

WRITING MOBILITY: THOUGHTS FROM A RESEARCH PROJECT ON BRITISH WORKING HOLIDAY MAKERS IN AUSTRALIA

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I remember a young woman with an Irish accent and a Thai sarong draped over her shoulders. She was talking to a man with a Canadian flag on his backpack. They were competing with travel stories, and sharing pub-quiz knowledge of Australia and other places. In the background, a couple of young men wearing Premiership football shirts sang the Dutch national anthem. And a Japanese woman passed by dragging a bright pink suitcase on wheels behind her. I remember conversations about the future. Someone listed the places they wanted to visit before they died. Someone else detailed their own plans, which involved getting married, buying a house, having kids, and growing old in the same place they grew up in, surrounded by family and old friends. I remember a young man with a neuropathic bladder. He was reluctant to leave the country in which his condition was diagnosed. He worried that he might not get the catheters he needed as easily elsewhere. I remember news of a detention centre in the middle of the desert, where refugees from other countries were held behind razor wire for years on end.

1. Following mobility

In this chapter, I return to the period 2000 to 2003 and a research project on British working holiday makers in Australia, to offer some thoughts on the problem of writing about mobility – since methodology neither begins nor ends with data construction. This research project was inspired by a number of things, and by two texts in particular. The first was James Clifford's essay on 'Travelling Cultures' (Clifford 1992). In this essay, Clifford criticises the localising strategy of traditional anthropology, which locates culture in a particular field (the village, for example), studies localised dwelling and rooted experience, and marginalises travel, transport technologies, prior and ongoing contact and commerce with other places, and national and international context. He calls on anthropologists and related researchers to rethink cultures as sites of both dwelling and travelling, and to focus more sharply on travelling subjects (migrants, tourists etc.), places (airports, hotels, motels etc.), experiences (superficiality, transformation etc.), and products (stories, knowledges, traditions etc.). The second text was John Urry's *Sociology Beyond Societies* (Urry 2000). In this manifesto for sociology and the social sciences more broadly, Urry observes that, in contemporary times, social relations are being reconstituted by inhuman objects (technologies, texts, images etc.) that produce mobilities across borders (migrants, risks, money, consumer goods and services etc.), with consequences for dwelling, citizenship and nation-states. Communities of

propinquity, localness and communion are being replaced or at least supplemented by bunds, neonationalisms and diaspora. Citizenships of stasis are being replaced or at least supplemented by multi-tiered, postnational and deterritorialised citizenships. The role of states is shifting from that traditionally associated with gardeners (who nurture populations) to that traditionally associated with gamekeepers (who regulate and facilitate mobilities). These observations lead Urry to replace the undermined metaphors of region, society and sovereign nation-state with new metaphors of networks (sets of interconnecting nodes), fluids (people, information, money etc. which flow through networks), and scapes (the routeways of machines and organisations along which flows get relayed). He also calls for sociology and related disciplines to refocus away from nation-state-society and towards mobilities: the travels of people, ideas and objects across borders, and their effects on experiences of time, space, dwelling and citizenship.

Following these calls and others, I headed from England to Australia in November 2001 to follow the set of travelling people, ideas, objects and experiences connected through Australia's Working Holiday Programme. This programme dates back to 1975 when Australia introduced the universal visa system. Prior to this, all Commonwealth and Irish citizens of European descent were exempt from the visa requirement. As part of the new system, in order to preserve the existing arrangement under which Australians were permitted to holiday and work in the United Kingdom, the Working Holiday Programme was established, allowing young British citizens similar rights in Australia. The objectives of the programme are stated on Visa Application Form 1150: "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". In 2001, the regulations contained the following requirements. Applicants must be citizens of the UK, the Republic of Ireland, Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malta, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway or Hong Kong. They must be aged between 18 and 30. They must have no dependent children. They must not work for the same employer or study for more than three months. And they must be of good health (with no disease or disability likely to endanger or be of cost to the Australian community), wealth (with approximately AU\$5000 for personal support during their stay and their return airfare home), and character (with no convictions and no mental illness). I return to these objectives and regulations below. The other thing to note about the programme is that, during the fieldwork year (2000-2001), over 75,000 working holiday visas were issued by the Commonwealth Government of Australia, almost 40,000 to British citizens.

This last point was one of the things that interested me about the programme. How had it come to this, that on any one day almost 50,000 young people from twelve different countries could be found not permanently migrating to Australia, nor taking a couple of weeks' vacation in Australia, but working and holidaying in Australia for anything up to 12 months (with the opportunity of extending this period beyond 12 months and up to four years with sponsorship from an employer)? Other things that interested me included the travelling and dwelling practices of working holiday makers, the relationship between these practices and discourses of international understanding and personal development, the relationship between working holiday maker practices and the travelling and dwelling practices of Australian citizens, and

the regulation of working holiday maker practices by local, provincial and national governments of Australia. The findings of this research project have been published elsewhere (Clarke 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Very briefly, I found that British working holiday makers in Australia practice life on the move by travelling-in-dwelling – periodically returning ‘home’ through websites such as Guardian Online, television programmes such as *The Bill*, radio channels such as the BCC World Service, music and photographs carried on their person, and through telephone calls, e-mail conversations, and gift exchanges with family and friends. They also practice life on the move by dwelling-in-travelling – carving out their own place in each space they stop at temporarily, by constructing traveller communities using mobile technologies of communication (web-based e-mail accounts, mobile telephones, listings magazines) and more traditional technologies of sociability (card and board games, alcohol, hostels with dorm-rooms and communal areas). These travel practices can lead to international understanding and personal development, if tightly defined. Personal development, when understood to involve both skills acquisition and self-narrative refinement (Giddens 1991), is encouraged by the upheavals, liminal spaces, slow times, and inscription practices generated by working holidays. International understanding, understood as a cultural construct, is crafted by active and reflexive working holiday makers out of the heterogeneous spaces and ethnographic times of working holidays. I discuss other findings of the research in the sections that follow. But the focus of the rest of this chapter is on methodology and, in particular, the writing part of research methodology.

2. Provocative mobility

The first thing to say about methodology is that, during this research project, I never really gave too much thought to the relationship between mobility and methodology. Certainly, I was not provoked by colleagues or referees, or by anything I was reading at the time, to consider such a thing as ‘mobile methodologies’. The research proceeded from a philosophical position influenced by reflexive realism and critical constructivism (Delanty 1997), post-Marxism (see Corbridge 1989), structuration theory (Giddens 1984), Actor Network Theory (see Law and Hassard 1999), and pragmatic universalism (Albrow 1996). Following two exemplary studies of mobile subjects and spaces published prior to and during the project (Ong 1999, Smith 2001), the research combined two modes of research practice: political economy; and an ethnography informed by Clifford Geertz’s thick description (Geertz 1973) and Michael Burawoy’s extended case method (Burawoy 1998). In turn, these two modes of research practice translated into four methods of data construction: desk-based contextual work; corporate interviews with representatives of Australia’s backpacker industry and Australian national and local government; participant observation; and in-depth interviews with working holiday makers.

I was, however, provoked from another direction to give at least some thought to the relationship between mobility and methodology – from the direction of mobility itself. What I mean by this is that following travelling people, ideas, objects and experiences led me to certain epistemological positions and practical decisions that are different from those to be found with more sedentary research subjects. At the epistemological level, since mobility involves seemingly forever changing contexts and perspectives, and seemingly never-ending encounters with new fields, the tone of the project became more cautious and modest – an acknowledgement that no obvious end-point

exists for research on circulation, and claims made on the basis of such research are freeze-frames from a world already on the move again. At the practical level, I would have liked to run focus groups with working holiday makers, convinced by Cook and Crang (1995), among others, that apparently individual thoughts and feelings tend to get worked-up through interaction within groups. But organising focus groups, and running them more than once with the same group so as to establish trust and rapport, is almost impossible when dealing with travelling subjects and their diverse itineraries. Indeed, completing the in-depth interviews was difficult enough, given the characteristics of travelling spaces which tend not to be quiet and clear of distractions.

Most importantly, for the purposes of this chapter, the mobilities I encountered in the field provoked me to think more carefully about the writing part of my project. I did this in the knowledge that writing not only attempts to mirror reality, but also helps to construct reality – that writing involves both *description* and *inscription*. I was provoked in this way because much of the writing on mobility I encountered prior to leaving for Australia did not fully prepare me for the mobilities I encountered during my empirical work. This writing included the texts by Clifford and Urry referred to at the top of this chapter – manifesto-style texts in which I read of a deterritorialised and postnational world of migrants, tourists, information and communication technologies, airports, hotels and so on. It also included books by Arjun Appadurai and Michael Peter Smith. In *Modernity at Large* (1996), Appadurai begins with two transnational processes – electronic media and mass migration – which are driven by economic opportunity, droughts, famines, leisure industries and tourist sites, and which are enabled by automobiles, aeroplanes, cameras, computers and telephones. These two transnational processes, he argues, offer new resources for the construction of imagined selves and worlds; produce diasporic public spheres, transnational or even postnational sodalities, and a sense of the global as modern and the modern as global; give rise to new patriotisms (queer nation, for example) and postnational social forms (multinational corporations, transnational philanthropic movements, international terrorist organisations etc.); and place the nation-state “on its last legs” (p19). The general theory of cultural processes developed by Appadurai from this argument contains five scapes – ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, financescapas, and ideoscapas – the relationship between which is disjunctive, since each scape is subject to its own incentives and constraints, leading to deterritorialisation.

A similar set of concerns is found in Smith’s *Transnational Urbanism* (Smith 2001). For Smith, two transnational political events – the end of the Cold War and the spread of the neoliberal variant of globalisation – displaced millions of political refugees and economic migrants during the 1990s. Meanwhile, new means of communication and travel facilitated back and forth movements of people and ideas, multi-sited projects and exchanges of material resources. As a result, he argues, we now live in transnational times, the characteristic social form of which is the migrant network. Caught up in this transnational moment, cities become places where criss-crossing transnational circuits of communication and cross-cutting transnational social practices come together in disorderly and contingent ways. Nation-states, by no means ‘on their last legs’ in Smith’s narrative, constitute and mediate flows of transnational investment, migration and cultural production across borders. Sending states work to reincorporate out-migrants into their projects (as foreign investors, for example). Receiving states police their borders physically through immigration legislation, and discursively through new nationalist ideologies. Smith acknowledges

a constitutive and mediating role for nation-states, but, like Appadurai (and Clifford, and Urry), his agenda-setting and lightly polemical text foregrounds certain mobilities over others, so as to build his case for transnational urbanism. For example, he approaches Los Angeles through its Korean population and their transnational lives, and not through its poor, black population, most of whom are excluded from networks (Gooding-Williams 1993, Thrift 2002) and, like 86% of all US citizens, do not even own a passport (Hertsgaard 2003). Similarly, Smith approaches New York through the case of Amadou Diallo, a street vendor originally from Guinea, brought to public attention when he was shot by members of the New York Police Department. The case of Diallo works in Smith's story to suggest that even African street vendors are on the move in this transnational moment. But Amadou's mother owned a gem trading company back in Guinea. She was good friends with the Guinean Foreign Minister. She sent Amadou to school in Thailand. Though not privileged in the North American context, Amadou was certainly privileged in the Guinean context. There is no space in Smith's tale for those Guineans with no access to the internet, no satellite television, and no hope of getting an entry visa for the United States of America.

In summary, much of the writing on mobility I encountered prior to leaving for Australia encouraged me to look for, and taught me to see, migrants, tourists, electronic media, transnational projects, postnational social forms, new patriotisms etc. It should be noted that, even at the beginning of 2001, the academic literature on mobility was diverse. It ranged from the nomadism of Braidotti (1994), for whom mobility brings forth a new subject – the nomad – free from the authority of family and nation-state, to the critical mobility studies of Cresswell (2001), for whom mobilities are produced out of material conditions, and Crang (2002), for whom the non-places of supermodernity (see Augé 1995) are characterised by hierarchy and exploitation. Beyond this literature, it should also be noted, existed a long-standing concern with the limits to mobility. Harvey (1982), for example, contrasts the hyper-mobility of money with the limited mobility of production (limited by fixed capital) and labour (limited by immigration policy, pensions policy etc.). Torpey (2000), in his biography of the passport, describes how this technology for regulating movement was invented just as many people became relatively free to move in the wake of the French Revolution and the birth of capitalism. It was used increasingly during the twentieth century, in a context of new transportation technologies, security threats, and location-specific welfare entitlements. These other texts and literatures were fascinating and highly relevant to my research problem. But they were not as widely read or acclaimed at the time as the manifesto-type writings outlined above which encouraged an exciting new focus for exciting new times. It was this excitement that took me to Australia, where a series of encounters provoked me to think more carefully about writing and mobility.

One of the first things I encountered on arriving in Australia was a political row over immigration policy. There had recently been the events now known as September 11th or 9/11. There had recently been the rape of some white women by some men of Lebanese origin in Sydney's western suburbs. Australian troops had recently stormed a Norwegian tanker to prevent the landing of 438 refugees rescued by its crew from the sea off Christmas Island. On the back of these and other events, John Howard's Liberal-National Coalition had just been returned to power in an election dominated by immigration policy, and with the words "Australia has an absolute right as a

sovereign country to decide who comes here". During 2001-2002, immigration policy was rarely out of the news in Australia. Six detention centres had been established where around 1000 refugees were held behind razor wire for up to five years. At Woomera, the largest and most notorious of these centres, detainees sewed their lips together and went on hunger strike to protest against their treatment. On 15 May 2002, the day after Budget Day that year, Australia's *Daily Telegraph* led with the title 'Fortress Australia' above details of additional funds for border protection: AU\$77 million for Maritime Unit Surveillance; AU\$28 million for Coastwatch Air Surveillance; and AU\$13 million for Customs (a new radar system). *Yet I was there looking for deterritorialisation and postnationalism.*

Another encounter was with working holiday makers themselves. Some had felt under pressure to stay at home and progress straight from school to university, or from university to employment, or from one job to another. Some had even felt under pressure just to remain where they were because of the security offered by their current situation. For example, one interviewee who back in England had worked in local government described how "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". Some working holiday makers imagined this pressure to settle into a job, and into relatively sedentary home and family life, would be there for years to come, and so they were taking the opportunity to travel now before settling down later. While some felt this expectation or norm as a suffocating pressure, others spoke longingly of a return to family and friends, and what they saw as the next lifecycle stage of settling down and building a life predominantly in one place. These working holiday makers were not convinced by the claims of new communications technologies. They found relationships difficult to maintain across distance. After receiving e-mails from family and friends, they felt like they were missing out on things back home. After receiving international telephone calls, they felt more and not less homesick. *Yet I was there looking for nomads and cosmopolitans.*

A third encounter was with residents of Sydney and their representatives. The Mayor of Sydney welcomes working holiday makers to downtown Sydney for the life they bring to the area after its office workers have returned to their suburban homes for the evening or weekend. The Mayor of Randwick, by contrast, fumes about working holiday makers in the supposedly quiet beach community of Coogee, for the late-night noise they make, the parking spaces they occupy, and the rubbish they leave behind them after moving on. The Mayor of Waverley has similar concerns about Bondi. Crucially, residents of Coogee and Bondi are not what people sometimes pejoratively describe as 'locals' – parochial people, hostile to outsiders. In the census of 1996, almost 40% of these residents reported having themselves been born overseas. What does distinguish these residents from working holiday makers, however, is their relatively sedentary lifestyles. They work regular hours to service their mortgages, take their kids to and from local schools, put the rubbish out on collection day, sleep between certain hours of the night, and find the arrivals, departures and travelling/dwelling practices of working holiday makers to be disruptive of these relatively place-based routines. *So I was there looking for mobility and finding, alongside the exemplary mobility I sought, forces fixing bodies in space through legislation and technology, desires for relatively sedentary lives or lifecycle stages, and, at the very least, pockets of shorter and slower mobility.*

3. Evoking mobility

These various encounters provoked a number of questions for my research project? What was this mobility I was pursuing? Was it a property of certain people and things, or was it part of and the sign for a more generalised condition? I had the impression from the literature that mobility stood for a more generalised condition. New transport and communications technologies, the end of the Cold War, and the spread of the neoliberal variant of globalisation had together generated new mobilities, which in turn were forging a new era characterised by deterritorialisation and trans- or postnationalism. If this was the case, how was mobility to be written about? How was a generalised condition to be brought to print – without reducing it to one set of practices or another, and to one set of experiences or another?

Since the research project ended, these questions have been addressed, to some extent, by a more mature mobility studies. Tim Cresswell's book-length consideration of mobility – *On the Move* (2006) – takes forward his position that mobilities are produced through forms of abstraction such as law, and surveys the highly differentiated mobility of recent and contemporary times. Two set-pieces in the book illustrate this highly differentiated mobility particularly well. The first is the chapter on Schiphol Airport. Here, the discourse of mobility rights and the micromanagement of mobility combine to produce a kinetic hierarchy of business travel, economy travel, relatively frictionless travel within Europe by European citizens (Schengen travel), illegal travel, forced travel and so on. The epilogue on Hurricane Katrina is the second set-piece that works particularly well to evoke contemporary mobility in all of its contested plurality. Cresswell recalls media images of poor black people dependent on under-funded public transport and stuck in New Orleans as the hurricane approached. He recalls alternative images of rich white people leaving the city via well-funded freeways. British tourists were rescued from deteriorating places of shelter while other categories of people were left there to ride out the storm and its aftermath. There was a debate about whether those people who did make it out should be called refugees or not. While, for some, they were clearly seeking refuge in other communities, for others, the term refugee had negative connotations inappropriate for US citizens.

A similar attempt to capture the multiple dimensions of mobility is made in the founding editorial of the journal *Mobilities* (Hannam et al 2006). The authors begin by observing how the whole world appears to be on the move, and arguing that, while mobility is not new, its speed and intensity is greater than before. But they go on to chart a course between what they term sedentarist social science (that treats the stable and proximate as normal, and, after Heidegger, focuses on dwelling) and nomadic social science (that focuses on deterritorialisation, postnationalism, and the supposed freedoms of nomadic life). From this course, mobility is viewed as dependent on the territorial concentration of resources; as organised through highly embedded and immobile material infrastructures, platforms or moorings – from airports to petrol stations. Between these nodes, routes contain fast and slow lanes, and gates that let some fluids through more than others ('the fast-tracked kinetic elite').

In this final section, I want to add something to these more nuanced framings of mobility. If what is often being described/inscribed in writings on mobility is a generalised condition or era, then we can turn to writings on other conditions and eras for examples of how best to bring such internally differentiated categories to print. Towards the end of my research project on Australia's working holiday programme, I found two such examples in the literature on modernity: Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (Berman 1982); and Martin Albrow's *The Global Age* (Albrow 1996). Let us take Berman first. He is interested in the adventures, horrors, ambiguities and ironies of modern life, which he reads in texts (Goethe's Faust, The Communist Manifesto etc.), spatial and social environments (Hausmann's Parisian boulevards, Moses' New York highways etc.), and individual lives (Goethe, Marx, Baudelaire etc.). From this reading, he identifies a set of paradoxical and distinctively modern concerns – a sensibility which has cut across the boundaries of geography and society for almost 500 years: on the one hand, a will to change, transform, grow, and an attraction to knowledge and new possibilities ('the desire for development'); and, on the other hand, feelings of disorientation and disintegration, and desires for stability and coherence ('the tragedy of development'). It is by these concerns that Berman defines modernist culture. And this culture arises from the maelstrom or vortex that is fed by social world-historical processes (modernisation): discoveries in the sciences; industrialisation; demographic upheavals; urban growth; mass communication; nation-states; social movements – all born of and driven by a capitalist world market characterised by growth, waste and instability.

One need not accept that modernisation was straightforwardly born of and driven by capitalism in order to appreciate Berman's insight into representations of modernity. He notes how the first modernists – Marx, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Whitman, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky etc. – wrote with a particular *rhythm and range* about modernity. Their writings evoked its pace and energy, but also the broad range of practices and experiences found during the period. He then turns to the twentieth century, when, rather than engaging with the ambiguities, contradictions, ironies and tensions of modernity, writers tended increasingly towards crude, closed, flat polarities and totalisations, either embracing modernity without qualification (the Italian futurists, the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, Marshall McLuhan, Alvin Tofler etc.) or condemning it with equal force (Max Weber, Herbert Marcuse, Michel Foucault etc.). Berman's preference is clearly for *the both/and dialectical modernism* of the nineteenth century. My encounters in the field pushed me in this direction also, towards *a both/and dialectical mobility*, that evokes both the rhythm and range of life in contemporary times.

Let us turn, finally, to Martin Albrow's exemplary treatment of the Modern Age (Albrow 1996). This epoch, he argues, exhibited certain features (rationality, territoriality, expansion, innovation, applied science, the state, capitalism etc.), but cannot be reduced to these features. Rather, it can only be fully understood by considering all sectors, spheres, activities and events that existed and took place during the period – including religion, the economy, science, politics, disease, ideas, discoveries, revolutions, natural disasters etc. A *theoretical thrust* for the Modern Age can be identified, he argues – for him, this theoretical thrust is expanded control in space and time. But a *historical narrative* of the epoch must be a larger and more complex configuration, so that core or profiling factors are supplemented by other

factors: rural populations, poor countries, traditional cultures, contingent historical events etc. Again, one need not accept this particular take on history and geography in order to appreciate Albrow's insight into the representation of generalised conditions or eras. He notes how the expansion of modernity rested on the belief that truth and error, knowledge and ignorance, rationality and irrationality take their shares from the same pool. Since the pool of human experience is expanding and infinite, however, he posits that modernity is best approached through *the rationality/irrationality tension or dichotomy*. There was no expansion of rationality at the expense of irrationality. But life was categorised using the binary code of rationality and irrationality. In my own research project, I found this insight useful. Life appears to be increasingly categorised using *the binary code of mobility and immobility*. To a large extent, a theoretical thrust for the contemporary era has been identified, along with core or profiling factors (see the literature reviewed in sections 1 and 2 of this chapter). But *the historical narrative of mobility* is still being written. It will be complete only when it evokes the rhythm and range of provocative experiences and practices encountered by those following mobility.

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