to British Citizens (Commonwealth Government of Australia's Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs – DIMIA).

There is a small literature on Australia's working holiday programme (see Dignam 1990, Brooks *et al* 1994, Murphy 1995, Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Migration 1997). For political reasons, it is concerned almost exclusively with economic impacts. There is also a small literature on backpackers in Australia, a significant number of whom are WHMs (see Pearce 1990, Loker 1992, Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995, Haigh 1995, Murphy 1996, Buchanan and Rossetto 1997). This second literature is dependent almost exclusively on data from the International Visitors Survey. In other words, neither literature has much to say in answer to the questions for this paper. How free and independent are Free Independent Travellers? More specifically, what do British WHMs in Australia get out of it? More generally, in what ways do working holidays make the world and its people modern? I address these questions using the findings of nine months fieldwork in Australia, undertaken from two complementary perspectives: ethnography and political economy.[1] And I address these questions in four parts or sections. Part one, 'An economic story', considers the way in which Australia's increasingly competitive and professional backpacker industry structures WHM practices. 'Not just an economic story' considers two further sources of constraint on WHMs: family and friends; and, after Hutnyk (1996), technologies of representation (guidebooks, backpacker magazines, cameras). 'Overestimating working holiday makers' asks whether and why travel in Australia might be considered challenging. In this third section, I engage with writings on modernity and self-identity, and ask whether and how a working holiday might enable personal development. Inspired by de Certeau (1984), part four is agency-oriented, and asks whether and how a working holiday might enable international understanding. I conclude this paper by returning to my starting point:

geography's recent interest in tourism as one way in which the world and its people are made modern.

An economic story

The narrative of loss outlined in the introduction to this paper is founded on some substance, it would seem. Today, WHMs act within many constraining structures, the most important of which – ironically, given the quotations above – is Australia's backpacker industry. Core and peripheral constituents of this industry include airlines, travel agents, tour operators, publishers, accommodation owners and managers, Internet cafes, entertainment venues, recruitment agencies, management companies … and gap year companies such as Gap Challenge, of which Ruth, one of my WHM interviewees[2], says (straight-faced, with no pun intended): 'It was a gap year company called Gap Challenge. And they basically arranged the whole thing for us […] so it wasn't really a challenge'!

In recent years, watch-words for this industry have been competition and professionalisation. Why? In part, because of the neoliberal context in which it operates. Deregulation of air travel produced confused effects in Australia, from the rise of Virgin Blue to the collapse of Ansett. Long-term, the outcome is likely to be attractive opportunities for WHMs to fly between the major tourist sites (Sydney, Uluru/Ayers Rock, Cairns), and over the spaces in-between. Deregulation of the insurance industry is also a subject of some debate in Australia. Lawyers tell a story of increased competition among insurance sellers, price wars and a race to the bottom through the 1990s, crisis at the turn of the century, and massive premium hikes in the last few years. Insurance

sellers tell a different story of ambulance chasing lawyers and the emergence of a compensation culture. Either way, the result is the same: small businesses suffer, such as that of Colin Skinner, who sold his 27-bed backpacker hostel and whitewater rafting business after 12 years when faced with premium hikes of over 300% (*Sydney Morning Herald*, January 26th 2002).

There is another context, specific to the backpacker industry, which is also important here. What has become known as Childers (the arson attack on a hostel in Childers, Queensland, which killed 15 backpackers from six countries in June 2000) is a factor in this insurance crisis. It is also a factor in the strict control of smoking many hostels now maintain – previously, smoking was an important technology of sociability for WHMs (Clarke 2005a). While Childers encouraged professionalisation in general and attention to standards in particular, another industry-specific development encouraged competition. Through the 1990s, the Bureau of Tourism Research (BTR) used data from the International Visitor Survey to describe the backpacker market (see Haigh 1995 and Buchanan and Rossetto 1997). The operational definition used was anyone who spends at least one night in a backpackers hotel or youth hostel. Such a large net was always going to catch students and other kinds of tourist and thus overestimate the size of the market. But since the industry desired the support inflated numbers gave it, in negotiations with the Australian Tourist Commission over funding for example, the BTR figures were welcomed. That is, until recently, when investors began showing an interest in this seemingly large market, leading to fears of increased competition and over-supply. The BTR and the backpacker industry are currently in discussion regarding a new operational definition. In addition to its role in the argument of this section – that

the travel practices of British WHMs in Australia have become in many ways increasingly constrained over the last decade or so – this story of operational definitions and market sizes is a wonderful example of the social construction of a scientific fact by interested parties.

The result of these developments, professionalisation and increased competition, is that Australia's backpacker industry is increasingly dominated by large companies, usually held by even larger investment companies, interested in such production techniques as standardisation wherever possible. Consider the case of Youth Hostel Association New South Wales (YHA NSW). The history of youth hostels dates back to a variety of movements centred on youth, walking and nature in late nineteenth and early twentieth century northern Europe, and particularly to 1909, when a German school teacher, Richard Schirrmann, arranged walking tours for pupils through the hill country bordering the Rhine using schools along the route as accommodation. Schirrmann opened his first purpose built hostel in 1910. Founding principles were education and health, sun and fresh air; a reaction to the dirty, over-crowded, poorly ventilated industrial towns of the Rhur. The movement grew and, with time, further principles were added, of environmental conservation, personal development, and international understanding (through the mixing up of different young people in one place). By 1932, when the first meeting of the International Youth Hostel Federation was held in Amsterdam, 2,123 youth hostels were in operation. Today, the global figures are 4,500 hostels in 60 countries.

YHA NSW was formed in 1943 and today operates 40 hostels. In the words of Julian Ledger, Chief Executive Officer, 'The philosophy of the organisation has been to

encourage travellers to approach their trips as being open-ended and free-spirited. Travel should become a journey of exploration, education and self-development'. Sounds familiar, but much has changed in recent years at YHA NSW. Hostels have become bigger, with more twin rooms and *en suite* bathrooms (and fewer opportunities for people to mix). Sydney Central opened in 1996 with, among other things, 570 beds, a swimming pool and sauna, a cinema, and a general manager, Hartmut Finke, whose prior experience was in 5-star hotels. There are many reasons for these developments. After Childers, for example, standards in terms of cleanliness and security are important, and rightly so. But competition as a coercive force seems to be key. Julian Ledger points to youth hostel associations in northern Europe, the markets of which contain more families and school groups, the nature of which is more charitable, evident in their relationships with government. He then describes the situation in Australia, where government support is virtually non-existent, the backpacker industry is mature, and economic realities are relatively harsh:

> We cross-subsidise a lot of very small country facilities from the city. Now you can't do that when someone sets up next-door in the city and charges a dollar less. So we have had to rationalise and, rather than providing what the committee thinks ought to be provided, you become entirely market-driven.

Market-driven, or competitor-driven? Drawing on seemingly rigorous market research, James Parker of TNT Magazine suggests that most backpackers were happy before these changes. Rightly or wrongly, they believed arson or abduction would never happen to them, and they enjoyed roughing it, at least a little bit, especially if it meant they could smoke cannabis in their dorm-rooms. If we accept this, just for the moment, we can write

this story of competition and created needs in the language of Marxist political economy. Theorising the property development cycle, Harvey writes (1978, 102):

> In the realm of exchange each capitalist operates in a world of individualism, freedom and equality and can and must act spontaneously and creatively. Through competition, however, the inherent laws of capitalist production are asserted as 'external coercive laws having power over every individual capitalist'. A world of individuality and freedom on the surface conceals a world of conformity and coercion underneath. But the transition from individual action to behaviour according to class norms is neither complete nor perfect – it never can be because the process of exchange under capitalist rules always assumes individuality while the law of value always asserts itself in social terms. As a consequence, individual capitalists, each acting in their own immediate self-interest, can produce an aggregate result which is wholly antagonistic to their collective class interest.

As for property development, so for the subject of this paper. Individual capitalists (players in Sydney's backpacker industry), each acting in their own immediate self-interest (by bettering their neighbour's offer with *en suite* bathrooms etc.), can produce an aggregate result (travel in Australia becomes easy and comfortable) which is wholly antagonistic to their collective class interest (Australia becomes a 'soft' destination and backpackers look elsewhere for transformative challenges).

Not just an economic story

What if we focus elsewhere though, on WHMs themselves, or on other constraining structures, other than Australia's backpacker industry? Before I left for Australia, and again on my return, I had many conversations with *family and friends in England* about my work, travelling and Australia. Such conversations may be experienced as enabling. But they may also be experienced as constraining. One WHM called Al told me:

> There is a kind of pressure that you feel you should go to certain places and locations, otherwise you haven't seen the real Australia. You've gotta go to Sydney. You've gotta go to the Barrier

Reef. If you don't go to those, you go home and people say 'you went all the way to Australia and you didn't see Ayers Rock'.

He felt under pressure to visit certain sites and not others – to 'do' Australia. On arrival in Australia, I was met at the airport by some old friends from university, on whose floor I spent my first two weeks in Sydney. In-between work and sleep, they showed me their own version of Sydney. I liked what I saw and rented a flat down the road, shamelessly adopting their friends and friendly places. Again, this is a common experience. I had the following conversation with Tracey about *family and friends in Australia*:

N: How come you first moved to Coogee?
T: When we first arrived in Sydney, we met up with some friends from home who were already living here.
N: Do you know why they had first moved to Sydney?
T: Yeah, because they had met some friends they knew from home.

Even of those who don't follow in the footsteps of others like Tracey and I, many fail to escape the physical presence of family and friends, because increasingly family and friends visit Australia during the visa year, especially around Christmas time, or else WHMs travel for the entire year with sisters or boyfriends or workmates anyway: *family and friends in England in Australia*. Amanda, for example, settled in Sydney for Christmas because her mum was coming to visit, and told me 'I don't think we've had more than three weeks without seeing someone we know from the UK'.

Old friends are not the only friends who structure the ideas and practices of WHMs. New friends are also important. In Sydney's pubs, hostels and apartments, WHMs tell each other stories, often illustrated by photographs. They recommend certain places and not others. Shirley says:

There was one stage there when I was going down the east coast, I didn't open my *Lonely Planet* for about 10 days because I just went with the flow. You know what the next thing to do is. It's just word of mouth. And the common thread with all backpackers is where've you been and where're you going next.

By implication, outside of these 10 days Shirley did open her *Lonely Planet* almost daily. *Lonely Planet* and other guidebooks link word of mouth to the backpacker industry. They institutionalise word of mouth. Hutnyk (1996) describes guidebooks to India as machines through which traveller experience is produced. Drawing on Heidegger's observation that technologies of representation enframe, bring one particular world into presence and not another, he suggests that we experience places through conditioning apparatus: voice (word of mouth), writing (guidebooks and magazines) and pictures (photographs, television programmes, films). Tourist guides are cultural mediators: they make us selectively aware; attentive at places marked as of interest, oblivious at other times (Cohen 1985). Barthes (1972, 76) labels the Blue Guide to Spain 'an agent of blindness'. It promotes mountains and monuments, and suppresses the reality of present day Spain and its people.

Other travel aids which filter and channel experience include backpacker magazines and cameras. *TNT Magazine* and *The Word* inhabit the space between WHM word of mouth and guidebooks such as *Lonely Planet*. They prosper because by the time guidebooks reach the shops in many ways they are already out of date. And they structure backpacker experience in similar ways to guidebooks. Many of my WHM interviewees never knew they were backpackers before reading these magazines. In their pages, full of stories, photographs and advertisements, WHMs may find themselves a community, an identity, and a script for performing both. As for cameras, Urry (1990) writes that cameras give shape to travel: we move purposefully from view to view. Such

views are cultured: we search out landscapes free from visual pollution, consistent with contemporary images of nature, touched by local particularity (Urry 1995). Once found, we capture these views, return home and display them to others, thus reinforcing their dominance (Crawshaw and Urry 1997).

Overestimating working holiday makers

To rehearse the argument so far, concerns that today's WHMs fail to achieve personal development or acquire international understanding through travel because backpacking in Australia has become too easy are founded on some substance. WHM practices are highly structured by the backpacker industry, family and friends, and technologies of representation. But is this the full story? In what is left of this paper, I suggest that the above position risks simultaneously over- and underestimating WHMs. To do so, I consider the 'whether' and 'how' questions of personal development and international understanding in more detail, and I engage with structure's traditional other: agency.

Backpacking in Australia has become too easy. This statement is central to the narrative of loss described above. But for many WHMs, a 12-month trip around the world remains a challenge. Before she came to Australia, Ciara thought 'It's so far away, I couldn't do it. A year away from home, and it just seemed like "Oh my God!"'. There are two main reasons why a year in Australia might still be considered a challenge. First, Australia is a vast continent thousands of miles from Europe in which, on occasion, WHMs really do come unstuck. Consider the following headlines taken from British newspapers:

Dangers of the wild blue yonder (*The Telegraph*, June 25th 2000, reporting on the Childers fire).

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Danger in travellers' paradise (*The Times*, July 16th 2001, reporting on three events: the arson of the Downunder Hostel in Kings Cross, Sydney, which killed six backpackers in 1989; the abduction and murder of seven backpackers hitchhiking the Hume Highway between 1989 and 1992; and the Childers fire).

Desert dangers: empty, hot and predictable (*The Guardian*, July 16th 2001, reporting on the disappearance of British WHM Peter Falconio while touring the Stuart Highway with his girlfriend).

Second, travelling anywhere is a challenge to some people. A few of my interviewees knew little if anything of backpacking or Australia. Kyra, for example, lacked confidence in her ability from the very beginning. She paid STA travel £90 to help with her visa application. Of her arrival in Australia, she says 'I didn't research it at all. I just dumped myself here and that was it. I didn't have a clue. I was at a complete loss'.

Many WHMs return home from their challenging travels proud and fulfilled, with good stories, with strong narratives. What does it mean though, to have a strong narrative, and why is it important? In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Giddens makes the following argument, at the centre of which are strong narratives. In our post-traditional order, where social status is no longer fixed, and lifespans are no longer fixed passages, self-identity is no longer just a given, but becomes a matter of choice, a reflexively organised endeavour, a project or active intervention, involving the sustaining or living of coherent yet continuously revised biographical narratives, autobiographies, interpretative self-histories. Two elements of Giddens' theory are particularly relevant to the discussion in this paper. First, he identifies *fateful moments*, crossroads in life (marriage or divorce, for example) which offer us negatives (they threaten ontological security) but also positives (they make possible the display of daring, they are moments of re-skilling) (see Desforges 2000). Second, he notes that, living in a climate of risk,

which also has its dark side, *we sometimes embrace risk for its psychological rewards*: feelings of thrill, demonstrations of bravado (see Elsrud 2001).

Given this context, maybe we should take the hyphenated claims of WHMs – that they return home open-eyed, open-minded, grown-up, laid-back, chilled-out, easy-going – a little more seriously. If self-development is not so much possible as continuous, then the question becomes *not whether but how* WHMs achieve self-development through travel. Fateful moments and risk seem important here. A 12-month working holiday in Australia carries numerous risks and, for some, involves enormous upheaval. Homes and even businesses may be sold or rented out. Careers may be broken. Partners may be left. Habits and routines are most certainly disrupted. New people and places are most certainly encountered. As a result, the working holiday becomes an opportunity for re-skilling, for the display or demonstration of certain qualities, to WHMs themselves and to others. On fruit picking, Shirley says 'It's the about the challenge. It's about being told this is the shittest job you can do. But I can do it'. Travelling alone, Ruth has become 'better at meeting and talking to people'. Strong themes in my interview transcripts include learning to cope with change and uncertainty, learning to be patient with and tolerant of others, and gaining confidence and a sense of control.

There are three further means by which self-development is achieved through working holidays. The first relates to space. Ruth claims that she can explore her potential in Australia in a way that she couldn't in England:

> At home, especially at school, you're put into a category and you stay in that. And at school there's some horrible, some not very nice people, who can knock your confidence. And so I'd say I'm a bit more confident now 'cause you can just be who you like, and if the people don't like you then that's OK 'cause you're just gonna move on. If they don't like you at home then your life is hell.

She touches on two things. Despite e-mail, visits from mum, Australian relatives etc., moving to the other side of the world still allows us to put meaningful distance between ourselves and home. In turn this means that relationships between WHMs are to a large extent baggage-free: 'It's all about where you're going and where you've come from, rather than what you did at home or how much you earned or that kind of thing' (Katy). This is liminality as described by Shields (1991): in places on the margin, we experience loss of social co-ordinates, liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life, freedom from restraint. The second further means relates to time. Writing on academic life, Massey (2002) recently commented on a general condition of fragmentation and immediacy, in which we lack time to think, to question, to get down to something big. WHMs characterise life back in Britain as speedy and stressful. They welcome the change of pace a working holiday in Australia offers them. Amanda has time 'to relax, rest, reprioritise, redress the balance'. Kyra has time 'to get my head together'. Getting one's head together may require more than head-work. My third means by which WHMs achieve self-development is inscription. Having freed themselves from home, WHMs re-skill, demonstrate certain qualities, take time to reflect, and order these reflections – preserve them, prepare them for display – through inscription. Lisa keeps a diary while travelling because 'you've got so much time to think about things'. She uses it 'to put meaning and order' to people, places and experiences. Other than diaries, we sort our lives into narrative form by filling albums with photographs, CVs with skills and experiences, passports with stamps – Munt (1994, 112) labels the passport 'a record of achievement'.

Underestimating working holiday makers

I welcome Munt's (1994) attention to passports, but I feel less warm about his claims regarding 'Other' postmodern tourism; that unlike post-tourists, some contemporary tourists shun simulacrum and use specialist travel agents to arrange personalised journeys 'off the beaten track' to reality and authenticity, not because of some oppositional and progressive postmodern nostalgia for the traditions, environments and travel styles of earlier times, but because they are involved in a middle class struggle to establish and maintain social differentiation. I feel this way because in both Munt's text and the text on which it is heavily based – Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction* – I fail to recognise my active, capable, reflexive research subjects (see Clarke 2005b). When I think of active research subjects, I think of de Certeau (1984). He argues that we are not passive consumers of dominant production or true, literal, autonomous meaning. We are not disciplined in the Foucauldian sense by coherent, silent, opaque panoptican procedures. Rather, without explicitly challenging or rejecting repressive strategies, we use or produce them again, we manipulate and appropriate them. Deviously, subtlely, joyfully, we employ tactics to get along or make do in the constraining space of others.

My argument has moved on. In the narrative of loss introduced at the top of this paper, we not only risk overestimating WHMs, as serious and capable subjects travelling to be challenged. We also risk underestimating them, as passive consumers of dominant production and autonomous meaning. Considered above from a different perspective, one constraining space for WHMs is the guidebook. My interviewees use *Lonely Planet* in a variety of ways. Some read it cover to cover. They discover Australia within its

pages. But many treat it like a directory, opening it only at the last minute, to find accommodation on arrival somewhere new. Most are reflexive in their use. 'I might read around but I don't go around with my nose in it, you know. I don't use it like a bible' says Amanda, aware that some people might, and of how that might be constraining. Guidebook publishers play an important role in all of this. Charlotte Hindle of Lonely Planet Publications worries about the potential influence her guidebooks have on both travellers and their destinations. These concerns are reflected in the Foreword of my guide to Australia (Lonely Planet 2000, 18):

> The best way to use a Lonely Planet is any way you choose. At Lonely Planet we believe the most memorable travel experiences are often those that are unexpected, and the finest discoveries are those you make yourself. Guidebooks are not intended to be used as if they provide a detailed set of infallible instructions!

'The best way to use a Lonely Planet guidebook is any way you choose'. The constraints within which WHMs must work are really not that narrow or heavy. Space is again important here, this time on a smaller scale. Edensor (1998) identifies two ideal typical tourist spaces, distinguished by the degree to which they are regulated: enclavic tourist spaces (cut off from locals, shielded from sights, sounds and smells, commodified, single-function, staged, familiar, likely to perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices) and heterogeneous tourist spaces (open, inclusive, sensually rich, hybrid, unpredictable, affording of encounters, confrontations and dialogue, encouraging of improvisation). The spaces of WHMs are power-full in many ways. The beach, often taken to symbolise freedom and egalitarianism (Shields 1991, Inglis 2000), is where Jeanne feels most self-conscious in Sydney. Hostels carry constraining elements of the backpacker industry to backpackers through their notice boards and tour desks. Nevertheless, on the whole

WHM spaces look much more like heterogeneous than enclavic tourist spaces. Compared to previous times, when many hostels would employ wardens to enforce curfews, today's hostels, with their dorm-beds and communal rooms, their bars and diverse clientele, are spaces of relative freedom.

WHM spaces are diverse. An assumption made by many involved with WHMs, from players in Sydney's backpacker industry to officers at DIMIA, is that working holidays involve two distinct periods – a period of work and a period of travel – with self-development and international understanding being confined to the second period, the period of travel. There are problems with this binary of work as ordinary and holiday as extraordinary (and therefore transforming). Work spaces are important sites for WHMs. In the diary I kept during my first trip to Australia, I describe how I became male through farm work (and the props of such work): 'I'm getting a kick out of labouring outside, wearing big boots and a cowboy hat, and eating steak sandwiches. Guess it's the testosterone in me!'. On international understanding, Al says 'The best way to understand a country is to get to meet the people, to work there'. For Ciara, the only time she got to meet Australians was a work. For Kyra, working in Sydney meant living in one place for a while and getting to know her (Australian) next-door neighbours.

This question of international understanding deserves deeper consideration. Some WHMs do make the effort to meet both local Australians and backpackers from other countries. Ciara shunned Melbourne's Irish bars because 'I haven't come out to meet Irish people'. In Sydney, Carl and Jeanne lived with three Australians. Jeanne also had an Australian partner for a while. Of learning from Australians, Heidi says this:

People who live in Australia give me advice. They tell me about things I should see but also they take me to the footy and the cricket. They explain to me about elections and John Howard and this women who's considered a racist – Pauline Hanson. And they tell me about Phar Lap the horse.

She describes a particular kind of knowledge; what we might call pub-quiz knowledge. Much WHM knowledge is marked by this and two further things. First a number of omissions and silences: Australia's large Thai population appears, if at all, in relation to restaurants and take-aways only; indigenous Australians appear, if at all, in relation to history, music and art only. Second, a simplistic opposition, between cold, grey, hectic Britain and warm, sunny, laid-back Australia. In response to Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey's attack on 'black armband' histories (tales of dispossession etc.), John Pilger (1992) applies the term 'white blindfold' histories to depoliticised and sanitised stories of Australia (heroic tales of man against nature etc.). WHMs are well versed in white blindfold histories, for many reasons. Like Hutnyk's (1996) charity workers in Calcutta, their understanding is mediated by technologies of representation. Like tourist more generally, their understanding is guided by a tourism industry only interested in representations that sell (Britton 1991). Like modern subjects more generally, faced with private, consumer and secular cultures (Sennett 1977, Lasch 1980), some WHMs are narcissistic, preoccupied with their selves, only interested in what Australia means for them. Jeanne says of her working holiday 'it was gonna give me a chance to do something for myself, that was enjoyable, that wasn't about anyone else, that was just about me'. Finally, the social spatialisation of Australia as holiday space or pleasure zone is important. Drawing on Shields (1991), O'Reilly (2000) notes that getting to know the Costa del Sol is not in the interests of her research subjects, British migrants, because for them its function is to be socially and culturally marginal – to be different, fun, ludic,

erotic – whatever the concrete reality. That tourists are interested in caricature, confirmation of expectations, signs, conveniently packaged novelty, the extraordinary, simulations, otherness etc. is a common theme in the literature (see Boorstin 1964, Britton 1991, Desforges 1998, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2001). I found some evidence of this disposition among WHMs. Ciara says 'when you come away for a year, you're in a kind of dreamworld'. But I also found WHMs who were more reflexive about their position as tourists, such as Jeanne:

> The quality of life is good. Having said that, I may have a different opinion if I was to be here. I only have a good quality of life here because I haven't got the things like a house, a car. What I earn I can spend, which I've never been able to do before. So that colours it a bit.

Some WHMs make a point of reading the papers, watching the news, listening to the radio, talking to neighbours and workmates, reading black armband histories such as Robert Hughes' (1988) *The Fatal Shore*. It may be said that these WHMs do learn something of Australia and its relationship to Britain. A high point for Ruth was 'meeting people and finding out everyone's not like you – not everyone comes from Sheffield'.

The 'how' part of this learning or understanding again relates to both time and space. Echoing ethnographers everywhere, Al says 'the amount of time you spend in a place is very important in terms of being able to soak things up'. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2001) suggests that tourism, understood as an intense series of exciting, selected, themed, collectable experiences, is incompatible with understanding existential reality, which is often repetitive, mundane, fraught, diffuse and familiar. But while two-week holidays involve hotel rooms and coaches, museums and galleries, restaurants and bars, shops and beaches, 12-month working holidays involve neighbours, work colleagues,

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public transport, supermarkets, favourite radio programmes and newspaper columnists. As for space, for those WHMs who learn to think differently, being on the other side of the world, away from family and friends, is important. Lisa speaks of 'getting outside your culture. And you have the freedom then to explore what you value'. Referring to how tourists observe a strange macroenvironment from the security of a familiar microenvironment, Cohen (1985) writes of the tourist bubble. But Ruth reminds us of another environmental bubble: 'at home it's hard to meet new people and to experience new things 'cause you're in this little bubble'.

Conclusion

How free and independent are Free Independent Travellers? What do British WHMs in Australia get out of it? In what ways do working holidays make the world and its people modern? WHM practices are highly structured by Australia's backpacker industry, family and friends, and technologies of representation. Yet, for many WHMs, travel in Australia remains a challenge, from which they emerge re-skilled, with strong narratives, having demonstrated certain qualities. So this paper lends some support to that narrative of loss. It contributes a story of backpacker industry competition and professionalisation, linked to both general conditions (neoliberal deregulation of air travel and insurance sales) and specific conditions (the Childers fire and that broad working definition of a backpacker used by the Bureau of Tourism Research through the 1990s). But it lends more support to that tradition of research which views tourists as active human beings and tourism as in some way transformative. It contributes tentative answers to the 'how' questions of personal development and international understanding. WHM personal

development rests on space (weakly circumscribed space, located away from the constraints of home), time (slow time, time for reflection), and inscription (in diaries etc.). As regards international understanding, WHMs *use* Australia's backpacker industry (in the de Certeau sense), read guidebooks and black armband histories reflexively, move between numerous heterogeneous spaces including work-places, and take their time, much like ethnographers do.

All this is not to suggest that working holidays are simply a force for good. Indeed, what people make of working holidays depends on their position (as WHM, or travel agent, or next-door neighbour to 10 or 12 hard-partying WHMs in Coogee or Bondi – see Clarke 2005a). Rather, the story of British WHMs in Australia is in many ways one of contradictions. WHMs exhibit both competence and incompetence. Australia's social spatialisation as liminal space aids personal development but hinders international understanding. Sydney's backpacker industry has good intentions (to spread backpackers around Australia) but is itself constrained by the forces of competition (there is profit to be had in 'herding' or 'ponding' backpackers). And, though some WHMs seek escape from the stresses of modern life, many return home re-skilled for those exact same stresses, confident in their ability to tolerate difference and cope with change, having learnt the importance of slow time, time for reflection, and having learnt how to order reflections, how to preserve the cumulative nature of achievement, through inscription.

This last contradiction takes us back to the top of this paper, where I discuss the renewed interest in tourism among geographers, and the idea that tourism not only makes places (as the world's largest industry), but also makes the world and its people modern. This paper contributes a new figure to the discussion: the capable WHM, with modern

skills and a strong narrative, born of heterogeneous space, slow time, a little risk, and much inscription. It also contributes a new question: What of those ineligible for such programmes as Australia's WHP? Visa application form 1150 states that WHMs must have no dependent children, be citizens of certain countries (12 in total, none in South America, none in Africa), aged between 18 and 30 years, and of good health (have no disease or disability which is likely to endanger or be of cost to the Australian community), wealth (have approximately AU$5,000 for personal support during their stay and return airfare home) and character (have no convictions and no mental illness). This research was carried out in Australia against a background of refugee detention centres and Prime Minister John Howard's 2002 Budget settlement: AU$77 million for Maritime Unit Surveillance; AU$28 million for Coastwatch Air Surveillance; and AU$13 million to customs for a new radar system. If there is cause for concern here, therefore, it is not that contemporary travel does nothing for people – the narrative of loss. Rather, it is that certain forms of travel in the present do much for some people, preparing them for a world of episodes and fragments, yet access to such forms of travel remains limited.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The fieldwork took place between November 2001 and July 2002. Of many 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 the extremes of humanism as voluntarism and individualism, and Marxist-realism as historicism and determinism (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 perspectives together). My political economy involved two methods: paper-based contextual work and corporate interviews. 17 relatively unstructured interviews were completed with individuals involved in some official capacity with Australia's working holiday programme and backpacker industry, from Julian Ledger, Chief Executive Officer, YHA NSW, to Chris Dorrian, Senior Officer (Tourism and Working Holiday Makers), DIMIA. My ethnography was influenced by Geertz's (1973) thick description and Burawoy's (1998) extended case method. It also involved two techniques: participant observation and in-depth interviews with WHMs. 19 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.

2. The names of WHMs have been changed for the usual reasons of confidentiality.

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