Going by the Book: Backpacker Travellers in Aboriginal Australia and the Negotiation of Text and Experience

Tamara Nicole Young
BBus, BSocSc (Hons)

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

Tamara Young: ______________________________

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Acknowledgements

Just over ten years ago I wrote my first undergraduate essay on tourism and Aboriginal Australia. In the pages that follow is an extended exploration of this topic, an area that has long been central to my academic research interests. Despite what some may think, my experience as a researcher of travel and tourism has not been a holiday! But it has been a journey. A journey which, from the beginning to the present, has been fulfilling and rewarding, both intellectually and personally. There have been many people who have made this journey possible and enjoyable, and I wish to acknowledge those whose support and friendship have guided me and sustained me along the way.

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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my Grandma
Elizabeth Newman (1914 – 2005)
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Synopsis

Long-term independent travel is regarded by many commentators as an active quest for discovery, and has long been proclaimed by individuals and organisations, both within and outside the tourism industry, as having a social, cultural and educative role. As independent travel becomes an increasingly popular and important sector of the travel market, the guidebook as cultural text becomes a significant and powerful mediator of experience. Guidebooks have a prevailing capacity to define and represent places, peoples and cultures and, at the same time, present descriptive and prescriptive information that simultaneously constructs the traveller and shapes their perspectives and experiences. Independent travellers such as backpackers, in their quest for the ‘authentic’, often seek out experiences with other cultures and demonstrate a desire to learn about, and interact with, indigenous people and their cultures. This thesis is concerned with the complex process of the dialectic construction of the backpacker (the traveller) as a particular gazing and experiencing subject, and of places, peoples and cultures (the travelled) as objects of the gaze. Central to the thesis is a consideration of the role of the guidebook as an interpretative lens through which the constructed and mediated nature of both the traveller and the travelled can be examined and understood.

Drawing on theoretical and methodological insights from the interdisciplinary fields of tourism studies and cultural studies, the thesis seeks to understand relationships between text, audience and culture in tourism. The interpretative method of textual analysis is married with qualitative interviews with a sample of backpackers to Australia to examine the interplay between travellers, guidebooks and experiences. An analysis of guidebooks published by *Lonely Planet*, *Rough Guide* and *Let’s Go* reveals that representations of Aboriginal people and their cultures are central to constructing an ‘authentic’ experience for independent travellers to Australia. These representations are, however, not without contradiction, as traveller discourses of authenticity, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and responsible travel are mobilised concurrently with popular tourism imagery and stereotypes of Aboriginal Australia. For the backpackers interviewed, the discrepancies between discourses provided in guidebooks means that their engagement with texts is dynamic, and their experiences with, and understandings...
of, Aboriginal Australia are continuously negotiated and renegotiated throughout their travel experiences. I argue in this thesis that backpackers actively engage with narratives and representations of culture contained within guidebooks, and negotiate these textual contradictions to construct a particular type of experience and traveller-self to make sense of their travels in Aboriginal Australia. The findings of this thesis raise important questions about the role that the text plays as mediator between the traveller and the travelled culture, and the tensions, contradictions and negotiations between text and lived experience.